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**UTILIZING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE TO FOSTER CRITICAL
LITERACY IN A SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

by

Denise McNaughton

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Language, Literacy and Special Education
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of

Master of Arts in Reading Education

at

Rowan University

April 7, 2020

Thesis Chair: Valarie Lee, Ph.D.

Dedications

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my students; those I have taught in the past, those I teach now in the present, and to those I will teach in the future and, especially, to all the ones who have taught me. Thank you for reminding me that learning happens every day.

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I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge all of the women in this program who have been absolute inspirations to me throughout these last two years. I have been lucky enough to have met and been able to collaborate with some of the most intelligent, dedicated, empathetic, and talented educators for the last two years.

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Finally, I must acknowledge and express my sincere gratitude for the support, dedication and absolute super stardom of my husband, Kevin. Thank you for ignoring me for the last two years when, after asking me what it is I needed from you, and I, not wanting to be a burden, said “nothing” , you knew better and would continue offer me everything from hugs, tea and, most importantly, unrelenting support.

Abstract

Denise McNaughton
UTILIZING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE TO FOSTER CRITICAL LITERACY
IN A SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM
2019-2020
Valarie Lee, Ph.D.
Master of Arts in Reading Education

The overall purpose of this study was to research the impact of multicultural literature on secondary students' abilities to employ critical literacy techniques and develop empathy towards groups of people from marginalized and oppressed communities. Students in a 10th grade, Academic level classroom self-selected independent readings texts about multicultural social groups and engaged in small group discussions centered on questioning text through the lens of critical literacy throughout the semester. Small group discussions focused on identifying trends of inequality. Findings of this study include patterns in student book selection, trends in student understanding of identity and the implications of identity within the context of social groups; evidence of student exposure to and awareness of historically marginalized or oppressed groups; evidence of student comfort level during small group discussions based on current or topical events; (6) the impact of real world context on student understanding of multicultural themes. Conclusions drawn from this study discuss the importance of implementing multicultural literature in the classroom for students at the secondary level and the importance of contextualizing fiction and nonfiction multicultural literature within the historical, political and social events in which these texts are based.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Scope of Study

Each summer, the same tune plays over and over in my head: “Next year will be different! Next year, they’ll really love reading, and they’ll finally realize just how amazing they really are!” I voluntarily spend hours over the summer planning, re-planning, organizing and reorganizing my units; making small but important changes to student objectives, assignments, and materials and incorporating research and readings I have done to make truly meaningful changes to what I have done in years prior. I would spend hours (happily) wiled away, as my husband looks at me and rolls his eyes, getting excited as I plan and dream and imagine hypothetical situations in my classroom: *Here I am, with a brand new crop of 130 students, changing lives! Making real connections! Inducing epiphanies! Encouraging student to student discussion that is rife with rich and deep exchanges, wherein they discover connections between each other they never knew existed! I love teaching! It is by far the most rewarding and worthwhile professions on earth!*

Fast forward to September, and the same issues that pop up every year are still there, more reliable than you ever want them to be: roster changes, I & RS meetings, 504 and IEP updates, implementation of new technology, PDP’s, SGO’s, curriculum updates, faculty meetings and, oh yea! Meeting 130 new students and making sure they know you are there for them but will also be challenging them with rigorous coursework and texts and ensuring you are differentiating your lessons so as to ensure the rigor is appropriate

but also attending to their learning needs. Oh and reading, because, yes, children, we will be reading books this year.

Aaaaaaaand let the deep sighing and muscle-pulling eye-rolling commence!

Origin of the Question

As a natural reader and writer from a very young age, I approached teaching with the expectation that the students I would teach-including students in Honors, Academic or General levels- would be keen to read the same classical texts that I read, studied and enjoyed in school. The overwhelming majority of students I met in the first few years teaching taught me the exact opposite; for most of the students I encountered, despite their academic levels, reading was “hard,” “boring,” and “useless.” Naturally, I was flabbergasted. What happened to the love of reading? Of delving into stories and exploring imagery and figurative language and debating the author’s style and intent? I was at a loss; given the strict curriculum most secondary teachers are plagued with, there was little wiggle room for incorporating new texts or concepts into the classroom. Finally, after exploring literature and research, my department gave in, and we began slowly-incorporating more contemporary texts into the curriculum. The children WILL read! Ah, but once again I was at a loss; students continued to show their apathy and overall disinterest in reading, period. Given the options-become stronger, better readers, or remain lost, confused and hopeless- I continued to fight for students to read.

I have read so much of the research literature which defends and insists that student choice in text positively affects student engagement with and improvement in reading and critical thinking, especially at the secondary level. The thinking behind much of this, I imagine, is the underlying fact that the books students read within a secondary

curriculum are difficult for students to connect with. Even texts that I believe students could potentially find interest in do little to nothing to pique or gauge their interest in reading, resulting in “fake reading,” a phenomenon investigated thoroughly in Cris Tovani’s *I Read it, But I Don’t Get It* (2011). Even when I introduced independent reading or book clubs into the mix, students fought against reading. Ironically, the effort they put into not reading would have been much better spent into doing research and finding a text they did want to read. The activities that took place throughout my literature circles with students varied slightly from year to year, and I hoped to be able to find the ‘just right’ mix of the types of texts, activities and discussion protocol to help deeply engage reluctant teenage readers in the act of reading, and therefore help develop their critical thinking and analytical skills in writing and in speaking, as well as develop their own critical views about the world around them. By incorporating critical literacy into book clubs and literature circles, students are encouraged to gain a critical consciousness through a language that teaches them to question their world, to ask who has power and who benefits from power, and to analyze why things are the way they are. As educators, our goal should be to teach our young adolescents to be more than "social actors," but rather to become "social transformers" of their world.

After moving from an extremely diverse and multicultural school district to a district that is by no means homogeneous in its demographics but far less so than what I am used to, I began to consider the implications of disallowing students to participate in independent reading of texts that are contemporary, varied in their content and context and, most importantly, multicultural in nature. As a graduate of my former district and a person who considers open-mindedness and acceptance as cornerstones of becoming a

well-rounded and fully developed human adult, I found it necessary to implement these multicultural texts into my classroom to ensure students are exposed to as much of the world outside of their immediate scope of self as I could possibly expose them to. In order to transition from students to “social actors” to “social transformers”, they must first begin to understand, then, recognize, and finally accept the bias and inequity that already exists within the world as they know it. This is no easy feat, but one that must begin somewhere in order for this social transformation to occur.

Statement of the Problem

Given the current culture and climate of the world today, and more specifically the makeup of the United States and the diversity of the population in the state of New Jersey, students are exposed, possibly more than ever, to groups of people from different cultures, backgrounds and histories. Within my current district, the population is by no means homogeneous; however, the culture of the students and the history of the district do not necessarily lend themselves to a diversified and open-minded way of thinking for students that are graduating high school, preparing to go off into the world and become legitimate and worthwhile citizens of the world. The question I posed for this research was: how does exposure to multicultural literature enable secondary students to empathize with people of historically oppressed or marginalized groups? Within the scope of this question, I was hoping to discover the extent to which students have been exposed to or are aware of historically marginalized and oppressed groups and develop their empathy for these groups of people.

The source of this question comes from the simple fact that the world, thanks in part to the young people within it, has become and continues to become more diverse and

inclusive in its social groups. The seed from which many of my questions regarding this research have grown is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *TedTalk* titled "The Danger of the Single Story." Adichie raises brilliant and overwhelmingly legitimate questions regarding the types of stereotypes and prejudices that exist amongst all people, and does so in language that is heart-felt, original and pleading to be heard. Despite many positive and dynamic changes within the thinking of makeup of our current culture and society, media and politics continue to fight to create a polarizing and divisive environment. The overwhelming presence of political coverage, the Internet and social media may prevent young people from producing their own opinions about cultural, political and social events that occur on-what feels like- a day to day basis. Students at the secondary level must be prepared, educated and well read enough to be able to curate their own informed opinions about political, social and cultural events, and to avoid the detrimental effects of harboring their own "single stories" about others. This ability to curate their own informed opinion starts with their exposure to the voices of other people and especially of other people from oppressed or marginalized groups.

As demonstrated through the work of Paolo Freire and Sonia Nieto, the importance of integrating, analyzing and normalizing the inclusion of multicultural literature and education and the stories of marginalized or oppressed groups within the literature read in classrooms cannot be overlooked. Nieto (2017) considers the importance of multicultural education to be paramount, given the diversity that is present in our schools today. Multicultural education must be infused completely into a curriculum and into the culture of a school or a building. It is the responsibility of the teacher to present information in as many fair and multiple ways as possible (Nieto,

2017). As such, it is the responsibility of teachers to foster the opportunities for students to become global citizens of the world.

In order to foster these opportunities for students to become exposed to this literature, providing students with reading choices of independent reading texts within the genre of multicultural literature can encourage positive student engagement with the literature. Hall, Hendrick and Williams (2014) emphasize the importance of student choice in reading and assert that “when students are allowed opportunities for choice, they become more involved in their reading and read more” (p.92). In a second research study, Gay Ivey (2001) conducted a survey on middle school students on what makes them want to read in the classroom. One primary theme that emerged from this research was that students valued time for personal reading. In addition to this, in response to the question, ““What makes you want to read in class?”, many of the students (42% responded that they were motivated by finding good materials to read and having choice in the selection of these reading materials” (p.361).

A second important theme that emerged from this particular research focused on the benefits, from the student perspective, of independent reading in the classroom. Ivey’s (2001) research also indicated that students “did not view time spent reading and listening as a way to get better at it. Rather, they saw silent reading as a way to make more sense of the text at hand, since time set aside freed them to concentrate, comprehend, and reflect without being disturbed or distracted by some other task” (p.367). These findings support Ivey’s (2001) assertions of the importance of choice reading in the classroom, especially if “having time to read and listen does help students to make more sense of what they read and to think more critically about it, it behooves us

to look at where time for engaged reading and listening is included in the school day” (p.367). By providing students with resources to promote independent reading of texts that students were interested in, students have the opportunity to be more invested in the literature and therefore create stronger connections with the stories of people within these marginalized groups.

Statement of the Research Question

The purpose of this research is to study what happens when multicultural literature is integrated into a secondary classroom to foster critical literacy of complex social issues. Specific aims of the study are twofold: to practice critical literacy using literature circles and book clubs and to facilitate critical writing and analysis of current and historical events through student talk and relevant multicultural texts and materials. The objectives for this research question requires students to not just read multicultural literature, but to also read and understand nonfiction texts and literary sources, including various media such as videos and speeches, as well as nonfiction articles and sources recounting current and historical events. This research question requires students to evaluate these current and historical events through a critical literacy perspective; students will be questioning not just the events themselves, but the sources of the information, those who are affected by these events, and the sources of power within these events. By utilizing critical literacy, students practice identifying inequity and bias within these events, as well as in the texts they are reading. Finally, the study will identify and analyze the impact of the exposure to multicultural literature and texts on students’ ability to develop empathy with historically marginalized and oppressed people.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter two provides a review of the literature surrounding the use of multicultural literature as a basis for literature circles and book clubs in secondary high school classrooms. Chapter three describes the design and context of the study, including a plan for obtaining and assigning their independent reading texts. Chapter three also includes information about the district and the demographics and vital information about classroom wherein the study and research will be conducted. Chapter four reviews and analyzes the data and research and discusses the findings of the study. Chapter five presents the conclusions of this study and implications for teaching and learning as well as suggestions for further research regarding the use of multicultural literature within a secondary curriculum.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

In accepting the challenge of teaching and learning about cultural diversity, we express the hope and belief that we can influence these issues or at least promote a little respect, understanding and tolerance [of them]. (Miller, 1987, p.1)

Introduction

There are numerous studies that research the importance and impact of engaging students in critical literacy in the classroom through the use of multicultural literature. In this chapter, the overarching theory of sociocultural theory is defined and explained as an umbrella beneath which lies critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy, as they are heavily influenced by the fundamental components of sociocultural theory. The theoretical foundations of critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogical practice are then defined and briefly explored and explained. In addition, within this literature review, studies will be briefly examined which discuss the theory of critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy in reading in the classroom. The chapter ends with a summation of the literature and ways in which this study may contribute to the conversation surrounding the importance and significant impact of introducing multicultural literature in a secondary education classroom.

Sociocultural Theory

In both purpose and definition, sociocultural theory and critical literacy theory go hand in hand. One often requires the other; in order to engage in critical literacy, one must confront one's own cultural background and analyze and question the role one's

own culture plays in one's learning. Sociocultural learning, within a mainstream classroom, is learning that requires teachers and learners to be aware of the influences of their own cultures and the impact these influences have on their ability to understand and absorb their learning.

Sociocultural theory emphasizes that “knowledge is constructed based on social interaction and experience” (Woolfolk, 1999, p. 279). This theory of learning focuses on the broad concept of culture as a whole and its impact on student learning. It is similar to socio-linguistic theory, but includes and emphasizes the importance of the roles of social, cultural and historical background in the experiences of learners and as core components in affecting the understanding of learners. Au (1997), states that “sociocultural theory emphasizes the idea that the human experience is mediated by culture” (p. 183) and that culture is a primary factor in influencing the experiences of learners. In the socio-cultural perspective, culture is viewed as incredibly important in affecting a learner's literacy development. Socio-cultural learning emphasizes the central role of social influences on literacy learning.

Beneath the broad umbrella of sociocultural theory are critical literacy theory and culturally relevant pedagogy. Both of these methods of literacy learning emphasize the importance of the role of culture in one's learning. Both Paulo Freire and Sonia Nieto have been influenced by and have also influenced sociocultural learning. Paulo Freire fought for equity in learning for both teachers and students and emphasized the importance of critical literacy theory, while culturally relevant pedagogy as it stands today is championed by Sonia Nieto and her work in classrooms which focuses on the impact of providing students opportunities to use their knowledge and backgrounds as

assets rather than deficits in their learning. Both of these learning theories stress urgency in the implementation of multicultural literature in the classroom in order to increase student consciousness and questioning as well as increase awareness of the importance of evaluating their own education and advocating for equity in learning.

Freire & Critical Literacy Theory

Critical literacy can be defined as “the use of the technologies of media and communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (Luke, 2004, p. 5). This definition is based on Paolo Freire’s work in exploring and exposing the inequalities which exist in society amongst the oppressed and the oppressors and the lack of opportunity of these oppressed individuals faced in overcoming their social persecution.

Paolo Freire challenged social inequalities and transformed education through praxis, dialogue and conscientization. Freire believed that “literacy practices are practices of power. As a practice or act of power, literacy may serve to link hope to possibility through developing various means of resisting the politics of oppression so that a qualitatively better world can be summoned, struggled for, and eventually grasped” (Freire, 1970, p. 9). Later, Freire goes on to explain that “dialogue is not an empty instructional tactic, but a natural part of the process of knowing” (Freire, 1985, p. 15), and requires that the teacher and student participate in a transactional learning process throughout their education. Through this transactional process, both teacher and student are engaged in learning and thinking critically, and are able to reflect on themselves and the world around them, therefore becoming better equipped to question and challenge the society in which they exist.

In Freire's seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he discusses education as a practice of freedom; this is in contrast to the practice of domination, which is embedded into the culture of education and which he sought to eradicate in the education system of lower class people. Freire modeled his literacy theory on this liberation education, as opposed to banking education, which is a traditional model of teaching and learning in the classroom. In this practice of liberation education, the teacher is considered a "teacher-learner," one who also learns alongside one's students; this is in contrast to the overwhelmingly accepted model of teaching, banking education, wherein students are empty containers to be filled by the knowledge the teacher possesses. Information is placed within the students' "containers" wherein they merely accept the information, memorize it, and retain it. With this model, there is no room for questioning, criticizing or analyzing information that is presented. Instead, students are left feeling they have no say in their own learning, and are expected to accept information that is "deposited" into them. In contrast to this method of teaching and thinking, Freire (1985) states that being a "teacher does not mean being a missionary, or having received a certain amount of command from heaven...a teacher is...one who must seek to improve and to develop certain qualities or virtues...the capacity to renew ourselves everyday is very important" (p. 15). By engaging in a transactional learning model, such as in liberation education, students and teachers have the capabilities to learn from one another, therefore allowing students to develop a critical consciousness about the world around them.

According to Freire (1970), as a component of critical literacy practice and theory, people "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world

which which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 83). This practice of questioning the world as it exists in reality versus accepting a dominant ideology engages people more deeply in the consumption and processing of information they receive as they are learning. Friere (1985) also describes the effects of the dominant ideology in education by explaining:

The dominant ideology, which serves the interests of the socially powerful, makes the world opaque to us. We often believe the ideological words that are told to us- and which we repeat-rather than believing what we’re living. The only way to escape that ideological trap, to unveil reality, is to create a counter-ideology to us break the dominant ideology. This is accomplished by reflecting critically on our concrete experiences,, to consider the raise d’etre of the facts we reflect on...Once teachers see the contradiction between their words and their actions, they...can become shrewdly clear and aware of their need to be reactionary, or they can accept a critical position to engage in action to transform reality. (p. 18)

Anderson and Irvine (1993) presented an early conceptual platform that looked at critical literacy through cultural studies, writing:

The importance of critical literacy being grounded pedagogically in a politics of difference offers learners, regardless of their particular classed, raced, or gendered subjectivities, opportunities to become 'border crossers.' Critical literacy, then, is learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations. (p. 82)

These power relations to which Anderson and Irvine refer echo Freire's belief in the power of power and the role the voice of the oppressors, or those in power, have over the information that is being consumed by those that are not in power. For Freire, this was rooted in the differences in socio-economic status of the people of third world countries, specifically.

Luke (2012) goes on to discuss the importance of the implementation of critical literacy practice in the classroom:

Critical literacy approaches view language, texts, and their discourse structures as principal means for representing and reshaping possible worlds. The aim is the development of human capacity to use texts to ...[transform] social relations and material conditions. As a cultural and linguistic practice, then, critical literacy entails an understanding of how texts and discourses can be manipulated to represent and, indeed, alter the world. (pp. 8-9)

This understanding of the manipulation of voices, texts, perspectives and languages is a crucial component to the purposes and implementations of critical literacy in the classroom. To continue to support this, Luke (2012) asserts that critical literacy "is an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological, and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum. It is focused on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities" (p. 5). Employing critical literacy in the classroom will develop awareness and empathy for students when considering the circumstances and histories of marginalized and oppressed communities in literature.

Critical literacy theory in the classroom. Working with secondary students provides them unique opportunities to analyze their own perceptions of the world and to engage in authentic discussion with one another. The power and discussion of language and its impact on social equality is a key component to fostering social justice and examining with a critical eye the role of power in the language of people. Critical literacy as a major educational theory is beginning to influence more and more classrooms of all age levels and content areas is also a complex and convoluted one. Behrman (2006) describes critical literacy as “a theory with implications for practice rather than a distinctive instructional methodology” (p. 490). This makes it difficult to create within a curriculum a coherent and consistent approach to critical literacy in the classroom. Behrman (2006) also insists that “in the critical literacy classroom, students are encouraged to critique their social conditions and to protest against them” (p.398). Critical literacy can be considered relatively straight forward in its aims-to expose the social injustices of various voices of people- but its course to achieving these aims is convoluted and potentially difficult in a classroom setting. It is a practice that needs to be continually adapted to each classroom environment and is one that, perhaps, should not be structured or unified. Alford (2001) insists that “a text may be interpreted from various positions, including the invited, author-centered view and the resistant, world-center view” (p. 238). It is these interpretations that create the discussions and transactions that enable both teachers and learners to question the validity of the voices that are represented in the literature to which they are exposed.

In his study of critical literacy in the adolescent classroom, Behrman (2006) examines exactly how critical literacy affects classroom-based instruction decisions, and

what teaching strategies are consistent with a critical literacy orientation. The study examined classroom practice as a focus. Students within these classroom studies were reading both nonfiction and fiction texts that were not labeled as textbook or canonical in nature.

Behrman (2006) found that “classroom literacy practices that involve students in reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, and producing counter-texts all help develop an understanding that text is given meaning, as opposed to containing meaning” (p. 497). This theme is the foundation of Freire’s work which emphasizes the role of power structures within education.

Behrman (2006) continues to explain some of the difficulties of implementing a formal critical literacy curriculum as it “appears to lack a consistently applied set of instructional strategies that would mark it as a coherent curricular approach..some critical literacy proponents have even resisted the development of a too narrowly conceived instructional methodology” (p.490). This leads to his assertion that critical literacy must be a continually evolving and redefined concept in practice within the classroom.

Classroom structures of critical literacy instruction, Behrman found, did not reflect the goals or aims of the objectives of the same texts these students were reading, for example, if themes such as social justice and democracy are some of the goals of critical literacy, then one might expect “not only classroom practices but also classroom structures to reflect those goals. Yet in almost every classroom practice reviewed, the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student remained clearly defined, and decision making was almost always in the hands of the teacher” (Behrman, 2006, p. 496). Again, this emphasizes the difficulty in maneuvering and implementing a critical literacy

curriculum in the classroom. This concept also echoes the same sentiments of Freire's work, wherein the learning that takes place in a classroom should be one reflective of a transactional relationship, with power structures being questioned and reconsidered, in order for both the student and instructor to create a genuine and authentic learning experience.

Lack of student choice, the strict role of the teachers and students in the classroom and the lack of collaboration within the classroom as a whole learning community all supported Behrman's findings of a somewhat ironic classroom structure for teaching critical literacy. Given the purpose of critical literacy, Behrman (2006) posits that "teachers and teacher educators must confront the question of whether any pedagogy that presumes a hierarchical relationship between teacher and students truly supports the development of critical inquiry" (p. 496).

Foss (2002) dictates that students should be encouraged to "peel" different layers of meaning from a text and to explore how the same reader might approach a text from different identities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality and religion" (p. 394). Foss's findings in her study of using layered texts to expose middle school students to injustices and engage in critical literacy found that most of her European-American students, while unfamiliar with concepts such as 'white' and 'male' privilege, were also more vocal in class discussion than were her more ethnically diverse students. Foss used techniques such as the "identity intersection" activity and "privilege walk" to expose students to the vast differences in their varying degrees of privilege. Working with student discussion and conversation, Foss utilized Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the focus of this study and discussion about privilege and identity. She

defined “onion books” as “‘classics’-those that stay with us and teach us something about ourselves and how we see the world. [They] offer the space for multiple readings, each time promising a different experience and question” (p. 394).

Rogers (2002) explains that the “critical literacy classroom is characterized by an emphasis on students’ voices and dialogue as tools with which students reflect on and construct meanings from texts...dialogue is important because learning is primarily a social act that is tied to its real-life context and relies on language as a mediator” (p. 775). In addition, according to Beck (2005), one of the goals of critical literacy in the classroom is to create and mold responsible citizens of the world; this task remains to be difficult as “the classroom is not removed from power struggles and inequalities that pervade our social lives beyond the school...realistically, not all students’ voices are created equal” (p.394). This creates an additional challenge for both new and veteran teachers, as ensuring classroom dynamics are productive and encourage student engagement can become difficult, especially given the nature of the text that students are reading and discussing.

Despite the challenges, engaging in critical literacy practice in the classroom is essential to encouraging and fostering global citizens of the world. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) suggest that since “today’s school students interact with many more information sources than [they] did...[students] need to know the author’s intent, to understand the sociocultural influences and to comprehend with a critical edge” (p. 52). This can be a difficult task to tackle with students, especially with students who may not be familiar with multicultural studies or texts, and therefore may have difficulty creating more than superficial connections or inferences with this literature. Given the culture of a

particular district, this may also yield pushback from students and parents, especially if texts may not appear to immediately serve the purpose of a traditional or standard canonical curriculum at the high school level.

Since critical literacy focuses so strongly on “issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation and action” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 53), it is of paramount importance that teachers are able to expose to students the power they hold in their own perspectives of language and social interaction. As a result of implementing a critical literacy stance in the classroom, teachers are able to encourage students to build their own constructs of justice and social equality; at the very least, teachers are able to expose their students to the flaws in these systems and to question the integrity and motive behind them. For Behrman (2006), the hope for implementing a critical literacy stance in the classroom is to yield authentic social action on behalf of students, meaning “the [research] activity must go beyond simply selecting a topic and finding library books or websites on the topic. Students must become engaged participants in a problem affecting them and be able to reflect upon the social and cultural forces that exacerbate or mitigate the problem” (p. 495).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

According to Paris (2014), as a practice, equality in pedagogy is “achieved by centering pedagogies on the heritage and contemporary practices of students and communities of color” (p. 87). For many teachers, this means putting aside the “question of how to get working-class students of color to speak and write more like the middle-class White ones” (p. 87), and instead integrate and incorporate multicultural literature within the classroom and curriculum. At the core of classrooms should lie the authentic,

valuable and pluralistic experiences of all students, and particularly of those students coming from historically marginalized or oppressed communities and cultures.

In order to demonstrate a culturally sustaining pedagogy, Paris (2012) states that educators must seek to “perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). Classroom learning should embrace multilingualism, multiculturalism and pluralism, creating a space for all student experiences to be validated, authenticated and valued. For Moll & Gonzales (1994), by adjusting the lens through which students are viewed—from one of Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, to one of the heritages and cultures of communities of color—wherein funds of knowledge are used not just as additional but fundamental, invaluable sources of knowledge and skills, educators can successfully integrate a culturally sustaining pedagogy practice within their classrooms. A study by Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992) sought to obtain relevant household knowledge that can be directly applied to the classroom and identify how students can use these funds of knowledge to directly and positively impact their education. These researchers found that teacher knowledge of student home lives can drastically reduce the “insularity of classrooms, and [contribute] to the academic content and lessons” (p. 139) that take place in a school environment. Through the results of this ethnographic study, the funds of knowledge were found to be especially relevant to teaching, as through the growing understanding of a student’s household knowledge, teachers can continue to apply and utilize these skills and experiences to explicitly enrich student learning.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy must first attempt to extend the “previous visions of asset pedagogies by demanding explicitly pluralist outcomes that are not centered on

White, middle-class, monolingual, and monocultural norms of educational achievement...[it] must resist static, unidirectional notions of culture and race that reinforce...difference and (in)equality without attending to shifting and evolving ones” (Paris, 2014, p. 95). As the demographics of the United States continue to change, so, too, should education practice, so as to reflect this changing population in classrooms. Culturally sustaining pedagogy extends previous conceptualizations regarding the work around literacy in that it requires educators go beyond simply responding or reacting to the cultures of the students in the classroom; instead, it proposes that education should assert itself in a foundational role in supporting and validating these cultures and experiences, while continuing to offer opportunities and access to the dominant cultures of power and access (Paris, 2012).

Students should not only be given the opportunity to be exposed to “window”, “mirror” and “sliding glass door” texts, (Sims Bishop, 1990) but should be given an authentic experience with these texts, so as to validate the experiences of the characters within the books, which represent the experiences of their peers within their classrooms, as well as outside the classroom walls. Sims Bishop goes on to emphasize the following:

Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds. The need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans. In this country, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems, books may be one of the few places where

children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people like themselves. If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy also reinforces the importance and overwhelming prevalence of the culture of power in the classroom; in order to change this culture and voice of power, educators must first recognize its presence and its effect on their own teaching as well as its presence and effect on the acquisition of knowledge by their students. By acknowledging, valuing and actively immersing education in the funds of knowledge of the students of marginalized and oppressed communities, educators can successfully use essential household or individual functioning and knowledge in formal classroom learning with students who would otherwise be considered as having a learning deficit in the traditional classroom environment (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). In short, students must be given the opportunity to use their existing knowledge, skills and experiences as authentic resources for their learning in the classroom, and not merely as secondary tools in their learning. Students must also be given the opportunity to learn about non-mainstream cultures and values through exposure to multicultural texts, discussion amongst one another and opportunities to question their own knowledge and subsequent biases within the safe space of a classroom.

Within the realm of sociocultural theory and learning is the need for culturally relevant pedagogy in the world of young learners. Culturally relevant pedagogy allows all learners to become engaged in a text and engage in transactions with their reading as it relates to their personal and cultural knowledge. These “funds of knowledge [are] the sources of knowledge that are central to [learners’] homes and communities” (Moll,

1992, 1994 p.), and provide opportunities for students of marginalized communities to utilize their sources of knowledge and align their cultural backgrounds with their learning. Through the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom, students of historically marginalized or oppressed backgrounds are able to use their “funds of knowledge” in the classroom and use them as vehicles for literacy and learning. Through the affirmation of student identities, educators can encourage students to be critical and questioning of their learning, be they members of mainstream or marginalized cultures.

Sonia Nieto & Multicultural Literature in the Classroom

Sonia Nieto is a 21st century reading theorist who has made significant contributions to the multicultural studies of reading. Her sociocultural theory and multicultural teaching practices have influenced teachers of literature and as well as other socio-cultural theorists. Sonia Nieto’s research focuses on multicultural education, teacher education, and the education of students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

While there are various cultural and other differences, Nieto primarily focuses on race, ethnicity, and language. Sonia Nieto emphasizes the importance of curriculum and instructional practices to allow students to feel a sense of identity in the nature of teaching and learning. While communication amongst teachers, students, parents, and schools is imperative, the primary interaction between teachers and students sets the stage for how learning evolves in a classroom setting.

Nieto (1992) defines multicultural education as “a process of comprehensive and basic education for all students. Multicultural education challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the

pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, gender, etc) that students, their communities, and teachers represent” (p. 208). As mentioned earlier, critical literacy and sociocultural theory go hand in hand, as multicultural education “uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, [thereby furthering] the democratic principles of justice” (Nieto, 1992, p. 208). Culturally relevant pedagogy, therefore, requires the application of critical literacy in its most fundamental use: to apply one’s own cultural experience to one’s learning and question the information that is being presented to the learner. Nieto’s focus is on ownership of learning, which can only take place in the context of multicultural curriculum and practice within the classroom, for students from all backgrounds and cultures.

Nieto (1994) also proposed that student voices must be included in discussions of school reform if there is ever to be any real changes within the classroom, indicating that “one way to begin the process of changing school policies and practices is to listen to students’ views about them” (p. 396). Nieto (1994) continues to discuss the issues with a typical school curriculum in schools which is more often than not “at odds with the experiences, backgrounds, hopes, and wishes of many students. This is true of both the tangible curriculum as expressed through books, other materials, and the actual written curriculum guides, as well as in the less tangible and “hidden” curriculum as seen in the bulletin boards, extracurricular activities, and messages given to students about their abilities and talents” (p. 399).

Nieto (1994) continues to encourage the implementation of a curriculum based on culturally relevant pedagogy as it “can act to either enable or handicap students in their

learning” (p. 404). She also emphasizes that “curriculum that draws on [students’] experiences and energizes them because it focuses precisely on those things that are most important in their lives.... can provide “cognitive empowerment,” encouraging students to become confident, active critical thinkers who learn that their background experiences are important tools for further learning” (p. 404).

Nieto emphasizes above all the importance and relevance of implementing a culturally relevant curriculum in the classroom for the sake of student learning. By incorporating culturally relevant texts in the classrooms, students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are provided the opportunity to use their personal and cultural knowledge in the classroom, alleviating many power structures that are often implemented in the classroom through the presence and influence of mainstream culture.

Integrating multicultural literature in the secondary classroom. Integrating multicultural literature in the secondary classroom provides students opportunities to become exposed to communities of people that may have been overlooked, unseen, or written about through a bias or prejudiced perspective in much of the traditional, Anglo-Saxon literature they are typically exposed to in most curriculums.

Within this study, Burroughs (1999) studied three cases in an English classroom at two high schools in New Jersey. These schools were chosen based on their significant minority population, mostly African American; due to the district’s diverse student population, the English department chair encouraged teachers to use multicultural literature in their English classes. The study’s data focused on the teacher’s decisions to choose particular works of literature in their curriculum and their reasons for inclusion (p.140). Data was also triangulated based on the conversations Burroughs had with both

the teachers and the students and the context and content of their changing conversations and discussions in the classroom based on and around the various multicultural literature texts that these teachers integrated into their curriculums.

The growing population of immigrant families in America is just one of the reasons to encourage exposure to multicultural literature in the classroom. Burroughs (1992) emphasizes this important learning factor, states a similar rationale for the inclusion of multicultural literature “in secondary English curriculum has been that many students come to school from diverse cultural traditions. Teachers who try to tap into these alternate literary traditions may be able to support learning in ways that make sense for students” (pp.136-137). Creating these moments also creates opportunities for students to incorporate their background and funds of knowledge into their learning, creating deeper transactions and making more meaning with text and literature in their classrooms.

Despite these opportunities for learning for students of cultural backgrounds, the traditional curriculum still stands for many teachers. Burroughs goes on to describe the effects of this integration on the formulaic and standards-based outline of most curriculums. Burroughs testifies the following:

For many teachers, integration constitutes a major problem in the incorporation of multicultural literature into this traditional curriculum. In literature curriculums constructed upon ‘scope’ and ‘sequence’, nontraditional authors do not fit comfortably into the curriculum...as a result, this literature may be seen as ‘lesser than’ the ‘great works’ of the canon, and it remains marginalized. (p. 137)

By incorporating these authors, Burroughs finds, many teachers do not consider the authors and their writing in the same category of literary “greatness”, and instead are considered outliers, and therefore remain marginalized, as opposed to opening up opportunities to experience works by authors of non-Anglo-Saxon origin and culture. Placing a slave narrative in between the works of authors such as Hemmingway, Milton, Melville, or Crane only serves to create a stronger contrast between both the content and the language of these works. Instead of exposing students to multicultural writing and texts, it instead only emphasizes the crude differences in writing between the two.

Burroughs continues to argue that specific attention to the reconception of instruction within constructivist frameworks can yield positive changes to a typical secondary curriculum. Instead of focusing on the teacher, focus on the student, their experiences, and the value they would retain from studying these works. For secondary students, Burroughs argues, “the key is that by entering into culturally significant conversations, students are entering into traditions of discourse that implicitly represent various ways of knowing and doing” (p.139).

Literature Circles in the Classroom

Literature circles, popularized by Harvey Daniels (2002), are “small, peer led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book” (p. 2). Daniels (1994) asserts that in the classroom, “when students engage in literature circles, they become reflective and thoughtful readers by developing higher levels of critical thinking and multiple ways to respond to literature while taking part in Grand Conversations” (p. 3). Reutzler & Cooter (2009) explain that “Grand Conversations

about books motivate students to extend, clarify, and elaborate their own interpretations of the text as well as to consider alternative interpretations offered by peers” (p. 191).

Using literature circles as a mode of communication and discussion within the classroom can provide students with a comfortable environment wherein they can discuss their readings, their questions and their concerns over a text. For the purpose of this research, the term “literature circles” is being used instead of “book clubs,” given that book clubs tend to focus on a small group of participants that have read the same text. For this research and data analysis, students will have primarily read independently chosen texts that fall within the same theme and genre, and therefore will have discussions that are thematically based, as opposed to specific content based characteristics of the same text.

Bonnie Burns’s (1998) article on the impact of literature circles on the classroom climate explores the positive implications of incorporating this teaching strategy in the classroom of adolescent and secondary classrooms. Burns (1998) states that literature circles in the classroom “incorporates several features that can change the classroom climate to be more cooperative, responsible, and pleasurable while encouraging growth in reading. These features include student choice, groups of mixed ability, student management of small interactive groups, and substantial time to read during the school day” (p. 124). All of these strategies and skills are useful not just for student participation and engagement in classroom lessons and activities, but are also important real world skills that students may apply outside of the classroom.

Burns (1998) goes on to discuss the importance of student choice and the roles these literature circles play in enhancing or helping students understand a theme. Burns

(1998) states that “literature circles offer to students a limited selection of books around a central theme, not just a random offering of novels” (p. 124), which again helps emphasize a thematic unit.

Improving the classroom climate using literature circles is also provided through differentiation within these activities. Burns (1998) says that especially for reluctant readers, “with literature circles, students are able to make several of their own decisions, which is motivating to many reluctant readers and gives students a feeling of control over a part of their learning” (p. 125). To add on, for groups of students of mixed abilities, “the social interaction that takes place in a literature circle is a key component of its success. To be able to verbalize the content, to listen to other modes of thinking, and to hear other perspectives all contribute to deepening comprehension” (p. 126). By incorporating literature circle discussions in the classroom, the environment becomes student centered and focused on student independent learning, while simultaneously encouraging cooperative learning and engagement with students and texts.

Casey (2008) emphasizes the importance of literature circles in the classroom in engaging students who may otherwise be considered reluctant readers, since “literature circles gives students the freedom to read self selected material at their own pace, which is an essential component to encourage and promote sustained silent reading and independent reading” (p. 283). Student choice as a motivating factor in reading, despite the theme or content, will promote active engagement with a text. Through this active engagement, students are more likely to create genuine discussion amongst their peers and create meaningful connections with their texts. To continue, Casey (2008) emphasizes that “by giving students their choice of reading, the likelihood that students

will read the text is greater. Literature circles also engage readers for many different reasons and on various levels. Students engage with text because they have the opportunity to make choices, participate, and take ownership of their own learning while sharing responsibility for that learning with peers” (p. 283). By using literature circles as the primary discussion strategy for the purpose of these activities and lessons, students are both more comfortable and encouraged to engage in more critical literacy based discussions with their peers, and are encouraged to engage in authentic questioning with one another.

Literature circles as spaces for multicultural literature discussions. Some previous research incorporating literature circles in the classroom to curate discussions about multicultural literature indicate several findings. Thein, Guise & Sloan’s (2011) research focused on a teacher’s literature circle unit in the classroom that gave students a choice in their reading and to introduce them to texts with topical political, social, and cultural perspectives. This teacher’s “literature circle unit aimed to engage students in discussions of current, relevant political and multicultural texts” (p. 16). To provide reasoning for this unit, Thein, Guise & Sloan (2011) noted that “literature circles seemed a logical space for this instruction not only because they are designed to provide students with greater interpretive freedom than occurs in teacher-led contexts, but also because the texts selected for this unit were approved for literature circles but not for general classroom use” (p. 16). Despite the efforts of the teacher in this research study and the participation of the students in the focal research group, Thein, Guise & Sloan found of these literature circles that if teachers want students to move beyond initial personal

responses to a text, a typical literature circle is not likely an appropriate space for this work” (p.22).

The findings of this particular study prove the difficulty in encouraging students to “illuminate a broader issue relevant to the use of literature circles for teaching multicultural and political texts” (Thein, Guise & Sloan, 2008, p.23). While providing students the opportunity to create a space wherein authentic discussion and provocative, critical examination of texts could occur, very rarely do these scenarios enable students to examine different perspectives and stances of a character. Instead, participants in these literature circles required teacher or researcher interference, prompting questioning and analysis of the text through the perspectives of each character based on their circumstances, but students continued to instead create personal connections with the characters and rely on less critical analysis, thereby only “reinforcing their status quo stances toward social class” (p. 21).

Conclusion

Despite the importance of integrating multicultural literature in the secondary classroom, conforming to a traditional curriculum and canon prohibit integration of these texts into secondary ELA classrooms. Freire (1970) and Nieto (1992) both believe in the power of enhancing the student’s experience in the classroom through questioning of text and exposure to typically marginalized worlds. Offering students choices of texts for independent reading of multicultural texts, in tandem with these learning models, can foster critical literacy in the classroom.

Chapter III

Methodology

Research Design & Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and is based on teacher observation, reflection and analysis of student discussion and responses to the text. Students read and discuss texts and information using a critical literacy approach, wherein they examine the presence of otherwise marginalized voices throughout fiction. For this particular study, students are exposed to texts which focus on the lives of people who have been typically marginalized or oppressed both in history and in modern day; the purpose being to discover and question their own worldviews and beliefs regarding these peoples and their histories and circumstances, thereby employing critical literacy in both their reading of texts and overall perspectives of the events which occur around them.

Using a qualitative approach for data analysis in this particular study is vital for teacher research as students are chosen as participants based on cultural backgrounds, allowing for deeper and more relevant information about students and their reflections on and reactions about the texts they are reading. As “many qualitative studies in education do not focus on culture or build a grounded theory...[qualitative] researchers ...seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives or worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998). In order to better analyze the perspectives and worldviews of these students, qualitative research must be used as opposed to quantitative in order to investigate the thinking processes of these students. Because the purpose of this particular study is to research the effects of exposure to different voices that are multicultural in nature, by evaluating and comparing student thoughts and

reactions to different texts as well as each other, the researcher may be able to track patterns and changes in thought processes primarily through student interaction and questioning of both students' own values as well as the values of other students.

Procedure of Study

The study took place between October and December of the 2019-2020 academic school year in an academic 10th grade English Language Arts classroom. All students across my classrooms were first given a survey of student reading history and interest in order to gain fundamental information about student reading habits and their general relationship with literacy and texts. This survey detailing their reading history and motivation to read, as well as their interactions with texts previously, was given to attain more information about student relationships with the texts they have read in the past. This survey included yes and no questions as well as open ended items relating to students' personal history with reading in school and outside of school, as well as their ability to make personal connections with the various books they have read in their personal reading histories. The responses on these questions provided me with rich data on individual student reading histories.

Within the survey, students were asked to gauge their connection to the texts they have read and detail when they felt represented in the reading of these texts, if at all, through double entry journals and discussion posts. Students participated in a number of student talk discussions wherein their discourse as well as their understanding of the text in the context of their own community was collected.

Once the foundation of our initial reading unit was introduced, students were given initial background information, including vocabulary terms and necessary

nonfiction sources, as well as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *TedTalk* “The Danger of the Single Story,” to create background knowledge and a foundation for the purpose of classroom discussion and student writing. The first terminology activity included the introduction and discussion of the term “intersectionality”; students viewed a 3 minute video through the website *Teaching Tolerance* which examined the definition and examples of this term in authentic scenarios. Students then discussed this term in an activity to strengthen their understanding of the implications of this term in the context of real life scenarios.

Next, multiple class periods were dedicated to Chimamanda Adichie’s *TedTalk* titled “The Danger of the Single Story.” Students viewed her talk and took notes throughout on key terms and anecdotes of Adichie’s, which led to a discussion of discrimination, prejudice, marginalization and oppression of various social groups that exist within today’s society. This procedure was required in order for students to become immersed in the thematic elements of this unit, providing more context and understanding for their reading and critical discussions. Using Adichie’s *TedTalk* as a foundation for context as well as setting the tone for the classroom discussion was vital in creating an appropriate environment in the classroom for our unit and subsequent readings and class discussions.

Before students engaged in discussions about their books, and after having practiced using some of the important terminology discussed above, students were exposed to a variety of topical, current event themes. Students were given various current event news articles to discuss amongst each other in student self-selected groups to get

themselves acquainted with talking about potentially difficult topics that they would also encounter in the texts they would read.

For student self-selection of books, students completed a book walk to learn about texts they would potentially be interested in studying and reading independently. Students were provided with access to over 100 texts in the classroom library. The book walk took place over the course of one class period; students were encouraged to peruse the books, read an excerpt, discuss them amongst one another, and take note of any appealing or compelling components of the book. Once the book walk activity was completed, students were asked to list their top three texts from this activity, and indicate on their list any reason as to why they would want to read that particular text. Based on text availability and student lists, students received their independent reading texts. Upon receipt of their text, they were given in and out of class time to complete their independent reading.

Participant Selection

While all students participated in all aspects of this study as part of the classroom activities and lessons, from the larger group of students who provided their consent for data research, eight students were chosen, whose data is analyzed and discussed throughout this research. Students were chosen based on their responses to the initial survey taken at the beginning of the year as well as based on their background demographics. Within this study, two of the participants are of an African American background; one student is of a racially mixed background of African American and white; one student is of a Korean American background; one student is of an Egyptian background. The remaining three students are white.

The percentage of male and female students was not a consideration in choosing participants for this study. The primary focus was to create a representation of different cultural backgrounds, which in this case and in this district included students from different racial backgrounds. Given that over 50% of the population in this district is white, I wanted to ensure that there were some students that would represent this portion of the population, in order to compare and contrast their data with the data of those students who are not culturally considered white.

The decision to identify a small number of students for the purpose of research and data analysis also stems from the relevance of the constructivist nature of the research. The purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). Students to be included in the research study were chosen to create a “small sample of great diversity” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), thereby allowing the naturally complex and multifaceted nature of a classroom environment to function as it would, while still being able to focus on the research question and its components.

The methodology used is constructivist in nature in that student “constructions are not more or less ‘true’, in any absolute sense, but simply more or less informed and/or sophisticated. Constructions are alterable, as are their associated ‘realities’” (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). As is common in teacher research, and given the nature of the research question for this particular study, by adhering to a constructivist approach, I was able to uncover student knowledge shaped by transactions and interactions with both text and

other people (in this case, students) and therefore tracked the course and emerging patterns of their knowledge and thinking throughout the research.

For teacher researchers, “when choosing methods appropriate to their questions, teachers frequently tap qualitative methods and interpretive processes to observe, document, and analyze classroom practices and student learning. Attending to the naturalistic conditions and multiple layers of classroom life demands a subjective, holistic, and flexible approach” (Klehr 2012). Therefore, for the purpose of research and data collection, primary focus was placed on formative assessment and evaluation of student talk, teacher conferencing and informal as well as formal short writing tasks. Students were asked to gauge their connection to the texts they have read and detail when they felt represented in the reading of these texts, if at all, through double entry journals and discussion posts. The purpose and importance of using qualitative methods for this particular research is that “qualitative methods offer a strong complement to numerical measures, allowing one to more comprehensively study how teaching and learning happen in dynamic classroom contexts” (Klehr, 2012, p. 123).

In addition to these qualitative strategies, according to Creswell and Miller (2000), “there are eight validation strategies frequently used by qualitative researchers,” some of which were utilized in the analysis of the data found in this research. These strategies include prolonged engagement and persistent observation of the field, triangulation and clarifying. The study involved multiple discussions and activities held over an extended period of time wherein I would build trust with students by learning their cultures and backgrounds and questioning their own understanding and knowledge of the subjects we discussed and studied. As mentioned earlier, written, verbal, informal

and formal writing and assignments were triangulated in order to validate the findings of the research. Finally, my own background and position on this subject was analyzed in teacher research journal entries to clarify my own bias as a researcher.

Initial survey responses were reviewed and participants in the study were chosen based on their demographics as well as their responses to the questions in this initial survey.

Data Sources

Given the qualitative nature of the study, I made the determination to collect data from various sources through immersive and authentic modes in order to triangulate data obtained from students (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Data sources included student surveys from before and after the unit begins wherein students discuss their understanding or interest in independent reading, multicultural literature and the themes present in multicultural literature as well.

Students participated in small group discussions based on their readings, wherein student talk was recorded and analyzed for use of particular vocabulary and language that was threaded throughout lessons based on Adichie’s “Single Story” TedTalk. Additional small group talk discussion was used in teacher observation to identify themes in student thinking and reasoning and identifying patterns of questions and confusions amongst students.

Student artifacts were also gathered in the form of Double Entry Journals based on independent reading and were used to analyze students’ text-to-self and text-to-world connections. A “one pager” activity allowed students to create real world connections with their text to current, historical, cultural or political events. Students completed a

final written reflection wherein they discussed the narrative of their text through a critical literacy perspective.

Data Analysis

In order to form a working hypothesis, the data collected was triangulated to analyze the impact of reading multicultural literature in a 10th grade English classroom on students' abilities to employ critical literacy to current and historical events. In addition to analyzing the impact of reading this genre of literature, by triangulating the data a thorough understanding of themes and data findings was created to more comprehensively understand the responses and phenomena. Students completed surveys at the beginning of the semester to identify their interest in reading in general and what type of reading they enjoy, as well as to identify any moments in their reading history when they could personally connect with a text. This triangulation method of using multiple methods of data collection allows for a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). By using various sources of qualitative data, including small group talk, student reflections on writing and text to world discussions, I was able to chart student responses as students continued their independent reading and were exposed to additional sources which required students to incorporate critical literacy in their thinking and writing.

By coding the data, specifically students' double entry journals and their responses in small group discussions, I was able to find trends amongst students as the discussions continued and students completed more reading and journal entries. Coding allows for ways "to link classroom research to teaching in powerful and immediate ways" (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p.148) which also provides for opportunities for deeper

understanding of research findings. From these students, I continued to code information gained from their double entry journal submissions as well as their literature circle discussions to identify trends and patterns in student thinking as well as trends in student talk. For students' double entry journals, codes and their meanings included in the coding sheets were "TS" (text to self), "TW" (text to world), "DNC" (does not connect personally), "SUM" (summary) and "Q" (questions). In addition to coding the information from their double entry journals, I created a table that identified trends in student talk, I was able to gain information about student understanding of both their texts and the text's connections to the real world, and listen for the development of their empathy towards groups of people from multicultural backgrounds.

My teacher research journal allowed me to reflect on the results of various activities and identify more trends in student talk; often, these entries provided more insight into unpredictable or surprising student responses, which led to continued questioning on my end about the relationship between multicultural literature and its effects on student understanding of real world events and issues. My teacher research journal also allowed me to reflect on my own teaching strategies in terms of the types of language I used, the types of resources and texts I provided for students and the nature of the questions I would ask them to garner deeper critical thinking. The information gained from these sources were triangulated in order to confirm findings and information about students and the activities in which they participated.

Community Context

Green Mountain Township contains a land area of approximately 21.95 square miles with a population estimated at 47,512 residents as of the 2010 Census. The Green Mountain Public Schools has eleven schools that serve grades pre-kindergarten through twelve. Green Mountain High School is the district's only public high school and is located in Middlesex County. The enrollment for students at Green Mountain High School for the 2019-2020 school year is 2,040 students.

The racial makeup of Green Mountain is predominantly White, yet has become more racially diverse since 2000. In 2010, Green Mountain was 69.4% White, 4% African American, 22.8% Asian or Pacific Islander and 6.7% identified as Hispanic. Approximately one-third of the population is foreign-born; China and India are the largest sources. The population by age is 75.9% over the age of 18.

Regarding educational attainment for adults aged 25 and over, 54.8% of the population had a bachelor's degree or higher in the 2010-2012 ACS as compared to 47.1% in 2000. People with graduate or professional degrees increased from 19.5% to 21.6% during this time period. Median family income increased from \$86,863 in 2000 to \$108,267 in the 2010-2012 ACS. During this time period, the percentage of children under the age of 18 that are in poverty more than doubled from 3.1% to 6.6%.

Median family income increased from \$86,863 in 2000 to \$108,267 in the 2010-2012 ACS. During this time period, the percentage of children under the age of 18 that are in poverty more than doubled from 3.1% to 6.6%. At the district level, the number and percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch has been increasing. Whereas 789 students (8.9%) received free or reduced lunch in the school district in 2008-09, the

number increased to 1,304 (15.8%) in 2013-14. Nearly one-quarter of the district's free or reduced lunch population attend Green Mountain High School.

School Context

Green Mountain High School is considered a Future Ready School; it has received the Bronze Certification, was awarded as a Blue Ribbon School, was listed on the 2018 AP Honor Roll and 95% of EBHS students attend post-secondary institutions. Green Mountain High School is also a Model School of the Arts, including the Award-Winning Concert Choir, Chamber Orchestra and Wind Ensemble. In addition, over 80% of students participate in extracurricular activities - 54 clubs and 30 sports. In statewide assessments, 71% of students met the state expectations in Language Arts, and 11% met the statewide expectations in Math in the 2018-2019 statewide administration of assessments.

Classroom Context

Mrs. McNaughton's English 10 Academic classes consist of students who do not qualify for either resource or honors level English classes. Class sizes are between 25-29 students per class, with 42 minute periods that meet every day of the school week, Monday through Friday. Students are also provided with one-to-one devices, specifically PC Laptops, wherein students have access to the school's WiFi and Canvas, the Learning Management System adopted only this year by Green Mountain School district. Within this school district, 10th grade is the first grade level at the high school; students entering 10th grade were previously enrolled in the junior high school which includes 8th and 9th grade students. The high school, while only three grade levels, still houses approximately

2,000 students. All students are required to pass English for their three years at the high school in order to graduate on time.

The curriculum for English 10 is an American Literature curriculum; the anchor texts within this curriculum include *The Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. There is also an independent reading and book clubs unit built into the curriculum; officially, the 10th grade independent reading unit is focused on a war and justice unit that include texts such as *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah, *The Alice Network* by Kate Quinn, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* by Philip Gourevitch, *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr, *The Zookeeper's Wife* by Diane Ackerman and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, among others. Given the nature of the study and the genre of texts that will be utilized in the classroom, Mrs. McNaughton was given explicit permission by both the English 8-12 Chairperson and Language Arts and Literacy Supervisor to complete an independent reading unit using multicultural texts that were provided by donations through DonorsChoose.org.

Most students across all of my classes have been in the Green Mountain School District for most of their lives or have, at the very least, attended Winston Junior High School for their two prior years of school (8th-9th grades) together. In order to create an appropriate and comfortable space for students to communicate, I utilized resources from *Teaching Tolerance* to provide students with background information and a foundation of understanding of the gravity and implications of both the texts being read and the various subject matter that was being discussed during these class periods.

Student Context

Students at this particular age, section and course level are, generally, unmotivated to read independently and have difficulty making both inferences within the text as well as connections to real world or current events. The availability of E-books and E-readers as well as audio books through programs such as Audible and Learning Ally make it easier for more reluctant readers to be able to become engaged with and complete reading assignments independently. Within this unit, students were given the option to read their texts online, using an audio book or with the more traditional route of using a hard copy of the text that was provided to them and wherein they were expected to complete reading at home.

Participants whose data was analyzed throughout the course of this study included Maria, Rachel, Michael, Kourtney, Meagan, Katie, Derrick and Taylor. All students are in 10th grade, and no students had a 504 or IEP. Students are in my Academic or general level class which is seen everyday for 42 minutes. Participants were first chosen from a pool of students who answered “Yes” to the question on the survey that asked if they believed reading was important and why. Students who answered “yes” to this question were then separated into groups of motivated and unmotivated readers, again based on their own self-assessment on this survey. Finally, participants from this pool were chosen based on

Maria is a 15 year old Korean female who describes herself as a non-reader, but is very academically motivated. Maria is also an active athlete and participates in track and field during the fall and winter at the high school. Maria was born and raised in Brooklyn, and moved to Green Mountain in 6th grade.

Rachel is a 15 year old Caucasian female who describes herself as a motivated reader both in school and outside of school. She is very academically motivated. Rachel is a very committed athlete and is on the cheerleading squad for both football and basketball at the high school. Rachel was born and raised in Green Mountain and has attended school here for the duration of her academic career.

Michael is a Caucasian, 15 year old boy who described himself as a motivated reader, and who prefers to use audiobooks to read independently. Michael is very academically motivated and a hard worker. Michael does not participate in after school extra-activities, but has a self-described active social life. Michael was born in Green Mountain and has attended all of his schooling in this district.

Kourtney is a 15 year old African American female who describes herself as a reader at home, but not at school. Kourtney is very academically motivated, but does not participate in any extracurricular activities at school. Kourtney was born in a different district and only moved to Green Mountain in 9th grade; this is her second year in this district. Kourtney was educated in her elementary and middle school years in a much larger urban school district.

Meagan is a 15 year old African American female who describes herself as a reader only at home, but not at school. Meagan does not participate in any extra-curricular activities. Kourtney was born and raised in the Green Mountain school district and has only ever gone to school in this district.

Katie is a 15 year old Caucasian female who enjoys reading occasionally and is very academically motivated. Katie is extremely active in sports and plays volleyball both for the high school as well as for a traveling recreational league, which causes her to

miss school for various tournaments throughout the year. Katie was born and raised in Green Mountain and has only ever attended school here.

Derrick is a 15 year old African American boy who describes himself as a non-reader. Derrick does not participate in any extra-curricular activities but enjoys playing video games at home. Derrick has previously lived in an urban city and attended public school there briefly in middle school, but has since returned to Green Mountain district and attended public school here from 8th grade to the present.

Taylor is a 15 year old Egyptian girl who is very academically motivated but does not consider herself a reader. Taylor is not involved in any extra-curricular activities but is very involved in her church community, which is common in the Egyptian population in this district. Taylor has always lived in Green Mountain and attended public school here for the duration of her academic career.

Chapter Four of this thesis discusses the results of the initial student survey and questionnaire, excerpts from my teacher research journal, excerpts from student discussions and some responses from student work samples. Chapter Five discusses the results and implications of the study and recommendations for further topics of study.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis and Findings

Chapter four includes the data and findings of this study which focused on identifying the effects of multicultural literature on fostering critical literacy in the secondary English classroom. This study took place over a series of eight weeks and the data analyzed included teacher research journal entries, student interest surveys, student led discussion in small groups and student artifacts. Data was analyzed and triangulated to determine a number of findings which emerged as the study and research continued in the classroom. Findings of this research and data include: (1) trends in student likes and dislikes in their reading history; (2) patterns in student book selection; (3) understanding of a person's identity and the implications of one's identity within the context of social groups; (4) evidence of the extent to which students have been exposed to or are aware of historically marginalized or oppressed groups; (5) evidence of student comfort level during small group discussions based on current or topical events; (6) the impact of real world context on student understanding of multicultural themes.

Trends in Student Likes and Dislikes

At the beginning of the study, students completed a survey to assess their interest and motivation in reading, both inside the classroom and outside of the classroom. The survey results (Table 1) included questions measuring their levels of reading enjoyment, specific texts they read, and connections to the life experiences of characters.

Table 1

Reading Motivation and Interest Survey

Student Name	Do you enjoy reading?	What is the most recent book you remember having disliked?	What is the most recent book you remember having liked?	Can you recall a time when you have read a book wherein you felt you had similar experiences to the characters in the story?
Maria	no	No title	<i>Wonder</i>	no
Rachel	no	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	yes
Michael	no	<i>Code Talker</i>	<i>The Secret Life of Bees</i>	yes
Kourtney	no	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	<i>The Boy in the Striped Pajamas</i>	yes
Meagan	yes	<i>Harry Potter</i>	<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	no
Katie	yes	<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	<i>James and the Giant Peach</i>	no
Derrick	yes	<i>Hatchet</i>	<i>Divergent</i>	no
Taylor	no	<i>Odyssey</i>	<i>Out of My Mind</i>	no

Student responses above indicated that a mix of both school required reading as well as recreational reading fell in the “liked” category of books they can remember having read that they enjoyed. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, *of Mice and Men* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* are all texts that are in the curriculum at the junior high school in this district. *Wonder*, *James and Giant Peach*, *Divergent* and *Out of My Mind* are all texts that are not within the curriculum or are at a lower reading level

than junior high. Despite 53% of students stating they do not enjoy reading, they were all able to name a text that they have enjoyed in the past.

Table 1 also represents a trend in student dislikes. Many of these titles, with the exception of *Harry Potter*, are found within the curriculum of the district, indicating a trend in student dislikes of canonical based literature. Historical background knowledge and a strong understanding of archaic language are also required for many of these texts, which most students may not possess. When asked to elaborate on their reasoning for disliking specific texts, some student responses included “I didn’t really get the point,” “I was not interested in the story” and “I thought the words were hard to understand”. These factors are indicative of a trend in lack of schema or background knowledge with both language and content, which can prevent students from engaging deeply with a text.

To add on to this, texts such as *Romeo and Juliet* require a strong understanding of Shakespearean language and vocabulary as well as text structure; most students do not have adequate interest or background knowledge of this genre of literature and therefore may have difficulty forming connections with Shakespearean texts. While the theme and plot of the text is familiar and interesting, the language and sentence structure impede student understanding of the literature.

A different genre from *Romeo and Juliet* but very dependent upon background knowledge, *Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac is based on the cultures and lives of Navajo Indians and takes place during World War II; such a text requires student background knowledge about the culture and history of the Navajo Indians, the culture of Marines during war time as well as background and knowledge of World War II. Without sufficient understanding of these concepts, students could have a difficult time

connecting with this text. In a similar vein, *Hatchet* also requires specific knowledge of nature, hunting and the culture of the outdoors in order to become immersed in the text and its relevant themes. This may explain students selecting “dislike,” but without further investigation, it is not definitive.

Another text included in the “dislike” column is *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck which also requires a specific knowledge and understanding of a very specific time period in American history, one which could easily cause confusion or disinterest if students are not educated in the social, cultural and economic circumstances of the US during this time. Finally, Homer’s *Odyssey* is yet another text that requires understanding and interest in the language and context of the text. Without these tools and background knowledge, students might have found the texts themselves uninteresting and were unable to create genuine connections with them.

Self-Selection of Independent Reading Texts

In order to encourage students to develop genuine connections with the texts they read, they were given the opportunity to choose a multicultural independent reading text. Students participated in a book walk for the duration of one class period to explore and investigate the texts that were available. A copy of each text was made available to students in the classroom, and as they completed a short walk around the room, they examined the covers, read the book flaps and the back of the books and identified potential texts they would be interested in reading. Throughout the walk, students were asked to share what was interesting about any of the books. Based on observation of student discussions, initially, students’ primary focus was identifying the length of each

book, the size of the font and the design of the cover of the text. Some of the feedback I observed while listening to students in the book walk included the following:

Taylor: [referring to *In the Neighborhood of True*] “I like the cover of this book, the font is pretty and I think the title is interesting.”

Michael: “Does this book have an audiobook with it?”

Meagan: “I saw the movie of this book, I liked it.”

Derrick: “This book has pictures in it!”

Maria: “This book is too long.”

It was clear in this first activity that students did not outwardly appear particularly excited to read these texts. Before this activity began, they were asked to look for books that would both interest them as well as books that discussed themes or ideas they may not be familiar with, in order to give them a range of potential books to choose from when it came time to rank their book choices. As they were looking for books to potentially read, they were given an index card to write down any titles that interested them. After the book walk concluded, they sat down and ranked their texts from “1-3”, with “1” being the text they would be most interested in reading and “3” for the text that, out of their choices, they would be least interested in reading. Next to their first book choice, they were asked to include one reason why they were so interested in that text.

There was much of overlap of number one student choices. Some of the most popular student choice titles included *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah, *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, *In the Neighborhood of True* by Susan Kaplan Carlson, *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander and *Never Fall Down* by

Patricia McCormick. When reviewing their book choice index cards, some of the comments indicating the reason for student interest included the following:

Maria: “This book looked interesting because it is about music.” (*Never Fall Down*)

Kourtney: “This book looks interesting because there is a movie about it, and if it was made into a movie the book is probably also interesting.” (*The Hate U Give*)

Katie: “I like the cover of this book, I am not sure what it is about so maybe by reading it I could understand the cover.” (*The Glass Castle*)

Taylor: “The cover is pretty, and I am interested to see the connection between the KKK and the Jewish people living in Georgia.” (*In the Neighborhood of True*)

Derrick: “I like basketball and I have never really read a book about it.” (*The Crossover*)

I noticed a few patterns in student book selection. In general, student interest in these books were based on personally attractive elements that appealed to their personal preferences, such as the attractiveness of the cover, the words in the title that referred to something they were interested in, or something that spoke to their own experiences. The books that were available to students all fell outside the realm of mainstream culture, and therefore student choice of text could be due to their specific interests or an element of their own personal culture that spoke to them. For some students, based on some of their responses above, these elements included their interest in sports and movies. None of the

available texts were based on mainstream stories or cultures, but only a handful of students made comments about their interest in the book based on the cultural content of the book.

Over half of the texts had African American characters as protagonists and focused on the African American perspective; given the small population of African American students in this building, it was telling and interesting to see that all of my African American students across all of my classes, with the exception of two students, chose a text with an African American protagonist. There were also plenty of students who are not African American who chose texts that focused on the African American experience.

A second pattern I noticed in student self-selection of texts indicated a more cognitive element to the texts students chose. In their brief index card evaluation and response as to why they ranked their texts in the order they did, an overwhelming number of students from all of my classes surveyed (87%) indicated on their index cards that they were curious and interested in the story and reading something new. This observation speaks to two important findings of this study: one, the influence of the availability of literature from a diverse and culturally relevant standpoint, and two, the impact of student self-selection of texts based on personal interest and connection to the subject matter.

Student Understanding and Implications of Identity in Social Groups

One of the aims of this study was to engage students in critical literacy and to facilitate critical writing and analysis of current and historical events through student talk and relevant multicultural texts and materials. By encouraging students to participate in discussions about real world ideas which shaped and influenced many of the authors and

stories students were reading about in their independent reading texts, students could evaluate current and historical events through a critical literacy perspective. Finally, students were encouraged to question not just the events themselves, but the sources of the information.

As a preliminary exercise and activity, students explored the website *Teaching Tolerance* to identify terms, language and techniques for engaging in classroom discussions about potentially difficult or uncomfortable topics. Structures and strategies from this resource were used to guide the facilitation of class discussion. Some of this language and structure included using “I” statements when discussing emotions and feelings and using silent discussion protocol.

One of the initial and most important pieces of vocabulary that students were introduced to was the term *intersectionality*. By introducing this term, I wanted to engage students in incorporating appropriate language as well as help provide context of the texts we would be reading. Students watched a short informational video from *Teaching Tolerance* that defined the term *intersectionality* and discussed the implications of this term for people of different circumstances and backgrounds. After having watched the video and given students time to jot down their thoughts and responses, students were asked to discuss, in their own words, what the definition and implications of this term meant for them. One student discussion went as follows:

Taylor: Intersectionality means you’re being judged based on the parts of your identity that is different.

Michael: I think it has to do with racism and how white people and black people are treated differently.

Taylor: Yea and I think it also has to do with being different and how people treat other people that are different because of things they can't help about themselves.

Michael: It's pretty much like discrimination.

This discussion was indicative of a few themes. The first was that students initially understood the foundation of intersectionality as rooted in the "different" parts of a person's identity. This is by no means incorrect, but based on the exchange included here, the more important understanding of this term is revealed through Taylor's assertion that "being different" in the case of intersectionality also means a person cannot change a particular part of their identity for which they may be facing prejudice or discrimination. The moment when Taylor states that the importance of intersectionality includes the elements of one's identity that one cannot help but have (i.e., one's race or physical disability), is an important factor in understanding this term and the implications of this term for members of oppressed or marginalized communities.

There were, however, similar echoes amongst other groups of Michael's statement above about intersectionality being like discrimination. Upon further examination of student discussion, it seemed as if students were trying hard to find a term they were more familiar with to help them define and identify the newer, more unfamiliar term of *intersectionality*. Students were struggling with the interconnectedness of one's identity and their influence on social categorizations of those specific elements and how they create these systems of disadvantage and discrimination.

The purpose of viewing the video and the follow up discussions of intersectionality was to get students talking, in general, about the fact that differences

exist amongst just about everyone, but more so they exist amongst those who are marginalized or oppressed and therefore have no choice but to think about the differences in their identity that set them apart from others. When discussing the video and definitions, students had very little trouble articulating what they understood and what was confusing, but the quality of discussion became dramatically different when they were given topics to discuss that could potentially be sensitive or uncomfortable for some students. The following is an example of the first small group discussion wherein students were given the opportunity to identify the components of ones' identity.

I wanted to work with uncomfortable topics, but I decided to incorporate ideas that every student could relate to. This activity required students to identify different elements of one's culture. Students were given a graphic organizer that was made up of different elements of one's identity, wherein students were to write down, again, what comes to mind for each topic. These categories included race/ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, education, ability and gender. Each group was given a different topic. As a class, we worked on one category together, to identify expectations for this activity. From my teacher research journal:

I projected a copy of the graphic organizer on the board. As a class, we discussed what comes to mind when we think of or consider one's race and ethnicity. This is the list we came up with:

- family background
- history
- color of one's skin
- traditions

- food
- dress
- stereotypes
- discrimination
- White vs African American vs Asian
- music

Students used the above brainstorm and notes as an example in their groups. Each group was given one category to create a list for. Then, each group shared their list for their category on the board, wherein the rest of the class wrote down notes from each group in their own graphic organizer.

Table 2 includes responses from the initial administration of this activity (“Initial Response” column) with one class and then from additional prompting and further inquiry into the groups’ initial responses (“Detailed Response” column). For each group’s list, I chose one of the terms each group identified that had a semblance of potential deeper and more relevant connections, and asked them to elaborate on their choosing of that term. This yielded more grounded and stronger connections to the concept of and connections to identity, and students were able to make stronger connections to each element of one’s identity. It simply required additional prompting and elaboration for students to discuss these ideas.

Table 2

Elements of Identity Progression of Responses

Group	Initial Responses	Detailed Responses
Language	French, Spanish, Mandarin, German, Italian School Home country Parents	Understanding of values Family background Multiple languages = multiple cultures Vocabulary (new words, word origins) Connection to family Connection to religion Connection to food/culture Comforting
Gender	Male Female Boys Girls	Gender fluid (not identify with one gender) New laws Transgender Open-mindedness Relationships
Religion	Beliefs Church Faith family	Prayer Family values Atheism Bible, Quran, Torah, Hebrew, Arabic, Islam “God” The Pledge of Allegiance
Socio-Economic Status	Rich poor	Poverty Wealth jobs /education “1%” Food Stamps Welfare Great Depression Recession
Education	Public school Home school Kindergarten-high school College	Poor v Wealthy schools City v Country Urban (minorities) Private Schools = money Community College v Ivy League Bachelors, Masters, Doctorate Jobs Real world education v traditional education

Table 2 (continued)

Group	Initial Responses	Detailed Responses
Ability	Physical disability Learning disability	Mental/Emotional disability Jobs available School Accessibility to social things Driving Support (home, school, job, laws, government, friends) Family and responsibilities Money Social Class

In the above table, initial responses were based on very general and obvious answers, such as “rich and poor” for socio-economic status and “male/female/boys/girls” for gender. For the second round of responses in the rightmost column, students were asked to examine their initial replies through the perspective of the point of view of the various types of people that would fall under their category. As an example, the boys in class were told to examine or analyze how their day would be different if they were a girl instead of a boy. Students were also told to discuss their category in the context of different places, such as home, school and the workplace. These probing questions garnered more detailed responses from each group. By providing students with more time to consider the implications each category would have on a person’s day-to-day life-such as the example above where boys were asked to consider the types of views of girls-they were able to come up with more detailed and in-depth ideas for each category in their chart. This was one of the first examples of students feeling uncomfortable about the topic they were discussing in small groups. By giving them more time to consider various perspectives and by allowing them time to discuss these perspectives among themselves, the chart yielded a more comprehensive and thorough examination of identity.

Awareness of or Exposure to Historically Marginalized or Oppressed Groups

During one activity after the discussion of “intersectionality,” students were placed in groups of their choosing and given very general topics that reflected current social issues to discuss as a group. By allowing students to choose their groups, my hope was to create a sense of comfort and safety amongst one another. The topics given to each group included control laws, police brutality, education, church and other buildings of worship bombings, poverty in urban cities and arranged marriages. Students were given the following points to jot down their thoughts, responses and understanding of their group’s topic:

1. Do some word-association with this topic. Write down ANY words or terms or phrases that you can think of when you see this topic.
2. What else comes to mind when you see or hear about this topic? This can be anything. Take your time and think about it; you may have more familiarity with the topic than you initially thought.
3. Can you make a personal connection with this topic?
4. Can you make any real world connections with this topic?

Students were given 5-10 minutes to silently think about these questions and respond independently. Then, they were asked to share out with each other in their groups. One exchange went as follows:

Derrick: I couldn’t come up with anything, I don’t really know what it means.

McNaughton: What about the name of a religion? Or a place you know it happened? Or a word you can use to describe your own reaction to it?

Derrick: Well, I don't really know any churches that got bombed.

McNaughton: Okay, well what about another place of worship? A synagogue perhaps? Or a mosque? A Baptist or Methodist church?

Derrick: *[silent]*

Rachel: Okay...well, wasn't there a bombing of a church like, during the Civil Rights Movement? Didn't it kill a bunch of young African American girls?

Derrick: Yes, that kind of sounds familiar...

McNaughton: Okay, so, Rachel, what were some words you associated with this topic?

Rachel: I put "sad", "scary", "death", "discrimination" and "hate".

McNaughton: Ok, let's work from those terms. What did everyone else write?

(no other students in the group spoke)

McNaughton: (to the whole class) Okay, friends, let's take some more moments to think about what we could possibly say about our topics. The purpose of this discussion is to just get us talking about things that may actually make us uncomfortable; the objective is not to remain silent, but to

become comfortable enough to talk about real world issues affecting many, many people in the world today.

This particular exchange revealed the importance of student background, context and general knowledge about, in this case, historical relevance to their topic. In this discussion, Derrick seemed to have very little background knowledge, and he had a difficult time connecting to the topic or theme that was being discussed in his group, which was bombings that take place at buildings of worship. Derrick may not be affiliated with a religion, or may not be aware of or exposed to the types of religions that are often targeted in these types of attacks. This would lead him to have very little personal experience or understanding of this topic, and therefore, understandably, would leave him with very little to say about it. In the case of Rachel, after some prompting, she was able to articulate a vague recollection of a historical moment that resonated with this same topic, which was the Birmingham, Alabama 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing of 1963. This is a strong connection, and one that would be worth revisiting in later discussions. Despite her lack of detail about the Birmingham Church bombing, she was still able to create this connection with the topic at hand, which therefore provided her with some context and additional understanding of the topic, despite the lack of specific historical details of this important moment in time in American history.

The discussion waned from there; my initial interpretation of this exchange was that students did not seem interested or motivated to discuss these topics. With prompting and more specific questioning, student responses revealed more so their difficulty with the topic in general, given the content and the implications, rather than lack of interest,

which is explored in the next section of these findings.

Evidence of Student Discomfort and Unease in Small Group Discussion

In the example above, students had a hard time discussing some of their real world topics; many of the available topics dealt with themes such as death, homicide and racism, and therefore might have been uncomfortable creating a discussion within their group. This reveals two important elements to student understanding in this particular activity: one, that students lacked background knowledge that would have provided them the confidence to participate in a discussion, and two, that their lack of background knowledge in tandem with the nature of the topic made it difficult for them to engage in a discussion with one another.

The initial exit ticket planned for this lesson asked students to include one thing they learned about their topic today and one question they still had about their topic. In order to adjust to the actual outcome of the lesson, I responded to the class discussion outcomes by instead asking students to write down why they had such difficulty participating in today's discussion. This was the revised exit ticket, so as to ascertain what factors impacted student discussion and conversation during this activity.

Overwhelmingly, 74% of all students across my classes stated they did not want to say anything that would potentially upset someone else in class. Many of the students cited their concern in "upsetting" others as the reason for being uncomfortable discussing these ideas and topics, even when they were able to choose with whom they would sit in a group. Rachel, from the discussion above pertaining to church bombings, stated "I was afraid that I would make someone sad if I said something," while Katie, whose topic was police brutality, stated "I did not want to make an assumption about

something that maybe she knew about, or if she would get upset if I said something.”

Meagan, whose topic was also police brutality, wrote on her exit ticket that “someone could have said something out of hand if they weren’t watching what they said to each other.” Participant exit slip responses were recorded in Table 3.

Table 3

Exit Ticket Responses

Student Name	Exit Ticket Response	Topic
Maria	I did not know anything about my topic, and I didn’t want to say something that would upset anybody	Gun control
Rachel	I felt like I kind of knew a little bit about church bombings, but I didn’t know if anyone else had an experience with it. I was afraid that I would make someone sad if I said something, plus I wasn’t sure I knew as much as I thought I did	Church bombings
Michael	I see it on the news and it is very confusing to me, so I don’t really know what to say. I know guns can be bad and good	Gun control
Kourtney	Guns can kill people that they hurt, and school shootings are bad and stuff but I don’t think people should have them. But some people might think they are good.	Gun control
Meagan	I think this is a sensitive topic for people and they can get upset easily, or someone could have said something out of hand if they weren’t watching what they said to each other	Police brutality
Katie	I see this on the news all of the time and it usually has to do with African Americans. Since one of the people in my group is also African American I did not want to make an assumption about something that maybe she knew about, or if she would get upset if I said something.	Police brutality
Derrick	i don’t really know anything about it. i know there are a lot of people in this school that are very religious though, so i wasn’t sure who was very religious or not and if they knew something about it i didn’t	Church bombings
Taylor	We all go to the same school and I have only ever been to one other school, and that was in Egypt when I was little. I moved here when I was young, and don’t remember much about school in Egypt. A lot of people in this school have friends from other towns though so I don’t want to compare or upset anyone.	Education

Impact of Real World Context on Student Understanding of Unit Themes

One of the initial sources students were introduced to was the TedTalk by Chimamande Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of the Single Story.” We used this video as the basis for many discussions as well as a lens through which we read and analyzed the texts we read in class. Adichie’s video discussed the negative impact of having a “single story” of a person, and particularly of a person of color. She prescribed open-mindedness and exploration and understanding of other cultures as some of the remedies for this dangerous affliction plaguing so many social and cultural groups, not only in America, but around the world.

Students were expected to be able to articulate and make connections to the real world contexts of their books periodically throughout their reading. One of the difficulties of administering these lessons and activities was to have students think outside of the regular realm of their classroom reading; while they were reading to understand and analyze as they would do with a traditional novel in an English classroom, they were also expected to take a step backward and place their text in the context of real world scenarios; these could be historical or current and topical situations that did, or could, occur in a real world context.

One of the shorter, informal writing assignments given to students asked them to discuss the importance of their independent reading book’s story within the bigger context of the stories of people around the world. The objective was to have students relate the events within their story to a real world context, with Adichie’s TedTalk as their lens for articulating this perspective.

Meagan’s entry read as follows:

The novel, *The Sun is Also a Star*, by Nicola Yoon, introduces the topic of deportation. The main character, Natasha, is Jamaican-American. Both her Mom and Dad lived in Jamaica and then came to America. But, they never got their green card. So, they are staying here illegally. Natasha's stay in America is jeopardized when her Father drove while under the influence and got a DUI. She and her family are meant to get deported the day the book takes place. Also, Natasha tries to convince people that she should be able to stay in America, but hasn't been able to build her case. This is important to bring up the struggle of someone who has spent most of their life in America, but then it can be taken away at any second with a little slip up. People don't realize that this is happening around us all the time. But, it helps people understand that many people have hard lives and problems they have to deal with everyday. In conclusion, deportation is a common occurrence in America.

While this student did not go into too much detail about the relevance of deportation of immigrants in America, she did acknowledge its existence and the relevance to current events and issues within the country.

Kourtney's entry read as follows:

In the novel, *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas, readers are exposed to Starr's life in Garden Heights. While living in Garden Heights citizens are exposed to violence, poor school systems and most importantly racism. In Garden Heights there are often fights and gun violence which makes Starr's parents paranoid about her being outside because of how dangerous it is. Also because Starr and her family live in a neighborhood with a bad school system, Starr is forced to go

to a predominantly white school forty five minutes away from Garden Heights, for a decent education. Racism is a huge problem especially dealing with police brutality. Starr’s best friend Khalil was shot and killed during a police stop, for being black. I think it is important for readers to read this text because people do not realize the violence and injustices in black communities. However, what this story helps readers to understand is that injustices happen way too often in black communities, and shouldn't be looked over.

Here, Kourtney was a little more specific in her discussion of the injustices that remain in black communities.

Demonstrating Understanding of Themes Through Terminology

By incorporating specific language and terminology into their reflections and responses, students were able to showcase their understanding of the themes of this multicultural and critical literacy unit. Students were encouraged to use terms that include “multiculturalism”, “the single story”, “intersectionality”, “marginalization” and “oppressed” during student small group discussion throughout the course of the unit of study.

By listening to student talk as well as analyzing their written reflections, I was able to better assess student understanding of these terms. Students were given opportunities to discuss the role of their text among the metaphorical ‘story’ their text represented. After assessing their responses, I returned to their word choice and coded the responses of the student participants from within the study. Coding these responses, I looked for language that both implicitly and explicitly referred to any of the terms mentioned above.

Table 4

Real World Context Writing Themes

Student Name	Term/Concept Referred to In Writing	Student Response
Maria	Single Story	The slavery that Arn's town was involved in affected everyone's lives. Readers of this text will see the brutality of the treatment they're getting. People got split from their families and they grew up being traumatized. Their damaged childhoods effected them because they were being starved and ate food that was barely edible. I think it is important for readers to read this text because Arn's story exposes the danger they faced from being slaves. I think that oftentimes, when people think of labor camp and slavery, they usually think about poor treatment. However, what this story helps readers to understand is that slavery and labor camp are so much worse than how its perceived. It emphasizes how discrimination does more damage than people actually think. (<i>Never Fall Down</i>)
Rachel	Marginalization/Single Story	I think it is important for readers to read this text because it really shows how cruel the world can be. The white cop had no reason to shoot this young black boy, but he still shot him and killed him, just because he was black. (<i>The Hate U Give</i>)
Michael	Multiculturalism	In the book, <i>In the Neighborhood of True</i> , by Susan Kaplan Carlton, readers are exposed to Ruth's crazy life. Ruth is very religious and is in love with a boy that is the opposite religion. She has gone to court because of her religious beliefs. People who read this text will have different beliefs about what Ruth went to court for. I think it is important for readers to read this text because the amount they will learn about Judaism is astonishing because of the actions that happened in the story. However, what this story helps the reader understand is what people believe in Judaism and how far people go to stand up for their beliefs. Readers will also think about the effects the KKK had on people who were not just African American.
Kourtney	Marginalization	Because Starr and her family lives in a neighborhood with a bad school system, Starr is forced to go to a predominantly white school forty five minutes away from Garden Heights, for a decent education. Racism is a huge problem especially dealing with police brutality. Starr's best friend Khalil was shot and killed during a police stop, for being black. I think it is important for readers to read this text because people do not realize the violence and injustices in black communities. However, what this story helps readers to understand is that injustices happen way too often in black communities, and shouldn't be looked over. (<i>The Hate U Give</i>)

Table 4 (continued)

Student Name	Term/Concept Referred to In Writing	Student Response
Meagan	Single Story/Multiculturalism	This is important to bring up the struggle of someone who has spent most of their life in America, but then it can be taken away at any second with a little slip up. People don't realize that this is happening around us all the time. But, it helps people understand that many people have hard lives and problems they have to deal with everyday. In conclusion, deportation is a common occurrence in America (<i>The Sun is Also a Star</i>)
Katie	Single Story	The Walls family was always poor, and the dad (Rex Walls) was an alcoholic and rarely was able to provide for the family. Because of this, the family had to move everywhere across the United States and struggle to keep shelter. Walls mainly talks about how their family is dysfunctional and how they are really poor, but she got through all those disadvantaged and started a new life in New York City to pursue her love for writing. This text portrays a very different life for someone who may not appear very different, but shows that your background and family life can be very different from the life you turn it into. (<i>The Glass Castle</i>)
Derrick	Single Story	The readers will see that his grandfather's death is one of the most important parts of his life. In his village, it seems like they have their religion and believes. His father was not wealthy and had three wives, the second wife is his mother. He has 17 siblings 5 from his mother and 12 more from the other wives. His village is attacked by The Dahomans and a white slave trader comes and takes his friend so Cudjo convinces them to take him too. I think it is important for readers to read this because Cudjo's story shows what happens during the end of slavery in Africa and America. Most people won't think that someone went on a slave trader's boat to not leave his friend. However, what this story helps readers to understand is that some people after years of slavery still did not know where the boats went with their people. (<i>Barracoon</i>)
Taylor	Single Story/Multiculturalism	I think it is important for readers to read this text because, It helps readers put themselves in others shoes, and experience things that others do and go through just because of who they are. It allows you to really understand other perspectives and situations reader might of never really thought of before. (<i>I Will Always Write Back</i>)

By providing a real world context, students were able to make a stronger connection to their text and the themes or conflicts present within their texts. For example, Derrick, who read *Barracoon* by Zora Neale Hurston, noted “ I think it is

important for readers to read this because Cudjo's story shows what happens during the end of slavery in Africa and America. Most people won't think that someone went on a slave trader's boat to not leave his friend. However, what this story helps readers to understand is that some people after years of slavery still did not know where the boats went with their people.” Here, Derrick makes a note of the influence of friendship in this text and the role it played in supporting the theme of identity and freedom in this nonfiction text.

In addition, it helped students turn their perspective outwards to the world surrounding them, and help them see the stories of their books not just as words on a page, but as stories that have a place in the world and affect real people, not just the fictional ones in the text. For example, Meagan, who read *The Sun is Also a Star* by Nicola Yoon, wrote “This is important to bring up the struggle of someone who has spent most of their life in America, but then it can be taken away at any second with a little slip up. People don't realize that this is happening around us all the time. But, it helps people understand that many people have hard lives and problems they have to deal with everyday. In conclusion, deportation is a common occurrence in America.”. While this is a superficial and relatively general response to the issue of deportation, Meagan is able to identify that deportation is not just something written about in a fictional text, but is something affecting people living the America today. Kourtney, who read *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas also made a strong real world connection in her response as she noted, “Racism is a huge problem especially dealing with police brutality. Starr’s best friend Khalil was shot and killed during a police stop, for being black. I think it is important for readers to read this text because people do not realize the violence and

injustices in black communities. However, what this story helps readers to understand is that injustices happen way too often in black communities, and shouldn't be looked over". With or without using the vocabulary and terminology directly, students were able to dig deeper into these texts and develop insights that reflected their understanding of the bigger themes and concepts these texts explored.

In this way, they began to question and consider the realities of the people in these texts, and therefore begin to analyze the importance of the stories they read about. After analyzing student entries for this assignment, 74% of students referred to "the single story" implicitly or explicitly. Marginalization or discussion of typically oppressed groups of people was referred to 33% of the time. Multiculturalism was referenced 52% of the time, and intersectionality referred to only 4% of the time. Students more closely connected their understanding and application of the single story to their texts, which helped them engage in the real world contexts of their stories.

Students were beginning to make some genuine real world connections. Formatively, I observed the language they used that demonstrated a stronger awareness of what they were reading. For instance, one exchange which occurred between two students during a think-pair-share Do Now Activity, went as follows:

Kourtney: I saw on the news how this black lady was killed by a police officer after he broke into her house. I don't know if it's like my book because, even though the one character didn't have his house broken into, he was murdered by the police and it seems like the police in this[news] story also took advantage and the lady still got killed.

Katie: Yea, it seems like this story can almost happen now, I mean, I know it has happened [in other states] and stuff, but I dunno if it could happen here.

Kourtney: I think it could, I think police are everywhere and black people are everywhere so what's to stop them from doing something like this anywhere?

While the content was, obviously, upsetting, I noticed an extremely explicit connection Kourtney made with her book to the world around her.

In a similar vein to the example above, the following is from my teacher research journal dated on November 9:

I have noticed a few students in each class, with no prompting from me, discussing events they have read about or seen in the media lately, or even that they have learned about in another class, that relate to what they are reading. However, when pressed to elaborate on what they are discussing, most are hesitant to discuss [their conversation] with me in detail. In an attempt to get students talking about these topics, I encouraged them to instead email me about the article or news moment or topic in school they discussed briefly in class and to include details or their opinions on how they can relate their text to this story.

It seemed my incessant reminder about examining the world around them started to pay off, and students were beginning to create connections between the news and media and the stories they read.

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter lead me to conclude that, overwhelmingly, the exposure of students to multicultural literature in the secondary classroom led to results that had not been previously considered prior to the initiation of this study. Students were, generally, reluctant to engage in critical discussion that required questioning of perspectives and their personal stance; students were also reluctant to engage in conversations that could potentially offend or upset their classmates. Familiarity with content and historical context also play a role in inhibiting or encouraging student critical literacy perspective while engaging in small group discussion.

Summary

The findings of this research included (1) trends in student likes and dislikes in their reading history; (2) patterns in student book selection; (3) understanding of a person's identity and the implications of one's identity within the context of social groups; (4) evidence of the extent to which students have been exposed to or are aware of historically marginalized or oppressed groups; (5) evidence of student comfort level during small group discussions based on current or topical events; (6) the impact of real world context on student understanding of multicultural themes.

Chapter five will review the summary of these findings as well as conclusions that were drawn from them; chapter five will also discuss implications for further study and research in this topic.

Chapter V

Summary

In order to engage students in critical literacy perspectives, Paris (2012) states that educators must seek to “perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). Classroom learning in the 21st century should be focused on embracing multilingualism, multiculturalism and pluralism, creating a space for all student experiences to be validated, authenticated and valued. This type of curriculum inclusion and enhancement is imperative amongst communities whose population consists of students from these historically marginalized and oppressed communities, but is also just as important amongst communities with a higher population of white students. Exposure to these communities through the reading of multicultural literature, critical discussion and an exploration of understanding and empathy, allows secondary teachers to demonstrate a culturally sustaining pedagogy in the classroom.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy, according to Paris (2014) must first attempt to extend the “previous visions of asset pedagogies by demanding explicitly pluralist outcomes that are not centered on White, middle-class, monolingual, and monocultural norms of educational achievement...[it] must resist static, unidirectional notions of culture and race that reinforce...difference and (in)equality without attending to shifting and evolving ones” (p. 95). As the demographics of the United States continue to change, so, too, should education practice, so as to reflect this changing population in classrooms. Culturally sustaining pedagogy extends previous conceptualizations regarding the work around literacy in that it requires educators go beyond simply responding or reacting to the cultures of the students in the classroom; instead, it proposes that education should

assert itself in a foundational role in supporting and validating these cultures and experiences, while continuing to offer opportunities and access to the dominant cultures of power and access (Paris, 2012). Given the population of white students in this district, exposing students to different cultures and experiences of others offers them these opportunities to gain insight into the lives of people whose demographic makes up much of the rest of the United States.

Through the activities and lessons in this unit, students were exposed to various types of multicultural literature and texts centered on historically marginalized and oppressed communities. It was clear from the beginning of the unit that students would take some time getting used to independent reading of such contemporary and nontraditional texts. Their efforts in reading allowed them the opportunity to learn about new and, possibly, uncomfortable worlds that have always existed but to which many of them have never been exposed. Student efforts and participation in small group discussion provided more opportunities to question and criticize the texts they were reading, and again create an environment of multicultural learning in the classroom.

The Role of Multicultural Literature in the Curriculum

One of the barriers and primary sources of pushback from students throughout this unit was the concern with grades; the culture of this district is very academic-focused and “changing up” the curriculum, as well as the nature of the assignments that students received and discussions they participated in, was a bit of a risk to be taking. I was concerned that students would only be worried about how they would be assessed throughout the beginning of the school year. As it turned out, I was not completely off base with my worries and concerns. After a month of independent reading, students

would come up to me, concerned that their classmates were reading something different than we were. My students were also concerned about their midterm exams, which, at that point, were not for three more months. It became clear that the culture of the classroom for these students, up until the fateful moment they were placed in one of my English 10 Academic classes, was very much traditional, geared primarily towards engaging students in reading and activities that were explicitly focused on preparing students for common and state assessments.

While the makeup of this district's student body is by no means homogeneous, the overwhelming percentage of white students versus the percentage of students from diverse backgrounds made it difficult to engage in conversation and discussion of literature from marginalized or oppressed groups of people, as illustrated in the data from Chapter 4. Most students felt satisfied with the typical exposure to authors such as Maya Angelou, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., but had difficulty appreciating the stories of authors such as Julia Alvarez, James Baldwin, Amy Tan and Khaled Hosseini. Students were not just unfamiliar with the names of these authors, but were unfamiliar with their cultures, their languages, their values and their histories.

At the end of the unit, students were given a survey to review their thoughts and reflections on what they read. Overwhelmingly, students stated they enjoyed what they read, but, in a separate question, still had difficulty making personal connections with the text. Students also, according to survey results, had a difficult time pinpointing the theme of the unit, despite the repetition of language such as "*intersectionality*", "*marginalization*", "*the single story*" and "*multiculturalism*". While using this language explicitly was difficult, students still referred to the concepts and ideas of these themes in

their writing and reflecting on their independent reading texts. These responses indicated that students were able to create connections between these terms, their meaning and their role in the texts they read.

In order to demonstrate a culturally sustaining pedagogy, Paris (2012) states that educators must seek to “perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of the democratic project of schooling” (p.93). Classroom learning in the 21st century should be focused on embracing multilingualism, multiculturalism and pluralism, creating a space for all student experiences to be validated, authenticated and valued.

An area of systematic inequality within my present school district is rooted in the lack of multicultural literature, and therefore lack of multicultural education, within the curriculum. Though the district’s population is relatively diverse and continues to grow in its diversity, the curriculum and literature within it do not accurately reflect the shifting demographic of the students. While the district, specifically at the high school level, is known for its academic excellence, the price paid for this excellence is a lack of cultural competence in the classroom and within the curriculum. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) states that “culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (p. 476). In order to maintain their own well-being, students must be exposed to a curriculum which emphasizes the importance of the intersectionality of students’ identities, and particularly the identities of those students from marginalized or oppressed communities. Exposing students to multicultural literature, and engaging them in authentic and genuine conversations which relate to their own experiences and cultures, helps to promote students' success and

validate their background, elevating the value of their academic success as well (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Limitations

Limitations of this study included the time element. As a secondary teacher in a high-performing district, I have 130 students for whom I am responsible. Throughout the time period when this study was conducted, students were also given common assessments and benchmark assessments. Interim reports and first marking period grades as well as parent teacher conferences were also time consuming responsibilities that had to be attended to. Given the department requirements for this grade level, and as a state-tested subject, time and pressure were always going to be a factor in the administration of assessments and adhering to the core curriculum.

An additional limitation was the lack of curriculum support for this unit. The unit had to be created entirely by me, while also attempting to adhere to the 10th grade curriculum guidelines in terms of preparing students for their common assessments and midterm exams. Without the opportunity to converse and plan with other teachers, I had more limited resources and input. I was also responsible for both Academic and Honors level students; the multicultural literature unit was only being implemented in the academic level classes.

Finally, again, given the time constraints and professional responsibilities required of teachers within this district, there was limited time to genuinely delve into the importance of the critical literacy perspective. Students will need to be able to reflect on themselves and the world around them, therefore becoming better equipped to question and challenge the society in which they exist. This is a difficult task to accomplish, and

given the time frame and limitations of the daily bell schedule, along with the traditional curriculum students are exposed to, students were unable to practice employing the critical literacy perspective closely and comprehensively.

Implications

Findings in this chapter imply that overwhelmingly, the secondary curriculum must begin to include multicultural texts. At the middle and junior high level, as well as at the secondary level, independent reading is a very part of the curriculum, and book clubs are introduced to students at these levels as well. These books that are available for these activities and reading lessons however are limited, and do not include texts from authors or about stories of people from oppressed or marginalized communities. The initial findings of this study imply that the incorporation of multicultural literature into the curriculum will provide students opportunities to broaden their reading interests and expose students to new and important worlds and stories from a culturally relevant perspective.

With most of the multicultural texts and literature activities or discussions with my two academic classes, I experienced difficulty gauging and then maintaining their interest in these topics; the culture of the students of this particular district seems to be focused on grades, and what students can do to be successful on state and district mandated exams. All students have been given a choice of the text they are reading, but clearly years of being required to read text, many which do not reflect their cultural experiences might impact students' desire to read "regular" texts. While culturally relevant pedagogy theory and research points to the importance of student-centered

classrooms, it is clear that students have not had little choice or control in their schooling. It takes time and practice for it to become a part of the curriculum.

To conclude the activities and lessons for this eight-week study, students in each class grouped themselves by theme to create a short presentation for other students in a Book Expo that was organized in the high school's media center. Throughout the day other classes of all content areas were invited to come into the media center to complete a "presentation walk" to each group's tables, learning about their texts and asking my students questions about their books, their books' themes and the relevant cultural connections found in each book. This presentation allowed for my students to present their expert knowledge on their books and get other students excited about their book as well.

In addition, the students who participated in the Book Expo at the end of the unit showed enthusiasm, genuine interest and excitement for their books when talking about them with other students. In fact, students were more engaged and on task throughout their short book presentations than they had been in small group discussions in classrooms. When I asked a few students informally why this was the case, students responded that it was easier to talk to students they did not know since they had so many more questions about their book, and that they enjoyed getting other students excited about their own groups' work in an informally competitive spirit. The implications of this project strongly suggest that once students were familiar with the themes and motifs of multicultural literature, they were excited and motivated to talk about these texts with other students.

Curriculum Implications

During a conversation with my supervisor after she observed one of my classes participate in this book expo, I discussed with her my desire to create a curriculum for a multicultural literature English elective class, to which she gladly encouraged. While this is encouraging and supportive, it does not completely solve the issues of homogenous and primarily Anglo-Saxon based curriculum of the core English classes and curriculum that students are required to take in order to fulfill their graduation requirements. Creating a singular curriculum based on a culturally relevant perspective using multicultural literature as the basis but that is optional for students is certainly not the be-all and end-all answer to the issues raised by this research. Integrating culturally relevant perspectives into the teaching culture, climate and curriculum of this district beginning in the elementary level will ensure students have equal opportunities to be exposed to and learn from different perspectives through various literacies experiences in the classroom.

Further research could be conducted at these lower levels wherein students within this primarily white district are in fact exposed to these literatures from different cultures and perspectives and given opportunities to read, learn and ask questions about groups of people and communities of every race, religion, ability, socio-economic status and culture. Exposing students to multicultural literature at a young age would also teach students about the differences people possess and the hardships many of these marginalized and oppressed groups face. These conversations and learning moments would curate well-rounded and empathetic young people.

Incorporating multicultural literature will also provide for a stronger foundation for practicing critical literacy in the classroom. Students must be exposed to the

inequality and power imbalance that exists amongst communities within society in order to gain a stronger perspective of this balance of power, leading to their questioning and criticizing of the status quo.

Conclusion

The findings and implications of this study resolutely point to the importance of incorporating multicultural literature in the curriculum of this district. Through practicing culturally relevant pedagogy, students and teachers are exposed to the experiences of those from historically marginalized and oppressed communities, and the experiences of the people in these communities can be validated and considered authentic and genuine and worthy of study, discussion, query and appreciation.

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