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CREATING A DATA STRUCTURE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERATURE
FOR USE IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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To my husband, Mike, who started dating me during student teaching and has now seen me through my master's Capstone - your love and support through this process has been a blessing and a perfect outward expression of your unconditional love. Thank you to my PLC members and co-workers who helped this project come to fruition. A special thank you to Marinda Phandanouvong - without you I can honestly say I would not have been able to complete the digital components of this project. I enjoyed learning from and creating with you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

As the United States has shifted in recent years toward a significantly more diverse population, so too has the student population in American schools. This diversity includes people of color, immigrants, the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community, individuals with varied religious and spiritual beliefs, English Language learners (EL), individuals with disabilities, and families living with varied financial resources. Although this change didn't happen suddenly, it seems education has lagged in ensuring the curriculum reflects the diverse classrooms of the country. In such, literature and access to reading materials that offer perspectives and characters from these diverse groups is still difficult to find. As a seventh grade reading teacher at a school with a diverse student population, I find it my responsibility to provide students with opportunities to read texts about people like them. This desire led me to my research question: What tools will help teachers and students access culturally relevant classroom materials for middle school students?

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of my personal educational and work experience that brought me to my current position as a middle school reading teacher at a diverse suburban school in the Midwest. Next, I will explain the Professional Learning Community (PLC) I am a part of and our goal to provide all students with culturally relevant classroom materials, including data that was gathered from the baseline student survey. I will discuss the challenge we encountered as a PLC team of how to best represent our diverse student population. These hardships are significant as they led to the topic of my Capstone project—to create a resource for educators to provide diverse

books to their students through categorization of available culturally responsive texts for middle school students.

Before I Became a Teacher

Education was not my field of study in my undergraduate career. Through conversations with trusted advisors, friends, and family members, I realized that my love of learning and desire to connect with people were characteristics that lended well to education. I started my Masters of Teaching at Hamline University with the plan to pursue my 5-12 Social Studies licensure and eventually teach middle school.

My passion for middle school students was formed while working as a paraprofessional at a diverse suburban school. The school's equity work and focus on relationship building was a priority and the forefront of school climate, which made this school attractive as an employer. Further, I found it consistently entertaining to be surrounded by sixth through eighth grade students. The students, though typical middle school kids, were inquisitive, always seeking to better themselves, and were enjoyable to work with, due to their desire to build relationships with staff. It was clear to me that middle school was my ideal student population.

In 2014, I student-taught at an urban high school where only 25% of students were meeting grade level proficiency standards in reading (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). I found this experience to be exceptionally difficult as a new teacher. I did not feel as though I had the resources or materials to bridge the gap in their reading proficiency, and the course materials were often too difficult to be used in general classes. Almost immediately after my student teaching experience, I accepted a job

teaching sixth and eighth grade social studies at one of the schools that fed students to the high school where I had recently finished my student-teaching experience.

Teaching Experience

My first teaching experience. This first teaching job, in my own classroom, proved to be incredibly difficult. Among other issues that arose from starting my first classroom experience mid-year (January), I found the student population to be a challenge in terms of matching materials to their reading levels. For students, studying social studies requires stamina in reading and great abilities to relate texts to individual experience, other readings, and the world around the learner.

The student population at my first official teaching job was 91% students of color, 84% free/reduced price lunch, 31% EL, and 82% not proficient on the Reading Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). I felt helpless, unprepared, and lost in knowing how to teach these students. Further, it was difficult to find materials they could connect with on a personal level or access due to the rigor of the provided curriculum. In my desperation, I turned to furthering my education by starting to pursue my K-12 Reading licensure, purely for personal and professional growth as an educator - not with the intention of using the licensure explicitly in a classroom setting.

Teaching in California. My next two years of teaching were spent in the Central Valley of California at a school that almost perfectly mimicked the demographics and proficiency rates of California as a whole. At this school, 76% of the population was comprised of students of color, 53% of which identified as Hispanic or Latino (California Department of Education, 2016). As I taught seventh and eighth grade history, I found

that even with increased proficiency rates, the provided textbooks were often too difficult for many students, especially those receiving English Language support or Special Education services. Again, I was tasked with trying to find materials that met the reading needs of all students, leading me to take an increased interest in reading as a whole. I tried to incorporate fiction texts into my classroom curriculum, utilized various primary sources with ample scaffolding, and consistently found video resources to aid in my teaching. Throughout this time, I continued to take classes to obtain my Reading licensure. I had one experience in particular that became a turning point in the way I thought about my Reading licensure and how I would utilize it as an educator.

Reading Licensure. My largest project of the licensure program required me to assess a student, create and execute an individualized plan, and finish with an assessment to measure growth over a short period of time. Although great gains were seen in the student I was working within a period of several weeks, I found that I was most excited about the gains I made as an educator. I found myself completely immersed in this project, and for the first time, realized that I wanted to teach reading. I no longer saw the licensure courses solely as means for gathering tools to use in my social studies classroom, much like band-aids to help me get by in terms of reading and language development. I realized the benefit and potency of individualized plans for students, that when bought into by the student and executed with efficiency by the teacher, had the ability to transform and expand phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and self-efficacy in students. This provided a benefit the student far beyond what I felt I would ever be able to do in my classroom. I decided that I had a passion for teaching reading and quickly finished my licensure.

At this same time, my family was making the transition from California back to our home state of Minnesota, and it provided the perfect opportunity to apply for reading teacher and interventionist jobs. With virtually no experience teaching reading, I was overjoyed when I was offered a position at the same school where I previously worked as a paraprofessional and realized my passion for working with middle school students. I came to believe that returning to the school where I was first inspired to pursue teaching was the perfect opportunity for me to transition to teaching a new subject area.

My current teaching position. I am currently the seventh grade reading teacher at a suburban school in the Midwest with a student population that is 77% students of color, 71% free/reduced price lunch, 17% EL, and 56% not proficient on the Reading MCA (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). The school finds its identity in the work done to increase equity, build literacy, and foster positive relationships between staff and students. These initiatives are school-wide practices championed by teachers and other staff and strongly supported by the administration. Because these practices are staff-driven, the school community functions to ensure equity, literacy, and positive relationships are achieved daily.

PLCs and Data

One of the big pushes as the 2017-2018 school year started was to transform Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that had been functioning for many years as meetings by department. The goal proposed by administration was for all staff to join a PLC that had a goal and purpose that was a passion for each individual teacher, regardless of subject taught. I quickly found myself immersed in a PLC with many other like-minded seventh grade teachers who wanted to create a PLC and do work to meet a

goal that focused on incorporating more diverse texts into all subject areas. The focus of our group became “Can our students say, ‘I see people like me’ in the texts they read at school?”

The Minnesota State Standards for English Language Arts for seventh grade list the need for students to “read widely to understand multiple perspectives and pluralistic viewpoints” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). Supporting the ideas of groups such as We Need Diverse Books, we knew that the perspectives our student population at large is not represented in literature and that access to literature containing diverse perspectives and characters is difficult to find. We had a strong feeling that our students would report that their perspectives and viewpoints were not represented in the materials they were reading at school. We needed to create a measure for determining what “people like me” meant and gather baseline data from our students.

PLC data gathering. The PLC determined six areas of culture to focus on as the guide for what “people like me” would refer to when gathering data from our students. The six areas were: age, gender/ sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, race/ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economic status. We created a student survey to draw data several times during the year to track if students were able to see themselves in the texts we were using in our classrooms. The data from the survey in September was used as baseline data to create a PLC goal.

Before gathering data, there were a few qualifications that were necessary to make the language accessible for seventh grade students and ensure students were answering uniformly. For the sake of reaching as many students as possible to see themselves in literature, we qualified “materials I read at school” to include any texts,

books, or articles assigned in class, as well as any choice materials students received from school via a classroom library or the media center. We also determined student-friendly language for many of the areas of culture for the survey. Each of the questions and areas of culture was also explained to students as they took the survey, with questions read aloud in order to create an equitable survey environment for all students.

PLC data. Our baseline data from the September survey of seventh grade students showed that there was much work to be done in having people like our students represented in our classroom materials. The data showed that nearly 50% of seventh grade students surveyed disagreed with the general statement “I see people like myself and my family in the materials I read at school” (Ramirez, 2017). When data was broken down into the areas of culture, it became clear there were areas that required attention. The three areas of culture that less than 50% of our students saw themselves and their families included: religion (people who have the same religious and/or spiritual beliefs as me), ethnicity (people who look like I do), and socioeconomic status (people who make the same amount of money as my family does and can afford similar things). Data showed that 45% of students surveyed reported that they saw people of their same nationality (people whose family/ancestors are from the same country as mine) in classroom materials. The categories of age, at 72%, and gender, at 88%, were the two areas that a significant amount of students saw themselves in classroom materials (Ramirez, 2017).

Leading to a Capstone Project

In looking at the data and our PLC goal, it was clear that there was much work to do, however, there was a quick realization that the task we set before ourselves was going

to be quite difficult - texts that adequately represented our student population were not being utilized in classrooms. It frustrated me that even when trying to incorporate our students' unique perspectives and diverse backgrounds in classroom materials, we were having difficulty finding materials. In my frustration, it became clear that I had a passion that could create a wonderful resource for educators. The guiding question of the PLC, "Can our students say, 'I see people like me' in the texts they read at school?" became not only a personal and PLC goal, but quickly formulated itself into an area of interest that I wanted to look further into during my capstone project. In such, my goal became finding ways to empower other teachers to provide diverse books to their students.

Summary

The purpose of my capstone project is to create a resource that answers the question: What tools will help teachers and students access culturally relevant classroom materials for middle school students? This question was motivated by my experience working in diverse schools with materials that did not meet the academic needs and match the diversity of the populations I served. In my current position, working with my PLC team to utilize diverse and culturally relevant resources in our classrooms, it became clear that finding such resources is a difficult task for many educators.

Chapter Two contains the literature review. Literature about Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is reviewed extensively, especially as it relates to literacy. The literature about CRP points to relationships, reflection, revision, and rigor as key components of the teaching framework. In regards to CRP and literacy, the literature supports the idea that students need to be reading materials about diverse characters and perspectives. Further, students need to engage in conversations about the literature they

read. Research has proven the importance of students having access to educational materials that are culturally relevant and contain characters and circumstances similar to those the students experience. The literature also states the importance of background knowledge and vocabulary, both of which play a large role in comprehension of literature. After reviewing relevant literature, Chapter Three will discuss the methods used to create the capstone project and Chapter Four will summarize the conclusions of the project.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increase of people in and around education vocalizing the need for culturally relevant classroom materials and educational resources that reflect the diverse students in the school system. Defining what constitutes culturally relevant practices, identifying possible resources, and determining best practices for promoting these resources within the school system are all areas that require looking at current research. Therefore, the research question being looked at in this literature review will be dissecting the many aspects of the question: What tools will help teachers and students access culturally relevant classroom materials for middle school students?

The first part of the literature review will be focused on identifying the key aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy and its application in the middle school classroom. The subheadings relationships, realization, revision, and rigor highlight the four key areas of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as shown in research. After reviewing CRP as a whole and how culturally relevant teaching can enhance literacy, both teaching practices and materials that best contribute to ensuring a culturally relevant environment for all learners will be reviewed. The goal of this narrowing of scope is to determine best practices that transcend one particular student group. Finally, the importance of involving the community and action steps to ensure their involvement in creating culturally relevant literacy practices for all students will be reviewed.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The goal of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy is to honor the culture of the diverse students in a classroom, utilizing multiple tactics and resources to do so. Both “culturally relevant” and “culturally responsive” are used within the context of education to describe the same idea of connecting with students on a cultural level to engage students in learning. While both phrases have small differences in the methods of implementation and theoretical approaches, the phrase “culturally relevant pedagogy” will be used throughout this paper as an overarching term referencing the practices of both culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy.

The Achievement Gap, the statistically significant difference in academic achievement between white students and students of color. The question of why some students excel academically and behaviorally in school while others do not, became an area of great debate in education. A common theme in research of the Achievement Gap was looked at deficit based rationale for why some students achieved at a higher rate than others until the early 1990’s (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2014). The architect of CRP, Ladson-Billings, an educational anthropologist, began her research on successfully educating African American students in the early 90’s as she looked to categorize educational practices that were successful in educating this group of students (Ladson-Billings, 1992). The original definition of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy listed three criteria: academic success, cultural competence, and a critical consciousness of current political order (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). This once revolutionary practice is now mainstreamed in school throughout the United States. The key premise of CRP is that culture influences the way students think, communicate, and behave both in and out of

the classroom context (Brown-Jeffy, 2011; Garland, 2017; Powell, 2013). Still, there are various recommended practices within CRP that are precedents for utilizing culture to empower learning. The four areas of CRP that are generally agreed upon are: relationships, reflection, revision, and rigor.

Relationships. Relationships are at the forefront of CRP. Teacher-student and school-community relationships are all necessary within culturally relevant pedagogy. Teacher-student relationships that build caring relationships are of the utmost importance (Lehman, 2017; Powell, 2013; Soto-Manning, 2017). Through relationship building, teachers are able to see the child as a whole person, unique from others. Before understanding the cultural norms of the students in their classrooms, teachers must know students on an individual level to be able to connect with them and provide optimal learning opportunities. In expressing the importance of relationships in the classroom, one teacher stated, “building relationships is inherently culturally responsive as you seek first to understand your students, before all else. And that means listening to their ideas, their emotions, their worries, and trying to understand how they understand school” (Lehman, 2017). Despite cultural differences students may have, it is essential that there is a caring relationship between each student and their teacher that informs how that student is taught as an individual, not only as part of a cultural group. Teaching all students the same material in the same way, based on a factor such as ethnicity, does not align with CRP. Rather, teaching each student as an individual, while taking into consideration his or her cultural beliefs and practices is what makes relationship building between teachers and students an essential part of CRP.

These relationships between teachers and students must always be growing and changing as students come to better understand who they are as a person and how they identify with their culture(s). Students are fluid in how they identify with their culture and further may not identify with the culture with which they are classified based on school data (Cole, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Although it is important for teachers to be knowledgeable of the cultures from which their students are from, there are great differences in how individuals and even generations as a whole experience their culture (Cole, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Powell, 2013). For example, students from bicultural families may have a different experience of one or both cultures they belong to than their peers with connections to only one culture. Similarly, first-generation Americans often experience their cultural differently than subsequent generations as the ties to the primary culture loosen over time. Cultivating individual relationships with each student allows teachers to carefully navigate each learner's connection to their culture, ideas about education, and how they relate to the greater community.

Along with teacher-student relationships, CRP looks at school-community relationships as a way of cultivating cultural awareness within the school system and bringing culturally relevant practices into the classroom (Garland, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Powell, 2013). Utilizing community members to come into classrooms as guest speakers, in-resident program facilitators, and tutors allows students to understand the importance of education to the community (Garland, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Education does not only take place within the confines of the school day or within the school building. Allowing students the time to see the ways both formal and informal education unfolds in their community can be motivational in understanding how school

connects to being a good citizen. These school-community relationships also influence how the teachers see themselves in terms of the community. Culturally relevant teachers see themselves as part of the community and can be seen by students attending community events and are involved in social-issues within the community (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Through bridging the school-community gap students see themselves as part of the community and the importance education is to the community. Further, the community is given power to contribute to school culture and have a voice in what is being taught to the students in their neighborhoods. As relationships are built between the teacher and students, as well as the school and community, the education of students begins to be reflective of the various backgrounds within a classroom.

Reflection. CRP is not a lesson or system to be used one time, but rather a way to think about teaching and learning. Within this teaching practice, it is necessary to be reflective and constantly learning. Teachers must reflect on how their community, culture, and upbringing may create bias in the classroom in terms of behavioral expectations and academic focuses (Brown-Jeffy, 2011; Cole, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Lehman, 2017; Powell, 2017). All teachers bring their own cultural norms and bias into the classroom. The culture of the teacher reflects expectations, particularly in terms of acceptable classroom behavior but does not always reflect unbiased views of student behavior. For example, a loud classroom does not necessarily mean students are misbehaving, although a teacher might make an assumption, due to their bias, that loud behavior is bad behavior.

It is essential that teachers reflect on how their upbringing and education influence their understanding of others. Topics around culture are sensitive issues that

must be discussed openly while taking place in a safe situation where differing worldviews are respected (Cole, 2016). Conversations must take place not only about the cultures of students and cultural norms to be expected from different people groups, but also about the cultural expectations of the teacher's own culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Lehman, 2017; Powell, 2013). Biases can include bias of gender expectation or gender roles, how socioeconomic status plays a role in education, and bias of race (Powell 2013). Bias around each of these topics can determine teacher perception of the ability level of students in different groups, the expected behaviors, and ability to be a "good student." All of the biases that teachers bring into the classroom are counterintuitive to the guideline of CRP that all students experience academic success.

Differences in culture play a role in both the learning-style of the students and the teaching-style of educators. Therefore, they must be noted in lesson planning, especially when student cultures differ from the culture of the teacher (Brown-Jeffy, 2011). Bias is, unfortunately, an embedded part of culture as anthropologically speaking, humans generally believe their culture is superior to other cultures. With this in mind, teachers must reflect on their own cultural expectations and how they contribute to bias in the classroom. As a central aspect of CRP, bias must be removed from the classroom, which can only be done when educators are willing to be reflective practitioners on how their own culture and expectations may play a role in their bias of student success. Once teachers are able to reflect on their educational and behavioral biases, they are able to make revisions to their teaching practices and curriculum to create a more culturally relevant environment for all learners.

Revision. Most curriculum is written from a point of view that may not resonate with the diverse set of students in a given classroom. It is clear to educators that there is explicit educational bias today in curriculum and the educational system in general, dating back to the industrial era education and pre-Civil Rights legislation. Evidence of these outdated practices can be seen in the use of bells for passing times and curricula that belittles certain culture groups. Teachers must look for ways to revise their curriculum to teach the same standards while allowing student interests and cultural norms to lead what is being studied (Brown-Jeffy, 2001; Garland, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Shealey, 2007). Ladson-Billings uses the language “problematize teaching” as a key way to revise the educational system (1995b). Rather than looking at areas of concern in terms of education as student deficits, look at the teaching and educational system as the problem. Revising curriculum to make it culturally appropriate for today’s diverse learners include affirming multiple perspectives, introducing socio political topics, making connections to student’s cultural knowledge and language, and incorporating diverse resources (Brown-Jeffy, 2001; Garland, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lehman, 2017; Powell, 2013). As each of these culturally relevant strategies is used to revise the current educational system, it will become clear that the learners were never the problem, rather the way the material was being taught.

Students come into the classroom as individuals with unique perspectives that must be respected and validated in the educational environment. Lessons that allow multiple perspectives to be shared are crucial to having a culturally relevant classroom environment (Brown-Jeffy, 2011). Strategies such as a turn and talk, Socratic seminar, or

wagon wheel give all students the ability to share their perspectives in a way that validates how they think about the world. Introducing socio-political topics as means for discussion and as a way of teaching curriculum create an environment where students are able to be critical of the status quo or current events affecting their communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2014). Utilizing topics of concern and raising awareness and the ability for students to determine wrongs in society critique cultural norms that are often accepted as fact.

Upholding student's cultural and language diversity is another way to create culturally relevant curriculum (Powell, 2013). Language carries power that is important in the connection to one's culture. Allowing students to share their cultural experience and their language at school allows cultural identity to become further accepted in the classroom. The incorporation of diverse resources to utilize in curriculum is an essential way to give students a way to relate to the curriculum and see diverse people reflected in their learning (Brown-Jeffy, 2011; Garland, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lehman, 2017). The term diverse in this context may mean the modalities by which curriculum is delivered, the race or ethnicity the material best represents, or the age group that the material most relates to. Each of these examples provides a way to revise curriculum to make it culturally relevant to all students through the use of sharing their opinions and culture, challenging the status quo, and introducing diverse resources into a rigorous curriculum.

Rigor. The purpose of education is to provide rigorous academic instruction to students. At the heart of CRP is the belief that academic instruction is culturally relevant when it holds all students to high standards (Brown-Jeffy, 2011; Cole, 2016; Ladson-

Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2017; Shealy, 2007). The most culturally relevant instruction is implemented when a teacher can do is hold all students, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, or any other factor to high academic standards and believe that every student is able to meet these high standards set for them.

Academic success is the business of the education system. Unfortunately, due to unfair stereotypes that have been prevalent in the past, not all students have been granted the opportunities to reach educational success. When looking at creating an equitable learning environment for all students, it is important to implement strategies to encourage students to meet these high expectations, rather than lowering expectations. Through building relationships with students and the community, acknowledging how bias influences teaching, and utilizing diverse methods of delivering curriculum, teachers are able to achieve the most important aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy, maintaining high academic standards. While high standard should be held across all content areas, the next section will look further at culturally relevant pedagogy as it applies to literacy.

Culturally Relevant Literacy Practices

These four identified key aspects of CRP - relationships, reflection, revision, and rigor - are general practices that are true of culturally relevant practice regardless of content or grade level. Although useful techniques to build an equitable learning environment can be used by all educators, teachers with specific content demands must know the best practices within CRP to teach their curriculum. Specifically looking at best practices literacy education gives is important in answering the research question

because there are specific teaching techniques and practices specific to reading that content area teachers should enact in their classrooms.

Literacy has historically been taught with Eurocentric characters, values, and topics (Nichols, 2000). The way in which reading has been taught in schools has not kept up with the changing demographics in the United States. Culturally relevant literacy practices are necessary for teaching diverse students. Books and stories share cultural values, systems of belief, gender roles, and so many other important aspects of culture. Due to the high level of culture embedded both explicitly and implicitly in books, it is essential that special consideration is taken to ensure that literacy practices are culturally relevant. These practices include making multicultural literature accessible, acknowledging student voice, providing necessary background and vocabulary knowledge, questioning texts to build critical consciousness, and utilizing youth culture.

Need for multicultural literature. For the purposes of this text, a broad definition of multicultural literature will be used. The definition that is most fitting to the context due to the five areas of culture being utilized as a reference guide is the following: “multicultural literature includes literature about people who are considered outside of the mainstream of society and have been in some manner marginalized” (Salas, 2001). This definition allows for a definition of multicultural literature that allows for differences in socioeconomic status and gender identity, unlike some narrower definitions that focus on ethnicity.

Diverse books are needed in classrooms to promote culturally relevant literacy (Hall, 2008; Nichols, 2000; Ramirez, 2014; Salas, 2001; Shealey, 2007). Diverse books link student experiences, lived experiences, and cultural knowledge into readings,

providing a context for understanding classroom literature (Callins, 2006; Feger, 2006; Ramirez, 2014; Shealey, 2007). Multicultural literature also gives students a lens into other cultures and legitimizes differing perspectives in the classroom, while providing a strength-based approach to student differences (Ladson-Billings 1992, Ramirez 2014, Souto-Manning 2017). Utilizing diverse texts in the classroom provides an environment in which no one culture or perspective is valued above the others, creating an overall environment of respect.

Qualifications for multicultural literature. Quality multicultural literature does not solely refer to any book with diverse, underrepresented, marginalized characters. Although Ladson-Billings (1992) did cite a literacy rich environment filled with reading materials as a culturally responsive approach to literacy, others have noted that it is not solely the number of books that matters (Callins, 2006; Hall, 2008; Salas, 2001). Regardless of level, diverse books should not be added to a classroom or school library solely due to the diverse perspective, but should undergo the same scrutiny as any other book to determine qualification to be added to the collection (Hall, 2008; Salas, 2001). Books must have authentic characters, provide culturally accurate details, share cultural values, and avoid perpetuating stereotypes (Hall, 2008; Salas, 2001). Books with diverse characters do not add diverse perspectives to the classroom unless they are free of negative bias and have a purpose in the library. As with any other piece of curriculum, available and used literature needs to go through a vetting process to determine the value added.

Culture in literature. Teachers choose books for specific purposes within the classroom or as additions to a library. What must also be noted when choosing books is

the way in which the represented culture(s) influence student understanding of the storyline. In a study of preservice teachers reading international children's literature, Montero notes the students had to "examine life looking from the outside in - something that international students experience frequently" (2006). This is because there are deeply rooted cultural norms present in literature. There are ways of speaking, implied gender roles, historical knowledge, and values that are not explicitly explained, but present in all literature. This is a reality for our diverse students.

Students who are not from the predominant culture are missing cultural background knowledge necessary to understand the story. Further, assessment of student understanding is often based on cultural information rather than on information explicitly stated by the author (Nichols, 2000). Culture is present even in the way we question students about what they read. Asking students to draw inferences means that we are asking them to blend their home culture and the culture of the text. This can cause differences in the way the student understands the text versus the way teachers believe the text should be interpreted.

Acknowledging student voice. Due to differences in cultural understandings and levels of background knowledge, culturally relevant literacy includes giving students the opportunity to discuss literature. Including student discourse in classrooms allows student to control part of their learning and share their take on literature through their unique lens (Callins, 2006; Conrad, 2004). Teachers must model making self-to-text connections for students (Feger, 2006). Once ready, students' ability to share their connections to the text allows their unique perspective to be shared. In turn, it teaches to legitimize other frames of reference when looking at texts and begins to teach students to

question their understanding of the text (Ladson-Billings, 1992). In sharing, students not only become part of the conversation, but are also able to share their own experience and culture in a cooperative classroom environment.

In working with dual language students and English Learners (EL), allowing student voice in the classroom can also provide a way to legitimize their home language. Allowing students to focus on their language strengths builds a culturally relevant classroom experience (Ramirez 2014). It also provides a venue for the student to build their English skills based on their home language strengths (Callins, 2006). Language is a part of culture that holds power. Allowing students to collaborate and share in classroom discourse that allows the utilization of English and home languages gives students the opportunity to share in an authentic way while building academic language skills (Ramirez, 2014). Words hold powerful meaning and giving students avenue to utilize their voices gives all students power in a diverse classroom.

Building vocabulary and background knowledge. Because the literature we choose to use in our classroom holds a great deal of power, it is necessary to ensure that all students have access to the vocabulary and background knowledge to access classroom literature. Vocabulary is rooted in language and often holds special cultural significance. Both vocabulary and background knowledge allow students to construct meaning about texts (Callins, 2006, Feger, 2006). Therefore, in order to provide culturally relevant literacy practices, all students need to be introduced to the vocabulary and background knowledge to help them understand the literature. Assuming that all students have the necessary tools to understand a text does not take into consideration variations in culture, life experiences, and language among diverse learners. Ensuring

that all students are familiar with the necessary vocabulary (both academic and specialized) and background knowledge to make sense of multicultural literature is a necessary step in ensuring culturally relevant practices are being used and students are able to understand the text in meaningful ways.

Questioning texts. Culturally Relevant literacy practices aren't just about being able to read but being able to make meaning of texts and critically analyze text. The purpose of CRP is not merely to have students be consumers of text but be critical consumers. Text talks can be used to build a focus and give students opportunities to interact with the text (Conrad, 2004). Being able to question texts with critical perspectives is a vital aspect of creating culturally relevant literacy practices (Feger, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2017). Modeling questioning techniques with texts provides a venue for students to share their experiences. This is possible with both fiction and nonfiction. Fictional texts provide an opportunity to make connections to one's own experience and question how the perspective of the main character or their experiences are different or similar to those of the reader. Non-fiction provides opportunities to read multiple perspectives and question the validity of each argument.

Critical readings act as a way to learn about yourself as a reader and how your experiences influence your perceptions of yourself and others (Souto-Manning, 2017). Through this questioning, students are able to gain a critical consciousness and a way of seeing the inequities within the world rather than accepting the way things are as unconditional fact (Souto-Manning, 2017; Petrone, 2013). Readings that encourage social action give all students, regardless of background, the opportunity to utilize literacy as a way of changing the world.

Critical consciousness and social action. Literacy is power. Having the ability to gather information, interpret meaning, critically evaluate opinions, and reply persuasively is the way to make change. Culturally relevant literacy gives students the opportunity to see, evaluate, and reply to inequalities within society. Culturally relevant teachers see the importance of literacy in its use as a tool for liberation (Ladson-Billings, 1992). The evaluation of current social norms through literacy provides a platform for diverse students to be heard, not only in the classroom, but on a larger scale. Being able to respond eloquently to social issues gives a voice to those who have often been marginalized from society - those for whom multicultural literature is of the utmost importance. It is also important for those from culturally dominant perspectives to see how societal and political issues affect diverse people.

Social Action Approach. The Social Action Approach provides four ways in which multicultural literature can be integrated into classrooms and the types of change that is brought about by each technique (Banks, 1991; Nichols, 2000; Salas, 2001). The highest level of the Social Action Approach: “students identify social problems and concerns, make decisions, and take actions to help resolve problems they have identified” (Salas, 2001). This approach to using diverse literature empowers all learners to exchange ideas and be part of action that contributes to change. In this way, literacy leads to liberation and is relevant to all students. Students see celebrities and other public figures constantly standing up for social change and utilizing diverse literature to cultivate a spirit of social action gives students the ability to do the same with their voices.

Utilizing youth culture. Culturally relevant literature must take into account the interests of young people, outside of their culture. Anyone who has taught knows that students have a culture of their own aside from their home culture. There are slang terms, social norms, common values, and interests that transcend cultural differences for young people. For this reason, popular culture must be used as a literacy tool (Petroni, 2013). Utilizing pop culture gives educators a way to reach all students in a relevant way regardless of individual culture. Incorporating aspects of youth culture through pop culture and social media gives a gateway for educators to support the commonalities amongst youth.

Digital learning. It has been cautioned to ensure that diverse learners are not labeled as insufficiently meeting literacy standards due to a lack of digital literacy perceived as reading literacy (Callins, 2006). For example, a student not knowing how to use a computer but given a reading test digitally may score below grade level solely based on lack of technology skills rather than actual low ability levels in reading. Although this may be true, most students are fully capable of using technology, and it is part of their youth culture that should be used in a culturally relevant literacy classroom (Saunders, 2012). Multiple research tools, social media platforms, and other multimedia tools are present and should be used in the literacy classroom.

Technology is a part of literacy and being able to determine the credibility of sources, connect with others, and express ideas digitally are all important skills that need to be learned. While teaching these skills and literacy, teachers are engaging in a large piece of youth culture - the internet. This platform also gives students the ability to communicate broadly and share ideas with diverse people. Digitizing discussions gives

everyone a place to share ideas and communicate regardless of comfort level within the classroom. There are also avenues to tie in pop culture and allow students to be in communication with celebrities who are engaging in social action work. Technology helps all aspects of culturally relevant literacy be possible through the endless avenues of research and communication available online.

We Need Diverse Books

Utilizing all of the best practices in CRP and literacy still does not fill the gap of diverse literature available for students. We Need Diverse Books is spearheading the movement to get diverse authors and perspectives in the hands of students, teachers, administrators, media directors, and other people with power over the literature in children's hands through their online campaign, anthologies, courses, and hashtag (We Need Diverse Books, 2018). The organization recognizes the need to call for culturally relevant literature in school across the United States. In the discussion about culturally relevant literacy practices, the access to diverse books is of the utmost importance. Without diverse literature, it isn't possible to fulfill the other components discussed above. Multicultural literature is at the forefront of culturally relevant literacy education.

Allowing students to see themselves in literature is an essential part of culturally relevant literacy education. The "classics" do not need to be abandoned and still hold value as literature (Hall, 2008). However, books need to be added to classrooms and libraries that share diverse perspectives and reflect the cultural values of multicultural students. Without diverse literature, the previous suggestions for increasing culturally relevant literacy are void. The most important aspect is ensuring diverse books, with

multicultural perspectives and free of stereotypes, are available for teachers and students to use. Finding these resources is difficult but can be made into a community endeavor.

Community involvement in choosing literature. Choosing diverse literature does not need to be a cumbersome task for school staff. Involving the community is a critical way to ensure that the diverse perspectives of all students within the community are represented in diverse literature. Community members are able to provide insight to culturally appropriate texts and are also a valuable resource in determining if certain texts uphold the cultural values within the community. Having parents and other volunteers on a committee can help to create a multicultural library filled with titles that support the diverse cultures within a community.

Summary

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy focuses on ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have access to the same educational opportunities. In looking at CRP at large, there were four main areas that were identified as being central tenants of the teaching philosophy. Relationships are at the heart of CRP and ensuring that the teacher knows each student as an individual and is able to build a relationship with them is key to having a culturally relevant classroom practice. Teachers must also undergo reflection to determine how their culture and life experiences play a role in some of the bias they bring to their classroom. Identifying and confronting teacher bias leads to a classroom environment where not culture is valued over another. Revision of curriculum is necessary to ensuring that what is being taught meets the standards, but also meets the diverse backgrounds of students. Ways of teaching must also be revised in order to bring in techniques that give value to different learning styles and behaviors. Throughout this

process maintaining high academic expectations and rigor is essential for ensuring CRP. All students, regardless of background, should be held to the same high academic expectations and through those high expectations, all students should get the same rigorous education. These are the most fundamental elements of CRP across the curriculums.

When looking at literacy instruction specifically in terms of maintaining cultural relevance there are further techniques and systems that can be incorporated to promote culturally relevant literacy practices. The primary way to ensure culturally relevant literacy practices is to increase the number of multicultural titles available to teachers and students. Only through having diverse literature available are other elements of culturally relevant literacy able to be supported. Giving students a voice in classroom discussions to share their opinions and experiences as they relate to literature involves all students and allows diverse perspectives to be shared. Providing instruction in necessary vocabulary and background knowledge to understand texts gives all students understanding of key concepts within a text. This is especially important when the cultural aspects of a text do not align with the student's own culture as there may be missed meanings if it is not explained. Allowing questioning of texts to develop critical consciousness and social action within students provides a platform to speak up against injustices seen in literature. By utilizing youth culture as a means for teaching literacy, equity is created; all students have the same understandings and background. These components of culturally relevant literacy instruction provide exceptional literacy education for diverse learners.

The main call in culturally relevant literacy education is for diverse literature to be available. Although literature is becoming more diverse, education has traditionally been from a Eurocentric perspective, and it has remained so in literature. As teachers and schools are able to build into their curriculum and libraries diverse titles that are culturally authentic and free of stereotypes, teachers can also build in other culturally relevant learning activities. Many resources are available to find diverse titles, including members of the community, and should be utilized to diversify reading selections.

Chapter Three will focus on the methods used to answer the research question. The above research has made it clear that the biggest need in providing culturally relevant literacy materials to teachers and students is the actual diverse literature itself. The following chapter will detail the creation of a digital tool that can be utilized to encourage teachers and students to seek out culturally relevant materials to enhance literacy on a school-wide level. This tool will provide an easy way to discover titles already available within the school that teachers can select to use for curriculum or students can access for personal enjoyment. Chapter Four will be a reflection on the project outcomes, personal learnings from the process, and future goals for the digital tool.

CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two described the need for culturally relevant literature in the classroom in helping to answer the question: What tools will help teachers and students access culturally relevant classroom materials for middle school students? The literature review discussed culturally relevant pedagogy as a whole, which included reviewing the basic tenets of the teaching practice in regards to both what is expected of teachers and the student outcomes that should be seen when applied with efficacy. The idea of culturally relevant literacy was discussed and the importance of having students see themselves and others in the materials they read for academic instruction and choice reading. Culturally relevant literacy practices were reviewed through a theoretical lens. Finally, the literature pointed to ways to ensure diverse books are represented in classrooms and other educational settings through obtaining diverse books and involving the community in culturally relevant practices and selection of materials that reflect the diverse student body at a school.

Chapter Three gives the methods that will be used as a response for answering the above stated research question. The chapter discusses the framework used for answering the research question, which consists of a data structure that will be created to be used as a search tool for all books in the media center at a culturally diverse school in the Midwest into categories based on which area(s) of culture the book best fits. A rationale for the chosen method based on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) practices for literacy and other relevant information from the literature review and best practices for website design are discussed. The audience and timeframe for completing the project

will be reviewed, with an emphasis on how the audience contributes to the relationship aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy. Finally, I will detail how the project's effectiveness will be measured in its ability to answer the posed research question. The longevity of the project, once initially created, is one of the key aspects in its creation. The ability to continually add to the data structure is discussed as it relates to the research question.

Framework

The project created is a data structure hosted on a website that contains information on a set of diverse young adult literature that can be searched based on several categories. All of the books in the data structure are listed on the home screen of the website. Users are able to see all available books listed in the data structure or easily clear a search by returning to the home screen of the website through selecting the icon at the top left corner of the screen. The search feature utilizes five key components of culture, which allows users to categorize books to help determine books that will match student's cultural interests. The five areas of culture that books are categorized by include: gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, and socioeconomic status. The website contains five drop-down menus - one for each area of culture. Users are able to select various options for each of the highlighted areas of culture. The search allows for multiple areas of culture to be selected, but users are not able to select multiple subcategories from a single area of culture. For example, a user can choose "male" from gender/sexual orientation and "black/African-American" from race/ethnicity, however, a user cannot choose both "male" and "female" from gender/sexual orientation. Each change in the drop down menus produces a change in

the available book selection, narrowing the books with each addition to the search. There is no search button. Rather, the data narrows automatically when a selection is made in one of the search categories. Further, the search feature floats on the webpage, allowing users to change their selections of search criteria while scrolling through the populated book list. This allows greater functionality and easier search modifications for users.

The data structure is hosted on a private webpage, allowing the creator to own the data and code. The external website also allows easier editing of data that might not be allowed by a single district's permissions. In order to allow accessibility for the target audience, the website is linked on the media center website of the school which the booklist was generated from. The digital platform the data structure allows for multiple people to access the material at once, opposed to a tangible resource. Further, the external website along with the link allows both easy access for the target audience, as well as a way for people outside of the target audience to access the site easily.

Books in the data structure were chosen based on several factors. First, books in the data structure all can be found in the media center at the target school. Second, books needed to be searchable by at least two of the categories. Finally, the initial set of books selected to add to the data structure were all recently published and anticipated to remain in the school's collection for the foreseeable future. Within these criteria, and working with the media director for the school, we chose 80 books to be added to the data structure. Most books were published in 2016 or later, so other diverse "classic" titles are not shown. The initial 80 books were used as a starting point but will grow as more books are added to the media center. Further, it is possible for books to be eliminated from the data structure as necessary. Space changes, lost books, and the addition of

newer titles often cause books to be removed from the media center's available selection. This "weeding" process is a primary reason why the majority of the initial 80 books will be books published within the last two years. Further, in a media center with roughly 5,000 books care was taken in determining which books would be most beneficial to have on the site. With the purpose of the database being diverse books, it was unnecessary to categorize every book. There are other keyword, subject, and author searches students can run on the current database. The purpose of this project was to provide opportunities for people to find books with diverse characters and perspectives.

Determining the categorization of the books in the media center required the utilization of several tools including websites such as GoodReads, Amazon, and various book blogs to help determine the correct categorization of the books. Teacher recommendations and collaborative discussions through the Professional Learning Community (PLC), partially tasked with ensuring student access to culturally relevant materials, were also be used as a springboard to guide designations. On the website, users are able to see the book title, author, call number, genre, and a summary. The title, author, call number, and genre were pulled from the media center's online catalogue. The online catalogue Destiny Quest, was also used to pull book lists and ensure that information in the database was in agreement with the catalogue (Follett School Solutions, 2016). The summary for each book was determined by the creator based on personal reading or through utilizing other summaries from some of the sources listed above. On the backend of the website, each book also has information about each of the categories of culture the book fits. This is what prompts books to be pulled when a search is initiated by a user. The data for each book can be edited by revising the JSON

code on the backend of the website. Additions to the booklist are able to be made through coding the JSON data or by utilizing an external webpage to add books. The external page allows potential users, such as the media center director, to add books to the data structure without having to code the data. Further, having the external webpage that populates new data ensures that previous data is not accidentally deleted or edited in the process.

Although the data structure is the primary component of the project, the website also includes other useful resources. There are four additional pages on the website that contain information about the project. These four pages are: About this Project, About the Creators, Other Resources, and Contact. The About this Project page features information about the project, including why it was created, its purpose, the target audience, and how it is to contribute to education. About the Creators gives a brief biography of Courtney Ramirez and Marinda Phandanouvong and each of their roles in the creation of the website. Other Resources gives links to several resources users might be interested in exploring. These resources are divided into two categories. One to help users find more diverse literature. The other category links to resources that were used in the creation of the website, data structure, and search features. The Contact page has an embedded Google Form that allows users to send messages to the creators. As a whole, the website includes all relevant information or allows users a way to make contact to get necessary information. The website was created using Bootstrap, which many large sites use as a resource for website design (Otto, 2018). The website includes a sleek design that follows best practices of website design through few colors, easy navigation, and

limited content. The website was designed to be user friendly and accessible for both adults and youth.

The database is meant to be a tool to aid teachers and students in selecting appropriate, culturally relevant texts that meet the interest of students. In such, the data structure only allows users to search based on the cultural component of the books. Rather than searching books by genre or keyword, the website focuses solely on cultural elements. The website does allow users to find the book in the target media center, but does not have the capability to find similar books like another database might allow. However, the purpose of this project is to ensure that culturally relevant titles are available for students to read and are able to access books that will show mirrors: reflections of the students in what they read, and windows: ways in which literature allows readers to look out into other perspectives.

An auxiliary purpose for the creation of the website is to determine any shortcomings in the current book selection at the target audience school. The data structure acts as a way to view areas of culture that few or no books in our media center selection, allowing the conscientious addition of books fitting all areas of culture. This secondary feature will be most useful as more books continue to be added to the data structure. The search can be utilized by staff members of the target audience school to determine any categories of culture that are underrepresented with current books. This allows for the purchase of new materials that focus on areas of culture that are underrepresented in the collection. The hope is that this function in time increases the awareness of staff of the diversity of the book selection available for students. As a

whole, the purpose of the tool is to aid in assessing culturally relevant reading materials in an educational setting.

Framework Rationale

The project was created based on the principles of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) discussed in Chapter Two, as well as ensuring full functionality of the search feature and website. Two of the key components of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) are relationships and community collaboration. Therefore, it seemed necessary to create a project that would be accessible by the community as a whole. Further, in regards to relationships specifically, it seemed counterintuitive to create a product that was only to be used by the teachers to establish culturally relevant practices within the school as a whole. According to CRP, learning is a social experience and students need to be given the opportunity to have conversations about what they are learning. These conversations give students a voice and promote dialogue about how individuals experience their culture and the culture of others. In such, it was necessary to have the product available for all to see so that conversations around diversity are able to be shared between all members of the school community. Ideally, students and teachers use the tool together, as they find books that peak the student's interest, open up dialogue for relationship building, and provide opportunities for discussions around books, leading to greater literacy and interest in reading.

The digital component of the data structure allows for relationships about books, contributes to accessibility, and allowed for greater function than would be allowed with a non-digital resource. Being hosted online, and through a digital platform, allows the database to be put through ongoing revisions as needed to best serve the users, including

additions of book titles and changes in where the books can be found. Edits are able to be done by changing the JSON file on the website. Additions are able to be made either directly into the JSON file or through an additional webpage that allows users to add material directly to the data structure with a passcode. Further, it is possible to add additional features and categories. Since there were additional areas of culture not included in the initial project, such as language or ability/disability, these categories may be added as the project grows beyond the capstone.

The search categories currently available were chosen based on data gathered from students. Gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion/spirituality, socioeconomic status, and nationality are the current search categories based on data from a survey given to students discussed in Chapter One. The five categories were chosen specifically due to less than 50% of students reporting that they identified with these areas of culture in classroom materials (Ramirez, 2017). The subcategories within each category were chosen based on common categorizations, trying to find inclusive terms where possible. The number of subcategories needed to be limited to ensure ease of use, so there are often broad subcategories that are used, such as for nationality. It was not practical to list every nation in the world. Rather than using countries, continents were used as the subcategory. Information about the exact location can then be added in the book's summary. Ensuring ease of use was a primary component of the design and narrowing search categories and subcategories was a primary way that the website was able to remain user-friendly. Again, if over time there comes a need to create additional search criteria, it can be done by editing the code.

The code for the data structure and search was coded specifically for this project, making it unique to this project and ensuring ease of use as it was created to perform to the exact specifications of the project. During the initial planning stages of the project many other options were explored, but available resources did not seem to have the features needed for the project. The media center database responsible for all book inventory, check-outs, and cataloguing media center materials was one option that was reviewed. Although it could have been possible to utilize tags to categorize books through the current system and tag searches could be utilized to search for culturally relevant materials, the database would be most useful would include narrowing down books by increasing the number of tags a book has, rather than increasing results as more tags are added. Another option was to utilize database software currently available. This would have required for specific permissions on the website and would have created difficulties ensuring the search performed properly. For this reason an entirely separate resource was created.

Creating a separate code and website also allows people outside of the school and district to access the information. If tags were used with the current system, the information would only be accessible to those who search the current database. By hosting the search and data structure on an external website it allows individuals outside of the school and district to utilize the information, and potentially even link it onto their school's website. The current platform does have a 1GB data limitation. If data storage ever exceeds the limit, it is possible to transfer the database onto another server (school or a paid server) in order to add more data. The digital format also allows the project to be replicated relatively easily by other interested parties. The website on which the data

structure is hosted has information about the project, allowing others to replicate the project with the books in their collection, making it a resource that not only benefits the target audience school, but could be used by educators and schools worldwide.

Audience

The primary audience for this project are the students and teachers at a diverse suburban middle school in the Midwest whose media center books were used to create the database. As discussed in the above section, this resource is available for staff and students to utilize, as it promotes conversation, relationships, and collaboration around culturally relevant literacy materials. Further, giving students the ability to utilize the website gives them ownership in their reading and likely means that they are finding appropriate books based on their interests

Book titles in the data structure range in reading level from upper-elementary through young adult and have a variety of topics. The books are generally appropriate for students ages 10-15 years old, although students outside of that age range may find the books interesting or may want to utilize the data structure to search for books of a particular cultural value, despite being above or below the reading level of the student. Further, teachers are encouraged to read the titles on the website in order to read diverse literature. Although linked on one school website, the hope is that the audience would reach farther than the school community. The audience for this project could be as far reaching as a global scale, as the data structure is accessible online.

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of this project was and will continue to be difficult to measure as it will not be closely monitored in terms of use and there is no viable way to study the

positive effects the website and data structure will have on staff or students. The effectiveness instead is measured through feedback and on the number of searches each month, with a hope that the project will grow in popularity as staff and students have a greater understanding of the necessity of utilizing culturally relevant materials in order to increase engagement and literacy. With the digital format allowing editing easily, if any aspects of the data structure or website are proving to be ineffective through feedback, they can be edited to better serve the user.

Timeframe

The website was completed May 2018 and is available for public viewing. Although available at the end of the 2017-2018 school year, revisions will be made over the summer as the books in the media center at the host school will change. Beginning in the 2018-2019 school year, staff and students will be given an introduction to the website and will be encouraged to use it. Each month, as new selections are added to the media center, often based on diverse new released middle grade and young adult books, these new titles will be added into the data structure. The project will be ever evolving and changing as the books selections available to teachers and students, both within the school and within the larger community, change over time. Titles have the ability to be removed from the data set on a yearly basis as books are weeded from the media center.

Summary

The project was created in response to the question: What tools will help teachers and students access culturally relevant classroom materials for middle school students? The website will feature five dropdown options in the following categories: gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion/spirituality, socioeconomic status, and

nationality. These drop downs will feature many different subcategories. The data structure will start with 80 books from the media center of my current school will be put into the data structure by May 2018, new books will be categorized yearly thereafter. Students and teachers will be able to utilize the website to help feature mirrors and windows for students individually based on their culture and interests. Chapter Four will review the process of putting together the project and what was learned throughout the experience.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The project described in Chapter Three was created in response to the question: What tools will help teachers and students access culturally relevant classroom materials for middle school students? The previous chapter described the elements included in the website digital data set. The website allows users to search for books of interest based on five areas of culture: gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion/spirituality, socioeconomic status, and nationality. The data structure will be added to as the selection of diverse books is expanded at the media center. Further, there will be the ability to edit the material over time as some books may no longer be needed on the data structure or might need to be edited based on user feedback.

Chapter Four will begin with a reflection of my learnings during the project, which includes the areas of diverse young adult literature, the creation of digital content, and culturally relevant pedagogy, as well as the ways in which the literature review most influenced my project. Next, the ways in which the project benefits the profession and implications for use will be addressed. This will also include looking at ways in which the project can be utilized and the limitations of the project. Finally, the future of both the project and my learning will be discussed as the culmination of the project and learning throughout the process has brought forth additional questions and goals.

Learnings

Throughout the process of creating this project, during both the research and production phases, there were many learnings that occurred for me. These learnings added both knowledge and skills to my toolbox of which I would not have acquired

without this capstone. The research process, categorization of books, and building the actual website all contributed to my professional development in different ways and brought forth unique challenges. Throughout this process, significant learnings I had were in regards to the multifaceted nature of culturally relevant pedagogy, digging into current young adult literature, and the vast knowledge that goes into creating a digital product.

Historical nature of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is currently considered by many educators to be a “buzz phrase” within education. This phrase and those close to it are often used within education, rarely being defined. Within educational research almost the opposite is true. Each author has a slightly different definition for this phrase, different key elements of what it looks like in the classroom, or even different phrasing for what is essentially the same thing: bringing the culture of students into our educational materials.

Through my research process, I sought to understand the different definitions of CRP, how they changed over time, and the many phrases that are closely related to CRP, including culturally responsive pedagogy. As a researcher, I found it important, but also at times a point of frustration, to try to understand the subtleties in definition and phrasing as each source had a purpose for the exact word choice used. The process brought forth the learning of the complexity of providing instruction to all students that is respectful of and responsive to the culture or all learnings, as well as the ways this has changed over time.

Ladson-Billings (1992), one of the first to coin the term “culturally relevant pedagogy,” has in recent years written about the need for more than what she wrote about

when originally publishing articles on the topic. This change in what those in education are calling for in terms of how to relate to students and the unique things they bring to school with them shows that this topic is ever evolving. The ways in which CRP has changed until this point is also a way of looking to the future - the pedagogy and teaching tools that are used today are not the end. Looking at the historical evolution of CRP over a 25-year period has helped me realize the context of what is commonplace in schools today. Where culturally relevant practices came from and where they will go as education continues to find ways to make learning inclusive and meaningful for all students was a key point of my professional development.

Analyzing young adult literature. Much as CRP has changed over time, so has the literature that is being published for and read by young adults. With recent calls for diverse literature to be published, there has been a change in the types of literature teens and young adults are reading. There has also been an increase in the acceptance of graphic novels as legitimate literature in recent years. Through this project I was able to track trends in young adult literature and look closely at the types of literature being published for teens today.

I am fortunate to work at a school that welcomes diverse literature and seeks books with unique perspectives. In the creation of this data structure, I was tasked with looking closely with a variety of books. As a reading teacher, I found this project useful in becoming familiar with books potentially read by my students. Knowing about the available literature and being able to connect students with books of interest is a key component of my role. This project required me to look deeply at current literature and

make connections between the books added to the data structure and potential uses at school.

Digital components. The area in which I was most stretched during this process was in the creation of the website and data structure. I came into this project with no skills or knowledge in the areas of IT or web design. When I would explain my plans to people, I would often say that I didn't know why I chose this project format because I had no skills to complete the digital component. Throughout the process of creating the digital project, I gained significantly more knowledge in the subject than I thought possible.

Through working closely with an IT specialist, I was able to gain significant knowledge in this area where I previously had little (M. Phandanouvong, personal communication). One of the biggest learnings was an increased ability to have conversations around the backend of technology. Before starting this project, I had very little understanding and was unable to really hold a conversation about the project I wanted to create in technical terms. Throughout the creation of this project, I have gained the ability to have a technical conversation about the project, how it was created, and what types of technologies it utilizes.

Along with an increase in understanding and language surrounding the project, I gained insight into available resources I might use to create something similar in the future. I was unaware of the vast amount of resources that can be put to use - free of charge - to create some amazing things. The fact that the entire project was built utilizing free tools available on the internet still astounds me. Learning about programs and tools that have been created to help people create digital content was one of the most useful

aspects of this project as I look forward. Without taking a step out of my comfort zone to choose this digital project for my capstone I don't think I would have ever gained the knowledge I did in regards to the technological side of my project. The three areas of significant learning I had were all very different from one another, but were uniquely tied together during this project.

Revisiting the Literature

The idea that stuck out most prominently to me in the literature was the importance of relationships between students and teachers. In alignment with the literature, I believe that building relationships and seeing students as individuals is a crucial aspect of creating a culturally relevant classroom. One challenge that this brought in the creation of my project was how my finished product would help build relationships or would continue to foster positive relationships. The original plan for the project was to create something solely for teacher use. Due to the importance of relationships in the reviewed literature, I was determined to find a way to have my database help to build relationships or open conversations that help to build relationships.

The creation of a collection of book data that is accessible and useful for both students and teachers to use helps to accomplish this goal. Through using the finished project either independently or together, students and teachers can have conversations about topics of interest, books, and life experiences. Further, it allows teachers introducing the data structure to students an opportunity to have discussions surrounding gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and nationality. These conversations may help contribute to a classroom culture of

understanding and acceptance. The website will foster relationships through the discussions surrounding books and the search categories.

Implications

The data structure of culturally relevant literature should significantly impact teaching and learning, especially in regards to getting diverse literature into the hands of students. One of the biggest battles as a teacher is to be able to find culturally relevant materials for classroom use. Literature that shows diverse perspectives is difficult to find, but it is critical that students are reading literature that allows them to see the world through multiple lenses. The large-scale implication of this project is that it allows teachers and students to search for diverse books, ultimately leading to more diverse literature that reflects the diversity of the student population to be read.

Benefits to the Profession

As communities become increasingly diverse, there will be a heightened need for young adult literature that reflects the diversity of the student population. One of the most difficult aspects of being a reading teacher is keeping up with all of the new young adult and middle grade literature published each year. Despite best efforts, it is nearly impossible to know the details of all new publications. Matching students with high-interest books is one of the primary roles of reading teachers, but it is often difficult to immediately make connections between students, their interests, and books that they would enjoy reading. Utilizing the created website gives students and teachers a place to start when looking for books with diverse characters and perspectives, ultimately connecting a greater number of students with culturally relevant texts than could be done without the use of this resource.

Along these same lines, the project will help educators best utilize the diverse books currently available. Even with the need for new titles from diverse authors and perspectives, educators must utilize what is currently available. There are many books from underrepresented viewpoints that have been published over a number of years that include diverse character and offer varied perspectives. As educators, we can speak to the need for more diverse literature, but we must take advantage of current books. Throughout the experience, I was pleased with the variety of titles available at my school, however, I was not familiar with many of the books until I began the research phase of the project. My hope is that educators and students who use this tool will see the potential for connections in the books currently available.

The project does not only benefit educators and students through connecting students with high-interest books. I believe that the tool can also be used to assess the cultural relevance of the books within the media center. A simple search of the data structure illustrates how easy it is to see how many books are in the media center representing the subcategories of each of the five areas of culture. Through the utilization of the website as a tool for determining what types of books are lacking within the media center, teachers and media directors are able to make decisions about adding books that will make the book selection increasingly diverse. Although at this point, this would only be applicable to my current school, I do believe this is a strong way that the resource positively influences teachers within my building.

Use of the Data Structure

The fully functioning website is accessible online and available to be accessed publicly. The project is welcomed to be used by anyone in hopes of producing large-

scale use through word-of-mouth sharing about the resource. The link to the search tool is located on the website of my current school's media center, from which the book list was created. Students and staff will be able to access the data structure immediately to use in the selection of text for students to read independently or to guide decisions about classroom texts to be used.

At the start of the 2018-19 school year, during my district's professional development week, teachers who may utilize the website as part of their curriculum will be given a short tutorial on how the data structure is used and potential ways to utilize it with students. All seventh grade students will be introduced to the data structure in their reading class and will be encouraged to use it to help them find books including wide perspectives. Beyond these introductions to the project, there are no formal ways that the project will be utilized. The hope is that teachers and students make a habit of utilizing the resource and help contribute to its growth as new literature is added over time.

Limitations

There are two limitations for the project that should be noted: the specificity of the books in the data structure and the cap for data on the current platform. The project was created using the books currently held in the media center at my current teaching position. The middle school has a diverse student population and regularly purchases new, culturally relevant literature, however, that does not mean that all literature that might be of interest to this age group is in the media center. Therefore, the data structure is not completely functional as a resource for culturally relevant literature as a whole as it only has data for books at one middle school in the Midwest. Further, the current platform that the data structure is hosted on limits entries to about 1,000 books. This

could be changed in the future if the website was hosted on another site, but it is a limitation as the project stands today.

Looking Forward

Although the creation of the data structure of culturally relevant literature is fully usable at this point and the project is complete, there are still revisions that I seek to make. As with any piece of technology, only time and use will tell the effectiveness of the project and what updates need to be made to make the website the most effective tool possible. Along with additions to the created project, there are additional learnings I hope to have over time. As the goal of the project was to create a “living” resource that could be adapted over time, so too will my professional growth.

Additions to the project. A project that could be modified and edited over time was one of the primary goals in the creation of the culturally relevant literature data structure. The current project has features that allow for additions to be made to the data structure. Additions will be made to the project as new books are added to the media center’s collection. This means that the information will change and grow with new books becoming available on a regular basis. Further, the hope is to eventually add titles available at the local public library and denote these books with a special symbol. This would allow a greater selection of books to be listed on the data structure. As stated in the limitations section, the maximum number of books that can be supported on the current platform is 1,000. At this time, there are no plans to change the host site; however, if the data grows to the point it can no longer be supported on the current platform, a decision could be made to change the server on which the data structure is hosted.

Another anticipated modification is to facilitate other categories to be added to the search categories. Two additional categories that are planned to be added quickly are Difference/Disability and Language. Through adding each of these and modifying existing books to include categorization based on these features will add usability to the data structure. There is a growing recognition in young adult fiction for characters with differences and disabilities. When selecting books for the data structure, it was clear that having a category for these books would be useful, but it did not fit with the original goal of the project. These future changes will help to create a better tool for users and will also help me to grow my own knowledge about the technology used in the project.

Future personal and professional learning. The technology used in this project was especially interesting to me as a learner. My interest in educational technology has grown greatly in the past two years through attending professional development workshops and working with colleagues to implement technology in the classroom. I have made it a personal and professional goal to find the most effective ways to use educational technology in my lessons to increase student learning. Further, I consistently seek to find ways that technology will aid in communicating ideas with others. The creation of this database gave me insight on other ways that technology can boost teaching and learning.

Through this project, I gained a lot of insight into web design, digital functionality, and coding. I would overall consider my learning of each of these components as understanding rather than full knowledge. While I am able to follow along while being guided through the process by an expert in the material, I would be unable to fully replicate the process independently or explain the process wholly to

someone else. In my opinion, I am at the very beginning of my learning in this area. I am at the second stage (guided instruction) or “we can do it” phase of the Gradual Release of Responsibility model for my own learning.

Brought forth in part by my work on the capstone project, my personal and professional goals now consist of gaining an independent learning level of knowledge in website design and coding. Even with many useful tools available today, I believe that it is a valuable skill to be able to implement technology independent from many of the user-friendly programs. There are limitations to what can be done with many of the easy-to-use resources available that do not allow for the creation of unique projects. I believe that through editing, making additions, and spending more time with the database, my skills and confidence will grow. As technology is becoming an increasingly relevant part of society, I believe that growing my knowledge and understanding of how websites work will be a useful skill both personally and professionally.

Summary

Chapter Four is a reflection of the capstone project process. The question that guided my process was: What tools will help teachers and students access culturally relevant classroom materials for middle school students? The process of creating a database of culturally relevant literature for middle school teachers and students guided me to many areas of learning. This learning included gaining insight to the historic components of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, increasing my knowledge of themes and specific titles within young adult literature, and gaining an understanding of the technology behind the database and web design. Further, through the literature review I

was able to gain insight about culturally relevant teaching practices and how those practices can be utilized alongside literature.

The goal of the project is to increase the culturally relevant texts used in classrooms. Through utilizing the created database, teachers and students will be able to select literature based on student interests and have conversations around diverse literature. The hope is also that this tool will allow educators to take note of the types of texts currently available and look to add books to their collection where there are gaps in showing diverse perspectives. The database was created with the books currently available at a diverse suburban middle school in the Midwest. This is the primary audience for the database, although the hope is that it is utilized by educators on a much larger scale. The limitations of the project were also discussed, including the limit of books under the current platform and that the books are drawn solely from one school's collection. Both of these limitations have potential to be mitigated in the future as modifications are made to the database.

Looking ahead, both the project and my professional development are in early stages. There are many features that I plan to add to the database that will allow for future modifications and editing of the data. There are also additional search categories that will be added. The learnings discussed within the chapter are not the end of my desired knowledge within this topic. Through this project I realized how enjoyable web design and database creation was. It is my personal and professional goal to add to my knowledge and move from a place of guided to independent learning over time in regards to the technological aspects of this project.

The entire capstone process has stretched me as a student and educator. The beginning stages of the project looked at developing a guiding question and reflecting upon the professional development that contributed to my interest in the topic. From there, the research done for the literature review grew my knowledge of the research process, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and techniques for synthesizing information. After the research, determining the framework for the project was a daunting task as there were many unknown factors. Each of the unknowns, however, were quickly diminished as the finished product came together. At this final point of reflection over the capstone process, I am proud of my finalized product, hopeful that my project will aid teachers and students, and eager to continue the learning started with this project.

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