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## Identity Placement In Social Justice Issues Through A Creative Writing Curriculum

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IDENTITY PLACEMENT IN SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES THROUGH A CREATIVE  
WRITING CURRICULUM

By

Tamara Johnson

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

Hamline University

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Capstone Project Facilitator(s): Jana Lo Bello Miller  
Content Expert: Andy Maurer

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Overview

Inequities are embedded in various different systems that have been upheld in our country for centuries. One of those systems is our education system, where inequities affect and determine the success of our students in and outside of the classroom. In education, the social justice pedagogy focuses on creating equitable opportunities and pushing for change in the systems that so often hold minority groups at a disadvantage in life. Using the social justice lens in a classroom setting pushes students to think about social change, their place in society and pushes them to understand the institutions in place that either limit or enhance their opportunities. This curriculum would be most understood in the context of a social studies classroom, but as an English Language Arts teacher, I began to think about how this could be used in a classroom where so much focus is on communication and interpretation skills. This led me to the research question: *How can curriculum be designed to place student identity in the context of social justice issues through creative writing and reading in an English Language Arts classroom?*

Learning through a social justice context allows for open dialogue and communication between people of different backgrounds and situations. There is hesitation when it comes to educators using this lens to educate students due to the discomfort of acknowledging privilege and topics that have long been rarely discussed in the classroom setting. Social justice pedagogy can be deemed as a “pedagogy of discomfort that compels us as educators and students to enter and critically engage difficult and discomfiting spaces that are systematically unacknowledged or silenced in

the classroom” (Dutta, et al. 2016). Now more than ever educators need to approach the curriculum with the knowledge and awareness of the inequities that affect our students who identify in a group considered the minority.

An important aspect of social justice pedagogy is identity. In order to teach through this lens and be successful in conveying these issues to students, educators must also look at their own identity and privilege that they walk into the classroom with every day. This is a concept that creates discomfort for those who have not faced oppression. To become an ally and create a space for students to become one as well, you need to place yourself in the context of the issues. For students to be able to navigate the ideals and values that institutions have created, they need to understand their own ideals and values and those that are placed upon them based on their identity. A way to explore this in the ELA classroom is through writing.

Writing programs in education have benefits that can apply to many different content areas. Improving writing skills in the classroom allows students to become stronger in communication and their ability to interpret messages. Writing is used in almost every job field and communication is key when working and collaborating with others. Creative writing is less of a focus in writing programs in education but has many of the same benefits as a writing curriculum that focuses on building communication skills to succeed outside of the classroom. By learning the different genres of creative writing and practicing such writing, students can explore social issues in unconventional ways and develop and recognize their own identity through freedom of expression. Classrooms with a focus on social justice normally use texts to incorporate social justice issues, but including a creative writing curriculum can help students further understand

their identity in the context of the issues that the texts represent. Thinking about myself as an educator and all of the interwoven concepts of social justice pedagogy has led me to my research question. In this chapter, I explain my personal and professional connection to social justice pedagogy, identity and creative writing and my motivation to design a curriculum that incorporates both.

### **Personal Connection**

I grew up in a biracial family in a predominantly white community. My mother is African American and my father is white and growing up I identified as mixed, not knowing that even though I thought people knew what race that meant, I should have been more specific. Mixed with what? I realized in 7th grade when I had a social studies teacher tell me I looked Egyptian and I said, “no I am mixed” and he went on to ask “with what?” that there were many different ways to be mixed race other than being black and white. I started to identify as biracial from then on. In my predominantly white community, I had no teachers that looked like me or teachers that really understood that I was indeed part African American until they saw my mother at school functions.

During this time as a child it did not bother me, but now reflecting back on my school experience as a biracial student, it does. This reflection has led me to an exploration of my identity and how many aspects go into that identity. Not only am I a biracial person, I also identify as straight, middle class, able bodied, female. These categories of race, sexual orientation, social class, able bodiedness and gender are just a few intersections of my identity that could place me into a minority group or provide me with privilege. Other categories could include my political views, religious views, or what language I speak. As an adult, I am figuring out that identity is much more than just

being mixed, but that I am becoming aware of what privileges I do have even though my race places me in a minority group.

It was through my time in my Creative Writing program as an undergraduate that helped me explore the complexities of my identity and where I stood in the context of social justice issues. I started my Creative Writing program at Hamline University hoping to focus on nonfiction writing because I thought I would write about what I knew best, my life. As I navigated writing about small issues I had with my hair or a boy I liked, I found myself not happy with how little my pieces of nonfiction writing were coming across as important to read. I moved on to fiction writing to focus more on stories I could create since my own life did not come across as entertaining or message worthy.

It was in the fall of 2014 when I watched the news and heard that Officer Wilson of Ferguson, who fatally shot 18 year old Michael Brown in the back, was not going to be indicted for his crime that I knew that I needed to come to terms with the injustices of our country and figure out what I could do about it. I had lived in a bubble up until that point that didn't allow me to recognize or feel the anger that was building up inside of me about the inequities that BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) faced. I turned to my writing to explore my feelings and deliver a message about what we, as a country, needed to recognize. As I continued to write and figure out myself in the context of these issues, I wanted to reach further and help others start on this journey as well. This is what led me to teaching.

After graduating with my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, I turned to how I could use my education in the Creative Writing and English fields to use writing to help others navigate the injustices of our country and place themselves in the context of



the issues. I had attended my undergraduate program at Hamline University and knew their values and mission would lead me to become a teacher that focused on students and equitable education for everyone. During my Master of Arts in Teaching program at Hamline, I have learned many valuable lessons and pedagogy that concentrated on students being the center of the conversation in the classroom. I learned about creating diverse lessons and providing multicultural education to students using diverse literature in the English Language Arts classroom. This education has led me to want to provide my students with diverse ways to navigate the world around them and use their voice to change society.

### **Professional Connection**

During the fall of 2020, I had the opportunity to student teach in the largest school district in Minnesota at Champlin Park High School in the Anoka Hennepin district. Being the largest school district, I was excited to experience what the workload would be like at a public high school that served over 2000 students. I soon learned that the English department at the school had a focus on social justice. It was my perfect opportunity to immerse myself in the school setting and learn how educators approached the topic of social justice in the classroom. During my time student teaching, I was invited to participate in a social justice collaborative team (CT) meeting with other English teachers. My cooperating teacher was one of three teachers who led the meetings and he often consulted with me about how the meetings went and what more we could do to enhance the experience.

During these meetings, the focus of the Social Justice CT was to lift up students and grow the opportunities afforded to students who identified as BIPOC, LGBTQ+ or

identified as being a part of another marginalized group. I appreciated being a part of a school setting where this was a goal. Some of the topics addressed in SJCT meetings were equity in the classroom, identity and self reflection on identity. It was during these meetings that I observed the need for identity exploration by educators and students if we wanted to promote social justice in the classroom. During one meeting with the SJCT we were asked to fill out a survey about our identity. This survey asked questions about our race, ethnicity, social class, religion, etc. that led the members of the group to think about some areas that we weren't aware of that give us privilege. We then were asked to discuss in small groups when we became aware of our racial identity. Many educators in a small group with me talked about learning about their racial identity or becoming aware of it well into their adult years or during college. I was one of two people who was aware of my racial identity from the time I was young. This was because I could look at my mom and dad and see two different races. I knew from a young age that I looked different than my parents and my peers. It was my white peers in the small group that didn't recognize their racial identity until they became aware of the oppression other races faced. This sparked my interest in exploring identity with students.

While student teaching, we read short stories by authors of color and I taught a novel that had a lot of opportunities to spark discussion about race, social class, and gender stereotypes but the discussion was only surface level. When teaching the novel, I wanted to go deeper but with distance learning caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, I was not allotted enough time to do that. Instead, to incorporate identity exploration, I used free writing with my class to ask questions that related to the text but also the student's identity and experience. I found that during this time, students could write and explore

their identity without the threat of what grade they would receive or what critique I would give them on their writing. They were allowed to be honest, use their voice and write about what they knew. This exercise helped me further develop my interest in how we could use writing to explore social justice issues and our identity in the classroom.

### **Summary**

To be able to promote social justice in the classroom, our students need to understand their place in society and where they are coming from to become aware of the injustices that plague our society. Identity placement in the context of social justice issues is important because we need to understand our privileges and limits in order to help others confront their own. This is imperative now more than ever due to current events in our country that have shown light on the injustices placed upon members of minority groups that can be exemplified by the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor or the discussion of women's rights, immigration and the ever changing political climate after the 2020 election and attack on the capitol. Students and educators are aware of the social justice issues and it is time to bring the conversation into the classroom. This capstone project seeks to research and design curriculum in order to do that.

The purpose of my capstone project is to design a curriculum using creative writing in the ELA classroom that will place student identity in the context of social justice issues so students can feel empowered and understand their voice in the conversation.. This capstone looks at literature on what has already been done and what is being used for curriculum in social justice pedagogy, the need for identity placement in social justice issues, the exploration of identity through creative writing and how creative writing has been used in social justice pedagogy thus far. Chapter Two reviews the

current research and literature on these topics. Chapter Three of this capstone provides an overview and description of the project with a timeline of when the project was completed. It will discuss the approach to designing the project and what framework inspired the work. Chapter Four provides a conclusion and reflection of the project which includes discussion surrounding the implications of the project and potential benefits to the profession. This capstone project will be a guide for teachers who hope to incorporate and integrate identity placement in social justice issues through creative writing into a secondary classroom.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

The previous chapter described the personal and professional rationale behind the purpose of pursuing the research question: *How can curriculum be designed to place student identity in the context of social justice issues through creative writing and reading in an English Language Arts classroom?* This chapter will review literature that pertains to the different components that are important to understand to address the research question and guide the creation of a creative writing curriculum that focuses on identity exploration and social justice issues. Each component addressed in the literature review will inform the approaches most appropriate for the curriculum design. The first section of this literature review will look at the conceptual framework of Social Justice pedagogy in education to promote further research for curriculum development through this educational lens. Within this section, goals and current approaches of this pedagogy will be addressed along with key concepts that are needed to understand the basis of this educational style.

The second section of this chapter addresses how identity is a core element for understanding social justice in our schools and curriculum. Bringing identity awareness and defining components of identity is important to put into context why identity placement is necessary for understanding current social justice issues in our society today. The third section of this literature review looks at research about specifically using creative writing in order to navigate identity exploration with students in the English Language Arts classroom. The last section of the literature review discusses the approach

of creative writing curriculum development through the Social Justice lens and what resources are currently available for educators to create and promote creative writing for a purpose and social change.

### **Social Justice Pedagogy**

Social Justice pedagogy focuses on equity, the injustices that are apparent in the various systems in our society and a call for social change. Research in the current approach of this pedagogy in our schools is important to understand to dissect the goals of this lens and implement a culturally relevant curriculum to students. Understanding the pedagogy can help put into context the need for critical thinking about social issues that affect our students. Critical thinking through this lens helps to expand the perspectives and desire to reveal truth, evidence and reasoning behind social injustices (Lalas & Valle, 2007). This section will look at the current approaches in social justice pedagogy and what specifically has been done in the English Language Arts classroom. It will also look at the history of how the goals have been developed and the factors in schools that support the process.

### ***Current Approaches***

Social justice in the classroom can be an uncomfortable conversation and, if not approached in a safe space, could be detrimental to the students who are partaking in this educational discussion. There are a few ways that Social Justice pedagogy has been used in classrooms. One of these approaches is a three step process which incorporates students' consciousness of the self, community and global awareness (Cammarota, 2011). This approach opens up the communication and awareness of who the student is, what inequities are present in their community and how that extends into inequities that are

apparent in society and around the globe. Within this approach, there is debate between framing social inequities through a problem-based lens or through a possibility-based lens (Cammarota, 2011). With students who are in minority groups, framing identity in a positive way helps them become aware of their voice within the issues, but for those students who are afforded privilege by how they identify, their approach to the issues needs closer examination of how they may contribute to the problems.

Another approach to social justice in the classroom intertwines with Critical pedagogy. Both pedagogies look at oppression and power structures. The discussion surrounding oppression and power structures comes in the form of historicity, understanding historic and present experiences, and dialogism which includes looking at contrasting views and perspectives (Behizadeh, et al., 2019). This method examines inequities through a problem-based lens and addresses what issues marginalized groups face and incorporates discussions through the viewpoints of various students and outside sources. A third approach to Social Justice in the classroom is looking at inequities and designing curriculum based upon the funds of knowledge in the classroom. Students analyze and look at what particular conditions and components of their identity affect their opportunities and inequities they face in society (Subero et al., 2015). Funds of knowledge in this approach is defined as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being,” (Amanti et al., 1992 as cited in Subero et al., 2015, p. 38). These common approaches to social justice in the classroom differ in how curriculum is designed but they all at the core of the pedagogical approach address equity and put the student at the center of forming the discussion around social justice issues.

### ***Social Justice Pedagogy in the English Language Arts Classroom***

With a content area focused on reading and writing, Social Justice in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom has long focused on discussing social justice issues as a side note to texts that are most notable for being a part of the literary canon; texts that are deemed classic and “good” literature. This is in part driven by the state common core standards that ELA teachers need to have their students meet in the classroom. In a study looking at social justice and media education, Brauer (2018) discusses the importance of not just teaching literature but teaching students to analyze literature. The author argues that students should be taught to engage with text and the components that go along with questioning, criticizing and placing ourselves within the context of the literature. This approach creates the space for bringing social justice issues into the ELA classroom and analyzing how literature lends itself to the inequities and issues facing society.

Along with including texts in the ELA classroom to engage with social justice issues, writing and communicating are key elements that are also used to immerse students and educators in the conversations and dialogue that goes along with social justice pedagogy. Lalas & Valle (2007) performed a study where they asked high school students to respond to a writing prompt regarding their educational experiences and understanding of the inequities that exist in their community. In this study, the authors gathered information about what categories of inequities appeared in the students’ writing. Through this writing prompt, students were able to reflect on their own identities and embrace their funds of knowledge. Using writing as a tool in the ELA classroom with a social justice context lends itself to the importance of placing the student at the center of social justice issues and conversation.



### ***Goals and Current Support***

The goals of Social Justice pedagogy are summarized by Gustein (2003) as follows:

- helping students develop consciousness in regard their life conditions and the socio-political dynamics of their world
- fostering a sense of agency in students, that is, students have to become actively involved in understanding and solving social inequalities
- encouraging the creation of a positive social and cultural identities by recognizing students' language and sociocultural practices. In doing so, teachers guide in this process of deep socio-political understanding through questions that address topics that have meaning in both students' lives and world circumstances (as cited in Subero et al., 2015, p. 36).

To achieve these goals, students need to participate in reflecting, engaging in discussion and critically thinking about the materials provided and presented to them in the classroom to further develop their awareness of themselves and social justice issues.

Along with fostering a sense of choice in students, the materials, discussions and content need to be accessible and comprehensible to students in the classroom (Lalas & Valle, 2007).

Social Justice pedagogy is an approach that can be uncomfortable for educators due to the concept of reflecting on privilege and oppressive systems that educators take part in, voluntarily or involuntarily. As educators, to refuse to partake in an approach that benefits students and is calling for change reinforces the concept of teachers as masters of their content and students solely as learners and not participants (Dutta et al., 2016). To

engage fully in the pedagogy, educators need support in the areas of curricular freedom and professional development with dialogue surrounding diversity, equity and identity (Behizadeh, et al., 2019).

### ***Summary***

Social Justice pedagogy is an approach to education that incorporates the student's identity and funds of knowledge to enhance the learning experience and achieve the goal of awareness of social inequities in society. This section reviewed approaches to social justice in the classroom and specifically what factors are used in the ELA classroom. It addressed the goals of the pedagogical approach and what support educators would need to enact and perform instruction through this lens. The next section will highlight research surrounding identity placement within social justice issues.

### **Identity Placement in Social Justice Issues**

Understanding identity is at the core of understanding social justice issues. By creating awareness of backgrounds, abilities and privileges, educators and students can place themselves in the context of issues that are the result of inequities. Research on the importance of identity placement in the social justice lens in education will provide information on the current approach and what is lacking to move towards social change. Identity awareness is crucial to reflection in order to move forward: "to be responsible educators, we have to encourage our students to embark on their journeys of learning and growth, a process that necessitates a self reflexive engagement with our own trajectories as teachers," (hooks, 1994, as cited in Dutta et al., 2016, p. 350). This section will provide an overview of the importance of identity within the social justice pedagogy and how cultural and social awareness provides a starting point for social change. The second

part of this section will discuss components of identity and the current research on identity reflection and awareness for educators. The last part will provide a look at current social issues that are major topics of social injustices.

### ***Importance of Identity and Social Awareness***

Identifying oneself is not as straightforward as subscribing to labels. Identity is an ongoing process that consists of making sense of oneself and also thinking of oneself as a member in a social group(s) (Francis & le Roux, 2011). Student identity is important in the classroom but along with student identity, teacher identity and awareness is just as important to enact the pedagogy of Social Justice. In a study done by Francis and le Roux (2011), the authors looked at how pre-service Caucasian female teachers found themselves to be agents of change within the realm of their privilege and awareness of membership in social groups that held power. Some participants in the study were not consciously aware of how their whiteness affected their choices in the classroom. Compared to thinking about their gender, the participants were more aware of how being a female teacher affected their ability for social change. This study points to the importance of being aware of what social groups educators subscribe to and what that membership does to influence instruction in the classroom. If teachers are oblivious to their identity, they may think they do not have the power to enact social change which could directly influence students thinking similarly.

A theory that lends itself to the concept of identifying social group membership is the Social Identity Theory (SIT). This theory explains that individuals choose social identities but also have social identities imposed upon them by various characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. SIT focuses more on the

collective identity of the group and the intergroup experiences that are outside of the individual (Hahn Tapper, 2013). While this theory brings the outside society into the classroom discussion, in a study done by Hahn Tapper (2013) the author found that enactors of this theory find it difficult to bring the unique identity of all students into discussion in the classroom. Social awareness and group membership is important for educators and students to understand, but research suggests that addressing the unique individual and group identity in tandem allows the students to be the center of discussion and agency in instruction.

For educators, identity does not just include the unique characteristics or subscription to social groups but also a relational perspective and the awareness of a range of social justice issues. Boylan and Woolsey (2015) discuss in their research that teacher identity in the classroom needs to incorporate their relation and consciousness to social justice issues and the commitment to enact instruction that reflects their awareness. The authors observe that teacher identity can be placed into two categories either determinate or indeterminate when it comes to enacting social justice in the classroom. A determinate teacher can place oneself into the context of social justice issues and can emphasize the importance of identity for students in the context of social justice issues (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015).

### ***Components of Identity***

Identity can be defined in various ways and the development of identity is ongoing. Francis and le Roux (2011) state that “Our identity locates us in the social world, thoroughly affecting everything we do, feel, say and think in our lives,” (p. 300). In the previous part of this section the focus of identity within social justice was on

teacher identity but students navigating identity holds an important role in achieving the goals of social justice pedagogy. In the study done by Francis and le Roux (2011) the researchers observed two components of identity that affected teacher instruction and their relation to social justice in the classroom. These two components were race and gender. These two components are both parts of identity that students bring into the classroom along with other factors.

When studying one particular teacher's approach to social justice, researcher Behizadeh, et al. (2019) found that specific categories of identity to address in the classroom with a problem-based approach included "race, gender, class, (dis)ability, [and] sexual orientation," (para. 11). With these categories the idea of privilege is a core point of discussion. It is important to note that some factors in identity are chosen and some are physical; such as race, gender presentation and some types of disability are visible to the eye. Other components have influence on a person's actions but are not as detectable without conservation.

In a study done by Tien (2019), the author makes a distinction between identity and positionality in social justice informed instruction. They argue that social justice instruction that focuses on identity is formed on the basis of the oppressed vs. oppressor and that those two concepts are part of a student's identity. This approach has turned students away from thinking that they have a stake in making social change but rather that they are identified by their social groups and not their own actions. Tien (2019) also addresses in their study that components of identity are socially constructed. Instead of focusing on privilege and power as components of identity, the study incorporated student opinion on what components gave themselves to having privilege and power in

society. Tien (2019) composed the following list in the study: gender, sexuality, age, race, ability, class, citizenship, body type, educational level, language, and religion. Each component on this list is not positioning student identities into a binary. The author notes that these components of identity can lend themselves to positions of power.

### ***Current Social Issues***

Schools have an active role in being responsible for social change. While incorporating social justice issues in the classroom can bring about resistance, educators have a responsibility in preparing students for life outside of the classroom. According to Francis and le Roux (2011): “All students need to be exposed to critical multiculturalism, anti-oppressive education or education for social justice, as oppression affects everybody” (p. 310). Oppression is a major topic when discussing inequities in and outside of the classroom. Tien (2019) in their study included readings of oppression based issues that could affect their students in the classroom such as reading about the school to prison pipeline and education reform in relation to the achievement gap. These issues can correlate to student experience and bring about discussion of marginalized groups that students may or may not be a part of.

In a study done about bringing discussion of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election into the classroom, authors Dunn, Sondel, and Baggett (2019) observed that a teacher’s own agency is not the only driving force behind instructional and curriculum decisions. The 2016 election was a turning point in the U.S. that zeroed in on the political polarization of the nation. Teacher discussion of this important event that directly relates to social justice issues was influenced by the following according to Dunn, Sondel, and Baggett (2019):

- parental stances on the election,
- support (or lack of support) from fellow teachers,
- their perceptions of the administrative stance (support, discouragement, or uncertainty), and
- direct administrative communication or explicit policies (for or against) (p. 456).

With little or no support to discuss current social issues, the attempt at neutrality represents itself in the classroom and does not enhance the discussion and need for social change (Dunn et al., 2019).

Another current social issue that is a topic of discussion is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. While this movement is a continuation of former Black activism groups, the discussion is automatically brought into the classroom when students walk in the door wearing their race on their sleeve. In an article examining the movement and how to teach BLM, Androne and Spencer (2019) discuss the need for the conversation and the responsibility to upset the status quo and to address the ignorance of our view, confusion surrounding the issues and the unawareness educators and our students may hold. Their study connects the current movement for Black lives to the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's March and connects the concepts to LGBTQ+ studies to teach intersectionality of these social groups (Androne & Spencer, 2019). Current social issues are important to understand due to the experience and funds of knowledge students are walking into the classroom with. While there are various different issues to address, including identity exploration in curriculum and approaching social justice in a safe space, students have the ability to see themselves as agents for change and understand their placement in addressing the issues.

### ***Summary***

Identity placement in social justice issues is crucial for both the teacher and student working together in the classroom. This section reviewed the importance of identity for the educator enacting the pedagogy and how Social Identity Theory (SIT) focuses on social groups that are constructed for those with similar identity attributes. It reviewed what components students and educators should understand in terms of identity instead of placing identities into a binary system and looked at current social issues that intersect and invite student identities into the conversation in the classroom. The next section will look at the research on how identity exploration can be done through creative writing in an ELA setting.

### **Identity Exploration Through Creative Writing**

Creative writing is a subject that enhances writing and communication skills. This section will explore the present curriculum for Creative Writing courses and how it explores identity. The first part of this section will look at the various genres of creative writing and how they relate to identity. The second part will explore the current approaches to creating and exploring the identity and voice of the adolescent writer. Creative writing is used as an avenue for students to reflect on their own experiences and give voice and context to the power they have in their own identities (Flores, 2018). The last part of this section will examine research on how to create safe space and community for identity exploration to take place through writing.

### ***Creative Writing Genres and Identity***

Creative writing is a mode of writing that is frequently seen in education as an elective course with little integration into the ELA classroom. Creative writing being



incorporated into a standard curriculum can enhance students' approach to reading and communicating. In a study done by Gilbert (2016), the author distinguishes the concept of “creative” with “aesthetic learning” in order to have students engage in conversation with texts and their reflective writing. The author discusses that the term “aesthetic” is more inspirational to students and allows for exploration of one’s interpretation of texts and materials in the classroom (Gilbert, 2016). An example that Gilbert provides to their students within the genre of creative writing and aesthetic learning is writing poetry in response to poetry students read. Poetry is a subgenre of creative writing that has traditional forms and can place a burden on the student writer when they are asked to identify as a writer instead of an aesthetic learner (Gilbert, 2016). Framing the writing of poetry in relation and reflection of personal identity makes the genre less threatening.

Creative writing is a reflective process for students no matter the subgenre. Another subgenre that lends itself to including personal narratives is nonfiction writing. Flores (2018) performed a study on a youth program aimed at using creative writing called the Youth Writing Collective (YWC) based in Arizona. In their study, the author found that the writers that participated were supported in navigating their awareness of issues present in their lives and the world around them (Flores, 2018). One way students participated in raising awareness was by being asked to write and share their lived experiences in any language they chose. Not all nonfiction writing surrounds autobiographical narratives, but for the purpose of the YWC, emphasizing student voices and identity was important to create community and discussion surrounding societal issues the student participants were facing.

The third subgenre of Creative Writing is fiction. Feuer (2011) performed research on a collaborative fiction writing project with students who were English language learners (ELLs). In their study, the author observed that approaching fiction writing as a process helped students communicate and that the students explained their collective narrative was influenced by their own experiences and issues in their lives (Feuer, 2011). Fiction writing lends itself to students developing ideas that can present complex issues, drafting and interacting with the narrative in relation to their own identity. All three sub genres of Creative Writing focus on the writer's voice and experiences that influence their writing.

### ***Current Approaches to Identity Exploration***

Writing is a tool that can be used to define student identity. Bellamy (2018) points to writing as a strategy to promote the well-being of students who identify as part of LGBTQ+ community. In research done on life writing, the author found that participating in life writing “may offer benefits across the age spectrum, particularly on shared experiences such as prejudice, a sense of ‘Otherness’ or not belonging, and navigating the hybridity of identities.” (Smith & Thurston, 2007 as cited in Bellamy, 2018, p. 682). Modes of life writing in this study include memoir, autobiography, essays, creative nonfiction, journaling and forms of digital storytelling (Bellamy, 2018). In this study, Bellamy (2018) also observed that creating a collaborative environment for students to write in allowed them to share experiences and they felt the unification of their marginalized identities. Flores (2018) furthers this idea that students writing and performing in collaborative settings such as writing workshops were able to voice their experiences and create their place in the world. While performing a study on the YWC,

the author reinforces the importance of writing for identity exploration within social justice “Through writing, sharing, and performing, youths used writing as a tool, a weapon, to confront injustice” (Flores, 2018, para. 60). Collaborative writing and performing writing are some current approaches that are being used to help students explore identity.

In a longitudinal study done on a student writer over the course of 4 years, authors Lammers and Marsh (2018) observed how the participant focused their writing on their “core identity” which influenced the development of various texts they wrote. By observing the student over a period of time, the authors found that the context in which the writer wrote and their positionality had an impact on the identity of the writer (Lammers & Marsh, 2018). The approach used for identity exploration in this study included having the student write a narrative in the form of a novel and also writing for the performing arts. Both forms of writing show how fiction writing can be used to enhance and aid in student identity development. The study done by Feuer (2011) discussed in the previous part of this section also points to using fiction writing in a collaborative setting to help students with identity exploration. Students were asked to write about a fictional city and the end result showed that the ideas for their fictional stories came from their own experiences and issues they dealt with (Feuer, 2011). Whether identity exploration is happening through fiction or nonfiction writing, crafting narratives in a safe space is essential to aid in the development of student identity.

### ***Safe Space and Community for Writing***

For students to be able to engage with texts and writing to explore identity and social justice issues, the classroom needs to be a safe space that allows for discussion and

multiple perspectives to be shared. Bellamy (2018) discusses in their study on promoting well being for LGBTQ+ students that resources to create a space for non dominant student experiences are sufficiently underused in schools (pg. 685). The author discusses a “third space” which is defined by Gutiérrez (2008) that should be used in the classroom to intersect “funds of knowledge, from parents, peers and culture, with academic discourses in a third hybrid space in which neither is lost,” (Bellamy, 2018). The “third space” is defined by Gutiérrez (2008) as a space where learning moves through a process and recognizes the different social spaces in and outside of the classroom that non-dominant groups inhabit. Flores (2018) cites the “third space” in their study on the YWC as a place where students shared experiences and were able to discuss the “sociopolitical nature of their experiences,” (para. 35). The “third space” opens up the classroom to bring in outside issues and provides a space for students to engage in reading and writing about issues that intersect with other’s experiences.

Boylan and Woolsey (2015) discuss the concept of smooth space in their study on teacher identity within the realm of social justice and mapping identity spaces. The smooth space, according to the authors, is a place where perspectives are not bound and shift according to the movement and inclusion of multiple identities (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). In the studies done by Feuer (2011) and Bellamy (2018), the authors observed collaborative spaces for students to explore their identities through writing. Collaborative writing approaches for identity exploration can happen within spaces where students see their experiences and funds of knowledge brought into the classroom. Bellamy (2018) states that creating spaces within the classroom that explore these experiences would not damage the existing framework in the ELA classroom and could cross over to other

content areas as well. For student writers to place their identities within the context of experiences in and outside of themselves and build community, safe spaces are essential for expression and exploration through creative writing.

### ***Summary***

Creative writing allows for exploration of identity and can provide a space for students and teachers to engage in dialogue with current social justice issues. This section discussed the types of genres of creative writing that can lend themselves to identity creation and exploration. It looked at the present ways that creative writing is being used to aid in developing identity for students and teachers and this section also discussed the need for safe spaces for development of identity to happen and feel valued. The next section will discuss the current literature and research done on how creative writing has been taught and used through the social justice lens in the classroom.

### **Creative Writing Through the Social Justice Lens**

This section will take a look at how Creative Writing can be taught through the social justice lens. The first part of this section will discuss the development of a creative writing curriculum and the importance of it in the classroom. The second part of this section will discuss how it is currently being taught and what resources educators have to implement a social justice curriculum in a writing class. It is important to understand the current resources for educators and students to carry out the concept of writing for social change and a purpose. The final part of this section will look at research surrounding how to educate students to write for a purpose and for social change.

### ***Creative Writing in the Classroom***

Storytelling has the potential to expose students to perspectives other than their own and hear about experiences they might never come across in their own lives. Creative writing curriculum differs from incorporating writing tasks and assessments into the ELA classroom by introducing students to genres that mirror the texts that they are exposed to. It also can create dialogue about complicated subject areas within the realm of ELA. Lockney (2012) discusses that creative writing can be used to initiate cross-curricular activities due to the application of creative skills that students are asked to demonstrate when writing. When developing creative writing curriculum, Lockney also points out the importance of framing writing in the curriculum as “workshops” as opposed to “lessons.” In the context of teaching the curriculum in the form of a workshop, students and teachers are practicing participants and can engage in a writing process instead of completing a writing task (Lockney, 2012).

When developing curriculum for Creative Writing courses, the emphasis on safe space and the personal gives way for positive outcomes for students and teachers. In a study done by Keehn (2015), the author found that when students engaged in the writing and sharing of personal storytelling, they developed critical thinking skills and connections to their peers. Within this study, the author also found that the skills developed through personal storytelling can help students reflect and build upon their differences within their communities (Keehn, 2015). Creative writing in the classroom can open up avenues for critical thinking and discussion of literary texts. It can also lend itself to the discussion of social justice issues that students may be unaware of.

### ***Current Resources and Models for Educators***

To engage with the teaching and framework of social justice pedagogy, teachers need to model learning through this lens to their students. Chapman et al. (2011) discuss the limited amount of successful models of social justice pedagogy that teachers have to adopt in their own classrooms. In their discussion, the authors state that building student awareness by introducing socially conscious topics and writing about them is a place to start when introducing a social justice pedagogy, (Chapman et al., 2011). For educators, a starting place for social justice discussions could include getting students writing and reflecting on their own ideas and opinions on various issues present in society. As an educator partaking in the learning process, this would also include the teacher reflecting and writing on their identity and current issues.

Stewart (2012) points to a resource that can further develop critical thinking and writing skills. The author discusses the use of literary texts from local authors that can add to the discussion of issues present in the community and also the history of the community in which students live. Stewart observed in a program called “Sharing our Stories” that the rationale for using local authors and texts was that it helped students gain insight into histories that may have been learned through a dominant culture’s perspective otherwise. Using local literature and current literature in the form of fiction, non-fiction and poetry can connect students to perspectives that are prevalent in their communities and also perspectives that may be less known or voiced to them. Students then can include their own histories created through their own writing to add to the conversation.

In a discussion about the power of language, Gorlewski (2014) states that the use of language should not be taught as a replication of authoritative views due to the idea

that students will not see their use of language in writing as empowering to themselves. Gorlewski also brings up the point of curriculum focusing on teaching for state assessments and not having enough time to delve into the process of writing and engaging with social justice. Gorlewski suggests that educators need to press forward by interrupting the current ways literacy and writing are approached in the classroom and help students explore their identity through language and the current power structures in place in and outside of the classroom. In the ELA classroom, language is at the core of the communication process whether that be through dialogue or writing and focusing on the power of language is a method for students and teachers of creative writing to spark discussion about current social justice issues.

### ***Writing for Purpose and Social Change***

At the core of creative writing and social justice is the idea that the writer has the power to use their voice for change. In an article by Berzsenyi (2011), the author discusses that in order for students to be able to write through the social justice lens, they need to be passionate about the injustices in our society and have a desire to communicate these issues to an audience. The author also suggests that teachers of creative writing and social justice content need to frame the course through a lens that provides students with a purpose and their own agency, (Berzsenyi, 2011). A starting point to frame a creative writing course this way is to have students brainstorm the social justice issues that are prevalent to them and what issues they are passionate about. Along with identity exploration in the creative writing classroom through this lens, Berzsenyi had their students list topics that reflected their own personal experiences and used that as a starting point to bring about passion in their students' writing.



In Creative Writing courses, the topic of “voice” goes hand in hand with the construction of self. Lim (2010) discusses the interchangeable concepts of voice, identity and construction of self through creative writing and how this identity can be socially constructed. Lim states that current creative writing pedagogy lacks the incorporation of learning about this constructed identity. In workshops the author observed, they found that the workshops that focused on constructed identity produced a freedom for students to have their voices heard. Gorlewski (2014) also discusses the importance of recognizing socially constructed identities within the realm of writing. Gorlewski acknowledges that voice and understanding the power of language is essential to the writing process and is “the first step toward empowerment,” (p. 42).

### ***Summary***

Creative Writing courses have previously focused on storytelling and creating safe spaces for student writers to use their own experiences to inspire their writing. Incorporating social justice into a creative writing curriculum can not only enhance the storytelling and critical thinking skills of students but can be used to empower students to use their voices to communicate and advocate for social change. This section looked at the current practices in the creative writing classroom, what resources and methods creative writing teachers can use for the teaching of social justice and how educators can frame writing for students to instill purpose and the act of writing for social change.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter looked at the current research behind topics that will help inform the answer to the research question: *How can curriculum be designed to place student identity in the context of social justice issues through creative writing and reading in an*

*English Language Arts classroom?* The literature review focused on four topics that are important to understand in order to understand how identity placement within social justice issues can be incorporated into a creative writing and ELA classroom. The first topic of this literature review focused on Social Justice pedagogy and the framework in which it is currently used in education. The second topic of this literature review looked at how identity placement is crucial to understanding social justice issues both from history and current issues in our society. The third topic of this chapter concentrated on how creative writing can be used as a tool for identity exploration in the classroom and the last topic of the literature review focused on the interweaving of social justice pedagogy and creative writing curriculum used in the classroom to empower student voices.

The literature review presents a strong reasoning for why identity exploration and placement is needed to understand the context of social justice issues and how student voices are important to be heard in the discussion surrounding these issues. Creative writing in the ELA classroom is seldom focused on in comparison to other content to meet state standards. and there is a need to apply the skills students use and learn through creative writing to help them grow as writers and people in and outside of school. The next chapter will outline the capstone project that will help answer the research question. It will discuss in detail the project description, the rationale behind the framework being used for the project and the timeline for the curriculum designed.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed literature that will guide the completion of the capstone project and provide a foundation to answering the research question. Chapter Three provides a detailed overview of the capstone project and how it answers the research question: *How can curriculum be designed to place student identity in the context of social justice issues through creative writing and reading in an English Language Arts classroom?* This project is a curriculum that incorporates identity exploration through creative writing in the context of social justice issues in an English Language Arts (ELA) classroom by focusing on different creative writing genres and methods of writing. The intended goal of the project is that the curriculum includes mini units for three genres of creative writing and develops student awareness of their own identity and social justice issues in their community. The first part of this chapter gives a detailed explanation of the curriculum design steps I took when creating the project. The second part of this chapter focuses on the research and rationale behind choosing the backwards design method of curriculum design along with a framework that inspired the lesson planning. After discussing the rationale behind the project design, this chapter looks at the intended setting and participants for the project. The last part of this chapter discusses the timeline I followed to complete the project.

#### Overview of Project

The project is a curriculum designed for a secondary ELA classroom. The curriculum was designed to also have the possibility to be expanded into a curriculum for

a Creative Writing elective course. The curriculum is over the course of a 12 week trimester and is aimed at high school ELA courses. The standards chosen for the overall unit design are from the Minnesota English Language Arts Standards from 2020 and are focused on 9th grade reading and writing standards but could be enhanced and adapted for 10th, 11th and 12th grade standards.

The focus of the 12 weeks is to explore identity through three different types of creative writing genres within the context of reading literature through a social justice lens within that genre of text. The first step in the curriculum design was to identify and understand the desired results of the curriculum. For this project, the desired goal of the curriculum is for students to have an understanding of how identity plays a part in social justice issues and how creative writing helps them explore their identity. This will help students become more self aware of their identity, discuss, read and write about current social justice issues in their community and society and will expose them to various genres of writing. With the desired goal in mind, the MN ELA standards that are best aligned with the projected outcome are the following:

- 9.1.4.2 Analyze the themes or central ideas, including how it emerges and shaped by specific details, of multiple texts, considering author perspective, identity, and bias.
- 9.1.6.1 Examine how the author's, including Dakota and Anishinaabe authors, purpose, stated identities, biases, and perspective shape the content and style of a text.
- 9.2.1.1 Write and edit work so that it follows the guidelines in a style manual appropriate for the discipline and purpose, with guidance.

- 9.2.2.2 Write to reflect how personal identities and the intersection of identities inform perspective.
- 9.2.6.2 Model use of structural elements of mentor texts, in written narratives, poetry, or other creative text.

After identifying the state standards that best aligned with the intended goal of the project, the next step in the curriculum design process was to identify essential questions for students during the unit. These are questions that students throughout the unit will be able to answer and understand about identity, social justice and writing for exploration and a purpose. The next step I took in my curriculum design was to assess what types of assessments will help teachers identify student learning and progress. During this step, I identified and designed ten assessments that incorporate reading and writing a piece of work within a genre of creative writing (poetry, fiction and nonfiction) and developed the assessments to align with the state standards outlined above.

The assessments that I designed for the curriculum focus on interpreting a text that is within a genre of creative writing and dissecting how the text relates to identity and social justice issues. Students respond in writing and engage in student-led discussion in the curriculum which not only enhances their writing skills but encourages students to communicate effectively and respectfully about issues surrounding identity and social justice. The writing portion of the curriculum where students create a piece of creative writing is framed as writing workshops to instill the thought that writing is a process and can continuously be worked on.

Lastly, after exploring and identifying the desired outcomes, designing the assessments that are used for evaluating student understanding and learning, I planned

out the learning activities and experiences that are the day to day lesson plans of the curriculum. The project is a curriculum over the course of 12 weeks but is framed as three mini units within the overall unit. These mini units are outlined as the following: 1) a mini unit on poetry which will include reading poetry through a social justice lens by local authors and students constructing a piece of written poetry 2) a mini unit on nonfiction writing while reading nonfiction texts by local authors with the focus on social justice and students constructing a piece of nonfiction writing 3) a mini unit of fiction writing paired with reading fiction texts with a social justice focus and students constructing a short piece of fiction. After the completion of the three mini units focusing on specific genres of creative writing, students will participate in a two week workshop on one of their writing pieces which will include editing, revising and sharing/performing their work with an audience.

To determine the effectiveness of the curriculum design, I planned my project around the concept of reflection both for the students and the teacher. Within the curriculum, there is reflection built into writing prompts and guiding questions for students and teachers to reflect on. It is emphasized in the project overview that teacher's using this project as a resource continuously reflect on their own identity and how it affects the shape of the course.

### **Rationale**

For this project, the source and research that supported the type of approach to creating the curriculum is the book, *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units* by Wiggins and McTighe (2011). The theory that the authors explain is the backwards design approach. With this approach, effective learning starts and ends

with the end goal in mind. By identifying the goal before curriculum design, teachers will be able to assess if the transfer of learning has happened. The authors state that by identifying where we want the students to end up first, then we can decide on the right pathway to get there (Wiggins and McTighe, 2011). This approach also helped to avoid activity oriented teaching and also the idea that as a teacher we need to cover all the content in a short amount of time without stopping and processing if learning is happening. From my personal experience, I have questioned where a lesson is going and sometimes have had to scrap a lesson before finishing it. I have learned that approaching a unit and the curriculum with the end goal in mind can help me process where students are in achieving that end goal and adapt lessons as we move forward.

The framework behind the lesson plan template and rubric for one of the assessments used in the project is from *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Gholdy Muhammad (2020). Muhammad discusses in their book the idea that identities should be explored in every content area to promote social literacy and the Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework moves beyond just what skills and knowledge are important for students. One of the important elements of the HRL lesson plan template is that student identities and backgrounds are taken into account and educators are asked to think about how students will use their skills and intellect to engage in thinking about equity and oppression in our society. The project incorporates an adapted lesson plan template from Muhammad's framework and uses a writing assessment rubric from the same lens for the summative assessment of the course.

In addition, in research discussed in Chapter Two, Stewart (2012) discusses the use of literary texts from local authors that can add to the discussion of issues present in the community and also the history of the community in which students live. Stewart observed in a program called “Sharing our Stories” that using local literature and current literature in the form of fiction, non-fiction and poetry can connect students to perspectives that are prevalent in their communities and also perspectives that may be less known or voiced to them. This research supports and inspired the idea to use local literature in the curriculum to help students relate and place themselves in the context of the conversations that will be had during the three mini units on poetry, fiction and nonfiction writing. In the curriculum, some example texts used and suggested texts include local Minnesota authors and works from local publishers in the Twin Cities area.

### **Setting**

The intended setting for my project is a suburban and/or urban high school with a diverse population. The standards pulled for this project are for 9th grade but with the acknowledgement that standards for 10th, 11th and 12th grade build upon the basis of 9th grade ELA standards. The diverse population that my project is intended for includes diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sex, and social class both in terms of students and teachers. The project is also intended for a high school English Language Arts classroom but could also be expanded upon for a Creative Writing elective course.

### **Participants**

The intended audience for my project is English Language Arts and Creative Writing teachers in a secondary high school setting. The curriculum design can be implemented in high school ELA classrooms and also Creative Writing courses. Urban



and suburban school districts could also be audiences to the curriculum design when helping departments and teachers re-write curriculum. The curriculum is recommended for any teacher or administrator that would like to relate ELA and creative writing to their students' identities and current events that are ongoing and affecting our society. Teachers that are already teaching through the social justice lens can use the curriculum to enhance their students' writing skills and as a guide in identity exploration. Teachers who are not familiar with using a social justice pedagogy can use the curriculum as a starting point for discussion and acknowledging the first steps in placing themselves and students in the context of social justice issues.

The goal for the intended audience is that every teacher or administrator that implements this curriculum is not discouraged or hesitant due to their own identity and experience with social justice issues. After reviewing the current literature in Chapter Two, it is important to note that discussing the privileges that come with how a person identifies is at the core of the discussion of social justice pedagogy. The curriculum was designed with the thought in mind that every teacher and student comes into the classroom with a unique and valuable experience and voice that should be explored in a safe space. Teachers that use the project as a resource should be partaking in reflection of their own identities and experiences that shape what privileges they are afforded in and outside of the classroom.

### **Timeline**

The capstone project was completed over the course of two months. The first step in the curriculum design process, identifying desired results, was completed the last two weeks of June 2021 during the Capstone Project course. The next step in the design

process, determining evidence and designing assessments for the curriculum, was completed at the end of June and first week of July 2021. The lesson plans for the three mini units and workshop for the curriculum was completed in the month of July 2021 with the overall project completed by August 1st. During the time that I created lesson plans for the curriculum and an overall unit plan, I researched and located literary texts from local authors and publishing houses in the Twin Cities to use as suggested texts in the curriculum along with other texts that fit with the desired goals. After completing the project, I reflected on my process of creating the curriculum and that reflection is the premise of Chapter Four.

### **Assessment**

The intended goal for the project is for students to explore their identity and navigate identity through a social justice lens. Along with the intended goal, desired results can also be reflected through students meeting the standards set forth above in their ability to create, analyze and model elements of writing. To assess the effectiveness of my project, I will gather information from student reflection within the course and also determine if the project is opening up avenues for educators to use the social justice lens within their classroom. One way to gather this information would be to conduct surveys on what types of literature is being included in curriculum and classroom libraries that relate to student identity and social justice issues after my curriculum design is incorporated into the classroom. I will also gather information from teachers who use the curriculum design to adapt and further examine how identity and social justice issues can be worked into different units in an ELA classroom. The data collected can help further

the expansion of incorporating identity exploration through a social justice lens in various settings and content areas.

The reflection portion used for assessment of my project is inspired by my own journey of reflecting on my identity. I found it very useful to be in discussions about identity and social justice with my colleagues while student teaching that I wanted to translate the same type of setting and reflection into the project. Working collaboratively in my experience has also helped me to understand and see various perspectives that helped define my own identity and my placement within the context of social justice issues. The project is grounded in the idea that constantly reflecting and discussing with others will open students and teachers up to ideas and concepts they might not have thought about before.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have restated my research question and given a detailed description of my project. After giving the description of the project, I supported my approach to the project by discussing the theory behind backwards design and cited the sources that will be grounding my work on the project. Next, I discussed the intended setting and audience for my capstone project. Finally, I discussed the timeline of completing the capstone project and what additional research I performed to support and complete the curriculum design. Next, Chapter Four will revisit my research question and provide a reflection on the final product of my project and my hopes for using this curriculum design in the future.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

Over the course of my education, I found myself interested in a lot of different topics but I never was asked or expected to take an interest in exploring my own identity through school. I began my journey of understanding and claiming my identity when social justice issues outside of school made a large emotional impact on who I was as a person and made me question what I could do about the inequities in our society. When I began my teaching career, I knew that I needed to incorporate identity into the curriculum for my students. This led me to the research question: *How can curriculum be designed to place student identity in the context of social justice issues through creative writing and reading in an English Language Arts classroom?* I explored this question by connecting my personal and professional experiences to the concepts of identity and social justice, reviewed literature that focused on social justice pedagogy and identity exploration through creative writing and synthesized my findings from my personal experience and the existing literature to inform and apply best practices to the 12 week curriculum that is my project.

Each subtopic to follow in this chapter will discuss the process and components that have helped shape the project and results of the research question. In this chapter, I will reflect on what I have learned through the process of creating my project, revisit what pieces of the literature review were the most important in shaping my project, discuss the implications and limitations of the project, provide an exploration of future projects, communicate the results of my research question and what value and benefits

my project provides to the profession. I will conclude this chapter and paper with final thoughts on the overall capstone project process.

### **What I've Learned**

As an educator, I feel that I am also a lifelong learner. Through this capstone project process, I have not only learned about how to design curriculum that will engage my students but how to design curriculum so that I as the teacher can continuously reflect and connect with content that is important to my students. When it comes to social justice pedagogy and enacting it, I learned while creating this project that the information and work is never ending. If you think that there is a good stopping point on your journey towards social justice, you are not willing to push further to question and critically think about the inequities marginalized groups face every day in our society. That being said, I also think that it would be very ambitious to believe that you could cover every aspect of social justice and identity exploration in one single classroom. It is a journey that will be continued beyond the classroom and well beyond the years of being a teenager and young adult.

When designing the 12 week curriculum for my project, I found myself thinking “What am I missing? What voices are missing?” when it came to lesson planning and I always had an answer. I came to the conclusion that with my research and my intended goal, that there would always be something missing in a particular lesson or activity and that it was alright to not cover everything as long as I recognized and asked those questions. Those are questions that I am hopeful students will ask themselves when faced with questions or content about identity and social justice. This was something that I was not expecting to learn. I went into the project with inclusivity on my mind and the best

intentions to incorporate every voice that is not often heard. I found that the most important voices throughout the curriculum are the voices of the students and how they articulate them through writing.

As a researcher, I found resources that gave me hope that educators care and want to incorporate identity into their curriculum. There is a lot more work to be done on how all content areas can contribute to identity exploration of their students. I was happy to find that creative writing has been a topic that enhances the journey of identity for students and that there is merit in teaching the subject in ELA classrooms. The approach to social justice in the education system has been around for a long time but in the climate that our country is currently facing, I was eager to research further to find resources that help students and educators interact and make a difference in combating the systemic oppression of marginalized groups in our society.

### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

Chapter Two looked at current and past literature that informed the answer to my research question. The chapter was broken down into understanding Social Justice pedagogy currently used in ELA classrooms and schools in general, how identity interacts with social justice issues, how identity can be explored through creative writing and how to teach creative writing through a social justice lens. All sections of the literature review were important in influencing the creation of the project and the instructional strategies used in the curriculum design.

The section on Social Justice pedagogy informed using the funds of knowledge approach in creating the curriculum for the project. This approach is discussed as “looking at inequities and designing curriculum based upon the funds of knowledge in

the classroom. Students analyze and look at what particular conditions and components of their identity affect their opportunities and inequities they face in society (Subero et al., 2015). In one of the first lessons of the curriculum, students spend time looking at and defining their own identities. How they explore and define their identities directly correlates to the topics they will write about in each genre of creative writing. This section of the literature review also discusses analyzing literature instead of just teaching it to students. Brauer (2018) argues that students should be taught to engage with text and the components that go along with questioning, criticizing and placing ourselves within the context of the literature. This article influenced my work by incorporating texts that students could engage and pick apart by using their knowledge of themselves, the author and the social justice issue at hand.

The next section of the literature review focused on information about how identity intersects with social justice. This section informed the overall outline of my project and connected the two topics with one another. In a study by Tien (2019), a list of identity components helped to inform a starting place for my project when teaching identity. The list of components is as follows: gender, sexuality, age, race, ability, class, citizenship, body type, educational level, language, and religion. Using this list as a basis helped me to think about how students might categorize their identity and how we could incorporate those categories into what texts were chosen. The following section discussed identity exploration through creative writing. This informed the outline of the creative writing portion of my project along with the writing workshops that are included in the curriculum. Flores (2018) in an article discusses how students performing in collaborative settings such as writing workshops were able to voice their experiences and create their

place in the world. This research influenced how writing workshops and a final writing showcase were included in the project.

The last section of the literature review informed me on how creative writing is currently being taught through a social justice lens. This helped me begin to understand the current approaches and what could differ in my own project. The most important part of this section was an idea taken from Stewart (2012) on the importance of using local authors and texts to present issues in the community. For my project, I took time to find pieces of literature that would fit the genre of creative writing and also be local to MN authors. While I could not find example texts for every genre from a local author, I did find that the texts I found from local authors and publishers in the Twin Cities touched upon issues that would be relevant to students and their identities. It also helped to incorporate voices that belonged to marginalized groups in our community. The overall literature review influenced the approach I took in creating the curriculum and informed me of current best practices that are worth including in the project.

### **Implications and Limitations**

The implications of my project on the education community will hopefully be that student identity needs to be worked into every content curriculum and the important questions that are asked through the social justice lens are necessary for each and every student and teacher. Now more than ever do I believe that our society is in a period of change where voices of those who are not often heard are important in pushing for social change. My hope is that through this project, creative writing can be seen as a way for this communication to happen and for voices to be heard. Another possible implication



could be that educators and administrators explore and recognize their own identity when entering a school or a classroom.

When it comes to social justice issues, I believe an implication of my project would be bringing the discussion of these issues into the classroom in a way that engages students and prompts for response to the issues. There is a current fight against implementing Critical Race Theory in schools which pushes educators even further to explore how we can discuss these topics and the need for understanding of the injustices in our country. My project is a start and introduction into how we and our students can place ourselves into the issues that affect our lives and could possibly influence the need for this content to be taught and discussed in our education system.

While there were no limitations in creating the project, there could be limitations in enacting the curriculum. As discussed in the introduction chapter and parts of the literature review, teachers could be hesitant to teach through a social justice lens or explore their own identity if it makes them uncomfortable. If a teacher was not willing to reflect or acknowledge the privilege they bring into a classroom, this curriculum might not go as planned. Other limitations could include access to local literature and administrative or student pushback on discussing certain social justice issues. My hope for the project is that if these limitations were to occur, that there would be much needed discussion of the implications and what is the best outcome for the students.

### **Future Projects**

There could be a few future projects that could follow this curriculum design. The most important future project that I would like to explore is expanding this curriculum to be a full Creative Writing elective course with more focus on writing. If this were to

expand into an elective course, there could be a course for each genre for students to choose which they would like to explore. While this was written with 9th grade standards in mind, another future project could be elaborating and expanding into 10th, 11th, and 12th grade standards including media creation such as songs, videos, films, etc. There is a focus on writing in the project but I would be interested in seeing how the objectives and activities could lend themselves to study of multiple mediums.

Creating a cross-curricular unit with a social studies course could be another potential future project. I think there is so much more to discuss and work with that the standards found in social studies would lend itself nicely to writing and communicating about social justice issues. Based on my findings, incorporating Critical Race Theory or Critical pedagogy into a cross-curricular course would enhance discussion and understanding of specific social justice issues.

### **Communicating Results**

I plan on communicating my results by sharing with colleagues and educators interested in creative writing curriculum. Hopefully in the future I will be able to teach or include a creative writing unit into my 9th grade ELA classroom. In my school district in the future there is potential for students to earn English credits through different electives and I would love to be able to present my course as a possible elective for students. I also plan on sharing some of the activities and writing workshop strategies with my collaborative team when we are thinking about how to get students more involved with writing and communicating their identities. The data collected on the effectiveness of my project would also be shared with educators to influence incorporating identity exploration and social justice pedagogy into their classrooms.

### **Professional Value and Benefit**

I believe that my project holds a lot of professional value because it is an introduction into the intersection of identity and social justice issues. In my current place of employment, there are strategies and discussions of how us educators can discuss these topics but not much discussion about how to get students involved and leading the charge for change. It not only is an introduction to these topics for students and teachers but it enhances the ability for teachers to reflect on their own identity in and outside of the classroom. A big part of the project is that these topics are things that need to be communicated about. The curriculum allows students to do that through enhancing their writing skills and their communication skills with peers while leading the way.

One of the most important benefits of my project is that it pushes educators out of their comfort zone to recognize and acknowledge themselves and the issues that affect our society and our students. A crucial part of being an educator is the ability to reflect and continue learning about the circumstances that provide us privilege in this world. If we are able to recognize that, then we can combat the systemic oppression that many of our students and peers are faced with every day. With this project, educators can use the curriculum to reflect on themselves but also teach their students how to do the same.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have reflected on the creation of my project which helped to answer my research question: *How can curriculum be designed to place student identity in the context of social justice issues through creative writing and reading in an English Language Arts classroom?* Throughout the process, I learned that reflection has been key, not only reflection on what was working for my project or what was best for the students

the project is aimed at but reflection on who I am as an educator and what I bring into the classroom in order to enact and enhance learning. Every day there are inequities at play in our society that need to be addressed and the groups that suffer from these inequities need to be supported and fought for. As someone who took a while to come to terms with my own identity, I now understand more about myself in the context of the social justice issues that affect so many. My own identity exploration through writing inspired the idea that students could use creative writing as well to use their voice and find their identity.

This capstone project and process has helped me to become more aware of what I bring to the classroom and what possibilities there are for me and my students in how we identify. I have created a project that combines my love for creative writing and passion for social justice so that students can also share in the discovery of how they can make a change in the world. I understand and acknowledge that there is a lot more work to be done towards various social justice issues but I am happy to play a part in helping students explore and begin their journey of navigating the world around them and showing them the creative ways they can use their voice.

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