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ADAPTATION OF ENGLISH STANDARDS FOR THE LEARNING OF A DIVERSE
POPULATION OF STUDENTS

by

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

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

To Kill a Mockingbird. Catcher in the Rye. The Great Gatsby. Romeo and Juliet. Of Mice and Men. These titles are almost universal among high school English curriculum throughout the United States. I read all of these titles for high school English classes and now, I teach all of these titles in my own English classes. They are considered “the greats”, parts of the literary canon that all American students should be familiar with. Pieces of literature that speak to the universal human experience. Or at least the universal human experience of the white, privileged, middle class male.

While this canon of literature and the reading and writing curriculum that goes with it may still relate to the experiences of some students, it is becoming evident that the way this literature is taught does not reflect the experiences and lives of diverse populations of students in our secondary English classrooms. In a country that is slowly coming to terms with its history of racism and attempting to be more tolerant of its own citizens, why are we still teaching a curriculum that only reflects one group of students? This is the issue that English teachers throughout the country are struggling with on a daily basis. How can I teach state standards and stay within the expected reading and writing requirements of my district while best serving a diverse group of learners? In my own experiences as a teacher and support staff, I have struggled with that same question. This has led me to ask myself, *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?*

This chapter will discuss my own background with our standard English curriculum both as a teacher and a learner. I will outline my personal experiences and observations in the secondary English classroom regarding teaching materials and our diverse population of students. Then I will give a brief overview of the capstone project as a whole as well as the significance of this project.

Background

As a student growing up in a rural community in Washington State, I, like most other students in the country, was asked to read all of the traditional works of literature in my English classes. These books were described to me as “the essentials”, the most important stories and authors for me to read as an educated American citizen. As an avid reader, I took this to heart. I truly believed that the only books worth reading were the great pieces of literature that my teachers talked about. At times, I felt guilty that I preferred *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* to *Lord of the Flies* or *Grapes of Wrath*. The way that these novels were talked about by my teachers made me feel as if maybe I wasn’t smart enough to enjoy and understand them as I truly should. When it came to writing about these novels and analyzing their characters and literary devices, I struggled. How could I understand these characters and authors if I could not relate to them on any level? My public school English experience left me feeling lesser than. While I loved to read and write, I abhorred reading and writing about the literary greats that were taught in high school. I finished high school with the belief that I was not intelligent enough to truly appreciate and understand these works.

This is the message that we still repeat to our students today. That these white, middle class authors and their white, middle class heroes are the most important and

relatable stories that everyone should be familiar with. These are the only heroes that should be admired and emulated. We ask our students to analyze character, symbolism and theme without asking them first how they can relate these stories to their own lives. As a white, middle class female, I was not far removed from the characters and authors of these novels. As I reflect, I can only imagine what it was like for my classmates of color to read these novels and be asked the same questions. If there were any characters in the novels who looked like them or had similar backgrounds, they were portrayed as evil or unintelligent, lesser than. Oddly, we never addressed these issues as we read. As a student, I took these portrayals to be true rather than learning to think critically about them.

Classroom Observations and Experiences

In my own experiences as a teacher and reading specialist at the secondary level, the issue of relevance and accessibility of curriculum to a diverse population of students has come up time and time again. My first experience in secondary instruction was as a reading specialist for a Response to Intervention (RTI) program at the junior high level. I had several job responsibilities in this position including helping underachieving students to develop reading and writing skills as well as engaging “reluctant readers” in books that they would find interesting.

I began this job just after finishing college and as a new resident I was very unfamiliar with the demographics of the Twin Cities area. The first thing that I noticed while working at this school was the way that the population of students was split. In this school, the students who were labeled as high achieving were all tracked together in a cohort. Students who were placed in the regular level classes were typically grouped

together with few exceptions. This left the students in special education and in my own RTI classes to move together as a group. The most noticeable part of this ability grouping strategy was that these cohorts were starkly divided by race as well. There was one student of color in the gifted and talented program and she decided to move out of the program halfway through the school year because she felt like an outsider. The regular classes were typically 60% white, 40% students of color. In my RTI classes we had one white student out of 103 total. This stark contrast was initially shocking to me. Why, in a school with a diverse student population, were the classes so segregated? How had all of these students of color ended up in my Intervention class while white students with similar test scores were not placed in RTI?

After working closely with my students, a few things became clear to me. First, it seemed as though many of these students in my Intervention classes were placed there not because they struggled more with reading and writing than their peers, but because they were disengaged in English/Language Arts altogether. It was not that they *couldn't* do certain skills, it was that they had no personal connection with any of the material. As the teacher and I designed activities, we tried to focus on topics that were of interest to our students. We strove to create reading and writing opportunities that related directly to the lives of our students. It became apparent that these students could demonstrate the skills that they were in RTI to learn. Why then, did these students not demonstrate their skills in the English/Language Arts classroom?

It also became evident that students who were reluctant to read had simply not been given the opportunity to read the right books. A key moment for me in understanding this was when I asked a student what type of book he was interested in and

he said, “anything that is not about a white boy in the woods with his dog.” This student was a student of color, and he shared with me that he had never read a book with a black main character. This experience opened my eyes to the importance of the concept of windows and mirrors. While students should learn about people with different experiences than them, they also need to see themselves in the literature that they are reading. This brings me back to my research question. *How can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?* How can we adapt materials that we are required to teach to relate them to the experiences of all students? What materials can we add into our curriculum or supplement our lessons with that will engage students of various backgrounds? I believe that when we can do this, we will see a higher success rate of students of color in the English classroom.

Project Overview

My capstone project will be focused on answering the question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?* I will begin with research and a review of the literature related to my question. My project will focus on the creation of curriculum materials that are relevant and accessible to a diverse student population. All of these materials will be centered around the Minnesota State English Standards and the texts that most often come up in secondary curriculum. The goal is to create activities for myself and other English teachers to use that will bridge the gap between the required texts and students’ own experiences. These materials

will engage all students in English curriculum to better develop their reading and writing skills.

Project Significance

This project will address the growing achievement gap that is so often referenced in Minnesota and throughout the United States. Students of color are being underserved by most areas of our curriculum, particularly English. This project is centered on encouraging the academic success of students of color in the English/Language Arts classroom. It is meant to encourage student engagement through the use of windows and mirrors rather than perpetuate the belief that students are somehow unintelligent for disengaging in texts that do not represent them.

It is my hope that this project can be a resource for other teachers. Educators have had to rethink everything that they do in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has meant that teachers have had to re-create or start from scratch with their course materials in order to find new ways to engage students. It is my hope that as we move forward we will not revert back to what we have always done, but be open to the idea that we as educators can use and create new materials to better engage our students whether they are in the physical or digital classroom.

Chapter Overview

Within our public school system, certain texts and pieces of literature have become so ingrained in our curriculum that it is hard to imagine secondary English classrooms without them. These texts often do not reflect the experiences or backgrounds of our increasingly diverse population of students. As a result, many of our students

cannot find real connections with the texts and become disinterested in the subject as a whole, which affects their performance across disciplines.

In my own experiences as a learner and a teacher, I have come to ask myself: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?* I have seen firsthand how relevant materials can engage students and demonstrate their academic abilities. Because of our education system's dedication to teaching particular texts, our students of color are often underserved in the English classroom and even falsely flagged as being low achieving. If we could create content and activities that are focused on the experiences of all of our students while still teaching the essential skills of reading and writing, we would see more of our diverse student population begin to thrive academically..

English teachers themselves do not have a lot of control over what standards they are being asked to teach and what books they are told to read with students. However, the materials and methods that teachers choose to use to teach these skills is up to them. The goal of this capstone project is to help teachers reimagine what their day-to-day teaching could look like with regards to the materials that they must teach. It is meant to give ideas to teachers about how they can adapt curriculum given to them to better suit the needs of all of their students and encourage skill development.

In the next chapter, relevant literature to the research question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?*,

will be reviewed in order to gain a better understanding of current research about the topic of accessible and relevant curriculum.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this capstone project and literature review is to answer the question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?* The chapters following this one will provide an outline and ideas for curriculum that secondary English teachers can use to better support a diverse population of students within the parameters of the current English standards. The purpose of this literature review is to introduce the existing research that addresses the components of this research question. This review will inform the creation of curriculum and materials that will make up the later sections of this project.

For the purposes of the literature review, the research question has been broken down into several main topics. The first section will focus on English curriculum as a whole. It will look at the current standards and commonly used texts in secondary English classrooms across the country. It will also review different ways that English teachers have worked within their existing course materials and expanded their units in order to make the texts and learning more engaging and relevant to a diverse group of learners. The second section will answer the question of who our current English/Language Arts students are. It will discuss how secondary teachers can meet the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. This section will provide activities from real classrooms that cater to a wide range of student needs. The final section in this review addresses student engagement. First, it will consider what student engagement looks like

beyond completing traditional assignments. Finally, it will provide examples of what teachers can do to create engaging and relevant activities in their own English classrooms to serve all of their learners.

English Curriculum

English curriculum has been through some major changes in the last several decades. In recent years, federal and state entities have played a large role in standardizing curriculum and setting expectations for what is to be taught in the classroom. “Federal education policy has become increasingly demanding and specific about literacy teaching during the past half century” (Shanahan, 2011, p. 152) which, in turn, has dictated the skills and authors that teachers must focus on in their English/Language Arts classrooms. However, even with ever-changing standards to meet, the core of English curriculum has remained essentially the same. The focus on the literary canon is as strong as ever, with an emphasis placed on a few, highly revered texts. These same texts are taught in middle and high schools throughout the country despite our changing classroom demographics and standards. This section will begin with an overview of texts and standards most commonly used in secondary English classrooms. Then, it will discuss ways in which teachers can expand and add to their course materials to suit the needs of their diverse classrooms.

Standards and Texts

In recent years, increasing focus has been placed on the standards that students must be proficient in in order to pass their secondary English/Language Arts classes. These standards have been created by government and district entities and are supposed to represent the tools that students need to be successful citizens of our society

(Shanahan, 2011). Most standards are centered around the student's ability to use and understand academic language and Standard English. These standards also name texts that students should be familiar with in order to be successful. The decision of which texts to read falls heavily on standardized testing entities such as the College Board and Advanced Placement English exam writers (Thein and Beach, 2013).

The Common Core Initiative is a widely known movement that plays a large role in the standards that states adopt for all subjects. The Common Core lays out a prescriptive foundation for what teachers should teach and what students should be able to do by the end of each school year, the goal being college and career readiness (Common Core, 2021). The basic tenets of the Common Core for English/Language Arts ask students to read, write, listen and use Standard English. Most state standards that are adopted from the Common Core curriculum emphasize the use of Standard English for all students. One of the benchmark standards for grades 6-12 is to “demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking”. Standard English is the only vernacular that is specifically named within English/Language Arts standards. The focus on Standard English within state and district standards has been an increasingly controversial topic for the last few years. In one study, April Baker-Bell (2019) summarizes the harm that students of color, particularly Black students, face when learning in a classroom that emphasizes Standard English. She discusses how students are silenced, ridiculed and made to feel lesser than their peers when they use African American Vernacular English rather than Standard English. The emphasis on the use of Standard English rather than on literacy and writing skills has caused mental harm to students of color and puts them at an immediate disadvantage in

the learning environment (Baker-Bell, 2020). Other scholars believe that teachers are able to work within the Common Core standards and teach Standard English while still remaining linguistically responsive teachers and serving their students from different linguistic backgrounds (Smith, 2019). Smith believes that teachers can find ways to help students be successful in learning Standard English while still supporting the linguistic skills of the student in their native language or vernacular. The use of standards to evaluate student learning is commonly accepted as a good thing. However, the inherent biases in how some of these standards are worded are causing large groups within our student population to struggle to be successful while giving advantage to other learners.

In many states and school districts, English standards determine which texts teachers can and cannot teach at which grade levels. Traditionally, the texts that are recommended or required for students to read in a secondary setting are all a part of the literary canon. Even though the literary canon is not one set list of texts, books that classically fall into the canon are held in higher regard and even considered superior to others. In fact, Barabara Moss (2013) and other scholars believe that certain texts are in the canon because they have been placed within the core standards by entities with a special interest. Moss claims that the way that most texts are chosen by states and districts alike is based on three factors: book quality, breadth, and text complexity. For most of the decision makers, book quality means that the text is a classic and considered to have literary merit and cultural significance. As Moss points out, this becomes problematic when there are students in the classroom from many different cultural backgrounds. Most of the research about diversifying English/Language Arts curriculum is centered around expanding or disrupting the concept of the literary canon within

secondary settings. Possibly the most referenced text within all of the research is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Within her study, Greenbaum (1994) points out that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is typically the only text on high school reading lists that is by a woman. When she asked her fellow English colleagues to create lists of the most important texts for high school students to read, she found that they were dominated by white, male authors and often did not include any recent writings. Teachers tended to name the texts that they were taught to be classics in high school. According to several sources, including (Fairbrother, 2000), (Haertling and Beach, 2013) and (Skerrett, 2009), the most common texts that are taught in the secondary English classroom are:

- *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare
- *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
- *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
- *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne
- *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck
- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott. Fitzgerald
- *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger

All of these texts are written by white authors, and only one of them is written by a woman. These texts do not reflect the diversity in race, culture, gender, language and sexual identity that makes up classrooms in the United States today. National, state and district standards present certain issues for teachers who are teaching students of diverse backgrounds. The next section will offer some ways that teachers have found to expand

their units to suit the needs of diverse learners within the current standards and required texts.

Expanding Course Materials

Many secondary English teachers and researchers have identified that there are problems with the curriculum that they are expected to teach when it comes to diversity in their students. In my own experience, teachers feel as though the curriculum they are being asked to teach is outdated and sometimes harmful for their students given the dramatically changing social landscape that is focusing more and more on social justice. The research shows that teachers from all over the country have been trying new approaches to teaching the same texts and standards in order to better serve all of their learners. Many researchers have identified teachers who are adding materials to their curriculum in order to address the issue of race, culture, language and gender within their classrooms. In one study, teachers were found to have added texts to their curriculum that deal with these topics while also meeting standards such as argumentation and interpreting informational texts (Skerrett, 2007). Skerrett found that teachers who were striving for a more multicultural approach to teaching English/Language Arts would supplement their required texts with other, relevant readings in order to spark discussion and critical thinking in their classrooms. This was tricky due to the sheer amount of required work that teachers were expected to get through, but teachers who made multicultural learning a priority were able to fit these other texts into their daily plans. Other teachers chose to add in whole units to their curriculum. One team, believing that traditional canonized texts should be taught alongside newer, more multicultural texts added in a graphic novel unit to their honors English classes. (Low and Campano, 2013).

This team of English teachers used the graphic novel to not only teach writing and analysis standards but also to start conversations about race and class, comparing it to other, more traditional stories that they had already read. They found that students were more engaged with the material and better able to make connections from this novel to more canonized literature that they had read in the past (Low and Campano, 2013). Students recognized that they could identify large, underlying themes not only in the classics, but in new literature as well. Research from Edith Campbell (2012), a high school librarian, reinforces the idea that students can learn similar things from many different texts. In her study, students of color reported that they wanted more texts that they could relate to and main characters that looked like them. She decided to research texts that she could offer to students that had the same messaging and larger themes as the books they were required to read in their English classes and found that there were a plethora of options from which to choose (Campbell). Campbell goes on to say that “providing ethnically diverse books to students isn’t a racial issue; it is realizing that providing multicultural books kicks that elephant off the shelf and shows that our libraries accept whoever comes inside” (Campbell, 122). This is an excellent analysis of what using multicultural literature in the classroom can do as well. When teachers use literature about and by authors who look and sound like their students, students know that they are welcomed in the classroom, not alienated in it.

As well as adding texts to the curriculum, research shows that many teachers have found ways to expand the discussions and analyses of their current texts to better relate to and address the needs of a diverse student population. A prime example of this is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. While *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most popular and consistently

assigned texts within the secondary English curriculum, high school teachers and districts tend to skim over the more problematic aspects of the novel that have an impact on racially diverse students, particularly Black students. In her study, Macaluso found that most secondary teachers treat the character of Atticus Finch as the hero, the ultimate power of good in the novel (Macaluso, 2017). This, he says, is problematic because Atticus Finch reinforces the idea of the “white savior” in literature and in the real world while portraying the Black characters in the novel as weak, helpless and someone to be pitied. The solution that Macaluso offers here is not to scrap the teaching of *To Kill a Mockingbird* entirely, but to study it through a critical lens. Instead of simply talking about Atticus as the savior in the novel, teachers should address with students why that image of him is problematic. This is a tool that English teachers can use in any text that they teach in order to promote critical thinking skills and give students a better understanding of the dynamics of the text. In her study of teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Black-Borsheim (2015) offers a similar analysis. She believes that if teachers are going to continue to teach texts that are centered around whiteness, that addressing the issue is key for students to fully understand the text. She continues to discuss the benefits of teaching students how to appropriately talk about race when reading a novel, in a way that encourages students of color to share their opinion while teaching white students how to have respectful and understanding discourse of the material. These strategies for teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* do not stop when this novel is finished. They are strategies that can be used in teaching, analyzing and discussing any text in a classroom.

English teachers often feel restricted by the standards they are expected to teach, the texts that they are required to include and the sheer amount of material that they must

cover within one school year. Many of the English/Language Arts standards that are commonly used throughout the United States use language such as Standard English that gives some students an advantage and puts some students automatically behind. States and school districts often require that students read specific texts, most of which are considered to be canonical. However, because of the generally homogenous makeup of the authors and characters in the literary canon, classroom texts do not reflect the racial, linguistic, gender and cultural makeup of the students. Teachers and researchers have begun to experiment with different ideas in order to make their classrooms more inclusive to all learners and responsive to each of their learners' needs. The next section will discuss the makeup of the diverse learners in classrooms today and how teachers can better cater to their whole population of students.

Diverse Learners

It is no surprise that our nation's public schools are becoming increasingly diverse in student population. Not only do classrooms have more racial diversity than ever but they also serve a diverse linguistic, cultural, and developmental set of students. As our nation's student demographics change, we have recognized a growing gap in achievement between culturally and linguistically diverse students. (Ball et al, 2011, p. 22) The first part of this section will provide an overview of who our students are and what their learning needs look like. The second part of this section will review research on how English teachers can best serve a diverse student population to eliminate the achievement gap.

Who Our Students Are

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, our student population has become significantly more racially diverse over the last 16 years. In 2017, the year of the last national count, there were 50.7 million students enrolled in public schools in the United States. Of that number, 24.1 million students were white, 7.7 million students were Black, 13.6 million were Hispanic, 2.6 million were Asian, half a million were American Indian/Alaska Native and 2 million students were of two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). These numbers indicate a large shift in racial diversity within our schools since the year 2000. In that time, the percentage of students who identified as white fell from 62 percent to 48 percent. The percentage of white students is projected to continue decreasing through the year 2029 and is forecasted to be around 44 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). For the purposes of this study, the population numbers of Minnesota will be used. For the 2020/21 school year in Minnesota, 63.7 percent of students are white, 11.6 percent of students are Black, 10.1 percent of students are Hispanic, 7.0 percent of students are Asian, 1.7 percent of students are American Indian/Alaska Native, and 5.7 percent of students identify as two or more races (Minnesota Report Card, 2021). These numbers mark a dramatic shift in the racial makeup of individual classrooms and schools. This means that teachers themselves will be teaching a rapidly changing population of students in their own classrooms over the coming years.

Linguistic diversity within public school classrooms is also on the rise. In Minnesota 8.4 percent of students were English Language Learners in the 2020/21 school year (Minnesota Report Card). Studies have found that students who are linguistically

diverse are at a higher risk than students who speak English as their first language (Ball, et al., 2011). This study points out the low academic achievement, higher high school dropout rates as well as lower college graduation rates for students who are linguistically diverse (Ball, et. al). More specifically, this study looks at students who spoke African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Spanish as their home languages. This study found that there were significant benefits to encouraging students who spoke either AAVE or Spanish to use these languages while participating in the secondary English classroom while also teaching them to code-switch to Standard English when necessary (Ball, et al, 2011.). While classrooms become more linguistically diverse, English teachers in particular need to have strategies to help language learners to be successful in all literacy skills, not only proficient in Standard English.

There are many other aspects that relate to student diversity and contribute to the specific needs of the students in our classrooms today. Enrollment in special education is another large piece to consider when teaching English/Language Arts at the secondary level. In Minnesota, 16.7 percent of students are enrolled in some sort of special education services (Minnesota Report Card, 2021). In one study, teachers found that students in special education particularly struggled with navigating classroom discourse, especially around making inferences (Craig et al., 2001). While there are many other diversities that apply to our student population, racial and language diversity will be the primary focus of the literature reviewed in the next section as well as of the curriculum developed later in this capstone project.

How Can Teachers Meet Diverse Student Needs?

Theoretical Framework. As our population of diverse students has increased, so has the research on how secondary English teachers can better serve their students. Multicultural education and Culturally Responsive Teaching/Pedagogy have become important concepts in this research. According to Skerrett, multicultural education is centered on equitable teaching practices and focusing on the histories and experiences of marginalized student populations (Skerrett, 2007). Students learn about the cultures of their classmates and the curriculum is developed from these cultures rather than the cultures being embedded in the curriculum. However, many critics argue that multicultural education is not enough to close the achievement gap. They believe that multicultural education takes the focus off of racism and the inherent advantages of the groups who traditionally hold power in our society (ie. whites, men, etc.) (Skerrett). These scholars have turned toward the theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching/Pedagogy. Culturally responsive teaching is based on embedding student experience into the curriculum and everyday classroom activities and considering student diversity as a strength and learning tool (Chenowith, 2016). However, this approach hinges on three key aspects of teaching: academic success, cultural competence and critical thinking (Kesler, 2011). Unlike multicultural education, teachers not only bring students' experiences and cultures into the classroom, they actively ask students to critically think about how these experiences relate to their learning (Kesler). Within this model, English teachers can ask their students to do things such as read "with" and "against" the text to interpret and analyze (Macaluso, 2017). This helps promote

discourse about the problematic nature of many of the canonical texts that were discussed in the previous section.

Examples of Multicultural and Culturally Responsive Teaching in the English Classroom. Many researchers who have focused on multicultural education and Culturally Responsive Teaching/Pedagogy have found that there are teachers who implement these theories into their daily classroom activities. A recurring theme in the research has been teachers who use classroom discourse to encourage critical thinking from their diverse population of students. One researcher began looking at classroom discourse that surrounded literature, particularly literature that discussed race, and found that white students and Black students tended to use different approaches to this discussion (Sosa, 2020). Sosa found that white students tended to disassociate with racism, or claim ignorance or unknowability while Black students tended to connect past and present instances of racism in an implied manner. She also found that many times, Black students were using silence as a form of resisting the racism that was going on in their own classroom. However, when students were given a framework in which to speak about racism within the literature they were reading and their own lives, they were able to have more productive discussions. Baker-Bell (2020) also researched classroom discussion as a method of Culturally Responsive Teaching, but with respect to the expectations of academic language. She discusses the effects that strictly enforcing the use of Standardized English has on students who speak AAVE, particularly how this enforcement often silences the voice of students of color. The conclusion of this study offers a framework for discussing and learning about AAVE and other languages and vernaculars in a way that empowers students who are native speakers of those languages

and informs speakers of Standard English. Yet another example from the research of responsive instruction is within a study done by Cythia Williams. Williams (2006) observed the effectiveness of a teacher who incorporated both Standard English and AAVE into her daily instruction. She encouraged students to speak in their home vernacular during class activities to ensure that they were understanding content first, then, she taught Standard English in a way that did not devalue the students' language abilities. The teacher in Williams' study made it clear that her philosophy was to first encourage comprehension of material, then move to communicating in Standard English, in an interview with her she states, "I try to use language that reaches them because first you gotta reach 'em... if you don't reach 'em, they won't learn from you" (Williams, pg. 348). Most of the research on classroom discussion focuses on putting student learning and critical thinking skills on the forefront and then ensuring that students have the academic language skills needed to be successful. These teachers are using discussion and verbal communication to teach content first and ensure comprehension in order to teach critical thinking skills.

Another way that researchers found multicultural education occurring within classrooms was through the use of identity formation activities. One teacher used an ethnoautobiography in order for students to learn more about the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of their peers and themselves (Chenowith, 2016). The author addresses how this activity capitalized on the cultural capital of her students as well as taught them essential writing and research skills. Other teachers have also found that using student identity to form their lessons around literacy has helped them to reach students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. One study conducted found that students were able to

connect more to materials on online platforms that they were more familiar with (Tarasiuk, 2010). Students who struggled in a traditional pen and paper classroom were able to thrive when participating in a more digital, online learning environment. This method of differentiation helped students to meet their own needs, for example in Tarasiuk's study, a student who struggled to stay on task or to complete work found himself teaching the teacher new ways to use online resources to better their learning, completely changing his identity in the class. Sometimes, teachers get stuck in the cycle of doing the same things over and over again, without regard to the changing needs of their individual students. These studies show that allowing students to explore their own identity through a variety of activities can help students to participate more and better synthesize class material. The next section will look at keeping students engaged while practicing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and different methods and activities that teachers have used to promote student engagement.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is key to ensuring the success of learners in the classroom. Students are proven to be more engaged in materials that are relevant to their own lives. English teachers must create content that is not only relevant to the age of their students, but that speaks to students' individual life experiences. "Educators are responsible for providing these students with effective instruction and for incorporating issues relevant to cultural diversity into the curriculum." (Brazil et al, 1999, pg. 1) This section will begin with a review of the research about student engagement in diverse classrooms. The second part will introduce the ways in which English teachers have added to their

curriculum and made changes in order to make learning more significant for all of their students.

Engagement in the Classroom

Oftentimes, the literature and activities that are done in a secondary English/Language Arts classroom seem disconnected from the lives and experiences of students within that classroom. This problem is exacerbated by the continual use of texts from the literary canon without the adaptation of curriculum to suit diverse learning needs. In one study about including 21st century literature into the classroom the author writes “reading literature that simply reflects a mono-ethnic view of history with sprinklings of works from other groups does not allow students the opportunity to think about other cultures and critically engage in discourse about history, current events and future events” (Perry and Stallworth, 2013, pg. 16). This author defines engagement as not only completing work and talking in class, but as doing the mental heavy lifting required to critically think about that work and how it relates to each student and the world as a whole. This definition of engagement will be used for the rest of the review as the goal of student engagement in the classroom. As found by Campbell (2012) in her research, students are often more engaged in reading and learning when they are consuming material that is centered around authors and characters that look and sound like them. Campbell finds that although most students are willing to consider books by authors who do not identify in a similar race or culture to themselves, students tend to become more avid readers when they find material that they can connect with on a more personal level such as an author who has had similar experiences to their own.

Creating Engaging and Relevant English Curriculum

In the first section, discussion was centered around the literature that is introduced in secondary English/Language Arts classrooms. As stated previously, the majority of this literature is focused on white, male characters and authors, and tends to include stereotypical depictions of people of color and people who are linguistically diverse. Much of the research on student engagement in the English classroom was focused on changing the narratives that students are reading. In their study, Thein and Beach (2013) advocate for engaging students in critiquing and constructing new canons. They believe that students, as members of our society, can use what they know about the world as well as their critical thinking skills to decide what should be considered “canon”. This tactic is mirrored in the study by Rybakova and Roccanti (2016). They advocate for using student experience and popular young adult literature alongside the canonical texts in order for students to relate and make more sense of both. Just as students are able to analyze literature to decide whether it should be a classroom text, students can make strong connections between popular young adult literature and more classic texts. This idea can promote student engagement by allowing students to both choose texts that they are interested in and engage in critical thinking about why they chose that text. This might look like literature circles or small group reading activities in the secondary English/Language Arts classroom.

Along with choice of texts, many researchers have found that English teachers are more often using visual literacy to engage students. In one study, a researcher looked at students’ familiarity with what he calls “the landscape of images” (Gilbert, 2013). Because students are more and more connected to the internet and are constantly being

bombarded with images through television and social media, students need to learn to navigate what they are seeing and how it influences their thoughts and opinions. Gilbert used the cover of a popular magazine to show students just how powerful visual images could be. He found that students were excited to analyze and better able to understand the connection between what they were seeing and how it influenced their own thinking, promoting student engagement in critical thinking skills. Another use of visual literacy is found in the study that worked with graphic novels. Fassbender, Dulaney and Pope found that students were able to engage just as critically in a graphic novel as they were in a traditional text (Fassbender et. al, 2013). These researchers found that students were so engaged with the images in the text that they were making deeper meaning and sometimes missing details that the teacher themselves had missed. Students were more engaged also in the assessment that followed this text that included them creating their own graphic work. Researchers found that students thought more deeply about each of their literary choices in creating the graphic than they did in the more traditional writing assignment.

A final method of engaging diverse populations of students in English/Language Arts curriculum is to utilize civic engagement and current events. One study found that teachers used their English curriculum to encourage students to find their identity as a citizen (Mirra, Coffey and Englander, 2018). This study followed two teachers who focused their classes on the formation of their students' identity in relation to their civic learning. These teachers centered their classroom first on asking students to reflect on their own identity and then asking students to reflect on their dreams and hopes for the society that they live in. Researchers found that students engaged in these activities due

to the relevance to their own lives. Students were drawn in by the narratives that they discussed in class that related strongly to their own lives (Mirra, et. al.). In a different study, teachers used current events and popular figures to engage their students in mastering specific standards. Teachers in the study by Skerrett used articles about current events, popular culture and famous figures in order to teach analysis, writing and argumentation skills (Skerrett, 2007). They found that students were more willing to engage with and think critically about these small pieces of informational text due to their relevance to the immediate lives of the students. The use of current events and ideas of citizenship are great ways to promote student engagement in any unit. There are always connections to be made between required texts and standards and the lives of students today.

Summary

This chapter reviewed literature that helps to answer the question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?* In order to answer this question, Common English/Language Arts standards need to be defined and analyzed. The first section of this chapter discussed the common threads in secondary English standards, more specifically the common problems that teachers have when teaching them. Secondary English students are expected to meet specific standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening, with an emphasis placed on doing these skills in Standard English. The first section then touched on the common texts that are read in most high school and middle school classrooms. It identifies *To Kill a Mockingbird* along with others as some of the most prominent texts in the canon. In my capstone project, it

will be important to keep both the standards and the required texts in mind. Most teachers find that they must work within these standards and texts, even if their population of students is not reflected in the curriculum. In my capstone, I hope to offer teachers ways to connect their students with the texts and curriculum that are requirements for student learning. After examining the curriculum, this review looked at who learners are in our classrooms today, specifically in classrooms in Minnesota, where I am basing my own research. It has become apparent that the racial, cultural and linguistic makeup of classrooms has and is dramatically changing. Teachers must constantly find ways to adapt their stagnant materials to the needs of their diverse learners. The next part of this section explicitly named some ways in which teachers can do this. First, it outlined the theories of multicultural education and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, then it reviewed the ways in which teachers have actually implemented these theories in their own classrooms. The last section addressed what student engagement looks like in today's classroom. It defined student engagement as not only completing the work given to them, but to be active participants in analyzing texts and the world around them by using critical thinking skills. This section continued on to outline ways in which teachers have engaged students in this work, particularly focused on developing student identity and addressing inequities in the education system.

The next chapter will provide an overview of the capstone project centered around the question: how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students? It will outline the steps and methods used to create the curriculum. This curriculum will be based on the research that has been reviewed in this

chapter. I will use the findings about curriculum, diverse learners and engagement to inform my own curriculum development.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

This capstone project is intended to answer the question of *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?*

This project is meant to support secondary English/Language Arts teachers in planning culturally responsive units that encourage students to meet state standards. Due to the changing demographics in public schools in the United States, particularly in the state of Minnesota, this question is one that is particularly relevant to all teachers. The intent of this capstone project is to offer suggestions of methods that teachers can use in order to promote the learning and academic success of all of their students, including culturally, linguistically and racially diverse populations of students.

The first section of this chapter will provide an overview of this project as a whole, including what the final product will entail. The second section focuses on the research framework that will be used in order to complete the project. First, it will describe the research supporting culturally responsive pedagogy and the effect it has when implemented in the classroom. Next, it will describe the theoretical framework for curriculum development as a whole including the use of backward design. The third section of this chapter provides more context to the project as a whole and will describe the setting and intended audience of the project, including the characteristics of the intended classroom as well as the overall environment in which the curriculum will be implemented. After this, a description of the project will be provided including the form

and content of the project. A timeline of the project as a whole will be provided before the conclusion of this chapter. All of the sections of this chapter focus on how I will answer the question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?*

Project Overview

As I reflected on the research described and synthesized in Chapter Two, I noticed some patterns beginning to emerge within the ideas shared about culturally responsive English/Language Arts curriculum. Most of the research focused on the teaching of specific texts that come up often in State standards and standardized testing such as ACT and AP tests. This research consisted of disjointed activities rather than cohesive units. Because of this, I chose to write a sample curriculum that could be adapted to many different texts so that teachers could see a full picture of standards, processes and assessments.

The most common text discussed in these writings was *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. While ideas for teaching specific texts are useful for many practicing teachers, I began to wonder if there were methods that could be used across the curriculum. My intention with this project is to create an English/Language Arts unit that can be easily adapted to be used across a wide range of texts that are considered “standard” by most states and districts. However, in order to create activities, I did feel that I needed to choose a text to use as my base. Due to the heavy emphasis that my current district places on the writings of William Shakespeare, I choose to center the standards, assessments and activities in my project around Shakespeare’s *Romeo and*

Juliet, a play that all of our ninth grade students are expected to study. The activities created for this unit of study are meant to be adaptable to many different novel or play studies that a secondary English/Language Arts teacher may be expected to teach in middle or high school. The goal of writing this curriculum is to present secondary teachers with ideas about how they can help their diverse populations of students be successful in the English classroom regardless of the texts that are required.

Research Framework and Methods

In order to determine the theoretical framework that I would be following while developing the curriculum for this project, it was necessary to turn again to the research question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?* To create the curriculum I needed a framework for both the writing and design of the curriculum as well as the ways in which I could ensure that the assessments, activities and expectations of the unit were based in culturally responsive theory.

Framework for Curriculum Design

First, I looked at the theories of backward design in order to create an effective curriculum. For this, I turned to the research and methods of Wiggins and McTighe (2011) and their strategy which they have named Understanding by Design. While Wiggins and McTighe admit that the “backward design” concept that they focus on is not their own idea, they break backward design down into actionable steps. These steps include:

1. Identifying the end goal or expected standard

2. Establishing what evidence of meeting the goal/standard looks like
3. Planning activities and lessons that support the end goal

In order to plan my own curriculum, I will follow the steps outlined by Wiggins and McTighe in their research. I will start by identifying which Minnesota State standards that I will be covering with my unit. To get an accurate understanding of which standards might be used with the text *Romeo and Juliet* I will use the standards that my current district lays out for this text at the ninth grade level. I will use these standards to create goals that will be covered in the unit that are framed as “student will be able to...” objectives. Moving on to step two of Understanding by Design, I will use the standards to establish what skills will be assessed and what the assessments will look like. This step is to ensure that activities and formative assessments that are done throughout the unit are intentional in supporting students’ success on the large assessments. With these assessments in mind, I can move to step three in the planning process which is planning the daily and weekly activities that will help students meet the end goal. Activities that we do in the classroom should be focused on both helping students to be successful in meeting academic objectives and creating a learning environment that is safe and welcoming for all students. To build this learning environment, the unit needs to also be rooted in culturally responsive pedagogy.

Framework for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The second aspect of my research question is focused on teaching and learning that is accessible and relevant to all learners regardless of race, culture or language background. After reviewing the research done in Chapter Two, I have determined that my entire unit should be rooted in the practices of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

While this theory is not prescriptive like the theory that Wiggins and McTighe lay out in their research, it should be entrenched in every activity we do and every decision that I make when planning. As explained in Chapter Two, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is based on the idea that equity comes when student experiences are embedded within the curriculum (Chenowith, 2016). Scholars who promote Culturally Responsive Pedagogy believe that it should be centered on teaching for academic success, cultural competence and critical thinking (Kesler, 2011). Because this approach is not prescriptive and does not only apply to the planning portion of teaching, I will need to keep these three factors at the forefront when I am planning this unit. Each decision I make regarding assessment, scheduling, activities and daily learning should be made after asking how it contributes to my students' academic success, and critical thinking skills and whether each is considering the cultural differences and knowledge of my students. By using the framework of both Understanding by Design and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, I will create a secondary English curriculum that is accessible and relevant to all learners.

Context

The intention of this project is to create a unit that is based on the Minnesota State Standards while also being culturally relevant to a diverse population of students. This unit will be able to be adapted for a wide variety of texts that are typically read in the secondary English/Language Arts classroom. I have based this project off of my current classroom and students as they are a good reflection of the diversity of students in the state of Minnesota as a whole. The intended audience for this project is both these students and teachers in my own district and others who are looking for ways to adapt the curriculum that they must teach in order to better serve all of their students.

Setting

The setting of this project is a high school in the largest district in the state by student population. This suburban high school serves around 3,000 students grades 9-12 and is located in a large metro area. There are around two hundred staff members in the building, the majority of whom identify as white. The staff members in this school do not represent the diversity of the student population or surrounding community. According to Minnesota Report Card (2021), students at this school identify as 64% white, 11% Black, 7% Latinx, 10% Asian, and 7% two or more races. These numbers are very similar to the demographics of Minnesota students as a whole. This data also shows that 3.5% of students in this school are identified English Language Learners and are receiving services. Twenty three percent of students are in the free/reduced lunch program.

Participants

The participants in this project reflect the students in my own classes. These classes are made up of an average of 29-35 students who are representative of the overall diversity in the school. This class is a regular level English 9 class. Most of the students come from different middle schools and different areas of the city and thus do not know each other well. An important note about the participants in this project is that they entered high school at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic and thus have had little experience with their new peers and have had incredibly disrupted learning environments for the eight months prior to this unit.

Project Description

As previously stated, this project will be centered around meeting and assessing mandatory state reading, writing and communication standards through the study of

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This text has been chosen for its prevalence in most secondary English/Language Arts Classrooms. In this project, I will be designing a six week curriculum that is based in the frameworks of Understanding by Design and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. This curriculum will meet and assess the standards that my own school district has set for the ninth grade level. The intent for this unit is to create assessments and activities that are responsive to a diverse classroom. The content and corresponding activities of this unit will be directly related to the racial, cultural and linguistic diversity of my students.

Timeline

I began this project process in January 2021. From January to April I solidified my research question, reviewed the literature surrounding my topic and drafted my first three chapters. In April to early May I revised my first three chapters. From June 2021 to August 2021, I will be completing the project and Chapter Four of my capstone. This means that in June and July I will be designing, writing and revising the curriculum and in August 2021 I will be reflecting on the project within Chapter Four and finalizing my project as a whole.

Summary

This chapter focused on how I plan to answer the question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?* It began with an overview of what this capstone project entailed, how it would be delivered and a rationale behind the choice of curriculum development. It then moved to describing the framework used to create the curriculum for this project. I chose to examine both

Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding by Design frame for unit writing as well as the framework for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Then the context of this project was described, including who the participants and intended audience were and the setting for which this project was created. Finally, this chapter described the project in more detail and gave a timeline for the completion of the project as a whole.

Chapter Four of this project will be a reflection on the process and completion of this capstone. It will address both the research and design process as well as the end result and effectiveness of the curriculum created. Chapter Four will focus on how and whether the research question, *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students*, was answered within this capstone project.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Introduction

This capstone project was a direct extension of my graduate work through the teaching program at Hamline University. My classes at Hamline, particularly my English/Language Arts methods courses, were focused on equity and teaching diverse groups of students. As I began my first year of teaching I realized just how little the current high school English/Language Arts curriculum catered to the diverse population of students that I was teaching. Most of the texts, assessments and activities that I was expected to teach were designed for the population of learners 50 years ago, not today. As my high school rapidly approaches a majority minority makeup of students, teachers must alter the ways that they teach in order to connect and engage more students. This led me to my research question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?*

This chapter will highlight the major things that I learned throughout the capstone process. It will begin with describing how I have grown as a researcher, writer and learner. The next section will cover the key ideas and connections that I took away from my research and literature review. Then, this chapter will outline the implications and limitations of my research and capstone project as a whole. This section will be followed by ideas for further research conducted by myself or other teachers. Next, I will review how I will use my research and project materials in my own classroom. The chapter will end with an explanation of how my capstone project is a benefit to all educators.

Project Takeaways

Throughout the process of this capstone project I have grown not only as an educator, but as a researcher, writer and learner as well. As I began thinking about the capstone as a whole, I thought that it was meant simply to improve my work as a teacher in the classroom. However, upon reflection of the process as a whole, I have realized that it also improved my skills as a learner. In the beginning of the research process for my capstone question, I felt as though I was not sure what I was looking for. Leading up to this, most of my research experience has been data driven. My question, *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students?*, is more focused on materials, methods and experiences that have been used in the real-world classroom, rather than in a study. Once I realized that data and numbers were not what I was really looking for in this particular review, I found that I had an ample amount of resources to learn from. This project forced me to grow as a researcher and to look to a variety of sources for ideas of how to better engage a diverse population of students.

The capstone project and paper itself challenged me as a writer as well. As an English major and Language Arts teacher, I have always considered writing to be a strong suit for me. While I did not have trouble with the actual writing process of the capstone, I found that the extended time period in which we completed the paper portion pushed me a bit outside of my comfort zone. This paper was completed over the course of six months, a much longer time frame that I am used to writing in. The number of times that I revisited each portion of my paper caused me to constantly be reconsidering my

research question, the takeaways from my literature review as well as the final shape of my project. Each time that I reviewed the written section of the paper, I came in with new ideas and different perspectives to add. As a result, I was constantly being challenged as a writer to incorporate these ideas without losing the original intent of my project as a whole.

Literature Review

Overall, I really enjoyed the process of reviewing the literature. It was incredibly helpful not only for this project, but as a classroom teacher as well, to take a deeper look into the ways that other English teachers plan, present materials and engage students in their own classrooms. I was reassured by the number of educators who are adapting materials and trying new things in order to better engage and reach their students within the English/Language Arts standards.

One of the more important themes that stood out to me during the literature review was an emphasis on allowing students space to critically think about classic literature and challenge the ideas presented by the stories. For instance, Macaluso (2017) writes that as teachers, we should be asking our students to think about the problematic way in which race is portrayed in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Typically, high school curriculum teaches that Atticus Finch, the white protagonist, is the hero of the novel while the black characters are helpless and pitiful. But, what message is this sending to our students of color? Macaluso and others believe that we should encourage all students to challenge the widely accepted narratives that come from our classic literature. This in turn will help materials to be more relevant and engaging to our ever-changing population of students.

After reviewing the ideas and methods of other teachers in engaging a diverse group of students with a traditional, canonical text, it was time for me to consider how I was going to structure my own curriculum. To do this, I turned to the strategy that Wiggins and McTighe (2011) have dubbed Understanding by Design. This framework for creating curriculum asks teachers to first identify the standards and goals that they want students to become proficient in during the unit. As I reflected on the literature review, I knew that I wanted students to think critically, have productive discussions and practice analyzing character and theme. The next step in Understanding by Design is to establish what being proficient in these standards actually looks like. To do this in my own project, I again turned to what I learned from my literature review. I decided that understanding does not have to mean that students can write an essay or perfectly interpret the language of Shakespeare. For me, being proficient meant that students would be able to critically analyze character and theme as well as discuss the central ideas of the text in a productive manner with each other. The last step in writing strong curriculum according to Wiggins and McTighe is to plan activities that help students to successfully meet the end goals that have been established. In my own project, this meant creating activities that engaged students with the text, discussions that pushed students to think critically and materials that asked students to make connections with their own lives. Using ideas from Macaluso (2017) and others, I attempted to ask students to challenge and relate to the text, rather than simply taking it as truth.

Implications

The goal of this capstone project is to help educators find new ways to teach, present and work with material in order to better engage with their students. It is meant to

be used as a resource, a kind of starting point for teachers who are working to create more meaningful learning experiences for a diverse group of learners. Even though the curriculum I created in my project is focused on the play *Romeo and Juliet*, English/Language Arts teachers can use and adapt many of the objectives, assessments and activities to whichever text they are asked to study. This project is also meant to challenge those professionals who write curriculum for English/Language Arts whether that be at the state, district or school level to think critically about their curriculum requirements. What can we do to update or even replace our texts, objectives and assessments in order to reach a new generation of students? Does it make sense to continue teaching the canonical texts in the same way as we always have, or should we be constantly evolving depending on the needs of our students? It is my hope that those who review this project will consider the narratives that they are presenting to their students through their classroom materials and question how they are engaging and relevant to their current student population.

Limitations

During this capstone process there were few limitations to the research, writing and development of curriculum. I do acknowledge however that the ideas that I have offered within this capstone project are not the only ideas or strategies for making material engaging and relevant to a diverse group of students. Many educators have found countless ways to accomplish this and the limitation for me was that I could not include all of the ideas and strategies that have been successful in this project. The intention for this project was to offer ideas that teachers could build upon in their own classrooms that would help them to better reach their students. For that reason, the

curriculum created was intentionally very flexible, with no prescribed way to implement it. While teachers may find that they are limited to what they can do and teach due to time constraints and mandatory district standards, this curriculum is meant to be flexible enough so that the teacher can use some or all of it during their unit.

Further Research

As I began to research and design the curriculum for my project, many other topics for further research began to form. Something that I would like to look further into is how English/Language Arts teachers can use culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms every day. I am particularly interested in how teachers can use texts, events, experiences and stories from other cultures in order to help students be successful. What does a culturally responsive English/Language Arts classroom look like when the teacher is required to teach the canonical texts? Another topic for further research that I considered when completing this project is about closing the achievement gap, particularly in the secondary English/Language Arts classroom. What is the root cause of the disparity between groups of students with regards to success in the English classroom? How can we as educators address this disparity and help all of our students find academic success in the English classroom?

Implementation and Benefits

This project was intentionally based on standards and a text that I am currently required to teach in my ninth grade English class. For me, it was important to create something that I could use and adapt in my own classroom. I plan on using most of the curriculum that I have created with my ninth grade students this year when we read *Romeo and Juliet*. What is important to note about this curriculum in particular is that it

can be adapted, not only to other Shakespeare plays but also to a wide range of texts that are commonly used in the secondary English curriculum. This way, I will be able to still utilize parts of the curriculum in my teaching even if texts change. In my school we work in subject/grade level collaborative teams. This means that myself and the other ninth grade English teachers share activities and methods that we are using with each other. I plan on sharing all of the materials that I have created here with my colleagues to use as they wish. I intentionally created this curriculum in the format that we use as a collaborative team so that sharing it would be easier for all.

It is my hope that other English/ Language Arts teachers, not only the ones in my building, will be able to see and utilize my project as a resource in their own classroom. This project can be used as a starting point for teachers who are developing their own curriculum or looking to modify their curriculum to better suit the needs of their students. Not only will they be able to use activities and materials that I have created here, but teachers can use the works of those cited in this project as well. My literature review includes many ideas from others about how to make material more engaging and relevant to all students. Teachers are encouraged to use the ideas cited in this paper to benefit their students. Methods of teaching and education should reflect the values of equity and inclusion that the education system preaches. In order to do this, teachers at the classroom level should strive to make learning engaging while maintaining high expectations. It is my hope that this project can contribute to the growing focus on these values.

Summary

My capstone project focused on answering the question: *how can the current Minnesota State secondary English/Language Arts curriculum be adapted at the*

classroom level to be more accessible and relevant to a diverse population of students? In order to do this, I created a curriculum model that is adaptable to many texts, that focuses on engaging and relating to the students that are in our classrooms. After finalizing my research question I reviewed the literature and materials that others have created regarding this topic. What I found to be most helpful was the curriculum design model by Wiggins and McTighe (2011) as well as Macaluso's (2017) ideas about asking students to read with and against traditional texts. In creating this unit I was very intentional about every choice that was made. Each activity, reading, discussion and assessment is meant to engage students with the text and ask them to think critically about the ideas presented in the text. I also believe that it is important to check in with students and their own thoughts and ideas around a text, particularly one that can seem so far removed from their own lives. It is my hope that this curriculum will not only be engaging for students but will inspire other teachers to take a look at their own teaching strategies. The goal of this project is to encourage other teachers to focus on creating lessons that push all students toward academic success while keeping them engaged. I believe that our educational system is the root of change in our society. If we can work toward an equitable classroom it will only help our society as a whole.

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