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How can Using Culturally Responsive Instruction in a Social Studies Classroom Contribute to Student Success?

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By

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As a future social studies teacher, one of the things that makes me most excited for my career is making a difference in the lives of my students. I believe teachers can make a huge difference in many areas of the lives of young people. Unfortunately, there is still a very important area where most teachers are struggling. This area is the opportunity gap between white students and African American students. Throughout this paper, I will attempt to answer the formidable question that asks, “How can culturally responsive instruction in a social studies classroom contribute to student success?”

In the course of this introductory chapter I hope to accomplish the following five things. First, I will aim to convince the reader that this topic is worth studying by providing personal anecdotes and a rationale for my study. Secondly, I will discuss why I choose to refer to the difference in academic success between White and Black students as the opportunity gap as opposed to the achievement gap." Next, I will use my findings and data to shine a light on this opportunity gap. After that, I will describe the many goals of my study and how it will be organized. Finally, I will provide a brief overview of my entire project and how it will come to fruition.

I narrowed the topic down to the opportunity gap between White and Black students in the social studies classroom because it would be impossible to focus on all of the subjects and all of the opportunity gaps that exist amongst all race, gender, and socioeconomic groups. In this project, I will design a curriculum that I believe would reduce the opportunity gap in a 10th grade social studies class if implemented. This

curriculum will be created and discussed in Chapter Three after the literature review in Chapter Two.

Going into this project, I thought I would be investigating why experiential learning was preferable to lecture based learning. As much as that is an important topic, and actually relates to the topic I am working on, I felt the need to study effective ways that social studies teachers can teach their Black students. I was sparked to learn about ways to address the opportunity gap by a bus. The bus had an advertisement on it that read, “Minnesota is the worst state for Black students”. Reading that at first, I laughed. I thought that was ridiculous and there was no way that Minnesota could be worse than states in the deep south like Alabama or Mississippi! However, after doing a little research, I found out that Minnesota has one of the largest opportunity gaps in the nation (Shockman, 2019). This is one of the key reasons I decided to do this topic for my research topic.

The topic of the opportunity gap between Black and White students is also personal for me. This topic is important to me because I have seven young cousins that are people of color and I have heard from their parents how their unique needs are not being met in classrooms. The parents of these seven children often talk to school superintendents and principals, but few changes have been made to improve their school experience. The parents have shared their long list of grievances with me and some apply directly to social studies. According to the parents, the children dislike social studies class because they rarely see people who look like them being depicted in a positive way. They also struggle

to understand why topics such as history matter and are often bored by teachers that routinely lecture.

Another key reason I chose to study the issue of opportunity gaps in social studies classrooms was because I attended Hamline University. One of the things I appreciated the most about Hamline University was how honest the administration and faculty was about racial issues. As a lifelong northerner and Minnesotan, I believed that most of the racism and harsh living conditions for Black people existed in the south. This state of mind undoubtedly contributed to my shock when I saw the bus with the opportunity gap advertisement a few years ago.

My Personal Experiences

On a personal note, I grew up extremely privileged in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. Eden Prairie High School was a social bubble for my peers and I. Before college, I only ventured out of Eden Prairie and went to Minneapolis and St. Paul to attend sporting events. I surely wasn't aware of the problems and inequality that existed in these cities. Attending Hamline University and spending more time outside of my bubble helped raise my awareness about these issues.

Although I was, and quite frankly still am, naive about the circumstances of underfunded schools in low income communities, being in the education program at Hamline slightly reduced my naivety. During this program, I spent time accumulating clinical hours at schools and student centers such as Falcon Heights, Murray Middle School, Little Earth Early Learning Center, Minneapolis Field School, and Minneapolis Southwest High School. Although these schools varied greatly in terms of demographics

and socioeconomics, they were much different than the predominantly white and affluent schools that I attended growing up.

A few of my experiences during these clinical hours helped create my interest in the opportunity gap. At the Little Earth Early Learning Center, I spent time working as a reading buddy. As a reading buddy, I had the chance to work one on one helping a young male student develop literacy skills. This male student resided in an area with higher poverty rates. About 94% of Little Earth residents live in poverty and violent crimes occur at higher than average rates there (Cox, 2014).

When I first started working with the student, the student was difficult to work with. He was often distracted and did not want to spend time improving his literacy skills. I knew that if I was a child living in a high crime and poverty neighborhood, school would not exactly be the first thing on my mind either. I spent the first couple of days trying to get to know the student and build relational trust. One day, we spent the entire day playing on the playground equipment. That day was our breakthrough! After that day, the student finally trusted me and was ready to start learning. His reading scores began improving and it was by far my favorite and most rewarding time spent in a school setting. This experience taught me how important relational trust is in the classroom, especially for students of color with a white teacher like myself.

Another important lesson I learned from Little Earth was the importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and curriculum. The vast majority of students attending the Little Earth Learning Center are indigenious children. Little Earth does a great job of making their students aware of their history as indigenious people. Every day

I was at Little Earth, the students completed projects or pieces of artwork that represented and taught them about their heritage. Furthermore, many indigenious people from a variety of tribes came into the classroom to talk to the students. Any observer could see how excited the students were to learn about their history. Unfortunately, most schools did not do a great job of exploring the history of people from many backgrounds. Minority students typically do not receive teaching that is culturally relevant and this contributes to the opportunity gap.

During my senior year of college, I had the privilege of receiving my clinical hours in a seventh grade social studies classroom at the Minneapolis Field Community School. During my time there, I worked with students who needed extra assistance in small groups. The class I worked with was predominantly white; however, two of the three boys that were working with me for extra support were African American. After spending some time with them, I could tell that these students were very intelligent. Their teacher told me that they were some of the most gifted students in the class. However, they disliked social studies and did not work hard in the class because they believed that it was unimportant.

After spending a few days with the students I could tell they were disengaged for many reasons. I discovered the main reason that they were disengaged was because the work was tedious and they did not see many people that looked like them in the historical stories they were being told. Luckily, they were offered the opportunity to complete a project on a historical figure of their choice. The two boys picked the African American sports stars Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson. I was able to attend their presentations and they both did an excellent job building a trifold and making a speech on their respective

historical figures. This is just another example of the power of culturally relevant pedagogy in addressing the opportunity gap.

During my student teaching experience at Minneapolis Southwest High School, I witnessed the opportunity gap in action. While student teaching virtually due to the Coronavirus pandemic, I taught three Advanced Placement U.S. history classes and two School Within a Grade (SWAG) government and economics classes, a term commonly used at Southwest High School. Students in SWAG classes are significantly behind their peers in terms of the amount of high school credits they have. Sadly, most of the students in my AP classes were white and a disproportionate amount of students in my SWAG classes were African American. The students in my SWAG classes were just as capable as the students in my AP class. They were just students that were disengaged with school for a variety of reasons. This recent experience has helped reinforce my belief in the opportunity gap and has made me want to build a greater understanding of effective teaching strategies to address it.

Next, I want to define what opportunity gap means. For many, the term opportunity gap is synonymous with the term achievement gap. According to TopHat (2017), "Opportunity gap refers to the ways in which socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, English proficiency, familial situations, community wealth or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational goals, achievement levels, and attainment for specific groups of students" (p. 1). Although both opportunity and achievement gap can be used interchangeably, for the purposes of this project, I will use the term opportunity gap.

I choose to use the term opportunity gap instead of achievement gap primarily because the term achievement gap puts misdirected blame on students. The term achievement gap "implies that children are not achieving as they should be, and that it's their fault" (Mooney, 2018). Although few would argue that gathering data and locating achievement gaps is not necessary and noble work, the term achievement gap is an unhelpful term that leads to misconceptions. Adults, opportunity, and circumstances out of students' control are more responsible for academic underachieving amongst groups than children themselves are.

Many people would agree that adults need to empower students to learn (Mooney, 2018). Theresa Mooney argues that most struggling students are not facing difficulties with school because they lack academic ability or effort. She believes that low-achieving students face systemic challenges and lack of assistance from adults. The term opportunity gap implies that if students from all backgrounds have the resources and opportunities needed to succeed, then there would be no difference in achievement between students of any background. This is my belief, and why I use the term opportunity gap instead of achievement gap.

Rationale for My Study

Although I believe my personal anecdotes are convincing, I want to show evidence of the opportunity gap beyond my experiences. Since public schools receive most of their funding from property taxes, schools in wealthier areas have better funding than their counterparts. There is a strong correlation between how well funded a school is and the student achievement levels in that school. A recent study by the Learning Policy Institute

found that, “on balance, in direct tests of the relationship between financial resources and student outcomes, money matters for student outcomes” (McKenna, 2018, p.1). According to the research, this is due to the fact that, “schooling resources that cost money — such as smaller class sizes and salaries for expert teachers — are positively associated with student outcomes” (McKenna, 2018, p. 1). These statistics illustrate that when it comes to student achievement, the birth lottery plays an important role.

Although this research shows an opportunity gap between wealthy and poor students, it also highlights the opportunity gap between White and Black students. “White families have the highest level of both median and mean family wealth: $188,200 and $983,400, respectively. Black families have considerably less wealth than White families. Black families' median and mean wealth is less than 15 percent that of White families, at $24,100 and $142,500” (Chang, 2020, p.1). Black families not being able to build generational wealth is due to 400 years of slavery, segregation (defacto and dejure), redlining, mass incareceration, and countless other injustices (Hamliton, 2019). Since Black families have less wealth on average, they commonly live in poorer neighborhoods that are served by underfunded schools. This issue helps perpetuate the opportunity gap between white and Black students.

Due to the fact Black families have less wealth than white families on average, Black families are less frequently able to hire tutors if their child falls behind. It also means that black children generally do not get to attend the same expensive ACT preparatory programs and other educational enrichment programs. As a student that had parents able to afford a tutor when I fell behind and was able to attend ACT preparatory

programs, I can attest to the fact that these opportunities make a huge difference. As I touched on earlier, white students attending well-funded schools are not brighter than their Black peers attending underfunded schools. They may perform better on tests and other measurements, but this is due to the many advantages they generally have.

Another societal reason for the opportunity gap between white and Black students is the mass incarceration of Black men. The Bureau of Justice Statistics has found that about one out of three Black men will go to state or federal prison at some time in their lives and only one out of twenty white men will spend time in state or federal prison over the course of their lives (Bonczar, 1997). These inequalities in our criminal justice system exist because Black men often live in aggressively policed areas where they are two times more likely to be pulled over by law enforcement than their white peers. (Davis, 2018). They are five times more likely to be searched after being pulled over even though law enforcement is half as likely to find drugs or other contraband in the possession of a Black man (Davis, 2018).

The result of these injustices is that we have a disproportionate amount of Black students without fathers in our classrooms. If one third of our Black students have a father in prison and largely out of their lives, it could easily affect their school work. Losing a strong male role model and someone to help you with your homework may hurt your school achievement levels. Without a doubt, the inequalities in the American criminal justice system directly affect the opportunities young Black students are offered in their years of schooling.

Although many of the social inequalities I just highlighted are mostly outside of the teacher's control in the classroom, it is important to be aware of them. As teachers, our unions and our voices give us political capital, which is an important tool to use to advocate for our students inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, we must be aware of the troubling statistics that were highlighted above, as they often explain why Black students are not reaching their full potential. An understanding of these issues can make us more patient and less quick to rush to conclusions when we see our Black students struggling.

Conclusion

At this point, my personal anecdotes, the statistics that I have provided to demonstrate the social inequalities in our country, show that the opportunity gap is real and worth studying. I believe that the opportunity gap is one of the most important issues in education. The way to fight this opportunity gap is to adopt teaching methods designed to ensure that African American students do not get left behind. My goal in answering my research question: “How can culturally responsive instruction in a social studies classroom contribute to student success?” is to identify strategies that can be used to reduce the opportunity gap.

In this project, I will focus on ways in which social studies teachers can more effectively teach their Black students. In addition to diagnosing the many complicated ingredients that contribute to Black students struggling in social studies class, I also hope to find some ways to address and lessen the opportunity gap. Obviously, knowing all the

reasons for the opportunity gap does you no good if you fail to learn ways in which to tackle the problem.

I also aim to convince educators to begin teaching student-centered classes. Furthermore, this study will make the idea of using culturally relevant pedagogy more attractive to educators who are hesitant to adopt it. Another goal of mine is that aspects of the curriculum I will design in Chapter Three will be used by teachers who are looking to create a more engaging and equitable class.

Finally, I will provide a brief overview of how my project will come into fruition. In Chapter Two, I will review the literature relevant to effectively teaching Black students in the social studies classroom. This chapter will focus mainly on defining strategies that social studies teachers can use to create a more equitable classroom. In Chapter Three, I will take what discoveries I made in Chapter Two and apply them to create a tenth grade social studies unit that leaves no group of students behind. The unit I will focus on will be the American Civil War and it will directly cover Minnesota State Standards. In Chapter Four, I will reflect on my work and draw conclusions as to how social studies teachers can adopt strategies that are proven to help them reach their Black students.

Chapter Two

Review of The Literature

My study attempts to answer the question, "How can culturally responsive instruction in a social studies classroom contribute to student success?". This chapter will review the literature that I studied in order to discover what scholars believe are effective practices for ensuring that Black students have a strong chance to succeed in a social studies classroom. I am adding to the existing literature by creating a unit on the American Civil War for a tenth grade U.S. history class. This unit will feature the strategies I will write about in this literature review.

Chapter Two reviews the literature related to adopting culturally relevant pedagogy, creating a student-centered class, being aware of economic factors that contribute to the opportunity gap, and utilizing effective teaching practices. These four themes are all critical things to keep in mind and use when trying to improve the way Black students are being taught social studies. By gaining a greater understanding of these themes, teachers will be in a better position to address the opportunity gap in their classrooms. Although this literature review and the study as a whole is focused on a social studies classroom, teachers of all subject areas and grades will be able to find ways to promote equity in their classrooms.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Aronson & Laughter, 2015,

p. 165). In a social studies classroom that adopts CRP, an observer would see lessons that tell the stories of characters from a variety of backgrounds. Students of all backgrounds would see people that look like them and practice cultural traditions similar to the ones they practice (Martell, 2018). To Christopher Martell, CRP is important because students of color have always been the most likely to have their cultures either unaccounted for, underrepresented, or mischaracterized in social studies classrooms. Martell believes that CRP is becoming more prevalent in social studies classrooms because many students, often, but not limited to students of color, do not feel connected to the curriculum.

Although it may seem like CRP in the social studies classroom would only benefit students of color, many scholars believe that is not the case. According to Christopher Martell (2018), "Even affluent white students describe the history they are taught as too neat and rosy" (p. 72). Yoonjung Choi believes that unfortunately, social studies as it is taught in most classrooms today, is eurocentric (Choi, 2013). Choi also argues that during the course of their careers at school, most students participate in a great number of lessons focusing on American and European history; however, the histories and contemporary issues of places like Asia, South America, and Africa are often marginalized (Choi, 2013).

Next, Choi (2013) writes that many immigrant students and students of color dislike social studies classes because the history of their ancestors are rarely discussed. Students of color also see few people that look like them showcased or depicted as heroes in their textbooks. Due to this, many students interviewed by Choi (2013) said, "history class is stupid" (p. 14). He believes that the lack of attention to the ancestral homes and cultures of immigrant students and students of color has created many problems in their

effort and attitude towards social studies classes. He found that beyond academic issues, this eurocentric way of teaching social studies has caused many students to have low self-esteem and/or identity confusion.

The scholars Arsonson and Laughter largely agree with Choi's view of social studies. They argue that, for the most part, every non-European group in social studies textbooks and curriculums is close to invisible (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). Like Choi, the two authors believe that learning is more powerful and students retain more from lessons when teaching is culturally relevant to students. Many social studies teachers acknowledge this, too. Choi interviewed a social studies teacher who told him, "I hated school because the curriculum never connected to me" (p. 14). It seems that Choi, Aronson, and Laughter all would agree with another teacher interviewed by Choi. This teacher argued that, "all students can achieve academic success if there are opportunities to find a relevance from their lives to school curriculum and are supported by caring teachers" (p. 14).

Choi believes that in 21st century America, if CRP is not utilized, many students will get left behind. This is due to the fact that, "25% of children are foreign born or first generation immigrants. [In addition)], 41% of teachers have English Learners (EL) in their classrooms (Choi, 2013, p. 12). Earl McBride agrees with Choi that the dominant way of teaching social studies will not be very effective for these types of students (McBride, 2010). Teachers who have adopted CRP understand that in most curriculums and learning materials, European histories, worldviews, and virtues dominate. McBride argues that if

teachers are to reach all students we must teach the worldviews, histories, and values of all our students' cultures (McBride, 2010).

In addition, teachers who use CRP embrace social justice and use the classroom as an instrument to create social awareness and change (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). A culturally responsive classroom is one in which students are actively engaged and discussing social issues. In a classroom like this, teachers and students do not shy away from topics such as racism and nativism in America. Unfortunately, many social studies teachers avoid discussing race in the classroom (Martell, 2018). Proponents of CRP realize that it is impossible to teach honest and complete social studies without frequently discussing race. It is also impossible to reach the end goal of CRP classrooms, cultural competence, without making race a prominent theme of a social studies classroom (McBride, 2010).

A great way to make the classroom an area for social change is to take Christopher Martell's advice on how a teacher using CRP should teach. Martell (2018) believes that the best way to meet Aronson and Laughter's goal of creating social awareness in the classroom is to have students learning collaboratively. Martell (2018) additionally argues that forming social relationships by learning and discussing issues in small groups is a cornerstone of the CRP classroom. Experiential learning is also a great way to build social awareness and change in a classroom led by a teacher that embraces CRP (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Martell, 2018).

Next, a teacher using CRP must hold all of their students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, to high standards. Proponents of CRP understand that deficit

perspectives, or believing that a certain student is struggling in school because of their cultural background, is a common and dangerous view that many teachers have acquired (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). Many scholars believe that these deficit perspectives are aimed most frequently at Black students. The Black student deficit perspective is illustrated by the fact that Black students are more likely to be placed into special education programs than white students (McBride, 2010). Some scholars also argue that in addition to being disproportionately placed into special education programs, Black students are victims of well-meaning teachers not pushing them as hard academically as other students. According to Earl McBride, teachers that teach Black students often "gently nurse them and treat them with altruistic concern" (p. 36). However, this "gentle nursing" can often turn into teachers challenging their Black students less than their white students. This, according to McBride, leads to the "benign neglect" of Black students (p. 36).

Gloria Ladson-Billings, who is often credited with being one of the founders of CRP, observed many education scholars and teachers using deficit perspectives. "She (Ladson-Billings) criticized scholars that claimed African American underachievement was attributable to a cultural system that did not value education. She contended this was an ahistorical conclusion and a deficit perspective" (Schmeichel, 2012, p. 221). In order to be a teacher using CRP, one must denounce the troubling misconception of Black academic inferiority and all deficiency labels (McBride, 2010). Furthermore McBride believes that the effective teacher realizes that if treated well and fairly, all students can demonstrate a proficient level of academic achievement.

According to the many scholarly pieces of literature reviewed, there are many goals of CRP. To put it succinctly, Aronson and Laughter (2015) believe that one of the key goals of CRP is to make students proud of their cultural heritage and proud of the cultures of their classmates. If this is a true and attainable goal, then CRP seems to be a way to protect students from the low self-esteem and identity confusion that Choi (2013) described in his writing. One term that was commonly used in the CRP literature reviewed was "cultural competence" (McBride, 2010; Schmeichel, 2012). To McBride, cultural competence is synonymous with cultural knowledge. When teachers use CRP, they are introducing students to many new cultures, ideas, norms, and values. This is the cultural competence or cultural knowledge that CRP develops in students (McBride, 2010).

While discussing CRP as a theory, Mardi Schmeichel wrote that, "CRP produces students who can achieve academically, demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (Schmeichel, 2012, p. 222). Critiquing the social order seems to be similar to what Aronson and Laughter (2015) wrote when they discussed how the CRP classroom should be a site for social change. Another parallel between the authors' views of what the goals of CRP should be came from Aronson and Laughter and Earl McBride. Aronson and Laughter and McBride both argued that CRP will destroy the deficit perspectives of students and their races and cultures. The authors above argue that the way to destroy deficit perspectives is through the cultural competence that CRP creates in students.

An idea touched on in depth by one of the authors reviewed was that CRP can make teachers more culturally competent and can also help them cultivate a greater sense

of what teaching practices work for students of all races and backgrounds. According to Schmeichel (2012), a great teacher must learn about their students' cultures and then use that knowledge to adjust her lesson strategies/teaching style. Schmeichel (2012) also points out that many researchers believe that certain types of learning activities help students of some backgrounds more than others.

For example, Schmeichel's piece articulates that some studies have concluded that Black children respond well to movement and learning in physical (hands on) ways. Although schmeichel acknowledges that none of this research is definitive, she writes that it is important to implement many different strategies in the classroom to help students of all cultural backgrounds that may or may not learn most efficiently in similar ways. She believes that this is another important aspect of CRP.

Interestingly, Schmeichel's piece is written objectively and it fully evaluates the benefits and negative effects of using CRP in the classroom. She notes that in some ways using certain practices in a classroom just to attempt to reach a certain group of students can backfire and cause backlash. According to her, some of the conclusions reached by the researchers have been troubling and unhelpful. "(These studies and ideas) have resulted in promoting stereotype categories and labels that then become barriers" (Schmeichel, 2012, p. 223). She goes on to explain that just because one strategy works for a student of a certain race, it doesn't mean that all students of that same race will learn effectively from that strategy.

Although the Black student movement stereotype may not seem particularly harmful, Schmeichel (2012) notes that there are more harmful ones. In her writing, she

tells the story of how a Black teacher often used the terms “act the fool” and “snap” with her predominantly Black students (Schmeichel, 2012, p. 224). She writes that this story is often used by education scholars as a way that white teachers can build trust with Black students. However, it seems wrong to assume that many Black students use improper English and that a white teacher not being genuine is the best way to teach (Schmeichel, 2012). It is also troubling to her that if Black students do not respond to those slang words or don’t learn best from movement, they may be seen as insufficiently Black.

Another goal of CRP is to use students’ diverse cultures to the teacher’s advantage. Martell (2018) believes that teachers are sometimes made uncomfortable by a diverse body of students. He notes that teachers may view diversity as a challenge for themselves. However proponents of CRP argue that student diversity can be a strength. Martell believes that teachers need to make students’ diverse cultural backgrounds an asset, not a liability to their academic success. To most of the authors reviewed, this is the goal of CRP. To do this, Kucan and Cho (2016) write, “(teachers must) engage students in using their cultural assets. Encourage them to call upon their funds of knowledge to make sense of things” (p. 21).

Finally, much of the literature reviewed not only defined CRP, but also provided examples of how a teacher could embrace it. Some teachers went as far as creating a new curriculum (Choi, 2013). In Choi’s writing, this teacher decided that in his World Civilizations class, the students would focus on Egypt and Mesopotamia as opposed to Greece and Rome. One of the teachers Martell (2018) wrote about did something similar. Instead of teaching from the regular, eurocentric curriculum, this teacher crafted a new

curriculum that included many stories about people that had the same cultural backgrounds as his students (Martell, 2018). Both of these authors argue that re-writing lessons and catering to your students' cultural needs is important for teachers that hope to practice CRP (Martell, 2018; Choi, 2013).

Creating Student-Centered Classes

Literature was also reviewed on how teachers can create a student-centered class. Much like CRP, a student-centered classroom is one where you mold your pedagogy to cater to your students' needs. In a social studies class, this may be something as simple as less lecturing and more group work. In sum, a student-centered class is where students are responsible for their own learning. Although the teacher leads, students are expected to be engaged with the material in many different ways. Many scholars believe there are a variety of ways to create a student-centered class. Many of those same scholars argue that a student-centered classroom is an essential thing to create in order to effectively teach Black students.

For many years, social studies and education scholars have noticed some troubling things when observing social studies classes around the country. Some authors, such as James Lowen, have written that the academic gap between white and Black students is higher in history class than any other subject at the high school level (Lowen, 2019). Furthermore, a significant number of students do not enjoy social studies classes anymore (Lowen, 2019; Parker, 1991). In multiple studies at most grade levels, students have identified social studies as being the subject they find most boring and least relevant to their lives (Parker, 1991). To many of the authors reviewed, this is because the material is

not relevant to students' lives (De Oliveira, 2019). However, many of these same authors argue that social studies teachers are failing their students, particularly their students of color, because they are teaching teacher-centered classes (Lowen, 2019; Parker, 1991).

James Lowen, the sociologist and author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me,* believes that one of the best ways to create an effective and student centered social studies class is to teach honest and engaging social studies. Unfortunately, Lowen (2019) cites studies that show that social studies, as it is taught today, is rarely engaging and often dishonest. Lowen (2019) notes that the classic factually incorrect statement commonly made in social studies classes is that Christopher Columbus discovered America. Lowen (2019), and virtually all historians, realize that people were living in America approximately 31,000 years before Columbus arrived in the Americas. Obviously, this would make Columbus' discovery of America impossible.

Although examples like the Columbus misnomer may seem unimportant, Lowen (2019) believes that students know that many social studies classes, particularly U.S. history, paint a better picture than reality for many historical figures. To Lowen, "lying or lying to students by omission does not work. Students know what's going on in the world around them and they're knowledgeable about many events" (Lowen, 2019, p. 336). This way of teaching doesn't only negatively affect students of color, "Even affluent white students describe the history they are taught as too neat and rosy" (Martell, 2018, p.72). Martell and Lowen believe that an important aspect of a student centered social studies class is teaching students the truth about world events.

Another important part of an effective social studies class is making the class engaging. Many teacher-centered social studies classes feature a teacher sitting at the front of the classroom and lecturing for the overwhelming majority of the class (Parker 1991; Wagner, 1982). To Parker, this is a poor way to teach. He believed that when a teacher stands at the front of the classroom and lectures consistently, it creates barriers between the students and the teacher. In his view, it also makes the teacher appear like a dictator to the students. Most of the scholars mentioned above would be quick to argue neither of those features can be present if a student-centered classroom is to be installed.

Next, Wagner argues that in the last forty years there has been a move toward a greater emphasis on preparing students for tests (Wagner, 1982). He argues that due to this, many teachers teach to the test and they treat the subject material they are teaching with more importance than the students they are developing. He describes this trend in a revealing sentence. To Wagner, teachers that focus too much on academics often say, “I teach English (or whatever subject they teach) to students” (p. 17). On the other hand, the student-centered English teacher will proudly remark, “I teach students English” (p. 16).

To believers in student-centered teaching, students are more than just names on a student roster or student ID numbers (Wagner, 1982). Wagner and believers in student centered teaching believe that teachers exist for more than just to teach material and make sure students are ready for standardized tests. They also understand that the level of motivation that some students have in a given class depends on the relationship that they have with the teacher. Parker joined Wagner in arguing that teachers needed to teach in student centered ways to maximize student motivation (Parker, 1991; Wagner, 1982). In

addition, Wagner argues that relating to, getting to know, and genuinely caring for students is necessary if a teacher wants their students to reach their fullest potential.

Furthermore, Wagner (1991) believes that if the student centered teacher makes their students feel important, students will be less afraid to take chances, ask questions, and make mistakes. He writes that teachers are able to more efficiently teach students subject material when students feel important and their esteem needs are being met. To him, teaching subject material and helping students become better humans does not have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, he believes that accomplishing the latter makes the former more attainable.

In much of the literature reviewed, scholars described their contempt for the amount of material that social studies teachers attempt to teach every year (Parker, 1991 & Lowen, 2019). To Parker and Lowen, the amount of terms, events, and names students have to recall every year is unfair and counterproductive. To both authors, a student centered approach, where teachers give their students the opportunity to go more in depth on certain subjects, instead of covering many topics quickly, would be preferable. Regarding this, Lowen (2019) wrote, “do not try to teach many things. It is enough to open minds, do not overload their minds” (p.355).

Next, two of the sources of literature studied argued that social studies is the perfect subject in which to give students choices (Parker, 1991; Erekson, 2014). To James Erekson, student choice and autonomy is very important (Erekson, 2014). He notes that in social studies, this could mean giving students the opportunity to choose which time period or historical figure they would like to complete a project on. Parker largely agreed

with this, but argued that only high performing students should be given a substantial amount of autonomy (Parker, 1991). It seems that student autonomy is a key part of a student centered class in the eyes of these scholars.

Interestingly, Parker and Erekson both noted the power of projects in the student centered classroom. Erekson (2014) writes, “student research and inquiry, service learning, and performance outcomes are better suited to an active, student oriented model of concept development (p. 9). He then goes on to explain his strong preference for student projects over lectures. Parker noted many of the same things Erekson did, but expanded on the idea of projects. He added that multi-disciplinary projects can be especially powerful and help students enjoy learning social studies.

The two aforementioned authors also noted the benefits of using primary sources and historical fiction. Parker (1991) is a huge proponent of the notion that a student centered class must make frequent use out of primary sources. He believes that primary sources make history more relevant and engaging for students. Erekson (2014) publicly agreed with Parker’s view when he argued that primary sources must be used frequently to supplement textbooks. Both Parker and Erekson acknowledged that historical fiction is an underutilized asset that student centered social studies teachers can use to make lessons come alive for students.

Another important aspect of student centered education is allowing students time to think and process information (Erekson, 2014; Parker, 1991). Much like when Lowen wrote, “we do not need to overload students' minds” (Lowen, 2019, p. 355), Parker and Erekson believe that a great deal of information can sometimes be too much for students

to handle. Erekson articulated that a student centered teacher must realize that students need a certain amount of time to process what they are being taught. Parker also noted that giving students time to think independently and in small groups is imperative (Parker, 1991).

The topic of student tracking was also discussed in the literature reviewed. Parker articulated that in the schools he studied, students were often put into three groups. The first group was for the highest achieving students, students in the middle group were average achieving students, and students in the third group were struggling academically. Parker noted that students in the highest track often received more classes in the humanities and their classes were focused on higher level thinking tasks. He wrote that the lowest track received little instruction in history, and when it did, they attended a class that did not push students as strongly and prioritized lower level thinking tasks. Unfortunately, African American students made up a larger than proportional percentage of the students in the lowest track (Parker, 1991).

Parker noted that tracking, sometimes considered a cornerstone of student centered teaching, can actually be teacher centered and contribute to the opportunity gap. Parker (1991) writes, “Teachers often want the easiest path. [Tracking and putting students into groups] allows instruction to be less diverse, because the students in the class are less diverse” (p. 26). To Parker, this is a prime example of an idea from scholars that has sometimes contributed to the opportunity gap (Parker, 1991). He believes that tracking is acceptable, as long as students get equal social studies instruction time and are pushed academically (Parker, 1991).

Many of the authors had interesting views on how assessments should be done in a student-centered classroom. Parker believes that an assessment in a student centered classroom should include the following things. First, the assessment should feel like a normal classroom activity for students. To Parker, this is because when assessments don't feel like a normal activity, it can lead to test anxiety and students may not perform as well (1991). Echoing this sentiment, Wagner articulated that the way high stakes tests are often done has caused "humanism to be removed from the classroom" (Wagner, 1982, p. 18).

Finally, according to Parker, an assessment should develop students' higher level thinking skills. Thirdly, there should be clear criteria that ensures that students know what they are being assessed on. He believes that if teachers can create assessments that include all three features, they will be able to create effective assessments in a student centered classroom. Wagner would likely believe that these changes to assessments could help bring humanism back into the classroom.

Being Aware of the Inequalities That Many Black Students Face

As teachers, it is imperative that we are aware of the economic factors that contribute to the opportunity gap. In America, regardless of where teachers teach, they will teach students of many different socioeconomic backgrounds. Unfortunately, race and socioeconomic backgrounds are strong indicators of how students perform in school. Teachers may not have a great deal of power to change unfair economic policies; however, it is important for them to be aware of the extra hurdles some of their students face. Being cognizant of these challenges make teachers more understanding and more effective in

their classrooms. An understanding of these economic issues is crucial to understanding and fighting the opportunity gap.

In this section, a variety of sources of literature were reviewed. The sources of literature that will be discussed in this section deal with economic, social, and criminal justice issues that affect students of all backgrounds, especially Black students. According to Murray, 2.3% of U.S. children have a parent that is currently in prison (Murray, 2009). He also writes that Black children are 7.5 times as likely to have a parent in prison than their white peers are. In addition, he notes that one out of five Black children have had one or more parents in prison before the time they turn nine years old.

Murray argues that the statistics shown above are important for teachers to know for many reasons. For starters, he states, "children that experience parental incarceration were more likely to experience ineffective parenting, child abuse/neglect, and parents that abuse drugs/drinking and or have a mental illness" (Murray, 2009, p.16). Also, he states that children who have parents incarcerated are twice as likely to have mental health problems and show characteristics of antisocial behavior. Furthermore, he explains that students that have parents in prison have to deal with the loss of an income earner, frequent moving, inconsistent contact with parents, and stigmas. Due to this and more, he describes children with parents in prison as the "forgotten victims of crime" (Murray, 2009, p.16).

Building on the statistics presented by Murray, Angela Davis argues that there are many reasons why Black children are more likely to have parents incarcerated than white children are (Murray, 2009; Davis, 2017). Throughout her book, *Policing the Black Man***,**

Davis makes the case that areas where African Americans commonly reside are over policed (Davis, 2017). Furthermore, she explains that some of the police officers have racial biases and the criminal justice system, as a whole, is infected by systemic racism.

To support her thesis, Davis points out that on average, a Black man receives a sentence that is 20% longer than a white man that commits the same crime. In addition, she notes that a Black man is twice as likely to be pulled over by law enforcement than a white male is. She writes that after being pulled over, a Black man is five times as likely to be searched by the police, even though searches conducted by the police are half as likely to find illegal things in the possession of black men as they are on white men. To Davis, these inequalities help explain why Black men are seven times more likely to spend time in prison than white men. The end result of these inequalities is that Black children are much more likely to have to confront the challenge of having a parent in prison. She believes that this issue contributes to the opportunity gap between Black and white students.

Next, some scholars believe that economic inequalities also contribute to the white-black student opportunity gap (Owens, 2017; Williams, 2019). A study cited by Ann Owens found that a $1,000 increase in family income is correlated with a 5-7% standard deviation increase in student test scores (Owens, 2017). Owens also reported that the family income achievement gap, or the gap between students from wealthier families and students from poorer families is growing significantly. According to Owens, that achievement/opportunity gap is 40 percent larger today than it was in the 1970's.

Owens argues that these numbers should be disturbing to educators, because family income impacts the amount/quality of resources that students receive. Owens clarified that the "resources" she referred to include, but are not limited to, food, shelter, childcare, healthcare, and child educational enrichment programs (Owens, 2017). Owens believes that access to those resources play a large role in student achievement. Building off of this, Jean Yeung notes that this is a racial issue too because Black families in 1998 had on average 1/8th of the wealth that that average white family owned (Yeung, 2008). This means that Black families often are able to purchase less of the resources that Owens described for their students (Owens, 2017; Yeung, 2008).

In his article, Joseph Williams provided a statistic that likely would have made Owens feel depressed. Williams wrote that for the first year in American history, 51% of public school students lived in poverty in 2017 (Williams, 2019). Williams interviewed high achieving students from low income families and asked them for some input on how they succeeded in school. Drawing on information from many respondents, Williams identified three common themes from the interviews. He found that high achieving/low income students want their teachers to create a culture of hope in the classroom, develop relationships with students and amongst students, and create strong parent-school partnerships (Williams, 2019).

Williams argues that the "culture of hope" he describes is attainable in classrooms if teachers show that they have genuinely high expectations for their students (Williams, 2019). He believes that expectations are a self-fulfilling prophecy. He argues that when students believe they are capable of doing something, more often than not, they will do it.

This is similar to James' Erekson's belief in student self fulfilling prophecies (Williams, 2019; Erekson, 2014). Erekson wrote, "when students have repeated chances to view themselves as competent, they get more competent. When they have repeated chances to view themselves as less competent, they grow to believe and behave according to this narrative of diminishing competence" (Erekson, 2014, p. 13).

Next, Williams learned through interviewing high achieving/poor students that relationships in classrooms are essential (Williams, 2019). These students often told Williams that positive relationships between students and teachers are necessary for success. One of the students told him that cultivating friendships between students across class lines is also important. This student articulated that it is difficult for him to be around students from wealthier backgrounds because they do not truly understand what he goes through. However, he concluded that if he didn't have wealthier friends, he wouldn't know about fun and educational after school/summer camps (Williams, 2019).

Williams' third lesson from this study was that parent-teacher relationships are crucial for lower income families. One of the students told Williams, "my mom would be more interested in my schooling if she knew where to begin, she doesn't understand the subjects or how to work with teachers" (Williams, 2019, p. 229). Unfortunately, Williams notes that this story is a common one for students in low income families. He believes that if teachers could apply the three lessons learned here, there is a great chance the opportunity gap between wealthy and poor students would decrease.

Ann Owens argues that another factor that contributes to the opportunity gap between African American and white students is school segregation (Owens, 2017).

Owens notes that schools are segregated in two related ways, income and race. Owens writes, “From 1990 to 2010, the segregation of public schools based on family income has increased by 15%” (Owens, 2017, p.2). Owens writes that throughout much of American history, schools have been racially segregated by law and by where certain races predominantly reside. Although Owens acknowledges that school segregation by law has been illegal for many years, she points out that segregation by race has been increasing in recent years in school districts across America. Owens writes that this is due to the fact that many white people live in suburban and rural areas, whereas African Americans disproportionately reside in urban areas.

Owens believes that this phenomenon helps perpetuate the opportunity gap in many ways. Since black students are likely to be less wealthy and are thus more likely to live in less affluent neighborhoods, they frequently attend schools that are funded less substantially than the schools their white peers attend (Owens, 2017). She notes that schools that exist in affluent areas have students that are on average one grade level more proficient in most subjects than students attending schools that reside in less privileged areas. Unfortunately, Owens writes that only one percent of students attend a school located outside of the school district their family lives in. She also articulates that living in poorer neighborhoods often leads not only to lower standardized test scores, but also lower cognitive ability test scores.

Predictably, when schools spend more money per student, students learn more and their future economic prospects improve (Owens, 2017). Owens believes that this fact helps create a cycle of poverty where disadvantaged students (often Black students) attend

underfunded schools and maintain in the same economic class until the day they die. She notes that in addition, underfunded schools often have a disproportionate number of students that are not motivated to learn for a variety of reasons. To Owens, this is just another obstacle that poorer people, who are disproportionately African Americans, have to face at school (Owens, 2017; Yeung, 2008).

Andrew Bacher-Hicks argues that school discipline tactics are another issue sparking the opportunity gap between white and African American students (Bacher-Hicks, 2019). He argues that consistent school attendance is critical if a student is to be successful in school. He believes that schools that are quicker to suspend and expel students are doing their students a huge disservice. He articulates that suspensions are detrimental to students' long-term achievement because while suspended, students have more time to interact with other at risk peers. In his study, he found that students that attended schools that were one standard deviation stricter than the average school were 15% more likely to drop out of high school and 11% less likely to attend college.

Bacher-Hicks is a strong proponent of the usage of less punitive disciplinary procedures in K-12 schools (Bacher-Hicks, 2019). He was pleased in 2014, when the Obama administration asked schools to do their best to limit harsh discipline practices such as expulsions and suspensions. He notes that the ill effects of harsh school disciplinary procedures are highest for African American males. He found that African Americans tend to attend stricter schools that discipline in harsher ways that contribute to the racial opportunity gap. He hopes that teachers will use his findings as evidence to support a transition to a more lenient and forgiving classroom.

Many of the scholars in this section note that one of the most important things teachers can do to address many of the issues presented in this section is to be aware of them and advocate for their students. Williams argued that teachers must understand the power of self fulfilling prophecies that many poor and or minority students face daily (Williams, 2019). To Williams (2019) teachers must understand that issue in order to fight it with a culture of hope in the classroom. Murray reminded his readers that black students were much more likely to have a parent incarcerated than their white peers (Murray, 2009). To Murray, this meant that teachers should be aware of this inequity and understand that there are often things going on in students' lives that are more important to them than a vocabulary assignment..

Readers of Ann Owens' piece learned of the wealth/income disparities between white and black families. Owens argued that in order to effectively teach black students, teachers must be cognizant of how those inequalities help perpetuate the opportunity gap. Bacher-Hicks reminded teachers that disciplinary practices can also contribute to the opportunity gap and pushed them to think about more effective ways to promote justice for their students (Bacher-Hicks, 2019). The common theme of all of these scholars is that they all believe there are certain economic, social, and criminal justice racial inequalities that contribute to the opportunity gap. To them, one of the best ways teachers can reduce the racial opportunity gap is to educate themselves on these issues and practice effective teaching with them in mind.

Utilizing Effective Teaching Practices

There are many small things teachers can do to make a huge difference in their classrooms. In this section, many pieces of literature regarding utilizing effective teaching practices to successfully teach Black students will be reviewed. In this part of the literature review, topics such as relational trust in the classroom and teacher/student self-reflection will be featured. These practices, and other effective strategies, can help lessen the opportunity gap in social studies.

Ann Gregory argues that one of the best ways teachers can improve their craft is to attend professional development workshops (Gregory, 2016). Professional development workshops are events where teachers learn from one another and experts in the field of education. In her article, Gregory writes that when teachers attended workshops, student achievement in their classrooms increased. Like Andrew Bacher-Hicks, Gregory found school suspensions and expulsions to be very harmful to students in many different ways (Bacher-Hicks, 2019; Gregory, 2016). Building off of Bacher-Hick's work, Gregory (2016) found that each time a student is suspended, their likelihood of graduating from high school decreases by 20%. To reduce the prevalence of drastic measures of punishment, Gregory (2016) recommended that teachers go to behavioral workshops to learn how to more effectively discipline students.

Gregory concluded that after attending a professional development class focused on student discipline, teachers only referred 0.95 students a year on average for suspensions or exclusions. In contrast, Gregory found that the average teacher that did not attend a discipline workshop recommended suspensions or expulsions for 2.21 students a year. To scholars such as Bacher-Hicks and Gregory, these numbers must be encouraging.

They also are very related to the opportunity gap, because Black students are two to three times more likely to be suspended than any other racial or ethnic group (Bacher-Hicks, 2019; Gregory, 2016).

Much of the literature reviewed in this section discussed the importance of building relationships in the classroom to more effectively teach students of all backgrounds. To Lauren Gatti, relational work is the most important aspect of teaching (Gatti, 2016). Similarly, Micheal Ripski argues that building relationships with students and between students is essential if teachers want to create a strong classroom (Ripski, 2008). Ripski (2008) believes that once teachers genuinely get to know their students, they can adopt a relational approach to discipline and authority. To him, being accepted as an authority figure in the classroom is impossible if students do not know and or trust you. He believes that teachers need to earn students respect and not vice versa. He argues that students need to see their teacher as a genuine person that is imperfect, but at the end of the day cares about and believes in them. Gatti largely echoed that view in her writing.

Ripski believes that once students trust a teacher and accept them as an authority figure, the teacher can fully employ a relational approach to discipline (Ripski, 2008). He writes that a relational approach to behavioral issues is as simple as, “just seeing your students as human beings” (Ripski, 2008, p.339). According to him, in practice this can be something as simple as being responsive to a particular student’s emotional needs when diffusing conflict. To illustrate this point, he provides an example of a teacher talking to a student the teacher is close with. Instead of going on an offensive against the student, the

teacher kindly asked, “what’s up? I noticed you are not acting like yourself lately” (Ripski, 2008, p. 344).

As the quotation above shows, Ripski is a huge proponent of finding the root cause of student misbehavior through a relational approach. Marcelle Nuoffer has a definition of relational discipline that is related to Ripski’s. Nuoffer wrote, “relational discipline is an approach in which educators build trust-based relationships with students so students learn how to behave in the classroom” (Nuoffer, 2012, p.8). Like the other scholars, Ripski believes that in a diverse classroom, this way of teaching is extremely necessary because African American students are more likely to be punished in punitive ways (Bacher-Hicks, 2019; Ripski, 2008).

Next, one of the sources of literature identified teacher and student self-assessment as being an important part of effective teaching. Rich Stiggins and his co-author, Jan Chappuis, articulated in their article that students often decide very early on if they will invest time and energy in a class or not (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Like James Erekson, the two scholars argue that many students need high levels of achievement before they can gain confidence in themselves. Unfortunately, Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) believe students that go down a path of doing poorly on standardized tests rarely make it out of that path due to the fact that they need an impressive score to boost their confidence. They believe that the focus on standardized tests has caused students to lose confidence in themselves, led to student burnout, and has made too many students dropout of school.

To fix the issues described above, Stiggins and Chappuis argue that teachers should use student involved assessments more often. With teacher help, students could

evaluate their own learning and come to more positive conclusions than standardized tests often do (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). In addition, the writers believe that students would be less likely to do poorly in school if they had to evaluate themselves and then describe their own honest findings to their parents, guardians, and teachers later on. They believe student self-assessment can lead students to think about themselves in more positive and helpful ways. They argue that if this practice was routinely involved in classes, including social studies classes, achievement for students of all backgrounds would increase.

Conclusion

Now that the literature review in Chapter Two has concluded, this project will advance to the project description in Chapter Three. In Chapter Three, I will take what discoveries I made in Chapter Two and apply them to create a social studies unit that does not leave any student behind. In this chapter, the reader will see the unit being constructed based off of the information provided by the many scholars reviewed in Chapter Two. The unit below will be for a tenth grade U.S. history class. The unit will be a four-week unit about the U.S. Civil War.

Chapter Three

Project Description

For my project, I created a tenth grade U.S. history unit on the American Civil War. This unit is two weeks long and includes pre and post-unit assessments. The purpose of this unit is to provide equitable learning for students of all races and cultural backgrounds. Particularly, I answer my research question, "How can using culturally responsive instruction in a social studies classroom contribute to student success". To accomplish this, I have taken many of the teachings from the authors in my literature review and applied them to this unit.

Next, I will discuss how this chapter will progress. I will begin by describing the intended audience for my project. I will then move on to discussing the context in which my project takes place. This means touching on the socioeconomic, racial, and educational backgrounds of the hypothetical students I have taught my unit to. Then, I will discuss the curriculum framework for my unit. I will do this by identifying which Minnesota social studies standards my two week unit addresses. This chapter will also include a brief description of why this project is important and contributes to the literature on my research topic. Finally, I will touch on when the project takes place.

Intended Audience

First, I will discuss the intended audience for my project. This project has been created with social studies teachers in mind. This work is more applicable to teachers of American history; however, teachers of any subject will be able to learn a few ways to make their teaching more equitable from my work. My themes of using Culturally

Relevant Pedagogy, creating a student-centered class, and being aware of factors outside of the classroom that may make learning more difficult for your students, are relevant to a teacher of any subject and or grade level. Although I hope teachers are my main audience, I also believe parents and people in other fields can benefit from studying my project. If parents become more supportive of teaching strategies such as CRP, there is a great chance we would see CRP being used more commonly in classrooms.

I decided on social studies teachers as my main audience because I am a prospective social studies teacher. I also believe that social studies is the optimal class to implement CRP and other student-centered teaching practices. In Chapters One and Two, I spent a great deal of time writing about how all teachers, specifically social studies teachers, are failing to adequately serve their Black students. I believe that this will continue to be a prominent issue in education until teachers begin to adapt to their increasingly diverse body of students. This project aims to convince social studies teachers that they must adjust their teaching to ensure that none of their students are left behind.

Project Context

Now I will discuss the context in which my project takes place. My project is designed for a diverse class of tenth grade students. This unit has been created for students in a diverse and urban school district. An example of this type of school district is the St. Paul (MN) school district. For readers unfamiliar with this district, it is a very diverse district. According to St. Paul Public School records, in 2020, 25% of 10th grade students in the district were African American, whereas 20% of 10th graders were white (SPPS, 2020). In this class, there are 30 students and no paraprofessionals.

Using the same demographic percentages of St. Paul schools, this would mean there would be eight Black students in my class. By using the same statistics, there would be 6 White students and 16 students of other races. The class meets in a typical classroom everyday for an hour. Socioeconomically, the students are quite diverse. The median household income is $57,000, which is pretty similar to the national average. About 15% of the students have IEPs (Individualized Educational Plans) and a similar number have social and or emotional disorders that impact their learning.

Standards Addressed In The Unit

Next, I will discuss what frameworks/theories were used to complete this project. The curriculum framework comes straight from the Minnesota Social Studies Standards. My unit focuses on standard 18 and 19. Standard 19 covers the Civil War. However, I believe proficiency in standard 18 is imperative for students if they are to truly understand standard 19. Standard 18 includes the many events and policies that helped spark the Civil War. In standard 18, topics like the Mexican-American War, Kansas-Nebraska Act (popular sovereignty), and the Missouri Compromise will be taught. I ensure that students have a strong understanding of these events and more before moving on to the Civil War and the rest of standard 19. This curriculum covers both standards in two weeks.

Another reason why I chose to teach both standards 18 and 19 is that standard 18 is the perfect standard to recraft and make more engaging for Black students. One of the benchmarks in standard 18 reads, “Evaluate the responses of both enslaved and free Blacks to slavery in the Antebellum period” (MN Social Studies Standards Code

9.4.4.18.6). That same benchmark provides a list of people, ideas, and things that should be discussed to address that benchmark.

The benchmark list points to Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, tool breaking, and purchasing relatives as people/things teachers need to teach in order to adequately address the benchmark. All of those topics are great chances to engage students in small group discussions, teach the topics honestly/from many perspectives, and use CRP. I believe that the lesson plan(s) that address this benchmark are the strongest part of my unit.

Standard 19 also presented many benchmarks that are favorable to the implementation of CRP and other teaching practices that help teachers more effectively serve their Black students. Although standard 19 covers the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, the benchmarks in this section focus less on the war than I expected. One of the benchmarks was especially promising. It read, "describe significant individuals, groups, and institutions involved in the struggle for rights for African-Americans; analyze the stages and processes by which enslaved African-Americans were freed and emancipation was achieved during the war" (MN Social Studies Standards Code 9.4.4.19.4). I was happy to be able to explore engaging ways to address that crucial benchmark. It is also important to note that I have used Backward Design as my theoretical framework in this project. This means that I have followed one of the rules created by the scholar Grant Wiggins. Wiggins once said, "the best designs derive backward from the learnings sought." (Bowen, 2017). In layman's terms, this means that I decided what I wanted my students to learn and then created my unit.

Next, I will include a brief description of how I selected this project, why I believe it is important, and how it contributed to the existing literature on my research topic. The main reason I chose to create a two week unit on the Civil War was due to how it is traditionally taught. The Civil War was a transformative time in American history, yet a troubling percentage of Americans do not know a great deal about it. Even more troubling, many Americans have been taught misleading information about the causes and reasons for the war. Sadly, based on my personal experiences, few Americans have a proficient understanding of the events leading up to the war.

I chose to design a new unit that fulfills the Standard 18 and 19 requirements because I believe they are very important standards. In addition, the standards have traditionally been taught in a non engaging way and they provide ample opportunities to use CRP and many of the other strategies I discovered in Chapter Two. I believe that this project contributes to the existing literature related to my topic in many ways. This project has showcased how strategies can be used to more effectively engage and teach Black students the Civil War. This unit also features lessons that focus on teaching the events slightly before and after the war.

This unit is now available for use. Although this unit is designed for a hypothetical class, I look forward to observing how it works in a real classroom setting. At the very least, my project has contributed to the advancement of CRP and other practices designed to make teaching more equitable. In the beginning of Chapter One, I discussed being inspired by a bus to write about ways to improve the way we teach our black students. For readers that do not recall, the advertisement on the bus said, “Minnesota is the worst state

for Black students". I hope that my project may encourage a few Minnesota educators to adjust how they teach the social studies standards 18 and 19.

Next, I will discuss when my project takes place. As mentioned before, my unit is covering Standards 18 and 19. The U.S. History Class in the Minnesota Social Studies Standards begins at standard 15. Although the Civil War may seem like early American history, thankfully, the MN Social Studies Curriculum U.S. History Section now starts at Standard 15. Standard 15 covers early European contact in the Americas in 1492. The time period between 1492 and the events leading up to the Civil War mean that school will be in session for two or three months before the U.S. History students get to Standard 18. Therefore, my unit will take place in late November or early December.

However, there are a few more important aspects of my project that I want to note before I move on to the conclusion of Chapter Three. I mentioned early in the chapter that this unit is designed for a diverse classroom. I should also reiterate that this classroom will have 15% (an average level) of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Due to this, I will have to differentiate my lessons.

Furthermore, I have created 10 lesson plans, or one for the 10 school days the unit will be taught. The first day features an introduction to the unit and a pre-unit assessment. The final day of the unit consists of a lesson conclusion and post-unit assessment. The post unit assessment gives students the academic freedom to do one of many different things to display their understanding of the unit. They are able to make a skit, video, paper, or speech.

Next, I will describe the rationale for choosing a specific type of form/presentation for my culminating project. Once it is time to share this project with others, I will create a poster to illustrate the main takeaways of my project at professional events. The poster will be an effective way to organize ideas and showcase the unit that I have created.

Conclusion

In this chapter, Chapter Three, I have laid the groundwork for my project. I began by identifying social studies teachers as the main, but not the only intended audience for my project. I progressed to describing the types of students that I designed the curriculum for. I then identified the Minnesota Social Studies Standards that my unit satisfied. I moved on to discuss how I selected this project, why I believe it is important, and how it contributes to the existing literature on my research topic. Next, I wrote about when my unit takes place and went into greater detail regarding what it looks like. Finally, I articulated why I would use a poster as a way to present my project in the future.

Now that I have completed Chapter Three, I will move on to Chapter Four, where I will present my conclusion and reflections on my project. I will start by identifying what I learned as a researcher, writer, and learner. I will then highlight many of the most important things I learned from my work. I will articulate the expected and unexpected insights I gained from this project.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

In this final chapter, I will accomplish many things. First, I will write about the discoveries I made while writing a capstone project on the question, "How can using culturally responsive instruction in a social studies classroom contribute to student success". While outlining the various discoveries, I will identify what discoveries were surprising. I will then shift my focus to describing what I learned during the Capstone process as a researcher and student. After this, I will revisit my Literature Review. While revisiting the review, I will articulate which scholars' writings proved to be the most instrumental to my work.

Next, I will address some of the real world implications for my work. Once I have laid out some of the ways my work could be relevant to educators in classrooms across the country, I will set my sights on recognizing some of the limitations of my work. Once an honest reflection of the constraints of my work are recognized, I will envision what future studies related to my topic may look like. After brainstorming what future studies related to my topic can and should look like, I will provide reasons as to why my study has benefitted the profession of teaching. I will conclude the chapter by reviewing all of the above and explaining how I will communicate the results of my study to peers and others in the future.

The most crucial insight I gained from creating this Capstone Project was the importance of using CRP in the 21st century. CRP is more important than ever thanks to our increasingly diverse and changing world. Yoonjung Choi (2013) wrote that in modern

America, 25% of students are foreign born or 1st generation immigrants (Choi, 2013). In addition, by the year 2045, White Americans are projected to no longer be the majority racial category in America (Kight, 2019). Due to this fact, educators must use Culturally Responsive Instruction, or many students will be left behind.

Another important insight I made was what CRP was and how to define it. During my four years at Hamline University as an undergraduate, I spent a great amount of time listening to professors explain the benefits of CRP. Although I vaguely understood what the term meant, this study greatly improved my understanding of it. While I currently write this paper, there is an intense debate in America over whether Critical Race Theory should be taught in schools. Although CRP and Critical Race Theory are not the same thing, it is not a stretch to assume that opponents of Critical Race Theory would also take adversarial positions on CRP. This study helped me find a convenient definition to use for CRP if and when I am asked to define or defend my usage of it. My practical definition of CRP will be, "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Aronson and Laughter, 2015).

Next, creating my Capstone Project also helped solidify my belief in using student centered teaching to increase student engagement and performance. My Social Studies methods class at Hamline University emphasized the importance of limiting lectures and providing time for small group discussions in class. While reviewing literature in my student centered teaching subsection, it was heartening to see that nearly every scholar I reviewed advocated for fewer lectures. In addition to using less lectures in my social

studies classes, this study helped me come up with many unique ways I can be a student centered teacher. One important idea in particular will always stick with me. That idea was to create student surveys on learning styles and curriculum interests and use that information to cater your teaching to students' needs (Wagner, 1982). This idea may seem obvious to some, but I never had a teacher do that for me during my K-12 experience.

In addition to student surveys, other cornerstones of student centered Social Studies teaching include having students read historical fiction as supplemental texts, using primary sources to make history come alive, and giving students the academic freedom to pick a topic of their choosing (related to the subject) and engage in project based learning (Parker, 1991; Erekson, 2014). I believe that if these various ideas were more prominently adopted in classrooms around the country, we would see student engagement and performance increase exponentially.

One wakeup call for me during the Capstone Project process came while reading Hilmar Wagner's article on student centered learning. In Wagner's writing, they began by articulating how they can effectively spot the difference between a student centered teacher and a teacher centered teacher. According to Wagner, the teacher centered teacher will tell people that they teach English (or whatever subject they teach) to students whereas the student centered teacher will passionately exclaim that they teach students English (or whatever subject they teach). This passage made me think deeply about how I view my job as a future Social Studies teacher.

Also, I made a few surprise discoveries during my study. Unfortunately, many of the facts and ideas I read and wrote about during this study were quite disturbing. The

most depressing, and surprising, fact I learned from my study was that for the first year in American history, 51% of public school students lived in poverty in 2017 (Williams, 2019). This fact is unconscionable in a country as prosperous as the U.S. Sadly, it also has important implications for teachers, students, and schools.

Another surprising fact I learned from my study was cited by Ann Owens. The study Owens cited found that a $1,000 increase in family income is correlated with a 5-7% standard deviation increase in student test scores (Owens, 2017). Although I always knew that coming from a high income family was an advantage in school, I was surprised to find out that it was this significant. The findings above reinforced my belief that there are some things in education that are completely out of teacher control. It is safe to assume that reducing family income level student opportunity gaps will take more than using CRP and other student centered teaching practices.

The resegregation of schools is a prime example of yet another astonishing, but sad discovery I made. Ann Owens found that "from 1990 to 2010, the segregation of public schools based on family income has increased by 15%" (Owens, 2017, p.2). Obviously, racial segregation by law in schools has been illegal for 50 plus years. However, schools have been becoming more de facto segregated as a result of where the average White and Black Americans can afford to live and send their children to school.

Furthermore, I learned that Black families in 1998, had on average 1/8th of the wealth that that average White family owned (Yeung, 2008). Some studies done more recently have found average Black family wealth to be as low as 1/10th of the average White family wealth. This is arguably the most depressing statistic I was introduced to

from this project. There are many historical and systemic reasons for this inequality. It is relevant for us as educators to know this because it means that it is likely that our Black students face more economic hurdles than our White students. Being aware of these inequalities can make us more patient and effective teachers.

Next, I will discuss what I learned as a researcher and student during the Capstone Project classes and process. As a researcher, I learned the importance of finding parallels between the writings I read. An idea often appears stronger if many experienced and credentialed scholars subscribe to it. This is because readers will likely trust a claim more if many experts allude to it in their work. Due to this, I did my best to spot as many overlapping ideas as possible from the literature I reviewed. An example of this was when I found that James Erekson and Trista Hollweck, two scholars with very different writing topics, both wrote about the importance of building relational trust in the classroom (Erekson, 2014; Hollweck, 2019).

It was also interesting and powerful to see scholars build off of each other's ideas. Most scholars cited information that they agreed with and tried to find new ways to support and or prove it. A prime example of this is when the scholars Aronson and Laughter used Gloria Ladson-Billings' definition of CRP in their work. Ladson-Billings is often credited with coining the term CRP (Aronson and Laughter, 2015). While introducing Ladson-Billings' definition to readers, they also attempted to define what each part of the definition meant and why they believed it was a strong definition.

In addition to supporting the work of peers, the scholars I reviewed also occasionally challenged the work of peers. This occurred very infrequently, but I was sure

to note it and include it in my literature review when I was able to spot it. I learned that this was an important thing to look for in my research for many reasons. First, scholarly debate is healthy and helps both the people arguing and the reader. It helps push academics to think more deeply and consider other opinions, which in turn makes their views more informed. It helps readers because it allows them to see two sides of a particular viewpoint and adopt whichever one they deem is strongest.

The most obvious example of one scholar criticizing a peer I found in my review of scholarly work came from an article written by Mardi Schmeichel in 2012. In her writing, Schmeichel was giving an honest assessment of whether or not CRP was an effective teaching practice (Schmeichel, 2012). She warned educators of the dangers of listening to some peers that she believed were taking CRP too far. According to her, some scholars were suggesting that teachers should use language that they believe was commonly used in the Black community. She found it troubling that some White teachers were being advised to use terms such as “act a fool” or “snap” in an effort to better relate to their Black students (Schmeichel, 2012). She believed that this advice was wrong because it was not only a cheap stereotype that assumed Black students would respond well to those sayings, it also would have made most White teachers inauthentic in the classroom. On top of that, she worried that Black students could be viewed as insufficiently Black if they failed to respond well to those sayings and live up to other stereotypes.

In addition to learning many things as a researcher, I also acquired a significant amount of knowledge and skills from participating in the two Capstone classes. Learning

how to use APA formatting was a challenge for me. In my opinion, I still have not mastered the art of APA formatting, but it is a great skill to at least be somewhat familiar with. In addition to APA formatting, this experience made me a much better writer. Reading a large amount of scholarly articles helped me learn how to write in a more scholarly way. Reading and writing a great deal has also made my writing more succinct.

An improvement of my writing ability is not the only thing I gained from this experience. Learning how to peer review and be peer reviewed was also a great lesson for me. Peer reviewing was difficult for me, mainly because the person I peer reviewed was very articulate and their writing was difficult to make suggestions for improvement on. However, I was able to learn from their work and apply it to my own writing. Furthermore, I was also able to figure out the benefits of telling peer reviewers what specifically to look for with regards to their reviewing of my writing. This was very helpful to both myself and my peer reviewer as my paper is quite lengthy.

Next, I will revisit my literature review and determine which scholars' writings were most crucial to my project. Although I have touched on my literature review earlier in this chapter, I will now revisit my literature review in more depth. My literature review consisted of four subtopics. Those subtopics included CRP, creating student centered classes, being aware of the inequalities that many students face, and utilizing effective teaching practices. Out of those four subtopics, CRP and creating student centered classes were the most vital part of my literature review. The scholars whose work I found the most applicable to my study were Youngjung Choi, Walter Parker, and Ann Owens.

Yoonjung Choi's work was extremely useful because it included interviews with students and teachers in a classroom that practiced CRP (Choi, 2013). The teacher interviewed by Choi, Mr.Moon, also provided many emotional quotes that outlined the need for CRP in the classroom. The students' testimonials were even more powerful. Many of the students in the class touted how much they approved of the changes Mr.Moon was making to class material and structure. Choi's work became an important first hand source of people being impacted positively by CRP.

Walter Parker's article on the Social Studies curriculum and student centered teaching was also vital to my Capstone project. Writing in 1991, Parker was way ahead of his time when it came to student centered Social Studies teaching. Although he may not have considered the topic of his work to be related to student centered teaching in 1991, his work details many ways that teachers can make Social Studies more enjoyable and engaging for students (Parker, 1991). In his writing, Parker rebutted peers that claimed small group learning holds higher achieving students back. He diligently and eloquently argued that cooperative learning activities such as jigsaw activities would help students build social skills and learn more.

Ann Owens' detailed description of how economic and social inequalities lead to opportunity gaps in the classroom also was extremely applicable to my study. In her work, Owens lays out many examples of inequalities in America and explains how they apply to student performance in school (Owens, 2017). As stated earlier in this chapter, she noted how schools are becoming more racially and economically segregated, and how strong the correlation between family income and student achievement is. In addition to these

insights, Owens also helped explain how higher family income often leads to better test scores. She lists the many resources that lower family income students may not have access to and how that can negatively impact their ability in school. She also makes the case that State Governments need to invest more in per-pupil spending and backs her argument up with relevant stats.

I will now discuss why my study has real world implications. Readers have by now come across many pieces of information supporting the notion that there is a racial and socioeconomic opportunity gap in Social Studies and other subjects. I believe that these injustices are some of the most shameful and important issues in the field of Education. I believe that there is nothing more inherently American than equality of opportunity. Not to be confused with equality of outcome, equality of opportunity means that students have as close as an equal chance to succeed in school, and in life, no matter the color of their skin or where they are born. I believe that if teachers begin using Culturally Relevant Instruction and the other student centered and effective teaching strategies I laid out in my study more prominently, the U.S. would have a greater equality of opportunity for all of our citizens.

I acknowledge that the goal above is lofty. As I mentioned before, teachers only have the ability to work with students approximately 7 hours a day, 5 days a week, 9 months a year. Outside of that time, students' living situations, family life, and other important factors are out of their control. Clearly, we need more than just Culturally Relevant Instruction to move to a greater equality of opportunity in this country. We need real policy changes to make a fairer economy and we need to address and look critically at

racial injustices in our past and present. I believe that my project is incredibly practical and that the real world implications are endless. If Culturally Relevant Instruction was more prominently used in America, all of our students would benefit.

Next, I will touch on some of the limitations of my study. To me, my study has two obvious limitations. First, my study only focuses on using Culturally Relevant Instruction in Social Studies classes. I believe narrowing my study this way was necessary, but my work may not be relevant to teachers that teach different subject areas. Secondly, my study mainly addresses how to use Culturally Relevant Instruction to more effectively engage Black students. My project on the American Civil War is only really culturally relevant to Black students. Asian, Latino, and Indigenious students did not receive enough attention in my project or study. The truth is, it is difficult to make one unit relevant to all of your students' backgrounds. Teachers that use my study to learn how to make lessons more culturally relevant to non-Black students of color may be disappointed.

I believe that many of the teaching strategies I outline would be helpful for students of all backgrounds. Less lecture, more small group work, and a focus on developing higher level thinking skills would engage students no matter their racial background. However, I would be surprised if all of the strategies are effective for students of all racial backgrounds. It is important to note that cultural backgrounds and experiences do impact students' learning preferences.

I will now shift my attention to envisioning what future studies related to my topic should look like. Although this is anecdotal evidence, I believe that CRP is becoming more prominent in schools across America. I have seen more teachers doing their best to

adopt CRP in schools I have worked in the last few years. As a result, I envision that a future study could be made that looks at how effective CRP has been. Researchers could use stats regarding test scores, student engagement levels, and student content proficiency. I would hypothesize that all of these indicators, including student and teacher approval of pedagogy, would improve. Like all studies, this study would have to include a large sample size of students, teachers, and school locations. Potential researchers would also have to be aware of the possibility that schools may take some time to master Culturally Relevant Instruction, and as a result, it may take some time until the benefits are obvious.

Another possible related study would be one that analyzes how the best way to implement Culturally Relevant Instruction may or may not vary for a variety of cultural backgrounds. As I mentioned earlier, my study focused on using Culturally Relevant Instruction to more effectively teach Black students. I focused my study on White-Black student opportunity gaps and how to make lessons engaging for Black students. It would be interesting to see if other student cultural backgrounds require a slightly different approach to Culturally Relevant Instruction.

A third and final potential study related to my study would be the following. It would be beneficial to understand why there is so much backlash to Culturally Relevant Instruction in America. If we want CRP and other student centered strategies to become more common in schools, we must understand the best way to pitch these ideas to fellow teachers, administrators, and parents. A study that relied heavily on interviews and other ways of feeling the pulse of a diverse group of Americans regarding Culturally Relevant

Instruction could be very useful. This study could also provide a guide for teachers that face backlash for using these novel and often controversial ways of teaching.

Also, I will articulate why I believe my work has been beneficial to the profession of teaching. As I touched on earlier, I believe that my study has a great deal of real world implications. Most of the real life implications of my study are applicable to teachers and students. I believe that my study has been a positive piece of work for educators because it has studied a fairly new way of teaching. This new way of teaching may seem like a burden for some experienced teachers, however, I believe that it is the future of teaching. It is likely obvious by now that I believe that this type of teaching can improve the lives of our students. Conversely, I foresee this way of teaching improving the professional lives of teachers too. Most teachers are not teaching for the salary, but the chance to serve their students. I cannot think of a better way to serve our students than valuing their diverse cultural identities and ensuring that they can relate to the content we teach them.

Next, there are many ways that I anticipate being able to communicate the results of my study. One important way I intend to present my findings to peers is through presentation. As part of my Hamline University class, we have made short presentations on our findings. I will maintain access to my presentation and use it when appropriate. In addition to short presentations and lectures, I could also create short posters or other visual depictions of my findings. Although this can be challenging, I believe that it could be powerful, as many people have limited attention spans and are visual learners. I anticipate that the avenue I will use most often to educate people on my findings is through short discussions. I have already had many of these with friends, family members, and hiring

managers during interviews. Through all of this, I have developed a fairly effective elevator pitch for my presentation. I know that my language must be accessible and succinct. I will do my best to continue to spread my findings via word of mouth.

Finally, I began Chapter Four by discussing what I learned about my topic while writing this paper. I gave special attention to pieces of information and ideas that I found surprising. I then progressed to a review of what I learned during the capstone process as a researcher and as a Masters' student. After this, I revisited my lengthy literature review and identified authors that I found most integral to my research. I then briefly touched on some of the real world implications and limitations of my study. Next, I imagined what future projects related to my research would look like. Once I envisioned some of the potential ways related research could be done, I described how my work was beneficial to the noble profession of teaching. Overall, it is my hope that this project will aid the push for CRP and other student centered teaching strategies in schools. If my project can convince at least one educator to adopt these important ways of teaching into their practice, I will consider all of my work on this project to have been worthwhile.

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