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## Culturally Responsive Identity Project for a High School English Language Arts Classroom

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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE IDENTITY PROJECT FOR A HIGH SCHOOL  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

by Monique A. Plaster

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

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

December, 2021

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## Dedication Page

To my supportive family who always encouraged me to continue pursuing my Master's degree, and felt proud of my accomplishments and exalted in them with me- I'm looking at you Brothers and Jamie. Thank you, Jamie and Solana for taking care of our parents and the house in my stead. Thank you, Mom and Dad for your belief in me that I could do this even when I was filled with trepidation. Thank you, Perrin, for always responding to my stressed texts and offering me serious wisdom no matter the time of day. Thank you to my family and friends for all of your advice and for listening to my worries. Thank you for your continuous encouragement and support throughout this period of my life.

Thank you to my Capstone Committee and professors. A special thank you to Joe Lewis for stepping into the role of my content reviewer when I had no other to turn to. I truly appreciated your feedback. Thank you to Patty Strandquist for offering your time and wisdom to make my project better for the students. Joe & Patty, thank you, truly all of your guidance helped me to complete this project. Thank you to my research peers who helped to shape this Capstone each week that we worked together. It was through your suggestions and questions that I was able to reach clarity of what I wanted to accomplish. I have learned a great deal from you all.

Lastly, and most importantly I dedicate this research to my past, present, and future students. I've spent this time researching and creating this project so that you might have a better experience in school and ultimately in life as a result.

“The space between the private and the public is the nexus of the personal and the social, if not political. It’s where we meet the strong or subtle cultural censors who attempt to define what community, race, class, or gender can or cannot speak, to tell us which stories are told and valued and which are not. In short, it’s where we’re reminded of the power of personal stories and the power of the storyteller.”

- John Capeci and Timothy Cage, *Living Proof: Telling Your Story to Make a Difference*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to address a problem that I've experienced as a student and continue to see as an educator: the lack of representation of the student body in the curriculum and texts taught in a communication and language arts classroom. Another problem is the lack of agency given to students in deciding how and what they'll learn, ultimately silencing and erasing some student voice, especially in students of color. The question that will be explored is: *What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?*

It is through this question that I hope to substantiate in the next few chapters that students' race and ethnicity should be acknowledged in the classroom, that students should be given an opportunity to share about themselves, and should be allowed to read books that reflect their identity. Students should be given agency over how they learn because this will foster an environment of acceptance and warmth that will empower marginalized students who are underserved in a traditional classroom. Educators must move past the model where the teacher is the sole holder of knowledge and power. Chapter 3, will propose a project that will provide an opportunity to empower students' voice, agency, and identity.

The current state of education demonstrates how there is a disconnect between the teaching force and the students it serves. This is expanded upon in the Rationale portion of this chapter. Then in the context section of this chapter, I will illustrate why this topic matters through the narration of my own personal experience in the classroom as a student of color, and now as a teacher of color.

## **Rationale**

According to The National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020, in the fall of 2017 there were 50.7 million public school students enrolled in elementary through high school, of which the number of students of color are 26.6 million, or 52% of the total number of students enrolled in US public schools (Hussar et al., 2020). Nationally, the teaching force totals “3.5 million full- and part-time public school teachers,” of this amount, “79 percent of public school teachers were White” and 21% are teachers of color. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The numbers in Minnesota are even more jarring.

In the state of Minnesota, in the school year 2020-2021, there were 58,315 full time public school educators (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). Of these educators, “Only five percent of the state’s teacher workforce identifies as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)” (Velazco, 2021). The number of public school students of color from preK-12th grade in the state of Minnesota totals 315,361 after adding together the numbers from the racial & ethnic groups individually listed as Black, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Multi-racial, and Hawaiian Pacific Islander (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021). Respectively, 35.3% of MN public school students identify as students of color and 64.7% as white. Clearly, there are stark differences in racial representation between teachers and students in Minnesota.

Now one might argue that you don’t have to share the same race as your students to be an effective teacher. However, this only holds true if educators are culturally aware, receptive and engaging. If educators continue to teach closed off to their students’

experiences and cultures never bothering to ask them questions, draw from their lived experiences, or encourage them to share and hone their voices, then it is a problem.

### ***Ethnocentric and Power Dynamic***

In general, people tend to have a very ethnocentric point of view, meaning a perspective that “evaluates anything from another culture using one's own values and beliefs, filtering everything seen in that culture with a bias that promotes the superiority of one's own culture” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 186). This elevation of one’s own culture, or in this case the dominant culture, occurs within education too. As James Banks (2012), one of the founders of the multicultural education movement, explains,

Ethnocentrism in education occurs when the curriculum, teaching methods, and educational strategies present the history and knowledge base of a nation from a monocultural Western European perspective that ignores the presence and/or contributions of other groups in society. For example, racial/ethnic minorities are often absent in the educational literature, and/or members of these groups are portrayed in stereotypical and negative ways. (p. 857).

This ethnocentrism and power dynamic of elevating the dominant culture in canon books or curriculum leads to 35.3% of MN students being erased and silenced.

Educators often wonder why there is such an achievement gap or discrepancy of engagement and attendance between students of color and white students. Research has shown that this gap stems from a curriculum that ignores accounts of color and does not take into consideration the feelings that will arise consequently from a colonial framework embedded in the very language of the content materials. The second

contributing factor to students of color not engaging at the same levels as their peers is a lack of engagement from the teachers, not only by not selecting materials that reflect their students but also not engaging their students in important conversations about race/ethnicity, prejudice, social justice, allyship, traditions, and culture. Therefore, in order to meet students' needs, the relationship of privilege and power must be examined at all levels from the interactions between students and teachers to the very curriculum and texts being taught.

### ***Leading through a Culturally Responsive Lens***

If educators do not feel comfortable or prepared to speak about these topics themselves, then they could allow students to play a role in leading them. These topics do not disappear just because they aren't mentioned. No, the silence is more deafening and pushes students to disengage more or feel like their teacher is untrustworthy for these conversations. One consequence of such silence is that students may not want to confide in teachers about any racial situations they may experience or encounter in or outside of school.

If the educator cannot contribute to the conversation because they lack lived experiences, then there is a classroom full of bitter experiences, and this is because students of color or People of Color don't have the luxury to not think or talk about these things. Race, color, and ethnicity are such an integral part of someone's identity, especially in racialized America. (Menasce Horowitz, 2019). The key is that the students, the human beings in our classroom, are still adolescents. They might need guidance on how to articulate these experiences using the discourse language of the dominant culture

so that they can be heard by people who do not want to listen or will not listen to speech that differs from standard English. This is where Language Arts teachers can assist students in learning self-advocacy and communication skills, in addition to being a generally supportive adult in their lives.

The most difficult conversations are important and must be had, especially in the classroom. This may frighten many teachers, but we educators can't neglect the important conversations that will build community and trust among the students. These conversations can be as simple as asking students about what is important to them; asking about the traditions they have and their meaning. These questions uncover who students are and what matters to them. To be seen is to be loved and to feel accepted. Each student deserves to feel accepted in the classroom.

### ***Student Agency***

In order to accomplish this goal of accepting students for who they are, educators must be willing to give some of their power to the students. This enables students to have agency over what and how they learn. In addition to talking about race/ethnicity and culture and acknowledging these aspects of their students' identities. I believe that culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) is necessary for the holistic wellbeing and success of all of the students in the classroom. This pedagogy of teaching will be further defined and explained in chapter two. However, statistics alone won't show the necessity of a culturally responsive student-centered classroom, but perhaps my own account will help convince those who need more than numbers.

## **Context**

As I've said, I identify as a woman of color. Every day of my life since I can remember, I have known I am Mexican. Unfortunately, it isn't because I looked in a mirror and could tell I was different or darker than my Kindergarten classmates. No, it was because I looked different from my Mamá. My Mamá who I've seen nearly every day of my life, who held me close. She has darker hair, a golden skin tone, and different facial features that are much wider than my own. I would feel sad that I did not look like my mother, but I did not think it made me less Mexican because everything else about me was Mexican.

She would feed me menudo, something my White father did not want her to feed me because he finds the concept disgusting. (It is a soup made from the lining of a cow's stomach.) She would dress me in embroidered dresses with cultural patterns and flowers and teach me the quick steps to dance along to the brass mariachis. I have always known I was Mexican because I was raised by a woman who is proud of her culture and fed me dishes she made from love.

Whenever I think of home, I think of the five or so seasonings found in nearly every Mexican dish and warm tortillas and a full house of family, both immediate and distant relatives. I was raised with the value that family comes first above all else, and that if one of us succeeds we all do. We are one. This is an integral part of my identity - it forms the core fibers of my being. Race and Ethnicity inform my identity before any other marker.

That is why it was heartbreaking to go to school and to feel my voice, experiences, and very existence being erased. While I pass for a completely White woman (unless I self-identify or one of my mannerisms gives me away), it could have been so easy to discover otherwise, if only I had been asked about myself. If my teachers would have taken an interest in me outside of whichever skill I needed to become proficient in, they would have discovered I was Mexican. This would have made me happy and feel acknowledged and more at ease that I belonged in the tiny classroom, the classroom that was filled with people who might have looked like me but did not share any other similarities.

Imagine how lovely it would have been to be able to write or talk about my culture, even something as small as a writing prompt in a journal. To receive any kind of response or acknowledgment from my teacher would have been meaningful. I would have been so happy to share an anecdote of making tamales over winter break if I was simply asked about a winter tradition my family does. Taking interest in students as people is something educators must do. Taking interest in students' experiences and giving them a space to express themselves and their culture is important because race, color, and ethnicity play a prominent role in one's life, especially in students of color who notice how the world interacts differently with them based on their appearance.

I was and I am still constantly misidentified in the classroom, and in my everyday life, and it does not feel good to have these experiences, when I'm constantly told that I am not Mexican, I'm White. A quote from the book, *Critical race theory in teacher education: informing classroom* helps to illustrate my point:

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people of a society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning some in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being (Han, 2019, p. 163).

This misrecognition or erasure of my identity happened every day when I went to school and my identity was overlooked by my teachers.

In fact, my high school teachers often mis-identified me. For reference, in my graduating class there were less than ten fully White students. So having me in the classroom appearing as a White student, my ELA teachers would try to have me confirm some cultural practices found in the books we were reading. The characters and culture in the book were about the dominant culture (white American culture). The thing is that I actually could not identify with those cultural practices nor with the fictional characters, because I was raised in the Mexican culture. I did not have any contact with my father's family after the age of seven. However, my teachers did not believe me when I would object or be unable to identify with the text. They didn't believe me when I said I was Mexican. They only believed me when my fellow peers of color would identify me and speak to validate my existence as Mexican. It made me feel disheartened, offended, and distrustful of these adults who I had liked before those incidents.

I understand the limitations of my erasure in school and the professional setting because I pass for a white woman. Unless I self-identify and out myself, I am treated as a

white woman who does not experience overt racism unlike most of our students of color. My experiences are limited and not as severe as some of our students' experiences. I do not walk down the street and get bombarded by racial slurs by strangers. I am not told to go back to Mexico or to speak English because this is America. I do not need to worry about how my height, skin color, and clothing will make me seem like a threat to some people. I do not experience overt racism. I do not experience initial racial prejudice or bias from my teachers. I did not experience racial microaggressions like some of my classmates in school experienced. I was not overly disciplined for minor disruptions. However, our students of color experience these things, sometimes more than one person can count on their hands in a single morning.

Students of color who have enough pigmentation will not pass like me. They will have experiences that most white educators can't identify with or might not see regularly. Students will never talk about these experiences or bring it to anyone's attention. Not unless they feel comfortable and feel like they can trust their teacher. Students will not trust their teacher unless the teacher takes an interest in them as a person first, instead of a walking grade or a standard to be met. To see and value our students will open many doors for them and for us educators. We can begin this process by learning about our students' lives, their identity, their race, ethnicity, and culture. ELA educators can use relevant diverse texts to begin these conversations.

### **Summary**

Race, ethnicity, and culture are a vital part of one's identity. It is a disservice to all of the students in our classroom, but truly detrimental to our students of color, to ignore

topics addressing these aspects of society and life. Truly, in order to be the best educators, we have to be culturally aware and use culturally responsive teaching practices that encourage students to share their voice and their lives. I firmly believe that educators must relinquish power and allow students to have agency over their own learning, adopting flexibility to allow more curriculum options that mirror the student body's demographics and interests.

### **Coming Next**

In the next chapter of this paper, I will explore the current research regarding race-racial identity, culturally responsive teaching, and project-based learning in the literature review. In order to address the research question: *What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* Later in this paper, I will offer a solution to this question in the form of a curriculum project found in chapter three. In chapter four I will reflect on the creation of my project and the challenges and success I found as a writer, researcher, and educator.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

*What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* In order to address this question, this literature review will be broken up into three sections or themes. The first theme will discuss race, the second theme will discuss culturally responsive pedagogy, and the third section will discuss project-based learning. It is important to understand the current challenges of education in the United States, a pedagogy framework to transform teaching practices and address these challenges, and a curriculum strategy to implement inside of the classroom. Putting theory into practice for the benefit of ELA high school students.

By the end of this chapter, educators should have a better sense of how race and racial identity informs the identity of students and teachers. Race as a topic and racial identity as a smaller category is such a prominent aspect of the United States' society. It informs every person's choices, thoughts and perspectives of one another (Thompson, 2014). Therefore, I believe it is important to examine race and racial identity within a United States context to better understand the relationship between schools and society. This will assist in understanding the dichotomy between students and teachers. The second theme of this chapter focuses on culturally responsive teaching which I find welcomes students' identities into the classroom. After examining the research that advocates for this pedagogy, the final theme of chapter two, project-based learning, will offer us a possible solution to my research question. *What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* I

believe the research will show that by Implementing a project-based curriculum that allows students a voice in a high school ELA classroom, that is also culturally responsive, this can be a way for educators to empower students to share their cultures and identity in a meaningful way.

## **Racial Identity**

### ***Overview***

This section will first provide an overview of important concepts such as: identity and race within a societal context for the United States. Then in the second portion of this section, racial identity will be put in context regarding public schools and education. Namely, how race and culture truly affect how students and educators perceive and interact with one another. Finally, this section will end by exploring research that advocates for a transformative method of teaching in order to address the cultural silencing and inequity of traditional public school classrooms.

### ***Identity***

Fundamentally, identity revolves around the question, “Who am I?” (Cortés, 2013, p. 1133). “This question encompasses how people act, think, feel, and behave in relationship to a group, society, people, and environment. It focuses on individuals’ racial, ethnic, gender, and/or sexual orientation perceptions in relation to the dominant culture group” (Cortés, 2013, p. 1133). Not only is identity a concept focused on the discovery of the individual but also on the relationship between self and others. Kaldis (2013), explains how an individual’s identity is split into three categories that position the individual into a larger group: the person, social, and role identities (Kaldis, 2013).

Although split into three different categories, these identities are interrelated. “The meanings of identities are derived from the culture that is shared among persons so that the understanding of the meanings is shared and communicated. People act to create and maintain meanings in interaction with others that identify and reflect who they are” (Kaldis, 2013, p. 455). From this desire to act and maintain meaning, people seek to belong to a community or group.

**Racial Identity in the US.** As Cortés (2013) and Kaldis (2013) point out, race is also a part of identity. Race, like identity, is complicated to define depending on the lens through which it is being examined. However, Leong (2008), Schaefer (2008), and Thompson, (2014) agree that race is socially constructed in order to define the social order/hierarchy of people within society based on appearance. Schaefer (2008) goes on to define race, “A race is a social grouping of people who have similar physical or social characteristics that are generally considered by society as forming a distinct group” (p. 1091). Schaefer (2008) continues to explain in detail the four main concepts that characterize race in contemporary society. The first characteristic is that race is socially constructed, meaning that race is not inherent but rather an identity that was created from people attributing meaning to it (Schaefer, 2008). The second characteristic is that “race is partially characterized by physical similarities such as skin color, facial features, or hair texture” (Schaefer, 2008, p. 1091). However, this does not mean this is a biological distinction but one that is influenced socially by people attributing importance to things like skin color (Schaefer, 2008). The third characteristic of race that Schaefer (2008) explains is the shared social history and ways of connecting with one another, such as a

shared vernacular. Lastly, race is given legitimacy “through political action” and a “historical process” of racial categories that leads to people self-identifying with the racial categories (Schaefer, 2008, p. 1091).

The US Census Bureau (2020) defines race slightly differently, categorizing people based on origin. For example, in the United States a person who identifies as “White – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (*About Race*, 2020, para. 2). This system of categorization however is not perfect as it does not take into consideration the ethnicity or complete culture of a person. According to the US Census Bureau (2020), “People who identify their origin as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish may be of any race” (*About Race*, 2020, para. 6). Since the US Census Bureau (2020) says Latinx/ Spanish people can identify as any race this relates to Leong (2008) designating race to be closely related to a person’s appearance or skin color. “...Race refers to categories derived from perceptions and social meanings related to observable physical characteristics. Ethnicity, on the other hand, corresponds to categorization based on cultural background and characteristics” (Schaefer, 2008, p. 1106). For example, in the United States, people who are classified racially as African American can have many different ethnic backgrounds (Schaefer, 2008).

To understand racial groups, it is fundamental to realize that they are “products of social, historical, and political context, varying in their scope and definition by time and space across the world” (Schaefer, 2008, p. 1106). The United States context of race must then always be thought of from a historical perspective (Thompson, 2014). After all the

United States justified slavery on the basis of race and racial superiority (Thompson, 2014). Those advantages of race, the social hierarchy of race (Leong, 2008; Schaefer, 2008; Thompson, 2014), did not end with slavery but continues today, namely in politics, policy, economics, education, and interpersonal interactions (Thompson, 2014).

Menasce Horowitz et al. (2019) conducted a Pew Research study that surveyed Americans on the legacy, implications, and climate of race in American society. They found that race plays a prominent role in the lives of Americans--namely, when it came to informing identity. It was found that People of Color believe race is a central factor (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019). The study revealed that 52% of African Americans felt that their race was extremely important, and 22% felt that race was important to informing their identity (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019). The breakdown for other minority racial groups believing that their race is an important influence to their identity was similar (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019). For Hispanics, it was 59% and for Asian Americans, it was 56% (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019). Whereas, those who identify racially as white, 47% stated it was not important and did not believe race was a central factor (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019, para. 30). Only a combined 15% said that it was very important and important (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019). There is a significant difference between the 74% of African Americans believing race is a very important factor to their identity and the 15% of White Americans who believe their race is equally as important to their identity (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019).

**Historical Influence on Identity.** There is also a difference in belief about how slavery affects and informs society and the ability to succeed today (Menasce Horowitz et

al., 2019). “More than eight-in-ten black adults say the legacy of slavery affects the position of black people in America today, including 59% who say it affects it a great deal” (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019, para. 3). The positions affected by slavery include the treatment African Americans receive from the justice system, fair treatment in professional settings, access to housing, access to education, and career opportunities (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019). Menasce Horowitz et al. (2019) found that African Americans are more likely to believe racial discrimination is to blame for the lack of access to higher paying careers and schools than White Americans (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019). “Whites are more likely than blacks to point to family instability and lack of good role models as major obstacles for black people” (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019, para. 3). The difference in considerations between African Americans and White Americans lead to the discussion of bias, prejudice, racial attitudes, and lack of racial awareness and privileges (Thompson, 2014).

**Race and Power.** In order to begin this discussion in a manner of racial and language equality, from this point onwards people who identify racially as White will be referred to as People of Whiteness (Thompson, 2014). People of whiteness is a term that “provides awareness of the systemic race hierarchy, but for transformative purposes, it allows the group to be viewed from horizontal dimensions that lend some idea of leveling and equality” (Thompson, 2014, p. 111). People of Color and People of Whiteness are then more equitable terms that reassign power (Thompson, 2014).

Part of the challenge to dismantling racism is the resistance of People of Whiteness to accept that racism is not only acts of overt aggression like physical or

verbal attacks; that racism does not only occur because of the deliberate and intentional actions of white supremacist groups. But that racism takes on another form that is much more prevalent and yet unseen. Racism is a daily occurrence for People of Color, and People of Whiteness tend not to recognize these situations.

These experiences of racism include encounters with patronizing attitudes, being spoken down to, being hired as tokens, contact avoidance, being accused of oversensitivity about race and racism, being told that one's color is not seen, or that color blindness is ideal. (Thompson, 2014, p. 111)

The resistance of People of Whiteness to recognize these encounters and behaviors People of Color suffer perpetuates a systemic problem (Thompson, 2014). It is precisely because of this inability to see everyday racism or race that contributed to most people of whiteness blaming African American's difficulties on unstable family situations rather than on prejudice and systemic inequalities (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019).

People of Whiteness who hold power and do not use it to dismantle racism and to help put an end to those daily occurrences of racism exacerbate the problem (Thompson, 2014). To recognize the everyday social contexts of racism is important (Thompson, 2014). Therefore, it is extremely important to be aware of privilege, power, and the different types of racism (Thompson, 2014).

**Individual and Systemic Racism.** Racism is viewed within two categories in the United States, the individual and the systemic. On the individual level Thompson (2014) describes feelings and actions of "bigotry, favorable or unfavorable race prejudice, stereotypes, personal dislikes, and biases" (Thompson, 2014, p.114). The definition of

prejudice is “a feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward a person or thing without sufficient warrant” (Allport, 1979, p. 7 as cited in Thompson, 2014, p. 114). Prejudice is then interconnected to racial attitudes. “A racial attitude is a racially informed belief or feeling about a racial group or particular member of a racial group” (Thompson, 2014, p. 118). Racial attitudes affect not only the conduct and behaviors of the individual but also the governmental policies, advertisements, criminal profiling and stereotypes of an entire society (Thompson, 2014).

Race is embedded into the very fabric of US society, and as a result, so is racism. Racism viewed from the systemic perspective examines systems of power. Systems of power are institutional organizations that greatly affect a person's life, like education, the legal system, economics, politics, and financial institutions (Thompson, 2014). Within these larger systems there is a misuse of power that does three things: oppresses People of Color; empowers People of Whiteness by giving undue privileges; and constrain both groups, ultimately destroying all (Thompson, 2014). This power three, that can destroy all from a systemic level, can be examined in the context of schools. When schools are able to select texts, decide which ideas are shared and perceived as truth and fact, and determine the methods used to sculpt young minds and evaluate learning, then everyone is submitting to the will of this power three ideology (Thompson, 2014, p. 116). This is an example of how systemic racism has the power to destroy all regardless of their racial group membership (Thompson, 2014).

### ***Education and Race***

Carter et al. (2019), Grayson (2020), Han (2019), Howard (2006), Milner (2010), and Shade et al. (1997), recognize that students are unique individuals whose race and culture play a prominent role in their identity as well as in their schooling experience. Carter et al. (2019), Howard (2006), and Thompson (2014) connect schools as being institutions that further and spread the dominant culture. Since schools “operate as microcosms of U.S. society, they mirror the white supremacist patriarchal logics that undergrid U.S. sociopolitical life” (Carter et al., 2019, p. 7). That means schools are “fraught with exclusion, dehumanization, physical violence, and discrimination” (Love, 2013, 2016 as cited in Carter et al., 2019, p. 7). The facade of schools being a safe space for all students is shattered by Carter et al. (2019) research study examining African American girls’ experiences in high school settings.

Carter et al. (2019) found that African American girls are overly disciplined by teachers, unprotected from harassment, discriminated against by teachers and school policy, are silenced verbally, crushed spiritually, and subject to stereotypical thinking and anti-blackness. The study gives first-hand accounts from students themselves, who pick up on the messages of discrimination both implicit and explicit from teachers and their school environment (Carter et al., 2019). The study also shares alarming statements made from educators that African American girls are unintelligent, sexually promiscuous, loud, aggressive, angry, unmotivated, and incapable (Carter et al., 2019).

The greatest issues that can be seen across sources and research point towards a normative dominant culture that results in ethnocentrism, racism, and has a detrimental

impact on students at the behest of educators and schools (Carter et al., 2019; Grayson, 2020; Han, 2019; Howard, 2006; Milner, 2010; Shade et al., 1997). Due to differing cultures between educators and students, students are misunderstood and punished because educators project their own cultural expectations onto students (Carter et al., 2019; Shade et al., 1997). This of course is exacerbated if the educator's culture or expectations are the antithesis of the student's (Carter et al., 2019; Howard, 2006). However, educators may be unaware of the impact they are having on students, because they are unconscious of the effects of race and culture. (Han, 2019; Howard, 2006; Shade et al., 1997).

Therefore, it is key to remember that students and educators have their own culture. "Culture is a social system that represents an accumulation of beliefs, attitudes, habits, values, and practices that serve as a filter through which a group of people view and respond to the world in which they live" (Shade, 1997, p.18). This filter that shapes how people perceive the world works in accordance with the previous topic of race. Educators must be aware that identity is composed of culture and race, and that the racial hierarchy in society and schools influences their racial attitudes, biases, beliefs, and teaching practices (Carter et al., 2019; Grayson, 2020; Han, 2019; Howard, 2006; Milner, 2010; Shade et al., 1997). Knowing this, educators must engage in critical reflection, the policy of schools must change, and the classroom culture of silencing must end (Howard, 2006; Han, 2019; Grayson, 2020).

### ***Summary of Section 1: Transformative Teaching; Call to Action***

*What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* This section explained the importance of understanding that our students come into the classroom not as blank slates but as continuing stories. Culture, identity and race are essential facets of our students. Therefore, it is important to devise a responsive teaching practice. In order to obtain a responsive teaching practice educators must engage in identity reflection (Howard, 2006), critical race theory (Han, 2019), and multicultural education (Shade et al., 1997) in order to make education equitable and possible for all students to succeed. This need can begin to be met with a transformative teaching pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching, which will be discussed in depth in the following section.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

#### ***Overview***

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is a method to transform educators' teaching practices. It is a framework that can address culturally and linguistically diverse students in their entirety. Taking into consideration students' racial and cultural identity in order to create a relevant and effective learning experience (Gay, 2018). This section will focus primarily on the research of culturally responsive teaching and its benefits. The section will also discuss the importance of building learning communities before moving on to the idea of education as social justice. The section will then conclude with the limitations of a culturally responsive pedagogy.

### *Educators' Misconceptions*

There are several misconceptions educators have that harm students of color and linguistically diverse students as well. As previously discussed in the last section **identity**, race and culture influences how an individual perceives and interacts with the world (Thompson, 2014). Teachers who prescribe to a color-blind society fail to address the biases and institutional arrangements set forth to harm students of color (Gay, 2018; Shade et al., 1997). There is a deficit view of diverse children rather than an asset-based view of the students (Gay, 2018; Kulger, 2012). The second misconception is that American or Eurocentric culture must be taught and students must assimilate and learn materials from authors of the dominant culture instead of materials from authors of color (Gay, 2018). There is one other misconception that greatly harms students of linguistic and cultural diversity: Schools aren't appropriate places to discuss social justice topics or issues. This belief creates a culture of silence and a neglect of topics that affect the students in the classroom (Grayson, 2020; Kulger, 2012).

There are expressions within education that are particularly harmful, such as "Good teachers anywhere are good teachers everywhere" (Gay, 2018, p. 29). These expressions give teachers a pass to keep their practices unchanged or to not adjust their teaching to meet the needs of all of their students. "Individuals who subscribe to this belief fail to realize that their standards of 'goodness' in teaching and learning are culturally determined and not the same for all ethnic groups" (Gay, 2018, p. 29).

There are also expressions that convey the idea that good teaching transcends place and school demographics (Gay, 2018). "They contend that it has nothing to do with

class, race, gender, ethnicity, or culture of students and teachers” (Gay, 2018, p. 29). This follows the idea that one size fits all for the curriculum and teaching practices used inside the classroom. However, research in the last decade and the staff meetings educators attend across the nation tell them this one size fits all approach is not true; it has become an accepted truth in education. Educators, however, may not know the underlying message that it sends to students who are still receiving a one size fits all education, which Kugler (2012) summarizes perfectly:

The uncomfortable, and sometimes dangerous, thing about sending the message of “we are all the same” is that it requires certain people to deny the parts of themselves that are actually different. By acknowledging the differences, we are acknowledging and validating our students, their lives, their experiences. (Kugler, 2012, p. 107)

In order to address these misconceptions, it is best for educators to adopt a transformative teaching pedagogy, and one such pedagogy can be culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018). This can be the starting point for educators because “Instructional reforms are needed that are grounded in positive beliefs about the cultural heritages and academic potentialities of these students” (Gay, 2018, p. 29).

### ***Culturally Responsive Teaching***

It is best for Gay (2018), one of the leading CRT researchers, to define it for us: Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for

them. It teaches to and through the strengths of those students. Culturally responsive teaching is the behavioral expressions of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning (p. 36)

With culturally responsive teaching, educators understand that culturally and linguistically diverse students need a teaching approach that bridges their experiences and identity to the curriculum and skills teachers are teaching (Gay, 2018; Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

Hammond and Jackson (2015), believe that culturally responsive teaching is supported by neuroscience research. Hammond and Jackson (2015) make the connection that a culturally responsive framework when teaching helps foster higher-order thinking and cognitive functions that are demonstrated by students excelling academically. It is for this reason that Culturally Responsive teaching has become prominent in schools trying to address the achievement gap between students of color and People of Whiteness (Gay, 2018; Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

The focus on academic performance and achievement is one reason why to adopt this teaching framework, especially for teachers who are having difficulty balancing standardization (Rodriguez et al., 2017). Nonetheless, it isn't the only reason or the most important. There are several benefits to adopting a culturally responsive teaching practice. The first can be the empowerment of students as individuals, building learning communities, and the empowerment of students in society through social justice (Gay, 2018; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Kugler, 2017; Nieto, 2013).

### ***Empowerment of Students as Individuals***

Culturally responsive teaching is not only about seeing a student as a part of a racial/ cultural group and acknowledging it, but also recognizing the individual (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2017). By recognizing a student in their entirety, it empowers them (Gay, 2018; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Nieto, 2013). “Empowerment translates into academic competence, personal confidence, courage, and the will to act” (Gay, 2018, p. 38). This empowerment comes from building a personal relationship with the student (Gay, 2018; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Nieto, 2013; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Nieto (2013) shares how important it is to move away from the neutral/ professional persona of teaching and make our interactions with students personal. Fostering a relationship with students as individuals empowers them.

Many of the researchers place personal relationships as one of the key factors to engaging students and empowering them. By becoming aware of the students’ personal background, passions, and culture it helps students become comfortable in the classroom (Nieto, 2013). It also helps educators design a curriculum that is relevant and engaging which contributes to increased student motivation and improved academic achievement (Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

### ***Learning Communities***

“At its core teaching is a social activity” (Nieto, 2013, p.119). Learning is also a social activity as students derive meaning from their identity, educators' delivery & experiences, and the perspectives of classmates who contribute. In order to get students to contribute and build understanding and meanings together, educators must first build

learning communities. Learning communities are classroom environments in which all students are acknowledged, accepted, and respected (Kugler, 2012). To summarize the benefits of building a learning community, educators should see increased trust, a willingness to share (student engagement), comfortability (feeling welcomed), and visibility from students (Gay, 2018; Kugler, 2012; Nieto, 2013). This is due in part to the findings from research that shows motivation increases when students feel a sense of belonging (Nieto, 2013).

Kugler (2012) composed powerful stories shared by numerous educators on how building learning communities contributed to students being more comfortable to share personal connections to the curriculum. By building an environment full of mutual trust, students will be willing to share more of their experiences and personality with the class (Kugler, 2012). It is vital to be willing “...to engage each other, learn from each other and do everything we can to understand each other's perspective” not only to build a culturally interdependent classroom but a culturally interdependent society as well (Kugler, 2012, p. 257). This level of openness and acceptance can be transformative for students who have not had a positive experience in schools (Nieto, 2013) due to a one-size-fits-all education. After all, it is a transformative experience “when students realize that being different isn't a quality reserved for others, but rather a state that describes each one of them” (Kugler, 2012, p. 259). By giving students a voice in the classroom, it provides “opportunities to support healing and acceptance of what cannot be changed or lost”--for example, students' identities or cultures (Kugler, 2012, p. 272). This

is why learning communities are an integral part of culturally responsive teaching and learning.

### ***Education as Social Justice***

Education in itself is political (Nieto, 2013). Education is a tool that society can use to suppress diverging ideologies and maintain the status quo (Thompson, 2014) or it can be a tool used to liberate people (Nieto, 2013). Educators, therefore, have a responsibility to empower students by preparing them to engage fully in society (Kugler, 2012; Nieto, 2013). This comes from participating in critical conversations, taking action, and competently navigating bias that is interwoven into society (Kugler, 2012; Nieto, 2013). Nieto (2013) describes social justice teaching as educators being intentional about the curriculum. The curriculum should give “voice to stories, histories, and perspectives that were not absent in history but are still largely missing from the traditional curriculum” (Nieto, 2013, p. 115). Sources should be cultivated and vetted in order to create a more honest and complete curriculum in all subjects (Nieto, 2013).

The first step to teaching in a culturally responsive and social justice framework is to address the curriculum being used in the classroom. Gay (2018) would say that diversifying the texts and authors used would be the ideal method. However, this is impossible in schools that prohibit educators from selecting curriculum materials (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020). If that is the case then Nieto (2013) would say that social justice education is still possible if educators “challenge conventional wisdom” (Nieto, 2013, p. 115). This can be as simple as asking questions related to authorship and perspective, such as, “Who said Columbus discovered America?” (Nieto, 2013, p. 115).

Challenging conventional wisdom means critically examining texts and materials, which is one of those higher-order cognitive functions that are fostered among students of color in a culturally responsive classroom (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). Nieto (2013) explains the benefits,

Challenging conventional wisdom is a way to get students to engage in critical discourse, bring up topics not generally sanctioned in school, become comfortable addressing matters missing in the curriculum, and learn that they have the responsibility to make the world a better place. Young people also need to learn that they have rights that need to be exercised if change is to happen; this too is an essential ingredient of social justice teaching. (Nieto, 2013, p. 116)

Social justice teaching empowers students by equipping them with the skills to question dominant ideologies, voice their opinions and experiences, and to view themselves as agents of change and power (Kugler, 2012). This ability to see injustice and stand up against it will create a better intercultural society for everyone (Kugler, 2012). It will help students belonging to the dominant culture to become allies and have a positive effect on their identity (Howard, 2006). The tools of addressing bias and being able to speak out against it will empower students of color who suffer from racism.

Social justice teaching is a part of being a culturally responsive educator who builds a respectful learning environment where all diverse students feel welcomed (Nieto, 2013). It provides another method to build community trust and to show that educators care for the issues that matter the most to students. Teaching to the needs of all diverse

learners requires a culturally responsive pedagogy, to meet students honestly and genuinely where they are in life.

### ***Limitations of Selected Research***

The limitation of culturally responsive teaching is that it focuses primarily on building bridges between the culture of students and the curriculum (Project READY, n.d.). Often these bridges are built in the hopes that students' achievement and academic performance will improve (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). However, in my opinion, culturally responsive teaching does not go far enough to holistically empower the diversity of students in the U.S. public school system. Instead, after establishing culturally responsive teaching practices, it would be best to move towards a culturally sustaining pedagogy. A culturally sustaining pedagogy does not simply view the students' cultures as a bridge but as something worthy of study (Project READY, n.d.). It encourages students to retain their culture and build a stronger identity and is important to their emotional and psychological wellbeing (Nieto, 2013, p. 130).

School lasts for 13-17 years of someone's life, on average. The goal of education is to make students prepared to be successful for the duration of their entire lives (Nieto, 2013). Those 84 years outside of school will be lonely and torturous if our students don't belong to a community due to assimilation into a white American culture (Nieto, 2013).

Therefore, by viewing students' cultures as living and equally important to know, schools and educators will not try to assimilate students into the mainstream culture. Students are able to become more critically engaged with their own cultures inside of the classroom by studying them, producing work that is influenced by them, and then equally

accepted at the same gold standard as if students produced a traditional essay instead of an alternative product (Project READY, n.d.). There is no deficit view of the students' cultures or works produced by them (Project READY, n.d.). This culturally sustaining framework will positively benefit students' self-worth and allow them to remain secure in their identity within the US school system (Project READY, n.d.; Thompson, 2014).

### ***Summary of Section 2: On the Road to Being a Better Educator***

*What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* From this section of the literature review we learned that educators must value the cultures of their students and welcome this aspect into the classroom (Gay, 2018). In order to do this, educators must view teaching as a social activity grounded in social justice (Nieto, 2013). Educators must also build learning communities where students feel comfortable sharing their identities, cultures, and experiences (Kugler, 2012). With these pedagogical practices in mind, it is time to implement them into the curriculum. In the next section, the focus will be on project-based learning.

### **Project Based Learning**

#### ***Overview***

“With the population of diverse learners in our nation’s schools steadily increasing, teachers serious about educational reform are seeking to better understand not only who diverse learners are, but also what they need to succeed” (Glasgow et al., 2006, p. xi). As Glasgow et al. (2006) have mentioned, it is not only important to get to know our students but their individual educational needs as well. One of the teaching methods

that can differentiate and allow students to independently work in a self-paced topic of study is project-based learning. Therefore, it is important to first give an overview of project-based learning, including the history and development of the method as well as the most current definition. Then this section will examine the research benefits of project-based learning for students, such as increased engagement & motivation. Lastly, this section will end by sharing a few differentiation strategies and tenets most important for implementing project-based learning in a high school ELA classroom.

### ***The Movement from Teacher-Centered to Student-Centered Teaching and Curriculum***

In a traditional classroom still practicing a teacher-centered approach or a one-size-fits-all curriculum, the educator or institution will create the entire curriculum and select all of the materials (Bourke & Loveridge, 2016; Glasgow et al., 2006; Herrera, 2016). The teacher will be standing at the front of the classroom delivering a lecture and telling the students what is important to know and remember (Ball, 2016; Johnson & Cuevas, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2017). Students have less opportunity for independent thinking or inquiry (Johnson & Cuevas, 2016), which can lower motivation due to students not seeing relevance or having an input or “voice” to decide what it is they want to learn about (Ball, 2016; Dole et al., 2016; Larmer, 2010).

English language art classrooms are also guilty of this teacher-centered approach that when “Boiled down, it might look like this: teachers lecture; students read and listen, take notes, talk to each other, write about the topic or take a test; the class moves on” (Ball, 2016, p. 3). This teaching approach, “favor verbal-linguistic intelligence, or the skills of listening, speaking, and writing” and doesn’t take into account the learners who

learn best using other methods or who can show content mastery in another format (Ball, 2016, p. 3). Since these are the only skills that are tested and taught, many students become disenfranchised and left behind (Ball, 2016). Students that don't perform well in these circumstances will then develop "false, yet, deeply entrenched, beliefs of inadequacy" (Ball, 2016). As educators I am sure that we wish to empower our students and turn them into lifelong learners, and in order to do so, we must put them at the center of our teaching and curriculum design (Ball, 2016; Dobson & Dobson, 2021; Glasgow et al., 2006; Herrera, 2016; Johnson & Cuevas, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2017).

### ***Students as Individuals***

First, we must recognize that our students are individuals with different learning styles (Ball, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2017). In the book *What Is It About Me You Can't Teach? Culturally Responsive Instruction in Deeper Learning Communities*, (Rodriguez et al., 2017) it based many of the strategies off of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and the individuation of students. By recognizing that students have multiple intelligences (verbal/linguistic, musical, mathematical/logical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, naturalistic, existential) this means that students have different styles of learning, different strengths and weaknesses (Ball, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2017). In addition to these various learning styles, students also have different backgrounds and interests. How then are educators able to differentiate materials enough for all students in the classroom to pursue their interests at the same time? - Ultimately, empowering student choice, voice, and engagement in the material.

### ***Project-Based Learning***

Project-based learning is one of the best methods to differentiate instruction that also uses Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Rodriguez et al., 2017). With a focus on 21st-century skills and integrating standards & lesson objectives (Ball, 2016; Larmer, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2017), project-based learning is suitable for the classroom.

The process of project-based learning is an "iterative cycle" (Rodriguez et al., 2017, p. 200). The seven essentials that project-based learning must have are explained well by Larmer (2010) and Rodriguez et al. (2017). Rodriguez et al. (2017) summarizes the process nicely by stating project-based learning,

...proceeds from a driving question, problem, or need relevant to the students' interests so that students conduct research on-and offline to answer the question, solve the problem, or fulfill the need, and ends with the creation of a product that students present to an audience. (Rodriguez et al., 2017, pp. 199-200)

Project-based learning in its simplest form is learning by doing (Rodriguez et al., 2017). Students go through multiple stages of investigation, negotiation, and revision, until they reach the end where they can create a product that answers their research question or explains their learning to their audience (Larmer, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2017).

As Ball (2016) explains, the purpose for project-based learning is that it always puts student interest, identity, and experience in the forefront of planning, and it is open enough to engage multiple intelligences (p. 3). Project-based learning requires the teacher to become a facilitator instead of the sole holder of knowledge, and to hand over control and power to the students (Ball, 2016; Dole et al., 2016). "With teacher guidance,

students choose authentic problems or challenges, conduct research, and work collaboratively on solutions for real audiences over an extended period of time” (Dole et al., 2016, p. 2). By allowing students to select the problems or challenges that matter to them, they are given a voice (Ball, 2016; Dole et al., 2016).

Tracing project-based learning to its roots, Johnson and Cuevas (2016), place it in an inquiry and constructivist education framework. That is to say, students derive meaning and knowledge from building it themselves through inquiry and investigation rather than from the teacher simply feeding them information (Johnson & Cuevas, 2016). This is why project-based learning is more impactful than a simple lecture. “The inquiry approach encourages student ownership, sense of control, choice and autonomy, explicit purpose for learning, collaboration and personal relevance” (Johnson & Cuevas, 2016, p. 4).

While project-based learning can be a solution to incorporating student voice, engaging multiple intelligences, validating students’ identities, increasing student engagement and motivation, it is not easy. An educator can’t simply give out any project or vague instructions without preparing students adequately for the task, and then expecting students to research and create a product that shows their learning (Johnson & Cuevas, 2016; Larmer, 2010). If educators do this, student engagement won’t rise and they may instead feel overwhelmed by the task (Johnson & Cuevas, 2016).

In order for a project to be meaningful, Larmer (2010) shares two criteria it must meet: “First, students must perceive the work as personally meaningful, as a task that matters and that they want to do well. Second, a meaningful project fulfills an educational

purpose” (para. 2). The teacher must also have high expectations for the students that are established at the beginning (Dole et al., 2016; Glasgow et al., 2006). Yet, teachers must also be willing to be flexible and revise expectations and plans as the project progresses (Dole et al., 2016; Larmer, 2010; Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). A part of this revision of activities and deadlines comes from conferences and check-ins the teacher has with students (Ball, 2016; Larmer, 2010). Students must feel supported in a classroom that gives them choices, as they may be unaccustomed to such situations. Explicit instruction in research skills or other skills needed to be successful must be taught before giving students unstructured time to pursue independent projects (Dobson & Dobson, 2021; Dole et al., 2016).

### ***Strategies for the ELA Classroom***

In a student-centered high school english language arts classroom, teachers would move away from classic texts and incorporate multicultural texts, multilingual texts, (Glasgow et al., 2006) and multimodal texts (Dallacqua, & Sheahan, 2020). “A student-centered approach would strive to include multicultural texts as ‘curriculum in conversation’ and use it as a framework for discussing multicultural literature” (Glasgow et al., 2006, p. 28). Dallacqua and Sheahan (2020) conducted research to show how vital it is to view these non-canon/nontraditional texts as equally important. They found that it empowers students to challenge dominant narratives, it sanctions the belief that multiple perspectives and answers are welcome, and it validates students’ identities and experiences who are unable to relate to the canon text (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020).

Glasgow et al. (2006) agrees with how important it is to select diverse texts or to allow students to make their own selections. Although, the focus of their research was concerned more with the students' enjoyment and ability to empathize with the story.

When most students watch movies or read books, their own life experiences contribute to their enjoyment of the film or book. The more they share or identify with the characters or the situation presented, the more they like the book or movie. (Glasgow et al., 2006, p. 125)

It is important to connect lessons and texts to our students' lives in order to engage them (Herrera, 2016).

Dallacqua and Sheahan's (2020) research using multimodal texts and composing, finds similarities with project-based learning and curriculum building and suggests that teaching and planning should be done around larger concepts (Rodriguez et al., 2017; Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Teachers should "locate a central idea (e.g., privilege) that can be considered through multiple angles and taken up in other media" (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020, p. 76). Even if they are confined to a classical text, positioning another text in conversation with the book will help students develop critical literacy skills and also reinforce the idea that multiple voices and perspectives are valued in the classroom (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020).

When it comes to designing the curriculum, Glasgow et al. (2006) suggests that educators who are interested in diversifying the shared classroom texts should "think about restructuring the entire curriculum rather than just adding a new text" (p. 29).

Students are aware if a text is thrown in simply for the appearance of diversity since the

conversations are disjointed (Glasgow et al., 2006). For this reason, educators must be purposeful in redesigning the curriculum (Glasgow et al., 2006). Educators must use backwards design to ask themselves what skills and larger concepts they want students to be able to use in the real world long after this class (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). There must be a conscientious effort to plan according to who the students are in your classroom. In the light of project-based learning, if educators release most control and inflexibility, lesson planning may not be finished before the start of the year but begin once students select what it is they want to learn (Ball, 2016).

Regardless, high school english language arts classrooms have the opportunity to create learning environments that are supportive to students. Learning environments that are built on mutual trust and rapport (Dole et al., 2016; Glasgow et al., 2006) prepare students to become self-directed learners (Johnson & Cuevas, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2017). English classes offer students the opportunity to join the critical conversation about society among various texts and create new knowledge to be shared with the others in a multimodal format (Dallaqua & Sheahan, 2020; Glasgow et al., 2006, Herrera, 2016). Therefore, it is time to plan a curriculum that offers students the agency to select how they will learn and share their findings, thus returning students the power to use their authentic voices.

## **Chapter Two Summary**

*What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* I sought to explore the literature and research on the problems plaguing the institution of education in the United States, which

boiled down to a majority of educators being unaware of how their cultural and racial identities influence their teaching practices (Howard, 2006). In a racialized America, race is at the forefront of identity, especially for those who identify as People of Color (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2019). Racism permeates several levels of society, one being education (Thompson, 2014). In order to dismantle systemic racism in schools, teachers must adopt a culturally responsive teaching pedagogy. By reflecting on their own identities and addressing bias and covert racial attitudes it will help educators to see their students' cultures as an asset and wonder to be acknowledged and learned about (Gay, 2018; Hammond & Jackson, 2015). From there, educators can begin to adopt other frameworks to join with a culturally responsive pedagogy that will empower students to have agency, voice, and a sense of belonging within schools. I believe project-based learning can do this, and it definitely offers students more agency to share their authentic voices (Ball, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2017). Educators, however, must be very conscious of how they plan to implement project-based learning and the supporting scaffolds that will be needed for students to benefit from this method (Dole et al., 2016; Larmer, 2010).

Now that we are aware of the current research on these topics, in chapter 3 I will share the development of my project-based learning curriculum that acknowledges students' identities and empowers student voice and agency. It will also offer one method to answer my research question, *what is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?*

## CHAPTER THREE

### Capstone Project

#### Introduction

The goal of this project was to answer the research question, *what is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* Chapter one introduced the problem that I experienced as a student and that other students are currently experiencing, a lack of acknowledgment about their identities. In schools, important matters such as race are often overlooked in favor of meeting educational standards and timelines. Chapter two explored the literature proving the claims that race and identity are important. To overlook it is detrimental to the students and causes unfair policies & practices within schools. As a result, culturally responsive pedagogy and project-based learning are important to implement in the classroom in order to address this issue. In this chapter, I will offer an answer to my research question. I will be developing a communication & language arts curriculum unit that can be implemented in a high school classroom.

This chapter will be broken down into five important sections followed by a chapter summary. The first section is called the project overview and is dedicated to describing the project a bit more in-depth. Then before going further into details, it is important to discuss the curriculum frameworks used to design the ELA unit which will be in the rationale section. The third section is dedicated to explaining the audience this curriculum will be the most optimal for and the setting in which this curriculum should be implemented. Afterwards the Project Description section will give more details regarding the curriculum. This includes the learning objectives and standards used in the

project. The last section will explain my timeline for developing this ELA curriculum unit. The summary shall recap all of the important information, my research question, and give a little sneak peek at chapter four. It is hoped by the end of this chapter fellow ELA educators will understand how to develop a culturally responsive project-based ELA curriculum that empowers student voice and agency, allowing students to meaningfully share their culture.

### **Project Overview**

The project is an eight-week curriculum unit for a communication and language arts secondary classroom. It is a unit that should be used when a classroom community has been established. It would work best in a setting that uses welcome week to build community and respect among the class. This unit should enhance students' rapport, motivation, and visibility within the classroom. This unit should set the tone for the school year, that students are empowered to become active learners who can reclaim their voice in education.

The focus of this project is specific to Minnesota schools and standards. The unit may be adjustable for communication and language arts educators in other states but will require independent revision. Although it is designed for secondary ELA classrooms, it would be most effective in the upper levels of high school. This is due to the current steps of skills students are taught. Many schools do not teach intermediate research skills until tenth or eleventh grade, as I observed in the 625 and 622 school districts in 2019 and 2020. These intermediate research skills in the upper grades are required to optimally empower students to independently find and read sources, and direct their own learning.

Therefore, if educators implement this unit with ninth-grade students or those not yet possessing research skills, it is important to differentiate instruction and to use supplementary materials for the students that need more guidance.

This section gave a brief overview of the project. In the next section I will share the rationale for designing this curriculum. In addition, I will tie in some of the research from chapter two's literature review to describe how this curriculum was created.

### **Rationale**

Often, educational literature offers information about best teaching practices. As someone who was pursuing a degree in education and learning to be an educator through such texts, it was difficult to visualize these frameworks or theories in practice. Rarely are full units with the lesson plans and materials offered in guiding educational literature. It may be due in part to the notion that not all students can learn from a pre-made lesson plan nor is every lesson plan relevant after a certain amount of time. This is all true, every lesson should be designed for the learners currently in the classroom. Which is exactly why I wanted to develop a curriculum unit that is flexible enough to be adapted to students this year and the next. This curriculum shows those educational frameworks in practice and can be used as an exemplar for other educators designing their curriculum. It is time educators involve students in the learning process and development of lessons. Students should be given power and agency over their own learning. Through this project, these goals will be achieved.

To create a flexible ELA curriculum that can be adopted across time, it is important to begin by designing the curriculum around transferable skills or concepts

rather than specific books. This stems from Wiggins & McTighe's (2011) educational framework of Understanding by Design (UbD). Additionally, education's purpose is for students to foster a deeper understanding. As a language arts teacher, the deeper understanding that I want to encourage is about society's influence and inner workings. I want to empower students to be able to communicate effectively and dismantle power structures that oppress them. As such, I must assist students in becoming critical thinkers.

Following Wiggins & McTighe (2011), in order to create an effective curriculum, I have to employ the practice of backwards design. Just like its name suggests, designing begins at the end and works in reverse chronological order. I'll begin by thinking of the desired outcome, then I'll determine how I'll measure the students' learning; lastly, I'll develop the learning activities. This is one of the educational principles along with project-based learning that is used to construct the curriculum unit. It is important to note that the unit also has a social justice influence and a directive to be culturally responsive.

### **Audience & Setting**

As stated before, the audience for this project are Minnesota high school students who are taking a communication & language arts class. Originally, I conceived this curriculum for classes with a large population of students of color. I did this in order to address the students as individuals and to bring visibility to their complete identities, which are often silenced or mitigated in traditional teacher-centered classrooms. However, I realized that all students are products of their culture and identity. Therefore, the scope of this curriculum extends beyond classes with racially diverse students and can

be used with any class demographics. Thus, this is relevant in urban, rural, or suburban settings.

This curriculum will be most suited for other Minnesota high school communication and language arts teachers to adapt. This is because the eight-week unit uses reading and writing MN ELA standards. It also uses literature, both fiction and nonfiction, as a conduit in discussing culture. The exploration of society and culture through products of media and various art forms is a unique ability of language art classrooms.

### **Project Description**

My project will be an eight-week ELA curriculum unit. The unit will be focused on the concepts of culture and identity. Namely, students will be in charge of exploring and defining their culture over the course of eight weeks. At the end of the eighth week, students will share with the class and possibly the community their project (research findings) through a medium of their choice. The project will blend the use of art forms inviting the personal histories of the students, literature, and nonfiction articles in order to answer the unit's guiding questions.

The guiding questions that students will be thinking about over the course of the unit are: What is culture? How does culture influence a person's identity? What factors influence how you see yourself? What is your community identity? Who are you? How do you share your identity with others? Although it is not a guiding question, something to have students consider is: how does society's perception of a person's culture influence a person's identity? This is a question to work towards as the semester and school year

progresses. Since, it is good to begin introducing students not only to making connections between themselves to the world but also critically examining society's influence. This question is in alignment with the belief that teaching is a social justice process.

Since there is a focus on culture as the concept to learn and explore, students are able to select their own texts and materials to read, rather than only reading a novel of my choosing. This option to select their own books helps ensure students are engaged and can relate to the characters (Glasgow et al., 2006). Being able to empathize with the characters will help students be able to make deeper connections to the literature (Glasgow et al., 2006).

Johnson & Cuevas (2016), however, cautioned against students having more options than they are ready to undertake. Larmer (2010) says that it is best to design a project at a level that is accessible to students; therefore, how open a project is for students to make choices varies depending on the class. Which is why there is a book list that students can select from if they do not wish to select a novel without assistance. If students do not like any books from the list, they are able to make their own novel selection and can seek assistance from myself or the librarian to find a book of interest. Ultimately, through this unit students are encouraged to explore the concept of culture through literature and then make personal connections between themselves and the books. They are encouraged to begin making choices for themselves regarding their education from the very first step of the unit, the book selection.

I want students to be able to articulate who they are and what is important to them. To share with the class a bit of their histories and for them to feel visible in a space

that might not have allowed them to before. I want to give students the opportunity to have a positive experience in the classroom and to build a learning community that values one another.

In the next section, the project timeline, I will share more about the assessments of this curriculum unit. After all, with backwards design, after establishing the goals and learning outcomes, I have to pair it with MN ELA standards and assessments to designate how I will measure students' learning.

### **Project Timeline**

The timeline for the creation of this project was sixteen weeks or one semester. Fourteen weeks were dedicated to creating the unit. One week was dedicated to writing chapter four. The last week of the semester was dedicated to editing and revising materials for the project. The majority of the time was spent on the development of the curriculum.

As a new professional and one not used to project-based learning, the materials and curriculum unit were built from scratch. Therefore, one week was used to research which MN standards would be best for this project and to develop the learning objectives. Keeping in mind UbD practices, I had to spend a lot of time deciding what I wanted my students to be able to do after this unit. I had to decide what big takeaways and skills students would learn from this unit to carry into the future. I also needed to plan according to what benefits I hoped students would achieve.

Since students are working through an independent process to explore and define their cultures for others, this process will ultimately culminate into a product (their

project) to share with the class and the community. Therefore, the second important factor in this unit design was planning the assessment. Another week was dedicated to creating the rubrics for students' projects. It is important that when giving students a project that clear expectations are expressed. Thus, it is vital to develop detailed rubrics so that students understand how they will be assessed.

After the objectives, guiding questions, outcomes, and summative assessments were designed. I dedicated another week to determine how I would implement formative assessments throughout the curriculum unit. I decided that it would be best to hold conferences, both peer and teacher-led sessions. In the hopes of moving away from the notion that the teacher is the only one with a worthy opinion, it is important to start building belief in one another's knowledge as well. Therefore, peer conversation groups or mini-conferences will be held for students to discuss their journey of research and to present the information they have gathered. In these small groups, students will be able to ask questions, discuss culture in a respectful and authentic way, and perceive how a general audience receives the information they are presenting. This will be paired along with self-reflection and self-assessment activities throughout the unit.

The next eleven weeks were also spent creating lesson plans, activities, and materials. Week fifteen of the semester was dedicated to writing my chapter four reflection. The last week of the semester was used to revise my paper and review the unit's materials. I have included my checklist of items I had to complete in order to ensure that this curriculum unit is culturally responsive and gives students enough agency in their learning.

### Timeline checklist

I have 16 weeks for the semester

I will use 14 weeks to develop the teaching materials:

- 1 week to develop the learning objectives and which standards will be assessed
- Rubric for the project (for the students) -Summative assessment
- Grading scale for the project-will I have to make a standards-based grading scale too? (Since this is popular among schools.)
- Formative assessments
- Student reflection activities
- Creating a calendar and mapping out the timeline for each lesson
- Lesson plans
- Planning on how to teach students research skills necessary for this project (possible supplemental materials for learners who need more assistance)
- Developing a book list students can use to select a book
- Power points and presentations
- Classroom Activities -writing prompts, class discussions, research time
- Group activities -small group discussions, peer conferences
- Conferences guidelines for peer groups
- Student-Teacher project conferences

1 week to write chapter 4

1 week to edit the capstone project paper

### Chapter Summary

Chapter three was committed to providing an answer to my research question:

*What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* In the rationale portion of this chapter, I explained why I decided to create an ELA curriculum unit dedicated to empowering students to share their culture in a meaningful way. As well as, the educational frameworks that support and guide my unit design. An overview of the project provided details regarding the length of the unit and other basic components. I also made clear the limitations of the project, informing every one of the intended audience and setting of this curriculum. By providing information related to the guiding questions, MN standards selected, and assessment information I hope this will help create a clearer picture of the curriculum

unit. After all, this unit is designed to be flexible, culturally responsive, and enable students to gain agency in the classroom through project-based learning. This concludes my chapter three capstone project description. In the next chapter, I will be reflecting on my journey through the capstone process. Sharing my findings from completing my curriculum unit as well as reviewing the literature relevant to the curriculum design process.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reflection

#### Chapter Overview

*What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* Originally, I began my research seeking to answer this question because as a student school was a place that did not care about my personal experiences, and only cared for my academic growth. Chapter 2 detailed the search through research and current literature trying to find the necessary elements that are required for students to feel comfortable, engaged, and empowered to express themselves in the classroom. Through the literature I discovered the pedagogy of culturally responsive teaching and the educational framework of project-based learning. Both of these practices center the students as wells of knowledge with power and control over their learning. Chapter 3 explained the proposal of an eight-week ELA unit where students create an identity project as a possible conduit to welcome students' identities into the classroom. After all, identity is one of the most present and yet elusive aspects of an individual's life, at least in my experience as a White passing woman of color. Chapter 4 overall, is a reflection on the creation of this capstone project.

Specifically, chapter 4 takes a closer look at the successes and challenges of creating a project-based learning unit that is culturally responsive and empowering to all students; in order to engage them authentically and to empower students to express themselves. Of course, this was easier said than done. Which is why for the first section of this chapter I will focus on looking at the major learnings I took away by designing this unit plan. In the following section, I reflect on the literature most pertinent to the

creation of my project-based identity unit. The third section will discuss the implications of my project for the world of academia and other classrooms in terms of policy. The fourth section of this chapter will discuss the limitations of my project and areas for growth and improvement. This will be followed by the benefits of my project to high school students and ELA classrooms. Lastly, my paper will conclude with a summary of my successes and challenges of creating an eight-week identity project unit.

### **Major Learnings**

As a researcher, writer, learner, and beginning teacher I learned various lessons through the designing and creation of such a long curriculum plan. In fact, after reflecting I realize that the process I underwent of deciding on a topic, developing a research question, researching and gathering my own materials, writing, creating a product, and a final reflection, is much the same process that I am implementing in my unit plan. I want students to have the agency to decide their scope of interest within a topic. For this project students were able to decide what pieces of their identity they were most interested in exploring and learning more about. Students were given the agency to select their own primary source reading material and the direction of research that they would conduct individually. The research question that they were trying to answer was given to them. Throughout the unit they were asked, who are you and how does your community influence this? The final product students would create to answer this question would be of their own choosing because as Howard Gardner pointed out there are multiple intelligences and students have preferences of self-expression, therefore I did not believe in limiting student choice (Rodriguez et al., 2017). Instead, I welcomed students to

brainstorm a project that wasn't on a list of generated possibilities but to create something that they would enjoy and be proud of after this unit was complete.

Perhaps, due to all of the infinite possibilities that students could explore it was very difficult to create lesson plans that ensured a student-centered approach in delivery of instruction and discourse content. I constantly had to ask myself, what must all students know in order to be successful. Since I did not designate a specific audience for this project it was difficult to know what supports I would need to include into the unit plan. After all, there were no specific demographics or any specific district and due to having an ambiguous target audience, that was generalized only to high school, and most suitable to 11th and 12th grade, I did not know how many language learners there would be in the classroom, or IEPs, and other considerations that are vital to creating a relevant and responsive curriculum.

Since there was no specific school in mind but a general high school setting, I also ran into the difficulty deciding on the timeframe of my lesson plans. I went back and forth between a 45-minute class to a 77-minute class schedule. The vagueness of my project's audience caused a slow start to the creation of my project materials because personally I am someone who needs a vision in order to begin. However, I wanted this project to be implementable and applicable to classrooms across the state and so I worked past these ginormous blanks of missing details.

I was able to work past these blocks due to Wiggins & McTighe's (2011) concept of backwards design. I began to ask myself, what is the purpose of this project and the enduring understandings that I hope students will take away from this unit. From there I

decided on how I would assess student learning. I knew that I would be assessing students' projects that they have been working on for the duration of the eight-week unit plan. However, I did not want students to spend all this time to only show the teacher their project but also to share it with their peers and community too. This was done to illustrate that their voices are important and matter beyond a classroom. Therefore, I added a presentation aspect to the summative assessment. Also, by having a presentation component students would be able to keep certain aspects of their project private that they did not have to include and share with an audience. This safeguards some of the students who are particularly vulnerable through the process of this unit but that are not ready to completely share everything with the world.

After identifying the summative assessments that would be used, I thought of the diagnostic and formative assessments. From there I had to pair these assessments and student objectives with MN English language arts standards and benchmarks. With the push for standard based grading in the cities, I designed a rubric that used the 4-point scale to grade students' presentations. Once the conceptual and foundational design work was completed, I made several calendars organized via a month and in a week's view, in order to plan the lesson plans of the ELA unit.

Continuing with the framework of backwards design I actually planned my last week of lesson plans first. Then the seventh week because I realized that class sizes are rather large and a class of forty students will need two weeks for student presentations. I designed week six next and since equity is very important to me as an educator, I wanted to give students enough time in class to also work on their projects so that everyone has

access to a device, internet, and an environment that is free of home obligations. Students who needed to finish up could have work days, those done could workshop their presentations through mock presentations. These mock presentations were also designed to be mindful of students with anxiety over presentations and to help alleviate their anxiety through practice with a smaller audience.

From week six, I returned to the beginning of the unit, to week one and decided how to introduce the unit. In the lesson plans I wrote a lot of teacher talk because I wanted to give an example of how open, welcoming, and encouraging a teacher should be when speaking to their students about a unit plan that requires vulnerability and openness. However, I could not keep up the pace of writing scripted, six-page lesson plans with their accompanying materials in the remaining time frame of this class. Nor should all eight weeks be scripted out because these lesson plans are only meant to be a guide and must be adapted to suit the teacher and learners that are present in the classroom. Hopefully, the lesson plans that have teacher talk will serve as a gentle reminder to speak in a welcoming, encouraging, and appreciative manner to students.

The major learning that I had after creating this unit plan is the difficulty to make universal plans that can be applicable across school districts and time. However, the difficulty will be worth it if the students are able to enjoy the lessons, come away with enduring understandings, and feel accepted. In the next section I will speak briefly about the literature that was integral to my project.

## Revisiting the Literature

The most cited research that I relied on for the creation of my project were broken up into three categories. The first category was content bases and had to do with identity and culture itself because these are the more abstract concepts that students would need to grapple with over the course of the unit. I would include citations of Shade (1997) and Kaldis (2013) in my lesson plans that required concrete definitions.

The second category of essential research was pedagogy related. I constantly had to keep in mind the student centered and culturally responsive teaching methods mentioned in Glasgow (2006), Nieto (2013), and Gay (2018) in order to allow students to create and construct meaning based on their experiences first, before supplementing their definitions with other interpretations or research. By keeping this literature in mind, I was able to resist the urge to fall back on my own learning experiences in a teacher-centered classroom. After all, this project was designed in the hopes of empowering students to express themselves and become independent learners, confident in sharing about their interests and identities.

The third category I focused on had to do with the design framework of the unit plan. I tried to keep the principles of Larmer (2010) and Wiggins and McTighe (2011) in mind when organizing and formatting my project. Larmer (2010) was especially important when it came to the construction of the model identity project and the steps that would have to be communicated to students. This is an essential piece of literature for teachers unfamiliar with project-based learning, such as myself, that need a clear-cut

guide defining the process of project-based learning so that we can share it with our students through clear direction and support.

After the creation of my unit plan and trying to construct it in a manner suitable and adaptable to a vague audience that I do not know personally; I realized why so many academics and authors often only provide guiding principles in literature to guide individual educator's creation of lesson plans and not tailored lesson plans; it is because it is truly a difficult endeavor to accomplish. One that is impossible to meet the criteria of being relevant to students in the classroom. Although my unit plan is created with the guidance of culturally responsive pedagogy and a project-based learning framework it is not something that should be replicated exactly but revised before implementation to best suit the students that will be learning from it. My conclusion then is only when a unit plan is customized and takes into account all of the individual learners in the classroom will it be relevant and truly beneficial.

### **Implications**

The implications of my project are that teaching and learning are not devoid of the influence of race, culture, and identity, and therefore should not be ignored but discussed, examined, and embraced (Glasgow et al., 2006; Grayson, 2020; Han, 2019; Howard, 2006; Nieto, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2017; Schaefer, 2008; Shade, 1997; Thompson, 2014). Additionally, students are capable of independently paced learning in which they decide their scope of learning. These implications of my project may be resisted in schools that have stringent policies regarding specific texts to teach, forbidden topics of

discussion, and that push for a teacher-centered classroom. This project is designed to give power back to the students and empower them to express themselves.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of my unit plan primarily are centered around the specificity and vagueness of material. The specific teacher talk in the lesson plans are my personality and will not ring genuine if educators recite it without feeling. The class texts, book lists, images in presentations, even the researchers cited in the slides may not be suitable or relevant to the learners in some classrooms. Perhaps, more language work is required, or implementation of video and audio rather than print visuals.

In general, a lesson plan template detailing the procedure, materials, and directions of the lesson will be optimal for customization. Which is the format of the lesson plans found in the middle weeks of my unit plan. Since the lesson plans are less detailed and specific than the first weeks of the unit plan, educators may feel apprehensive and unsure of how to proceed. However, this is by design because the lesson plans I have constructed are an example, a possible solution to offer a more relevant, empowering, and culturally responsive curriculum but not the only solution. These lesson plans are meant as a more detailed guide that should always be customized to suit the individuals present in the classroom. Therefore, guiding texts used with the whole class, images, and even writing and discussion prompts should be changed to be relevant to the students who are presently in the classroom.

## **Benefits**

Although imperfect, my unit plan is a benefit to the teaching profession because it offers educators across the state of Minnesota an example of how to construct a project-based learning unit, one specifically relating to identity. I find that in the times of standardization and high stakes testing that the fostering of students' love of learning is diminished. In high school, there are numerous pressures placed on students and a number of high stakes tests. The curriculum then seems to revolve around these tests and often canon or American standard content, that are not relevant to or reflective of the lives of a diverse student population.

In contrast, my unit plan offers students the opportunity to take time and reflect on their positionality in America, societal influence on identity and culture, and the empowerment of self-expression. Through student choice and agency integrated throughout the unit, students are encouraged to redevelop that love of learning. My unit plan is a wonderful addition to the teaching profession because I know it is designed with only the best intentions for students. If it has a positive effect on students emotionally, cognitively, or socially then it is a success and I would encourage other educators to adopt this unit plan and adapt it to their specific students.

In order to share my unit plan with a network outside of personal connections it will be published on Hamline digitalcommons. This will allow my unit plan to be adaptable to classrooms across the state of Minnesota. Besides digitalcommons, I plan on reaching out to my graduating class of fellow ELA educators and sharing the unit plan with them. They can use it as they see fit and share it with their schools and associates.

As my network and community membership continues to grow, I will continue to share my unit plan.

In the future, I will continue to develop and revise this unit plan. In addition, I would like to conduct research on culturally sustaining teaching practices which is something new I learned about while researching culturally responsive pedagogy. After conducting research on this pedagogy, which seems more extensive than culturally responsive teaching, I would like to create unit plans that use this pedagogy instead.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 reflected on the success and challenges I experienced creating my capstone project: an eight-week unit plan that had students create an identity project. The research I conducted in chapter 2, the planning of chapter three, and the project itself were all essential to answering my research question: *What is necessary to empower and engage students in high school ELA classrooms to allow them to express themselves?* In this chapter I reviewed the literature that was integral to the creation of my project, the implications of my project, the limitations of my project, and the benefits my project brings to the teaching profession.

I found that after creating my project it reinforced my desire to create a welcoming, encouraging, and supportive classroom and curriculum for all of my students. As a student of color and a teacher of color I hope to provide my students a space where they feel visible, empowered, and accepted. It is also my imperative to be mindful of students' cultures, race(s), and identity and to invite these aspects of the students into the

classroom. I truly hope that this unit plan will be useful to other educators and implemented across the state of Minnesota in high school ELA classrooms.

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