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## Studying the Self: Students Examining Culture and Identity for Improved Engagement and Achievement

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Studying the Self: Students Examining Culture and Identity for Improved  
Engagement and Achievement

by

Zara Pylvainen

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

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

August 2022

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	5
Personal and Professional Experience	6
Current Context	7
Conclusion	10
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review	12
Introduction	12
Key Terms	13
Culture and Identity in the Classroom	14
Where Culture and Identity Intersect with Language Use in Schools	19
Where Culture and Identity Intersect with English Language Arts Curricula	22
Critical Literacy	22
Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction	23
Historically Responsive Literacy	25
Impact of CRP and CSP on Student Engagement and Achievement	27
Summary	29
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description	31
Rationale for Project	32
Setting, Audience, and Timeline	32
District- and School-Mandated Parameters	34
Curriculum Design	34

	3
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Instructional Strategies	35
Historically Responsive Literacy	35
Text Selection in Curriculum	36
International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme Unit Design and the Understanding by Design Framework	36
Instructional Goals	38
Minnesota State Standards	39
Assessment	41
Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Instructional Strategies	44
Unit Flow	46
Summary	48
CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion	49
Major Learnings	49
Revisiting the Literature Review	52
Historically Responsive Literacy	52
Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Literacy Instruction	53
Possible Implications	53
Limitations of the Project	54
Future Projects	56
Sharing of Results	56
Contributions to the Profession	57

Summary

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

There has long been discussion of the importance of curriculum that is relevant and meaningful for students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Alim & Paris, 2017; Hollie, 2017; Muhammad, 2020). While there has been some effort and attention towards representing students in the curricula they study, the texts that have largely comprised the 7th grade English language arts (ELA) curriculum I have taught are still mostly written by white men and do not focus on the issues that are the most relevant or interesting to students. At the same time, many students have not been engaged by the schooling offered to them and struggle with schoolwork. As a teacher, my aim is to address both of these issues in revising the ELA curriculum I teach. For this capstone project, my research question was: *How can curricular materials on topics of identity and culture impact student engagement and academic achievement?*

By focusing on the topics of culture and identity, I hoped to give students a chance to think about their own lives and environments, as well as those of their peers, in meaningful ways, while also having opportunities to gain understanding of the world around them. In this chapter, I have described my personal and professional experiences that have led me to this capstone project. I then explained the significance of this research topic for teachers, policy makers, families, and of course, the students themselves. Finally, I have described the context in which I worked and provided a rationale for my project.

## **Personal and Professional Experience**

As a child raised with a strong sense of my Finnish American heritage, I remember my ears perking up everytime Finland was mentioned in a textbook in school. Even in my undergraduate studies, I was excited to use Finnish as an example in completing an assignment for my Introduction to Linguistics course. For many students, however, the connections between their culture and identity and school work have been few and far between. Most curricula used in schools today represent a largely White populace that excludes many of the students who attend those schools.

As I began teaching, I quickly learned that some of my own life experiences were unrelatable for my students. Sometimes, my students and I could use these moments as opportunities to share and learn about one another. However, where I often understood the references in assigned texts, students did not always connect to these stories. When teaching the novel *Tangerine*, the upper-middle class housing development where the novel takes place was familiar to me but foreign to many of my students. Consequently, these students seemed to struggle to connect with and understand the novel, leading to disengagement and low motivation to complete assignments related to the novel. To illustrate, students complained we were “still reading that book” and recalled only a few plot points or details about the novel when prompted.

On the other hand, many students tend to jump at a chance to write about themselves or to share a story with the class. During my first year of teaching, I realized that students were eager to share their responses to daily writing warm-up because they were excited to tell others about their dream dinners, weekend plans, or the most important people in their lives. This past year, one student in particular struggled to stay

focused enough to complete reading and writing assignments. After reading just a page, he often looked up and announced he was bored or began talking to a classmate. Other times, he entered class, put on headphones and immediately began watching movies on his Chromebook, disengaging from class. However, when given the chance to just share a few facts about himself, this same student became engaged, volunteered to participate, and encouraged other students to participate as well. Assignments like “Where I’m From” poems that asked students to share their backgrounds have turned into free verse expositions on “the tea of growing up Black.” My students have shown me through their excitement and engagement, time and time again, that they crave the opportunity to engage in ELA while centering their own cultures and identities. Furthermore, in a classroom setting that values cultural identity, students have rich opportunities to learn about the wide range of cultures and identities shared by their peers.

### **Current Context**

Currently, I teach 7th and 8th grade English language arts (ELA) at Robbinsdale Middle School, a school that serves mostly students of color, with around 80% of students identifying as Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, or multiracial (Minnesota School Report Card, 2022). Some sections of ELA are designated co-taught sections to provide additional support for English language learners or special education students, creating an even more diverse group of students. In each of these classes, students may have a chance to learn from one another, find support from classmates, or even find their own thinking challenged by their peers. Individual students also come to class with rich sets of experiences, which may change how they understand themselves and others.



Racial justice and equity have been a primary focus at our school and in the Robbinsdale Area Schools for several years. The achievement gap in Minnesota and nationwide continues to widen (Grunewald & Nath, 2019), and this has been true in Robbinsdale as well (Minnesota School Report Card, 2022). In addition to examining and confronting our own biases as teachers, we also have a responsibility to ensure that our students feel comfortable and encouraged to bring every one of their identities to the classroom and to feel not just accepted, but celebrated for it.

However, our current curriculum has not yet shifted to fully reflect the students we teach. Our district uses the SpringBoard English Language Arts curriculum created by the College Board. While there is some representation of our students in the seventh grade curriculum by way of texts by Walter Dean Myers, Nikki Giovanni, and Marta Salinas, other aspects of our curriculum ignore and marginalize most of the students I teach. For example, the unit where we study mythology currently includes two Greek myths, but other cultures are represented by four half-page origin stories. In other words, the curriculum presents mythology as Greek mythology and a small inclusion of “everyone else”. While we have worked to expand the texts we have offered students to read, we have not yet developed a curriculum that centers our students as the core of our curriculum.

As we continue to improve our curriculum and planning, I believe that a focus on identity and students’ cultural practices would not only address social justice issues within our school, but also build students’ sense of community and cultural identity at school and beyond. Indeed, considering student backgrounds and cultures is a key factor for any teacher aiming for a culturally relevant or culturally sustaining pedagogy

(Ladson-Billings, 1995; Alim & Paris, 2017). Middle school students are often working to understand forces of injustice and the impacts faced by communities and students themselves. Thus, culture and identity can become high-interest topics for boosting student engagement and building a sense of community within the classroom. By adapting the essential questions, key texts, and assessments for each unit, I believe we can offer students the same assessments and rigorous academic standards as previous classes but with a perspective that allows for them to not only be their true selves, but to continue to develop their truest selves in the classroom. With this research question, I hoped to build on past successes and continue to develop curricula that students find engaging and relevant to their own lives.

In fact, these units lacked what Bishop (1990) described as windows through which students could see their world, doors through which they could meaningfully participate in it, and mirrors in which they could see their cultural identities reflected. Nonetheless, several of our units were already well-suited to a lens of cultural sustainability. For example, units focused on personal narratives and mythology could easily invite students to tell stories about themselves or to explore and share storytelling of many cultures. In these units, we could of course begin by choosing texts that are more reflective of the students I teach. However, I believed we could go further in our curriculum to help students not just feel included but to have a chance to develop their own culture and identity. For instance, a study of personal narrative can help us discuss elements of identity and the many forces that form and create our identities. When students then write their own personal narratives as part of our summative assessment, they can reflect in their writing on their own identity and practice self-expression of their

identity through storytelling; students can build their own sense of identity through the assignment itself.

I believed that this shift in curriculum would result in greater student engagement, and thus, higher student achievement. When my students feel like what they are learning is about them on a deep level, they also express that what they are learning feels important and relevant to them. I have seen how this importance translates into intrinsic motivation for learning and greater learning overall.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this capstone project was to develop a curriculum that engages students on a deep level by centering student identity and culture as part of the curriculum itself. In doing so, this capstone asked: *How can curricular materials on topics of identity and culture impact student engagement and academic achievement?*

In my personal and professional experience, students are most engaged when they feel that the work they are doing is relevant to their own lives. Furthermore, marginalized students need to see themselves in their learning where they have historically been deprived of that opportunity and yet to be given an equal access to this day. In fact, these students need more than just inclusion and acceptance in their curriculum, they need to be at the *core* of the curriculum. By centering all students in a diverse classroom, all students will have opportunities to both learn about others and learn about and share about themselves in their schooling experience. When students see themselves in their curriculum in this way, they will be more engaged in their learning and student achievement will increase.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature on student culture and identity, curriculum, student engagement, and student achievement. Current research on student culture and identity includes discussion of both culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Chapter Three describes this capstone project and its audience, and provides a rationale for this choice of project. Finally, Chapter Four includes reflection on the completion of this project and an overview of its implications on educational policy and further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

The demographics of students being served by public education in America is rapidly changing. From 1995 to 2017, Hispanic students went from making up 13.5% to 26.8% of total public school enrollment. Meanwhile, the percentage of White students enrolled in American public schools has gone from 64.8% in 1995 to 49.5% in 2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects that by 2029, White students will make up 43.8% of total public school enrollment. In addition to changing racial demographics, educators are also increasingly aware of the intersectionality of identities including race, gender, class, religion, sexuality, and physical and mental abilities. With these changing demographics, it is vital that our schools shift away from schooling that holds a white-supremacist, Eurocentric, Protestant ideal as the cultural norm. Rather, teachers have a responsibility to serve the multicultural, multilingual, multiracial body of students that we have in front of us. As Alim & Paris (2017) pointed out, as the demographics of our nation change, so too will the culture of power in our society, and all students will need access to this multiethnic, multilingual culture. Therefore, schools need to ensure that our curricula and pedagogy aim to reach all students and to not just include, but honor and sustain, the culture of all students.

In this capstone project, I aimed to answer the following question: *How can curricular materials on topics of identity and culture impact student engagement and academic achievement?* In asking this question, I seek to address not just the ignorance of

groups of our students and the perpetuation of white supremacy in current curricula, but also the current disengagement among many students of color in our schools caused by this ignorance. While current discussion of the achievement gap between White students and students of color are based on the flawed metric of culturally biased standardized tests, it still stands that our schools are measuring students by these metrics, and there is a clear difference in how students are served according to these metrics. On the other hand, research on culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, and other frameworks, suggests that we have an opportunity to not just reach a wider group of students, but to help those students excel in the classroom while having their own identities and culture become a central focus of the classroom. In studying this issue, I have shown how we can better serve all students in the changing society in which we teach.

In this chapter, I first identify key educational research on issues of culture and identity in the classroom. Then, I describe how culture and identity have been considered in curricula. Finally, I describe the impacts considering culture and identity in the classroom have had on student engagement and achievement.

### **Key Terms**

For the purposes of this capstone, I have used the following definitions for key terms in this research. Here, *identity* is defined as the social, cultural, and community aspects of a person's life that define how that individual sees themselves as well as how others perceive them. Muhammad (2020) listed racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, kinship, academic/intellectual, personal/individual, and community identities as examples of identities as they relate to students in schools (p. 49). It is important to acknowledge that

within this definition, other's perceptions also will often play a role in how an individual might see themselves and therefore also become part of their identity.

While *culture* is sometimes used synonymously with race, in this capstone, culture refers to the “shared and common beliefs, models for living, and practices by a group of people (Muhammad, 2020, p. 45). As Hollie (2017) put it: “The cultures referred to are not based on race, nor ethnicity alone. The cultures...speak to who we are, wholly related to our identities and how they are manifested in the context of institutions such as schools” (p. 19). To illustrate, cultures may be based on a person's age, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation, or socioeconomic status, as well as any number of other identity markers.

*Student engagement* is defined as the relationship between the students and the learning material that is being presented to them. This may appear in a number of ways, including but not limited to work completion; connection with the teacher; a willingness to share personal experiences, perspectives, and ideas; active participation with their peers; and/or increased academic performance (as measured by grades and test scores).

*Academic achievement* is defined as increased outcomes for an individual student based on the measures which we have available to us, including reading level, work completion, the meeting of state standards, test scores, and grades on district-wide summative assessments.

### **Culture and Identity in the Classroom**

Students enter classrooms carrying their personal identities and cultural backgrounds with them. While marginalized students often are viewed in terms of what they lack – such as knowledge of dominant cultural norms or Standard American English

skills – acknowledging students’ cultural backgrounds shifts our view to an asset-based perspective, allowing us to see the vast wealth of knowledge all students carry with them into the classroom. Moll & Gonzalez (1995) described these cultural backgrounds as including *funds of knowledge* that carry “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 443). These funds of knowledge may include skills related to the labor market such as plumbing, masonry, or carpentry, as well as skills learned from older relatives, such as midwifery, herbal remedies, plant cultivation, and first aid. Importantly, the study of funds of knowledge acknowledges that students and their families gain access to this wealth of knowledge through social networks beyond the individual household. While some students may not enter the classroom with full access to dominant cultural norms, recognition of the knowledge students do carry with them helps educators to view students from an asset-based lens.

In her coining of the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP), Ladson-Billings (1995) asserted that teachers who practice need to be cognizant of students’ cultural backgrounds and to work with all students to ensure cultural competence as well as a critical stance and academic achievement. Ladson-Billings (1995) found that the students in the classrooms she observed demonstrated achievements both in standardized assessments and in their ability to pose critical questions in the classroom and their interaction and collaboration with their peers to solve problems. She argued that whether or not there is a fit between students’ home and school culture, students still must achieve. She further asserted that student achievement does not necessarily have to come at the expense of students’ cultural competence. The teachers she observed empowered



the students to become better at navigating the academic demands of schools while incorporating students' home cultural practices, such as studying rap lyrics to teach elements of poetry. Finally, Ladson-Billings (1995) stated that culturally relevant teaching must promote not only student achievement and cultural competence but also the critique of social inequities. Teachers she observed did not shy away from the political and economic context of the students' community. In fact, those teachers encouraged students to engage with social issues in their community. In one instance, students presented a proposal for an alternative use of the vacant shopping mall to the city council.

Built out of a sense that CRP does not go far enough, Paris (2012) proposed "...culturally sustaining pedagogy [that] seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 93). However, Paris did not critique Ladson-Billings's main aims of CRP: academic achievement, cultural competence, and a critical stance for all students. Rather, Paris (2012) argued that the research and teaching coming about under the name of CRP was not adequately meeting these three goals. In particular, he pointed out that cultural competence should focus on maintaining language and cultural practices of marginalized students while acquiring the dominant language and cultural practices students may need access to (p. 94). Therefore, Paris argued that the term "relevance" does not go far enough to describe what should be our aims as educators. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), on the other hand, suggests that education seeks to promote multilingualism and multiculturalism at the deepest sense – to "perpetuate and foster – to sustain" this pluralism (Paris, 2012, p. 95). In fostering this pluralism, Paris continued, we also need to

remember that our students are engaged in both “traditional and evolving” cultural practices, and that our goal is to sustain both (Paris, 2012).

Indeed, culturally sustaining pedagogy builds on the concept of *third spaces*, or the creation of a zone in between the classroom and students’ home backgrounds. In these spaces, “alternative and competing discourses and positionings transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning” (Gutierrez, Lopez & Tejada, 1999). Third spaces can be viewed as areas where students bridge the gap between the knowledge and skills privileged at school and the knowledge and skills they need and use outside of the classroom. In the third space, these worlds and realms of knowledge can collide, interact, and build on one another to create the “rich zones of collaboration and learning” that Gutierrez, Lopez, and Tejada (1999) described.

Paris and Alim explained that while helpful, previous frameworks of third spaces, funds of knowledge and culturally relevant pedagogy interact with culture in “static ways that look only to the important ways that racial/ethnic difference was enacted by previous generations” (p. 9). On the other hand, Paris and Alim argued, youth are engaged in the fluid process of continuing to develop their identities and culture, and our pedagogies need to reflect that. Beginning with the base of linguistic, cultural, and literacy practices as assets, CSP calls “for schooling to be a site for sustaining the cultural ways of being of communities of color” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 5). Thus, the third space described by Gutierrez, Lopez, and Tejada (1999) is not just a place for cultures to interact, but becomes a space where youth can develop and sustain their culture and identities while engaging in learning. For example, Caraballo and Soleimany (2019) found that in the third space built between students and teachers, students are able to discuss the human

condition, their own experiences and “even interrogate the very power structures that surreptitiously work to marginalize them” (p. 97).

While some, notably Delpit (2006), have argued that students need access to a culture of power, Paris and Alim pointed out that as the demographics of the United States changes, so too will the culture of power in our society. Students need access to the multiethnic and multilingual future toward which we are moving. Where others might see a language gap for students entering classrooms that have historically privileged Standard American English, CSP becomes “necessary to honor, value, and center the rich and varied practices of communities of color, and is a necessary pedagogy for helping shape access to power in a changing nation” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 6). In fact, Paris and Alim (2017) have asked us to question our aims in the cultures we ask students to become competent in, asking:

What if the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms, but rather was to explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize their cultural practices and investments? (p. 3).

Gambrell (2017) added to the discussion of cultural relevance in schools and emphasized that spirituality, too, needs to be recognized as part of student identities and therefore part of both culture and meaning-making for students. For example, studies of literature or music might examine how spirituality has been linked to the creation of music and literature, or inspire a multicultural study of how spirituality interacts with art forms across the world.

As importantly, CSP also advocates that we encourage students to critique cultural practices, especially those that are misogynistic or homophobic. Part of a key goal of CSP is to not just sustain language, literacy, and cultural practice, but to also “[open] up spaces for students themselves to critique the ways that they might be—intentionally or not—reproducing discourses that marginalize members of our communities” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 11). This critical awareness builds upon the critical stance Ladson-Billings (1995) called for in her definition of CRP, but asks that we are not just critical of dominant cultural norms, but also help students to maintain that critical stance towards their own culture even as they continue to sustain and develop it. In examining the effects of studying culture and identity in an English language arts curriculum, in many ways, I am examining the impacts of adopting culturally sustainable practices in my curriculum.

### **Where Culture and Identity Intersect with Language Use in Schools**

While CSP seeks to flip the narrative of deficits in students, Bucholtz (2017) pointed out that youth language in particular is often seen from a deficit standpoint, despite its innovation and sophisticated use; and furthermore, language is actually central to developing identity. Bucholtz further argued that schools must sustain students’ linguistic repertoires including the languages currently excluded from classroom learning, and that we can leverage linguistic repertoires as “resources both for achieving institutional access and for challenging structural inequality” (p. 45). In other words, peer-based, youth-based, familial, heritage-based languages need to be used and studied in addition to and alongside dominant cultural languages.

In order to focus on the key aspect of language use in the classroom, Hollie (2017) developed a culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (CLR) to both urge

us to consider culture over purely looking at race, and to include a focus on linguistic identity as well. Hollie, too, built on previous work of CRP, but insists on a focus on “transforming instructional practices to make the difference for improving relationships between students and educators and increasing student achievement” (Hollie, 2017, p. 21). CLR advocates for VABbing, or validating home culture and language, affirming students’ identities, building understanding of students’ cultural and linguistic behaviors, and bridging students towards success in mainstream society (Hollie, 2017, p. 27).

Hollie’s instructional practices include recognition of multiple dialects of English, as well as other languages, while giving students opportunities to connect, translate, and bridge their understandings of how and when linguistic registers may be used.

Martinez (2017) described Black and Latinx students’ experiences in schooling as commonly an experience of linguistic violence. For instance, students’ contributions and insights are rejected in the classroom when they do not align with expectations of monolingualism and monoculturalism. In the face of this linguistic violence, Martinez suggested that English language arts classrooms become a space where teachers and students can examine and critique this linguistic violence and “foster linguistic solidarity between Black and Latinx youth” (p. 182). Martinez (2017) provided a language of solidarity framework with four key components: 1) pride in home and community languages, 2) critical language pedagogy that examines the social, historical, and political nature of languages; 3) literacy tasks that allow students to make sense of their own language experiences; and 4) a language of solidarity across Black, Latinx, and other communities. Furthermore, Martinez (2017) argued that we have a role in building solidarity between groups of students, such as Black and Latinx students. Language

sharing and overlaps of culture, including shared interests, can work as “points of leverage for learning” (p. 185).

Indeed, numerous studies have shown that explicitly addressing language and the presumed hierarchies of language in our world is critical to culturally sustaining pedagogy. Borck (2019) described one teacher explaining to their students, “We have to learn how to speak in Standard American English not because that is the best way to speak but because it is how the people in power - the people with resources - speak” (p. 384). In this explanation, the teacher shows that they understand students will need to access the culture of power to which Delpit (2006) refers, but at the same time, both teachers and students can critique the assumptions and beliefs that privilege one language over others. In other words, teachers took on the role of helping students navigate disparities between current cultures of power and realities of the cultures and communities students live in.

For many English language arts teachers, the primary goal of teaching is to teach English – that is, Standard American English. From this perspective, consideration of linguistic practice has no place in a teacher’s pedagogy. Some educators view a reliance on home language and dialects as a deficit, or even the practice of translanguaging as a sign of lacking skills in both Standard American English and the students’ language, but language use must be considered as part of recognizing student strengths and skills. Furthermore, educators need to recognize that “This is more than a mere linguistic fact; in its acknowledgment of speaker skill, it goes to the very heart of identity” (Bucholtz, 2017, p. 51). Thus, student language use is part of the language arts – both in the sense of

skill in language use and, even more importantly, the ability to use a wide range of linguistic tools for the expression and understanding of oneself and the world around us.

### **Where Culture and Identity Intersect with English Language Arts Curricula**

Principles of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy are among key lenses for understanding how teachers can approach their classrooms with the mindset of reaching all students, all while providing opportunities for cultural sustainability and increased engagement and academic achievement. In the following section, I discuss critical literacy, culturally responsive literacy education, and historically responsive literacy as frameworks for putting theory into practice.

#### ***Critical Literacy***

A strategy commonly used to bring CSP to the English language arts classroom is the use of critical literacy. As Ervin (2021) described, “By inviting students to analyze and respond to literature through multiple critical perspectives, teachers can privilege students’ diverse cultural identities” (p 321). Drawing from CRP, CSP, and critical literacy, Ervin argued that even when teaching a prescribed curriculum, teachers can invite students to explore their own identities through critical readings of texts. Other strategies might include using critical theory, pairing and layering texts, counter-storytelling, student discussions, and authentic and non-traditional assessments of student understandings.

Gutierrez (2008) also discussed the possibilities of learning allowed when critical literacy is used in conjunction with the construction of a Third Space. In this framework, the center of learning becomes students’ lives situated in cultural, historical, and social contexts, including schools, classrooms, and the many places where students are learning

outside of schools. Students working in this model are invited to consider their own actions as historical actors and social participants, while they also work to make meaning of both their world and their own identities. This pedagogy demands we examine multiple interacting contexts, always complicating our understanding of how everyday practices and environments both support and constrain learning and identity.

### ***Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction***

Hollie (2017) agreed that literacy skills are crucial for our daily lives and for understanding academic achievement, but he added that we need to “understand how texts function as social practices that show identities, values, beliefs and social networks” (p. 142). Within Hollie’s CLR framework, he advocated for *culturally responsive literacy instruction* (2017). This framing of literacy instruction is taught with the goals of 1) engaging students in culturally and linguistically responsive texts; 2) using read-alouds to engage in oral traditions; and 3) using effective literacy strategies responsively (p. 143).

This first goal of using culturally relevant texts is a common goal for educators, with many textbook publishers also making an effort to broaden the diversity of texts offered. Despite this trend, truly culturally responsive texts are difficult to find, especially when considering that many current attempts are tokenistic representations of people of color. Therefore, CLR educators should “*plan to supplement* the state-mandated anthologies with culturally responsive texts” (Hollie, 2017, p. 145, emphasis in original). For example, Valdez (2017) chose to teach a prescribed unit titled “Taking a Stand” by supplementing the unit with the novel *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia, allowing her to teach about the Black Panther party as an example of protest, community support, and a counter-narrative to more traditionally taught U.S. history. The novel also



took place in a setting similar to students' own lives, and students were able to examine the racism still present in their own lives through the study. Similarly, Gibson (2010) argued for using urban fiction to engage students as a form of cultural relevance, despite many adults thinking it is inappropriate or not as valuable as more traditional, canonical works. Gibson maintained that students are already engaging in reading these works, and we do a disservice to students by not including them in our curricula. However, in seeking to supplement prescribed curricula, Hollie (2017) cautioned that teachers need to further be aware that not all texts that include various cultural groups are culturally responsive, and should be examined to make sure they highlight authentic experiences of cultural groups.

Culturally and linguistically relevant literacy instruction should also include effective read-alouds. Reading out loud has been shown to improve fluency, but perhaps more importantly, is a way of “validating and affirming students by simulating the oral tradition of storytelling” (Hollie, 2017, p. 150). Therefore, engaging students in read-alouds – as modeled by the teacher, by individual students, and as a whole group – has both academic and identity affirming benefits for students.

Finally, Hollie (2017) asserted that CLR and culturally responsive literacy instruction should not exclude effective literacy practices. In fact, educators can approach incorporating CLR into instruction with a both/and mindset, weaving CLR concepts into research-supported literacy instruction for both academic and cultural benefits. Therefore, teachers are not choosing between CLR and teaching English language arts (ELA) standards. Rather, using CLR concepts to guide instruction can improve the teaching of ELA standards.

Other teachers have found ways to embed culturally sustaining practices into their ELA classrooms with a focus on poetry, particularly spoken word. For instance, Woodard and Coppola (2018) highlighted the example of a spoken word poetry unit giving chances to examine multicultural forms of poetry juxtaposed with canonical works more traditionally taught in schools. Performance to peers and comments from peers gave an authentic audience and the chance for students to share their own identities, as well as to critique aspects of their lived experiences as they saw fit in culturally sustaining moments. In the example given by Jones and Curwood (2020), when teachers and mentor poets showed their own vulnerability and valued student voices, students were welcomed into a third space where they could express themselves, explore their own identities, and write poetry and spoken word of their own. Students also engaged in critical literacy in this third space by writing about the societal issues impacting their own lives. In other words, students were asked to “talk back” to the world through their speaking and writing (p. 287).

Finally, Puzio et. al’s (2017) study of mistakes made by teachers enacting CSP in English classrooms serves as a reminder that teachers, especially White teachers, are influenced by their lack of insider knowledge of marginalized communities and the hierarchical structures present in education. Indeed, teachers implementing CSP will make mistakes, and they will learn from those mistakes when they listen to and learn from the members of the marginalized communities they seek to support in enacting CSP.

### ***Historically Responsive Literacy***

Rather than relying on curricula that was not designed to teach marginalized students, Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) is rooted in the rich tradition of Black

literacy societies as a way to create an educational practice that works for students of all races, ethnicities, and identities (Muhammad, 2020, p. 22). Muhammad (2020) identified three themes of Black literacy development:

- literary presence, or the “staking a claim and making oneself visible within the intellectual community through acts of literacy” (p. 27);
- literary pursuits, or the acts of literacy that were believed to “lead to liberation, self-determination, self-reliance, and self-empowerment” (p. 28);
- literary character, or the personal and academic characteristics developed through literary practices (p. 30).

It is these themes and other lessons from historical Black literary practices that create the foundation of HRL.

Historically responsive literacy can be viewed as a framework for implementing CRP, the principles of which Muhammad (2020) pointed out were present in African educational philosophies, Black literary societies, educational directives in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, as well as in the writings of Black authors like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Carter G. Woodson, and W.E.B. DeBois (p. 43). HRL has four main literary pursuits which are 1) literacy as identity meaning-making; 2) literacy as skills; 3) literacy as intellect; and 4) literacy as criticality. In these pursuits, there is alignment with other theoretical frameworks. For example, HRL’s focus on identity meaning-making can be viewed as a part of a culturally sustaining pedagogy while literacy as criticality can be viewed as adopting the critical stance called for by culturally relevant pedagogy. HRL presents these 4 literacy pursuits as the overlapping

goals of a successful curriculum, with work in each goal building upon the other pursuits as well.

### **Impact of CRP and CSP on Student Engagement and Achievement**

The aim of CRP, CLR, and CSP pedagogies is to affirm and sustain students' identities and cultures in a school setting, but beyond even this important benefit, there is evidence that these pedagogies improve both student engagement and achievement in school (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cherfas et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017; Irizarry, 2017; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; San Pedro, 2017; Sharif Matthews & Lopez, 2019, Walker & Hutchinson, 2021; Yu, 2022). In the example of an Ethnic Studies course centering Native identities, taught in a public school near a reservation centering Native identities, one student noted “that his story was the curriculum, that he had an opportunity to reflect on his reality and envision his futurity by making changes in his present actions” (San Pedro, 2017, p. 112). In fact, being asked to share stories about himself and what represented him, taking a class that reflected his own identity, became one student's reason to stay in school long enough to graduate (San Pedro, 2017). In other words, a culturally sustaining course provided the relevance to his own life the rest of his education had been missing.

Irizarry's (2017) study of language use in classrooms showed that when a group of students was allowed to choose the language to conduct class in, they chose to enmesh standard American English, Spanish, and AAVE, moving fluidly between languages as made the most sense to them and allowed them the most meaning at that moment. In this example, not only did students use multiple languages as expansive tools, but previously disengaged students became newly engaged in their learning. Irizarry (2017) further

noted that students expressed that they wanted to learn about the experiences of People of Color and the experiences of urban youth. In sum, they wanted to learn about themselves, to see the connections between their own learning and the broader context of other marginalized learners and society at large, and to feel able to make a change in their learning.

Furthermore, these benefits have been shown to provide benefits across the board for students. For example, according to a mixed-methods study done at a diverse high school in Colorado, African-American students preferred culturally relevant lessons to those that relied on standard, pre-existing curricula (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Students recognized these lessons as culturally relevant when their teacher was culturally responsive and caring (Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). In another study by Dee and Penner (2017), being assigned to an ethnic studies course in 9th grade led to improved attendance by 21 percentage points, improved GPAs by 1.4 points, and increased credits earned by 23 credits . These surprisingly large results suggest that the opportunity to study a culturally relevant curriculum can lead to improved academic engagement and performance across a student's schooling.

Additionally, benefits of cultural relevance and cultural sustainability can include increased academic achievement. Cabrera et al. (2014) found that taking classes in a Mexican American Studies program in Tucson significantly improved performance on state standardized tests and high school graduation rates. Cherfas, Casciano, and Wiggins (2021) showed the positive impact of Hip-Hop pedagogy, one specific form of CRP, on passing grades and graduation rates, as well as high-stakes exam scores.

Furthermore, these benefits have been found in science and math classes as well. For instance, Sharif Matthews & Lopez (2019) found that honoring heritage language and incorporating cultural content, combined with critical awareness on the part of the teacher, not only improved student engagement but led to growth in mathematics achievement for Latino students. A more recent study found that CRP improved student engagement and achievement in science and math in an urban school setting (Yu, 2022).

In a study focused on literacy instruction in particular, using differentiated instruction, culturally responsive texts, teacher read-alouds and small group instruction – all components of CRP and CSP – led to greater student achievement (Walker & Hutchinson, 2021). In this study, students read literature with characters that reflected their own identities and reported that they enjoyed reading these texts. Teachers focused on direct interactions highlighting students' growth, goals for learning, and their resiliency while validating challenges in their lives. In the end, they found a 29% increase in passing rates on state testing when compared to previous year. It is clear that CRP, CSP, and CLR all provide a way students can connect with their learning and increase personal relevance, leading to more engagement and achievement.

### **Summary**

Many pedagogical frameworks and theories have considered culture and identity in schools, including funds of knowledge, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, showing that teachers must work to understand, include, and sustain their students' cultures in the classroom. Other scholars have deepened this work by examining the role of language use in schools as it relates to students' culture and identity, showing that flexibility and inclusion with language use can lead to greater

student engagement and ownership of their learning. Curricular frameworks such as critical literacy, culturally responsive literacy, and historically responsive literacy provide a method for including culture and identity in curricula. Finally, research shows that the opportunity to study culture and identity in school can lead to increased student engagement and academic achievement.

Chapter 3 provides a description of my capstone project in detail, including the rationale for the project, the setting, audience, and timeline, and the district- and school-mandated parameters within which I must work. Next, I detailed the research and theoretical frameworks supporting my curriculum design. Finally, I outlined the assessments I will use to evaluate the success of my curriculum design.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

My capstone project studies the impact of including identity and culture as topics of study in curriculum. Specifically, I hope to see the results of these curriculum changes on student engagement and achievement. This work will challenge teachers to reconsider what belongs in an English language arts curriculum while encouraging students to engage in identity and cultural exploration. Furthermore, students will be given opportunities to study, develop, and think critically about the culture(s) they live in and want to sustain in the future. It is important to recognize in this capstone that while much research has been conducted about culture as tied to race, or culture as contrasted with a White, Eurocentric norm, the cultural study embedded in this capstone project aims to consider all forms of culture, including race, ethnicity, religion, age, ability, geographic areas, and even the cultures formed surrounding common interests and hobbies.

Ultimately, I seek to answer the following question: *How can curricular materials on topics of identity and culture impact student engagement and academic achievement?*

In this chapter, I provide a description of the goals of my project, the rationale for my project, and the pedagogical frameworks I used in designing this project. Next, I describe the setting in which this project will be conducted including parameters set by the school district and school where the project will take place. Finally, I describe the timeline for completion and implementation of this project as well as the assessment I use to evaluate the success of this project.



## **Rationale for Project**

For this capstone project, I reframed an existing unit of curriculum for the 7th grade English language arts classes at Robbinsdale Middle School. While there are district- and school-set parameters that I must teach within my instruction, teaching this unit previously has shown me the lack of cultural relevance for students within this unit. In reframing and redesigning this curriculum, I hope to expand the cultural sustainability of this curriculum and to engage students more deeply in their learning, thus leading to greater student achievement.

While culturally relevant pedagogy has been part of common discussions in educational circles, Muhammad (2020) points out that it is often presented as a “an ‘add-on’ in schools and districts rather than the means of framing systems” (p. 35). Further, despite a wealth of research on the subject, “there remains a large gap between what we know or *should know* and what we actually do in classrooms and schools” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 21). My study aims to apply principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, and historically responsive literacy instruction to curriculum design (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Alim & Paris, 2017; Hollie, 2017; Muhammad, 2020). In other words, this capstone aims to put theory into practice and turn what we know into what we do in teaching.

## **Setting, Audience, and Timeline**

This capstone project was designed for use in seventh grade English language arts (ELA) classes at Robbinsdale Middle School (RMS). RMS is a public middle school in the Robbinsdale Area Schools district serving about 700 students. While RMS is located

in Robbinsdale, Minnesota, students at RMS primarily live in Crystal, New Hope, Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, and North Minneapolis. In the 2020-21 school year, 36% of students were African American or Black, 23% of students are Hispanic, 22% of students are White, 10% of students are two or more races, 9% of students are Asian, 0.25% of students are Native American or Alaska Native, and 0.1% of students are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (Minnesota School Report Card, 2022). With a majority of students receiving free-or reduced-price lunch, RMS is a designated Title I school.

The participants in this project are the students who will be enrolled in my seventh-grade ELA classes in the fall of 2022 at RMS. The audience of this project are primarily my colleagues at RMS and across the district. Since Robbinsdale Area Schools is currently beginning a curriculum review of the middle school ELA curriculum, including adaptations made to our current curriculum, results of my project will be shared with ELA teachers and the Curriculum and Instruction team at the district level.

This capstone project was completed in the summer of 2022, with a completion date of August 2022, and the curricular unit created will be implemented in the fall semester of the 2022-23 school year, lasting approximately seven weeks. By the end of the fall semester of the 2022-23 school year, I will reflect on the success of the unit as shown in student summative assessments, participation in class activities and discussions, student work completion, and observations by myself and my colleagues made during the teaching of this unit. Based on this reflection, the unit will be revised and changed as necessary to meet the needs of future groups of students.

### **District- and School-Mandated Parameters**

Robbinsdale Area Schools specify that all middle school English language arts (ELA) courses taught in the district will use the SpringBoard English Language Arts curriculum designed by the College Board. Teachers may adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their students, but it is expected that the summative assessments embedded in the curriculum remain the same across the district. While it is possible that the ongoing district curriculum review may result in a change to the district mandated curricula, any changes will not take place for another school year. Therefore, while the texts chosen and instructional strategies used throughout the unit will be changed in this capstone project, the summative assessments will be only slightly modified from the SpringBoard curriculum. Robbinsdale Middle School is also an International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IBMYP) World School. Therefore, this unit design must adhere to standards of the IB Middle Years Programme (IBMYP) for Language and Literature classes.

### **Curriculum Design**

For this project, I reframed and redesigned an existing unit of curriculum that is currently taught in my seventh grade English language arts (ELA) classroom at Robbinsdale Middle School. The curriculum currently taught is Unit 1 of the SpringBoard English Language Arts Grade 7 curriculum, “The Choices We Make” (The College Board, 2021). In this project, I aimed to redesign the unit with a lens of culturally sustaining pedagogy, historically responsive literacy pedagogy, and improved text selection to ultimately design a curriculum that better meets the needs of my students and leads to greater engagement in student learning and improved academic achievement.

Specifically, I hoped to embed study of identity and culture into instruction in order to provide students with a forum to examine, understand, express, and sustain their own identity(ies) and culture(s). In doing so, I mainly used principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, historically responsive literacy, and understanding by design.

### ***Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Instructional Strategies***

At the core of my curriculum design are the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Paris (2012) explains that “culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). Germán’s (2021) framework of Textured Teaching puts CSP into practice with student driven and community centered teaching, flexible pedagogy, interdisciplinary teaching, and experiential learning to meet the needs of all students while working towards love and community, justice, and truth and knowledge (p. 6-7). These principles guided my curriculum design, along with pedagogies such as historically responsive literacy (HRL), culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (CLR), and the importance of culturally relevant and sustaining text selection.

### ***Historically Responsive Literacy***

In this capstone project, I worked towards the goals of Historically Responsive Literacy, or HRL (Muhammad, 2020). These goals are 1) identity development, 2) skills development, 3) intellectual development, and 4) criticality (p. 63). In reframing a curriculum with these goals, I seek to create learning that is “humanizing and more complete” in order to improve the education of all” (p. 63). Muhammad (2020) points out that this framework reframes current learning standards, which are not fully inclusive of

the students we teach and are not responsive to the demands of both our students and the present state of the world. Therefore, in addition to the state standards and district mandates of my curriculum, the goals of HRL became key pursuits of this curriculum design.

### ***Text Selection in Curriculum***

In order to fully engage and learn from an English language arts curriculum, students need to study culturally relevant and sustaining texts (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Hollie, 2017; Muhammad, 2020). Walker and Hutchinson (2021) explain the importance of text selection in order to give students a chance to explore contemporary issues and changes through texts, as well as to experience joy in reading texts that reflect their own lives and challenges. Muhammad (2020) argues that texts in classrooms should have the same goals as our pedagogy, namely to help students know themselves and their worth, to understand the histories and truths of other people, to learn skills and knowledge, and to develop criticality (p. 153). Indeed, Hollie (2017) asserts that teachers must “actively *plan to supplement* the state-mandated anthologies with culturally responsive texts” (p. 145). Furthermore, Hollie cautions that some texts that include characters of various racial identities may not actually include authentic representations of various cultures. Thus, the selection of supplementary texts must be carefully considered.

### ***International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme Unit Design and the Understanding by Design Framework***

The curriculum design for this capstone project was completed with adherence to the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IBMYP) unit design guidelines (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014). This framework stipulates

that teachers begin with inquiry, or establishing the purpose of the unit. Then, teachers plan the action stage, or the teaching and learning activities for the unit. Finally, the IBMYP framework stipulates that both teachers and students engage in reflection before, during, and after the unit (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014, p. 50-51).

These three stages mirror, and are partially drawn from, Heineke and McTighe's (2018) Understanding by Design (UbD) framework. The UbD framework stipulates that units are planned in three stages: identification of desired results, determining acceptable evidence of those results, and finally, planning the learning experiences and instruction to achieve the desired results. With the IBMYP framework drawn from UbD principles, it is a natural fit to use the UbD lesson template for individual lesson plans in addition to the IBMYP Unit Planner for broader planning purposes. For this capstone, I used a version of the UbD lesson template modified by the Robbinsdale Area School district for use across the district (Robbinsdale Area Schools, 2021).

Both IBMYP and UbD frameworks emphasize teaching towards conceptual understandings, and consideration of these aims early in the planning process of a unit. In the inquiry stage of IBMYP unit planning, teachers choose concepts students will study as well as the global context for study and statement of inquiry. By starting with concepts, IBMYP provides greater accessibility to students since these concepts "place no limits on breadth of knowledge or on depth of understanding" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014, p. 56). In other words, students may study these concepts at whatever level or depth of understanding is appropriate for their own learning. In addition to a key concept, related concepts extend learning and global contexts for learning help students connect their learning to other subject areas and the

world around them. The key concept, related concepts, and global contexts are all combined in a single statement of inquiry that describes the relationship between concepts and contexts in a way that students can understand (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014, p. 62). The statement of inquiry should also be transferable beyond the content of the unit.

### **Instructional Goals**

In this capstone, desired results include both state- and district-mandated learning standards for English language arts as well as conceptual understandings of students' own identities and cultures. The key concept for this capstone project is *identity*, and the related concepts are *genre* (specifically narrative) and *self-expression*. These concepts will be taught within the global context of *identities and relationships*. For this unit, the statement of inquiry is: *Personal narratives provide valuable perspective on how we express our identities and personal choices*. In designing with these goals in mind, it is important to recognize that while there is certainly evidence of students understanding and considering their own identities and cultures, identity and culture are both inherently in flux, so there is no "completion" of our understanding of these aspects of ourselves. concepts as part of essential questions of the unit, and this capstone project aims to do that.

In addition to exploration of the concepts of identity, genre, and self-expression, this unit aimed to teach students how to write a narrative with a clear organizational structure, using transitions to aid the reader in understanding the progression of the text. The writing should also use sensory details and/or figurative language to add detail and create an engaging text for a reader. Students will also practice skills of citing evidence

from a text to support an answer and to engage in classroom discussions, both with and without preparation. Finally, students will engage in work analyzing works of fiction, including the ways in which authors create characters and use sensory details and figurative language to add depth to their writing and convey a particular setting, character, or tone.

### ***Minnesota State Standards***

This project was designed in accordance with Minnesota State Standards for English Language Arts (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011). This study specifically targets the standards below:

- 7.4.1.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 50).
- 7.4.2.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 50).
- 7.4.4.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 50).
- 7.4.6.6 Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text, including those from diverse cultures (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011 p. 50).



- 7.4.10.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature and other texts including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently and independently with appropriate scaffolding for texts at the high end of the range. a. Self-select texts for personal enjoyment, interest and academic tasks. b. Read widely to understand multiple perspectives and pluralistic viewpoints. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011 p. 51)
- 7.7.3.3 Write narratives and other creative texts to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences. a. Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically. b. Use literary and narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, rhythm, rhyme, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters. c. Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another. d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, figurative and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events. e. Provide a conclusion (when appropriate to the genre) that follows from and reflects on the narrated experiences or events. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 60)
- 7.7.4.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 61)

- 7.7.5.5 With some guidance and support from peers and adults, use a writing process to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, drafting, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well the purpose and audience have been addressed. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 61)
- 7.9.1.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. a. Come to discussions prepared, having read or researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion. b. Follow rules for collegial discussions, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 67)
- 7.11.6.6 Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases; gather vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, p. 74)

### ***Assessment***

Students will complete one summative assessment as part of this unit. Due to district specifications that all middle school English language arts courses use the assessments included in the SpringBoard Curriculum, this assessment will be Embedded Assessment 1 specified in Unit 1 of the Grade 7 SpringBoard English Language Arts curriculum, which is entitled "Revising a Personal Narrative." In order to reflect this

project's focus on identity in curriculum, the assessment has been retitled "Personal Narrative About Identity." Students will be asked to write a narrative detailing a moment when they have made a choice and how that choice has impacted their identity. Students are also asked to use transitions in their writing and to include the use of sensory details and/or figurative language. Student work on this assessment will provide a metric for both student engagement and achievement after implementation of this curriculum design.

In addition to the summative assessment described above, formative assessments, student quickwrites, and participation in class discussions will provide feedback on the success of this curriculum. Formative assessments include summaries of class notes, completed graphic organizers detailing main components of assigned texts, preparation for and participation in a Socratic Seminar discussion about a text, a completed one-page report about a character in an assigned text, a sample of text using sensory details, and identification of figurative language used in an assigned text. In direct preparation for the summative assessment, students are also expected to complete an outline detailing their ideas, structure, and use of sensory detail for the final narrative.

Completion of classwork, including nongraded and formative assessments, will provide an additional metric for student engagement and achievement throughout the unit. While completion of classwork can be a sign of compliance rather than true engagement, in past years, it can be a valuable metric when combined with teacher observations of engagement via class participation and the quality of completed work. There may be some students completing work simply to comply with instructions, but teacher observations and evaluations of this work may offer insight into whether or not a

student has engaged in their learning beyond the surface level. Teacher reflection, journal entries, and discussion among colleagues will provide an additional method for evaluating this curriculum. Finally, because some of the English Language Arts standards are tested in state standardized tests, student test scores in the Spring of 2023 will provide an additional measure of student achievement. The four standards that will be included in the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments are as follows:

- 7.4.1.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018, p. 50).
- 7.4.2.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018, p. 50).
- 7.4.4.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018, p. 53).
- 7.4.6.6 Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text, including those from diverse cultures (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018, p. 55).

Assessment of this project will also be completed as part of the reflection process embedded into IBMYP Unit Planners. This process includes teachers asking questions before, during, and after the implementation of a unit. Reflection questions at the

beginning of the unit include “What do students already know, and what can they do?” and “Why do we think that the unit or the selection of topics will be interesting?” (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014, p. 70). During teaching, reflection questions include “What student inquiries are emerging?” and “What is the level of student engagement?” (2014, p. 70). After teaching the unit, reflection questions include “What evidence of learning can we identify?” and “What student-initiated action did we notice?” (2014, p. 71). These reflection questions can help evaluate student learning and achievement, as well as engagement in the unit and topics of identity and culture in a classroom setting.

### **Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Instructional Strategies**

Throughout the unit design, instructional strategies have been chosen to allow students time to process their learning, discuss ideas with each other, and to think deeply about the key and related concepts of this unit. Some strategies used are those explicitly designed by the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Program to scaffold academic language use in the classroom (Bennett et al., 2016). These strategies focus on “building bridges” to success, as Hollie (2017) discusses in his VABing strategy (p. 27). Throughout the unit, the focused note-taking process is used to learn key vocabulary, knowledge, and skills throughout the unit while giving students time to process what they are learning (Merritt et al., 2018, p. 98). Another key instructional strategy in this unit is the critical reading process (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 96-97), used to give students a chance to preview a text and build vocabulary within the reading process, as well as to think critically about the text and interact with what they read. Within the critical reading process, students will use the Inside/Outside/Outside vocabulary strategy to look for word

stems and context clues to determine meanings of unknown words in a text (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 115). Class discussions are also a key strategy for this unit, including Think-Pair-Share and other partner discussions (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 69), Philosophical Chairs (p. 123), and Socratic Seminar (p. 120). These discussions give students a chance to use oral language skills to support academic language use, as well as opportunities to reflect on concepts they are exploring in the unit. Finally, the one-pager report strategy will give students a chance to present their learning creatively while making connections and applying their learning (Boyko et al., 2016, p. 248-250).

### **Resources**

This unit is designed using the College Board’s (2021) SpringBoard English Language Arts Grade 7 curriculum as a foundation. Additionally, resources include the following texts:

- “Why Couldn’t I Have Been Named Ashley?” (Achilike, as found in the College Board, 2021)
- An excerpt from *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991)
- “The Medicine Bag” (Driving Hawk Sneve, 2000)
- “Fish Cheeks” (Tan, 2000)

Other resources include children’s literature with themes of names and identity, as well as selected essays and news articles about individuals making choices that impact their identity. These resources will provide opportunities for students to explore the concept of identity and to consider real life examples of choices impacting identities. Finally, audio recordings of texts, both those found on the Internet and those recorded by

the teacher, are available for students to use as a supplemental resource throughout the unit to increase accessibility to class content.

### **Unit Flow**

This unit is laid out in 11 lessons. Each lesson is designed to take approximately one 80-minute class period to complete in a block schedule setting, but with the understanding that teachers may need the flexibility of using more time for a particular lesson or activity. Teachers may also modify the lessons to fit within shorter class periods or to work without the block scheduling setting. Therefore, the unit should be planned to take place over about six weeks of instruction overall.

- Lesson 1: Students will preview the statement of inquiry for the unit and the summative assessment so they have a clear understanding of our learning goals for the unit.
- Lesson 2: Students will explore the concept of identity by creating a word map as a class and then mapping out elements of their own identity. Students will take notes on the genre of narrative, in particular focusing on the personal narrative.
- Lesson 3: Students will use a critical reading protocol to read the personal narrative “Why Couldn’t I Have Been Named Ashley?” (Achilike, as found in the College Board, 2021). Students will identify the incident, response, and reflection included in the text. Students will then choose to read *My Name is Sangoel* (Williams and Mohammed, 2009), *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001), or *Alma and How She Got Her Name* (Martinez-Neal, 2018) on their own.

- Lesson 4: Students will read “My Name” from *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) and participate in a Socratic seminar discussion based on both “Why Couldn’t I Have Been Named Ashley?” and “My Name”.
- Lesson 5: Students will take focused notes on characterization and read “The Medicine Bag” (Driving Hawk Sneve, 2000), They will then complete a one-page report about the characterization in the text.
- Lesson 6: Students will take notes on sensory details. Students will complete an activity where they practice writing about a piece of candy focusing on one sense at a time.
- Lesson 7: Students will choose to read either “Topher Sanders Speaks” (Sanders, 2009) or “Yolanda Easley Speaks” (Easley, 2010) and record the incident, response, and reflection in the chart used with previous texts. Then, students will use a choice board to select and read a non-fiction text that describes a scenario where someone made a choice that impacted their identity.
- Lesson 8: Students will take notes on figurative language. They will read the text “Fish Cheeks” (Tan, 2000) and participate in stations to identify examples of figurative language used within the text.
- Lesson 9: Students will take notes on types of leads, or ways to begin a narrative. Students also brainstorm a topic for their summative personal narrative, select a topic, and write a beginning of their personal narrative.
- Lesson 10: Students will take notes on using transitions in narrative writing. Students will use a graphic organizer to plan their narrative and continue writing their personal narrative.



- Lesson 11: Students will use the looping revision strategy to add sensory details and figurative language to their narrative. They will finish writing their narrative and participate in writing groups to self- and peer-edit their work.

### **Summary**

In this section of my capstone, I have outlined the rationale for my curriculum design, described the setting, participants, and timeline for the project completion, and identified the pedagogies and elements of curriculum design I will use to guide my work. This curriculum design will assist me in answering the research question: *How can curricular materials on topics of identity and culture impact student engagement and academic achievement?* In the following chapter, I have described the results of my curriculum design and the potential for implementation of the curriculum.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

In my past three years teaching English language arts (ELA) at Robbinsdale Middle School, I have been increasingly frustrated with the curriculum I teach. I knew my students needed more ways to connect to the material and more opportunities to see themselves and each other in the classroom. I also witnessed students disengage from class, choosing to put their heads down, leave class whenever possible, or even just stare at the wall instead of participating in discussions or engaging in their learning. These observations led me to the research question: *How can curricular materials on topics of identity and culture impact student engagement and academic achievement?*

In this chapter, I first outlined the major findings of this capstone project, including the realization of my own agency as a teacher and the possibility for the improvement of other units within my curriculum. Next, I described how culturally sustaining pedagogy, historically responsive literacy, and culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy have all come together to support the development of this curriculum design. Then, I discussed possible implications and limitations of the project, which lead to the suggestion of future projects that continue to reflect on and revise curriculum to best meet each new group of students I encounter. Finally, I discussed the ways in which this project will be shared with colleagues and how this project benefits the profession as a whole.

### Major Learnings

Through this capstone project, I have learned that culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) can be implemented even within institutional constraints. To put it simply, it can be

done. My first encounters with CSP were eye-opening and inspiring for me as a teacher, but quickly followed by my own hesitancy. Of course it would be wonderful to allow students to examine and develop their own identities and cultures, but would I have time to develop a curriculum that makes room for this type of self reflection? Is there room within a school year to teach the standards *and* allow for CSP? By focusing on CSP, would I be limiting the literacy instruction my students receive in their ELA class? In this capstone project, however, I found that there can be room for ELA standards and CSP. In fact, the two can be intertwined and work together to increase student engagement alongside academic aims. By creating lessons and activities that focused on students' personal identity, I found myself creating more cohesion within the unit so that each lesson would build upon previous opportunities for self-reflection. As these connections between lessons strengthened, so did the academic goals and ties between lessons and assessments. By reframing a unit with CSP as a core aim, I found myself auditing each activity more closely, removing any "busy work" in favor of opportunities to share stories and ask questions about themselves and each other.

While working on this capstone, I also learned that as a teacher, I have more agency in my classroom than I knew. Before, I was aware that my actions as a teacher mattered and that I could impact students through personal relationships and my teaching. This ability to make a difference was in large part why I became a teacher. However, as a teacher, it is easy to feel frustrated and constrained by institutional demands, especially with a mandated curriculum. In working on this capstone, I was able to address my frustrations with the curriculum assigned by my district and work within the constraints of my job while still working towards goals that better meet the needs of my students and

my own development as a teacher. In reflecting on what I have been able to accomplish in this capstone, I feel empowered to continue to work for what is best for my students and myself, within whatever constraints may arise.

Finally, through this capstone project, I have learned that not only is it possible to prioritize cultural sustainability alongside academics, but that doing so can improve instruction overall. My work in the literature review of this capstone demonstrated that a focus on cultural relevance and culturally sustaining pedagogy could support student engagement and achievement (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cherfas et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017; Irizarry, 2017; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011; San Pedro, 2017; Sharif Matthews & Lopez, 2019, Walker & Hutchinson, 2021; Yu, 2022). In planning this curriculum design, I also found that a focus on topics of identity and culture created stronger connections between learning activities and summative assessments, leading to a more focused unit overall. While adherence to teaching standards and objectives kept a focus on teaching key skills and knowledge, knowing that students will be asked to reflect on their personal identity in their writing led to making sure students had time to explore the concepts early on in the unit. At each point in the unit, I wanted to be sure that there was a strong link to a skill needed for success or to a conceptual understanding I was building towards, and what resulted was a unit where each activity was chosen more intentionally and with greater alignment than I have achieved in previously taught units. Indeed, culturally sustaining pedagogy became a connecting thread that brought the unit together as a whole.

### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

My research for this capstone centered around culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which Paris and Alim (2017) argued was necessary in order to reflect the ways in which students are developing their identities and cultures. In particular, CSP for schools to be “a site for sustaining the cultural ways of being of communities of color” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 5). While CSP remained a theoretical touchstone throughout my capstone process, several other approaches fit within a CSP ideology and heavily influenced my curricular planning.

### ***Historically Responsive Literacy***

Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) was introduced by Muhammad (2020) as an approach drawing from the traditions of Black literacy societies in order to serve all students. HRL’s four literacy pursuits of identity meaning-making, skills, intellect, and criticality work within the CSP framework when used to build an English language arts (ELA) curriculum that allows for students to develop personal identity and culture. The pursuit of identity meaning-making was especially crucial to this capstone as the curriculum designed asks students to explore their own personal identity throughout the unit.

Muhammed’s (2020) work was also useful to me as a resource in unit planning. As I considered diverse texts to teach and ways to approach topics of identity in the classroom, Muhammed’s work provided a plethora of ideas and inspiration. In fact, I created several lessons asking students to consider the stories and meanings behind their names, inspired by Muhammed’s similar lesson plan (p. 74-76).

### ***Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Literacy Instruction***

In this capstone project, I also found myself drawing on many of the strategies and approaches to teaching suggested by Hollie's (2017) culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (CLR). While CLR can be seen as an approach to Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), rather than CSP, the practical approaches Hollie takes to literacy instruction provide a useful resource for an English language arts (ELA) curriculum. Indeed, culturally sustaining pedagogy was created as an extension of culturally relevant pedagogy, so it is unsurprising that an approach to culturally responsiveness in the classroom would be so relevant to this capstone. In particular, CLR's focus on culturally and linguistically responsive texts and effective literacy strategies proved essential to this curriculum design. In order to create a curriculum that better fit the needs of my students, I needed texts that students could relate to and that offered a more diverse perspective of our world. CLR, together with historically responsive literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy, has aided in this curriculum design while offering possibilities for future curriculum design as well.

### **Possible Implications**

The most immediate implication of my project is that the principles guiding this project could be applied when adapting other curricular units. For example, just as this capstone adapted part of the SpringBoard English Language Arts Grade 7 curriculum, the rest of the SpringBoard curriculum could be similarly adapted to promote culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Furthermore, teachers using other English language arts curricula could implement similar changes, such as reframing writing prompts and replacing texts, to existing unit plans. Indeed, identity and culture are works in progress

throughout our lives, and students need opportunities to develop their own identity and culture in the classroom time and time again. The benefits of CSP would be best gained when students return to CSP practices in the classroom each unit, school year, and even in each subject area.

In order to allow teachers to implement CSP in this way, policymakers need to consider time for proper planning and curriculum design. This project was made possible by time allocated through a graduate school program, and without that structure and dedicated time, it would have been difficult to dedicate the hours of research and planning required for this level of curriculum redesign. Of course, teachers need not overhaul entire units at a time, and small changes can be implemented and built upon in every classroom. However, schools truly dedicated to meeting the needs of all students, especially students of color, should ensure teachers have as much paid planning time as possible so they can dedicate time and resources necessary to revamp old curriculum designed for White, Eurocentric audiences. While it may not be possible to drastically change funding allocations for districts, prioritizing teacher planning time during professional development days or working to find room within the budget to pay teachers to collaborate and plan during summer months will be a needed step in the right direction.

### **Limitations of the Project**

A key limitation of this project is that it cannot be fully implemented until I have taught the unit I designed and been able to consider student engagement throughout the unit, as well as performance on formative and summative assessments. This teaching experience is especially important when attempting to address issues of personal identity, since only the students themselves can show their engagement and personal reflection

throughout the unit. After teaching the unit, I will be able to complete the reflection process and evaluate and then adjust the unit as necessary.

Another limitation of this project is that I have designed a curriculum to meet the approximate demographics of students I am likely to work with this coming school year based on previous years' student data and school trends. However, student populations can and do change, and with that, the specific cultural backgrounds and knowledge students carry will change as well. While I have done my best in this unit to consider as diverse a set of texts as possible, and to formulate assignments that all students might be able to access and connect to, as student bodies change so too will the needs of students, and I will have to adjust this curriculum design continuously. This also means that teachers working with different student bodies may have to adjust or adapt this unit to better meet their particular group of students.

An additional limitation of this type of project is that most teachers do not have the adequate time to plan this type of curriculum redesign. While my hope is that this project provides a tool that might alleviate time requirements, the reality is that adapting curriculum to a particular setting or a specific set of constraints takes time. Education is already underfunded across the country, and most school districts lack the funding to provide additional planning time for teachers. This financial restriction will continue to limit the extent to which teachers can implement culturally sustaining pedagogy in their classrooms. Furthermore, many teachers will need professional development in areas such as culturally sustaining pedagogy, adapting curriculum, and backwards unit design, and this professional development will also take time and money that may not be available. For many teachers, these limitations mean that our job is to implement what we



can as we are able to, continually reflecting on and revising our curriculum and instruction as we go on.

### **Future Projects**

This capstone project focused on a single unit taught in my seventh grade ELA class. Future projects would extend culturally sustaining pedagogy to all units in my classroom. While I will not immediately be able to redesign each unit to the level I have done with this capstone project, I hope that over time I will be able to work towards culturally sustaining pedagogy in every unit I teach, even if these future projects must occur gradually.

I also plan on the informal collection of data through student feedback, formative assessments, summative assessments, and my own observations of student engagement in the classroom. This data will be crucial in the necessary reflection and continuous redesign of this unit. I hope in this way to act as a reflective practitioner, adapting and adjusting my teaching as necessary while I continue my own journey as a teacher. Further, I am excited to share the results of this project with colleagues, so other teachers might benefit from my learning in this capstone.

### **Sharing of Results**

The most immediate sharing of results of this capstone will occur within my school building. I will begin the 2022-23 school year working with a colleague who will be new to my building, and I plan to share this unit design with them for use in their seventh grade English language arts (ELA) courses. This unit plan will also be shared with seventh grade ELA teachers across the district who are also expected to work with the SpringBoard curriculum. While I know these teachers have already found their own

ways to adjust and adapt to this mandated curriculum, I hope this unit design will offer new suggestions to their planning. Finally, as our school district continues its review of the secondary ELA curriculum, I plan on sharing this unit design as part of the review to demonstrate how SpringBoard can and has been adapted with a mindset of meeting the needs of a diverse group of students. In addition to sharing my initial unit design, I also plan to share my observations and reflections after teaching this unit with the groups mentioned above. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the development of curriculum and continued collaboration in my building and in the school district.

### **Contributions to the Profession**

By sharing this unit design with my colleague, this project will provide 7th Grade ELA teachers in Robbinsdale Area Schools with a curriculum that not only embodies CSP but also aligns with the district's mandated SpringBoard curriculum as well as the MN state standards. For those newer to the district and/or new to the profession and who have less power and resources to modify the district's curriculum, this will particularly be helpful because it addresses the shortcomings of the SpringBoard curriculum while retaining its overall structure based on the IB Middle Year Program (MYP) unit planner.

This project will also provide an example for future teacher-scholars hoping to integrate culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) into their teaching. Even though this was designed for a 7th Grade class, it could be modified to be taught in other secondary grades. Moreover, while this project would be the most useful for teachers who teach in IB MYP, it could easily be implemented in non-IB MYP schools since IB MYP unit planner is based on effective instruction. Even if the curriculum is not replicated in its

current state by other teachers, the texts, the tasks, and the assessments will serve as useful resources for any teacher who hopes to implement CSP in their classrooms.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four detailed the findings and reflections I had upon completion of my capstone project answering the research question: *How can curricular materials on topics of identity and culture impact student engagement and academic achievement?* First, I described my main learnings from this project, including the realization of the agency I have even within institutional constraints. Next, I described the impact that the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, historically responsive literacy, and culturally and linguistically responsive literacy have had on my capstone project. I then discussed possible implications of this project and limitations of this project. Next, I discussed potential future projects, including similar re-designs of other units in my current curriculum. Finally, I explained how results from this project will be shared and the contributions this project has had to the profession as a whole.

Critical examination and development of one's identity is difficult work at any time, and to attempt to achieve this in the classroom may seem a daunting task. Teachers are already tasked with so much, and to take on the work of culturally sustaining pedagogy may seem like something extra that there just is not time for after all other demands have been met. In this project, however, the work of culturally sustaining pedagogy has breathed new life into my curriculum, benefitting academic instruction as well as the development of student identity and culture. For students experiencing this curriculum, the hope is that personal identity can be nourished and nurtured, including their identities as strong, involved learners.

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