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Elevating Student Voices Through Rigorous Academic Discussion: A Unit of Study for the Middle School English Language Arts Classroom

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Elevating Student Voices Through Rigorous Academic Discussion:
A Unit of Study for the Middle School English Language Arts Classroom

by
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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background and Context

Walking around my 7th grade English Language Arts classroom as students participate in small group discussions, I observe nearly every table engaged in what I might call “answer sharing.” There is no academic discussion occurring. After one student begrudgingly volunteers to begin, they share the answer prepared on their paper. Without any response to the first speaker, the student to their left follows suit. This continues until each student in the group has shared, at which point one of two things happens depending on the social relationships that exist in the group. Either, conversation quickly turns to a topic unrelated to the task at hand, or the table falls silent, each student twiddling their thumbs until I refocus the class back to the whole group. As I ask for volunteers to share about their discussion, I am met by crickets until one student, unable to stand the silence any longer, raises their hand unenthusiastically to share a simple response.

Experiencing situations like this many times, especially in the most recent school years, has led me to the question: *How can student voices be elevated through rigorous academic discussion in a middle school English Language Arts classroom?* This chapter will explore the development of this research question through a lens of culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy. When considering student voices, it is crucial that the history of those whose voices have and have not been elevated in the American education system is considered. As a white teacher working with predominantly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students, before designing a curriculum intended to

engage students in discussion, I must first consider what barriers may need to be broken down in order to allow for an environment in which all students feel that their authentic voices are important to the academic work at hand. With this in mind, this chapter will first lay out the background and context of the project, a unit of study for a middle school English Language Arts class, including its connection to student voice, rigor, and speaking and listening standards. Next, I will explain the rationale behind this project including the impact it could have on teachers and students and some considerations of bias that will be necessary in the development of the unit. Finally, the chapter will be summarized and the next chapter previewed.

Personal Experience

In the introductory scenario described at the beginning of this chapter, academic discussion didn't happen, inquiry didn't happen, and quite frankly, learning didn't happen. This is a problem that has only been further exacerbated by nearly three years of interrupted learning for students. As we welcomed students back in person for the 2021-2022 school year, I watched schools instantly put into place additional reading and math intervention and support systems. We knew students had regressed in these skills. However, after two years of online learning in which many students chose to keep cameras off on Zoom classes and never unmuted themselves to participate, what was the plan for helping students regain their speaking and listening skills? Students lost social skills, academic vocabulary skills, confidence to speak up, and uncertainty surrounding their social standing in a classroom. This is all at play when a question is posed and met with silence from students.

As I began reflecting on these salient issues I was met with during the 2021-2022 school year due to the many effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on all students, I also began considering how they intersect with a *hidden curriculum* of racism in the classroom (Martusewicz, et al., 2021). Classrooms often elevate eurocentric norms and patterns, whether intentionally or not, making it more challenging for students of color to make their voices heard. On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted students and communities of color. Throughout the 2021-2022 school year I participated in a Racially Conscious Collaboration training during which I received a piece of post-observation feedback noting the high percentage of time my voice was speaking during class rather than the students. What message is this sending to students about their role in the classroom, the value of their voices, or the expectation or lack thereof of critical thinking, especially in the context of a white teacher like myself teaching students of color? All of these reflections led me to my research topic as I wanted to explore the importance of elevating student voices, using academic discussion as a key component in a rigorous learning environment, and prioritizing speaking and listening standards in an ELA classroom.

Elevating Student Voices

In *A White Teacher Talks About Race*, Landsman (2009) notes that “If we make the thoughts, reactions, and words of our students central to the curriculum, we can have deeper discussions of history, philosophy, science, and literature” (p. 51-52). When students know that their voices are important in a classroom, they are more likely to ask questions, share creative ideas, risk making mistakes, and form connections with their peers that will help them build upon each other’s thinking. Many students have

conformed to this notion of school as sitting and listening, and have come to see school not as a place to explore and take risks, but as a place to get the “right” answer and sit silently unless you have it. I believe that fostering an environment of academic discussion early on in the year can help to change this way of thinking. This belief is what drove my project idea for a unit of study intended to be taught at the beginning of the school year.

Rigor

Elevating student voices isn't only to the benefit of building students' concept of self and belonging in a classroom. When students engage in true academic discussion, their understanding of content deepens, their ability to understand multiple perspectives and challenge their own assumptions broadens, and a classroom environment in which students are doing the heavy lifting rather than the teacher is created. Rigor, examining multiple perspectives, challenging ideas and assumptions, and decentering the “teacher voice” are all elements of a culturally responsive and anti-racist classroom that can be brought to life through engaging students in academic discussion. In the chapter entitled “Helping Students of Color Meet High Standards” within *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real About Race in School*, Ferguson discusses a “high help, high perfectionism” (Pollock & Ferguson, 2008) learning environment as one in which students put in the most effort, met by high demands as well as support from the teacher. He notes that “the most common classroom type when students of color were the vast majority was the opposite, *low help with high perfection*, a combination that produced much worse behavior and substantially lower effort” (Pollock & Ferguson, 2008, p. 79). Many of the pedagogies explored in Ferguson's chapter connect directly to student voices being prevalent in the classroom. Some of these include welcoming questions without being

concerned about the pace of the lesson, talking to students about their lives outside of the classroom, waiting for students to answer no matter how long it takes, and encouraging and expecting lower achieving students to verbally participate, again without pacing concerns (Ferguson & Pollock, 2008). It can be easy to place pacing above all else by jumping in with a teacher's voice when students need additional time, cutting off discussion, or calling disproportionately on students who will give a quick correct answer. The effect of doing this is lowering expectations for many students which "can deprive students of an education, a future, hope" (Landsman, 2009, p. 106).

Speaking and Listening Standards

Specifically in an ELA classroom, speaking and listening skills are directly written into the Common Core standards, yet those standards are often glossed over or even completely ignored by daily lesson plans, and are often not reflected at all in standardized assessments. The Common Core Standard SL.1 specifically addresses students' ability to engage in academic discussion across 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. Yet how often are students held to a rigorous bar for reading or writing tasks, but then not expected to participate in rigorous discussion or worse, discouraged from doing so? In addition to the importance of speaking and listening skills for all students, by deprioritizing speaking and listening in an ELA classroom, we are also elevating students who are high achieving readers and writers without acknowledging students who may be brilliant orators but who lack certain writing skills. Just as we should provide those "high perfectionism, high help" (Pollock & Ferguson, 2008) environments for students as they develop reading and writing skills, we should do the same when it comes to academic discussion, setting high expectations for meeting speaking and listening standards while

also providing direct instruction and scaffolding as needed so that students can meet those high standards.

Rationale

Once it is clear to a teacher that discussion is a key component to a rigorous culturally and linguistically responsive learning environment, the question then becomes, how do we teach students to engage in true discussion? What explicit instruction and practice is necessary for students to be able to engage in a classroom centered around their voices? My experience has taught me that the first few weeks of school each year are crucial in developing norms and practices that will determine the direction a classroom takes throughout the year. Therefore, a unit of study centered around academic discussion to be implemented at the beginning of the school year has the potential to greatly affect the classroom environment. Given that the standards already exist for speaking and listening in the Language Arts classroom, this also makes a middle school ELA classroom an ideal place to implement an objective and standards-driven unit with an emphasis on discussion.

Impact

The impact of this project for students is two-fold. A main driver in creating a discussion oriented classroom environment is to elevate student voices and sense of belonging. When students are given the majority of the air time during a lesson, they build confidence, peer connections, and an appreciation for their own knowledge and that of their classmates. This then directly ties to the academic significance of this unit of study. By engaging in rigorous and authentic discussion daily, students will develop

deeper understanding of the topics, ask more questions that lead to new knowledge, examine multiple perspectives, and identify misunderstandings.

This project also has the potential for a strong impact on educators. Teachers should be able to use this unit to lay the foundation for a discussion-based classroom. The work will need to continue for the remainder of the year to build upon the skills students develop in this initial unit. Implemented well, this project should serve as the basis for a student-driven classroom environment in which the teacher is a facilitator rather than the center of all learning.

Important Considerations

As I explored this research topic, I was left with two important considerations to keep in mind. The first is considering students' home language and/or dialect and ensuring it has a place in academic discussion. Anti racist strategies listed in *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real About Race In School* (Pollock, 2008) include key ideas surrounding nonstandard English and cultural codes. A teacher's responsibility is to find value in the various language and cultural norms of students and also to help them learn about different linguistic codes. It is important not to devalue any linguistic norms during academic discussion. This should also include teaching students about and accepting various communication styles such as overlapping communication styles prevalent in many non-white cultures. The second consideration is student silence. Katherine Schultz (Pollock & Schultz, 2008) calls on teachers to "determine when silence is a productive marker of learning and when student's silence reflects disengagement or a lack of understanding," and "when a student's silence is an indication of individual style and when silence is a marker of racialists classroom dynamics" (p. 217). This is important

when considering participation norms and expectations for students. How can teachers hold a high bar of rigor for academic discussions while also making space for productive silence? As I develop a curricular unit based on rigorous academic discussion, these culturally responsive considerations must be kept in mind.

Summary

This chapter explored the background, context and rationale behind the research question: *How can student voices be elevated through rigorous academic discussion in a middle school English Language Arts classroom?* This question is inherently linked to culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy as it is important in fostering a community of learners whose voices are deemed important. Additionally, it helps create a rigorous learning environment centered on critical thinking and deep content knowledge through a focus on speaking and listening standards.

The following chapter will contain a literature review that explores research that has already examined the topics of student voice and culture, middle school cognitive and social development, and discussion-based instruction in middle school classrooms. Following the literature review, Chapter Three will detail the plan for the project that will be created, a unit of study designed to engage middle school students in rigorous academic discussion at the beginning of the school year.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Fostering rigorous academic discussion skills in students can be one of the most challenging tasks for middle school teachers. Given varying cultural norms surrounding conversation, middle school brain development, and simply a lack of taught skills of what rigorous discussion looks and sounds like, this can be a time consuming and difficult subject to broach with students. However, in *A White Teacher Talks About Race*, Landsman (2009) poignantly stated that, “If we make the thoughts, reactions, and words of our students central to the curriculum, we can have deeper discussions of history, philosophy, science, and literature” (pp. 51-52). While challenging, this work is urgent and crucial if deep learning is to follow. Additionally, while often overshadowed by reading and writing instruction, the Common Core State Standards name speaking and listening skills as important language acquisition skills alongside reading and writing in an ELA classroom (*English language arts standards "speaking & listening" grade 8*).

The challenges that teachers often face when trying to encourage true discussion in the classroom, especially recently given the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents, beg the question *how can student voices be elevated through rigorous academic discussion in a middle school English Language Arts classroom?* Given the importance of language and communication in cultural norms, it is crucial to look at classroom discussion through a culturally responsive lens as this will allow students to more deeply engage in rigorous classroom talk. Therefore, this literature review will begin by looking at what Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is and how it can be

used to elevate student voice and culture. The chapter will then explore middle school cognitive and social development as it relates to both strengths and challenges for these students in discourse-centered classrooms. Finally, it will explore literature surrounding discussion-based instruction and strategies that can be used to engage students in rigorous academic discussion, building speaking, listening, and literacy skills. All of this literature will be used to guide the development of a unit of study for my project.

Student Voice and Culture

When attempting to engage students in rigorous discussion, authentic student voice and culture must be encouraged and elevated in order to help students feel comfortable. This is a primary tenet of Culturally Responsive Teaching. This section will delve into literature about Culturally Responsive Teaching, communication norms, and cultural background knowledge as they all relate to engaging students in academic discussion in a middle school classroom setting.

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Definitions

In the plethora of literature about Culturally Responsive Teaching, a variety of terms are used. These include Culturally Responsive Teaching and/or Pedagogy (CRT/CRP), Culturally Relevant Teaching and/or Pedagogy (CRT/CRP), and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP). Hammond (2015) made it clear that CRT is a complex system of practices and beliefs rather than just a simple instructional strategy. It can be broken down into the four principles of awareness, learning partnerships, information processing, and community building. Put together, this means that a culturally responsive teacher is aware of both their own cultural lens and those of their students, builds trust with students through authentic connections, uses that connection and awareness to help

students learn, and creates a safe environment in which students can learn (Hammond, 2015). Many other authors have written about Culturally Responsive Teaching as well, each using inspiring words to help readers grasp the complexity of CRT. In *The Dream-Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings (2009) stated that, “culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (p. 19). Paris and Alim (2017) claim that, “CSP positions dynamic cultural dexterity as a necessary good, and sees the outcome of learning as additive rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits” (p. 1). These and other explanations of CRT all assert the importance of elevating and legitimizing cultural norms and practices of students in the classroom. Doing so has direct implications for students’ engagement and participation in classes. The following subsections will consider communication norms and background knowledge through a CRT lens.

Communication Norms

When addressing the language and communication norms of students, Landsman (2009) stated, “These are creative students, and so their language changes all the time. This language is vibrant and innovative. I want such brilliance in my writing classroom. Their language is from their culture and I want that culture in my room” (p. 70). The positive and affirming language used in this quote clearly demonstrates a culturally responsive understanding of varying linguistic styles. Communication style is a key component of any culture. Historically in schools, a Eurocentric communication style has been taught and expected in classrooms centered around using a *one voice at a time* style

of discussion. This is due to the fact that the US educational system values a passive-receptive style of learning (Ardasheva et al., 2016). This, along with the use of General American English is sometimes referred to as *school-based discourse* and can be discrepant from the communication and linguistic styles that many students are used to. Importantly, this misalignment can lead to disengagement in classroom discussions. For example, many minoritized cultures practice a participatory-interactive style of communication in which there is speech overlap and even physical movement involved in communication (Ardasheva et al., 2016). While overlapping communication styles are common in many cultures, in a eurocentric environment, this can be misunderstood as interrupting or a lack of listening rather than engagement (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This is in stark contrast to the passive-receptive style often encouraged in the US educational system (Ardasheva et al., 2016). Due to this cultural variation, students may be disciplined when they speak over another speaker rather than invited into the conversation as a valued voice.

In addition to conversational norms, the language used by students to communicate is also a key component of student engagement in discussion. Historically, General American English (GAE) has been proposed as the *correct* or *proper* way of speaking. However, this diminishes the legitimacy of other languages, dialects and linguistic styles that students may use in order to deeply engage with learning. The following sections will delve closer into African American English and Spanglish as examples often heard in American schools.

African American English. General American English (GAE) has often been presented as *correct* English especially in contrast with African American English

(AAE). However, in *Every-Day Anti-Racism: Getting Real About Race in School*, Pollock (2008) named the importance of not presenting language variety as hierarchical. Rather, in exploring anti-racist strategies, the author claimed that teachers should focus on teaching students to become fluent in a variety of language codes. Washington and Seidenberg (2021) also named the importance of both respecting language and/or dialect while instructing students to become fluent in GAE. In fact, AAE does consist of phonetic and phonemic rules and patterns just like GAE. Rather than demeaning AAE, teaching students to recognize the patterns in both AAE and GAE can help students become more adept at switching between the two (Washington & Seidenberg, 2021). Encouraging students to use both AAE and GAE depending on the task and audience can help students become fluent in both language codes and legitimizes students' home language. Students may be more willing to engage in classroom discussion when their home language or dialect is welcome in the classroom setting.

Spanglish. Spanglish is the practice of combining the languages of English and Spanish, and using them simultaneously within speaking. A study designed to investigate the use of Spanglish within social interactions in the classroom identified similar findings and ideas as those discussed above regarding AAE (Martinez, 2010). This study found that students' use of Spanglish in the classroom, especially in discussion, elevated their learning in a number of ways. Although Spanglish was occasionally used when students struggled to think of the English words they needed, this accounted for very few of the instances. Often, students dropped Spanish words into conversation when they helped convey nuances that English did not allow for. Other times, students were acutely aware of their audience, and code-switched depending on the audience, showing creativity and

thoughtfulness in their speech. Additionally, Spanglish was used to help students clarify and build upon ideas. Using this language variance allowed students to more deeply engage in the content being discussed, and it helped them sustain conversations that otherwise may have fallen flat (Martinez, 2010). When students were able to use their authentic voices through the use of Spanglish, they were able to connect with the content being taught more fully, ultimately building their knowledge.

Cultural Background Knowledge

For all students, but especially for English Language Learners (ELLs), and culturally and linguistically diverse students, building upon cultural background knowledge in instruction is crucial. There are many links between culture, language, and cognitive processing that make it challenging for students with a different cultural schema than the one presented within a classroom to grasp concepts as deeply as they could (Applebee et al., 2003). The importance of activating students' background knowledge and connecting curriculum to the cultural schema of students has been written about in depth. One study entitled "Using culturally relevant pedagogy to influence literacy achievement for middle school black male students" (Walker & Hutchison, 2021) found that 8th grade students were more likely to participate in their English Language Arts (ELA) class when they felt confident in their literacy skills. When they were able to connect class content to their cultural schema, students developed those literacy skills more quickly. This article pointedly concluded that low achievement especially in Black male students is largely due to "isolated and irrelevant instructional practices that have often denied their rights to literacy" (Walker & Hutchison, 2021, p. 427). Activating cultural background knowledge therefore is not just about connecting with students

personally, but is foundational in their ability to gain the literacy skills necessary to engage with the world around them.

In another study regarding classroom discourse in a science class, the results showed that when students' lived experiences were intentionally brought into the class, students were more likely to add their ideas to discussion, feeling like they held important knowledge to be shared with the class (Thompson et al., 2016). This is in contrast to many traditional styles of instruction in which the teacher is seen as the holder of knowledge. This study also found a correlation between teachers incorporating students' narratives and lived experiences into lessons and more rigorous discussion (Thompson, et al., 2016). Students were more willing to engage deeply with the content when they felt like it applied to their own lives.

Ultimately, multiple studies have connected students' academic success with curriculum and instruction that validates students' cultural identities, values, and norms. When students feel seen by their teachers and the instructional practices used, and when students see their cultural practices and values in action in the classroom, they are more likely to find success (Richards et al., 2007). Including students' cultural background knowledge into classroom discussions both helps students better understand their own cultural values as well as those of others (Howell et al., 2011).

Aside from the social and emotional implications, the inclusion of students' cultural backgrounds is also directly linked to how the brain functions and learns. When human brains encounter information, they immediately begin searching for links to previous knowledge and cultural schema. This process allows individuals to better make sense of new information (Hammond, 2015). Activating middle school students' prior

cultural knowledge and allowing them to engage in cultural communication norms that help them make sense of information is therefore not only crucial in building community, but is actually imperative for learning to follow. This is especially true for adolescents who are rapidly trying to understand themselves, the world around them, and how they fit into it. The following section details the literature on middle school students' cognitive and social development as these processes pertain to students' abilities to engage in rigorous discourse-centered classrooms.

Middle School Cognitive and Social Development

Misconceptions about middle schoolers can lead to negative perceptions of their academic and social abilities at times. However, many of the dynamic changes happening during this stage of life actually lend themselves well to deep learning when provided the right environment in which to do so. The rapid brain development happening within adolescents provides a unique opportunity for both cognitive and social development (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). A classroom environment that supports students as social and conversational learners can lead to critical thinking and deep learning for adolescents. Specifically in an ELA classroom, this has been labeled a sociocognitive approach to literacy by Applebee and colleagues (2003), in the study entitled "Discussion-based approaches to developing understanding: classroom instruction and student performance in middle school and high school English." While historically socioemotional learning has been viewed as separate from academic instruction, these researchers discussed how the social processes within a classroom are a key component of deep learning and cannot be viewed as entirely separate from cognition. This section will explore literature on both

the cognitive and social development of middle school students especially as it relates to discussion in the classroom.

Cognitive Development

Adolescent brains are rapidly changing specifically in areas connected to decision-making, impulse control, and memory (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). These changes make adolescents adept at learning through experiences as they make connections to previous learning. Cognitively, middle schoolers are quickly maturing in their ability to think abstractly and creatively about the world around them. As their brains are adapting to new learning, making connections to their own lives and questioning what they read is crucial for middle school learners (Richardson, 2010). Creating strong academic discussion opportunities for middle school students can provide them with a space to explore their new original thoughts and ideas. Additionally, middle schoolers thrive when given chances to hold responsibility for their own learning as their sense of independence increases (Howell et al., 2011). Therefore, more student-driven classroom activities help students take ownership of their learning and more deeply engage with academic content.

Middle school students are becoming increasingly susceptible to boredom in school especially when learning in more traditional teacher-led classroom environments. In order for their developing brains to learn and grow as much as they are able, students need to experience their learning first hand and be active members of their learning environment. Mora (2011) reported that boredom is directly linked to a lack of cognitive engagement amongst middle schoolers and is experienced most in teacher-driven activities. A discourse-centered class therefore, could be ideal for deep learning in a middle school setting. In a study evaluating Accountable Talk protocols, which will be

more clearly defined in the upcoming section, students reported that learning was fun and exciting, and that they felt intellectually challenged, leading to deeper engagement and learning of the content (Howell et al., 2011). When middle schoolers are able to engage as active learners, they are able to grow intellectually and academically.

Social Development

During early adolescence, students are also experiencing emotional dysregulation and an increased focus on peer interactions. Positive peer interactions and close peer relationships are important for student learning and engagement. Knowing that students are hyper focused on their peers and social acceptance/rejection makes the importance of creating emotionally safe and inclusive classrooms for middle school students clear (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). Letting students explore content with peers through discussion, given support and instruction on how to do that along with an environment in which risk taking is safe, will likely lead to deeper learning than teacher lecturing or independent work. In fact, research has shown that planning and allowing for natural peer social interactions in the classroom leads to more critical learning than more traditional classroom environments. Additionally, middle school students demonstrate higher motivation when they are able to work with their peers (Tapee et al., 2019). This is all likely due to the fact that socialization within the classroom is often what helps students create meaning of the context around them when their social interactions are focused on the content of instruction (Applebee et al., 2003).

In addition to the academic benefits of social learning, students have also reported that academic discussion skills, when taught explicitly, have helped them form more positive peer relationships and solve conflicts productively (Ardasheva et al., 2016).

Although socializing is often viewed as something that happens outside of class, preventing students from being social, especially in middle school, may actually be detrimental to their learning and social development. In a classroom that uses specific discussion protocols as a primary mode of student learning, students reported that they felt a strong sense of belonging and that their voices and opinions were important, leading to an overall increase in confidence (Howell et al., 2011). In this classroom, 76% of students also reported that they felt more comfortable in peer interactions due to the instruction of discussion skills in their class (Howell, et al., 2011). This is crucial given that middle school can be a time of intense peer scrutiny.

Student Silence

Although cognitively and socially middle school students are situated well for rigorous academic discussion, a classroom that does not support positive peer interactions can also be doomed for silence. Given that middle school students are constantly concerned about their social position, a classroom that does not support students in making mistakes or creating a positive community will likely not foster any sort of true discussion. In addition, students may need explicit instruction and support in *how* to engage in productive conversations as well as positive feedback as they develop skills (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020).

Although silence may be an indicator of negative peer relationships or disengagement, it is also important that teachers interrogate the root of student silence. Schultz (2008) reminded teachers that silence can indicate deep listening and learning. Additionally, there can be racial implications when met with student silence. For example, an African American boy may be considered disengaged when silent, while a

female Asian student may be considered just naturally more quiet (Shultz, 2008). Teachers should consider and investigate the root of student silence and ensure that all students are equally encouraged to engage in classroom discourse while also being given time to listen and formulate thoughts and ideas. Shultz (2008) asked the reflective question, “When do we accept silence and wait for talk, and when do we push students to speak so that their voices are heard?” (p. 220). Given the social context of middle school, it is crucial that classroom structures be set in place early in the year so that all voices are encouraged and students feel socially comfortable and safe sharing their ideas (McGlynn & Kelly, 2018). Once this safe and social classroom environment is established, students are ready to thrive in discussion-based activities.

A safe learning environment is key for deep learning in middle school. As students face rapid growth both cognitively and socially, classroom instruction must be intentional and developmentally-responsive. Due to their increasing desire for autonomy, prioritization of peer relationships, and questioning of the world around them, discussion-based approaches to classroom instruction are an ideal fit for middle school students. The following section examines the literature on discussion-based instruction.

Discussion-Based Instruction

In a 1997 study, an observation of an 8th grade English class showed that in a hour-long period, less than 52 seconds were spent in true discussion (Adler et al., 2003). In many classrooms more recently, similar discrepancies between discussion-based instruction and other instructional strategies still exist. The 2003 study “Closing the Gap Between Concept & Practice: Toward More Dialogic Discussion in the Language Arts Classroom” (Adler et al. 2003), found that while teachers knew the importance of

discussion and believed in student-centered instruction, a reason for avoiding academic discussion was a sense of a lack of control. Other teachers reported concerns about a lack of engagement and accountability as reasons they avoid sustained academic conversations in their classes (Meston et al., 2020). However, the benefits of a discussion-based approach to instruction especially in English Language Arts classrooms are made clear in multiple studies. This section will explore terminology used to discuss discussion-based instruction, the connection between classroom discourse and literacy skills, and the implementation of discussion-based instruction and activities in a middle school classroom.

Terminology

The term discussion can be a broad label that is often applied to interactions that are predominantly teacher-driven and one-sided in classrooms. Therefore, other terms are used to differentiate between a more traditional question and answer approach to discussion and true academic discussion in which student voices take the lead. *Dialogic discourse* means interaction amongst multiple voices and perspectives and is in contrast with *monologic discourse* (Adler et al., 2003). Similarly, the terms *academic discussion* and/or *academic conversation* are used to indicate sustained and meaningful conversation about a specific academic topic (Meston et al., 2020). Academic conversation also includes active student voice and is reciprocal between the members of the conversation (Meston et al., 2020).

A specific pedagogical strategy that promotes and teaches true academic discussion amongst students is *Accountable Talk (AT)*, an instructional protocol guided by the principles of accountability to the learning community, to reasoning, and to

knowledge (Ardasheva et al., 2016). A main difference between Accountable Talk and other classroom conversation protocols is the lack of specific roles within a conversation group. In AT, while there are common expectations, the conversation can be free flowing, allowing multiple groups to have the same overall purpose, but still take the conversation in unique directions (Richardson, 2010). Accountable Talk asks students to give extended responses, at least two sentences, use academic vocabulary in their speaking, demonstrate original thinking, and listen closely to others, questioning or building upon their answers (McGlynn & Kelly, 2018). In addition, AT requires specific social norms to be followed in order to hold students to high expectations of engagement and shared learning (Ardasheva et al., 2016). This style of student response is in clear contrast to simple answer sharing in which a short answer is given and the speaking role is transferred quickly back to the teacher for a response.

When facilitating dialogic discourse or Accountable Talk in a classroom, teachers must provide students with *authentic questions*. This means that questions posed are not seeking a specific correct answer but rather truly inviting in voices of all perspectives. When authentic questions are asked, students can take charge of the discussion and the teacher acts more of a facilitator to keep the discussion on track (Adler et al., 2003). This teacher role is imperative in making sure that discussions sustain the level of rigor required for deep learning.

Discourse and Literacy

Academic discussion, in contrast with a traditional teacher-led question and answer approach to instruction, is a key component in reading and writing. In fact, classrooms that combine both high academic demands and discussion-based instructional

strategies were found to result in higher end of year literacy performance for students across gender, socioeconomic status, and race (Applebee et al., 2003). Ladson-Billings (2009) urged teachers to recognize that literacy includes both literature as well as oratory accounts. When considering English Language Arts Common Core standards, both reading and listening are included as receptive language skills, and both writing and speaking are included as expressive language skills. All fall under the umbrella of literacy. Accountable Talk can be used to improve literacy skills as it offers authentic questioning and open discussions, and as it builds upon students' background knowledge (Applebee et al., 2003). In one study, after engaging in AT as an intervention strategy, middle school students stated that it helped them understand multiple perspectives, picture what they read, and notice things in their reading that they hadn't the first time (Richardson, 2010).

Used before writing assessments, academic conversations can allow students to formulate their thoughts and ideas and prepare to write. In addition, AT can be used as a type of assessment in and of itself (Richardson, 2010). This can be especially useful when assessing reading comprehension with students who may struggle as writers.

Rigor

Rigor is a key component of culturally responsive teaching and is the distinguishing factor between basic classroom conversation and true academic discussion. However, academic discourse is not a skillset that many middle school students naturally have. Ferguson (2008) discussed a "high help, high perfectionism" (p. 78) environment in which students are held to high standards while also being given the support necessary to reach them. He noted that often students of color learn within low help, high

perfectionism classrooms in which students are held to high standards but not given the support necessary to meet them often resulting in low achievement. Martusewicz (2021) stated an alternative finding in *EcoJustice Education: Toward Diverse, Democratic, and Sustainable Communities*, noting students of color and poor students are often held to lower standards and offered less challenging curriculum than their white or wealthier peers. In addition, multiple studies showed that English Language Learners are given fewer opportunities to engage in academic conversation than their peers who speak only English at home (Meston et al., 2020). Hammond (2015) also wrote that the curriculum taught to English Language Learners, poor, and BIPOC students is often less rigorous and more focused on lecture and memorization. When rigor is removed, students are not given the opportunity to rise to their full potential, often exacerbating the achievement gap clearly seen across racial and socioeconomic lines in the United States.

Classroom Implementation

Discourse-rich learning is a key component to rigorous classroom instruction as it asks students, rather than teachers, to do the heavy cognitive lifting. This is not something that always comes naturally to students and, in the beginning of the year, skills must be taught through mini-lessons, modeling, practice, and feedback (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2017). Throughout all stages of implementation, teachers should welcome student questions and responses no matter their effect on lesson pacing. In addition, teachers should encourage and call on all students equally, giving the necessary wait time to students who need it (Ferguson, 2008). Ladson-Billings (2009) wrote about the importance of communicating to students that the work done in the classroom is serious and important. This mentality shifts simple answer sharing to true Accountable Talk in

which the goal is not to get a correct answer and move on, but rather to question, connect, and synthesize information for deeper understanding. This shift away from lecture-style teaching allows students to engage in higher-order thinking and practice thinking abstractly and creatively. This shift changes the role of the teacher in the classroom to more of a facilitator. However, teachers still have an important and active role in order to ensure that academic discussions do not dissolve into simple socialization or disengagement. Teachers should be highlighting important ideas shared by students, challenging students to extend their thinking or consider other perspectives, and summarizing student ideas (Ardasheva et al., 2016).

When implementing academic discussion practices, it may be crucial that teachers share the goals of this strategy with students. In one study, researchers found that teachers and students in multiple middle school classes had discrepant understandings of the purpose of academic conversation (Meston et al., 2020). While many teachers wanted students to engage in conversation to build their agency, voice, and original thinking, students viewed it more exclusively as a means to understand content. Due to this understanding, some students reported being frustrated as conversation seemed to be a less efficient way to gain information than lecture-style instruction. This led to more short answers from students in conversation and disengagement (Meston et al., 2020). In contrast to the discrepancies found in this study between teacher and student thinking, many English Language Learners who engaged in Accountable Talk protocols understood their classroom conversations as a way for them to learn the *language of power*, or language that gives and assumes privilege in society, as well as school-based social norms, a shared focus of their teachers. When these goals were explicitly taught

and shared with students, they understood the importance of the conversations and were more willing to deeply engage in them (Ardasheva et al., 2016). Considering again the developmental stage of middle schoolers, transparency also allows students to take ownership of their learning.

Differentiation. Given the rigor of true academic conversation and Accountable Talk protocols, they must often be scaffolded for students as teachers cannot assume students will have discussion skills naturally. Without scaffolding, introducing academic discussion into the classroom may lead to a low help, high perfectionism environment noted above. Just like ELA teachers give explicit instructions surrounding reading and writing, the same must be true of speaking and listening. Sentence starters and frequent modeling, especially at the beginning of the year, can be tools to ensure students are receiving the support necessary to meet the demands of AT (McGlynn & Kelly, 2018). When teaching English Language Learners the protocols for engaging in academic conversation, teachers may use more extended prompts or questioning, allow multiple languages to be used during initial conversations, and gradually release responsibility to students (Ardasheva et al., 2016). Given the student-driven nature of academic discussion, ELL students may need additional modeling and teacher support before being able to sustain longer conversations independently. In addition to the language skills necessary for sustained discussion, some students may also lack the social norms necessary for engagement in discussion, which could lead to either disengagement or disagreement within student groups. Social norms expected in discussion should also be explicitly taught and differentiated (Ardasheva et al., 2016).

Given the urgency of ensuring the right to literacy of all students, implementing discussion-centered classroom practices is crucial for students. As teachers look to actually implement instructional practices such as Accountable Talk in order to create a discourse-rich environment, maintaining rigor while simultaneously differentiating instruction for students is important. When practices are put in place to engage all students in rigorous academic discussion, there are clear positive academic outcomes in student literacy.

Summary

This chapter has explored a plethora of literature all pertaining to discussion-rich classrooms in a variety of ways in pursuit of the research question, *how can student voices be elevated through rigorous academic discussion in a middle school English Language Arts classroom?* First, student voice was examined through a culturally responsive approach to teaching. A multitude of literary sources note the importance of *authentic* student voices being welcomed in the classroom in order for academic discussion to follow. This includes honoring a variety of cultural communication norms, languages, and dialects within conversations. This does not mean that teachers should not help students gain fluency in other norms and communication patterns, but rather that teachers should recognize opportunities in which a students' primary communication style can actually help their learning. In addition to reviewing literature about communication norms, this section also noted research surrounding cultural background knowledge. Many researchers have found that activating prior cultural background knowledge and making connections to students' cultural schema during instruction has direct positive implications for their academic success.

Secondly, literature specific to middle school students has shown that middle schoolers may be especially poised for rigorous academic discussion. As their developing brains are eager to form new connections and gain new insights, they are beginning to think more abstractly and have interesting thoughts to share with others. Adolescents are also extremely social and often learn more through peer interactions than teacher-directed learning. Although cognitively and socially, middle schoolers have many qualities making them up for the challenge of academic discussion, teachers also need to keep in mind social implications of peer scrutiny that could result in students disengaging.

Finally, rigorous discussion-centered instruction was discussed specifically as it pertains to literacy. The term rigorous is important in differentiating quality academic discussion from traditional heavily teacher-guided conversation. Rigor is a distinguishing factor in achievement. Additionally it becomes an issue of equity as many authors noted the varying levels of rigor in instruction when examining race and socioeconomic status of students. Multiple researchers have found that quality rigorous discussion-based instruction has direct ties to literacy proficiency. Students in multiple studies showed tremendous growth in reading after engaging in discussion-based protocols such as Accountable Talk throughout the year. As teachers plan for discourse-rich learning, the differentiation needed for students, especially for English Language Learners, should be considered to ensure that students are reaping the benefits of academic discussion.

Based on the literature reviewed in this chapter, the following chapter will describe the project that will follow, a discussion-centered unit of study designed for beginning of year middle schoolers in an English Language Arts classroom. Taking a culturally responsive approach, Chapter Three will explain the project itself, the intended

audience and setting, the timeline for creation, and finally how the project will be assessed.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Throughout my nine years of teaching middle school English Language Arts (ELA), I have noticed a consistent lack of academic conversational skills amongst students. Perhaps this is due to the traditional classroom communication styles that students have become accustomed to in which the teacher does most of the talking, and students are merely called on for brief correct answers. In the most recent school years, I have also noticed this problem further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as social anxiety has started playing an even stronger role in students' willingness to participate in classroom discourse. This knowledge led me to the question *how can student voices be elevated through rigorous academic discussion in a middle school ELA classroom?* Teachers know that the beginning of the year is crucial for developing both academic habits as well as social relationships for students. Therefore, for this project I will be designing a unit of study intended to be implemented at the very beginning of the school year in a middle school ELA classroom. The unit will be written to both teach strong academic discussion routines and habits within a literature-centered classroom as well as to build a strong community in the classroom in which students feel confident in sharing their voices.

Positionality

As described in Chapter Two, communication norms and language are deeply integrated into students' cultural lens. Therefore, in my position as a white teacher teaching in an urban setting with a predominantly Latinx student population, it is crucial

that my own cultural biases be carefully examined throughout the writing of this unit. Throughout my own K-12 education, I found myself in classrooms with very few students of color, and teachers who used many traditional styles of teaching that would not be considered culturally responsive. While this style of education led to academic success for me, this likely would not be the case for the students I now teach. Paris and Alim (2017) indicate the importance of not just accepting or even celebrating various cultures and languages in the classroom, but moving to actually sustaining them “in ways that attend to the emerging, intersectional, and dynamic ways in which they are lived and used by young people” (p. 9). As a white educator, it is crucial that I design this unit in a culturally responsive and sustaining manner.

This chapter will provide an overview of the unit itself, including essential and guiding questions, and power standards. It will also describe the pedagogical frameworks that will be used to guide the formation of the unit. Finally, it will provide information about the intended setting and audience, timeline for creation, and assessment for this project.

Unit Overview

The unit will be designed as a four week unit intended for any middle school grade level (6, 7, or 8) in an English Language Arts classroom to be implemented as the first academic unit of the school year. The lesson structure assumes 55 minute classes Monday through Thursday, with shortened 40 minute periods on Fridays. The speaking and listening learning activities will be the same across grade levels. Although anchor texts will be recommended, teachers could easily follow this unit with texts of their

choosing based on preference, grade level, or teacher discretion knowing reading levels in their classroom.

Essential and Guiding Questions

At the beginning of the unit, students will be given the essential question as well as the guiding questions that they will work to develop answers for throughout the course of the unit. The essential question for this unit is *how do you have a strong academic discussion?* The guiding questions that follow from this include:

- What is an academic discussion?
- What makes an academic discussion different from any other conversation?
- What norms must be followed in an academic discussion?
- What do successful speakers and listeners do in an academic discussion?

By the end of the unit, students should have an understanding of all of these questions and be able to participate in a sustained academic discussion with a small group of peers.

Power Standards

A power standard is simply a standard that is the focus of a unit. For this unit, I will be using the Common Core speaking and listening standard one. The main wording of the standard is identical in grades six, seven, and eight. The standard states that students will be able to “engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade level topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly” (*English language arts standards "speaking & listening" grade 8*). The subparts of the standard vary slightly in wording across the grade levels, but maintain the same four components of preparation and citing evidence, following norms, asking and answering questions, and

paraphrasing the perspectives of others. These four subparts will guide instruction during the four weeks of the unit. Throughout the unit, students will have many opportunities to receive direct instruction and practice various types of discussion. Although students will also participate in reading and writing activities throughout the unit, the end of unit assessment will focus solely on speaking and listening and will not directly evaluate reading or writing skills.

Pedagogical Frameworks and Rationale

In designing this unit, multiple pedagogical frameworks will be applied. The unit will be written using an Understanding by Design (UbD) backwards planning approach. The daily lessons will follow a workshop framework as designed by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP). Finally, the guidelines of Accountable Talk (AT) will be used for student practice and assessment. This section will further explain each of these elements and the rationale for utilizing them.

Understanding by Design

The Understanding by Design (UbD) Framework is a framework for thoughtful curriculum planning that centers student understanding, transfer of learning, backwards planning, teachers as coaches, and constant revision (Heineke & McTighe, 2018).

Through backwards planning, teachers first consider what they want students to understand at the end of the unit, then identify the evidence that students will need to show to demonstrate understanding, and finally plan engaging learning activities that give students opportunities to practice skills that will produce this evidence (Heineke & McTighe, 2018). For the unit presented with this project, a UbD framework will be used. The end goal of the unit is for students to understand the elements of successful academic

discussion and be able to follow them to engage in meaningful discussions. The evidence students will show is through authentic peer discussions about grade level topics that will be observed and evaluated using a rubric. The learning activities planned throughout the unit will give students opportunities to receive direct instruction about the skills necessary to meet this goal as well as ample time to practice and receive feedback on their progress.

Workshop Model

The Workshop Framework is based on the Units of Study curriculum written by Lucy Calkins as well as co authors from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP). The Workshop model prioritizes explicit direct instruction and a lot of time for student practice and teacher feedback. Lessons are structured to begin with a mini-lesson, followed by independent work time with teacher conferring, a mid-workshop teach point, and finally a work share (“The Reading and Writing Workshop Framework and Environment,” 2022). This same lesson structure will be followed in the design of the academic discussion unit. Just like reading and writing, students often need explicit direct instruction when it comes to discussion skills, yet it is often assumed that students will be able to just talk about their ideas with little to no guidance. Following the workshop model will allow for the same benefits in students’ academic discussion growth as has been seen with reading and writing growth using the same model. In multiple case studies, schools who used the TCRWP curriculum demonstrated significant growth on end of year ELA test scores after two years (“Research and Efficacy Case Studies and Findings,” 2022). This is likely due to the individualized attention students receive when one-on-one and small group conferring are

prioritized and teachers can tailor feedback to the specific needs of students. The school setting in which I will implement the unit uses the TCRWP Units of Study as the ELA curriculum for all middle schoolers. By designing this beginning of year unit to follow the same framework, students will have the additional benefit of learning the routines of a workshop-structured class early in the year.

Accountable Talk Guidelines

Accountable Talk (AT) is based on the three dimensions of accountability to the learning community, accurate knowledge, and rigorous thinking (Ardasheva et al., 2016). These dimensions will be used as a core component of both instruction and assessment throughout the unit. Accountability to the learning community involves students both actively speaking and listening, and adding onto and clarifying others' thinking. Accountability to accurate knowledge means that students must provide evidence to support their thinking. Finally, accountability to rigorous thinking means that students explain their evidence gathered from several sources and push others to expand their thinking (Ardasheva et al., 2016). These three components of the AT framework will be integrated into the rubric used to assess student understanding of academic discussion throughout the unit.

Setting and Audience

The school setting for which the unit was designed is an urban charter school in a large metropolitan area. The student body has an overwhelming majority of Latinx students as well as a large majority of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The intended audience is middle school (grades six through eight) English Language Arts teachers. Although this unit will be designed for implementation in any middle school

ELA setting, some school settings and teachers may find it to be an especially good fit. First, given the focus on culturally responsive pedagogy throughout the unit, diverse student demographics and students who identify with traditionally marginalized cultures may especially benefit from it. Secondly, ELA teachers who will be using the workshop model throughout the year may find the unit especially appealing as it will introduce students to many of the structures found in the Units of Study curriculum. Finally, teachers who teach class periods that are approximately one hour long will be able to implement the unit without much adjustment.

Timeline

The Academic Discussion Unit will be developed during the summer of 2023 semester throughout a twelve week course. The implementation of the unit is intended for four weeks (19 lessons) of instruction at the beginning of the school year, assuming one shortened week for Labor Day. In addition, the rubric provided in the unit can be used beyond the duration of the unit to assess student growth throughout the year.

Assessment

In order to determine the impact of the unit on student understanding of academic discussion, formative and summative assessments will be administered. Additionally, student surveys will be used both at the beginning and the end of the unit to gather additional anecdotal information about students' perceptions of their own discussion skills and the purpose of academic discussion in a classroom.

Formative and Summative Assessments

Both the formative and summative assessments within the unit will be based on observations of student discussion in small groups of ideally four students using a rubric. Each week of the unit will end with a formative assessment that uses one component of the rubric. Students will receive feedback on their progress after each formative assessment. In addition, the formative assessments will allow teachers to note areas where additional instruction or support may be required. The summative assessment will use all components of the same rubric to allow students to see growth and teachers to understand the effectiveness of the unit. Discussions throughout the unit will be centered around literature read in class.

Student Surveys

In addition to the quantitative data received through the formative and summative assessments, a student survey will also be provided both at the beginning and the end of the unit to gather anecdotal feedback from students. The survey will ask students to reflect on their understanding of academic discussion skills and their role in the classroom. Students will also have the opportunity to provide feedback that can be used during the revision process of the unit after implementation as this is a key component of the Understanding by Design framework.

Summary

In summary, this chapter has described the unit of study that will follow Chapter Four. The unit of study comes in response to the question, *how can student voices be elevated through rigorous academic discussion in a middle school English Language classroom?* It will be designed using the Understanding by Design framework, and

individual lessons will follow the workshop model components designed by the Teachers College Reading and Writing project. Throughout the unit, Common Core speaking and listening standards as well as the guiding principles of Accountable Talk will be taught and used to assess student understanding and growth. As the unit will be designed through a lens of cultural responsiveness, learning activities will engage students authentically, allowing them to approach learning through their own cultural lens as well as learning about those of others. In Chapter Four, a concluding reflection on the overall project creation process will be offered stating the understanding gained throughout this process, implications and recommendations for the implementation of the unit plan, possible limitations, and the benefits of the unit created to the profession of teaching as a whole.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

This project was developed in response to the question, *how can student voices be elevated through rigorous academic discussion in a middle school English Language Arts classroom?* As it unfolded, many pieces came into play and many other questions were raised: how do teachers encourage students to share their authentic voices? How can literacy be infused into a unit focused on academic discussion? How do teachers maintain rigor in a unit focused on speaking and listening? Ultimately, a unit plan was developed with all of these questions in mind. This chapter will serve as a reflection on my own learning journey, highlighting important literature, naming the implications and limitations of this project, identifying future research to be done, and finally considering the next steps when it comes to implementing this unit plan and sharing my results.

Personal Learning and Reflection

Throughout the course of developing this project, I certainly learned a lot as a researcher, writer, and student myself. As an 8th grade ELA teacher, I can now reflect on my own learning within the context of my teaching. I have always told my students that no matter what career they enter one day, they will need to be able to read, write, and communicate well in order to get there. Completing this project served as a good reminder of the writing skills that my students need to build up to. Although the rigor of the content and expectations of graduate level writing might look substantially different than that of my 8th grade students, the underlying skills themselves are fairly consistent.

As a researcher, I had to examine many different sources, ensure they were credible, excavate important information, and synthesize my learning. These are all skills that I teach my students on a smaller scale. As a writer, I had to plan and organize, scrutinize over wording, and read the same paragraphs, pages, and chapters over and over again to ensure I had made my points clearly and supported them with evidence. Going through this process myself gave me some empathy for the students who write a first draft of an essay and tell me “I’m done!” quickly followed by an eye roll and sigh when I tell them there are still many steps to complete.

After several years of not being a student myself, having been in the MAEd program for the last two years has allowed me to step back into the role of a student and remember its challenges and joys. I had to relearn that research and writing can be exhausting, and also that there is such a sense of accomplishment at the end of it, especially when you reach a new level you hadn’t reached before. This perspective can help me push my students knowing that they will feel pride when they finish the writing process, while also giving grace along the way knowing that our brains can’t always just sit down and write at the drop of a hat. As I explored important research related to discussion-based learning, I found many important sources that helped me develop a unit plan that would set up my students with the foundational skills needed to be successful in a language arts classroom.

Important Literature

Before any teacher can expect students to share their voices frequently and in productive ways in class, as students are asked to do in the unit plan developed for this project, it is crucial that students feel comfortable. Speaking is an act of courage for many

students, and too often, students receive mixed signals- teachers want them to participate, while at the same time giving the impression that good students are quiet students. An added layer to this is that often, linguistically and culturally diverse students are told that their communication styles don't belong in the classroom, leading to disengagement. The literature I read for this project on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) was therefore foundational in designing my unit plan as was the literature on specific discussion-based classroom procedures and protocols to support students.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

CRT must set the groundwork for any curriculum development as it is in many ways the key to student engagement. Authors such as Ardasheva and Ladson-Billings have written incredibly important work on the varying communication styles of students, and how each one must be accepted and celebrated in a classroom. Even when instructing students to use one particular style of communication, teachers must be sure never to give the impression that others are lesser-than. Ladson-Billings (2009) specifically mentions how many students who use overlapping styles of communication common in many non-European cultures are frequently told that they are interrupting or acting disrespectfully.

I also explored important literature on the use of African American English (AAE) vs. General American English (GAE). Again, the research named the importance of not degrading AAE as illegitimate, but rather respecting it as a valid dialect even when instructing students to use GAE (Washington and Seidenberg, 2021). Similarly, Martinez (2010) writes about the benefits of students using Spanglish in the classroom, noting that it can actually be extremely helpful in sustaining academic discussion.

Ultimately, when teaching is culturally responsive, students are more likely to feel safe to share their authentic voices, and in turn are more likely to be academically successful. Walker and Hutchison (2021) specifically note that increased literacy skills are seen when students are provided with culturally relevant background information. Not only for the unit developed for this project, but for all curriculum across content areas, working from a mindset of cultural responsiveness is key for student success.

Impact of Discussion on Learning

When developing the content of the unit plan, the literature I read about the impact that discussion-based learning can have on students was instrumental. Specifically for middle schoolers, discussion-based activities and instruction fit perfectly into their brain development as it allows students to take more ownership over their learning (Howell et al., 2011), and infuse socialization into their academics (Applebee et al., 2003).

In researching specific protocols for implementing strong discussions into the classroom, I read a lot about Accountable Talk (AT). Understanding the premise of AT and how it allows students to have structure and complex discussions without limiting their autonomy helped me grasp how to best engage students. Although AT leaves room for student groups to take discussions in many directions, it also holds them accountable to strict norms and rigorous expectations (Ardasheva et al., 2016). Through this research, I could then bring it back to the idea of rigor presented in my research question.

Hammond (2015) writes that often culturally and linguistically diverse students are held to lower standards than their white peers. Piecing together the research on discussion strategies and protocols that can be used along with the research on Culturally

Responsive Teaching allowed me to develop a unit plan that elevated all student voices without ever lowering the bar, pushing students to demonstrate what they are truly capable of, something that is not always done in many classrooms.

Project Implications and Limitations

There is currently a misalignment between the research that shows the clear benefits of more communicative and collaborative classrooms and the practices put in place often due to the importance placed on standardized testing. The overarching implication of this project is that there needs to be a shift in the priorities of the classroom as well as what an ideal classroom really looks like.

First, speaking and listening skills must be elevated rather than dismissed as less important than other areas. The unit plan designed for this project does not immediately introduce students to extremely rigorous grade level texts or literacy skills. However, the foundation that it will lay will give students the skills needed to be able to discuss and analyze more rigorous texts later in the year. Exposing students to rigorous content does nothing for them if they do not have the skills necessary to explore it. This project and the research that goes along with it shows that direct instruction and practice in academic discussion skills goes a long way to helping students access more rigorous content.

Secondly, this project shifts the teacher's role in the classroom from a more traditional role in which the teacher holds the knowledge and gives it to the students, to a more nuanced role in which the teacher serves as a facilitator and feedback-giver while students do most of the talking. This unit, following a workshop model, keeps direct instruction short, with a priority placed on student practice and interaction, as well as real

time feedback. This allows students to work at their own pace, encourages students to support one another, and requires students to do the bulk of the thinking themselves.

With the implications of a new mindset surrounding the daily logistics of a classroom required of this project, a main limitation is the amount of autonomy teachers have at any given school. For example, merely being able to use roughly the first four weeks of school on a unit such as this before diving into curriculum may not be a possibility for many teachers. Depending on the level of autonomy they have, some teachers may not even be able to incorporate activities found in this project into their pre-existing curriculum. Especially in any schools that emphasize test prep, a unit that does not explicitly address the reading and writing grade level standards most likely to be tested may be out of the question.

As teachers, we know that our brains are constantly thinking about the limited amount of time we have in a day, in a semester, in a year. Each year, it is nearly impossible to fit in everything that we want to, as well as everything that our schools or districts want us to. In order for this unit to be used, a shift in priority must happen, and we must see the big picture- that teaching strong discussion skills up front will only allow students to better master rigorous content throughout the year. In addition, this unit plan cannot be the finish line. There is much that can be done to further impact students across grade level and content area.

Future Research and Professional Impact

This project focuses on academic discussion in a middle school English Language Arts class. However, the impact of strong discussion skills is likely to be significant across grade levels and content areas. Future research into implementing similar practices

in both elementary and high school, as well as in different content areas would be important. Extending practices surrounding academic discussion into elementary school would likely only strengthen the habits in middle school and high school. It would be interesting to track students who are explicitly taught academic discussion skills in elementary school across content areas throughout their educational journey to truly understand the significance of teaching these skills. Based on the research done for this project, I would expect that there would be impacts on both students' academic performance as well as their relationships with their classmates.

The other key area for additional research moving forward is Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). There is constantly new research and writing about this topic, and it is crucial that educators are continually revising their practices based on new understandings. Given that the purpose of this project is to guide teachers to elevate student voices, it is imperative that we are listening to students' feedback in the process. It would be key to gain student feedback after teaching this unit along with looking into academic writings in order to make the unit as culturally responsive as possible.

The professional impact of this project could hopefully begin to transform student learning experiences. As teachers and administrators do the work to better understand their students and recognize the importance of student voices being central to the classroom, students will become more engaged and therefore more successful in their learning. If whole schools could adopt a focus on academic discussion skills in the classroom, they could see a big change not only academically for their students, but in the school culture as a whole.

Next Steps and Sharing Results

The first step moving forward from here will be to teach this unit to my 8th graders this fall. Following that, I will analyze the pre and post surveys as well as the summative assessments to understand the effectiveness of the unit on student learning. In addition, I will conduct informal interviews with students to gain a better understanding of their engagement levels throughout the unit and any feedback they may have. Based on all of this information, I will make adjustments to the unit as needed. In addition, I will consider how best to integrate academic discussion into the rest of my units throughout the year so that students continue to use and practice their skills.

Once my own data gathering and reflection is done, I hope to bring my ideas to a larger audience in my school. I will share my results with the ELA department and encourage the team to implement this unit across grade levels the following year. I will also bring my results to other content areas as well as my administration in hopes of making academic discussion skills central to student learning in all content classes.

Summary

In summary, the development of this project, from writing the beginning chapters to creating the unit plan and materials, allowed me to be reflective in my practice as both a student and a teacher. Perhaps the most meaningful practice reinforced throughout this process was consistently returning to the foundation of culturally responsive pedagogy. Doing this repeatedly throughout the many steps of this project allowed me to check my own biases and ensure that the work I was doing was truly going to benefit students in the end as I work towards implementing the project and sharing its principles with a wider audience in the upcoming school year.

Completing this project at the start of a new school year is significant in that we, as educators, must begin the year with student voices in mind. Each student that walks through my classroom door in the coming days has a unique story, unique abilities, and unique background knowledge that is valuable to the learning community. However, without effectively creating a space in which they are comfortable and confident sharing their authentic voice, those stories will go untold, denying learning opportunities to all students. Therefore, the beginning of the year is perhaps the most important time to ask the question, *how can student voices be elevated through rigorous academic discussion in a middle school English Language Arts classroom?* Asking this question now, and continuing to make it a focus throughout the year, will lead to curriculum design and implementation that fosters critical thinking and deep learning in all students.

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