

Hamline University

DigitalCommons@Hamline

School of Education and Leadership Student
Capstone Projects

School of Education and Leadership

Summer 2023

Incorporating Opportunities for Diverse Literature into the Early Elementary Classroom

Mary Cline

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cline, Mary, "Incorporating Opportunities for Diverse Literature into the Early Elementary Classroom" (2023). *School of Education and Leadership Student Capstone Projects*. 952.
https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp/952

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education and Leadership at DigitalCommons@Hamline. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Education and Leadership Student Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Hamline. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hamline.edu.

Incorporating Opportunities for Diverse Literature into the Early Elementary Classroom

by

Mary Cline

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

Hamline University

St Paul, Minnesota

August 2023

Capstone Project Facilitator: Laura Halldin
Content Reviewer: Wendy Richards
Peer Reviewer: Joy Cline

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents. To Dad, for recognizing the opportunities that this degree would open for me, and for encouraging me to just get started. To Mom, for holding me accountable to a high degree of excellence in all my schooling. Your standard of excellence has been my beacon as I navigated this path.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	6
Overview.....	6
The Journey.....	6
Literacy Curriculum.....	10
Rationale and Importance.....	11
Positionality.....	12
Summary.....	12
CHAPTER TWO: Review of Literature.....	14
Introduction.....	14
Windows and Mirrors.....	14
Definition and Purpose.....	15
Effects and Importance of Mirrors.....	16
Effects and Importance of Windows.....	17
Creating Opportunities for Windows and Mirrors in Literature.....	18
Important Considerations for Selecting Literature.....	19
Windows and Mirrors Summary.....	20
Student Engagement.....	21
Causes of Motivation.....	21
Effects of Student Engagement.....	23
Specific Engagement Strategies.....	24

	4
Student Engagement Summary.....	26
Culturally Relevant Instruction.....	27
Justification for Culturally Relevant Instruction.....	27
Culturally Relevant Instructional Strategies.....	28
Effects of Culturally Relevant Instruction.....	29
Culturally Relevant Instruction Summary.....	31
Critical Literacy Strategies.....	31
Importance of Critical Literacy.....	32
Specific Strategies for Teaching Critical Literacy.....	32
Effects on Student Engagement and Student Learning.....	34
Considerations for Implementing Critical Literacy Strategies.....	35
Critical Literacy Summary.....	36
Summary.....	37
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....	39
Introduction.....	39
Project Overview and Rationale.....	40
Project Description.....	42
Audience.....	43
Timeline.....	44
Assessment.....	45
Summary.....	46

CHAPTER FOUR: Reflection.....	47
Introduction.....	47
Reflection upon Learning.....	48
Revisiting the Literature Review.....	49
Implications and Limitations.....	51
Using the Results.....	52
Benefits for the Profession.....	52
Future Extensions.....	53
Conclusion.....	53
REFERENCES.....	55

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

As a teacher of multilingual students in a predominantly white school, I have become well-aware of the lack of representation my students have in the literature we use in their classrooms. Thankfully, the world has come a long way in having more multicultural literature available, but many school districts have yet to update their curriculums to match the growing diversity of their student populations. It is my goal to provide my multilingual students, as well as other marginalized learners, with a way to see themselves represented in the books we read. This concept is sometimes referred to as a “mirror.” Not only is this a benefit to my students, but it also opens up the rest of the student population to view the world through new eyes as well. That concept can be referred to as a “window.” This leads me to my research question: *How are first and second grade students’ classroom engagement impacted by the incorporation of “windows and mirrors” in their literature curriculum?* Chapter one discusses my journey towards embarking on this research path, my rationale for selecting this particular topic of study, my positionality on this topic, my intentions and goal in doing this research, a summary of this chapter, and an overview of the following chapters.

The Journey

I grew up in a primarily white school. I was “tracked” through classes that were challenging but were often only made up of students that looked and acted just like me. This was mostly due to having good grades and being locked into a tight schedule with

my participation in two music classes. I knew that there were students who spoke other languages, but I had not had the opportunity to interact with them much during my high school years. In fact, I had no idea that the field of “English and a Second Language” even existed until my senior year of high school. My mom, a substitute in the district, was placed in an EL classroom one day. She came home, bursting to tell me all about it. At the time, I was trying to figure out a secondary field of study to pair with my primary major of elementary education. So when my mom came home, exclaiming that she got to take students outside to experience snow for the first time, the unique concept of being a part of those “firsts” caused my ears to perk up. I decided that ESL education would be the perfect addition to my elementary education degree. As I made my way through my undergraduate program at the University of Northwestern, St. Paul, I started leaning away from my original plan of being an elementary teacher with a good knowledge of ESL best practices, and instead, I started focusing on becoming an EL teacher with a good knowledge of elementary best-practices. I had completely fallen in love with the idea of becoming an EL teacher. I loved the style of teaching, the strong bond with students, and the ability to impact children in a more individualized way.

I graduated with my undergraduate degrees in elementary education and ESL education, and I promptly got a job teaching English as a Second Language in Roseville, MN. During that initial year of teaching, I was first exposed to the idea of incorporating opportunities for “windows and mirrors” in the books we read with students. I had never considered its importance until that time. I began to wonder what the impact would be if we designed curriculum around that concept. During my time in Roseville, I started to be

mindful of the books that I chose to use with students. I tried to pick ones that represented the diverse population that I worked with.

Beyond just my students though, I started incorporating this same practice into my own life. I realized that most of the books that I chose to read were only providing me mirrors of my own world. Those kinds of books felt good to read, but I was not learning much from them. I have always loved immersing myself in new, relevant middle-grade novels, so I intentionally started to seek out books that gave me a broader perspective of how children from other cultures viewed the world. This search expanded to include books that were just about children who grew up differently than I did. I felt that I was becoming more well-rounded in my book choices, and I loved the different stories and perspectives it was giving me. In addition to books, I started watching youtube channels from families around the world. I would pick places that I was interested in, and simply search for videos about them on youtube. I have run across many very well-run accounts where people simply record and post videos about their lives. I have found this to be fascinating, and I have thoroughly enjoyed learning about real people and how they live. Alaska happened to be one of the places that I most wanted to visit, so I decided to search for videos about it. After finding a few videos from a family who lives in the interior of the state and spends a lot of time traveling to different areas in the state, I subscribed and have followed them for years now. I learned so much about the life and culture of Alaska that when I finally got a chance to visit in the summer of 2022, along with my brother and sister-in-law, I shocked them with all the knowledge I had built up of what Alaska was like. They would ask random questions, more to themselves than to anyone in

particular, about certain things we would see, and I would often surprise them with a factual answer that they never would have expected me to know.

After three years of teaching in Roseville, I made a transition to teach in Eagan, MN. Roseville's EL population had been shrinking, and that meant I had only ever been a part-time employee. That was not a great situation for me in the long-term, and it made a lot more sense to find a district that was growing in their EL population. Landing in Eagan was a dream come true because it is the same district and city where my dad has spent his whole career teaching. It felt like I had come full circle. I grew up surrounded by the teachers in this district, and to become one of them myself, felt surreal.

I believe my school district has grown into one of the most desirable school districts within the twin cities metro area. Many parents drive their children from various areas of the metro in order to attend a school in this district. They choose this district for their children because it is known to be rigorous and offers great opportunities in academics, arts, and athletics. It also offers great benefits and support systems for teachers, and it holds both teachers and students to very high standards. This is great, but it also makes for a very wide achievement gap between students who grow up with every opportunity and support, and those who do not. Often, my EL students fall into the category of "those who do not." I spend a lot of my time trying to help them to keep pace with their peers. I ask questions in my head every day about both what I could possibly do to make learning and school more engaging for my students, and how I can make content more accessible for them in general.

Literacy Curriculum

In my new school, I started utilizing more co-teaching (teaching alongside the classroom teacher in a classroom setting). It was a great experience because it allowed me to work with both my EL students and the general classroom students as well. However, it also exposed me to the knowledge that our literacy curriculum was really lacking diversity in its book choices. It had not been updated in a long time. Our school population had begun to change, but our curriculum had not changed along with it. That left my EL students with many opportunities to have windows into other worlds, but not many mirrors into their own. And in contrast, it left the white students with the same situation that I grew up in. They only consistently had mirrors of their own worlds in the books we read in class. I often wonder how our school's literacy curriculum affects learners. Most of the books within the curriculum have a very traditional, white-American perspective. It does not offer much in the way of cultural diversity. This leaves almost all the students with little to no opportunity to either see themselves represented in literature or to see other perspectives and worldviews represented in literature.

Small steps are being taken as a district to change this in our district, but it is a big undertaking, and there are so many options to explore when it comes to incorporating multicultural and inclusive literature.

One day in my co-taught first-grade classroom, we read a book about a little girl who wore a hijab. It was the first time we had read a book like that with the class. When we opened up the book and started reading the story, one of our students sat up a little straighter and her eyes got brighter! She whispered to her friend, "She looks like me!"

The sparkle in our student's eyes when she saw a little girl who looked like her in our class book was extremely meaningful to me. I could tell that the experience had positively impacted this student, and I was inspired to work harder to have our multicultural families be better represented in our literature choices.

Interestingly enough, that was not the last important interaction between our student who wore a hijab and her little friend (who also happened to be a multicultural student herself). My student's friend started becoming very fascinated with her friend's hijab. It got to the point where she would walk into school, pretending that she was wearing a hijab as well. One day though, she started picking at the gems on her friend's hijab and trying to remove it from her head. Of course, this caused a bit of a commotion in the classroom. We tried to explain to our student's well-meaning friend that it was not appropriate to touch or move her friend's hijab. This experience showed me that we need to normalize other cultures or other ways of life in our literacy curriculum so that our students are exposed to them at a young age and they are not a novelty.

Rationale and Importance

A strong literacy curriculum is vital to the success of all the students in a school, and I know that ours has gaps and holes when it comes to representing the entirety of our school district's student population. Like my examples from my first-grade classroom, having a diverse curriculum has benefits for all different types of students. Style (1988) discussed benefits for students in the dominant culture group as being able to think about others' wants and needs more effectively, while Sims Bishop (1990) noted that it is equally important to give students the opportunity to see themselves within the literature they read, which results in a strong feeling of self-worth. It is my goal to work to create a

curriculum that benefits all students and gives them the opportunity to both have a broad perspective that will show them more of what the world has to offer and to have the opportunity to see themselves in literature.

Teachers are required to teach with the texts that are used in the curriculum, so my goal is to work with our literacy team towards updating our curriculum so that teachers do not have to spend their own time searching for appropriate books to use with their students. And in some cases, teachers would simply choose not to add to the already existing curriculum, due to one reason or another. If the work is already done, it will be a benefit to all the students in the school.

Positionality

I believe it is important to acknowledge how my own background experience affects my research. As stated above, I grew up in a privileged environment, where I had ample opportunities to access literature that both mirrored my own life, and gave me windows into the experiences of others. As a white teacher of multilingual students, I want all my work to uplift their stories and experiences without “othering” them in any way. The goal for this research project is to broaden the worldviews of all the students in my school and to create a united spirit of inclusivity and respect towards those who may look, think, or act differently than ourselves.

Summary

In summary, the need for a diverse and inclusive curriculum is of great importance for both continued student success, and for student engagement with the curriculum. With some additions and deletions to the current curriculum, along with strong rationale, positive change is achievable.

In the chapters that remain, I will continue to dig deeper into the question: *How are first and second grade students' classroom engagement impacted by the incorporation of "windows and mirrors" in their literature curriculum?* In chapter two, I will spend time analyzing and reviewing specific literature that pertains to this research question in order to develop a strong rationale for the importance of this research and work. Chapter three will contain an outline of my capstone project. Finally, in chapter four, I reflect on the project's completion and the effect it has had.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to review and synthesize the relevant literature surrounding the incorporation of multicultural literature, specifically “windows and mirrors” into students’ literacy curriculum. There are many aspects that impact student learning, such as certain instructional styles and classroom materials, and this chapter explores some of the most important of these, in relation to multicultural literature. The guiding research question for this literature review is: *How are first and second grade students’ classroom engagement impacted by the incorporation of “windows and mirrors” in their literature curriculum?*

This chapter contains four subtopics that explore the research question in more depth. First, the terms “windows” and “mirrors” will be defined and explored. This section discusses the effects that windows and mirrors have on students and shares relevant research findings. This chapter also contains information about the causes and effects of student engagement, as well as specific strategies to engage students more effectively. In addition, this chapter discusses how the incorporation of culturally relevant instructional strategies impacts student learning. Finally, this chapter explores how critical literacy questioning techniques can be used to deepen student discussions and understanding of literature and the world around them.

Windows and Mirrors

The concept of “Windows and Mirrors” is a reference to the work of Emily Style (1988). In the world of literature, a “mirror” refers to an opportunity for the reader to see

him or herself reflected in the literature. In contrast, a “window” refers to an opportunity for the reader (typically of the dominant culture group) to see into the life of someone else, in order to gain a better understanding of their culture. This section discusses an in-depth definition of windows and mirrors, research that supports its incorporation into curriculum, as well as the effects of it seen in the classroom and important considerations one must have when selecting inclusive texts.

Definition and Purpose

“Windows” and “Mirrors” are two separate concepts within the similar focus of multicultural literature. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) discussed the significance of mirrors in literature and how they allow readers to see themselves reflected in what they are reading within the context of the larger world. Reading a book that mirrors one’s life can be an affirming experience for the reader, who can then see how he or she fits into the world. This suggests that mirrors within literature is something that teachers should seek out for their students. The positive effect they have on readers is powerful.

Bishop (1990) then shifted her focus to the dominant cultural group and suggested that those within that group needed to be presented with opportunities to have windows into other cultures and other lives, otherwise, their worldviews would become quite selfishly focused on themselves and their own importance. It is a precarious situation for students to most often see themselves within their literature. Students who grow up seeing themselves portrayed as the most important and dominant cultural group may subconsciously view others as less important than they are. It is critical to give students both the opportunity to view themselves within literature, but it is equally important to provide them with the opportunity to view others within literature.

Arguably the most dominant people group represented in literature is the white male. Emily Style (1988) discussed the white male as having the most representation in literature, while other groups such as women and people of color much fight harder for representation. Not only is this unfair for the underrepresented, it is an inaccurate representation of society and the world at large. Both Style (1988) and Cahill, Ingram and Joo (2021) remarked upon the need to accurately represent our society and world through literature. We need to have a curriculum within our schools that portrays a multicultural society, as well as each and every student within our rooms (Style, 1988). That representation needs to be broad. It should also be current and actually reflect the modern world that our students live in. This should include the representations and interactions of various cultures, religions, abilities and disabilities, and gender identities (Cahill, Ingram & Joo, 2021). White males should have the ability to be seen and heard within the literature, but their voices should be equally matched by all the other groups of people, wanting to be seen and heard as well.

Effects and Importance of Mirrors

Having quality literature that provides opportunities for students to see their life mirrored back to them is vitally important to the students in classrooms. They show students their value in this world. In fact, Bishop (1990) powerfully noted that students who see their cultures missing, misrepresented, or even made fun of in literature felt undervalued and unimportant. This highlights the importance of finding and utilizing quality literature that will show our students mirrors to their lives. Not only is relatability and accurate representation important to students' well-being, but it is also important to their school curriculum goals.

Many of the goals in early literacy curriculum are focused on students making connections with the books they are reading. Rebecca Quiñones noticed that her second-grade students started out identifying books that mirrored their lives based on the activities that the characters did in the books that they also enjoyed to do. They were focused on making more superficial, surface-level connections with characters. This led Quiñones to deepen student discussion around identity and to teach her students how to make deeper connections with characters in their books. Quiñones noticed that once her students had a deeper understanding of their own cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities, they became more successful in forging those identity-based connections with the literature in the classroom. Their ability to find mirrors within the text went to a new and deeper level than before (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022). This really implies that students need direct instruction in how to interact with literature in order to make the most out of their connections with mirror texts in literature.

Effects and Importance of Windows

In addition to mirrors, windows are an important part of the classroom literature curriculum. Windows are what widen the world of students and invite them to view lives, cultures, and ways of thinking that are different from their own. In the classroom, students are impacted by windows in literature in a variety of ways. One of these ways is through learning how to be curious about and respectful of other cultures and traditions (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022). Simple exposure to new thinking and ideas through literature is sometimes enough to get students out of their own little worlds and introduce them to a more broad and inclusive way of thinking.

Using more inclusive thinking patterns can lead to positive impacts on students. Students who spend time reading and thinking about others, develop curiosity and respect for others (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2022). Style (1988) discussed the concept of children who are accustomed to viewing the lives of others through windows in their curriculum and their ability to become more mindful of the wants and needs of someone else. This is a practice that is grown over time, and it leads to a more empathetic, caring child.

In the school environment, the need for understanding, kindness, and compassion is crucial to success. School is where teachers and curriculum can influence the students of today on their journey to becoming the adults of tomorrow. Bishop (1990) noted that one of the main reasons for using inclusive literature is so that students can see how to get along with and work with others who are different from themselves. Having that spirit of kindness, understanding, and compassion can make great steps towards solving problems both on a smaller scale, such as school classrooms, and on a larger scale, in the world today.

Creating Opportunities for Windows and Mirrors in Literature

For many educators, it is challenging and time-consuming to locate appropriate texts for their students, but there are many different kinds of books that can contain windows or mirrors. Cahill, Ingram and Joo (2021) noted that in books used for storytime, 55.6% utilize animals as a main character. People are then the main characters in 34.% of books. Most often, when educators think of creating an opportunity for a window or mirror in a text, they use a book that portrays a child that may be similar to or different from the students in their class. Throughout their work, Ascenzi-Moreno and

Quiñones (2022) and José Botelho (2021) both talked about using a significant number of books that contain human characters to whom their students can easily relate. Those make sense and are natural choices for creating opportunities for students to forge those connections.

Often educators pass up opportunities to use books that contain an animal as a main character because it is not as obvious that students may be able to see a window or mirror in that sort of text. Sotirovska and Kelley (2020) argued that books containing anthropomorphic characters can be just as valuable in creating a place for windows and mirrors to be discussed in the classroom. These types of books allow students to view the characteristics and stories of animals as being separate from a specific culture or ethnicity, and therefore the animal can be a mirror character to a much broader range of students (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020). This allows students to discuss specific issues and gain new perspectives, free from any specific constraints that would minimize a student's ability to connect with the character. Books with anthropomorphic characters are valuable additions to the classroom curriculum because they aid in deepening discussion for a much broader group of students.

Important Considerations for Selecting Literature

When dealing with culture, ethnicity, religion, and identity, there is never a one-size-fits-all approach. It can be difficult to locate appropriate texts to incorporate windows and mirrors into the curriculum. Just because a book may fit into a certain, diverse category, does not mean that it will be a book with which students will connect. Ascenzi-Moreno and Quiñones (2022) had the background of being bilingual, and therefore had certain texts that they felt strongly connected to the bilingual experience.

They brought those texts eagerly to the bilingual class, anticipating that they would instantly create mirror opportunities for the students, only to be disappointed that the students, despite having a similar background to their teachers, did not connect to the texts in the way that their teachers hoped they would. This teaches the important lesson for educators not to assume they know which texts will connect with which students. Their job is to simply present texts that could potentially be mirrors and guide students to make those identity-based connections on their own.

Another cautionary point is to be careful about choosing texts that represent a specific culture or situation and mistakenly assume that it represents everybody in that culture's lived experience. José Botelho (2021) discussed and concluded that because there is so much diversity, even amongst cultural groups, one must be cautious about assuming a text is representative of it. She went on to reflect that not all texts will connect as mirrors with the assumed audience and noted that all texts chosen for containing potential windows and mirrors need to be thoroughly vetted for potential dominant worldviews and stereotypes that could be harmful to student groups (José Botelho, 2021). These precautions are important to consider when choosing texts that will be read in the classroom. The goal for including windows and mirrors is to enhance the student learning experience, not to make assumptions about students or unintentionally introduce harmful stereotypes.

Windows and Mirrors Summary

Ultimately, school curriculums will benefit from the addition of texts containing opportunities for students to see windows and mirrors. Selecting quality texts with opportunities to view through a window into another culture creates empathy, kindness,

and compassion in students within the dominant culture group. Students viewing texts as mirrors will experience an increased awareness of their own identity and feel an increased sense of belonging in the world. The selection of texts that contain windows and mirrors may be tedious and more difficult than expected. Educators must be careful to avoid both harmful stereotypes and damaging, dominant worldviews. They must also consider many different types of texts containing various types of characters. Though the process is long, the results make the effort worthwhile.

Student Engagement

Student engagement refers to how invested and involved students are in their learning. Figuring out how to engage students in school is becoming a critical issue in attempting to close the educational achievement gap (Capper, 2022). There are teaching strategies that can affect classroom engagement, but the materials used in the classroom are of great importance as well. These materials can include the use of multicultural literature that incorporate windows and mirrors. Both materials and teaching strategies contribute to creating a classroom environment that is conducive to engaging students in learning and in school. This section discusses specific strategies and materials that support student engagement, as well as other factors that affect student persistence through difficulty and motivation to succeed.

Causes of Motivation

Student engagement often has a lot to do with how motivated students are in school. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) discussed the importance of motivation and its relation to engagement. They shared that engagement is a direct result of motivation and that a reader's level of motivation is what impacts their time spent reading, their cognitive

effort, and their comprehension. A less motivated reader is going to perform at a lower ability level than a highly motivated reader (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Kessels and Van Houtte (2022) studied different types of motivation that students may possess. The two main categories reported were “controlled” and “autonomous” motivation. Controlled motivation is all about doing something only because one feels like they have to do it. Autonomous motivation is when one does an activity because it is important to them or it is fun for them (Kessels & Van Houtte, 2022). These researchers noted that when students were more autonomously motivated, they were more engaged in school, and when their motivation was controlled, they were less motivated (Kessels & Van Houtte, 2022). This points toward the need for teachers to create opportunities to autonomously motivate students. The goal needs to be that students should enjoy their learning and feel that it is important and worthwhile of their time and attention. Then their school engagement will increase.

One of the ways that teachers can increase student engagement is by paying close attention to the types of materials they use in their classrooms. Capper (2022) studied the effect of using culturally relevant literature on classroom engagement with her students. She discovered that when her students were able to make cultural connections with the texts they were reading, they were both more motivated to read the books and more engaged when actively reading (Capper, 2022). The students’ engagement levels were both observed by other teachers and reported by the students themselves. Some of the specific reports from students included feeling like the books they were reading were more relatable, and that because of that they were able to understand the material better. They felt more engaged because they were reading about people from their own culture.

They even reported feeling like they connected with the characters in the book on a deeper level because it felt like they could relate with things that the characters both said and did (Capper, 2022). Clearly, carefully-selected reading material has a positive effect on students and their engagement levels in the classroom. The students in this case displayed higher levels of autonomous motivation and therefore displayed higher levels of engagement with school activities. Using multicultural literature in the classroom is a great way to increase student motivation and engagement.

Effects of Student Engagement

There are many reasons that increased student engagement should be a goal for both schools and teachers. It has a clear, positive effect on students both in and out of the academic environment. In the study done by Kessels (2022), it was found that students who were engaged in the classroom had an increase in their general well-being. Kessels' study was further broken down by student gender, and it found that specifically girls' well-being was actively regulated by being engaged in their classrooms (Kessels, 2022). Student engagement appears to be strongly connected with their well-being. Thinking about the type of regulation and routine that schools provide, that does not come as a surprise. When students are engaged with what is happening in their classrooms, it creates a sense of peace and calm. According to Capper (2022), the effect of classroom engagement spans between increased success in school, as well as increased success in life. Therefore, it is critical to set the foundation for student success both now and in the future by effectively engaging them in school activities.

Specific Engagement Strategies

Many different strategies have been proven to be effective in engaging students of various ages. Of course, as discussed above, creating opportunities for students to be autonomously motivated is highly important in effectively engaging them in school (Kessels, 2022). In addition, Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2022) discussed many other engagement strategies and their application to college-aged students. Some of these strategies feel applicable and valuable to be discussed within the context of student engagement as a whole because they hold universal value for students of all ages. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) also discussed many practical strategies for engaging students as well.

First and foremost, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) discussed the importance of teachers selecting engaging texts that their students will find interesting. Students are more likely to be engaged and motivated when they are reading books that they genuinely enjoy (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). This makes a great deal of sense, but often teachers are tempted to just repeat lessons year after year, using the same texts because it is easier than taking the time to find new ones. However, each group of students is unique and has unique likes, dislikes, and interests. Texts used in the classroom should reflect the personalities found within the student body.

Another suggestion from Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2022) was to ensure that newer students received extra support and early interventions as they made the shift to college-level work. This applies to younger elementary students as well. Many interventions such as Reading Recovery support happen at an early age in order to catch students who are a little behind so that they do not become extremely behind. This early

intervention process is often very successful at ensuring students are able to comprehend what is going on in their classrooms and therefore stay more focused and engaged in their learning. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) also reinforced the importance of teaching students specific strategies both explicitly and implicitly in direct instruction by claiming that this increase in understanding will lead to an increase in engagement. In general, students who understand more of a text will be more easily engaged in their learning.

Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2022) also discussed the importance of increasing student time on task. They noted that when students are actively engaged with learning activities such as problem-solving activities, peer coaching, or service learning, they are more likely to apply their learning and think more critically about what they are doing (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2022). This is seen in elementary school through the increase of project-based learning. Students are spending much more time in school actually applying their knowledge and learning to create real-world products and solutions. The goal of this form of teaching and learning is to both engage students while they are in school and to also prepare them for their future schooling and job assignments. Easley and Lehto (2022) discussed many ways to engage students successfully through collaborative learning such as modeling and discussing skills used in partner work like navigating conflicts and interactions with each other as students work towards common goals. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) also noted that increasing students' time spent collaborating with others tends to increase their level of motivation and engagement in performing learning tasks. Supporting students to engage in collaborative learning is an effective way to increase student overall engagement in school.

The final applicable focus is on ensuring teachers are using best practices when it comes to working with students of underrepresented populations. Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2022) state that some of the ways to engage multicultural students (and really, all students) are to set aside time for students to one-on-one with their teachers, making sure students are affirmed for their good work, and encouraging students so that they are able to see themselves as successful, even with difficult tasks. It is often the little things that go a long way in engaging students. Easley and Lehto (2022) also suggested being mindful during group work of pairing multilingual students with carefully chosen partners who will be able to work well with diverse students without taking over tasks and doing everything themselves. This creates more independence and ownership of work in students who would otherwise need a lot more adult support. Young students are easily encouraged to work hard and do their best when they feel that their teacher cares about them, believes in them, and goes out of their way to support them in the classroom.

Student Engagement Summary

There are many pieces that make up student engagement. Increasing student engagement by helping students become more autonomously motivated is critical. This can be done by implementing strategies that ensure all students are seen and heard in their classrooms, providing opportunities for active, hands-on, applicable learning, and making sure that struggling students do not fall through the cracks and fall behind in school. This can also be done by ensuring that students have access to literature with which they can connect and in which they can see themselves. By doing these things, teachers and schools can work towards closing the achievement gap and create the best

possible future for the students they impact. One area that teachers can specifically work on is incorporating culturally relevant instructional strategies.

Culturally Relevant Instruction

Culturally relevant literacy instruction refers to instruction that is aware of and responsive to cultural, socio-economic, and academic diversity in the student body (Acosta & Duggins, 2021). It considers specific strategies that work well for groups of students, and it goes beyond simply introducing students to multicultural concepts and figures. Culturally relevant instruction is best used alongside strong, multicultural literature that offers plenty of opportunities for students to windows and mirrors. Pre-service teachers do not get much training in culturally relevant instruction, and therefore, many teachers have a limited understanding of it (Acosta & Duggins, 2021). This section will explore the importance of using culturally relevant instruction, some of the specific strategies and materials that are successful within classrooms, and the effects that have been seen from moving from a prescriptive approach to a responsive approach.

Justification for Culturally Relevant Instruction

According to Searle, Tofel-Grehl, Hawkman, Suárez, and MacDonald (2022), most teachers in the United States are white, but their classrooms are growing increasingly more diverse. This can cause an issue when the teaching and learning style preferences of middle class, white teachers do not adequately serve the students in the classrooms. Searle, Tofel-Grehl, Hawkman, Suárez, and MacDonald (2022) acknowledged that while most white teachers are well-intentioned and mean no harm, the educational system today is fraught with underlying racism and white supremacy. School districts and teachers are beginning to be more conscious about engaging in more

equitable practices in school. The desire for teachers to be better educators for their students is there, but in order to support that desire, teachers need access to materials, curriculum, and professional development that are designed for them to serve a diverse student population.

Culturally Relevant Instructional Strategies

Teachers can utilize many different strategies and methods in order to incorporate culturally relevant instructional practices into the classroom. Ulluchi (2011) stated that teachers could begin by becoming more inclusive of different cultural aspects of both the students in their classrooms, as well as of cultures around the world. This can happen through a variety of avenues, including the incorporation of diverse literature and art, classroom research around other cultures, or activities such as role-playing or acting out different scenarios (Ulluchi, 2011). In addition to reading diverse literature with students, teachers can and should discuss complex themes found within the books (Kemmerlin & Wilkins, 2020). This provides students with the opportunity to share connections and further engage with diverse literature and their classmates.

Another important piece to consider is the amount of time dedicated to diverse-literacy practices. Ulluchi (2011) encouraged teachers to become more consistent with their incorporation of diversity-focused practices in the classroom in order to make it a normal part of what students learn in school. She mentioned that it was far more powerful for students to have that consistent exposure, rather than reading about topics such as Latino culture or Black History Month only once a year (Ulluchi, 2011). Younger students especially do well with routines and structures that are consistently followed, so

by being consistent with diversity-focused materials and discussions, teachers can support student engagement with these topics.

Effects of Culturally Relevant Instruction

The reason teachers desire to use culturally relevant instruction is to see a positive impact in their students' engagement in school. There are many beneficial outcomes that can occur when teachers consciously incorporate these strategies into their classrooms. Kemmerlin and Wilkins (2020) studied the effects of using read-alouds that displayed and discussed more diverse family representations on second grade students. They found that students were more engaged in classroom discussions and were more willing to talk about deeper topics that exposed more vulnerable aspects of their lives. They also found that students were able to recognize the complexity and depth of injustices that occur in society. Finally, they noticed that students became both more empathetic towards characters in difficult life situations and more accepting of characters who came from backgrounds and situations that were different from their own (Kemmerlin & Wilkins, 2020). This increase in engagement with both important and sometimes difficult subject matter is important for student development both in the classroom and outside of it.

In her time spent working with culturally competent teachers in the field, Gloria Ladson Billings (2014) identified three main effects of utilizing culturally relevant curriculum with students. Firstly, the students experienced an increase in academic success. This came about because the teachers became less focused on behavior management and more focused on the learning itself, the students became more interested and invested in their education. Ulluchi (2011) actually described what this could look like in her study on teaching strategies. She discussed teachers letting go running their

classrooms on tight schedules and instead letting students take the time they need to finish tasks. She also referred to allowing students to move purposefully and freely about the classroom in order to complete tasks in places that made the most sense to them. Students were allowed to use clipboards, sit on the floor, or sit in nooks and crannies around the room (Ulluchi 2011).

Secondly, as a result of increased culturally relevant instruction, Ladson Billings (2014) discussed an increase in student cultural competence. Students demonstrated both an increase in knowledge and pride in their own cultures, as well as an increase in knowledge and awareness of other cultures (Ladson Billings, 2014). This is accomplished by utilizing materials that both represent the students in the classroom and introduce the students to cultures and diversity not represented in their immediate school or classroom community. Ulluchi (2011) referenced the importance of including diverse materials that represent a broad range of diversity because often teachers only include materials that directly represent their own classroom community. While providing students with mirrors is important, it is also important to give them the opportunity to learn more about others.

Finally, Ladson-Billings (2014) noted that students experienced an increase in sociopolitical consciousness. This just means that students gained the ability to take their learning from the classroom and apply it to real-world situations. Like Kemmerlin and Wilkins (2020) demonstrated, this is accomplished through teaching students how to discuss important and difficult topics in the books they read in their classrooms. By teaching students how to have those discussions and conversations with each other, they learn how to display empathy and acceptance for people who are different from themselves (Kemmerlin & Wilkins, 2020).

Culturally Relevant Instruction Summary

By incorporating culturally relevant instructional practices into the classroom, students are able to have greater academic success as well as gain real-world knowledge of other cultures and valuable problem-solving skills. Integrating these practices into classrooms can be as easy as creating space for students to have deeper discussions around books or opening up the classroom to be a place for students to move around freely as they learn and work alongside each other. For teachers, being flexible and open to what students need to be successful is a key component in culturally relevant teaching, and one of the culturally relevant strategies that works well with student engagement is critical literacy.

Critical Literacy Strategies

Critical literacy is the method by which students read critically in order to assess text for its true meaning (Bennet, 2012). It opens up opportunities for discussions about the deeper meaning of the books that are read. It encourages the reader to engage in different ways of thinking about a text and encourages them to bring their own perspectives and cultures to deepen the discussion. Along the way, critical literacy can allow for teachers to address assumptions and stereotypes that may be in place while reading texts and working with students (Creighton, 1997). Critical literacy strategies go hand-in-hand with texts that offer windows and mirrors. This section explores strategies that are used in critical literacy, the importance of incorporating it into the classroom, as well as the effects it has upon student engagement and student learning.

Importance of Critical Literacy

Many authors have a lot to say about why critical literacy is important. One of the most basic justifications for using it in the classroom is because children are highly influenced by what they read (Creighton, 1997). Both children's conscious and subconscious mind is like a sponge, soaking up all the information it can. This should cause teachers to think carefully about the messages students are receiving from the books they are reading. José Botelho (2021) argued that the most important part of teaching critical literacy is teaching students *how* to read texts because that interaction with text or the images within text is how meaning is made.

Teaching critical literacy skills within the classroom impacts both the learning taking place in the classroom and students' interaction with the world around them. As Bennet (2012) stated, students who are taught to read critically have a stronger ability to interpret and evaluate whatever is influencing their thoughts. They can then respond appropriately based on their well-rounded views on situations. Inevitably, this additional insight into the deeper meanings and motivations of written text allows for deeper and more meaningful exploration of the world, and by teaching students how to think and read critically, teachers are opening up more opportunities to engage both in learning and with the world around them (Napoli, 2002).

Specific Strategies for Teaching Critical Literacy

One of the most well known strategies for teaching critical literacy is to study and use multiple perspectives when reading a text. Wee, Kim, and Lee (2017) spent time studying how kindergarten students interacted with both regular fairy tales and fairy tales told from an alternate perspective. Through this activity, the children were able to break

free from the strictness of characters being absolutely good or absolutely bad because they really broke down the characters' different motivations and perspectives of the events of the typical fairy tale. Through this, the students also realized how powerful the narrator's voice is in how the story is portrayed (Wee, Kim, & Lee, 2017). Beyond just thinking about the multiple perspectives from the characters in a story, students can consider the multiple perspectives that they themselves have in regards to texts read in the classroom. Cleovoulou and Beach (2019) discussed the importance of children listening to each other's voices and thoughts about stories in order to gain new perspectives on how a story can be interpreted. They noted that having children sitting in a circle for this kind of discussion was important so that everyone could view themselves as equal participants in the conversation (Cleovoulou & Beach, 2019). This is a great way to incorporate many voices into a discussion about the deeper meanings of books. Especially in diverse settings, there are many voices and perspectives represented in classrooms.

Another way teachers can use critical literacy in the classroom is to discuss and challenge stereotypes, social norms, and gender norms. In Wee, Kim, and Lee's (2017) work with kindergarten students, they observed the students gain the ability to see characters in a new light based on new information. In their work with the book *Cinderella* and other alternative perspectives on the story, the students were able to have deeper conversations about their original stereotypes of the stepmother and stepsisters and whether or not they were portrayed fairly. This leads to deeper discussions about the common negative stereotypes surrounding stepmothers in general within fairy tales. The students accepted the fact that both good characters could do bad things and bad

characters may not always be portrayed fairly in stories (Wee, Kim, & Lee, 2017). The children also read the story of *Snow White* and an alternate version and discussed typical gender stereotypes, coming to the conclusion that girls could do anything that boys could do. The children noticed that many books portrayed girls and boys in a particular way, and that in the end, it was perhaps an unfair and inaccurate portrayal (Wee, Kim, & Lee, 2017). These examples show that the awareness that critical literacy discussions bring to student learning was extremely valuable both in the books students are reading in class and in their application to their lives in the real world outside of school.

Effects on Student Engagement and Student Learning

When incorporated effectively, critical literacy has a great impact on student learning. It is an efficient and practical way to lead children towards opportunities to experience windows and mirrors in their curriculum. José Botelho (2021) stated, “Critical engagement with multicultural literature becomes mirrors, windows, and doors as readers gain new understandings of how cultures work and are constructed sociopolitically and historically” (p. 123). In addition to opening up opportunities for windows and mirrors, critical literacy gives students valuable skills such as being able to pose questions and challenges towards stereotypes and common beliefs that they might otherwise have glazed over and accepted as an absolute truth (Bennet, 2012). These are important skills that students need in order to think more critically and deeply in school and function as a productive member of society as well.

Students participating in critical literacy activities report more engagement in school as well. Wee, Kim, and Lee (2017) noticed that at first their kindergarten students struggled to accept and enjoy the parodies of the fairy tales they were interacting with

because they did not feel authentic, but after some time, effort, and discussion, the students became very engaged with the developments of the stories. In order to get their students to that point of being engaged with the alternative perspectives offered by the fairy tale parodies, the teachers needed to commit to facilitating quality discussions that taught children how to challenge common stereotypes and gender roles (Wee, Kim, & Lee, 2017). An additional impact of the critical literacy questioning strategies and examination of multiple viewpoints that were employed by the teachers was that the children learned how to identify people in the stories who were being marginalized (Wee, Kim, & Lee, 2017). This skill is also applicable to both the classroom, and the greater world. By using critical literacy strategies, students gain more than just skills to better their education. They truly gain the ability to put themselves into the shoes of other people's perspectives in order to view real-life situations from multiple perspectives.

Considerations for Implementing Critical Literacy Strategies

When implementing critical literacy strategies, teachers need to be aware and mindful of several things. Firstly, according to Creighton (1997) and Cleovoulou and Beach (2019), teachers must have a student-first mindset when using critical literacy, and it is important to focus on enabling children to use texts, as well as real-life current events, to gain a deeper understanding of their own personal lives, and to become more aware of how their lives affect others' lives. Teachers should also maintain a student-centered mindset when having discussions using critical literacy questioning and thought processes. According to Cleovoulou and Beach (2019), teacher comments during class discussions can distract students from their purpose. Instead of focusing on hearing other perspectives and learning from each other, they can unintentionally and

subconsciously focus on getting positive feedback from their teacher. Teachers should focus on asking good questions that prompt discussion from students, but those questions should be solely for the children to examine their own perspectives or the ones present in the text (Cleovoulou & Beach, 2019; Wee, Kim, & Lee, 2017).

Other important considerations for implementing critical literacy are the proper selection of texts and the frequency with which critical literacy methods are used. Cleovoulou and Beach (2019) and Wee, Kim, and Lee (2017) both cautioned teachers to be cautious about which texts they select for using critical literacy approaches in their classroom, and Creighton (1997) suggested that teachers ensure their texts are representative of a wide range of cultures and voices. This is a great opportunity for teachers to incorporate windows and mirrors as well as critical literacy into the curriculum. They go hand-in-hand, and both are beneficial to student learning. These practices should be used frequently with students not only because they are beneficial, but also makes learning more effective. Wee, Kim, and Lee (2017) noted that teachers should be careful not to consolidate critical literacy into one single lesson or activity that happens infrequently. Instead, they should aim to systematically implement the practice into instruction with consistency. Student learning happens best within rhythms and routines, so while this is not surprising, it is very important to keep in mind.

Critical Literacy Summary

Critical literacy has the potential to transform classroom discussions and classroom learning. By considering multiple perspectives and challenging typical stereotypes and gender norms, children become more engaged with their learning and with the culture and world in which they live. The ability to pair critical literacy strategies

with books that contain windows and mirrors for students is quite valuable, and it doubles the impact on students. If teachers are careful to select quality books and to guide student learning through discussions with each other, critical literacy can leave a meaningful impression on the students who engage with it.

Summary

In this chapter research was analyzed and synthesized in order to explore the four subtopics of windows and mirrors, student engagement, culturally relevant instruction, and critical literacy and their relationship to the research question: *How are first and second grade students' classroom engagement impacted by the incorporation of "windows and mirrors" in their literature curriculum?* The information that was reviewed helped to deepen understanding around the importance of utilizing culturally relevant literature in the classroom in order to increase student engagement.

There were many important takeaways from this research. First, the incorporation of windows and mirrors into the classroom curriculum has a positive impact on student engagement. Second, the use of discussion techniques, such as the ones used in critical literacy can also increase student engagement and provide opportunities for lifelong application of concepts to the real world. And lastly, the use of culturally relevant materials in the classroom matters and has positive impacts for both minority students as well as students in the dominant culture group.

In the following chapter, I discuss my capstone project. I use the research gained from this chapter to inform my creation of an addition of multicultural literature with discussion activities to my school's literacy curriculum. The intent is to provide students

with multiple opportunities for having windows and mirrors in the books they read at school.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

This chapter contains a description of the capstone project I created to address the need for more texts that contain windows and mirrors into my school's literacy curriculum. The goal of the project is to provide teachers with appropriate texts that fit right into the curriculum they are already using and to give them lessons with discussion guides to give them a starting point for using them in the classroom. This project ultimately supports student engagement and learning within the classroom, but it is meant to be primarily accessed and used by the teachers and other relevant support staff in the school. This project continues to address my research question: *How are first and second grade students' classroom engagement impacted by the incorporation of "windows and mirrors" in their literature curriculum?*

My project consists of a series of lesson plans that fit within the school's literacy curriculum. In this chapter, I describe the many details surrounding this project. First, I give both a rationale and an overview of the project and describe the importance of its use in the classroom. Next, I will further discuss the intended audience for this project and who it impacts in the school community. After that, I describe the timeline of the project from its creation to its implementation into the classrooms of my school. I also discuss how this project's effectiveness on student engagement will be assessed. Finally, I give a project summary and a transition into chapter four, the project. The sections I discuss in this chapter are vital to understanding the impact and importance of the project I have created.

Project Overview and Rationale

The intention behind this project's creation is to provide the teachers in my school with an easy way to introduce and discuss texts that contain windows and mirrors with their students. My school does not really have a true literacy curriculum. They go through a series of "units of study" throughout the year that connect literacy, science, and social studies together. It is full of some interesting themes, but many are quite old, and almost all of them need to be updated with more culturally relevant literature. My project works within the community unit that is already present in the first and second grade curriculum of my school and adds culturally relevant literature to the curriculum. In addition, I add lesson plans with discussion/activity guides to help both the teachers and myself as we use the new books. These discussions are based on some of the components of critical literacy.

There are many reasons why this work is important. Capper (2022) studied the effect of using culturally relevant literature on classroom engagement with her students. She discovered that when her students were able to make cultural connections with the texts they were reading, they were both more motivated to read the books and more engaged when actively reading. The students' engagement levels were both observed by other teachers and reported by the students themselves. Some of the specific reports from students included feeling like the books they were reading were more relatable, and that because of that they were able to understand the material better. They felt more engaged because they were reading about people from their own culture. They even reported feeling like they connected with the characters in the book on a deeper level because it felt like they could relate with things that the characters both said and did.

Additionally, Gloria Ladson Billings (2014) identified three main effects of utilizing culturally relevant curriculum with students. Firstly, the students experienced an increase in academic success. Secondly, students demonstrated both an increase in knowledge and pride in their own cultures, as well as an increase in knowledge and awareness of other cultures. Finally, students experienced an increase in sociopolitical consciousness. The goal of my research is to positively impact student engagement, and research has shown that using culturally relevant texts is an effective way to do this.

My project contains 24 lesson plans with discussion guides for teachers. These lessons were designed using some of the pieces from the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework by Wiggins and McTighe (2011). This framework focuses on a backwards design of instruction, starting with identifying the desired results and then designing instruction so that it shows evidence of students achieving those results. The UbD format is focused on students developing a deeper understanding of what is being taught and it has a very tight alignment between the major parts of a lesson plan (standards, essential question, lesson activities, and assessment).

The focus of these 24 lessons is to bring diverse books into the classroom that both provide a window and a mirror for students in the classroom and allow for rich discussion and reflection amongst the participating students. Kemmerlin and Wilkins (2020) had much to say on using and discussing diverse literature with students. They noted that students were more engaged in discussions that exposed more vulnerable sides of themselves and more appreciative of the value diversity brought to their classroom. It also helped students to recognize the depth and complexity surrounding issues of injustice in society. Finally, discussion of diverse literature increased student empathy for

characters in their difficult situations as well as increased student acceptance of people and situations that were different from their own lives. From my point of view, engaging students through group discussion is a great way for them to digest new books and new concepts because students truly get a lot of benefits from this.

By designing lessons that draw students into discussions around culturally relevant literature, teachers can expect to increase student engagement, in addition to many other positive outcomes. The following section delves further into the description of my project and the ways in which it can be used in the classroom.

Project Description

This project is designed to impact the first and second grade students at my school. It is a series of 12 lessons for 1st grade and 12 lessons for 2nd grade that coincide with the school literacy curriculum's community unit. The curriculum stands on its own already, but these lessons seek to fill in gaps that are apparent in its ability to engage multicultural students. Each lesson plan contains a book and a guide for how to use it within the curriculum. The lessons are designed to meet social justice standards by Teaching Tolerance (2022), ELA standards by the MN Department of Education (2010), and WIDA English Language Development standards (2020). Each plan also provides the teacher with a discussion guide to use while reading and an extension section that encourages students to draw and write in response to the book. Many of the discussion questions coincide with critical literacy questioning techniques and help students to see the world through the eyes of not only the characters in the books, but also through their classmates as they engage in discussion. The discussion questions are meant to provide

students with an opportunity to learn more about other cultures and gain empathy and understanding about other ways of life.

Teachers are strapped for time in today's day and age. The teachers at my school are no different. They have positive intentions and work hard so that their students can be successful, but time limits their ability to seek out culturally relevant resources for their students. Most of the time, they teach using the same books over and over again every year. Some teachers feel comfortable leading class discussions around more difficult topics, but others are less comfortable with it. By providing some group discussion questions to use both during and after reading books, my project aims to lighten the load for teachers by eliminating the prepwork of finding books and creating engaging questions and activities, while maintaining a strong impact on student learning and engagement. It creates an opportunity for teachers to engage with literature they may not have been brave enough to try on their own and potentially gives them the confidence to try talking about new things with their students that both increases their engagement and increases their empathy and understanding toward others. This project is intended to make it easier for teachers to include culturally relevant materials and teaching strategies with their students without taking up their precious time.

Audience

The intended audience for this project is primarily the classroom teachers in my school. They are the ones teaching the main curriculum and have the potential to facilitate whole-group discussions with the students. They have the most time with students and are able to build and maintain strong classroom communities, which are vital to having these books and having these kinds of conversations. But, in addition to

the classroom teachers, the first and second grade students are the other intended audience members for this project. These students are the ones who will participate in all the discussions and activities. The books, discussions, and activities are meant to increase student engagement.

An additional audience would be any other relevant teachers who work with the students. Interventionists, special education teachers, and EL teachers would be among those who also may utilize resources from the classroom curriculum in their instruction. In my own teaching, as an EL teacher, I often co-teach with grades one and two at my school. This curriculum is designed to be used by teachers like that as well.

Timeline

The creation of these lesson plans took place during the summer of 2023. The process started, through research and personal reflection, with the identification of culturally relevant categories or themes that were missing from the existing curriculum. The focus of these themes was largely built around the various cultures that are represented in my school. Then I moved on to searching for and identifying appropriate texts to add into the curriculum. These texts were selected to represent the common cultures of the students that attend my school. They were also intentionally selected to represent many cultures found in the world both inside and outside of school. This way, the students could both see their own lives reflected in literature and be exposed to literature that introduced them to the lives of other students in the school or other cultures outside of the school. After selecting the texts for this project, I moved on to writing lesson plans that could accompany these books that include prompts for rich class discussions. These lesson plans were intentionally placed into specific units throughout

the year. At the beginning of the 2023/2024 school year, these lessons were introduced and provided to the classroom teachers as part of their literacy curriculum for the year.

Assessment

The success of this project will be measured by looking at the written and drawn responses from students as they reflect upon the book and discussion. The students will use their drawings and writing to share their take-aways with a small group of students. Each lesson has a unique rubric that aligns with the book's discussion and the reflection questions that are posed to the students. The expectation is that students will connect or reflect on each book that they read and engage in discussion with their classmates or the teacher. This engagement and assessment data will be collected by the classroom teacher and potentially the EL co-teacher in the room.

In a less measurable way, the success of this project will be seen in the conversations that are sparked and the questions that are asked as the students navigate through the books and discuss them with the teachers and their classmates. Frequently, students can become disengaged during whole-group instruction and activities, so measuring student engagement with the new texts vs the existing texts will be a good way to see how effective this project is. Engaged students will actively participate in the lessons by sitting in close proximity while books are being read and also eagerly discussing the books with the teacher and their classmates during and after it is read. They will also be able to reflect on their learning independently in their reader's notebook afterwards. Teacher feedback will be provided through a survey. This survey will ask teachers to identify books and lessons that were meaningful to their classroom and ask them to identify gaps they still see in representation. This survey will inform selection of

texts moving forward, and in the future, more texts and lessons may be added to this set to maintain a quality representation of windows and mirrors and potentially give teachers more of a selection to pick and choose from based on the needs of their students.

Summary

This chapter discussed the creation and implementation of my project, a series of texts and lesson plans to incorporate windows and mirrors into the literacy curriculum in my school. This project is an important step in increasing multicultural student engagement, as well as widening the world of the dominant culture group by exposing them to new cultures and ideas. In addition to increasing student engagement, it also increases student knowledge of the world around them and increases their empathy for others. In the following, final chapter, I reflect on my project, conclude my study, and provide closure on this project as a whole.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Introduction

Reading books has been a pleasure of mine for nearly my entire life. I love to read about people who are just like me because it makes me feel like I am valuable and have a place where I belong in the world. I have also experienced joy from being transported to another world or being able to view life through the eyes of a character who is markedly different from me. I value both experiences, and I recognize the privilege I have to choose which kinds of books I want to read. Books are powerful that way. They can show their reader a mirror of their own life, or they can allow their reader to gaze through the window into the life of someone new and different.

Through my years of being a teacher, I have seen the effects of reading high-quality books with my students. I know which books they will find easy to connect with, and I know which books will be more of a chore to read than a pleasure. Often, especially with my younger students, they engage and connect with books that mirror their own lived experiences. Therefore, I set out to answer the question: *How are first and second grade students' classroom engagement impacted by the incorporation of "windows and mirrors" in their literature curriculum?*

This chapter provides reflections on my major learnings throughout the process of answering my research question and creating a project to implement in my school. It then dives into the most important sources and information that I found from my literature review. After that, I examine some of the implications and limitations of my project as it is introduced to my school community. Finally, I discuss how my project benefits my

school and the educational profession, as well as some future research and project extensions that can be performed in the years to come.

Reflection upon Learning

For the first time in my educational career, I was able to take the time to dig down deeply into the research connected to student engagement in the area of reading. I was able to dissect my research question, delve into specific areas of research through the literature, and then create a project that would match the research results I discovered. This process was lengthy, but very rewarding. Throughout this capstone project, I grew most in my knowledge and understanding of both the importance of this work, and also the use of discussion to guide my students towards deeper understanding of texts.

As I collaborated with my content reviewer and my professors, it seemed like every conversation we had centered on the importance of using diverse literature with students. My school district does use some diverse literature, but it is a rare occurrence in the curriculum. Yet, I noticed that my students' engagement increased so exponentially when it was included, that I knew creating a project around diverse literature was a worthwhile endeavor. I assumed that finding books for this project would be fairly easy with the increasing amount of diverse literature available these days, however, I was surprised at how difficult it was to find books that were written for a younger audience and also written by authors of color, writing from their own lived experiences. This was important to me because I felt like it gave my students the best opportunity to view that literature as an authentic window or mirror. Finding the right books was a challenge, but the process of doing so allowed me to really decipher what made each book a good choice to be included in my lesson plans.

After locating a selection of books from which I could build my lessons, my newfound knowledge of shaping and guiding a class discussion became very important to the creation process. I learned to lean into questions that gave students the opportunity to make connections from the text to their own lives, and I also worked hard to create questions and discussion points that encouraged students to put themselves into someone else's shoes, something that can be hard for younger students to do. I feel like in this self-centered world that we live in, creating space for these kinds of discussions was an important step for my students to take.

Revisiting the Literature Review

The literature review for this project focused on defining and giving purpose to windows and mirrors, student engagement, culturally relevant instruction, and critical literacy strategies. With the purpose behind the lessons being the incorporation of diverse literature and the centerpoint of each lesson being the discussion guide, the two most important sections of the literature review were the windows and mirrors section and the critical literacy section.

The focus on incorporating windows and mirrors into the literacy curriculum was the main idea of this project, and the woman who spearheaded this work in 1988 was Emily Style. The focus of her work was to draw awareness to the need for both mirrors of one's own culture and windows into the culture of others in the literature we read, both for ourselves and for the students we teach (Style, 1988). Two years later, Rudine Sims Bishop discussed Style's findings, talking about the significance of readers being able to see themselves and their lives reflected in what they were reading in the context of the larger world (Bishop, 1990). She also discussed the importance of members of the

dominant culture group being given the opportunity to have windows into other cultures and other lives in order to shift their focus from their own importance onto the importance of other ways of life (Bishop, 1990). These findings served as a guidepost for me as my curriculum took shape in my mind. I knew that not only would this be an empowering project for my multicultural students, but it would also be an important study for my students in the dominant culture group.

Researching how to increase student engagement through discussion questions, such as those used in critical literacy strategies was another vital piece of the literature review that shaped my thinking and how I went about creating my project. Wee, Kim, and Lee (2017) had incredible insight into how I could go about this because they studied how critical literacy could be incorporated into a kindergarten classroom. This age group is very close to my target age group, and they experienced great success engaging their younger students to think beyond the literal meaning of the texts they read. They engaged their students in discussions that taught them to think about multiple perspectives present in the story. The students also learned how to identify injustices and people who were being marginalized just by engaging in discussion with their teacher and classmates (Wee, Kim, & Lee, 2017). Wee, Kim, and Lee (2017) also emphasized making engagement in critical literacy with diverse books a common occurrence within the classroom, working it into the regular curriculum. This guided me into making my lessons congruent with the curriculum already being used, and to make my discussion and reflection time very similar to how the students respond to other types of reading they do in the classroom.

The literature review was the gateway for me to learn about choosing appropriate books for my project, and building discussion questions that spark student engagement and interaction in whole group literacy lessons. It also helped me to build a strong foundation for the project I would then create.

Implications and Limitations

While my project is important, it has a few limitations and implications that will potentially affect its implementation. One such implication is that if the school does decide to implement these lessons and discussion guides beyond merely my first and second grade co-taught classrooms, they will likely need to purchase one or two extra sets of these books. If more classrooms decide to implement these plans, there would be up to eight total sections of students all vying for the same books. The teachers would also likely need some professional development so they understand the purpose behind the creation of the plans and a demonstration of how they work.

One limitation that sat in the back of my mind throughout the creation of these plans is the fact that children's literature quite often gets outdated and replaced with more relevant titles. Sometimes a newly released book can quickly become a beloved classic and stand the test of time for years on end, but other times books come and go out of style quite fast. These books may also no longer reflect the cultural makeup of the student population at my school in the years to come. The likelihood that all the books would become irrelevant is unlikely, but it is something that will need to be considered and monitored when looking over anecdotal evidence of student engagement and their ability to reflect and connect to texts in their reader's notebooks.

Another limitation of this project is that the lesson plans do not account for all the directions that each discussion with the students could go. Some books may be easy for a classroom of students to connect with, while others are harder. This will depend on each classroom's students' lived experiences and personal connections to each story. This is a difficult thing to predict when planning, so while these lessons are really a solid springboard for discussions to be started amongst students, it should be understood that if the students take the discussion in a different direction from the original intent, that would still be a valuable experience.

Using the Results

The plan is to use these texts and lessons throughout the community unit in my school's first and second grade literacy curriculum in the fall of 2023. I will start by using them with just the teachers I co-teach with. But as we see how it works implementing them and having discussions, I would like to propose that the rest of the first and second grade classrooms use the lessons as well. The teachers I work with are very open to trying new things, so I anticipate excitement from them when I introduce these plans to them. Their excitement will help propel the rest of the school into using them as well.

Benefits for the Profession

This project will directly benefit the teachers in my school because it provides them with easy access to lesson plans that will engage their students in discussion, as well as give opportunities for them to experience more windows and mirrors in their curriculum. Teachers are strapped for time, and I know that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to search for and plan lessons around these texts. Still, they yearn for the benefits these texts would provide in their classrooms. These texts and

lessons with discussions will especially engage multicultural students more deeply and give them the invaluable feeling of being seen, heard, and valued within their school community.

Future Extensions

In the future, I hope to expand this project to include third, fourth, and fifth grade lesson plans with discussion guides. It may continue to lean heavily on picture books, or it could branch out into middle grade novels. Both types of books would be valuable for those grade levels. I would continue to emphasize the importance of finding books whose authors are authentic from the cultural group(s) represented in the stories. The best chance a book has of offering windows or mirrors to students is if it is written by an author who has experienced the things he or she is writing about.

I look forward to using the discussion techniques I learned from critical literacy strategies, such as considering multiple perspectives and identifying marginalized or stereotyped characters, as I work with students throughout the year in their literacy block, regardless of the text we are reading. Because of this capstone project, I am now equipped with how to ask more pointed questions and guide discussions in such a way that will amplify my students' voices.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reflected on my major takeaways from completing this research and in creating this capstone paper and project. I also revisited the literature that guided my steps as I completed this work. I identified some of the limitations that I discovered along the way and discussed some implications as well. Finally, I talked about how my project benefits the teachers in my school and the students who will get to use it. I also

remarked on the opportunity I have ahead of me to continue this research, planning, and creation into other grade levels at my school.

This capstone project has been the most intense educational endeavor that I have ever undertaken. It has taught me so much about how to design and take on a research project that supports my professional learning. Through all I have learned, I am a better teacher, student, and co-worker. I also now have invaluable knowledge that guides my input into the literacy direction my school will take in the coming years. I am thankful for the challenge and thankful for the new knowledge I have gained. It will direct my path as I move forward in my teaching career.

REFERENCES

- Acosta, M. M., & Duggins, S. (2021). Growth through crisis: Preservice teachers learning to enact culturally relevant literacy teaching. *Action in Teacher Education (Routledge)*, 43(4), 479-495. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2021.1926371>
- Bennett, M. (2012). Delving into critical literacy in the elementary classroom. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 13(1), 65-68.
- Cahill, M., Ingram, E., & Joo, S. (2021). Storytime programs as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors? Addressing children's needs through diverse book selection. *Library Quarterly*, 91(3), 269-284. <https://doi.org/10.1086/714317>
- Capper, K. (2022). Culturally relevant pedagogy in the English curriculum. *Journal of Education*, 202(4), 397-405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022057421991856>
- Cleovoulou, Y., & Beach, P. (2019). Teaching critical literacy in inquiry-based classrooms: Teachers' understanding of practice and pedagogy in elementary schools. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 83, 188-198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.04.012>
- Creighton, D. C. (1997). Critical literacy in the elementary classroom. *Language Arts*, 74, 438-445.
- Easley, K., & Lehto, J. (2022). Let's Work Together: Teacher strategies for supporting student engagement in long-term collaborative inquiry. *Science & Children*, 60(1), 80-83.
- Guthrie, J. T., & Wigfield, A. (2000). Engagement and motivation in reading. In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research*, Vol. 3, pp. 403-422). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

- José Botelho, M. (2021). Reframing mirrors, windows, and doors: A critical analysis of the metaphors for multicultural children's literature. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 47(1), 119-126.
- Kemmerlin, C., & Wilkins, J. (2020). Promoting elementary students' awareness of diversity and social justice through interactive read-alouds. *International Journal of Learner Diversity & Identities*, 27(1), 33-48.
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-0128/CGP/v27i01/33-48>
- Kessels, U., & Van Houtte, M. (2022). Side effects of academic engagement? how boys' and girls' well-being is related to their engagement and motivational regulation. *Gender & Education*, 34(6), 627-642.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.2011840>
- Kinzie, J., Gonyea, R., Shoup, R., & Kuh, G. D. (2022). Promoting persistence and success of underrepresented students: Lessons for teaching and learning. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*, 2022(170), 51-65.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20507>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. The remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74-84.
- Minnesota Department of Education. (2010). Minnesota academic standards: English language arts K-12. <https://education.mn.gov/mde/dse/stds/ela/>
- Moreno, L. A., & Quiñones, R.(2022). "Those books are not mirror books to me": Learning from children about how to engage in identity work through picturebooks in a dual-language bilingual classroom. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 48(1), 64-76.

- Napoli, M. (2002). Chapter three: Transmediating in the classroom: Implementing critical literacy in elementary grades. (pp. 35-43)
- Searle, K. A., Tofel-Grehl, C., Hawkman, A. M., Suárez, M. I., & MacDonald, B. L. (2022). A case study of whiteness at work in an elementary classroom. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 17(3), 875-898.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-022-10121-8>
- Sims Bishop, R. (1990, March 5). *Windows and Mirrors: Children's Books and Parallel Cultures* [Keynote Address]. California State University, San Bernardino Reading Conference, San Bernardino, CA.
- Sotirovska, V., & Kelley, J. (2020). Anthropomorphic characters in children's literature: Windows, mirrors, or sliding glass doors to embodied immigrant experiences. *Elementary School Journal*, 121(2), 337-355. <https://doi.org/10.1086/71105>
- Style, E. (1988). *Curriculum as window and mirror*. nationalseedproject.org. Retrieved 10/15/22, from <https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/curriculum-as-window-and-mirror>
- Teaching Tolerance. (2022). Social Justice Standards The Learning For Justice Anti-Bias Framework.
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards>
- Ullucci, K. (2011). Culturally relevant teaching: Lessons from elementary classrooms. *Action in Teacher Education (Association of Teacher Educators)*, 33(4), 389-405.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2011.620528>

- Wee, S., Kim, K. J., & Lee, Y. (2019). 'Cinderella did not speak up': Critical literacy approach using folk/fairy tales and their parodies in an early childhood classroom. *Early Child Development & Care*, 189(11), 1874-1888.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1417856>
- WIDA. (2020). WIDA English language development standards framework, 2020 edition: Kindergarten–grade 12.
<https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/WIDA-ELD-Standards-Framework-2020.pdf>
- Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2011). *The understanding by design guide to creating high-quality units*. ASCD.