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Creating Inclusive Spaces: Using Book Clubs to Increase Diverse Literature in Schools

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Creating Inclusive Spaces: Using Book Clubs to Increase Diverse Literature in Schools

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Education: Natural Science and Environmental Education.

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DEDICATION

To my beloved daughters, Erika Meilin and Amelia Mei-Zhen:

May I always have the strength, wisdom, and courage, to be the phenomenal person you believe me to be. May you realize that you can never cross the ocean unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore. I love you to the moon and back.

To every educator dedicated to ensuring that all their students are seen and loved:

May we together, continue to learn from one another, support each other, and elevate and amplify our collective voices, to create inclusive learning environments for all.

To students everywhere, who finally feel their voices represented in books.

“You realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced”
- Malala Yousafzai

“Not everything that is faced can be changed,
but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
- James Baldwin

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

For my capstone project, I have chosen to explore the question: *How can we create inclusive spaces in schools through diversifying available literature by establishing a book club?* I am an Asian-American female science teacher who has been teaching for 17 years in a suburban New Jersey public high school. In a district with predominantly White colleagues and increasing numbers of students of color, I am seeking to support classroom educators in their efforts to infuse diversity, equity, access, and inclusion into their daily practices. Historically, our school district has not openly addressed issues of equity and inclusion, but that is changing as the community grows in diversity. I'm interested in exploring pedagogical methods to amplify and elevate student voices, particularly those of marginalized communities, and creating multicultural inclusive learning spaces. My capstone project hopes to address the needs of underrepresented students, including LGBTQ, BIPOC, non-Christian, and immigrant communities: I'm very interested in beginning to dialogue with students regarding diversity and inclusion, to empower students to develop into youth advocates with a social justice lens and equitable framework. Book clubs help build students' social-emotional capacities, particularly for youth of color, youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and youth with disabilities (Tijms, Stoop & Pollock, 2018). Furthermore, book clubs provide spaces for cultural exchanges where one can learn about ethnic and religious differences (Polleck, 2011) and increase awareness of multiculturalism in diverse communities (Daniels, 2002).

Personal Experience

I am the mother of two young multiracial (a mix of Chinese, Irish, and German heritage) girls. Near the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, I was heartbroken and angered to hear my upper elementary-school aged daughter return home from school one day and say that her peers jeered at her when she stepped onto the school bus that morning, saying “take that China virus with you and get off”. The bus driver did not take any action regarding the matter - she neither addressed it directly with the boys who made the remarks, nor did she bring it to her supervisor's attention, nor did she report it to a teacher or principal. She did not check on my daughter's emotions nor did she stop the children from continuing, over several days, to make anti-Asian remarks and insults. When this was brought to the school's attention, they reassured that an investigation would be launched, but no repercussions ever emerged. No apology was ever made; no student assembly or meeting ever held; the students were never counseled - it was quite simply, ignored. For context, my daughter is the only child of Chinese descent (and only half, at that!) in her entire grade. Based on census data, we live in a town that has a population of 6,500 people of whom 91% identify as White, followed by 6% Asian. There are no families identifying as either African-Americans or First Nations people in the census data and none of the households reported speaking a non-English language at home as their primary language.

During the COVID-19 online school year of 2020 - 2021, I was teaching from home while my two daughters were simultaneously attending school remotely. This gave me a lot of insight into the cultural competencies (or lack thereof) that teachers have, and particularly how this impacts students from non-dominant cultures in schools. On Friday

February 12, 2021, the principal gave his live morning announcements, and joyously on Google Meets said he was so excited to announce that today, there was not one but two major holidays that he wished to highlight! My daughters, donned in new red clothing on the first day of Chinese New Year (wearing red is a tradition to celebrate Chinese New Year, which is a 15-day celebration that ran from February 12 through February 27, 2021), leaned forward eagerly. “Valentine’s Day and President’s Day!” he announced brightly, and followed it up with “and I see many students in red today to celebrate Valentine’s Day!” He said this on February 12, completely failing to recognize why many Asian students in his community were wearing red that day. I posted on social media, saying it’s a shame that teachers/schools are celebrating Valentine’s Day today; yet there is no mention of Lunar New Year, one of the largest global celebrations; and a teacher replied online “but many of us don’t have Asian students in our class.” On Twitter, I said: “This is problematic. It shouldn’t take having a Black student in your class to begin discussing Black excellence, Black history, or Black accomplishments. It shouldn’t take having a LGBTQ+ student to begin the conversation on inclusivity. Over 2 billion people are celebrating this holiday today.” It resonated with others, because it received 404 Retweets and over 3,700 Likes. I knew I needed to do more as an educator to raise our collective cultural competencies for all our learners in our classes.

I am an avid reader; the type that immerses oneself for an entire day by a sunny window, reading the day away. (I’m incidentally, so proud to have raised a daughter who reads as I do, borrowing fifteen books from the library in a go, stumbling excitedly from the car to her room, to spend the rest of the weekend reading). I recognize that the books we read can have a life-long impression on our lives, perspectives and even beliefs. A

good book makes us pause, think, and it can change us for the better. It is through books and the stories told, the voices shared, that we grow.

Professional Experience

For the past 17 years, I have been the only Asian educator at my high school, and only one of two non-White female teachers (my colleague being a Latina educator). It has been challenging at times to feel singled out for one's identity, whether it pertains to our differing upbringing, lived childhood experiences, philosophical worldviews, our approaches to problem-solving or communication. I am continually frustrated that the district fails to acknowledge any of my cultural holidays such as Chinese New Year, and for me to celebrate my heritage, I must submit an application to use one of three personal leave days per year for administrative approval.

Around 2015, my school's principal recognized a lack of diversity in the student body. Though a public school, we are an admissions-based high school that accepts students from across the state of New Jersey. The racial demographics of our enrolled students did not match that of the county or state demographics - we were largely homogeneously White hetero-Christian and majority male (Class of 2016 had 65% males and 35% females). This made us aware that there were diversity issues that needed to be examined in our school.

When a new role was created in 2021 - 2022 titled Curriculum Coach for Diversity, Equity, Access and Inclusion for my school district, I felt compelled to take action and apply. I was appointed for a one-year position in 2021 - 2022, and was renewed this year in the role for the 2022 - 2023 school year. I am grateful to the district for recognizing the importance of this initiative for members of our community, and the

timely need for developing strong DEAI skills in our district. I was recently awarded a \$2,000 grant through the National Education Association Sustainable Jersey Schools Grant to infuse diversity into our school culture through literature. My goal will be to make available a diverse assortment of literature, and establish a book club that meets regularly to discuss underrepresented voices.

Project Rationale

This capstone project will attempt to increase student awareness of diverse literature through the establishment of a book club focused on elevating and amplifying diverse voices. For my capstone project, I have chosen to explore the question: *How can we create inclusive spaces in schools through diversifying available literature by establishing a book club?* The goal of this project is to increase feelings of inclusivity in a school culture, especially for underrepresented or marginalized students. My teaching philosophy as an educator has always focused on cultural inclusivity. I believe that we need to create safe, judgment-free learning spaces that celebrate diverse identities of all students. Culturally-sustaining pedagogy focuses on fostering cultural pluralism to bring about equity and inclusion in learning spaces. Equality is the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities, such that all people are treated fairly and with the same respect, regardless of their age, ethnicity, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, or religious faith. In a society that values equality, everyone has the same chances to succeed and to participate in the decisions that affect their lives; and this can include equal access to education, healthcare, employment, or other resources and opportunities. Equity is the principle of fairness - while the concept of equality promotes the idea that everyone should be treated the same, the concept of equity recognizes that

different people may have different needs and come from different backgrounds, and that treating everyone the same may not always be the most fair or effective way to achieve fairness. Equity is about ensuring that everyone has the resources and opportunities they need to succeed, regardless of their identity, background, or personal experiences.

Students cannot learn if they do not feel comfortable, safe, seen, heard, and valued. These feelings are difficult to reach when students do not feel represented by the curriculum, instructional lessons, and informal feedback from their classroom teachers. Bishop (1990) states: “when children cannot find themselves in the books that they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in a society of which they are a part”. Recognizing the importance of acknowledging diversity and creating inclusive spaces on school campuses is key for addressing the social emotional needs of our learners. Developing a sense of belonging and a strong sense that one’s identity is welcomed in classrooms and in school communities has been shown to be important for student academic success.

Chapter Summary

For my capstone project, I have chosen to explore the question: *How can we create inclusive spaces in schools through diversifying available literature by establishing a book club?* I plan to achieve this capstone goal through two objectives: (1) obtain diverse literature for the students, and (2) establish a book club that meets regularly to discuss underrepresented voices. Chapter One introduced my capstone project plan to increase inclusivity in schools through the establishing and running a book club for students to increase access to diverse voices through literature, and highlighted my personal and professional experiences that led to the capstone project rationale.

Chapter Two provides an in-depth review of existing literature and research regarding the importance of creating inclusive spaces, engaging in culturally sustaining practices, providing diverse literature, and how book clubs can serve as transformative and inclusive spaces for students. Chapter Three describes the capstone project, identifies the intended audience of this project and the context in which this project takes place, provides a suggested diverse book list and the theoretical framework used to complete this project. Finally, Chapter Four highlights what was learned through the capstone project process, considers possible implications and limitations of this project, provides recommendations for future research projects, and a reflection of my growth and future directions. I strongly affirm that every school needs to actively seek out multi-varied literature that represents the diverse voices of all walks of life, such that students from all backgrounds see themselves reflected in the available books and conversations, as well as serving to introduce students to new alternative perspectives. It is important for schools to provide students with literature that is representative of their diverse experiences and backgrounds. This helps students feel seen and valued, and it also helps to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment. It is important for schools to make a conscious effort to incorporate diverse voices into their literature selections in order to promote equity and inclusivity.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides background information and supporting research in order to answer the central question of this capstone project: *How can we create inclusive spaces in schools by diversifying available literature through the establishment of a book club?*

The goal of this literature review is to examine educator and school biases towards underrepresented students, to explore the importance of creating inclusive spaces and culturally sustaining practices, to identify the importance of providing diverse literature in schools, and how the establishment of a book club can lead to inclusive spaces in school communities.

Educator and School Biases

It is well-established that teachers play an important role in student learning and academic achievement; and that the quality of teaching is a key factor in student learning and that teachers have the power to significantly impact the academic success of their students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 1995; Zeichner, 2003). From 2000 – 2015, while more than 80% of American educators remained White, schools became more and more racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse, with the percentage of White students decreasing from 61% to 49%, and students identifying as Black, Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander increasing to 41% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). A 2014 survey of 2,000 youth (aged 14 to 24 years old) by David Binder Research & MTV Network found that while most people (91%) believe in equality and the idea that everyone should be treated equally, over 48% simultaneously believe that one should not

acknowledge racial differences and feel that it is not appropriate to draw attention to someone's race or ethnicity even if it is a compliment or positive statement (David Binder Research Music Television, 2014).

A person's race and ethnicity can be important factors in someone's experiences and identities. Ignoring or avoiding discussions about race can contribute to the perpetuation of systemic inequalities and discrimination. The concept of "color blindness" or "not seeing race" is a recent concept that traces back to as recently as the 1960s and has been used as a way to counter the economic and political advancement of people of color but fails to acknowledge that the differences in race that can result in individuals continuing to be treated unfairly and with prejudice (Hartman, 2013; Mazzocco, 2017). By avoiding discussions about race, people may not be aware of the ways in which race affects the experiences and opportunities of different individuals, and may not be able to fully understand and address the impacts of racial bias and discrimination. In a color-silent society, people may be hesitant or unwilling to talk about race and ethnicity openly and honestly, which can make it difficult to address issues of discrimination and inequality. Research has shown that simply "not seeing race" is not a realistic or effective way to eliminate racial bias and prejudices.

Well-intentioned statements like "I don't see color" and "educators should stop noticing race and accept/love all students in their class" can be extremely counter-productive to creating inclusive classrooms. Silent racism can be as dangerous as acts of blatant racism. A blindness to the unearned advantages prevents Whites (or other dominant groups such as monolingual, hetero-patriarchal, cis-appearing, Christians) from speaking up against discrimination because they fail to see or acknowledge the

privileges conferred upon them by systemic societal structure. By denying the existence of racial differences and the impacts of racism, or the inherent privileges we are conferred as a group in America, we are unable to fully understand and address the ongoing effects of discrimination and inequality, and this can make it difficult to create meaningful and lasting change, and can contribute to the perpetuation of inequities (Tatum, 2017).

Additionally, the value of cultural and racial identities should be recognized and celebrated, rather than erased or ignored. Acknowledging and celebrating differences can help to create a more inclusive and diverse society, and can foster a greater understanding and appreciation of different cultures and experiences. Open and honest discussions about our differences are important because they allow us to better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and perspectives of others. By engaging in these discussions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and we can work together to create a more inclusive and just society. Many educators and schools attempt to sit comfortably in the silent non-racist camp claiming neutrality on societal and political issues: however, it is important for educators and schools to be aware of and confront issues of discrimination and inequality that may affect their students. Opting out of such conversations about discrimination and inequality in schools is often equivalent, in its effects, to actively supporting the status quo of a racist system (Tatum, 2017). Educators and schools must work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment where all students feel valued and supported. This may involve engaging in difficult conversations about race and inequality, or actively working to create educational policies and classroom practices that promote social justice. We need a call for educators and schools to not merely be

non-racist, but to actively be anti-racist. The goal of anti-racist work is to address and dismantle systems of racial inequity, rather than attempting to make race "invisible." To do this effectively, it is important to acknowledge and recognize the reality of race and other forms of privilege, in the ways in which it shapes people's experiences and opportunities. Seeing race means recognizing the ways in which people of different races may face different challenges or opportunities, and working to create societal policies and pedagogical practices that identify and address the root causes of racial inequity, rather than simply treating the symptoms.

In working with diverse school communities, our identities and perspectives as educators will inevitably differ from that of our students. By understanding the intersecting identities and positionalities of themselves and their students, educators can better understand the ways in which these factors may shape their experiences and opportunities, and can work to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. It can also help educators to be more effective in their teaching, as they are better able to understand and address the unique needs and challenges of their students (Nieto, 2010). This may involve acknowledging and addressing issues of discrimination and inequality, and working to create policies and practices that promote fairness and justice for all. Unfortunately, a perpetual "White gaze" permeates the educational system for students of color (Tuck & Yang, 2014). The term "White gaze" was popularized by Toni Morrison, and it refers to the assumption that the default reader or observer is White, and that the experiences and perspectives of White people are the norm or standard (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019). It can also be used to describe how minorities feel obligated to take into account a White person's reaction and behave accordingly. The

term "white gaze" refers to the ways in which the perspectives and experiences of white people dominate and shape how we think and operate within society. This can include the ways in which mainstream culture, media, and institutions often reflect and prioritize the experiences and perspectives of white people, while marginalizing or ignoring the experiences of people of color. When further examined, it has been noted by multiple studies that in addition to a white gaze in our public schools, there is a pervasive anti-Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, anti-Latinidad, Islamophobia, and model minority myths pertaining to Asian-Americans, embedded in the United States schooling system (Dumas, 2014; Lee, 2005; Lomawaima & McCarthy, 2006). Teachers need to continually examine their implicit biases and actively work to ensure that their instructional practices, delivery, and assessments reflect the values and beliefs of their students, as recognizing that differences and plurality of cultures is a classroom strength is important to make all learners feel welcome in the space (Paris & Alim, 2014a). Inclusive spaces means creating an environment where everyone feels welcome and valued. We have to actively seek out and consider the opinions and experiences of people of color, and to work towards creating more inclusive and equitable systems and structures. To create an inclusive and equitable environment, we have to become more aware of our unconscious biases and engage in activities or professional training that help us to recognize and understand our biases, and to develop strategies for reducing their influence on our actions and decisions in schools.

Importance of Creating Inclusive Spaces

Students who belong to non-dominant identities are often excluded from representation in schools; in America, the dominant identity in schools being a hetero-cis,

Christian, middle class, White student. For students who are part of non-dominant groups, such as students of color, LGBTQ+ students, or students with disabilities, the school climate may be particularly important in shaping their experiences and opportunities. If a school's climate is not inclusive or supportive of non-dominant students, it can create barriers to their learning and well-being. This may include a lack of representation or visibility of non-dominant groups in the school, or a lack of policies and practices that support their needs and experiences. Social identity threat refers to the negative impact that stereotypes or discrimination can have on the performance and well-being of members of a particular group. When individuals feel that their identity's perceived characteristics are deficient, they may experience a sense of threat or vulnerability that can lead to poorer academic performance, as well as other negative outcomes such as increased stress and anxiety (Holeton, 2020).

Inclusive spaces in schools are those that are aimed at engaging students, making learners feel welcome and giving everyone an equal opportunity to participate. In a national survey (David Binder Research, 2014) of over 2,000 respondents between 14 to 24 years old, only 10% of White respondents but 23% of respondents of color reported feeling excluded at school because of race or ethnicity. Students of color also report being treated differently by teachers because of their race, at rates three times higher than White counterparts. The inequities in student experiences through the educational process from their teachers and from their peers, can lead to wide gaps in life-long achievement measures, and these ought to be examined further. The experiences of multiple marginalized groups, including Native-American, Asian-American, non-Christian,

immigrant, and LGBTQ students, have been previously documented by researchers, and are outlined below.

Experiences of Native-American Students

Invisibility in classrooms is a common experience for Native-American students, as educators often have a hard time determining whether there are even any in their class because of mixed heritage, wide variation in physical appearance, and adoption of European last names (Soldier, 1997). The results of this invisibility in classrooms can be devastating: Native-American students have the lowest percentage of educational degrees, face the lowest high school graduation rates nationwide, and are more likely to be at or below the poverty level compared to all other ethnic/racial groups in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2016). It is therefore important to address this continued negative experiences of Native-American students in schools.

Stereotypical imagery of Native-Americans, whether in a negative or positive context, has a negative impact on the self-esteem, academic achievement, and community worth of Native-American youth (Fryberg, 2008). This is because stereotypes are oversimplified and often inaccurate portrayals of particular groups or individuals, and they can be harmful because they can limit or distort the way that people see and understand others. Dismantling stereotypes and tropes, and instituting in its place culturally sustaining pedagogy of Native-American perspectives and experiences, can help create a more accurate understanding of the past and present perspectives for both Native and non-Native students. This can help to promote a greater sense of understanding and respect between different groups, and can support a more inclusive and equitable school community.

Experiences of Asian-American Students

There is a persistent belief that Asian-Americans do not face racism, when in reality, there is a long history of prejudice towards this ethnic group (Young & Takeuchi, 1998). The myth of the model minority is a harmful stereotype that suggests that Asian-Americans are academically and economically successful in schools and society through hard work, determination, and passive compliance to expected group norms. This myth obscures the reality of racism and discrimination that many Asian-Americans face, and it encourages their silence about these issues. Asian-Americans face discrimination and harassment in various areas of life, including in the workplace, in housing, and in their communities. A study examining subtle and blatant racism towards Asian-Americans found that both forms of racism led to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and stress, and subtle racism led to decreased levels of personal self-esteem (Yoo et al., 2010). There is a significant underreporting of racial harassment of Asian-American students and it is often met with unresponsive, indifferent school administrators, which reminds Asian-American students that they are invisible (Kiang, 1998).

While Asian-Americans as a group may have higher median income levels compared to other racial groups, this stereotype does not accurately reflect the experiences and realities of all Asian-Americans, as it hides significant disparities within the community, particularly in subgroups such as Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders who experience higher rates of poverty, are underserved by human services, or may be underpaid, when compared to other ethnic groups (Segal, 2002). Asian-American students often feel a sense of alienation or disconnection from the mainstream culture and

education system due to a variety of factors, including a lack of representation or visibility of their culture and experiences in the curriculum and school community, as well as discrimination or other forms of bias (Pang, 2006; Yang, 2004), and the combination of all these negative emotions result from having non-inclusive spaces in schools.

Experiences of non-Christian Students

American public schools are subject to the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which prohibits the government from establishing a national religion or promoting any particular faith tradition. This means that public schools cannot endorse or promote a particular religion or require students to participate in religious activities. However, there is evidence that Christianity may be privileged over other faith traditions and non-beliefs in public school environments (Blumenfeld et al., 2009). This can occur through a variety of means, including through the curriculum, policies, and practices of the school. Hartwick's (2014) survey of randomly-sampled teachers found that 88% of the teachers self-identified as Christian, a result that suggests that teachers identify as Christians at a higher rate than the national average among American adults. The Christian discourse in the American education system is ever-present, from Winter Break coinciding with Christmas (a Christian celebration) but not Hannukah (a Jewish celebration), and school districts overwhelmingly centering their Spring Break around Easter (a Christian celebration) instead of Passover (a Jewish celebration). In addition, there are St. Patrick's Day observations, St. Valentine's Day candies and cards, Secret Santa gift exchanges, and singing Christmas Carols in the school choir. Public school

education and media in the United States accelerate Anglo acculturation and disfavours multicultural and multilingual socialization of ethnic children (Gerami, 1998).

Freebody & Baker (1985) point out that for many non-Christian children, textbooks for elementary schools in America are:

A world in which they will always feel vaguely out of place, insecure, and perhaps inferior, as they see their more fortunate peers detect and soon actually produce the signs; learn, without ever having been explicitly taught, the ways of thinking; and display a genuine reverence for the objects with which they themselves can claim only an uncomfortable acquaintance. (p. 396)

There is an implicit assumption by Christian educators that these symbols, phrases, and behavioral gestures are understood and a shared cultural experience for all their students, when in reality, they are not. Non-Christian children quickly learn to greet one another with “Merry Christmas” and to exchange presents with one another, and participate in school-wide Secret Santa events, even if it is not a cultural practice they have in their personal lives. It can be challenging for non-Christian families to navigate a school environment that may privilege Christianity faith traditions in American public schools.

It is completely normal and important for families to want to pass on their cultural and belief traditions to their children. This can help children feel connected to their heritage and give them a sense of belonging and identity. It can also help them understand and appreciate the diversity of the world around them. However, it is important for schools and educators to be sensitive to the fact that non-Christian students may be exposed to belief systems and ways of life outside of their own family, and that this can create challenges for families who want to help their children understand and feel proud

of their heritage. This can be a challenging and time-consuming and emotionally heavy task, and may place additional burdens on non-Christian families. The 2017 Pew Research survey found that more than 50% of Muslims in the U.S. report that it has become increasingly difficult to be Muslim in recent years, and have experienced at least one incident of discrimination in the past 12 months (Pew, 2017). Across several indicators of psychological well-being, Christmas displays harmed non-celebrators and non-Christians (students who identified as Buddhist or Sikh) through feelings of non-inclusion, suggesting concerns about the ever-present representation of dominant cultural symbols such as Christmas displays in classrooms or school campus (Schmitt et al., 2010). It is important to recognize that the unconscious transmission of implicit ideology, such as Christian faith ideology, can have a significant impact on students from different cultural and religious backgrounds. When schools prioritize materials and resources that reflect only a single ideology or perspective, it can create a sense of exclusion for students who do not identify with that ideology. This can lead to feelings of self doubt and a lack of belonging among students from marginalized groups, and it can also reinforce stereotypes and the notion of the superiority of one faith over another (Hollins, 1996).

Experiences of Immigrant Students

The lived experiences and social structures of familial homes are often different between native and immigrant students in America. Most ethnic immigrant families expect some level of Christian indoctrination of their children through the United States formal education system, through secular acculturation of Christian identity as part of this

process (Gerami, 1998). Immigrant children in the U.S. increased by 51% between 1994 and 2017, comprising one quarter of American children (Child Trends, 2018).

The exclusion of immigrant experiences from the curriculum and school environment can contribute to a widening academic achievement gap between immigrant students and native English-speaking students (Lindholm, 1987). This gap is further widened through the use of inappropriate assessment tools, lack of support systems for immigrant families, biased attitudes of school employees, inadequate qualified professional development teacher training, and low expectations toward immigrant students (Sleeter, 1991). First-generation immigrant students of Latino and Asian American heritage are more likely to feel unsafe in schools, and face higher rates of victimization by peers and teachers than White immigrant students (Peguero, 2009).

Experiences of LGBTQ Students

In addition to ethnic backgrounds and religious identities, sexual orientation and identity is often targeted in schools. LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth report high rates of peer victimization (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). This may include physical, verbal, sexual, or electronic harassment, as well as negative, biased language and discriminatory practices (Greytak & Kosciw, 2013). In middle and high schools, almost half of LGBTQ+ youth face both verbal and physical abuse from peers and this leads to a negative impact on their mental health and well-being, higher rates of depression than found in their peers, and youth not being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). More unsettling, 39% of LGBTQ students report hearing school teachers and staff themselves making homophobic remarks (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). The experience at school for LGBTQ+ students hinges heavily on the

presence or absence of forming a student connection with their teachers and other adults at school. When LGBTQ+ students experience higher than average amounts of harassment and discrimination in schools, this can create a hostile and unwelcoming school environment. For those students who see school as a vital refuge from an oppressive and harmful living situation at home, finding support and inclusive spaces from a teacher or school can provide a major long-term benefit, as “when LGBTQ youth receive more support and when their identities become more normalized, their experiences in school improve and their odds of wanting to go to college increase” (Feldman et al., 2022).

Most literature provided in schools surrounding sexual health and identities are often from heterosexual and cisgender norms and frequently do not include LGBTQ+ voices (Jarpe-Ratner, 2020). LGBTQ+ students often lack visibility in both school curriculum in texts and topics taught but also in teacher discomfort in teaching LGBTQ+ topics out of fear of getting in trouble for potentially controversial topics (Page, 2017). Despite teachers self-reporting a high level of comfort discussing LGBTQ+ topics in their English classrooms, very few actually implemented texts that had queer stories in their curriculum (Page, 2017). The impacts of leaving queer topics out of school curriculum are quite clear: LGBTQ+ students feel less seen and schools become less welcoming to students, and attendance rates and academic performance plummet.

Conclusion

In schools that serve students of color, using culturally sustaining practices that seek to uphold and affirm the “languages, literacies, histories, and cultural ways of being [of] people of color” (p. 2) and empower students to navigate society while maintaining

their identities is critical (Paris & Alim, 2014b). Cultural inclusion, in particular of a student's social identities (i.e. gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, religion, or place of origin) are important to consider in school settings.

Beyond outwardly visible verbal or physical harassment and bullying behaviors, microaggressions are subtle but harmful actions or comments that communicate a negative or oppressive message to someone based on their identity, such as their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other aspects of their identity. Microaggressions can have a significant impact on the well-being and mental health of those who experience them, including one's self esteem, produces feelings of anger and frustration, depletes one's energy, increases feelings of worthlessness, produces physical health problems, shortens life expectancy, and can contribute to a sense of otherness or alienation from the mainstream culture when access and opportunity in education, employment, and health care are denied (Sue, 2010).

Feeling uncertain about social belonging, or a sense of connection to others, can have a negative impact on motivation and achievement for students from underrepresented groups (Holeton, 2020). Blum et al. (2002) suggest that a responsive school climate is one that is welcoming and inclusive, and that promotes a sense of belongingness to the school community. This type of climate is important for the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students, and can foster a positive and supportive learning environment. One of the ways to create such inclusive spaces in school is to focus on culturally sustaining practices that recognizes and celebrates the diversity of cultures and heritages from all student backgrounds. Culturally-sustaining practices

maintains heritage, values, cultural and linguistic pluralism of all students in the classrooms.

Culturally-Sustaining Practices

In the context of the United States education system, school practices often reflect the expected norms of monolingual, white, heteropatriarchal, middle class identities, which often excludes students who come from multicultural backgrounds. Alim & Paris (2014) state:

The purpose of state-sanctioned schooling for communities of color has been to forward a largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories, in order to achieve in schools (p.1).

Therefore, underrepresented students are often viewed through a deficit lens in schools, where their academic performance or behavior problems are attributed to faults within the students themselves rather than external factors such as discrimination or bias (Ladson-Billings, 2004). This type of deficit thinking can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and perpetuate inequalities, and can have a negative effect on self-esteem and academic achievement.

Culturally-sustaining pedagogy or practices focuses on fostering linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism to bring about equity and inclusion in learning spaces for positive social transformation (Paris & Alim, 2014a). This is important because youth of color are often marginalized in schools for having different languages, cultures, or customs. Underrepresented students may be made to feel like they need to abandon their identity and culture, and assimilate into white culture.

In contrast to traditional deficit-based models that detrimentally disadvantage underrepresented students, asset-centered pedagogies believe that everyone is able to academically succeed if provided the right context for learning (Moll, 1990).

Culturally-sustaining pedagogy is a teaching approach that values and builds upon the cultural knowledge and experiences of all students, and seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. One important component of this approach is the cultivation of students' racial identities in the context of school culture. Research has shown that, for Black students in particular, having a positive racial identity (a strong sense of one's own racial identity and positive associations with one's racialized group) and a critical racial awareness (an understanding of structural racism and its impact on schools and students) are highly correlated with academic resilience (Graves, 2014). In other words, these factors can help Black students to overcome academic challenges and achieve success in school.

Culturally-sustaining practices call on educators to first examine their own biases and prejudices, then educate themselves on best practices, as they work towards reaching all students in many different cultures. As the make-up of students enrolled in schools within the United States has shifted from a Eurocentric population to one that consists of a diversity of cultures, languages, and customs, it is important that schools emphasize culturally-sustaining pedagogies that recognize the multitude of learning experiences and authentic sociolinguistic moments for children of all backgrounds.

Culturally-sustaining practices provide a framework where educators can build important bridges between students' ways of knowing and communicating, and that of the school community and traditional curriculum. A space that is inclusive and culturally

sustaining allows students to work on aims that connect to their shared interests and lived experience, and group expectations are such that student voices are heard and valued. This goal can be achieved by increasing the availability of diverse literature in school communities, by focusing on both diversity in author voices, but also diversity in character representation within books chosen. When students can relate a book to their own lives, they can make deeper connections and understand the text better (Kong & Fitch, 2002).

Significance of Diverse Literature

A common flaw of many selected literature by Board of Education or districts across the nation, in school curricula, and by classroom teachers, is the use of books that feature mainly a dated, Western, White perspective or narrative (Barron, 2021). Unfortunately such classic Western canon fails to recognize current and culturally relevant literature that feature diverse viewpoints, authors, characters, and genres. It is important to include literature with multicultural characters and themes of political injustice, multicultural identities, and breaking down the barriers of systemic oppression because it helps facilitate conversations about cultural sustaining practices (Kelly-Howard, 2021). It is important to include literature that represents a range of cultures, identities, and experiences in order to promote understanding and respect for diversity. This can help facilitate conversations about social and political issues, and can also help to promote cultural sustaining practices, which are actions that support the continuation and revitalization of cultural heritage and traditions. By reading literature that represents diverse perspectives and experiences, individuals can gain a greater understanding and appreciation for diversity, and can become more aware of the ways in

which power dynamics and oppression impact different groups of people. This kind of literature can also provide a sense of validation and recognition for marginalized voices and can help to create a more inclusive and respectful society.

Biases in Existing Available Literature

Biases in classroom textbooks and board-approved curricula across the United States suggest that it is important for schools to provide supplemental multicultural literature in classrooms and school libraries (Hardie, 2011). Bishop (1990) states: “when children cannot find themselves in the books that they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in a society of which they are a part”.

It is a well-known fact that the publishing industry for youth literature has historically been dominated by white authors, and fewer books published annually by, and about, Black, Indigenous and People of Color characters (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2021). In a research paper examining published YA literature for the past 30 years, less than 10% of books were published by or about non-White, non-heterosexual, non-middle class identities (Boyd et al., 2015). This has led to a lack of representation for children of color (especially Black, Indigenous, Latino, Asian-American, and multiracial), who may have difficulty finding books that reflect their own cultural identities and experiences. It is important for children to see themselves reflected in the media they consume, and this includes the books they read. When children of color are able to see themselves and their experiences represented in literature, it can help to validate their identities and foster a sense of belonging. On the other hand, when children are consistently exposed to books that do not reflect their

experiences or identities, it can contribute to a sense of isolation and disconnection.

While we are aware that it is important for young children to see their identities reflected in the literature they read, there are tragically more published animal books than there are books about diverse groups of people.

While published young adult books with LGBTQ themes have shown a slow but steady increase in the past decade, it is still a far underrepresented voice in literature compared to nationwide statistics of students who identify as such (Martin, 2021). In addition to the lack of published books featuring diverse voices, students in the United States from early childhood through high school lack diverse literature in classrooms and in school libraries (Crisp et al., 2016; Martin, 2021). Adding another layer of difficulty to the introduction of LGBTQ literature to students is that within classrooms themselves, teachers hesitate to discuss topics related to the LGBT issues. Many elementary school teachers hold the misconception that children do not identify themselves as LGBTQ, and have the misbelief that sexual orientation should not be discussed in schools (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Swartz, 2005; Smolkin & Young, 2011). Furthermore, some teachers expressed fear or discomfort regarding having critical tough conversations with their students and addressing potential student questions during the discussions (Albright & Bedford, 2006), fear of legal and professional ramifications (Casement, 2002; Rowell, 2007), and lack of confidence regarding their knowledge of LGBTQ issues (Casement, 2002).

Diverse Literature to Address Historical Social Justice Inequities

Exposure to concepts such as privilege, class, race, and societal norms can be an important part of education, as it can help students understand the complexities of society

and the ways these concepts affect people's lives (Newell, 2017). Providing students with the opportunity to examine complex concepts in a supportive and reflective space can be a powerful way to help them develop critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of the social and political issues that shape our society, and of the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of others.

Diverse literature can play an important role in promoting equity and inclusivity in education. By including literature that represents a wide range of cultures, experiences, and identities, we can give voice to historically invisible perspectives and help to highlight the diversity of human experience (Glazier & Seo, 2005). This can be particularly important for students who have traditionally been underrepresented in traditional curricula, as it can provide them with the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the literature they read and to learn about the experiences and perspectives of others. Additionally, by reading diverse literature, students can gain a greater understanding of the ways in which systemic oppression has shaped our society, and can learn about the struggles and challenges faced by people from different backgrounds. Overall, diverse literature can be a powerful tool for promoting understanding, empathy, and inclusivity, and for helping students to recognize and challenge systemic oppression.

Diverse Literature to Gain Multicultural Perspectives

It is important for students to see themselves and others represented in literature, to see oneself reflected in the media we consume can help to validate our identities and foster a sense of belonging. However, it is also important for students to recognize themselves in others and to understand our common humanity (Galda et al., 2013). By reading literature that represents a wide range of cultures, experiences, and identities,

students can learn about and connect with people who may be different from themselves. This can help students to develop empathy and understanding for others, and to see that, despite our differences, we all share a common humanity. Reading diverse literature can also help children to recognize and challenge stereotypes, and to see the world from multiple perspectives.

Rosenblatt (1955) found that reading books about diverse populations can be a valuable way for children to gain insight into cultural experiences that are different from their own. It is absolutely critical that educators present more than just a single story of white culture that is found in traditional curricula, and instead provide access to multicultural perspectives. Educators need to seek to show the narratives and lived experiences of students from all backgrounds, so all students know their stories are just as important as any other, and to do so by including books that feature diverse protagonists or are written by diverse authors, so that they are given “affirmation, visibility, and insight into the world in which they live” (Horning et al., 2014). In a TED Talk titled “The danger of a single story”, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) said:

Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (17:24)

Culturally diverse literature refers to literature that represents a wide range of cultures, experiences, and identities. When we speak of culturally diverse literature, themes centered on race, ethnicity, culture, and language are often considered important characteristics of diversity (Boyd et al., 2015). Some further extend and advocate for expanding culturally diverse literature to include physical and mental disabilities,

socioeconomic status, language variations, dialect differences, and religion (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007). There are many different aspects of diversity that should be represented in literature, including various family structures, sexual and gender identities (Boyd et al., 2015). Beyond just representing the students in the classroom, it is perhaps most important to represent the personal stories of those not present in the classroom. Providing diverse literature offers our students a different perspective than that of their everyday lives (Boyd et al., 2015).

It is widely recognized that providing access to high-quality, diverse literature is an important step in improving literacy outcomes for students. Literacy specialists, coaches, and researchers have emphasized the importance of culturally responsive curriculum and instruction in improving literacy rates, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds (Kelly-Howard, 2021). Culturally responsive teaching involves acknowledging and valuing the cultural backgrounds and experiences of students, and using this knowledge to inform instructional practices. This can include incorporating diverse texts and resources into the curriculum, and using teaching methods that are culturally relevant and meaningful to students. By providing students with access to diverse books and content that reflect their own cultures and experiences, educators can help to engage and motivate students, and create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Conclusion

Diverse literature should positively represent all cultures to function as mirrors, windows, and doors to view other cultures (Crisp et al., 2016). The term was famously coined by Bishop (1990) as a powerful framework to illustrate the idea that:

Books are mirrors when readers see their own lives reflected in the pages. Books are windows when they allow readers a view of lives and stories that are different from their own. Books become sliding glass doors when readers feel transported into the world of the story and when they feel empathy for the characters. (p. 10)

Books have the potential to serve a wide range of purposes, including entertaining, fostering a love of reading, and informing readers. Reading about characters who share similar experiences or aspects of identity can help children feel seen and validated, and can help them feel more confident and proud of who they are. At the same time, reading about characters who have different experiences or identities can help children learn about and appreciate the diversity of the world around them. It can also help children develop empathy and understanding as they learn about the challenges that others may face due to their race, ethnicity, culture, or other aspects of their identity (McNair, 2010). Multicultural literature involves understanding, accepting, and appreciating cultural differences, as well as acknowledging the power dynamics and struggles that exist within society, and working towards social justice and equality for all. Cultural competency is about recognizing and challenging the ways in which systems of power and oppression have shaped our society, and working towards the transformation of these systems in order to promote greater inclusivity and equity (Cai, 2002). By prioritizing cultural competency in our work and interactions, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable world for all.

While I believe classrooms and school libraries are important places for providing available diverse literature, I think elevating it to the next step by the establishment of a

book club as an inclusive space for holding these critical conversations and safe explorations of identities and cultures is important for social justice change.

Benefits of Book Clubs

This capstone project advocates that the establishment of a book club with a focus on analyzing diverse literature can provide a solid framework for amplifying student voice, increasing visibility of students from all cultures, and providing student authority over what they read and choose to learn. Book clubs can be structured in multiple ways depending on student needs and teacher preference. However, the majority of book clubs have an element of community sharing, reading, writing, and discussions (Duffy-Hester, 1999). It is understandable that teachers may be hesitant to make major changes to the curriculum out of a concern for the impact on test scores. However, it is important to recognize that the curriculum is not just about preparing students for standardized tests, but also about providing a rich and engaging learning experience that promotes understanding and appreciation for the diversity of human experience. By including a range of diverse materials and resources in the curriculum, teachers can help to promote cultural competency and inclusivity, and can provide students with the opportunity to learn about and connect with people from different backgrounds and experiences. While it may be challenging to make major changes to the curriculum, it is important for teachers to be willing to take risks and to think creatively about how to incorporate diversity and inclusivity into their teaching practices. By doing so, they can create a more engaging and meaningful learning experience for all of their students. Newell (2017) points out that an additive approach to multiculturalism— including content, concepts, and themes that address a variety of cultural experiences without changing the overall

structure of the curriculum—is not going to address the issue of recognizing one’s privilege.

Superficial changes to the curriculum, such as adding a few diverse texts or resources without fundamentally changing the curriculum's focus or structure, can be an ineffective way to promote cultural competency and inclusivity. This approach can fail to truly engage students and to provide them with a meaningful learning experience that reflects the diversity of human experience. Additionally, this type of approach can reinforce the false notion that ethnic history are not critical parts of the education for all youth, and can contribute to a sense of marginalization and exclusion for students from non-dominant cultures (Ford et al., 1999). Instead, it is important for teachers to take a more holistic approach to incorporating diversity and inclusivity into the curriculum, by fundamentally rethinking the curriculum's focus and structure, and by actively seeking out and including diverse materials and resources that reflect the experiences and perspectives of all students. By doing so, teachers can create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment for all of their students. Furthermore, a lot of emphasis by schools on combating hostile environments for non-dominant youth is through providing of training that is usually conducted in the course of one or two days, and is an example of a “one and done” professional development, which may not allow for the necessary time and nuances needed to implement the key content and pedagogical strategies from the professional development (Yoon et al., 2007). This capstone project thesis seeks to advocate the establishment of book clubs as a way of creating sustained, long-term support from educators and schools in the field of social justice and equity work, through the creation of inclusive spaces for students.

Book Clubs as Inclusive Spaces

Learning environments are most effective when they provide a sense of security and inclusion for students. When students feel welcomed and supported in their learning environment, they are more likely to engage with the material and participate actively in class. Providing students with a sense of belonging and connection to their peers and to the community can be an important aspect of creating a positive and supportive learning environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). This can be achieved through the use of inclusive teaching practices, such as using diverse materials and resources, promoting respectful and open-ended discussions, and providing opportunities for student collaboration and participation. By creating a sense of community within the classroom, educators can help students feel more connected to one another and to the material, and can promote a more positive and engaging learning experience for all. A book club that creates a safe space for students to learn through student-centered involvement and selection of diverse literature, as well as dialogue topics to facilitate sharing of multicultural lived experiences, provides a way for underrepresented students to feel seen, heard, and welcomed.

Between 1976 to 2016, a survey of over one million students found they are reading significantly less than they did 40 years ago, and are spending less time interacting with their peers in person, leading to increased sense of loneliness, particularly for females, Black and Latinx youth, and students from low socioeconomic households (Twenge et al., 2019). Book clubs enable youth of color to explore their historical legacies and increase confidence and self-esteem (Boston & Baxley, 2007;

Fisher, 2006). Therefore, book clubs can provide inclusive experiences for youth especially those most marginalized within our communities and schools.

Student Ownership

Establishing a book club for students to hold critical conversations about their identities in safe spaces is more than an additive approach to addressing inequities faced by students. Book clubs focused on elevating and amplifying diverse literature centers underrepresented student perspectives and lived experiences. Such book clubs increase a students' awareness of multiculturalism and can be used to prepare youth to live in diverse societies (Daniels, 2002). Book clubs can be used as spaces for youth to grapple with identity, language, race, sexuality, social class, and gender in that they encourage students to take on more critical perspectives (Sanacore, 2013). Book clubs are a fun and informal way for students to strengthen their literacy skills, but also serve to support authentic learning through student-led choice and transference of knowledge to real-world problem solving (James, 2003). Book club discussions encourage students to share stories with each other that they believe their classmates could enjoy or relate to. When students develop a sense of ownership surrounding their learning, this can lead to an inclusive space full of active, empathetic learners (Durkin, 2021).

Chapter Summary

In Chapter Two, the importance of diverse voices being represented in the available literature for students to feel welcomed and seen have been identified. Multiple studies have identified that many groups of underrepresented students, including non-Christians, LGBTQ+, Native-Americans, children of immigrant families, and youth of color, feel invisible or not included in school settings because their culture or identity

are not represented in the curriculum, assignments, or literature. Creation of inclusive spaces through culturally appropriate pedagogy such as by the establishment of authentic, student-centered, book clubs can create inclusive spaces for underrepresented students. As Jacqueline Woodson (1998), an African American author of children's literature and lesbian mother said:

I know what it is like to be hated because of the skin you were born in, because of gender or sexual preference. I know what it is like to be made to feel unworthy, disregarded, to have one's experiences devalued because they are not the experiences of a dominant culture (p. 36).

The next chapter will provide details of the capstone project itself, the intended audience and context of the project, a suggested diverse voices book list, and the theoretical framework of how it will be implemented.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Project Overview

This capstone project established a book club to diversify available literature to high school students, in an attempt to create inclusive spaces on school grounds. The book club was led by two teachers at the high school, an ELA teacher and I. We developed ground rules for establishing norms and expectations during our time and space together at the book club meetings, and identified prompts for discussions. We also aimed to involve student leaders to begin dialoguing to encourage peer feedback and leadership. We insisted on anonymity and did not take attendance of the members present at the book club meetings to create a safe and inclusive space for all students. The aim of the book club was to meet once a month, during our lunch hour. The date and time of the monthly meeting was advertised via email and posted physical flyers around campus.

Framework and Research

In Chapter Two, the literature review focused on several key topics: educator and school biases, the importance of creating inclusive spaces, the role of culturally sustaining practices, the significance of diverse literature, and the existence of book clubs as inclusive spaces. In this chapter, the methodology related to this capstone project addressing the research question: *How can we create inclusive spaces in schools through diversifying available literature by establishing a book club?* will be explored. As we grow to become culturally responsive educators, we must recognize that this work is not a one-time exercise, but something that is a regular part of our professional development work. My capstone project seeks to create inclusive spaces in school by doing the

following: identifying multicultural and diverse YA literature, establishing a book club to facilitate thoughtful discussion and reflection, engaging the voices and perspectives of students in my school in critical dialogue surrounding social justice issues, and creating a safe community of like-minded students who will support this work as its scope expands. This chapter explains the framework for the project, the intended audience, the timeline for implementation, a suggested book list, and assessment of the capstone project.

Literature that includes multicultural characters and themes of political injustice, pluralistic identities, and breaking down the barriers of oppression can be an important tool for facilitating conversations that support culturally sustaining practices (Kelly-Howard, 2021). Culturally sustaining practices are actions that support the continuation and revitalization of cultural heritage and traditions, and can help to promote understanding and respect for diversity. By reading literature that reflects the experiences and perspectives of people from different cultures, we can gain a greater understanding and appreciation for the diversity of human experience, and the ways in which different cultures contribute to our world. This can help to facilitate conversations about social and political issues, and can also help to break down barriers of oppression and promote a more inclusive and equitable society. Reading diverse literature can be a powerful tool for promoting cultural competency and inclusivity, and for supporting the continuation and revitalization of cultural heritage and traditions. Book clubs can be used as spaces for youth to grapple with identity, language, race, sexuality, social class, and gender in that they encourage students to take on more critical perspectives (Sanacore, 2013).

The ethnicity of the authors and illustrators should not be the sole factor in determining the authenticity of a work of literature. While it is important to consider the

cultural experiences and perspectives of the authors and illustrators, it is also important to recognize that individual experiences and perspectives are not necessarily representative of an entire culture. In order to gain a deeper understanding of a culture, it is important to engage in research and to seek out a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

Intended Audience

There were several stakeholders involved for this capstone project: firstly, the administrators and teachers who assisted with the acquisition of books and establishment of the book club, and secondly, the high school students who would be participants in the book club and the creation of a community. This capstone project took place within a public high school in a suburban community in Monmouth County, New Jersey. In the 2021 - 2022 school year, the school had an enrollment of 266 students, 29 faculty/staff, and 1 administrator. The intended audience of this capstone project are high school students, enrolled in 9th through 12th grade. Monmouth County, New Jersey is a county with a population of 643,615. The racial-ethnic distribution of Monmouth County is White (73.9%), Black (6.4%), and Asian (5.6%), with 7.9% of the county identifying as two or more races. The remaining 6.2% identify as “some other race alone”. The median household income in Monmouth County is approximately \$108,000, which is above the national average (\$70,784), with about 6.0% of the population below poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

The birth of this capstone project began with informal conversations with my colleague, an ELA teacher. We had been working together for a year as co-coaches of the Diversity, Equity, Access and Inclusion initiative for our school district; and we were seeking ways to expand our efforts to amplify and elevate diverse voices within our

school community. Reaching out to my building principal, he was extremely supportive of my ideas, and in conjunction with the Principal of Curriculum for the school district, they were able to support my efforts to write and successfully obtain a grant through Sustainable Jersey for Schools and National Educators Association to fund the acquisition of YA literature. Beginning in the fall 2022, I created and distributed flyers, and began encouraging students to attend the book club meetings.

To grow the club membership, we encouraged a buddy system, where we provided incentives to existing members to bring a guest to increase interest. We also polled students to determine best available lunch times for holding meetings, and also attempted to pilot several reiterations of the book club, such as creation of short stories and holding abbreviated meetings. We also found that the greatest success in attendance rate was providing food to the students - simple incentives like ice-pops, donuts, cookies, or popcorn, were great incentives for increasing participation at any specific book club meeting.

Beyond the establishment of this book club at my high school, I hope that this project will prove useful to teachers and student leaders alike, who may wish to create their own book clubs at their schools, in an attempt to diversify the literature available to their students, and to begin important peer discussions surrounding critical topics surrounding identity and belonging.

Timeline

It was extremely important that this capstone project emphasize the importance of long-term, sustained work on the part of educators to shift the culture of a school, and that such endeavors in the field of social justice cannot be one-time exercises conducted

at a professional development workshop. The ideas for this capstone project began in 2021, and many conversations were had with administrators during the 2021 - 2022 school year, culminating in the awarding of a one-time grant to fund the purchase of diverse YA literature in spring 2022. The first drafts of Chapters One, Two, and Three were completed in December 2022, and various edits and revisions continued throughout the 2022 - 2023 school year. The final draft of this capstone project was submitted for approval in August 2023. The establishment of the book club occurred in the fall 2022 and monthly meetings continued during the 2022 - 2023 school year, and there are continued plans for the book club to continue through teacher and student engagement and grant funding for the 2023 - 2024 school year.

Suggested Book List

In attempting to create a suggested book list, several steps should be considered in order to determine if the text fits within the parameters of an authentic piece of multicultural literature (Boyd et al., 2015): (a) study the work of authors and illustrators to determine the quality of culturally rich books, including style, topics, themes, and perspectives; (b) draw from award categories of non-white cultural groups as well as various resources; and (c) learn to determine the authenticity of authors' work by looking at visual and verbal sensitivity, authenticity and accuracy, and ideology. Mendoza and Reese (2001) suggest the following guidelines:

- Are characters outside the mainstream culture depicted as individuals or as caricatures?
- Does their representation include significant specific cultural information? Or does it follow stereotypes?

- Who has the wisdom?
- How is the language used to create images of people of a particular group?

Pollock (2022) suggests that to be more intentional about our choice of young adult literature for a book club, to consider the following questions:

- Do these texts match the linguistic and cultural diversities of my students?
- Do they consider their variety of abilities?
- Do they represent or address their needs, interests, and identities?
- Do they reinforce stereotypes based on the characters' race, ethnicities, gender, class, abilities, languages, or sexualities?
- Do they reinforce any stereotypical views of youth?

A list of some suggested books that I've compiled and acquired for the book club that has been established (see Appendix A). In addition to the selection of these multicultural books by the ELA teacher and I, we also solicited student feedback from book club members, and were able to expand on our library collection through student input.

Assessment

Students were given several anonymous student surveys, in both formal and informal settings, that sought to identify the effectiveness of the functioning book club. The survey assessed the student's reactions to the conversations sparked during the book club discussion on the topics discussed and reflections on how they engaged with the literature read. The survey focused on various diversity and inclusivity initiatives that recognize and support marginalized student identities. There were several modifications made to the structure of the book club that were implemented after reviewing the student feedback.

Chapter Summary

For my capstone project, I have chosen to explore the question: *How can we create inclusive spaces in schools through diversifying available literature by establishing a book club?* Chapter Three goes into the scope of this capstone project, including the intended audience, timeline, and implementation of the project. My capstone project began to take shape as I recognized the need for creation of inclusive spaces for youth, and was undertaken respectfully and collaboratively, working with students to determine what our community needs. The objective of the project was to amplify and elevate diverse voices, to initiate dialogue and critical listening, and honor the multicultural identities and lived experiences of all members in our community. This project is aimed at high school students. I am establishing a book club focused on amplifying and elevating diverse voices in literature, in an attempt to increase student perceptions of inclusive spaces in our community. Creation of inclusive spaces fosters a sense of belonging and feeling of being seen, which increases student engagement and achievement. Chapter Four will describe the reflections that were drawn from the development and implementation of this capstone project, a revisit to the literature review, possible limitations of the project, and potential options for possible directions in the future.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides final reflections on the central question of this capstone project: *How can we create inclusive spaces in schools by diversifying available literature through the establishment of a book club?* In this chapter, I reflect on the creation of this project, sharing what I have learned as an educator and writer. I return to the literature, making connections between my research and the outcome of my capstone project. I address the limitations I encountered in creating the project and possible limitations of other educators attempting to create this project in their own communities. I examine the project's implications, determining how it might be used in the future, and who might benefit from the materials I have created. Finally, I will suggest several potential future projects to continue creating inclusive spaces in schools.

Creation of the Capstone Project

This capstone project consists of the logistical guidelines for the establishment of a book club specifically geared towards multi-perspective literature to create inclusive spaces in schools through diversification of available resources. The intended audience for this capstone project are any educators looking to create and facilitate a book club with students. This project is designed to impact high school students of all backgrounds and identities at my school, and is intended to be used by any educator, group, or student, at any institution. The results of this project were communicated at a professional conference and I plan to continue disseminating the logistical methodology for creating a book club to diversify available literature in schools, at both the district level and also at

the state-wide level This capstone process has taught me a lot as a researcher, writer, and learner. As a researcher, this capstone has allowed me to create a solid rationale based on primary literature highlighting the importance of equity work. As a writer, the creation of this capstone paper allowed me to synthesize the objectives supporting my project. As a learner, I am so fortunate to have had many amazing and supportive peers at Hamline University who share my vision of creating a better, equitable, educational world for all learners. My perspective on the importance of social justice work in schools has increased through this journey, and I am empowered to continue creating opportunities in our school community for elevating and amplifying the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Revisiting the Literature Review

The goal of this capstone project is the establishment of a book club in an attempt to create inclusive spaces in school communities. Inclusive spaces in schools provide students with a feeling of belonging and safety, through pedagogical ideologies focused on embracing multiple cultural perspectives that support and elevate student identities from a religious, cultural, national origin, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities. Schools need to actively seek out multi-varied literature that represent the diverse voices of all identities, such that students from all backgrounds see themselves reflected in the available books and conversations that occur between teachers, between teachers and students, and between peer students, in school classrooms and spaces. This helps students feel seen and valued, and it also helps to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment. The creation of a book club as a capstone project that focused on

diversifying available literature was a conscious effort to incorporate diverse voices into their literature selections in order to promote equity and inclusivity in my community.

In reviewing the literature, this capstone project was particularly influenced by several key research ideas. It is important to recognize the important influential role that teachers have on the future successes of students, and proper teacher education, awareness, professional development training, and experience, are critical for shaping a teachers' effectiveness in a classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2010). If a school's climate is not inclusive or supportive of all students, it can create barriers to their learning and well-being. This may occur through a lack of representation or visibility of non-dominant groups in the school, or a lack of policies and practices that support their needs and experiences. By ignoring the existence of differences in our individual identities, or the inherent privileges we are conferred as a social group, we are unable to fully address the ongoing effects of discrimination and inequality within our education system, and this can make it difficult to create meaningful discussions and change, and can contribute to the perpetuation of inequities (Tatum, 2017). Bishop (1990) states: "when children cannot find themselves in the books that they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in a society of which they are a part". It is important to include diverse literature with multicultural characters and themes of political injustice, multicultural identities, and breaking down the barriers of systemic oppression because it helps facilitate conversations about cultural-sustaining practices (Kelly-Howard, 2021). The discussion of diverse literature in book clubs can be used as inclusive spaces for students to hold

critical and respectful conversations surrounding topics of identity, language, race, sexuality, social class, and gender (Sanacore, 2013).

In the process of the creation of this capstone project, I was positively thrilled to see so many other Hamline University capstone projects focused on promoting educational equity. I discovered the recent development of interactive websites to search for BIPOC YA literature that promote empathy (Fowler, 2022) or a website to implement student-led book clubs at the elementary school level (Torbenson, 2019), and professional development to increase cultural competency to address the needs of Muslim students (Aly, 2023) or professional development for educators to use literacy to discuss race and racism with students (Hanlon, 2022), and curriculum for intentional instruction of queer topics in GSA clubs for LGBTQ+ students (Gallagher, 2023) or curriculum for implementing culturally-sustaining pedagogy through the use of music in the ESL classroom (Arnosti, 2022). In revisiting the literature review, I found new connections and understandings to my capstone project through the interconnectedness of how we are all tackling educational inequities through multiple lenses - through various social justice actions that have translated into websites, professional developments, curriculum, or in my case, the establishment of a book club for students.

Limitations

I have been extremely fortunate to have the unwavering support of my school administrators, ranging from my school principal to my curriculum supervisor to my district superintendent. Their support has allowed me to advance many equity projects within my school and also district, including this capstone project on establishing a book club to address diversifying available literature for high school students. I envision that a

limitation of my project for other educators is the lack of support by administrators or parents, or a lack of interest from the student body, that will limit the success of such endeavors in other communities.

One limitation I faced in attempting to create inclusive spaces in schools through a book club was not in the establishment of the book club, but the continual maintenance and forward momentum in continual engagement and participation by both teachers and students. As is often the case with music and performing arts initiatives in schools, informal extracurricular activities such as this book club that was held during lunch periods, sometimes fell by the wayside, when students or teachers were busy with required high-stakes state testings, school day cancellations, or Advanced Placement examinations. As high school students find themselves stretched thin as they overcommit to various activities, attendance of this optional book club would often be one of the things students opted out of.

Reflections as an Educator

I recall a casual conversation I had as a high school educator with a group of students that occurred outside of the classroom. The group of high school students were complaining that they didn't particularly enjoy their English class because "the books we read are boring". In delving into this conversation topic, what they meant by "boring" was that the literature discussed was unrelatable (most of them were classics, so they were dated, and topics and themes centered on a White, Christian, heterosexual, male ideologies). I realized, the students did not relate to the materials read because they could not see themselves relating to these experiences.

This informal casual conversation that I had with students, which resulted in several more reiterations with the same and different groups of students over several years, propelled me to move forward in my social justice journey as I considered the following questions:

- How do I create inclusive spaces for non-dominant students to see themselves in my classroom and school?
- Where are my blind spots, as a heterosexual, Christian female educator, and how have my biases prevented me from exploring these until now?
- How can I take accountability for the impact of how and what I teach my students?
- In what ways can I bring about social justice change (as a science teacher) by changing the literature available to students at my school?
- How do I persist in strengthening my own social justice consciousness in order to better understand my journey as an educator?

My growth in social justice work to become a culturally competent educator has not occurred in a vacuum. I have learned immensely from others who are engaging in equity work, both at my school, within my district, and across the region to include formal and informal educators in Pennsylvania and New York. I learned to seek the feedback of administrators, professional community leaders, fellow colleagues, parents of non-dominant cultures, and students within our community. Through many collaborations and tweakings of the project, this work grew and evolved to best fit the needs of my school community and address the desires of the students.

Potential Future Work

At the 2014 BookCon, all 30 authors selected to speak on author panels were White (Neary, 2015). The increased frustrations at the lack of diverse voices experienced by many sparked a new movement that sparked the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks. Thousands of internet users posted the #WeNeedDiverseBooks hashtag and it led to an increase in open discussions about the need for more representation in literature. We Need Diverse Books is now a non-profit organization that promotes the importance and value of BIPOC authors, characters, and stories in children's literature. In the past decade, this slow but persistent need has grown in strength of voice and numbers, and the establishment of this book club to increase diverse literature at my high school is a representation of one such endeavor.

The results of this capstone project were communicated at a conference for formal and formal educators when I was an invited panelist for a session titled "How do we advance equity, diversity, and inclusion in schools?" I plan to continue disseminating the logistical goals of creating a book club to diversify available literature in schools to other high school teachers within my district through our Professional Learning Communities and in my role as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion district coordinator for dissemination of best practices to advance equity within our school district, which will take the form of professional development sessions made available to district employees. At the state-wide level, I plan to submit session proposals to various professional conferences and workshops to encourage other teachers to create book clubs at their schools.

This capstone project is a benefit to the profession as it is crucial for educators to create opportunities for students to feel welcome and included in school communities, as feeling safe in their individual identities as students is critical for learning. A multi-cultural holistic approach to education that addresses the social-emotional needs of our students is imperative in today's worldview of education. I hope that this capstone paper will provide a clear pathway for other educators to benefit from the materials I have created and encourage others to join the cause.

The experience of creating this project has reinforced to me how much equity work and cultural competence in school communities are a journey, and not a destination to be achieved by educators. Establishment of this book club provided a forum for students to hold critical discussions about social identities and varied cultures, but there is still a need for so much more to be done. Teachers, parents, and students all feel a need for increased development of cultural competence and skills, an acquisition of vocabulary and language to properly address emotions, and increased exposure to experiences and perspectives that allow personal growth in identity development and social-emotional connections.

A future project that I am excited to pursue in the upcoming school year and beyond is an extension of the establishment of the book club created. At one of our book club meetings, where I brought in food that was culturally relevant to what we were reading, a student exclaimed "a Read and Feed Club!" and that sparked a new idea. Food is often something that shapes us - our identities and our cultures, and in the end, our society (Sibal, 2018). Food is often used as a means of representing our cultural identity. Sharing food is a way of learning about someone else's culture, for it is a method of

sharing celebrations and often unknown meanings and significance. “Food connects us to each other, to our own pasts and identities/memories, and to the larger world around us... Food can take us into exploring ourselves as well as the impact that we as individuals might have on other people, economies, ecologies, and society” (Long, 2015). Food and the sharing of a meal brings people worldwide together with an almost irrefutable idea of a good time. I piloted a cultural food pot-luck event with students and teachers at my school, and it was met with huge success. Word spread across campus and students and teachers alike were eager to attend a future “book club” event featuring cultural food. My hope is to expand my diverse voices book club project that shares diverse literature, to one that will be a diverse food club that shares diverse cultural cuisines.

The central question posed in this capstone project attempts to address is: *How can we create inclusive spaces in schools by diversifying available literature through the establishment of a book club?* The birth of this capstone project began slowly, through informal conversations with students and teachers, through a recognition of an absence of diverse voices and perspectives in the literature students are exposed to in traditional curricula, and through a realization of a deafening silence in the critical discussions had in school surrounding our identities and our cultures. This project to establish and grow a book club that has been fondly named “Diverse Voices Book Club”, sought to diversify available literature that students were exposed to, in an attempt to address social-emotional learning needs through a diversity, inclusivity, and equity lens. As the book club grew, a community of social justice warriors arose - students, teachers, parents, and administrators who were determined to make change in our school to create more

welcoming and respectful spaces. World perspectives through different eyes, ideologies and opinions spread through written word, have brought about a paradigm shift.

I'll end with a quote I included at the start of this paper by the famous James Baldwin, an acclaimed American writer whose work focuses on many complex social and psychological pressures of the intersectionality of sexuality, race, and class that ran parallel with major political movements in American history, such as the civil rights movement and the gay liberal movement: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Once we have been awakened to the inalienable truths for the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in school communities for the betterment of all learners, may we have the courage and strength to persist together as teachers in our quest for educational equity to create inclusive spaces for all our students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SUGGESTED BOOK LIST

Title	Author	Topic	Brief description
Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian	Sherman Alexie	First Nations	Junior is a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation, who leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white farm town high school. Based on the author's own experiences.
Firekeeper's Daughter	Angelina Boulley	First Nations	A half-native, half-white young adult witnesses her friend's murder and becomes involved in an FBI investigation revolving around a new drug.
Saints and Misfits	S. K. Ali	Muslim	A story about Muslim faith, identity, and social issues, featuring an Arab Indian-American teen.
The Map of Salt and Stars	Zeyn Joukhadar	Muslim	In 2011, the peace in Syria is disturbed by protests and shelling. A young girl, Nour, is forced to flee across the Levant and North Africa in search of safety.
Love, Hate, and other filters	Samira Ahmed	Muslim, Indian	American-born Muslim Indian 17-year old teen experience when a terrorist attack occurs.
The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali	Sabina Khan	Muslim, Bangladeshi, LGBTQ	When seventeen-year-old teen with conservative Muslim parents is caught kissing her girlfriend, she is whisked off to Bangladesh.
The Astonishing Color of After	Emily X. R. Pan	Asian, Multiracial, Grief	Biracial female visits her grandparents in Taiwan after her mother dies. A novel about finding oneself through family history, art, grief, and love.
Black Flamingo	Dean Atta	Multiracial, Greek, Jamaican, LGBTQ	A mixed-race gay teen growing up in London navigates what it means to be Greek-Cypriot and Jamaican in coming-of-age verse novel about

			identity and the power of drag.
Almost American Girl	Robin Ha	Asian, Immigrant, Blended Families	Teen graphic novel about an only child of a single mother from Korea who immigrates to Alabama.
These Violent Delights	Chloe Gong	Asian	A blood feud between two gangs set in 1926 Shanghai. A Romeo-Juliet story set in China.
Everything I Never Told You	Celeste Ng	Asian	A mixed-race Chinese-American family whose middle daughter Lydia is found drowned in a nearby lake.
World of Wonders	Aimee Nexhukumat ahil	Non-fiction Asian	Nonfiction collection of essays about the natural world, and the way its inhabitants can teach, support, and inspire us.
Banned Book Club	Kim Hyun Sook	Asian, Korean, Graphic Novel	Memoir of South Korea; a dramatic true story of political division, fear-mongering, anti-intellectualism, the death of democratic institutions, and the relentless rebellion of reading.
They Called us Enemy	George Takei	Japanese internment, Graphic Novel	A graphic memoir recounting actor/author/activist George Takei's childhood imprisoned within American concentration camps during World War 2.
New Kid	Jerry Craft	Black, Graphic Novel	Graphic novel about a 7th grader who is enrolled in a prestigious private school, where he is one of the few kids of color in his entire grade.
Slay	Brittney Morris	Black	Teen game developer creates an online role-playing card game that is a safe community for black gamers, but a real-life troll threatens to sue for anti-white discrimination and the game is labeled a racist, exclusionist, violent hub for thugs and criminals.
The Immortal	Rebecca Skloot	Non-fiction Black	Henrietta Lacks was a poor Southern tobacco farmer who worked the same

Life of Henrietta Lacks			land as her enslaved ancestors, yet her cells—taken without her knowledge—became one of the most important tools in medicine.
Akata Witch	Nnedi Okarafor	African	Born in New York, but living in Nigeria, twelve-year old Sunny is albino and incredibly sensitive to the sun.
The Gilded Ones	Namina Forna	West-African	Sixteen-year-old Dekka lives in fear and anticipation of the blood ceremony that will determine whether she will become a member of her village. Already different from everyone else because of her unnatural intuition, Dekka's blood runs gold, the color of impurity—and Dekka knows she will face a consequence worse than death.
The 57 Bus	Dashka Slater	Black, LGBTQ, non-fiction	A nonfiction book for teens about race, class, gender, crime, and punishment, tells the true story of an agender teen who was set on fire by another teen while riding a bus in Oakland, California.
Romiette and Julio	Sharon Draper	Black, Hispanic	Romiette is African-American and Julio is Hispanic, and the Devildogs, a dangerous local gang, violently oppose their interracial relationship.
House in the Cerulean Sea	TJ Klune	LGBTQ, fantasy	Linus is unexpectedly summoned to Marsyas Island Orphanage, where six dangerous children reside: a gnome, a sprite, a wyvern, an unidentifiable green blob, a were-Pomeranian, and the Antichrist. Linus must set aside his fears and determine whether or not they're likely to bring about the end of days.
Carry On	Rainbow Rowell	LGBTQ, fantasy	A ghost story, a love story and a mystery.

Henna Wars	Adiba Jaigirdar	LGBTQ/Ban gladeshi and Irish	Set in Dublin, the book follows Nishat, a Bangladeshi teenager who comes out as a lesbian while in high school.
Challenger Deep	Neal Shusterman	Mental health	For 14-year-old Caden Bosch, his gradual descent into schizophrenia is a quest to reach the bottom of Challenger Deep, the deepest place on Earth.
Dear Evan Hansen	Val Emmich	Mental health	A simple lie leads to complicated truths in this big-hearted coming-of-age story of grief, authenticity, and the struggle to belong in an age of instant connectivity and profound isolation.
The Poet X	Elizabeth Acevdo	Afro-Latina	An Afro-Latina heroine who tells her story with blazing words and powerful truth.
I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter	Erika Sanchez	Latinx; Grief	A novel about a teenager coming to terms with losing her sister and finding herself amid the pressures, expectations, and stereotypes of growing up in a Mexican American home
Come On In	Adi Alsaid and Varsha Bajaj and Maria E. Andreu	Immigration	Anthology explores the joys, heartbreaks and triumphs of immigration, with stories by critically acclaimed and bestselling YA authors who are shaped by the journeys they and their families have taken from home--and to find home.
A Phoenix First Must Burn	Patrice Caldwell et al.	Black, gender nonconforming	Sixteen tales by bestselling and award-winning authors that explore the Black experience through fantasy, science fiction, and magic.
Color Outside the Lines	Sangu Mandanna et al.	LGBTQ, interracial	YA anthology explores the complexity and beauty of interracial and LGBTQ+ relationships where differences are front and center.

Reclaim the Stars: 17 Tales Across Realms & Space	Zoraida Córdova et al.	Latinx	Seventeen fantasy and science fiction short stories from leading voices in the Latin American diaspora!
A Thousand Beginnings and Endings	Ellen Oh et al.		Fifteen bestselling and acclaimed authors reimagine the folklore and mythology of East and South Asia in short stories.