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Using Diverse Literature to Increase Empathy and Cultural Understanding in the Classroom

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Using Diverse Literature to Increase Empathy and Cultural Understanding in the
Classroom

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Masters of Education.

Hamline University

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background Information

Teaching middle school is not for the faint of heart. In fact, oftentimes, when I share with others that I teach sixth grade students, I am often met with a face contorting with confusion, fear, and perhaps disgust. However, working with middle level students feels like something I am meant to do and being a small part in a students' victory or having a positive influence on a students' life makes those looks of unease worth it. The joy of middle school is that each day brings something new and each day is a fresh start. This is a time of change and a time to explore. Which leads to big reactions, emotions, and questions. The development that happens throughout the middle level years are the most formative to adolescents. It is a time I look back on in my own academic journey and remember fondly, which I know is not something too many people can say.

My ultimate goal as an educator is to be a part of putting students on a path to becoming a lifelong learner. When considering my own teaching philosophy I want to build relationships with students that will allow them to get the most out of their academic years in a way that will encourage and inspire them to continue learning and building skills well into adulthood. One way in which I want to enrich the learning experience of students is to incorporate diverse literature and perspectives. The driving research focus that surrounds this capstone is *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote empathy and cultural understanding*.

In order to provide resources and tools regarding diverse literature recommendations, I want to ensure that I create a platform that is accessible and user

friendly for all individuals. Therefore, I intend to create a website that will be a platform for students, educators, and community members to utilize in order to converse about various types of literature that portray a wide range of perspectives, histories, and experiences. Through this website, individuals will also be able to find various life topics as well as empathetic skill building ideas that coincide with the diverse novel recommendation. By providing titles and descriptions that are either from the perspective of a character that has physical challenges, has historically marginalized perspectives, and has experience with self identity struggles, classroom libraries can then have the power to provide the opportunity for some students to learn about a different perspective from their own and provide validation and representation for others. The importance of implementing these titles into classrooms, is to create a more empathetic and inclusive environment, which is something all great educators strive for.

When I am asked who my favorite teacher was, my mind always drifts to my middle school Language Arts teacher, Mrs. Keller, because she was the most kind, encouraging, and enthusiastic person. She was someone who showed students that it was okay to wonder, explore, and grow. She did this through literature. She exposed students to perspectives, conversations, and cultures that allowed students to question and consider viewpoints that may be vastly different from their own. She embodied the goals I now find myself having as an educator today. Through her class, we were able to read books such as *The Outsiders* (1967), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and *La Linea* (1985). These are just a few of many novels that tell the story of a character that has to navigate diversity in order to achieve. These novels gave me pause and required me to consider beyond my own life and into someone else's. It was through novels that I realized that

teachers were so much more than someone who stood at the front of the room and read a book to the class, but had the power to become so influential. It was through reflecting on my own middle school experiences that I realized that I became passionate about reading in Mrs. Keller's classroom. This was the spark that ignited my interest in literature and perspectives. I strive to create a classroom that will ignite that same spark in my students.

Personal Connection

The desire to include a variety of perspectives comes from a reason that hits close to home. I identify as a Straight, White, woman in her late twenties. I work in a school that is predominately White and come from a community that is predominately White. However, this same experience cannot be said for my own brother. Yes, he too grew up in a predominantly White community, however, he is gay. His experience as a gay man is one that he has navigated with grace and strength, even when society tried to knock him down. The need to include not only diverse perspectives regarding race in the classroom, but also perspectives that shed light on the LGBTQIA+ community is one that is important to me.

This desire comes from a conversation I had with my brother in regard to literature. It was my baby brother who asked me if I shared novels and stories that came from the perspective of a gay character. He shared his experience regarding not ever reading about gay characters whom he could relate to and wondered aloud about how encouraging that would have been when he was in middle school. He shared that only just recently has he been finding literature and film that makes him feel proud and empowered to see his story represented. This gave me pause and I was horrified that I had not ever assigned literature or resources with gay perspectives. How could I have

forgotten to include representation of the LGBTQIA+ community within my own classroom? It made me ask myself how I could have let that happen when I knew representation was something my brother never had during his academic years. It was him who shed light on the power and the impact it could have on today's adolescents.

It made me realize that throughout my own schooling experience, as well as my own teaching experience, that most of the titles we were reading as a class were written from a majority perspective. Typically these were books that came from a White, Heterosexual perspective that told the story of the White, Heterosexual experience. I want to be a part of sharing viewpoints that are going to be more inclusive and representative of the students in my own classroom, today.

As a teaching professional, I want to be intentional with incorporating diverse literature into the classroom, allowing the opportunity for students to recognize culture, tradition, history, and perspectives that differ from their own. Diverse literature implementation has the power to connect learners in a way that can create a positive learning environment. As stated by Flannery (2020), a good book has the power to help a reader understand the experience of other people who do not share the same race, religion, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status. Diverse literature has the opportunity to teach empathy to students (para 13). It will also allow for the facilitation of discussion and conversations regarding empathy. Middle school is a time when there are so many big feelings and big emotions that swing from both ends of the emotional spectrum. This is a time when young minds are beginning to understand more about the world around them. What I have noticed over the past six years of working with sixth grade students, is they strive to feel connected. The connectedness makes students feel

supported and comfortable within the classroom. Even if it is not always apparent, and shows itself in unique ways, these adolescents look out for one another when it counts. Just last year, we had a student who experienced the loss of a loved one. While this student was out of school for some time, the second she walked back into the building, she was met with support and displays of love from her peers. This was not prompted and was not something the staff asked of the middle school student body, but something they did because they felt connected to this girl through her story and her experience. These students wanted to be a beacon of encouragement and support to someone who was experiencing hardship. This is not something that one can teach with words, but rather something that one experiences. As an educator, I want to lean into those traits and encourage students to engage in conversations regarding culture, perspective, history, and diversity in a way that will promote inclusion and empathy so those reactions become second nature to students.

Rationale

The rationale for this capstone project is driven by the desire to include diverse literature and perspectives into the classroom in a way that will promote cultural understanding and empathy in students. I strive to provide an environment where students get this exposure to reading about historically marginalized perspectives as a way to normalize those perspectives because, it was not until college, that I began to understand my own privilege as well as seek out opportunities to have such conversations regarding diverse topics and perspectives. It is realizing that becoming uncomfortable with learning about new perspectives is a positive experience and one that provides opportunity for learning and growth on a personal level. Even now, as an educator, I teach in a

predominantly White, rural community. According to Us News, the school I am employed at serves students in grades 5-7 for a total of 539 enrolled students. The diversity at this school is low. When considering enrollment, there are 86.3% White students, which makes for a minority enrollment of 13.7%. Within this minority enrollment, there are 5.9% of students who are two or more races, 4.6% Hispanic/Latino, 2.6% Black or African American, and .6% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander (US News. n.d.). While this school is seeing improvements regarding diversity within the small community each year, the diversity is not evenly distributed. The experiences these students are exposed to compared to students in a more high traffic, suburban school are vastly different. There are not a lot of diverse perspectives in my classroom, which is why I feel passionately about incorporating experiences and voices within my Language Arts class. The students who are from minority groups should feel represented, heard, and seen within their school community and those who cannot relate, will have the opportunity to learn about voices and stories that are different from their one. The sharing of experiences and perspectives are a piece of what makes people feel connected. It is a step in the right direction in regards to influencing a continued growth in empathy levels in young students during their developmental years.

By providing space for students to engage with literature that is from a different perspective or experience of their own, it will provide them with a more diverse view and encourage a better understanding of people. This empathy building will then put them on the path towards success when continuing through their academic and personal lives. With these opportunities with literature, students will begin to understand a world that differs from their own. The idea of building empathy through literature is powerful

because it connects the idea of the human experience and the experience of characters within a novel. Some students may find validation in reading about characters that they can relate to directly and others may gain cultural understanding; “Books... help all children see themselves and recognize and appreciate others who are different from them, opening discussions that build skills such as empathy and self-awareness” (Garden, 2023, pp. 33-34). Not only does engaging in such courageous and empathetic conversations benefit students, but it will then bleed into the community as well. The power to reach other staff members, families, and community members through open discussions revolving literature has the potential to create positive change. By implementing diverse literature and perspectives regarding minority perspectives, the culture of the school becomes more representative and inclusive of the student body. Since a negative environment can hinder student learning, it is important to ensure that there is a positive classroom climate that supports all voices. Garibay (2015) stated that it is important to reflect on one's own identity as well as identify hidden messages in the curriculum. Take time to consider what voices are being marginalized and which voices are being centralized and implement a curriculum that speaks to a variety of perspectives and voices (p. 5). Garibay (2015), went on to state that as an educator, it is also important to verbally reiterate to the classroom that diverse perspectives and experiences are important as well as valued. Establishing ground rules for discussion and learning is just as important as implementing diverse perspectives. Garibay (2015) stressed the importance of establishing ground rules needing to begin with setting the expectation that respect regarding the discussion of varying views is of utmost importance;

By actively and explicitly signaling support for diverse views, faculty can build an inclusive space from the beginning. The message of such ground rules should be that class participants treat each other with respect and that name-calling, jokes, innuendos, verbal attacks, sarcasm, accusations, and other negative exchanges are not tolerated. (p. 8)

This provides the stepping stone for other educators to be able to support and engage in positive and productive thinking regarding diversity in their own classrooms. According to Ruday et al. (2021), it is important for teachers to guide and support students through literature discovery and encourage students to discover texts that affirm their own life experiences as well as those of other individuals. However, it is up to the student to determine for themselves whether a text showcases their own experience or if they should reflect on the experience of others within their community (p. 124).

Summary

Through this capstone research, I aim to expose students to diverse literature in many ways and normalize the implementation of diverse literature to promote cultural understanding and empathy. I strive to be able to share diverse perspectives and viewpoints with students in hopes of providing a space where all students are represented in the classroom, but also are able to learn about a variety of different cultures, traditions, stories, and values. This is a topic that I am passionate about because I want to ensure that all students feel safe and respected in school. I strive to positively influence and impact each student I have the privilege of working with in my classroom. I hope to be the teacher that provides literature that has students feeling validated and seen by being able to read about a character who looks like them. I want students who are a part of the

LGBTQ community to feel protected and supported by reading about characters who share the same experience. For all of my students, the goal is to learn, hear, and understand perspectives and cultures that may be different from their own in order to promote new levels of understanding. Students will then be able to take these understandings beyond the classroom and into the world. I strive to include literature that is going to speak to all students in some way. When I think of my brother having to sit in his middle school Language Arts class, and only hear a majority viewpoint year after year, it hurts my heart to think of the look of defeat on his face to take in underlying messages about how he should live his life. I want all students to be able to relate to literature in some shape or form and if they cannot relate, then I want them to learn from it.

Throughout this capstone project, I intend to share resources in the form of novels that will benefit both students and staff members as they are interested in incorporating diverse perspectives into the classroom. In Chapter Two, I intend to include research that supports my topic by providing resources that speak to including diverse literature in a way that will promote cultural understanding. This examination of literature will provide insights on how to facilitate courageous conversations, *implement diverse literature, encourage student voice, and lean into expanding student cultural understanding and empathy*. Chapter Three allows me to dive deeper into the research and identify the background information necessary to understanding the literature that was researched in order to gain a deeper understanding of my research question. It will also allow me to implement my website in a more informed and beneficial way. The website focus will be dedicated to informing students, educators, and community members about the various

types of literature that shine light on minority voices and perspectives. Chapter four will conclude this capstone and will serve as a reflective space regarding this project's results as well as how to take the findings and apply it within the classroom from year to year.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Implementing diverse literature into the classroom with the intention of increasing students' cultural understanding and empathy, is essential in striving to create an inclusive classroom. In Chapter One, it was referenced that Chapter Two would provide more detail regarding the importance of implementing diverse literature as a way to build a positive and safe learning environment in a middle school classroom. By sharing my own personal and professional experience with implementing diverse literature, I have provided context as to where that passion stems from. Throughout Chapter Two, I define empathy and cultural understanding as well as include literature that supports the implementation of diverse literature. There will be research that supports diverse literature in terms of minority perspectives regarding race and sexual orientation. Additionally, I will explain how this inclusion of diverse literature and curriculum will increase students' cultural understanding and empathy in the classroom, and hopefully, beyond the classroom. The research highlighted in this literature review supports my focus behind this project: *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy.*

While identifying research relevant to this project, I have organized my findings on this research into five themes that all relate back to the implementation of diverse literature and the impact on cultural understanding and empathy. The first theme focuses on how empathy and cultural understanding is defined as well as its importance. By starting with this theme, readers will be equipped with the background knowledge needed to understand how empathy is identified, measured, and promoted in humans. Identifying

the purpose behind increasing general cultural understanding and awareness is a quality that will continue to be developed throughout the various stages of life. The second theme provides literature regarding the benefits of creating inclusive curriculums. By providing an inclusive curriculum and creating an inclusive environment, students will naturally be exposed to the various perspectives within the classroom as well as those extended beyond the classroom. This is also a great way to engage learners in content as teachers build their academic skills. The third theme dives deeper into the implementation of diverse literature as well as what this looks like in an English Language Arts classroom. This is also the section that provides research regarding opinions that support and oppose the incorporation of diverse literature regarding race. This section provides context to incorporate perspectives, authors, characters, and storylines that are relevant to racial minority groups. With so many school districts struggling with the concept of book banning, this section will shed light on the positive and negative impacts that diverse literature in the classroom provides. The fourth theme aims to provide research specific to literature that is inclusive to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or questioning persons, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) community. It is important to include research specific to this topic because classrooms everywhere should be equipped on how to facilitate and engage in conversations regarding LGBTQIA+ diversity. The final theme within this literature review strives to tie together all the themes into one purpose. The fifth theme is centered around the impact of implementing diverse literature and perspectives into the classroom. The importance of representation in the classroom is the ultimate goal of this research. Creating an environment that represents all students within the classroom as well as work

to educate all students in the classroom about perspectives that differ from their own will take them far beyond their academic years.

At the end of Chapter Two, I synthesize the impact of my research findings as well as directly connect the research to my project and research focus: *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy*. The chapter closes with a summary of the research discoveries as they relate to the five themes introduced above.

Empathy

The concept of empathy is a fundamental human trait that allows individuals to understand and relate to the emotions of other people. Empathy is the bridge that helps connect people together in a way that provides the space to relate to one another on a deeper level. Empathy allows people to relate to the excitement, joy, sorrow, and hesitation that others experience. In a society and world that often focuses on divisions and differences between individuals, empathy can prove to be a powerful tool used to nurture and communicate understanding and compassion for one another. Understanding the logistics of empathy allows individuals to understand perspectives that vary from their own. It serves the purpose of offering support, guidance, comfort, and advice in given situations. Fostering empathy can have a profound impact on relationships, individuals, as well as a community as a whole. By viewing the world with an empathetic lens, individuals can work towards a greater appreciation of differences throughout our communities and in turn create a more compassionate and understanding world. In order to provide demonstrations and modeling of empathy from a young age, educators should be intentional about providing space and opportunities for the adolescents in their

classrooms to participate in empathetic conversations. One way in which educators can do this, is to provide literature that will serve as the root to engaging in such conversations.

Historical Origin of Empathy

Empathy is an emotional concept that is not new, however, is a term that continues to evolve over time. Research findings from Frankel (2017) supported that the term empathy was originally coined by British Psychologist, Edward Titchener in 1909, as he worked to identify the feelings, development, and emotional state of one person, ultimately, providing the term therapist to societal vocabulary. Empathy is defined as “...to describe the capacity of human beings to be in tune with another’s emotions and to know and understand one another through reflection and shared experience” (Frankel, 2017, para 2.). After Titchener set the foundation to study empathy, it became something scientists studied for decades to come. In 2010, many more discoveries were made regarding the connection between the brain and empathy; “...neuroscientists discovered the existence of “mirror neurons,” pathways in the brain that mimic in one person the actions of another” (Frankel, 2017, para 3.). This new information provided an explanation for the effect of witnessing another individual's distress. This correlates with research stated by Jansen and Kiefer (2020) which explains that while this growth and development is occurring within the adolescent brain, puberty also is a big factor in the rate at which this process occurs. Typically, cognitive and emotional development can vary throughout the years, which from an education perspective makes it difficult to offer grade level specific guidance as adolescents may be developing at different rates. However, the occurrence of puberty plays a big role in this process. There are many

factors that can influence the onset of puberty, for instance “...many environmental factors influence the start of puberty. For instance, factors that often vary by race and socioeconomic status such as nutrition, exposure to pollution and certain toxins, immigration, adoption, and obesity are associated with differences in the onset of puberty” (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020, p. 19). Due to the various stages of these changes in development, it is important to note that educators can aid in this growth by providing a foundation and structure that enables the individual to participate in self-regulation; “...middle level educators can support students’ cognitive development, helping to better prepare them for learning in the future” (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020, p. 22). Providing the foundation for teachers to aid in this cognitive development and empathy building is crucial for the adolescent experience.

Situational Versus Dispositional Empathy

While empathy is clearly important, it becomes a challenging concept to measure when educators do not have a baseline measurement or a means to measure changes in empathy in their students. Research shows that there are two main ways to measure and identify changes in empathy. Stueber (2019) shared that situational empathy is going to be the most likely starting point of measuring in adolescents. The author differentiated two types of empathy: “situational empathy which is the reactions in a specific situation” and “dispositional empathy which is understood as a person’s stable character trait” (para 1). Situational empathy can be measured by asking a person who has experienced a situation in real time what their reactions and feelings to an event were. One can then study facial expressions, gestures, and body language in order to determine effect. This is not a perfect tool but is a tool of observation used to measure level of empathy. This

author also provides information regarding dispositional empathy. Stueber (2019) continued by stating that dispositional empathy is measured through reports of others (on behalf of children, for example) or through administering questionnaires that allow for people to reflect and process before reacting (para 2). It is important to note that with both of these strategies of measuring empathy will be dependent on a variety of factors. Some of these factors include having a reaction that is based on the reflection of others' knowledge and experience of how one should feel in a situation. Another factor could be the individual's own ability to recognize and verbalize their own thoughts. In order to do this, an individual should practice self awareness by understanding that they may need processing time to organize thoughts and feelings. The driving force behind these factors connects to the way in which an adolescent develops both physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Understanding the differences between situational and dispositional empathy as an educator is important because these concepts play critical roles in a student's social and emotional development. By understanding situational empathy, educators are able to help students navigate how to understand and respond to others that are experiencing emotions and feelings. This is helpful for both student and teacher to understand because it allows the teacher to utilize tools to help support and guide students and it helps demonstrate to students how they can respond in the future. Understanding dispositional empathy is beneficial in the classroom because it is important to be able to identify and articulate one's own disposition and general characteristics of showing empathy. One way in which educators can establish this learning is through literature. By using literature to model the complexities of empathetic dynamics, it provides a safe environment for students to

engage with characters and storylines that will allow them to witness character growth. Gaining insight through novels and conversations regarding literature that are based upon navigating various obstacles of life, especially through the adolescent stages, is imperative when working to increase empathy and emotional well being in the classroom.

Adolescent Development and Empathy

The middle level years are such a pivotal time of development for adolescents. There are many changes that emerge as a result of middle level academic experiences. According to Futures Without Violence (2023), a nonprofit dedicated to transforming social norms by providing information and resources to explain the science behind various situations and developments shares many critical findings regarding the development of the adolescent brain. In this case, providing research regarding the science of brain development suggests that aside from the first five years of life, the most rapid period of brain development happens in the middle school years. However, it is important to understand that full development is not achieved until adulthood.

The middle level years are when the most social emotional learning and empathy development takes place (para. 2). For many of these middle level years, there is a wide range of emotions felt that range from (peer) pressure, anger, happiness, excitement, jealousy, and greed. Middle school educators must work to help these adolescents identify the misunderstood emotions and help harness them into strong values that will allow them to develop their character. The foundation of character building and the idea of building resistance and problem solving skills are intentionally engaged during these years. Research from Futures Without Violence stated that during the adolescent years, teens are often participating in poor decision making and risk like behavior, however, this

emotional immaturity is the part of development that can be harnessed in middle level years. There is opportunity for growth and in this period of time of an adolescent life does not need to be labeled emotionally immature, but rather these years can be shifted. It is important to recognize the physical changes the brain is undergoing during this time and how that growth is connected towards behavior. According to Abrams (2022), during adolescence, the brain undergoes growth and changes in a variety of ways,

Gray matter in the cerebral cortex tends to thin, while white matter that connects various regions of the brain generally increases in volume. Functional connections between regions, which researchers measure with brain scans that track oxygen usage in blood, also undergo widespread changes during adolescence. (para. 7)

Ultimately, the adolescent's brain can be shaped and flexible towards positive development if the development is recognized and understood. Abrams (2022) continued by sharing that due to these pivotal years, it is important to be aware of these changes in adolescents and work to optimize positive mental health changes. In conjunction with this idea, the research according to Jansen and Kiefer (2020), stated that when adolescents undergo puberty, there is a gradual maturity and growth of cognitive and social-emotional balance. During this time, the prefrontal cortex continues to develop and in turn, there is a change in the adolescent's executive functioning that includes cognitive control, decision-making, inhibition, and working memory (p. 19).

This growth and development in connection with adolescents' desire to explore and participate in various learning experiences help strengthen qualities such as problem solving, conflict resolution, decision making, and cognitive flexibility. During this developmental stage, it is important to consider the impact as described by Jansen and

Kiefer; “For young adolescents, hormonal and social changes coupled with increased activity in brain areas associated with emotion and reward can lead to difficulty managing emotions” (p. 19). This is when educational guidance becomes imperative to the adolescent's developmental changes.

One way in which educators can provide this guidance is through literature. If teachers can capitalize on implementing literature during the time of this brain development, they can help foster various responses such as empathy, tolerance, conflict resolution, and problem solving skills. Mecham (2018), stated that there is power and correlation between problem solving and empathy. Mecham (2018) continued by stating that empathy is a fundamental quality that coincides with problem solving, because once it is able to be recognized and utilized, it enables the individual to better appreciate and understand all sides of a topic or issue (para 2). Jansen and Kiefer (2020) elaborated that during this adolescent stage cognitive control is developing gradually but emotional development is what needs to be fostered in the classroom and that’s where problem solving and conflict resolution skills begin to be practiced (p. 19). Due to the fact that there are so many emotions and changes that adolescents are experiencing during their middle level years, it is crucial for educators to implement literature that connects to the changes and experiences they may be navigating, will help nurture their emotional well being as well as cultivate a positive learning environment in the classroom. According to Garibay (2015), one way in which literature can help with this includes educators promoting books that represent how students feel and are treated in the classroom. By laying ground rules that demand respect through conversations and learning moments, classroom environments are able to be built and grown in a positive and inclusive way.

Students must feel supported in all aspects of the classroom, not just in content but also in various discussions and learning aspects and experiences (p. 3).

Empathy Within Education

When considering empathy through the lens of education, being aware of the social interactions that take place during middle level years, and understanding that emotions are heightened during this time due to the various social interactions is important. This is where educators can begin to capitalize on this development in order to make an impact on empathetic development. According to child development researchers, Feshbach and Feshbach (2009), empathy is one of the most important and impactful elements of education due to the development happening during the adolescent stage. The research as concluded from Feshbach and Feshbach (2009) reported that the functions of empathy have many benefits; "...social understanding, emotional competence, prosocial and moral behavior, compassion and caring, and regulation of aggression and other antisocial behaviors" (p. 86). There are so many factors that go into fostering empathy and many of them begin in the classroom and extend into life beyond the classroom. The following sections of this chapter will examine the different avenues in which empathy can be fostered through literature in the classroom for middle level students.

Empathy is especially important today because empathy can have incredible impacts that reach personal lives, work lives, and the world as a whole. As stated by Masters in Education (2024), there are many foundational skills that are achieved through empathy that could consist of problem solving skills, communication, conflict resolution, teamwork, and decision making skills that all affect how people thrive in various aspects

of life. As stated by Masters in Education (2024), when considering one's personal life, empathy is important for healthy relationships as they are built on nurturing, caring, and a mutual understanding of one another; “Without taking the time to try to relate to one another’s feelings and perspectives, people in relationships will likely feel uncared for” (para 12). In order to avoid making others feel undervalued and uncared for, it is important to take the time to converse and recognize various perspectives not only in an individual’s personal life, but also in the workplace. In a professional working environment, there is a call for teamwork. Taking the time to relate to coworkers and other working professionals allows for opportunity for productive communication and conflict resolution skills. When considering personal lives and the workplace, it is important to take the time to attempt to understand and see concepts from another individual’s perspective in order to create healthy friendships, relationships, and work environments. If one is able to do this, then empathetic communication is able to bleed into the world and create a domino effect that will provide a more empathetic society.

Masters in Education (2024) concluded that the best way to increase empathy in a way that is going to create a more compassionate individual is to be intentional with listening to others and reading literature. Listening intentionally means setting aside one's own thoughts in order to put what another person is saying first and devote full attention to (para 28). In addition, the connection between literature and empathy is one that can continue to grow through various life stages because of the way in which it shifts our perspective. By placing oneself in another's perspective, it naturally begins to create compassion and empathy; “The reason this discovery matters is because it shows that people are able to identify with people and groups that are actually outside of

themselves” (Masters in Education. 2023. para 26.). This shows that individuals can relate to others who have experienced things completely different than their own. Thus, why it is so important to provide ample exposure to literature through adolescent development in order to set students on a path to being a lifelong reader and learner.

Empathy and the Classroom Environment

A classroom environment can have a tremendous impact on building empathy within students. While considering the developmental stages that a middle level student experiences, it makes the work of intentionally teaching empathy and prosocial behaviors that much more important. Feshbach and Feshbach (2009) stated that empathy plays a role in curating prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, sharing, donating, and other altruistic acts that have resulted in positive interactions and behaviors (p. 86). If these prosocial behaviors are intentionally fostered, they will become habits that benefit life outside of the classroom as well. One way in which these behaviors are developed and encouraged is through programs such as social-emotional learning as well as can be supported through literature.

The Importance of Relationships with Empathy

The experience of middle school can be a challenging time for many adolescents. There are so many changes that are happening physically to their bodies and minds, as well as within their day to day life. Middle school is the start of the academic experience that promotes individuality and encourages more freedom into their lives. This is where they begin to invent themselves as individuals and form their identities. This is a critical period in their development in regards to their values and beliefs. These initial steps to their identity creation can be heavily influenced by those around them. The influence that

can result from solid and reliable relationships in an adolescent's life begins in this stage. Healthy, supportive, reliable, and loving relationships in a young adolescent's life can have a major impact on not only the individual's life beyond the classroom but also on their ability to show empathy. Bennett et al. (2023) argued that by working to build positive student-teacher relationships, one is aiding in the development of secure attachment within the individual. This then helps students build and recognize social-emotional learning skills, acceptable behaviors, empathy, and conflict resolution skills. These social functioning skills stem from the educators being intentional with creating an environment that students feel safe to explore in “Close and supportive relationships with instructors help serve as a buffer from distress, allowing children to focus their attention on engagement, social growth, and interactions with others within a learning environment” (Bennett et al., 2019, para. 3). One way in which to build relationships with students in the classroom is through literature. Through literature, students can learn a lot from various character interactions; “Specifically, engaging with narrative fiction and mentally simulating the social experiences represented may improve or maintain social skills, especially skills of empathy and social understanding” (Mars et al., 2009, p. 408). Utilizing literature as a means to engage in discussions regarding behavior and various character interactions provides a great platform for educators to be able to harness adolescent feelings regarding empathetic situations. Specifically, including a curriculum that is inclusive toward a variety of learners and students is imperative for building empathy through diverse literature.

Summary of the Development of Empathy Within the Classroom

It is notable to understand the origin of empathy in order to truly understand how far empathy and understanding of empathy has come. The comprehension of empathy cannot happen without understanding the developmental process of the adolescents' brain. Research supports the idea that the adolescent years are by far some of the most developmental years to the brain due to the cerebral cortex and the frontal lobe beginning to develop and strengthen. This is also a time when adolescents experience changes physically and emotionally in ways that build their identities. In terms of how this relates to empathy in the classroom, Frankel (2017), shared appreciation for the groundwork that was laid by British Psychologist, Edward Titchener in 1909, educators for decades to come have been able to establish empathy and build and create empathy within their own classrooms and communities. By understanding the basics of empathy in the classroom, educators are also able to identify the differences between situational and dispositional empathy. As a result, educators can work to understand the students directly in their classroom by utilizing techniques such as observation, reading body language, as well as surveying and reflective questioning. By grasping these items within the classroom and working to build empathy, teachers are able to promote prosocial behaviors such as problem solving, conflict resolution, and cultural understanding of others. This goes hand in hand with building relationships and establishing community within the classroom. By being intentional with building connections with students, modeling empathy can be implemented in the classroom. There are various examples of cultural understanding and literature that can be utilized in the classroom to demonstrate empathy and cultural understanding as well. Using diverse literature to help students understand these

behaviors and emotions, can lay the groundwork to promote lifelong empathetic learning. When individuals are on the path to being a lifelong learner, it means that there were educators along the way who recognized the need for individualized instruction that would make the individual excel beyond the classroom. One way in which individualized learning and empathetic development takes form is by encouraging a curriculum that is reflective and inclusive of all individuals within the classroom through literature.

Inclusive Curriculum

Incorporating a curriculum that is diverse and applicable to a variety of students and learners is imperative to a positive, safe, and inclusive classroom environment. The importance of an inclusive curriculum has lasting effects that go beyond the classroom; “A multicultural and inclusive curriculum provides teachers with opportunities to learn about their students and to use that learning to underpin acceptance, belonging, respect, engagement, and collaboration in classrooms” (Tanis, 2022, p. 10). In order to create a curriculum that is flexible, differentiated, representative and relevant to students, educators must consider their student population. By being intentional in creating an inclusive environment, qualities such as empathy and cultural understanding can be enforced. It is also important to note that the incorporation of an inclusive curriculum may come with both positive and negative reactions from various members of the school, classroom, and community.

Eurocentric Curriculum

Historically, the curriculum in the classroom has not portrayed diverse voices. Especially when considering literature, the perspective has been notoriously based on Eurocentric beliefs. According to Esegbona-Adeigbe (2021), research declared this

perspective to be designated as from the experience of a white, man that is heterosexual in a way that provides a dominating force and majority opinion. The Eurocentric belief runs the conflict of not providing clarity or understanding towards the perspective or voice of a woman or minority group. Esegbona-Adeibe (2021) went on to state that the use of a Eurocentric curriculum in the classroom sends the message that students are expected to engage and relate to content and experiences that may not relate to them. As stated by Ugwuegbula (2020), an example of Eurocentric curriculum is when schools teach Western ideals, specifically in regard to science, math, and history lessons (para. 3). Furthermore, when students experience history courses in school, they are simply taught basic history from the White perspective, which silences Black History or Indigenous studies. If any of these lessons are taught, it is usually from a history textbook that follows the perspective and narrative of the majority perspective - White. Ugwuegbula (2020) went on to state that the diversity is left out and the dark parts of history are usually glossed over or omitted (para. 3). Therefore, there is an element of an invisible curriculum of Black and Indigenous knowledge, as well as knowledge from various perspectives related to LGBTQIA+ that has devastating effects on an individual's sense of belonging or identity. Through lessons of this nature, there is an unspoken societal message that is sent to students who are absorbing this curriculum (para 6). This kind of disservice in the classroom enforces the idea that diverse curriculum, perspectives, and experiences are a deficit. Educators should be aware of the literature and curriculum they are providing to children as a way to reverse this thinking and break the pattern of Eurocentric voices and help dismantle systemic racism that seeps into the educational

curriculum. By including diverse literature and voices, educators can be a part of this change, while also fostering cultural awareness and empathy.

Creating Cultural Understanding and Awareness Through Literature

The United States Public Education System has been thought of as teaching these Eurocentric perspectives and not implementing diverse voices. Therefore, different cultures and perspectives are left out and struggle to navigate within the educational system due to a lack of representation. According to Davis (2023), there are many obstacles and barriers already in place in regard to equity in the classroom that are out of the teacher's control. These barriers include, "...poverty, race, and ethnicity; access to quality instruction; lack of stability at home; hunger; abuse; homelessness; gender; and student's and parents' language and educational levels..." (Davis, 2023, p. 22). Davis (2023) went on to explain that even with these obstacles in mind, teachers can still increase their own knowledge regarding diverse literature, culture, and perspectives in order to create a learning environment that is inclusive and equitable to student learning. Providing cultural representation through literature in the classroom is pivotal because research found from Davis (2023) showed that students' identities are affected by their environment, specifically their culture and the culture around them. By implementing literature that is multicultural and shares a diverse perspective, teachers can aid in developing an adolescent's personal identity (p. 23). By utilizing multicultural literature in the classroom, educators are able to expose students to various cultures and also improve student understanding of other cultures and perspectives. This gives students a way to understand others and in turn, promote empathy and cultural awareness. By doing this, educators are able to help foster positive cultural identities and nurture interracial

relationships and interactions (Gay, 2018, as cited in Davis, 2023). This is a concept that coincides with the findings and research of Gloria Ladson-Billings. According to Ladson Billings (2016), it is stated that culturally relevant teachers should understand that humans exist in a diverse and globally connected world. Teachers are helping young adolescents be prepared for the outside world. Therefore, culturally relevant teachers understand the importance of nurturing students in multicultural perspectives and experiences, thus, aiding in building empathy in students (p. 36). Utilizing literature as a way to expose students to other perspectives and cultures is a way for teachers to be able to foster conversations that have the ability to promote empathy and a positive, inclusive classroom environment.

Creating an Inclusive Environment

In order to combat sending any unspoken messages to students, using curriculum and literature that is representative of all voices and histories is essential. Educators today need to be intentional with the material they are providing to students to ensure that they are breaking down the barriers that come with teaching curriculum and literature that is solely from one perspective. Being purposeful in building relationships with students in order to gain knowledge of their background and histories will aid in providing an environment that is inclusive to all learners and voices. Research findings from Arday et al. (2021) also supported the idea that involving curriculum that diversifies the existing canon of literature and curriculum requires educators to take a minute to encourage reflection. This reflection should include recognition of privilege, capital, and the willingness to unlearn or disrupt knowledge that may be harmful to students' exposure to various cultures and perspectives (p. 15).

Summary Regarding the Need for Inclusive Education

An inclusive curriculum is a life-changing approach within education that aims to challenge the dominant presence of historically typical Eurocentric beliefs and values that fail to shed light on multiple perspectives and voices. By being intentional in creating an inclusive curriculum and environment, educators are embracing a more diverse and culturally represented perspective. Doing so through literature provides a way in which students can relate to characters and engage in conversations regarding ideas and voices that differ from their own. It also encourages minority students to feel validated and seen through characters that they can relate to. Creating an inclusive classroom means deliberately shifting towards integrating literature and resources from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and encouraging a more empathetic understanding of the world. Inclusive classrooms help foster and nurture environments where all students can feel valued, regardless of their cultural background, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity. This then allows students to engage with a variety of diverse ideas and experiences that lead them toward a wider understanding of cultural diversity and empathetic values.

Diverse Literature

According to Servaes et al. (2022) from the National Library of Medicine, diversity is defined as the intersectionality of a wide range of people from different social and ethnic backgrounds as well as different perspectives, gender, or sexual orientation (para 1). In terms of implementing literature that reflects the diversity in the classroom, understanding what this literature entails is important. Diverse literature is so imperative because it allows a classroom to become representative of students. The motivation behind including such literature is to ensure that all students feel seen and heard within

the classroom, whether that be in regards to race or sexual orientation; “For Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native students, who are often stereotyped or overlooked in popular culture, it is personally validating and academically engaging to see themselves and their life experiences reflected on the pages” (Flannery, 2020, para. 7). For an adolescent to see their own experience reflected on the pages will increase student engagement drastically because it is validating for the learner. This is an idea that Flemming (2019) agreed with by stating that books are a means of escape for many readers. It is imperative that as students are going through developmental stages of life, they find books and stories that resonate with their lives in order to avoid sending any unspoken message that connects back to an outdated canon of literature and perspectives (para. 4).

Building empathy through literature does not just benefit the individual student but has the power to make a positive impact on the academic success of students. According to a research study conducted by Cartledge et al. (2015), there is power in providing students with literature that goes beyond their own lived experiences. These authors support the notion that providing literature that is both relatable and informative in regards to culture can increase positive behaviors such as empathy and caring attitudes. The study suggests that these results are identified when a reader is able to connect to literature in a way that is specific to culture, race, and experience. Whether this connection is categorized as being a window text or a mirror text, the increase in empathy comes from students beginning to understand the world around them (pp. 17-18). The connection between incorporating diverse literature to building up levels of empathy in relation to implementing windows and mirrors into the classroom is meaningful for individuals in the classroom.

Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors

A prevalent theme in the research is that there is a critical need for diverse literature in the classroom. A common way in which educators are able to provide an environment where peers learn from peers regarding diversity is to begin the conversation of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. Bishop (1990), famously provided information on the idea of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors and stated the importance of all these ideas working in tandem. Windows allows for a reader to be privy to a worldview different from their own. Mirrors are then perspectives the reader can relate to and see oneself in. Sliding glass doors allow for the reader to step through the door into a world that allows them to experience and become part of the story (para 1). The concept of a sliding glass door is one that continues to evolve and develop, however, is an idea that encourages empathy and promotes conversations regarding diverse perspectives. However, this framework encourages students to learn from one another as they gather resources and materials that apply to their own windows and mirrors. According to Waterford (2022), the conceptual framework known as windows vs. mirrors was first published in the Oak Knoll School Monograph in 1988 by Emily Style. As referenced from The Seed Project (2023), her essay called “Curriculum as Window and Mirror” was published as a way to provide educators with a framework to create a more inclusive curriculum.

The windows and mirrors framework has become a widely practiced strategy to promote diversity and inclusivity in the classroom. According to Flannery (2020), a window book provides children with a view of looking beyond themselves and learning about the experiences of people who are different from them. A window book would

share the story of tradition, language, culture, and perspectives that are vastly different from the life of the reader. Window books help the reader begin to make connections regarding the different experiences and build empathy. Furthermore, Kawi (2020) shared a similar sentiment; window books are used to learn about the authentic perspectives and history of another person. By learning of other authentic perspectives and histories, readers are able to identify different perspectives and engage with identifying shared experiences, if any. These intentions aligned with including literature related to the concept of windows provide educators with a foundation that encourages people to value culture, language, and provide empathy to others.

While window books provide insights into the lives of others, the concept of a mirror book speaks more to children relating to the story because they share a similar lived experience. Learning and engaging with stories that are similar and relatable have power in them as well. The purpose of a mirror book is to provide students with a chance to feel seen and heard by reading about experiences similar to their own. Similarly, there is meaningful power in reading literature that differs from one's own, and has the capability of building empathy from students. As stated by Flemming (2019), diverse experiences also provide opportunity to foster learning within a new story or perspective as told from the very voices in the classroom. Adolescents need to see themselves represented and identified in literature because not doing so could be detrimental to development and esteem; “when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read...they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (Flemming. 2019, para 7). By incorporating diverse literature, perspectives, and stories, educators are able to send the message that all students are truly

valued in society. Flannery (2020) also stated that representation of all students matters and the importance of students seeing themselves in novels and being able to relate to characters has a significant impact. This becomes a validating experience and also creates motivated readers.

Jackson (2023) shared similar thoughts regarding sliding glass doors. This research stated that sliding glass doors work in alliance with windows and mirrors, however, because the idea of a sliding glass door allows readers to take a more active role in the literature, it allows them to live in the point of view of various perspectives. Jackson (2023) commented that the classroom climate becomes more inclusive and positive when windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors are used in tandem. It provides a platform in which students can participate in conversations about other perspectives, cultures, and histories in a way that encourages empathy. The power that comes from these discussions is that the classroom climate becomes more accepting and validating as it celebrates the lived experiences of all voices in the classroom (p. 55). By providing a variety of resources and literature that represent and validate all points of view in the classroom, educators are establishing expectations regarding the encouragement of promoting diverse literature and empathetic conversations.

Diverse Literature and Empathy

A key reason that teachers should include these two types of literature is that they build empathy among readers. Sharing multiple outlooks through literature allows students to learn more about the people and experiences around them and the more exposure to various types of authentic perspectives they have, the more likely they are to be able to work with others who are different from them once they age into the real world

and work force. Kawi (2020) shared the importance of representation and seeing oneself in the story as well. Both of these perspectives are valuable in the classroom and will help promote empathy toward others. The research supports the idea of diverse literature building empathy in students. Flannery (2020) shared that the power of a well-written book can help others understand a different side of life. It allows others to comprehend what life is like for people who do not share the same race, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. Diverse literature provides opportunities to teach empathy. Educators providing these resources, stories, and perspectives are naturally increasing empathy in students by showing them a world that may be different from their own and provide opportunity for reflection. Students should be exposed to literature that educates them on various traditions, experiences, race and ethnicity, and voices in order to build those empathetic perspectives. One element of diverse literature that should be incorporated into classrooms now more than ever is literature that is reflective of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Importance of Representation in the Classroom

The presence of diverse literature and inclusive representation within a classroom, not only enriches and encourages students' education experience, but it also aids in increasing empathy. Diverse literature and inclusive representation in the classroom also allows students to connect with others and better understand the lived experiences of others while learning about a variety of backgrounds and identities. The idea of representation in the classroom is of utmost importance. It is a huge part of creating an environment where students feel safe, supported, and comfortable. Whether diverse literature is described as culturally diverse or diverse in terms of sexual orientation, it is

important for adolescents to be exposed to such perspectives. For students who are a part of historically excluded communities in relation to culturally or racially or are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, they deserve to see themselves represented in the classroom; “Kids need to see people who look like them who have faced challenges, overcome obstacles, and made a difference in the world” (Rodriguez, 2018, para. 3). For kids who are not a part of these communities, it is essential that kids are exposed to various perspectives and histories because it aids in their development of empathy and cultural understanding. Rodriguez (2018) went on to share that incorporating diverse literature into the classroom and providing a space for kids to be exposed to these perspectives, does wonders for building a community. When students see perspectives that they can relate to, it allows them to connect to literature in new ways. This aids in their own cultural awareness and understanding as well as to feel validated by feeling seen and heard within the classroom (Rodriguez, 2018, para. 8).

Summary on Why Diverse Literature is Valuable

Diverse literature is important to include within the classroom because it is so critical for educators to foster a more inclusive and culturally diverse educational experience. Diverse literature serves as a way in which to discuss various concepts of discussion such as windows versus mirrors. “Windows” provides insights into various cultures, races, ethnicities, LGBTQIA+ perspectives that are different from their own experience. This in turn creates an expansion on their worldly understanding and promotes empathy. “Mirrors” would then be utilized to reflect students’ own experiences and identities, and this offers a sense of validation and representation. Creating this sense of community and belonging is important to creating an inclusive and safe classroom

environment. By exposing students to a wide range of voices, experiences, histories, and narratives, diverse literature can help nurture a more positive and inclusive classroom environment. The literature helps cultivate cultural awareness, break down barriers and stereotypes, all while encouraging students to be open minded and empathetic to their peers. These qualities and perspectives can then lead students towards a more diverse worldview filled with empathy, respect, and understanding. Diverse literature can appear in a variety of different forms. One area in which more exposure should be considered is in regards to literature that involves LGBTIA+ literature.

The Purpose of LGBTQIA+ Literature

The Center (2023) is a website dedicated to not only informing the public on various concepts and conversations regarding LGBTQIA+ but also serves as a connection for those who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community directly. LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation that represents an entire community; “LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more” (The Center, 2023, para. 1). The Center went on to state these terms are widely used to describe a person’s gender identity or association and sexual orientation. The world has come a long way in terms of inclusion, but it is important to ensure that students are exposed to characters and perspectives that belong to the LGBTQIA+ community as connected to the concept of diverse literature as well. The idea being that this is impactful to students who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. These historically marginalized voices are then able to feel represented and validated by being able to relate to perspectives within various types of literature. While on the other hand, students who are not as familiar with novels from this perspective or are not as comfortable engaging in

discussion regarding LGBTQIA+ perspectives, are provided an environment to safely participate in these conversations and enforce empathy. According to Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2016), by not including texts that provide readers with an LGBTQIA perspective, we are highlighting normative identities and silencing others (p. 847). Stifling these perspectives silently sends the message that there is only one way to be and identify. This hidden curriculum then becomes detrimental to the developmental process of adolescents shaping their own identities. Providing diverse perspectives validates a variety of children in the classroom.

Implementing LGBTQIA+ Literature in the Classroom

Incorporating LGBTQIA+ literature into the classroom is an integral part of creating a classroom environment that is safe and inclusive to all students. Dinkins and Englert (2015) shared their findings from a case study that researched the impacts of heteronormative curriculum on levels of comfortability and safety in the classroom for students who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. From this study, LGBTQIA+ students reported a high amount of negative, biased, and hurtful comments due to being uneducated on the topics and perspectives regarding LGBTQIA+. When literature from the LGBTQIA+ perspective is integrated into the classroom, it connects back to the concept of windows versus mirrors. This literature can provide common ground for other students to learn and break down social barriers surrounding LGBTQIA+. It also creates a powerful validation for students who are a part of the community to feel seen, heard, and represented. Reading and engaging with literature that has diverse perspectives provides exposure to others; “Reading literature also offers students the opportunity to explore the intersectionality of identities, cultures, and experiences by connecting the

complexities of diverse characters to students' lives" (Ghiso et al., 2012 as cited in Dinkins & Englert, 2015, p. 393). Reading novels about characters that share a diverse perspective is powerful to the classroom because it helps foster understanding of others as well as challenge stereotypes and bias surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community. Maguth and Taylor (2014) agreed that providing exposure opportunities for students to engage with literature that connects to LGBTQIA+ topics and perspectives is crucial in creating an inclusive and safe classroom environment. However, Maguth and Taylor (2014) elaborated on the importance by stating that by not implementing diverse literature, most classrooms are aiding in the invisibility of important issues and recognizing historical tendencies. These authors speak specifically to the fact that social studies textbooks, historically, have erased LGBTQIA+ issues, events, and people within the curriculum due to the treatment of people who are gay to be problematic (p. 25). Maguth and Taylor (2014) stated that one of the most important reasons for incorporating LGBTQIA+ literature into the classroom is in regards to creating an inclusive environment;

...the teacher must create a safe and relevant environment for the discussion of sociopolitical issues of LGBTQ youth. A prerequisite for the successful inclusion of LGBTQ topics, issues, and people is the creation of a safe and caring classroom environment whereby students listen and respect one another's opinion. (p. 25)

By including curriculum and literature that connects to the LGBTQIA+ community, students are able to participate in a more inclusive and understanding society. As a result of this, teachers are able to create an accepting and safe environment that promotes

acceptance, empathy, and respect for all individuals, inside and outside of the classroom, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Examining Differing Views Within the Classroom

While there are numerous scholars, educators, researchers, and people who champion the inclusion of diverse literature regarding culture, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity, there are also voices that argue against this implementation. These voices refer to arguments regarding age-appropriateness, parental objections, and potential cultural issues. Perfas (2023) reported that the American Library Association (ALA) documented 1,269 attempts to ban and restrict books in libraries across the United States in the last year, this is a number that is up since the ALA began tracking this data over two decades ago; “Nearly half - 45.5 percent - of 2,571 unique titles challenged were written by or about LGBTQ people” (Perfas, 2023, para. 3). Perfas (2023) went on to state that the main reason for parents and community members to challenge LGBTQIA+ books is due to sexual content. The author stated that the fear of breaking down bias is negatively affecting people within the LGBTQIA+ community by focusing on the uncertainty and doubt within society in regard to how the LGBTQIA+ community is perceived. Tensley (2022), agreed that the restrictions and banning of books stem from the outdated idea that literature from the LGBTQIA+ perspective promotes sexual situations in adolescents (para. 9). Tensley (2022) went on to state that the reason book banning is so prevalent in school systems is because schools are the first place that is targeted due to the development that takes place during this time. Future societies begin to evolve during the academic years and this is where students' values and beliefs begin to form. For some parents, community members, and people, they fear the unknown of

diverse literature and instead of taking the initiative to educate themselves, they strike with fear first. One way to combat this unknown is to engage with learning about the literature that comes from diverse perspectives and engaging in conversations that are beneficial to understanding. Ruday et al. (2021) agreed that teachers and households should take the initiative to learn more about the literature that represents the others and teaches about diverse perspectives and histories. Utilizing literature to engage in such conversations is impactful in increasing cultural understanding and empathy.

Summary of the Importance of Implementing LGBTQIA+ Literature

The inclusion and incorporation of literature that speaks to the LGBTQIA+ perspective in the classroom serves many purposes. One of the most important reasons for implementing diverse literature from this perspective is to promote inclusivity and open-mindedness and to begin the work of breaking down stereotypes and biases in society. It helps students explore diverse perspectives and understand the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals which also encourages empathy and reduces prejudice. It also should be noted that in the classroom, it is important to acknowledge that there are differences in opinions, beliefs, and values that exist in various cultures and households of students. Hence, the importance of creating a space in the educational system and classroom that is respectful and inclusive for minority voices and perspectives. By including these minority perspectives in the classroom through literature, we are validating and providing representation for all students, but specifically LGBTQIA+ individuals. Embracing diverse literature in the classroom, only enhances student ability and capacity to acknowledge and appreciate diversity in a respectful way. These skills grow and develop as students exit the academic system and enter into everyday society.

These skills are fostered in the classroom and stems from incorporating literature and perspectives that are diverse and representative of all voices in the classroom.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has delved into the intricacies of adolescent development and the important role that empathy plays within this developmental process. Through the research, a more comprehensive understanding of the need for diverse literature within this process is evident. The research has highlighted significant progress in terms of research on the topic of empathy, specifically how empathy can be utilized in a classroom setting. When working to grow empathy and cultural understanding through literature in the classroom, it is important to understand the power of relationship building. Educators should be making connections and building relationships with students in order to motivate their learning as well as encourage them to engage and learn about various cultures and perspectives. The most apparent theme in the research that emerges is the need for inclusive curriculums to move away from Eurocentric norms and biases and move into a more diverse and minority represented perspective. By using literature as a tool to help create cultural understanding, empathy, and inclusivity, classrooms can become transformative environments where both “windows” and “mirrors” for students are just an everyday occurrence. Using literature to enrich perspectives, naturally aids in improving empathetic understanding.

This literature review has addressed the profound impact of diverse literature that speaks to provide a voice to various races, ethnicities, and LGBTQIA+ perspectives. This impact has the power to become endless as empathy levels extend well beyond the classroom. It has been stated that representation within the classroom and throughout the

educational system leads to positive changes in the school, community, and society as a whole. It becomes clear that promoting diversity and inclusivity within the classroom is not just a common goal of educators, but is a societal necessity. By embracing diverse literature in the classroom, educators can pave the way for a more empathetic, equitable, and harmonious future that will ultimately enrich the lives of students.

The next chapter of this capstone addresses a project based approach with the goal of providing resources aimed at the research focus: *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy*. I intend to share a resource that can be utilized by both students and staff as a way to implement and encourage diverse literature in the classroom. This resource aims to provide ideas, research, resources, book recommendations, and empathetic building skills/themes within literature that can be utilized in the classroom.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

The central point of this project is to begin conversations that surround books in a productive way and serve the following research: *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy*. This area of focus is supported by literature that revolves around similar themes of research that involve empathetic classrooms and conversations, inclusive curriculum, the importance of diverse literature, and the impact diverse literature has on real world representation and understanding. Chapter Two focused on how the adolescent brain develops and how educators can begin to foster empathy and cultural understanding during this time, as well as the importance of inclusive and diverse literature in the classroom in order to provide representation and real world understanding of a variety of experiences in the classroom. Chapter Three focuses on a project that promotes diverse and inclusive literature that represents a variety of voices and perspectives in the classroom. The literature will either be written from the perspective of a diverse voice or written by or featuring diverse authors. This project takes the form of an interactive website that can be used by both teachers, students, and parents as a way to identify resources that can foster conversations regarding diversity and foster empathy and cultural understanding.

The website follows the intended focus of research in regards to *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy*. This website was designed to be accessed by both students, parents, and other educators. The intended purpose of this website is to be a central hub

for individuals to go in order to gain book recommendations, book reviews, as well as finding ways in which to engage in conversations regarding diversity, inclusion, and empathy. The website is user friendly in the sense that students can understand where to find recommendations for literature that is told from a diverse perspective or to find literature that represents themselves. As a feature intended for student use, there is a section of the website dedicated to various book recommendations that will come with a brief summary of the novel. The novels featured on this website include novels that are age-appropriate as well as novels that are on library shelves within the school. The recommendations come from other educators, community members, students themselves, and researched novels. The goal being to include titles that target relevance and voice of historically marginalized students. The themes surrounding the novels coincide with various big ideas and prevalent themes that can prompt discussions that revolve around promoting empathy and cultural awareness. These conversations aim to assist teachers, parents, and students with fostering empathy among their children and students.

The primary goal of this website is not only to advocate for more diverse literature and perspectives within the classroom, but to also amplify voices from historically marginalized groups regarding race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to instill empathy in all students, regardless of racial background or sexual orientation. The idea comes from the research of Bishop (1990) that stated the importance of creating inclusive environments coming from utilizing the concept of windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors. Using books as windows offer glimpses into other life experiences and perspectives that are different from the individual's perspectives, while mirrors reflect

one's own unique experience and perspective that is deserving of recognition. Windows and mirrors become enforced through the idea of sliding glass doors.

As stated in agreement by Jackson (2023), windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors help educators provide literature that speaks to a variety of learners. This is critical in creating an inclusive and diverse classroom environment because for White students in a predominantly White community, the intentional use of windows and sliding glass doors through literature is helping to expose readers to different perspectives. Additionally, an advantage of using literature to provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, is the normalization of diverse characters. Students begin to understand diverse cultures and perspectives and recognize that characters do not have to follow the Eurocentric voices; "... the normalization that comes with featuring characters who do not match the societal default of a white, upper-middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, male, christian individual" (Jackson. 2023. p. 56). Therefore, the importance of providing a resource that is going to be accessible to students, teachers, and community members as a way to promote diverse literature is so crucial, especially in communities that are not historically diverse. The following information in this chapter will focus on the project description, the intended audience, as well as the context and timeline regarding when the project will take place. The final piece of this project will be a reflective element that details the effectiveness and findings of the implementation of the project.

Rationale

There is so much power in literature. Literature has the power to open up an entire world of stories and perspectives. Literature has the ability to provide a voice that others

can relate to or a voice that others can learn from, “Multicultural literature and a diverse classroom library, even at an elementary level, reflects the stories and narratives of those whose voices have not traditionally been heard” (Blintt, 2020, para 7). By exposing students to different narratives and encouraging a variety of diverse conversations, empathy is naturally being fostered. This coincides with findings stated by Feshbach (2009), regarding empathetic communication. Dialogue that models empathy as well as discusses empathy directly will result in students having a greater and more impactful understanding and acceptance of the world. They then can begin to develop more positive mindsets towards themselves and others (p. 85). This connects to a prevalent theme in the research findings stated by Jackson (2023), that teachers who are looking to move towards a more inclusive classroom environment, should be making one small change; start implementing literature and stories that speak from a diverse perspective (p. 61). By utilizing literature as a way to connect individuals within the classroom the classroom culture becomes more inclusive, positive, and accepting. The idea of creating this culture can only begin after the teacher is able to make curriculum changes that will reflect the voices of the students within the classroom coincides with the findings of Jackson (2023), when stated;

The social implications of this seemingly small change also speak for themselves: enhanced community building, feelings of belonging and inclusive-ness, and meaningful relationships within a diverse community. In sum, the types of books we read to students matter, and it is incredibly important that we choose books that reflect the students we are teaching, in every dimension of their identities as well as the intersection of those identities. (p. 61)

Being aware of the various perspectives and identities in the classroom is critical to creating cultural awareness and empathy in the classroom. Rather than having individual students be responsible for sharing these perspectives, utilizing literature that speaks to different cultures, ethnicities, and sexual orientation are incredibly important when trying to engage middle level readers and students.

Considering how important literature is when trying to increase adolescents' cultural awareness, it is important to also acknowledge the digital age in which the world lives in. Many school districts have adopted a 1:1 technology program which allows students to have access to their own individual devices to complete assignments. Most curriculum is now streamlined to being digital due to the access and accessibility for families and students. Therefore, it is important to recognize that utilizing technology is a way to engage adolescents because it is a staple in their everyday lives. The website created to showcase premium literature that is diverse and representative of a variety of students is important because it will be available to students and families through a few clicks on a keyboard. According to the School of Education (2020), it is best practice to include a variety of resources that involve the digital elements because of the way in which it helps build essential 21st-century skills. The effectiveness of using digital learning tools in the classroom can also aid in increased engagement from students, create differentiated instruction, foster personalized learning, as well as improve lesson plans for teachers (para 3). Utilizing the ease of a website for student access is also a way to involve multimedia resources in the classroom as a way to keep students participating in daily activities.

A commonality in the following research findings supports the idea that providing a variety of multimedia resources that can be made readily available to people, specifically students in the classroom, can be beneficial. Therefore, the use of a website can be impactful to learners in a digital age due to the accessibility and hands on learning component. According to Abdulrahman et al. (2020), utilizing a variety of multimedia or digital learning tools in order to reach a variety of learners is impactful because it provides mental representations and connects meaning by using different media elements, which in turn supports information processing (para 8). According to Lcom Team (2023), it has been suggested that using multimedia resources, often time digitally, have positive impacts on the learning process of students. By creating a website as a digital resource, the goal is to attract a variety of learners by providing diverse resources in one place. By providing information in one location as a user-friendly resource, it becomes a place for individuals to go for whatever resource they may need within the classroom on their educational journey. Therefore, including one central place for students, staff, and parents to go to in order to find literature that speaks from a diverse perspective and can be used as a platform to engage in empathetic conversations, is a resource that can be implemented in many classrooms and reach many individuals. Attached to each novel recommendation, there will be major themes detailed in the novel as well as empathetic skill building concepts that are targeted in the novel.

Project Description

Due to the fact that the world has moved to a digital age, the use of digital technologies has become even more user friendly and accessible to all. According to the Lcom Team (2023), which is a website dedicated to teaching others how to excel in a

digital world, shared that learning digital citizenship early on is important. Providing adolescents with websites and digital tools that are beneficial to their learning and development. This idea also coincides with ensuring that students are learning ways to use technology in order to gain knowledge and skills while also engaging in safe and responsible digital activities (para 3). Due to the fact that this project's target audience is middle-level students, it is important to keep in mind that their digital resources should be engaging as well as informative. Teaching students how to use educational technology is equally as important as the content they are receiving as they are developing their own identities. This project aims to provide a space where students can navigate diverse conversations and learn about high-quality literature in a safe classroom environment. This website is an online platform that is designed to cultivate a love and appreciation for diverse literature among adolescents, while also empowering parents and other educators to engage in meaningful discussions about various cultural topics that lead to empathy.

This website serves as a resource for students to discover a premium collection of diverse novels and author perspectives that reflect a variety of cultures, perspectives, experiences, as well as identities. Parents and staff members are able to explore a plethora of book recommendations and reviews regarding different titles in order to ensure that their adolescents' literary selection is not only age appropriate, but also entertaining and educational in regards to fostering empathy and understanding. It also aims to offer insightful themes and empathetic building skills that are tailored to each book. This will provide a framework for discussion and conversations at home and within the classroom. By creating this website dedicated to showcasing diverse literature, educators will be able to build a community of young readers who are learning and acquiring the tools to

engage in empathetic conversations. These skills and understandings are then understandings they can take with them into the world beyond the classroom.

Participants and Setting

The intended audience for this project includes anyone directly related to education. The intent of this website is targeted towards middle level students due to it being a resource for book recommendations that are separated by genre and various types of diverse literature and perspectives. Additionally, it serves as a resource for various staff members trying to implement similar perspectives in their classrooms. The intended staff members would be those who are able to implement literature and resources into their curriculum. Teachers involved in adolescent literacy instruction, such as Language Arts and Social Studies based courses where there is more of a reading element. However, if applicable, this is a website that can be a resource for any educator who is passionate about including diverse voices in their classrooms. The purpose of a website is to make material that is ultimately accessible to all who are inquiring about incorporating diverse literature and empathetic conversations regarding diverse literature into their classroom or lives.

The setting of the project is online so it is within a public domain provided by Wix (n.d.). The website is organized by various tabs that lead to another page dedicated to the topic of interest. This allows the user to navigate the site to fit their needs. This website serves as another aspect of representation and validation towards students who are a part of minority perspectives. There are different areas on the website that are specific towards diverse perspectives in terms of culture and race as well as serve to represent LGBTQIA+ perspectives. The intent of this is to be able to provide viewers

with a user-friendly platform that allows them to navigate towards the literature they are seeking. The goal of these various areas are to make the website more interactive and engaging to readers and viewers while also promoting high quality literature that speaks to a variety of experiences and perspectives in a way that encourages empathy.

Timeline

This project is to be implemented in the Fall of 2024. I intend to identify which website software is going to be the most beneficial to me as an individual. I will then rely on the literature reviewed in Chapter Two to guide which voices should be highlighted on the website. I will begin to put together a list of books and summaries of some important and popular titles that are relevant for middle school students with the hope that this will be continuously updated. I want to make sure that I have enough material that I can ask my content and peer reviewer to help provide feedback on areas in which the website could improve and then make those changes prior to making the website fully live to the public and something students can utilize on a daily basis. As students are reading diverse novels throughout the year, I will be able to incorporate novels they are interested in as well as novels they have any reaction to as a way to formulate discussions and conversations that promote understanding of various perspectives around them.

Assessment and Feedback

In terms of identifying if the website is a success, I have asked coworkers to engage with the website by navigating through it to assess if it is user friendly. Staff members then provided feedback regarding what was user friendly and what areas of the website needed improvement as well as any other ideas they may have. This allows me to be able to create a website that is accommodating and available to a variety of

individuals. After other educators are able to provide feedback, I will enlist the help of students to share their thoughts. This will allow students not only to feel connected, but to also allow me to create a website that is engaging and resourceful for students. By utilizing student opinion through observation, conversation, and feedback on the website, it will also allow me to drive my instruction in a way that provides an opportunity for students to increase their practice in empathetic conversations as well as gain a stronger cultural understanding of those around them.

Summary

Chapter Three described the intended purpose of implementing a website to utilize as a resource for both students, staff, and the community in order to address the research focus; *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy*. The intentionality of a website is to ensure that there is representation and education in regards to the variety of learners and perspectives within the classroom. The website will be good digital citizenship practice for students as they are navigating a digital and technology based world within and beyond the classroom. When using literature to foster empathy and cultural understanding, using this website as a tool to help navigate the implementation through recommendations and testimonials may be helpful. In Chapter Four, I will reflect on the design process as well as the implementation of using a website as a resource within the classroom.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

When considering topics to explore on a more critical level, I asked myself to reflect on what subjects I was most passionate about. It became evident that reading was that passion. Thinking back to my own middle school literature experience, it was one that was centered around White protagonists, which made sense because that was the environment I was surrounded by. My reading experience growing up was primarily serving as “mirror” literature which would coincide with Bishop (1990) stated research. It was not until my undergraduate college experience where I began to realize that there was more than one perspective and there was meaning and value in learning from diverse perspectives. This was when I began to seek out books that served as windows and sliding glass doors as well. As I am wrapping up my sixth year as an English Language Arts teacher, I find myself passionate about finding diverse literature that shares a variety of perspectives, with the intention of highlighting stories of those who have been historically marginalized due to race, socioeconomic status, physical ability, and sexual orientation. I feel especially called to highlight these areas because I have learned through my educator experience that these are the main areas in which the students who enter my classroom can relate most directly.

It was said best by Jason Reynolds in a Penguin Random House Audio (2015) interview when he was talking about the purpose of diverse literature encompassing a wide variety of definitions of diversity in order to grow the next generation into empathetic beings; “If we can raise and grow empathetic young people through literature,

then some of the prejudices they won't have, because they have already sort of read about some of these people, and they've been normalized" (Penguin Random House Audio. 2015. 1:19-1:30.) It is critical to understand that diversity does not just encompass a racial conversation, but rather extends beyond into a variety of different perspectives that should have literature representation in the classroom. That is exactly the goal I had in mind when creating this project. My intention with creating this project was to provide a place for educators, students, and community members to go in order to find recommendations on literature about the racially historically marginalized, kids who experience poverty, students who are struggling with self identity and sexual orientation, as well as physical ability and disability. By making these titles and authors accessible to readers at the middle level, the idea is to normalize a variety of stories in order to promote empathy. The research focus that drives this project is *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy.*

Chapter Four focuses on my project in the form of a website. This chapter includes a reflection on the victories of the process as well as the challenges that appeared through the creation of this project. I also include key takeaways from the process as well as detail how the literature and research findings from Chapter Two impacted the outcome of the website. To conclude this chapter, I reflect on the effectiveness of the website, the key findings from the process, as well as the project as a whole.

Relevance of Literature Review and Major Learnings

When creating this website, I relied on the literature that was reviewed in Chapter Two. It was important to keep my research focus at the forefront when delving into the literature; *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy*. To begin answering my research question, I started by focusing my understanding on the origin of empathy in order to understand what curates empathy. Frankel (2017), stated it best by establishing the definition of empathy as the way in which humans are able to relate to others' emotions and to understand one another through lived experiences. Stueber (2019) agreed that empathy is how one relates to another, but suggested that in order to truly understand empathy, one needs to understand situational and dispositional empathy. Stueber (2019) shared that situational empathy is when the reaction of a specific situation can be related to, while dispositional empathy is more related to others' reports on situations. Disposition is identified more after a reflection period. When creating this project, I felt as though both of these empathetic concepts should be reflected in the literature. There should be literature that adolescents can instantly react and relate to as well as characters and stories that they can begin to understand after taking a moment to reflect and compare.

After establishing what empathy was defined as, I moved into learning more about how the adolescent brain develops and how these two concepts relate to each other. I wanted to ensure that the literature I was recommending through this project would be impactful to the middle level age. Abrams (2020), pointed out that there are a variety of developmental changes happening in the brain that an adolescent is experiencing through the middle level years and as educators, it is important to provide positive experiences to

be recognized and understood in order to promote positive development. Jansen and Kiefer (2020) agreed that when adolescents are experiencing developmental and hormonal changes in relation to puberty, they are beginning to increase maturity and cognitive and social awareness to the world around them as the prefrontal cortex is continuing to form. Garibay (2015) concluded this section of research by stating, one way in which literature can help with increasing empathy is by including literature that represents how students are seen, how they feel, as well as what they can learn and grow from.

It made me realize that the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass door literature was going to be the most relevant to use as it was imperative in identifying novels that would be recommended in the classroom and primarily utilized by students. Bishop (1990) provided insights into creating an inclusive classroom that uses this concept to offer glimpses into other life experiences as well as offer validation of an individual's own experience. Upon reading this research, it made me feel motivated to provide a resource that would identify literature that could serve as a mirror and allow students to feel validated; meaning they saw themselves in the character or story. I also felt strongly that there should also be books that serve as a window for other students to learn more about experiences they do not have in order to learn and normalize various experiences. The idea of a sliding glass door may arguably be the most important because it allows a reader to put themselves in the shoes of the character and empathize directly with lived experiences (Bishop, 1990). This research was able to enlighten me in a way that provided understanding of my own middle level academic experience, I was only reading novels that were mirrors and reflected my own experience and history. Understanding the

importance of reading literature that serves as a window and a sliding glass door, allows me to learn more about others perspectives and empathize with other experiences. That is the exact response and reflection I hope to inspire in students within the classroom.

Once I was able to understand how the middle level student was able to process and develop empathy, I felt more confident to continue studying my research question in regards to the type of literature that would be featured. I referenced in Chapter One that I came from a predominantly White community and teach in a predominantly White community as well. There are less than 14% of students who are a part of minority enrollment at my current place of employment (US News, n.d.). After reflecting on this data, I wanted to ensure that I found quality middle level book recommendations for students who were a part of the minority enrollment at my school. Therefore, a website viewer will notice that there are novels either by authors or about characters that are two or more races, Hispanic/Latino, Black or African American, and Asian/Pacific Islander. Using these perspectives as a starting point to ensure that the students that enter my classroom and feel validated and represented was of the utmost importance. Thus, the reader will see novels that reflect these perspectives and voices. I also felt passionate about including perspectives and recommendations of literature that were a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. This is a community that is under-represented in the education system and a community that I feel personally connected to as my brother has shared his experience with lack of validation and representation as a gay man throughout his academic years. Using literature that was middle level appropriate as well as relevant was research that I thoroughly enjoyed because it felt as though I was learning something new and bringing fresh perspectives to the classroom. There were so many authors, characters,

and voices that I was not aware of and to be able to read and connect over these novels with students felt powerful and inspiring. Not to mention, being able to connect on another level with my brother was incredible. It brought us closer as family because he appreciated seeing parts of his own story play out through various characters.

Project Creation

Creating a website seemed like the most accessible and user-friendly way to provide resources to both students and other educators, but I quickly realized that creating a website was much more work than I anticipated. However, once I began figuring out the logistics of how to create a website, I found myself enjoying my time and feeling excited about the work I was creating. I have created a website called *Empathy Driven Literature* as a way to connect literature in the classroom to natural opportunities and conversations that can build empathy in students. Users can find the website by utilizing the website domain: <https://jmartin2753.wixsite.com/empathydrivenlit>.

The accessibility of a website cannot be ignored. The access that is provided through a website ensures that all individuals, regardless of location or schedule limitations, are able to engage with diverse literature and empathy-building content at their own convenience. The incredible part about websites is their ability to host a variety of diverse mediums, including books, articles, essays, and multimedia resources that all aim to cater to various interests, reading levels, and cultural backgrounds. A website also provides me a way to update and interact with the audience immediately based on feedback and commentary, thus communicating updates, results, and ideas relevant to this project. This kind of diversity enables users to explore a wide range of perspectives and experiences, promoting empathy and understanding.

Website Features

There are a variety of features present on this website. Each feature is organized into different website pages that are labeled to give the user direction. The purpose of this organization is so individuals can find what they are looking for and explore areas in which they are interested in. Users will be able to navigate through the toolbar by finding the following pages; Home, About, First Steps, Empathy, Inclusive Recommendations, LGBTQIA+ Recommendations, Author Spotlight, and a Contact Page.

Home Page

Upon arriving at the website, Empathy Driven Literature, viewers will notice a basic introduction to the rest of the website. Throughout this website users will find the rationale behind the creation of Empathy Driven Literature. Immediately, upon accessing the website, users will be able to see the Home Page. The Home Page will provide a brief introduction into the rest of the site while also providing insight as to the “why” behind creating the site.

About and First Steps

In the About and First Steps page of the website, users will find that there is information regarding the author of the website as well as details into the personal motivation behind creating this website. When users venture into the First Steps page of the website, there is language that is defined which is used throughout the rest of the website.

Empathy

The Empathy page is where users find information regarding how to create and promote an empathetic space. This page is meant to be used to encourage ideas in terms

of activities and discussions that can be used in the classroom when educators are implementing literature, while also providing reading recommendations to students. This page has more information regarding what empathy is and how it can be fostered in the classroom through activities and discussions that are anchored by books. As stated by Waterford.org (2022), empathy is not just a skill; it is the foundation of a healthy and compassionate society that starts in the classroom. By being intentional with our use of activities and literature to build empathy. The goal is to cultivate a classroom environment where every student feels valued, understood, and supported. Another element to this page is the concept of Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors which is a structure that surrounds the idea of how students view themselves and others in novels. As an educator or as an individual, picking literature to read can be a difficult task, therefore, utilizing the idea of Windows, Mirror, and Sliding Glass Doors as a consideration is imperative to creating an inclusive and diverse classroom library (Bishop, 1990).

Inclusive Literature

The Inclusive Literature page is dedicated to sharing novels that involve a diverse perspective or character. Inclusive and Diverse in this case means a historically marginalized perspective in regards to race, ability/disability, and socioeconomic status. This page is for those who recognize the importance of exploring various narratives and perspectives. The novels on this page represent marginalized voices, and the purpose of this page is to provide a platform for these voices to be heard. By providing educational resources that examine different cultures and experiences, the idea is to foster a more inclusive community where all feel seen and heard. Incorporating diverse literature into

lives can enrich one's understanding of the world and help students to become more empathetic and compassionate individuals. The titles, book descriptions, empathetic skill-building tools and big ideas that are provided are there to broaden perspectives, challenge stereotypes and biases, and empower marginalized voices.

LGBTQIA+ Recommendations

Similarly to the Diverse Recommendations section, the LGBTQIA+ Recommendations section is intended to share novels that are involved in the LGBTQIA+ community whether by narrative or by author. Especially in today's world, it is so important to make our young readers who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community feel validated and affirmed through literature. For those individuals who are not a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, it allows them to read about a perspective and experience that has the power to inform and encourage connection through reading; thus, promoting empathy. The literature recommendations listed on this page are novels that have been recommended by real middle level students and have the accolades to support. The descriptions, as well as the empathetic skill building tools and big ideas listed on each recommendation are there to give insight into big themes of the novel as well as ideas for educators on how to foster discussions in the classroom or on an individual level.

Author Spotlight

The intended purpose of the author highlights section of this website is to direct attention to the people who are responsible for creating novels that validate and represent so many individuals in the classroom. These authors are responsible for providing a platform and a voice for so many marginalized perspectives and deserve to be recognized for their contributions. Additionally, this page serves as a resource for users to navigate in

order to continue their own research as to what novels they can continue to use to explain their personal and classroom libraries.

Contact Page

The contact page is a page that is dedicated to interacting with website viewers. This is a place where viewers can submit novel recommendations and requests for features as well as share any connections or comments to the literature or empathy building skills provided. The hope is, that once an individual submits a request, I can get the website updated appropriately within a week's time. To keep the recommendations fresh and enticing to viewers, it is important to highlight and recognize viewer participation and interaction and this is a page that celebrates this concept.

Implications and Limitations

When creating this project, my intention was to create an accessible website for educators, students, and adults to use in order to find diverse literature that also promoted and increased empathy and cultural understanding of others. My goal is that this website succeeds in being useful to students in any classroom, but also for adults to continue on their learning journey as well. It is human nature to have the natural curiosity of others, so learning about various perspectives and ideas through literature places all individuals on the path to becoming a lifelong learner and reader. When considering the potential implications of this project, one has to take into account that this website can impact educators about what is accessible in terms of literature and what is available for students both in the classroom and outside of it. The potential of encouraging reading and learning through various lenses is something that could impact classrooms for years to come. By implementing this website as a resource, it can lead to more representation and inclusion

in the classroom which builds empathy in students as well as a more rounded cultural awareness and understanding of others. The added advantage to this project is that it has the potential to also influence a love of reading in young adolescents as they enter into adulthood.

The greatest limitation in regards to this project is keeping it completely up to date with current, relevant, and interesting novels that will pique student interest. The website has a contact page that will allow readers to interact and provide recommendations of novels to be added to the website. The key part of this project is that it can be added and edited at any point which is ideal because I want to be able to update the website with new literature as it becomes more relevant and interesting to students. The ultimate purpose behind creating this website was to be able to include literature that I was not aware of, newly published, or not easily available to middle level students. Furthermore, I have categorized the website into “Diverse Recommendations” which provides the flexibility to include a wide range of diverse titles related to race, socioeconomic status, religion, and sexual orientation. The most challenging aspect of this website will be maintaining and updating in a timely manner.

Next Steps

In terms of what comes next for this project, I intend to continue sharing this website with students who enter my classroom on their digital classroom page as well as with educators and parents. This website provides great information in terms of empathy and empathetic foundational skills that can be naturally built through reading of various types of literature. I want students and educators to be able to use this website as a

resource to expand their reading horizons in order to expose themselves to a variety of different perspectives and experiences while also fostering a love of reading.

The intended focus of this project was driven by the focus; *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy*. Literature is powerful in so many different ways. The purpose of including diverse literature into the classroom is to provide students with the opportunity to learn about various perspectives from a variety of different people in order to increase empathy as well as foster cultural understanding. The intention of providing these opportunities for students throughout their adolescence is because their brain development and the ability to increase empathetic understanding can be nurtured during these years through literature.

Future Research & Communication of Findings

As this project ages, I would love to be able to continue adding titles that are relevant to the students I serve. I intend to do this through conversation, observation, and relevance of literature regarding the individuals that I directly work with. The idea being to continue to update this website throughout the academic school year, but intentionally updated with each new group of students. Therefore, utilizing student feedback is going to be imperative to the foundation and success of this project. The students that enter my classroom currently have access to this website and resource through their digital learning platform. When a student inquires about an independent reading novel recommendation, my first step is to point them to this website and encourage them to find a title that seems most interesting to them to encourage individual choice. This project will continue to be communicated to families through the digital platform utilized by their sixth grader as

well as communicated by our administration team through a weekly update that is emailed to staff. It has become a staple link in the update that is recurring. This benefits the building because then all educators have access towards novels that are representative of the students within our school. This means that all teachers can engage in inclusive conversations regarding diverse topics and perspectives. In order to reach even more individuals with this project and findings, this project will be located on hamline Digital Commons as a resource for students, educators, and faculty members to utilize through their own research and discovery.

Summary

This capstone project was created with the goal of focusing on the idea of *Exposing middle level students to diverse literature in the classroom in order to promote cultural understanding and empathy*. In Chapter Four, I expanded on the relevance of the literature from Chapter Two as I created my project in the form of a website. I also worked through the implications of this project as well as the limitations. To summarize this chapter, I also included my intentions and goals for the website in the future.

When I think back on my own middle school experience, I smile because those were pivotal years with moments that had the power to impact the person I have become. A huge part of that was due to my incredible middle school teachers who put me on the path to a love of literature. I want to be a part of that experience for middle level students to come, therefore, I feel eager about implementing literature that allows students to get lost in a story and be transported to a different world. It means even more to me to help make sure that students are able to be transported to other worlds that are meaningful and have the power to create more empathy and cultural understanding within their own

communities. I want to ensure that all students feel validated and represented in the classroom so to create an inclusive classroom library that has books that serve as a window, mirror, and sliding glass door is so important to me as an educator and personally. I want to ensure that by normalizing various sexual orientations, races, and other areas in which people should be celebrated for their differences, that individuals are increasing their empathy and cultural awareness. Therefore, what they say is true; teaching middle school is not for the faint of heart because it is a field that is constantly changing because the students that enter the classroom are constantly evolving. Thus, an educator's work is never done and that is exactly what sets the expectations of a great educator. That is the kind of educator I strive to be for my students.

As a current middle school English Language Arts teacher, all students have a place where they can feel safe, supported, and seen. Literature provides the opportunity to build this environment. It is important to me that individuals like my brother, are able to hear and see literature about characters that have experienced similar things in life and can feel validated and supported and less alone on their own journey. It is my dream that students, teachers, and parents can help nurture empathy and cultural understanding as a way to build life long skills that will take them throughout the rest of their lives and it can all be done through literature.

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