

TEACHING MULTICULTURAL TEXTS AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Background

In 2018 I student taught in a very diverse, urban high school where I was in the minority; in one of my classes the only other white person in the room was my cooperating teacher. Thus, it was impossible for me to overlook the need for culturally responsive teaching. After a few weeks of my cooperating teacher and me struggling to get our ninth grade Literacy students to take interest in Scholastic literary magazines, I hit the pause button. I proposed we scrap the magazines and their articles about beekeeping and agates in favor of a text that was more relevant to our students. The text had been encountered during my teaching licensure coursework the previous fall. In that class we read *How It Went Down* (Magoon, 2014), a young adult novel about the shooting of an African American teen by a white man, set in a neighborhood not too different from where our school was located. Given the small class size, the teacher and I split the cost of 10 books and from the onset of the novel our students were hooked.

If my interest in relevant classroom literature had not been piqued by some of my licensure coursework and personal experience alike, it certainly was now. In late summer 2018 I received the reading lists for my first year as a full-fledged high school English teacher. Reviewing the list, I noticed (unsurprisingly) that many of the titles were the same books I read a decade earlier. It was clear that my concern regarding the interest/relevance of canonical texts would not go away, but would instead continue to demand my attention so long as I served as a teacher. Thus, I decided that it was critical

to further investigate our current secondary literary canon and determine how we can institute meaningful change to our practice of selecting texts for the English classroom. This led me to ask the question: *What are the best practices for selecting and teaching multicultural literature in secondary schools in order to represent and build empathy for students from traditionally marginalized populations?* Thus, this project seeks to create a resource that English teachers and departments can use as they update their curriculums to be more inclusive of multicultural literature.

### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter begins by discussing my personal background as it laid the groundwork for my interest in this subject, but also produced glaring blind spots. Next, it highlights a personal paradigm shift (previous to my decision to become a teacher) that led me to become more aware of the power of representation. It then shares current examples from my teaching practice that continue to push me as I search for answers to replacing canonical texts. The conclusion of the chapter explores some of the existing assumptions and resistance that I have anecdotally encountered during my insistence to revisit and rethink our traditional classroom literature.

### **Formative Experiences**

I was raised in a middle class family in an affluent suburb of a major Midwestern US city. My school was over 90% white students with an even whiter set of teachers. Exposure to diverse points of view was even less common than encountering diversity within the classrooms and hallways. To compliment my insular educational experience, I was raised by two college educated, conservative leaning parents who reflected nearly

every cliché of the Baby Boomer generation. They owned a modest home, had two children, and struck an admirable balance between their careers and supporting us in our personal endeavors. We attended church on Sundays, took an annual summer vacation, and were never late to Monday night piano lessons. The comfort and predictability of my upbringing left me convinced I had a strong grasp on the world and the keys to life. But as I have grown older, I realize that along with this stability came numerous blind spots -- especially when it came to equity and justice for more marginalized populations.

Like many teachers, my interest in education stemmed from a variety of influences. My mother was a special education teacher who worked with children from birth to age three. Given their young ages, and the varying rate at which students develop, it was her role to determine which patterns of behavior were developmentally appropriate and which were indications of a delay. In the case of a delay she would then refer them to the proper therapist (occupational, physical, speech, etc.) for intervention. I was too young to realize it then, but her approach to seeking the right tools/interventions to ensure the future success of her students influenced my approach to aiding others. Additionally, from 1993-1995 I attended daycare at the rehabilitation center where my mother worked.

The daycare was primarily comprised of children who received services from the various therapists who worked alongside my mother. However, children of the center's employees were also welcomed, which is how I found myself there. What made the experience unique is that the majority of my classmates had a disability. Some were as minor as a speech impediment and others as severe as deafblindness. My earliest friends

were different from me, but we were taught to celebrate and honor their differences, not be afraid of them. It is this initial lesson on empathy that would stick with me.

As a middle schooler, I joined our speech team and would continue to compete through my senior year of high school. Being competitive, I valued the opportunity to devise a plan to achieve success, which was rather paramount to my self-worth as a teenager. Because my identity nearly entirely aligned with the community in which I was raised, the subject of my performances was largely in concert with those around me. I did not seek to question the status quo, but was instead implicitly upholding it.

As a speech coach, I see the innumerable benefits the co-curricular activity provides for students -- most importantly the platform for self-expression. I have witnessed firsthand how speech gives marginalized voices an arena that cherishes their unique perspectives; speech encourages students to challenge norms and institutions in a thoughtful and rational manner. It is not surprising that as a student I blatantly overlooked these invaluable attributes of the activity, but as an educator, I realize how essential they are to students, especially those coming from marginalized communities that are overlooked or forgotten in the too often stagnant curriculum that fills our classrooms. At the time I did not realize it, but a part of my identity was in fact being omitted from the classroom.

### **A Paradigm Shift**

While my identity aligned rather closely with the environment in which I was raised, there was one sharp contrast that has greatly impacted my life -- I'm gay. Although *Ellen* premiered in 2003, my freshman year of high school, I came into my



political consciousness as President George W. Bush and many state legislatures, including my own, were attempting (and in many cases succeeding at passing) constitutional amendments that banned gay marriage. This blatant display of homophobia served as notice that my difference was not one that belonged. And apart from an anomaly, the representation of homosexuals in mainstream media remained rather taboo, especially when it came to gay men. In our heteronormative, patriarchal society that flagrantly promoted images of toxic masculinity I had no prominent role models to look up to, rarely saw myself represented on screen, and cannot think of a single gay character in any book I read.

Just before my freshman year of college in 2007, I was watching an episode of the television show *Grey's Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2008), which featured the storyline of two gay soldiers. It was a tender moment they shared before one of them was wheeled into surgery that gave me goosebumps -- I had never seen two men kiss in an earnest, loving manner. It dawned on me just how often my heterosexual peers saw themselves in film, television, books, etc. While I was not able (at that time) to broaden the scope of that ah-ha moment and realize there were innumerable other minorities who saw themselves represented as infrequently (or not at all), it was a significant moment in my understanding that representation matters.

Fast forward nearly a decade to 2016, gay marriage has been legal in the United States for an entire year just as a woman is nominated for President by a major political party for the first time in our country's history. Simultaneous to Hillary Clinton's candidacy, prominent male members of society start falling like dominos to the

momentum of the #metoo movement. Despite Clinton's loss, I sensed a shift in our country. A shift that seeks to raise the profile of those who were previously marginalized: excluded from the narrative, overlooked for positions of power, and dismissed for admirable attributes. However, this shift is not met with open arms by all. With the swearing in of President Trump race relations have tensed, hate crimes have increased, and ignorance is being embraced in the halls of Washington, D.C. As citizens fight to endure these setbacks, I am reminded of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice" (as cited in Capehart, 2018). The march towards justice in the United States has always been arduous -- from the bloodshed of our Civil War to the cries of mercy from "Dreamers" -- and will never be finished. However, for too long I believe we have either resisted or ignored the need to bring the fight to raise our most marginalized into the classroom, specifically the English classroom. Thus, given my lived experiences, and my position as a public teacher, I aim to do just that.

### **Current Context**

I currently teach in a large suburban district adjacent to a major metropolitan city in the Upper Midwest, in a different state from which I grew up. I feel well supported by colleagues and administrators, and am proud of the fact that my school is one of the few making progress to close the well documented achievement gap. But no place is perfect, and I still have my concerns in regards to some of the texts we teach.

For example, in my ninth grade English class we recently finished reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), a book that has been taught to ninth graders across our

district, and the United States, for decades. Noble in its quest to highlight the injustices of a more segregated America, the book ultimately comes up short in disrupting the status quo by presenting a white male savior (Atticus Finch) as the hero of the novel. Though *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) likely had its time and place in our high school English curriculum, as an English teacher, it is clear that the time has come to reinvent the literary canon that English teachers have clung to for too long, in order to ensure our curriculum reflects the abilities and achievements of the diverse students who come to learn in our classrooms (Al-Shalabi, Salameh, Thebyan, & Umari, 2011). This need is evident when I reflect upon my current place of employment.

The school where I teach opened its doors during the 1997-98 school year with a student demographic akin to that of my high school, almost entirely white, middle class. However, during the 2018-19 school year students of color make up more than one third of our population and that number is expected to rise. Although our community is becoming more diverse, the same cannot be said of our teachers. This phenomenon is not unique to my school or my state, but is a problem facing the country as a whole.

The lack of diversity in teaching staff at my school led me to wonder why it is hard to recruit persons of color to the profession. Is it because students of color do not see themselves in their own teachers? Is it because students of color do not see themselves in the curriculum? The answer, like most, is probably less black and white. But in thinking back to my ah-ha moment watching *Grey's Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2008), I know that representation matters -- more than someone who does not face marginalization based on one of their identities. This is the reason my project is designed

as an entry level resource for those seeking to incorporate multicultural literature into their curriculum.

The call for diverse curriculum is not only for people of color to see their experiences mirrored within the classroom; the benefits of culturally responsive teaching extend to their non-marginalized peers as well. English scholars have continuously articulated that literature also presents readers an opportunity to look through ‘windows’ into the lives and experiences of others: others who might be immigrants rather than native born, others who might practice Hinduism instead of Christianity, or others who negotiate between one culture at home and another at school. Additionally, the need for greater representation in our English curriculum does not stop with skin color, religion, and immigration status. It is important to take inclusion further to incorporate persons with disabilities (both physical and mental), the LGBTQ+ community, and various socio-economic classes.

I believe the push for a more diverse set of characters for our students to meet is critical, but tossing books with such representation into our curriculum and calling it a day is irresponsible. We must ensure that the books we adopt are not reinforcing stereotypes commonly associated with more marginalized voices. For example, it would be concerning if every book that features a Latino character focuses relentlessly on their immigration status, thus reinforcing that the legal documentation they carry (or do not) is the most significant aspect of their existence -- instead of their talents, motivations, struggles, etc. I recently witnessed this when my students completed a non-fiction unit in my eleventh grade English class that featured texts of resiliency/survival from countries

outside of the United States. While I was excited that we were exposing students to the cultural differences and hardships that others face in the Third World, war torn, and developing countries, I immediately noticed that the story from Latin America was that of a Honduran boy seeking to cross illegally into the United States. Yes the book exposes students to the life of someone outside of their home, often insular, country, but I fear the ultimate goal of the protagonist might have only reinforced existing biases.

This pitfall of greater representation of the often voiceless further cements the need for teachers to critically examine potential replacement texts for the canon with a critical lens to ensure that stereotypes of minorities are not perpetuated (Dong, 2005). Additionally, teachers may need to reach out to members of other communities or other professionals for their input on if the representation of marginalized characters is appropriate, or merely reinforcing biases. Because teachers will be tasked with teaching (not just selecting) texts outside of their own lived experience or areas of expertise, they also need to learn about said communities. While this might seem burdensome on top of the grueling expectations of classroom teachers, cultural proficiency trainings have become more commonplace and schools are better equipped than ever to prepare their educators for such encounters. This is not to say our current trainings are enough, but more so to highlight that the framework for achieving such outcomes is more present than it has been. Thus, the time is both right and long overdue for schools to begin making the integration of multicultural literature a top priority for English classrooms.

## Research Question

Given my upbringing, personal journey, and the context of today's classrooms, I have settled on the research question: *What are the best practices for selecting and teaching multicultural literature in secondary schools in order to represent and build empathy for students from traditionally marginalized populations?* In order to tackle this question I need to examine the canon and how traditionally marginalized populations are currently represented in classroom literature. Additionally, it is critical to develop an understanding of how traditionally marginalized populations are represented in potential replacement literature, as well as how to properly teach multicultural literature as to avoid perpetuating stereotyping. Investigating multicultural literature's role in building empathy will also add to my case. And lastly, knowledge of how curricular books are currently decided upon is essential in developing a tool for replacing the existing process with one that is more equitable and inclusive.

While some of the discussion around this topic has sought to reinvent or generate a "new canon" that is not the goal of this project. Each community and school is unique, with different needs. One of the current canon's major flaws has less to do with what is included and more to do with the rigid nature of the text set. Thus, replacing one set with another would perpetuate the inflexibility that has caused the canon to become so outdated. Instead, this project presents a more extensive list of multicultural titles, resources for evaluating additional potential texts, and best practices for teaching multicultural literature. Institutional change is difficult and often requires buy-in from

multiple parties. Thus, it is critical to consider the opposition's arguments in order to prepare for the inevitable clashes.

### **Assumptions and Resistance**

Change is almost always met with resistance, especially when a dominant group is being challenged by an opposing minority. Thus, I do not expect my project to be met with open arms. That being said, I have noticed momentum building for this cause and even shared examples from my own school in our attempt to chisel away at canonical texts. Discussion of disrupting the canon began as early as the 1980's with the emerging philosophy of culturally relevant teaching (Al-Shalabi et al., 2011). However, nearly 40 years later, here we are, too often teaching the same books our parents and grandparents grew up reading.

The most common argument I have encountered in my admittedly limited discussions regarding an updated English curriculum usually stems from the nostalgia that the books in limbo are simply classics that we just cannot afford to replace. There is a common language among all American-educated adults who have read the tragic love story of *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1970), turned the pages of *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925) in anticipation of meeting the novel's namesake, and questioned the innocence of youth alongside Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951). However, even if these texts are eliminated from the curriculum in favor of more inclusive reads, the books will still exist. I am not advocating for the destruction of them, but instead a shift in our focus -- much like the debate over whether Civil War era statues of Robert E. Lee should stand. Toppling the statues will not remove General Lee from

the history of our country, but it will refocus the narrative and cast a light on those he has spent more than a century casting shadows over. I believe that is more important than simply upholding a norm we have grown accustomed to.

Another argument for maintaining the canon is that the books which comprise it are exemplary works of iambic pentameter, satire, etc., critical to understanding historical movements/periods in writing. While this argument perhaps has more weight in a literary sense, the majority of our high school English students will not go on to become literary scholars. While some of my colleagues will continue to prioritize teaching the art of literature, a primary goal of my teaching is to use literature as a vehicle to help students understand themselves and the world. There is a difference between an art history class that walks students through movements and styles of art and an art class where students are given the freedom to learn about and express themselves using a different medium. -- our English classes must be more like the latter.

### **Summary**

America's education system, like many sectors of our country, is a perpetual work in progress, and it should be. The face of our country has always been changing and our education system needs to adapt to these changes. Our world has become more tech saturated and thus we have seen a prioritization of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) within our schools, with some schools even using the acronym to brand the focus of their curriculum. However, I am concerned that there are parts of the educational system, like the literary canon, that have not kept up with other changes within the country (Sarraj, H., Bene, K., Li, J., & Burley, H., 2015). Our current political



climate has brought our history, identity, and the question of what it means to be American to the front and center of our national dialogue.

Perhaps it is because our schools have not prioritized reflecting these changes in their curriculum that we have reached our current state. Thus, I see no better place than the American high school English classroom for us to tackle these questions/debates. But in order to do so effectively teachers need to have the tools to educate the next generation thoughtfully and robustly. As an English teacher, my argument is the existing canon does a poor job of representing the diversity within our classrooms and prevents learners the opportunity to look into the nuanced lives of their classmates. The time to act is now.

### **Capstone Overview**

The following three chapters take a deeper look into how the literary canon can be thoughtfully replaced with multicultural literature. Chapter Two is the Literature Review which provides an overview of the canon, examines how schools set their English curriculum, explores the need for and best practices when teaching multicultural literature, as well as how literature can be used to build empathy. Chapter Three is the Methods section and presents an overview of the research project, clarifies the setting and audience, and sets a timeline for the project. Finally, Chapter Four is the Conclusion and reflects on the successes, limitations, and future of the project.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Chapter Overview

When considering the guiding research question, *What are the best practices for selecting and teaching multicultural literature in secondary schools in order to represent and build empathy for students from traditionally marginalized populations?* there are four sub points that need to be explored. This chapter begins by examining the history and current status of the literary canon. Next it explores who controls English curriculum and the influence of Common Core State Standards. The third section discusses the inclusion of multicultural literature into the English classroom while highlighting the best practices for doing so. Lastly, the final section seeks to understand how multicultural literature can be leveraged to further develop empathy in readers. Together, the literature reviewed in this chapter will provide the foundation of the accompanying capstone project.

#### The Case for Maintaining the Literary Canon

Though there have been significant strides starting in the 1970's and 80's to reform the American literary canon, the canon is not without staunch defenders (Al-Shalabi et al., 2011). Reasons for support vary, however they are often rooted in the call for, as literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt states, a "common intellectual experience" (as cited in Al-Shalabi, et al. 2011, p. 50). Because the same literature is taught to students across the country, the literary canon has the capacity to build common ground amongst Americans and helps establish a national language, which in turn shapes the

country's collective beliefs and values. Furthermore, Al-Shalabi, et al. (2011) explains defenders of the canon express that it serves as a "prerequisite for understanding the country's heritage" (p. 50). While the works included in the canon may extend beyond American writers (Shakespeare, for example), their exclusively Western origins nonetheless reinforce similar ideas and values. For this reason, Al-Shalabi, et al. (2011) describe how this capstone and other attempted intrusions to make the canon more diverse are seen as corrupting or rewriting America's past.

Beyond the collective and influential experience of reading canonical literature, defenders also draw attention to the intellectual rigor the canon establishes. Krystal (2015) explains that writers included in the canon are often cited for doing "their best to forge something new," compared to today's "great sprawl of what passes for literature" (p. B11). In essence, canonical texts are recognized for forging new paths across the literary landscape, not because they recycled familiar ideas. Another aspect of intellectual rigor associated with the canon described by Pike (2003) is its goal not to entertain readers, but instead to educate them. Canonical authors were not writing to ascend the New York Times' Best Seller List, they instead sought to engage in a dialogue with other writers, both present and past. Thus, the preservation and teaching of the literary canon, according to Krystal (2015), is critical to preserving literary rigor and as well as literary history.

Though critics of the canon often criticize the relevance of its subject matter to today's readers, defenders cite the advantage of reading beyond one's immediate worldview. For defenders such as Pike (2003), a professor of literature at the University

of Leeds, literature “neither describes nor constitutes real objects” (p. 358); literature facilitates a dialogue or relationship between the lived experience of a reader and the ideas communicated on the page. He continues that meaning is not just knowledge bestowed upon the reader by the author, but instead a “co-construction” between the reader and writer (Pike, 2003, p. 358). Therefore, Pike (2003) contends, “It is misguided . . . to assume that only texts written in the late-20th or early-21st century can be relevant to today’s adolescents” (p. 358). This is not to say that students should not engage with late-20th or early-21st century writing, but instead seeks to dispel the notion that only works written directly for consumption by a particular population are engagingly relevant. As readers we naturally forge relevant connections with literature regardless of the origin. Despite the validity of the aforementioned support, the voices calling for change to the canon also present a compelling case.

### **The Case for Changing the Literary Canon**

Mainstream criticism of the canon began to gain momentum during the culture wars of the 1970’s and 1980’s. Krystal (2015) highlights, schools began pushing the need for self-esteem, teaching “low” expressions of art and literature in addition to the “high” classics, and incorporating previously disenfranchised authors into the classroom (p. B10). Much of the charge was led by postmodernists, best known for their interest in toppling institutions and doing away with traditional standards that American society was accustomed to. Postmodernists asked questions of the canon such as: “Any reason that George R. R. Martin should have parity with William Faulkner? Is Maya Angelou really less important than Emily Dickinson?” (Krystal, 2015, p. B10). Though the initial

disruption of the canon began in spite of institutional norms, it gave way to critical questions regarding who the canon stood for and what it represented.

Pike (2003) points out that bringing a fresh lens to the canon led some critics to conclude that the canon is merely a “legacy of British colonialism” (p. 357).

Furthermore, Anastasia Stamoglou (as cited in Al-Shalabi, et al., 2011), author of *The Battle of the Books*, articulates that the canon is a “vehicle for spreading and reinforcing the dominance of specific groups” (p. 50). And while defenders of the canon might argue that the literature within it represents American history, it is important to highlight that it presents a rather focused, singular narrative of American history -- the white male’s.

Al-Shalabi et al. (2011) explains the lack of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity within the canon can be attributed to the fact that these groups have grown significantly since the founding of the U.S.; however, the same cannot be said for women, who “represent the group that is most widely underrepresented” given they have nearly always comprised half of the country (p. 52). This lack of women authors included in the canon unsurprisingly extends lends itself to a lack of female protagonists within the stories themselves.

As for the lack of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, the rigidity of the canon thwarts attempts to make it more representative of the current demographics of the U.S. In turn, Al-Shalabi et al. (2011) articulates the lack of represented voices in effect silences marginalized groups with a whitewashing of our history. How are students to understand the prolific contributions made people of color when their experiences are not welcomed in our classroom? From slavery to Japanese internment camps, the U.S. has a

long history of violating the rights of minorities. Excluding authors from these communities in our literary curriculum in deference to their oppressors continues to propagate the injustices they have faced (Al-Shalabi et al., 2011). In a democracy that aims to represent all people equally, the same cannot be said for the canon.

With a narrow canon comes a narrow understanding of America. Al-Shalabi et al. (2011) opines that American culture is perpetually shifting and changing, the “human experience is universal, diverse, and worthy of being explored,” but the current canon does not allow for such exploration (p. 51). Not only does the lack of diverse authors exclude certain narratives from the canon, but Rybakova and Roccanti (2016) draw attention to the fact that it prevents students from historically marginalized and underrepresented groups from seeing themselves within the literature that they are required to read. Furthermore, the subject matter of most historical canonical texts, such as allusions to Christianity or ancient mythology, are also out of reach for students (Pike, 2003). As a result, Pike (2003) concludes that learners are “at a serious disadvantage when studying writers from the ‘great tradition’ because those writers’ experiences . . . are so alien to the modern reader” (p. 357). The disadvantages of the canon are clear, but attempts have been and continue to be made to provide alternatives for teachers and students.

### **Alternatives to the Canon**

Because of the aforementioned reasons, Al-Shalabi et al. (2011) explains some teachers, departments, and districts have begun to move away from the literary canon and opted for a “pick and mix” approach to selecting literature for their courses (p. 54).

However, there have also been more formalized changes to previously orthodox sources. In 1989, the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* became the first anthology of literature to intentionally incorporate more multiethnic content. Lautner (2016) points out that while it did not completely abolish the existing canon, the maneuver to at least expand the scope of our reading lists was significant. However, as diversity within the U.S. continues to grow, so should the scope of the canon to meet the needs of readers. Recently, conversations of class and privilege have dominated our national dialogue. As such, it is important that our reading lists be nimble enough to incorporate corresponding literature to ensure these conversations carryover into the classroom (Lautner, 2016).

While it is important that literature is representative of people, beliefs, and our current national dialogue, texts must also be of interest to students. Because of a lack of student interest, Rybakova et al. (2016) contend that canonical texts have historically led to more teacher-centric instruction, which in turn limits a student's opportunity to engage critically with the material. If students are not willing to engage with the material because it is disinteresting or too difficult it often falls to the teacher to push the learning objectives, rather than guide students to their own conclusions (Rybakova et al., 2016). For this reason, young adult literature (YAL) has become a prominent alternative to canonical texts.

YAL features teenage protagonists typically in a coming-of-age story. While such books pique student interest, Rybakova et al. (2016) explain that literary scholars often dismiss them as "juvenile and immature," rife with "subpar writing," and mostly crafted for "entertaining" the reader (p. 33). However, such sweeping generalizations

should not be attributed to each title within an entire genre. Additionally, Rybakova et al. (2016) point out YAL was not considered a genre until it split from children's literature in 1957, thus it "has not yet had the time to establish its literary merit among generations of critics that distinguished works such as Shakespearian plays from other literature" (p. 32).

Given its entrenched history in the English classroom, the debate over the canon will never be finished, however, that does not mean there is not any middle ground for the two sides to reach a compromise. Pike (2003) suggests incorporating responsive teaching, an approach to teaching that prioritizes where the student is rather than the teacher, could lead to a balanced approach when it comes to using canonical works. Though many students might not be interested or ready for the rigors of the canon, responding to their needs/desires in conjunction with the canon is possible. Rybakova et al. (2016) point out this often takes the form of pairing a YAL text with one from the canon. For example, *Romeo & Juliet* by William Shakespeare could be complimented with *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell (2012). Both works tell stories of young love opposed by their family's differences -- centuries apart. Per Rybakova et al. (2016), "Such pairings can facilitate discussions on historical and modern conceptions of romantic love and the societal constructs with which different times and cultures place on it" (p. 38).

### **Summary**

The longstanding literary canon that has dominated high school syllabi for decades, like any archaic institution, is rightfully being called into question. While there



are cases to be made both for and against the canon, there is no denying that with the cultural shift in the U.S. the canon faces greater and greater obscurity. Thus, forging compromises to bridge the divide have emerged in attempts to ensure familiar elements of the canon are not swept into the dustbin of history, while still meeting the needs of contemporary pupils. Thankfully, the decentralized nature of curriculum decision making in the United States allows for districts, schools, and teachers alike to experiment with changes to the literature they teach.

### **Curricular Control: Past and Influence of Common Core**

While many many schools throughout the U.S. teach the literary canon, there is no required national curriculum that states must follow. According to Rayle (2018), “The U.S. Constitution does not mention education, and it has long been presumed that it should be left to the states” (p. 156). Therefore, curricular control has been rather decentralized for centuries. In the mid-1800’s many districts began to adopt Superintendents, who often presided over curricular choices (Andero, 2000).

This localized control gave Superintendents the power to influence what was being taught within the schools they presided over. While localized control is often championed in conversations regarding education, the immense power granted to superintendents began getting called into question, especially if their schools were performing poorly (Andero, 2000). Thus, according to Andero (2000), as of the 1990’s, Superintendents began “losing control and [began] experiencing an erosion of power over the curriculum policy making to the court, state and federal regulations” (p. 278). Another factor that eroded Superintendents’ control over curriculum was universities and

business leaders feared the next generation of Americans would be ill-prepared to compete in a global workplace.

To address poor standardized test performance of U.S. students, local control began being stripped away and the call for a more centralized national curriculum began. In 2010, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were rolled out in the subject areas of English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics; 41 states agreed to adopt and implement the standards (“Standards in Your State,” 2019). According to Casey (2016):

The standards emerged from decades of work, led primarily by private business interests and state government officials, to create and implement common standards across schools in the U.S. in order to respond to the “crisis” of international economic competition, declining college admission test scores, and the demands of businesses for employee training. (p. 58)

Notably absent from the creation of CCSS were classroom teachers. Thus, CCSS was met by teachers, as well as others, with trepidation. While the origins of CCSS can give pause to some, Li (2015) articulates that the standards “say little about the content that should be taught. The development of a precise and often more advanced curriculum is left to the states, districts, and teachers” (p. 4).

For example, ELA standard 6.RI.1 (as cited in Lawson et. al, 2017) calls for students to “Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” (p. 14). Many of the standards are similarly ambiguous and do not stipulate a certain author that teachers must share with students. That being said, according to Berchini (2016), CCSS does provide a set of “exemplar

texts seemed to represent the traditional ELA curriculum, which historically excluded literary contributions by authors of color” (p. 55). Furthermore, Boyd, Causey, and Galda (2015) state, “More literature from the canon is recommended and far less modern, contemporary, diverse literature” (p. 380). While CCSS does provide the framework for states and teachers to select a multitude of texts by which to deliver the standards, the texts they do showcase often perpetuate the lack of representation students from marginalized populations have often encountered in the ELA classroom. Fecho (as cited in Casey 2016) explains that districts and schools too often “merely replicate [curricular programs] rather than matching the program to the skills, interests, resources, and beliefs” (p.68). Instead of confronting this issue by requiring more contemporary or multicultural texts, the framework provided by CCSS seems to facilitate the status quo.

### **Summary**

The landscape of K-12 curriculum has always been in motion, never stagnant. The flow of control from local superintendents to the more national CCSS has encountered pushback in some capacity at every turn. In a country as vast as the U.S., with a Constitution that does not give jurisdiction of educational curriculum to a federal agency, it is unlikely that there will ever be a consensus or singular model for how to educate America’s youth. Instead, states, districts, and teachers have the opportunity to influence the curriculum they teach, sometimes more than others, to match the populations they are serving. Thus, our schools have the freedom to incorporate multicultural literature into their curriculum.

## **The Need for Multicultural Literature**

As demographics in the US change, multicultural literature aims to reflect the diversity found within the classroom. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, classrooms in the U.S. had always been predominantly white until 2016 when that number fell to 50% (Sharma & Christ, 2017). However, Morrell and Morrell (2012) describe how in the country's 60 largest school districts only 25% of the students are white. Nationwide, the largest group of nonwhite students is Hispanic, at roughly 25% of the K-12 student population (Sharma et al., 2017). The change in demographics of the U.S. is not showing signs of slowing. Per census projections, in 2043 the US will become a majority-minority country as the population of whites continues to grow at a slower rate than other groups (Sarraj et al., 2015). Given the majority of texts taught to secondary learners are, according to Burroughs (1999), written by "white males of European descent" (p. 137), integrating multicultural literature into the curriculum at this moment in time is like trying to catch a train that already departed the station; representative literature is already lagging behind demographics and will continue to grow worse if changes are not made.

The scope of what constitutes multicultural literature is considerably broad. It includes the traditional markers of diversity such as race, gender, religion and ethnicity, but it continues to expand (Landt, 2006). According to Boyd et al. (2015), literary scholars "advocate for expanding the borders . . . to aspects such as physical and mental disabilities, socioeconomic status, language variations, [and] dialect differences" (p. 379). The authors note how the borders continue to expand with the LGBT community and

immigrants being included under the umbrella (Boyd et al., 2015). Thus, multicultural literature seeks to be inclusive of any traditionally marginalized population, so that students of those various groups can see themselves in the texts they are being taught.

The teaching of multicultural literature is more than anecdotally supported. Per Berchini (2016), research provides evidence that “children must be able to make connections with what they read to become proficient readers” (p. 55). Additionally, Sharma et al. (2017) add, “The use of culturally relevant texts anchors students’ culturally relevant knowledge, such as their identities, experiences, and norms, in ways that improve their literacy outcomes” (p. 296). Thus, if the majority of the texts being taught showcase a white experience, roughly half of the U.S. K-12 population is presented a roadblock to becoming stronger readers. On top of a logistical disadvantage, Boyd et al. (2015) explains, “If children never see themselves in books, they receive the subtle messages that they are not important . . . and that books are not for them” (p. 379). If learners internalize that books are not for them it can negatively impact their reading ability -- this is critical as reading is foundational to academic success. Thus, teaching multicultural literature will serve students well beyond the English classroom.

The benefits of multicultural literature also extend beyond students of marginalized populations. According to Campbell and Whittenberg (as cited in Landt, 2006), reading multicultural literature “heightens respect for individuals . . . acknowledges contributions of minorities . . . brings children into context with other cultures . . . [and] encourages students to detect prejudice and work toward its elimination” (p. 269). Making these realizations accessible to all students, but especially

those coming from places of greater privilege, will help expand their understanding of how large and complex the world truly is (Landt, 2006, p. 691). Thus, when selecting multicultural literature to add to their curriculum, it is important that educators approach the work broadly to represent as many lived experiences as possible.

### **Selecting Multicultural Texts**

Despite understanding the importance of multicultural literature to a multicultural society, not enough of it currently exists. According to Boyd et al. (2015), over the last 30 years just five percent of books published feature marginalized cultures, which “does not even begin to reflect the census figures for the U.S.” (p. 380). Additionally, in 2013 the Cooperative Children’s Book Center evaluated roughly 3,200 new titles and found that a mere “93 books had significant African or African American content . . . 57 books had significant Latino/Latina content . . . [and] 34 books had American Indian themes, topics or characters” (Boyd, et al., 2015, p. 380). While it is true that some multicultural texts do exist, Haeffner (2016) explains that these small numbers dwindle even further when they are categorized by reading level as not all learners (especially younger or struggling readers) are capable of accessing books at every level. Furthermore, Boyd et al. (2015) articulates, “There are even fewer books that depict characters with exceptionalities like disability, LGBTQ characters, [and] various religious beliefs” (p. 380). This lack of resources can make it especially difficult for teachers as they attempt to incorporate more multicultural literature into their curriculum. Additionally, not all multicultural literature that features characters or stories of marginalized groups is represents the group authentically.

The cultural authenticity of a work is critical when evaluating whether or not a multicultural text is appropriate for teaching. While it might be easy to spot obvious tokenizing or blatant stereotyping, it is impossible for a teacher to understand cultural nuances of innumerable marginalized groups (Boyd, et al., 2015). Thus, a strong starting place to ensure cultural authenticity is by researching the author. Ladnt (2006) explains, “A book written by an author with an emic—insider—perspective is likely to be culturally authentic” (p. 696). This practice will help avoid books that more covertly perpetuate negative stereotypes (Sharma, et al., 2017). That being said, there is additional criteria that is important to meet.

Ladnt (2006) reviewed a range of multicultural literature selection guides and paired them down to the following five salient points:

1. The accurate portrayal of the culture or cultures depicted in the book includes not only physical characteristics such as clothing and food, but relationships among people within the culture and with people of different cultures.
2. There is diversity within the culture; characters are unique individuals, not stereotypical representatives.
3. Dialogue is culturally authentic with characters using speech that accurately represents their oral traditions. Non-English words are spelled and used correctly.
4. Realistic social issues and problems are depicted frankly and accurately without oversimplification.

5. Minority characters are shown as leaders within their community able to solve their own problems. Cultural minorities do not play a supporting or subservient role while whites are seen as possessing all the power. (p. 695)

While criteria to evaluate the quality of multicultural texts exist, reading and evaluating them with said criteria is time consuming.

Landt (2006) expresses concern that the time consuming nature of evaluating multicultural texts might lead teachers to “decide it is better to avoid integrating multicultural literature with their curriculum rather than take the chance of including inappropriate choices” (p. 691). However, there are resources for teachers to turn to that have already vetted multicultural books for their authenticity. MOSAIC: Multicultural Book Collection, an initiative of Lincoln Public Schools in Nebraska, has spent over 25 years curating authentic multicultural book lists (Haeffner, 2016). Additionally, there are numerous book awards that are annually awarded to various multicultural sub-genres that can support teachers in selecting multicultural texts for use in their curriculum.

Examples of these annual book awards include the following:

- The Coretta Scott King Book Awards, for books created by African American authors that depict the African American experience;
- The Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award, for books that depict the Mexican American experience;
- The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award, for manuscripts that portray the Jewish experience; and



- The Skipping Stones Honor Award, for books that promote multicultural awareness (Sharma et al., 2017, p. 300).

While the goal of integrating multicultural texts is one approach, Burroughs (1999) also suggests that teachers should also consider “deemphasizing the novel” to help free up space in a unit of study to engage with smaller, less traditional texts (p.146).

Other less traditional texts that Burroughs (1999) encourages teachers to consider texts such as slave narratives, despite that they “may be seen as ‘lesser than’ the ‘great works’ of the canon” because of their more authentic style and structure (p. 137). Regardless of whether a teacher uses a series of short stories or a singular class text, the manner in which multicultural texts should be taught differs from canonical literature because there is a greater emphasis placed on the experience of the characters, rather than the work itself.

### **Teaching Multicultural Texts**

Successful teaching starts with successful relationships between the teacher and learners, and multicultural literature is no exception. Thus, at the onset of teaching multicultural literature Sharma et al. (2017) highlight the importance of teachers being informed about the lives and identities of their students. This foundation will not only make the students feel valued, but as Berchini (2016) points out, can help the instructor make decisions about which multicultural text they may want to teach. In addition to the selection of a text that will appeal to learners, Berchini (2016) reminds us that “it is not enough to offer literature written by authors of color under the guise of curricular inclusion; how these texts are taught matters” (p. 56). Therefore, it is critical for teachers

to genuflect and understand which assumptions and biases they might be bringing into the classroom.

One reason for teachers to reflect on their assumptions prior to teaching a multicultural text is described by Chappell (2016). The author warns that “orientalizing, imperialist classroom practices [are present] when teachers emphasize culture -- for example, dress or food -- over the storyline” (p. 84). This pitfall often occurs when teachers lack the wherewithal to articulate the more nuanced motivations and practices within a culture. To avoid such, Berchini (2016) stresses how vital it is for teachers to direct the attention of their students beyond cultural cliches by which they might be most familiar, and instead draw attention to the characters and their lived experiences (p. 55).

To maximize the effects of multicultural literature, Burroughs (1999) notes how teachers must take a different approach to teaching than is often the case with classic texts. Instead of focusing on topics like “symbolism, plot, and setting,” he notes how multicultural literature should be used as a vehicle to discuss “culture clashes [and] cultural oppression” (p. 149). Not following the advice of Burroughs (1999) can lead students to ignore cultural differences in a multicultural text, that Berchini (2016) explains could leave students with the impression that such factors are not important in both the lives of the characters and their own. Therefore, teachers must be very intentional in how multicultural texts are taught and discussed to fully maximize their benefits. There are several key strategies teachers can use to do this.

Sharma et al. (2017) suggests creating multiple sets of questions, starting with broader questions that can be discussed across all texts in a unit, as well as more critical

questions aimed at each individual text. For example, a unit on immigration could begin by asking guiding questions such as “Why do people immigrate?” or “What are the challenges of arriving in a new country?” (Sharma et al., 2017, p. 304). These questions would ideally span all pieces of literature throughout the unit. Secondly, questions targeted at individual texts could ask more nuanced questions about specific feelings, motivations, and decisions of a character.

Teachers can also help students engage deeply with a multicultural text by using reader’s response approach, which prioritizes the reader’s connection to the text. According to Glazier and Seo (2005), this approach decreases “[reliance] on a teacher or critic to provide a single, standard interpretation of a text,” and instead prompts students to “construct their own meaning by connecting the textual material to issues in their lives” (p. 689). Furthermore, reader response encourages students to consider what they are bringing to a text.

When students are encouraged to bring their background knowledge to a text, Gloria Ladson-Billings (as cited in Sharma et al., 2017) explains, “[It] empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 295). While there is clear support for utilizing a reader's response approach with multicultural literature, not all are in favor of it.

For example, Chappel (2016) is concerned that “reader’s response trumps considerations of the material circumstances of the publication of the book” (p. 85). Because reader’s response writing is open-ended and allows for the reader to react with their raw opinion, Chappel is worried that a reader’s potentially negative response to the

text could be taken as more valid than the lived experiences of the author. This is problematic when it comes to multicultural literature because it prevents students from building empathy -- one of the primary reasons for teaching multicultural works. That being said, there are other, more appropriate approaches that teachers can utilize.

Barker (as cited in Chappel, 2016) argues, “A cultural studies or critical theory lens, in contrast, asks us to understand not just the reader’s response but the matters of power and cultural politics” (p. 85). Cultural studies and critical theory approaches both seek to identify and understand various phenomena that takes place within groups/societies. For example, investigating why some countries are god-fearing while others are more agnostic. Thus, either of these approaches expands the scope of the reading beyond the reader and asks one to engage more meaningfully with the circumstances that inform circumstances within a text. Chappel (2016) articulates these lenses are necessary because “writing is never a neutral or objective phenomenon but a matter of positionality” (p. 85). Without understanding the position of the author and their identity, it would be challenging for a reader to truly understand the richest meaning of the work.

### **Summary**

With the changing demographics of the US, the need to incorporate multicultural literature is vital; classrooms are already lagging in terms of representational texts and will only fall further behind as traditionally marginalized populations continue to grow. However, selecting multicultural texts is not as simple as finding a book that features a person of color. There is a large range of identities and experiences beyond race and

ethnicity, such as socioeconomic, disability, and LGBT that deserve to be included. All of these populations need to be represented authentically, which requires teachers to extensively preview texts before deciding to teach them.

Thankfully, there are resources such as multicultural book lists and multicultural book awards to point educators in the right direction. Lastly, teachers need to be especially intentional in how they teach multicultural literature. Moving away from traditional literary analysis will place a greater emphasis on the cultural aspect of the text at hand. Strategies such as reader's response or using a cultural studies lens to engage with a multicultural work will ensure a more authentic and transformative experience for the reader. One of the most significant ways that multicultural literature can influence readers is by helping them build empathy for people with different lived experiences than themselves.

### **Definition and Types of Empathy**

Though the practice of teaching and building empathy may seem to be a better curricular fit in an elementary school setting, but Miller (2000/2001) highlights the acquisition of empathy is a lifelong endeavor that can be greatly aided by the literature taught within secondary classrooms. Before examining the impacts of and strategies for cultivating empathy via literature, one must understand both the definition and various forms of empathy. Louie (2005) describes empathy as “an other oriented perspective congruent with another's sociocultural values, political ideology, and historical context” (p. 566). Furthermore, Louie (2005) explains it is this “other oriented perspective” that requires an “active attempt by one individual to get ‘inside’ the other through deliberate

intellectual effort” (p. 567). Thus, while individuals might feel empathy for others automatically (like our friends, or family members), Junker and Jacquemin (2017) describe how empathy (especially for people we don’t know) is a skill that can be acquired and honed through “deliberate” effort on behalf of an individual -- empathy is a choice (p. 80).

Measures can be taken in order to ensure the conditions for empathy generation are ideal, but one must first understand the various forms that empathy can occur before exploring maneuvers to cultivate it. First, deliberate attempts to empathize span cognitive, historical, and cross-cultural approaches. Louie (2005) defines cognitive empathy as being “able to articulate others’ perspectives by understanding others’ circumstances (p. 571). For example, a student might understand the decision of a woman to terminate a pregnancy if her pregnancy is high risk and carrying the child to full term could prove lethal. While this form of empathy allows processing to take place within the context of one’s own existence, Louie explains (2005) historical empathy requires one to “reconstruct the attitudes, feelings, and actions of an individual who lived during a historical period” (p. 571). An example of historical empathy could be understanding the decision of an African slave to submit to their owner rather than face the consequences of rebelling.

Another type of empathy is cross-cultural. According to Louie (2005), cross-cultural empathy is arguably one of the more challenging to achieve, as it requires the ability “to step away from one’s self-centered approach of interpretation and work with others’ beliefs and values to explain what others think and do” (p. 571). In this case

one might set aside their rigid expectations of timeliness when engaging with another culture in which time is more relative, and waiting for someone or something is not considered to be an annoyance.

The aforementioned types of empathy are more cognitive in nature, asking individuals to intentionally put themselves in the place of another, be it contemporarily, historically, or cross-culturally. However, as previously mentioned, empathy often incorporates an emotional or automatic element. Louie (2005) notes that the first, and more common type, is parallel emotional empathy, in which one is “able to express emotional responses similar to those the other person is experiencing” (p. 571). For example, feeling sad for a friend who just lost a family member to cancer. The second type is reactive emotional empathy, where one “[reacts] to the emotional response of others” (Louie, 2005, p. 571). In this case one might grow angry that their friend was cheated on by a spouse, while their friend exhibits emotions of sadness and despair.

While empathy is an integral element of the human experience, multicultural literature can serve as an integral tool in laying the foundation for such connections between people.

### **Building Empathy via Multicultural Literature**

Before understanding how literature serves as an access point for building empathy, Louie (2005) describes why it is important for our secondary educational institutions to prioritize development of the trait. According to the author our society is global; the U.S. is comprised of diverse cultures, religions, races, sexual orientations, etc. Thus, empathy is a critical tool that gives one access to understand and relate to their

fellow citizens especially those who may be different from a person's immediate circle. In addition to understanding one's immediate neighbors, Louie (2005) also notes how empathy allows us to expand our understanding of the "diverse cultures of humanity" globally (p. 566). These efforts are noble in their quest to mitigate differences and forge both domestic and international alliances, but empathy's influence also pays dividends on a local/individualistic level as well (Junker et al., 2017). According to Junker et al. (2017), "Research has shown that professional efficacy in a variety of disciplines (e.g. medicine, social work, etc.) increases with an individual's ability to empathize" (p. 79). These examples provide a basis for why it is critical to teach empathy, but why use literature to do so?

Junker et al. (2017) provide one explanation as to why literature should be used to teach empathy. They plainly state, "The more a person reads, the more empathetic that person is likely to be" (p. 81). Interestingly, Clovin (2017) also provides an explanation for why the desire to learn about others via literature appears to be innate. According to Clovin (2017) research reveals that children as young as four years old prefer reading social stories compared to stories about inanimate objects. In fact, one study (as cited in Clovin, 2017) found that when white children "read short stories with multi ethnic characters, their attitudes toward African Americans were more effectively improved than when they interacted with a group of African American children" (p. 26). The work of Clovin (2017) supports the assumption that the impacts of literature on children and the skills they develop can be essential to their later years.



Essential in building empathy is the Theory of Mind. Theory of Mind is defined by Clovin (2107) as “the skills involved in understanding the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of other people” (p. 25). Developing these skills early becomes socially advantageous as one ages. For example, Clovin (2017) asserts that “adults, especially, do not always display their emotions or intentions transparently for the world to interpret. Therefore, young people need to develop skills to predict, understand, and relate to the minds of others” (p. 25). One of the best methods for developing this skills in children is via literature because it often presents a character’s inner thoughts and motivations, without sound (Clovin, 2017). This contextualization and rationalization of thought allows readers to understand what moves a character, not merely pass judgement on their actions. Without Theory of Mind skills it would be difficult for older readers to engage empathetically. Furthermore, multicultural literature, specifically, presents an opportunity for readers to experience the story from the perspective of an author with different lived experience than their own.

Colvin (2017) describes how using Theory of Mind to become “emotionally involved in a narrative” has led to increases in empathy and made readers “more likely to change their attitudes about people similar to those in the story” ( p. 26). With this in mind, it is important that curricular texts exploit this potential by incorporating diverse perspectives. Specifically, multicultural literature has the ability to change hearts and minds, which in turn helps mitigate prejudices and foster unity amongst diverse communities but only if the foundation is laid correctly during the early years of

education. However, this can be easier said than done as there are numerous roadblocks that educators face when it comes to empathy building.

### **Barriers to Building Empathy**

The advantages of building empathy, specifically via literature, are well documented. However, Louie (2005) notes it can be difficult for students to suspend their value systems and personal beliefs in order to empathetically approach a text, especially when they disagree profoundly. Therefore, there are barriers and pitfalls that need to be avoided when attempting to use literature to teach empathy. According to Junker et al. (2017) there are two primary obstacles: one, wrong texts, and two, wrong instructional approaches. For example, a wrong text can be one that is too difficult, by nature of “unlikeable narrators, complicated imagery or language, unconventional chronological organization” that according to Junker et al. (2017) has the potential to inhibit an empathetic response (p. 85). In fact, Junker et al. (2017) explains, “Some students might attribute their difficulty understanding the novel to cultural differences rather than textual challenges” (p. 85). This backfiring would have the opposite intended effect that led one to teach a multicultural text in the first place.

In addition to choosing the wrong texts, instructional approaches that accompany a multicultural text can also go awry. Junker et al. (2017) articulate, “It’s not what content is being presented; rather it is how the content is presented and then experienced by the reader that may determine whether or not empathy increases or decreases” (p. 85). It is imperative that teachers of multicultural literature front-load or scaffold the reading experience with resources to help students access the cultural differences within the text.

Supporting the need to scaffold the reading experience is Louie (2005) who asserts, “Students, usually limited in their background knowledge about the multicultural texts they read, tend to interpret these texts on the basis of their self-centred worldviews and experiences” (p. 567). Another reason for scaffolding these experiences is provided by Dong (2005) who notes that students’ “desire for identification with the text hampers their ability to read texts from other cultures” (p. 55). Without necessary supports and scaffolding students may either try to forge false equivalencies with their own lives or simply throw in the towel -- both of which run counter to the reasoning for reading multicultural literature.

Additional scaffolding may also be needed during and after the reading of multicultural literature as well. Per Dong (2015), teachers commonly use a New Critical approach to discussing literature that asks the reader to interpret the meaning beneath the text. However, a criticism of the New Critical approach made by Dong (2005) is that such textual analysis methods can “turn students away from the discussion of critical issues related to multicultural texts” (p. 55). The reason for this is that rather than focusing on discussions of historical context or cross-cultural differences, the New Critical approach focuses student attention on literary aspects of the text, thus according to Dong (2005) neglecting the opportunity to cultivate empathy by discussing the motivations, constraints, and inspirations of the characters involved. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers follow a series of best practices in order to maximize the development of empathy.

## **Best Instructional Practices for Building Empathy**

Just as there are wrong texts and wrong instructional approaches that inhibit empathy, there are right texts and right instructional approaches that foster empathy building. To begin, Junker et al. (2005) identified that first-person narration has proven to aid in empathy building because it provides an opportunity for readers to directly identify with a protagonist (p. 80). Additionally, reading realistic novels has a positive effect on empathy as Nussbaum (as cited in Junker et al., 2017) explains, “They teach us to see humans, including individuals very different from ourselves, as distinct beings with their own desires, identities, and complex life histories” (p. 81). Lastly, and somewhat surprisingly, Clovin (2017) notes that because empathy is associated with human connection, fictional literature often generates greater empathy as it offers a “safe place” for readers to “experience emotions because they do not affect the reader’s real life” (p. 26). Thankfully, first person, realistic-fiction is a fairly common genre, and thus it should prove relatively easy for educators to find and incorporate such texts into their curriculum.

However, choosing the right texts is only the start. Without proper scaffolding, a student’s capacity to build empathy could be in jeopardy. To begin, Dong (2005) asserts that teachers “must help students reflect on their cultural backgrounds and switch ideological stances to learn other perspectives and expand their cultural horizons” (p. 56). In essence, teachers must help students identify and set aside their predisposition in an effort to help them code-switch from their culture to another. During this process, Dong (2005) recommends that teachers take an “ethnographic approach,” which calls for

students to “observe, listen to, and experience people’s behaviors in context” (p. 57). The contextualization component is key to this scaffolding as it helps students understand different cultural values and beliefs. These preparatory measures will ensure that students do not approach a multicultural text blindly without the tools necessary to unpack the story at hand.

In addition to intentional preparation, building empathy depends on students engaging in purposeful reflection during and after reading a multicultural text. For example, Junker et al. (2017) recommends that students engage in creative writing when reading a multicultural text. They indicate that “students writing in a creative mode scored substantially higher on empathy inventories than those writing in an analytical mode,” specifically when prompts, “required students to take on the role of other characters” (p. 85). That being said, the creative writing needs to be intentional. For example, Junker et al. (2017) explain the act of taking on the role of other characters is particularly impactful as it asks a student to understand “multiple perspectives” -- their own, the character they are writing as, as well as others influencing said character -- in addition to considering the “cultural framework” in which the story exists (p. 85). Thus, such prompts elicit both cognitive and emotional empathy. However, empathy building can still take place when a reader responds reflectively as well. In this case, a student would not be pushed quite as far in terms of crawling into the skin of a character, but would still need to tap into elements of both cognitive and emotional empathy to thoroughly reflect.

**Summary**

Empathy is a trait that can be fostered. One approach to fostering empathy is through reading multicultural literature. Not only does this benefit the populace as a whole, with more people becoming interculturally proficient, but there are tangible benefits associated with individual growth. Although multicultural literature is a helpful tool, it must be used thoughtfully. Both the selection and instruction of texts must be done intentionally in order to cultivate empathy in readers.

**Conclusion**

Chapter Two began by examining the current state of canonical literature commonly taught in secondary schools, as well as the arguments for and against it. Next, curricular control was discussed as well as the role CCSS has played in shaping curriculum in the United States. Then, multicultural literature was investigated in terms of the need for it, as well as the best practices for teaching it. Lastly, empathy was explored as a benefit of teaching multicultural literature. Together, these areas of research laid the foundation for the capstone project as described in Chapters Three and Four.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

#### Chapter Overview

As U.S. classrooms become more diverse, it is critical that curricular texts reflect the diversity of the learners. However, the integration of multicultural texts must be done thoughtfully to both maximize learning and avoid stereotyping. Thus, it is important to ask: *What are the best practices for selecting and teaching multicultural literature in secondary schools in order to represent and build empathy for students from traditionally marginalized populations?*

As a high school English teacher in a suburban district that is becoming increasingly diverse, it is important that the curriculum I teach exploits the potential of my students from every background. However, I have found comprehensive resources to develop and implement units featuring multicultural texts difficult to come by. While there are multicultural book lists available featuring texts vetted for authenticity and positive representation, they too often do not provide resources for thoughtfully teaching the text. Additionally, teaching resources available via websites such as Teachers Pay Teachers one) come at a cost to the educator, and two) do not explain the theory and research behind the most effective methods for teaching multicultural literature so they can be applied to other units. In my experience, the limited scope of such resources makes the process of creating a multicultural book unit piecemeal and time consuming. Like Ladnt (2006), I also fear the more challenging teachers find the process of

developing and implementing a multicultural English, coupled with their already hectic schedules, the less likely multicultural texts will be used.

This chapter begins by providing a rationale and overview of the project. Next, is a concise description of the supporting research to highlight the feasibility and need to increase the use of multicultural literature in U.S. classrooms. The summary of the research is followed by a description of the setting of my teaching experience, which will provide additional context for the project, before explaining the intended audience. Finally, the last section is a description of the timeline for designing and creating my project.

### **Project Overview**

As previously mentioned, it has been difficult to identify a single comprehensive resource that provides free access to the necessary components to create a multicultural English unit from the ground up. Thus, for this project I built a website that provides teachers with a multicultural teaching resource backed by research that includes:

- talking points regarding the importance of multicultural literature;
- links to vetted multicultural book lists that promote empowered characters from marginalized communities, rather than perpetuate stereotypes;
- best practices for teaching multicultural literature, even if you are not a member of the community you are teaching;
- resources such as a sample unit; and
- links to grants for purchasing multicultural text sets, etc.



A website was chosen to present this material because the platform is dynamic. A dynamic website was important because new books are constantly being published -- a static resource would quickly grow outdated. Likewise, it will be easier to incorporate new research that supports the inclusion of multicultural literature, or add additional best practice for teaching multicultural texts as they become realized. Additionally, the organization of the website, with various tabs across the top, allows for educators to directly access the specific content they are most interested in. For those just beginning the process of building a multicultural literature unit, the sequence of the various tabs walks teachers in order through the process of developing a multicultural literature unit.

The first section of the website features the **Justification** for teaching multicultural literature. While teachers have the autonomy to make many decisions within their classroom, choosing and purchasing class and unit texts is a process that requires approval from multiple parties within a school and district. Thus, this section provides teachers with research-backed talking points to use for informing department chairs, school administrators, parents/guardians, and district decision makers alike of the importance of including multicultural literature into the curriculum. The page is broken down into three areas: Representation Matters, Building Empathy, and Versatility. Representation Matters opens by addressing how changing demographics with the United States, coupled with the lack of curricular changes, impact students. Building Empathy addresses how multicultural literature can be used to build empathy in students, as well as the effect of such increased skills. Lastly, Versatility explains how teaching multicultural literature can come in many forms to fit the needs of various classrooms.

The second section of the website, **Selecting Texts**, is broken down into four areas to aid educators in deciding on multicultural titles for their curriculum. It begins with Considerations that should be kept in mind throughout the selection process, such as a text's Lexile score, the effectiveness of first person narration, etc. Secondly, a list of Criteria is provided for teachers to use when evaluating books to ensure they are authentic and appropriate. Next is a Preliminary Book List comprised of 100 titles that exclusively feature protagonists from marginalized communities (race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, etc.). Lastly, External Book Lists shares a series of links to other multicultural book resources such as the Coretta Scott King Book Awards. These links allow users of the site to search for new literature outside of the Preliminary Book List.

The third section provides teachers with **Best Practices** for teaching multicultural literature. This section shares eight different tips for teachers to incorporate into their instruction of multicultural texts. The practices range from unit-wide reminders such as not tokenizing a student from a marginalized identity to serve as a spokesperson on behalf of the entire group, to specific ideas for an assignment such as creatively writing as a character from the text. Each of the practices not only includes an explanation and rationale, but also an example for educators to follow.

The final **Resource** section of the website provides teachers with a sample unit, justification for the decisions made throughout the sample unit, and links to multicultural book grants. The sample unit provides guiding/essential questions, front loading/pre-reading resources, guided reading/journal questions, as well as larger weekly

assignments to accompany the aforementioned text, *How It Went Down* (Magoon, 2014). Next, the sample unit is broken down to explain the decisions made in conjunction with the supporting research and best practices. Lastly, the section includes links to a series of grants for multicultural literature that teachers could apply for when looking to purchase multicultural texts for their classrooms should their school/district be unable to provide the necessary financial resources.

### **Supporting Research**

The supporting research speaks to both the feasibility, need, and benefits of incorporating more multicultural literature into English curriculums. First, there are welcoming conditions that would allow for teachers and districts to break away from the literary canon. Secondly, the canon is not representative of the U.S. student population and will continue to become less and less representative as learners become more diverse. Lastly, the benefits of incorporating multicultural literature extend to students beyond those from marginalized communities. Because there is a universal need within the U.S. to teach multicultural literature, sharing this information via a website will allow for free access to all educators.

The case for teaching multicultural literature -- in tandem with, or in place of canonical literature -- is multifaceted. Before reviewing the benefits, it is important to remember both the legal ease with which it can be adopted as well as the country's pertinent need. Legally speaking, the U.S. Constitution does not mention education as one of its domains. Thus, there is a long history of leaving decisions regarding education up to individual states (Rayle, 2018). As of 2019, over 80% of the states have

adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to guide their English curricular outcomes, but according to Li (2015), CCSS says “little about the content that should be taught” (p. 4). Therefore, districts often have great freedom when it comes to the content of their courses.

Beyond the lack of legal requirements, the traditional literary canon often taught in schools is narrow. Canonical literature often promotes the works of old/deceased, white, cisgendered, male authors who do little to represent the wide swath of human experiences today (Al-Shalabi et al., 2011). Morrell et al. (2012) point out this is particularly problematic when considering that in the country’s 60 largest school districts only 25% of the students are white. Many students are not afforded the opportunity to see themselves or others like them in the literature they are required to read. This problem is projected to worsen, as the U.S. Census estimates that by 2043 the U.S. will likely become a majority-minority country (Sarraj et al., 2015).

An ability to see oneself in literature is not merely a preference, but instead an academic advantage. According to Sharma et al. (2017), culturally relevant texts that speak to a student’s lived experiences “improve their literacy outcomes” (p. 296). Given that literacy is foundational to success in other content areas it is imperative that students from traditionally marginalized populations are given an equal opportunity to see themselves in multicultural literature. But the benefits of multicultural literature extend to students even in groups that have not been historically omitted. Junker et al. (2017) explain, “The more a person reads, the more empathetic that person is likely to be” (p. 81). Reading in general is a tool that can help students build empathy for others, and is

also evident when reading cross-culturally. Additionally, Clovin (2017) noted that when white children “read short stories with multi ethnic characters, their attitudes toward African Americans were more effectively improved than when they interacted with a group of African American children” (p. 26). Thus, the benefits of teaching multicultural are far reaching.

Conditions in the U.S. are primed for the expansion of multicultural literature into the traditional English classroom. Starting with educational laws, curricular choices are traditionally left to individual districts, schools, and teachers. Meanwhile, the students impacted by curricular choices are becoming more and more diverse, and less represented by the traditional literary canon. Because multicultural literature has proven beneficial to both students from marginalized groups as well as white students, it is important for schools to embrace the curricular change.

### **Setting**

As mentioned in Chapter One, I currently teach English at a high school of 2,200 students in a suburb of a major metro in the upper Midwest. The school is one of four comprehensive high schools in the district. Of the 2,200 students, in 2018/2019 nearly 600 of them were open enrolled from nearby high schools in or around the district. In 2018/2019 the school was 32% students of color with 17% of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch. When the school opened its doors in 1996, the student body was roughly 95% white. There is a teaching staff of 102, 15 of which teach English.

The school takes testing quite seriously and pays for all Juniors to take a pre-ACT as well as the standard ACT examination during school hours. The average ACT score of

Juniors in 2018 was 23.7, nearly four points higher than the national average; both the ACT English and ACT Reading scores were three points higher than the national average. Recently, the school was ranked as the top comprehensive public high school in the state, and outpaces peers institutions with 81% of students meeting state reading standards -- 10 percentage points higher than the district average and 20 percentage points higher than the state average.

With regards to curriculum requirements, students are required to take four years of English classes in order to graduate. All students take English 9 (on-level or honors), English 10 (on-level or honors), as well as two full years of English electives. Elective opportunities range from courses such as AP English Literature and AP English Language, to specialized electives such as Mythology and Broadcast Journalism. The Class of 2018 saw 80% of students entering four-year universities, with another 16% opting for a two-year or technical school.

### **Participants**

While I designed this project with resources that would help my school in mind, I envision it being universal enough for many other English teachers throughout the U.S. The need to incorporate multicultural literature into the classroom, and to teach it effectively to maximize returns, is not unique to my school, district, or state. Though designed to primarily serve secondary English classrooms in particular, some of the resources and best practices may be appropriate for lower grades as well. The project, however, was not researched or designed with an elementary audience in mind. That

being said, the choice to limit the scope of the project by no means discounts the need for multicultural literature throughout all of K-12 education.

Knowing that children who see themselves in the stories they read build stronger literacy skills makes it vital that multicultural literature be incorporated across all English/Reading curriculum at every level (Sharma et al., 2017). Simply put, the pedagogical needs younger students differ greatly from my personal understanding of secondary learners. Thus, attempting to incorporate unfamiliar grade levels could dilute the content or mislead readers. Ideally, the format of the project could be replicated with content specifically designed by educators with training and experience to serve elementary school students.

### **Timeline**

The creation of the project was two fold. It began in June 2019 by developing the content that would later populate the website. This included drafting the Justification section with supporting research; the Selecting Text section, including curating the preliminary book list; the Best Practices section, which presents strategies for teaching multicultural literature; and building the additional Resources section, such as the sample unit. In addition to compiling the preliminary book list, the sample unit was the most time consuming artifact to generate.

Around early July, I began building the website to hold the aforementioned content. Given my lack of coding knowledge, I used the platform SquareSpace to design the site layout and facilitate the process of creating and hosting a domain.

The final phase in early-August included usability testing. For this phase I shared the site with my adviser, classmates, and colleagues for review. Their feedback was used to make the necessary final tweaks before launching.

### **Summary**

To begin this project, I identified a lack of consolidated resources for including and teaching multicultural literature in the high school english classroom. Next, I provided a rationale for why a website is the most practical tool for consolidating and sharing such dynamic content. I then explained the four key subpages of the website -- Rationale, Selecting Texts, Best Practices, Resources -- and revisited the research literature to highlight why these components were critical to answering the question: *What are the best practices for selecting and teaching multicultural literature in secondary schools in order to represent and build empathy for students from traditionally marginalized populations?* Sharing the context of my teaching experience shed light on the need for multicultural literature within my own practice, before articulating the scope and universality of my project -- as well as its replicable framework for elementary school educators. Lastly, I presented the completion timeline of the project.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Chapter Overview

The intention behind my research project was to answer the question: *What are the best practices for selecting and teaching multicultural literature in secondary schools in order to represent and build empathy for students from traditionally marginalized populations?* The need for multicultural literature continues to increase as the United States becomes more diverse as well as divided. Thus, the purpose of the project was to provide a singular resource (a website) that could act as a springboard for teachers looking to develop a multicultural literature unit from the ground up. While there are numerous resources and plenty of research to support the teaching of multicultural literature, I have personally found those tools to be decentralized. Given teachers' limited time for planning and professional development, it was important that the website be comprehensive from the initial advocacy stages for a multicultural literature unit all the way through to instruction itself.

Chapter four begins by reflecting on major learnings as well as the literature that proved integral to the completion of the project. Next, the implications and limitations of the project are addressed to provide further context to readers. Potential future research is then discussed to help broaden the future understanding of multicultural literature's impact. An action plan for sharing the project is also included before a conclusion is presented.

## **Major Learnings**

While I walk away from this experience more educated on the importance and practice of incorporating multicultural literature into the classroom, I am also taking away a more comprehensive understanding of K-12 education in general. The finest education is nuanced -- not only meeting the needs of individual students, but paying mind to the demographics and priorities of the community at hand; those demands are always changing, and sometimes rapidly. However, education as an institution is anything but nimble. Whether it is because of nostalgia (for canonical literature) or politically motivated regulation (Common Core), educational progress tends to be slow, clunky, and often limited by a lack of resources.

As an English teacher I have done my fair share of research and writing. However, this capstone project allowed me to reach new depths in my research not previously demanded. The topic of multicultural literature is not new or revolutionary, there is extensive writing on it beginning in the late 1980's (Al-Shalabi et al., 2011). Therefore, to fully comprehend the topic it was imperative that I explore its' origins, which included following previous research/writing cited within more contemporary publishings. This task led me to the work of the multicultural literature pioneers like Gloria Ladson-Billings and allowed me to better understand the history and scope of this still evolving movement in ways I had not previously understood my research topic.

Just as I sorted through greater volumes of research and writing on the inclusion of multicultural literature in schools, I was tasked with synthesizing said volume of information. As a writer I was challenged to keep my work within the parameters set by

the research question. The interconnectedness of research is sprawling. When writing, it was tempting to travel down each potentially tangential path, but for the sake of readability it was important that my end goal remained clear throughout the capstone. Much like keeping the research question front and center, the distinct sections found in the literature review helped keep my writing from straying.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review covered four key areas related to integrating multicultural literature in the English classroom. It opened with a look at the traditional literary canon that has dominated for decades. Next, the review examined curricular decision making including who is in charge, CCSS, and the feasibility of change. The third section dove into both the need for and best practice for teaching multicultural literature. Lastly, the feasibility of building empathy via multicultural literature was explored and best practices were presented for doing so.

The first two sections of the literature review more or less formed the basis for the initial Justification section of the website. This page of the project explained the limitations of the current literary canon, while also touching on how localized control of education makes the shift to more multicultural literature feasible. Rybakova et al. (2016) were particularly influential as they provided numerous examples of how the limited purview of the canon alienates many of today's readers outside the dominant religions, cultures, gender identities, etc. Additionally, Rybakova et al. (2016) specifically highlighted the ability of Young Adult Literature to make up for the canon's shortcomings.

The remainder of the project primarily utilized research from Multicultural Literature as well as the Empathy sections of the literature review. When it came to the Best Practices section of the project website, Burroughs (1999) emphasis on approaching a multicultural text in a different manner helped set the course for abandoning traditional analysis of literature (imagery, setting, etc.) to instead focus on the characters and the influences with which they engage. This new starting point was helpful in looking past the manner in which I myself was taught to examine (and how I had been teaching) literature. Sharma et al. (2017), were also particularly influential as they provided examples for well crafted questions -- "Why do people immigrate?" -- that would lead students to a place of inquiry rather than judgement (p. 304). I was able to follow their lead when crafting the sample unit.

As for building empathy, the largest influence on the project, spanning both the Selecting Texts as well as the Best Practices sections of the website, were Junker et al. (2017). When it comes to selecting texts, Junker et al. (2017) highlighted several key attributes of texts that best facilitate empathy building, such as first person and realistic fiction. As for best practices, Junker et al. (2017) encouraged the practice of creative writing as a character to help students explore multiple aspects of a character's lived experience, rather than pass judgement on them or their circumstances.

On a personal level, as explained in Chapter One, I was already a proponent of teaching multicultural literature, but found the aforementioned best practices insightful and will undoubtedly incorporate them in my teaching moving forward. However, the literature review did shine light on some of the more nuanced arguments in favor of the

canon, which I had not previously considered or been prepared to debate -- such as Pike (2003) articulating that canonical authors were often writing in dialogue with other writers, not seeking to climb the New York Times' Best Seller List. Additionally, reviewing literature surrounding the history and adaptation of CCSS, such as Casey (2016), provided me with a greater understanding of how curriculum is being shaped and by who. Lastly, I did not doubt the importance of multicultural literature, but before Sharma et al. (2017) and Berchini (2016), I was not aware of just how critical representation is in order for students to develop literacy skills that enable them to become strong readers. This newfound knowledge is impactful for me to consider, but for all teachers.

### **Implications of the Project**

The implications of the project are two-fold. First, the project highlights the need for multicultural literature in the secondary English classroom. The ample academic and cultural benefits are made clear in the Justification section of the website and should serve as a call to action for those opposed to, on the fence, and in support of integrating multicultural texts in their teaching of literature. The page specifically breaks down into three subpoints: Representation Matters, Building Empathy, and Versatility. Representation Matters speaks to the cultural and demographic shifts that call for a change to our literature curriculum. Building Empathy focuses on how multicultural texts can be used to build bridges between groups. Versatility explains how multicultural literature can share the spotlight with canonical texts while still delivering on its promises.

The second implication of the project would be the manner in which multicultural literature is incorporated -- thoughtfully. The 'Selecting Texts' section of the website breaks down the selection process for educators, provides a preliminary book list of vetted multicultural novels, and also links to additional, outside multicultural book lists. The Best Practices section of the site helps teachers with a list of eight different ideas/considerations to make when developing questions and assignments that foster reflective, not judgemental, engagement with multicultural texts. Lastly, the Resources section shares an example unit showcases the aforementioned the practices in practice for educators to use as a guide when crafting a unit.

While the project aims to be a complete resource for those beginning their foray into teaching multicultural texts, it does come with limitations.

### **Limitations**

The educational needs of more than 50 million students across the United States cannot be contained in a single manual. And while the scope of this project was specific to teaching multicultural literature in a secondary setting, it too cannot account for all the variances in students' literacy needs. Because the site was intentionally written as guiding framework, rather than a list of must-do steps, there limitations that need to be discussed.

Given the vast volume of books already published and the continuous supply of books being published, the book list will forever be a work in progress. The books chosen for the preliminary book list are mostly contemporary stories from varying marginalized identities. However, the diverse needs of some readers or school

communities likely fall outside of the scope of the 100 titles included in the list. While links to various resources and a list of criteria to verify the authenticity of a text were provided, the system is ultimately a bit piecemeal. Additionally, plot descriptions and Lexile scores can only go so far in providing the full extent of what a teacher needs to make a decision about classroom text. Until a teacher reads the book itself it is difficult to know if a title is the right fit on a multitude of levels.

As previously mentioned, this project was focused on secondary students. While some studies found in the literature review were encompassing of elementary students, and parts of the project could be beneficial to elementary teachers/students, my training is at the secondary level, and thus the project was compiled through this lense. To argue that everything found in the research and project is applicable to teaching multicultural literature at the elementary level would be misleading. Thus, for elementary teachers I would recommend further research to find proven tactics for incorporating multicultural literature at the lower levels of K-12 education.

Another limitation of the project is that it does not directly address scaffolding for over or under achieving students. The project and included example unit implies that teachers can and should make the necessary adjustments for their classes or for students on a case by case basis, but it does not specifically provide examples or make continued mention of such practice. Additionally, the project does not provide strategies for helping students who might be resistant to reading multicultural literature. Much like the potential need for scaffolding, defiant learners in a multicultural unit would need to be addressed on a case by case basis.

Lastly, the project does not specifically address how multicultural literature can be taught using choice novels or book groups (where students might not all be reading the same book), instead of full class texts. Though some of the practices found in the Text Selection as well as the Best Practices section would also work for titles beyond a class text, the website does not address this head on, nor give examples for how units could be adjusted to span a large diversity of books. In this case, similar to meeting the needs of individual learners, a teacher would need to reflect on their literacy training to determine the best course of action in concert with the strategies included in the project.

To address some of the aforementioned limitations of the project, and in consideration of other unknowns on the topic of multicultural literature the following future research is suggested.

### **Future Research**

While the more immediate benefits of multicultural literature were detailed in the Justification section of the project and at various points throughout the literature review, the longitudinal effects are less known. For example, we know that readers, and specifically readers of multicultural literature are more empathetic, but what effects does this have on those former students later in life? Do they tend to be more successful because of a willingness to embrace people from all walks of life instead of subscribing to a singular worldview? Are they better problem solvers because they wrote creatively to try and understand the various forces bearing down on a marginalized character? Does teaching multicultural literature in an elementary setting lead to high test scores at the secondary level because more students have higher literacy skills and feel a greater sense



of belonging in their school communities? Such outcomes still remain unknown and could be beneficial to further supporting the inclusion of multicultural literature throughout K-12 institutions in the United States.

Just as future research should investigate at the longitudinal outcomes of teaching multicultural literature, future research should also dive into the effects of stepping away from canonical literature. How does the loss of common literary experiences impact American adults? Do patriotism and attitudes towards the United States shift as a more singular narrative of the history of the country is replaced by diverse voices?

Additionally, new research and new technologies are perpetually changing educational best practices. Techniques that were championed ten or fifteen years ago might today be challenged by new learnings and cast aside. Thus, keeping current on new/innovative approaches and refining the practice of teaching multicultural literature is integral to its continued success. But the benefits of teaching multicultural literature are only as impactful as it is made known.

### **Communicating Results**

In a field as vast as K-12 education, teachers are perpetually being fed innumerable resources to improve their practice. This saturation can make it difficult for tools such as this project to rise to the top. Thus, I will begin sharing my findings with my department chair. Already a proponent of multicultural literature, she has led a strong push over the last several years to replace problematic canonical texts with diverse titles that allow for greater student choice. That being said, merely replacing old books with new books isn't enough. Replacement must be done thoughtfully and be accompanied

with updated questions and assignments that will take advantage of the new opportunities presented by a multicultural text. Sharing this project as a resource with our colleagues to help guide their efforts will ensure that the updates to our reading lists are not short-sighted.

In addition to serving as our department chair, my superior is the literacy coordinator for our district. Thus, the work being done at our high school isn't happening in isolation. As a district with 33 schools and over 20,000 students, the reach of the literacy coordinator is wide. Simultaneously, the scope of the district can make it difficult for newer initiatives to gain traction. Sharing this project as a resource to other district teachers who are transitioning to more multicultural texts could allow for a swifter implementation of her agenda. However, as previously mentioned, in its current iteration this project was not specifically designed for elementary teachers/students. But perhaps through sharing the resource I could connect with other content experts within the district who could aid me in expanding its scope.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Each chapter of this capstone, as well as the project, have sought to answer the question: *What are the best practices for selecting and teaching multicultural literature in secondary schools in order to represent and build empathy for students from traditionally marginalized populations?* As is often the case, the answer to this question is complex and multifaceted. Chapter One provided an overview as to how I developed a personal interest in this topic, and why it is so important to me that as a country the United States embrace the teaching of multicultural literature. Chapter Two examined

four areas of research that are critical to understanding the history, scope, and importance of multicultural literature: the literary canon, curricular control, multicultural literature, and building empathy. Chapter Three provided an overview of the project and methods, in addition to explanation/justification for the decisions made. Lastly, Chapter Four reflected on the successes, limitations, impacts, and future of the project.

This capstone didn't begin when I sat down to write the first chapter. This capstone began the day I walked into daycare. This capstone was propelled the night I watched that fateful episode of *Grey's Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2008). This capstone was brought to the forefront of my consciousness when I witnessed my students relate to *How It Went Down* (Magoon, 2014). This capstone began percolating in my mind years before I knew I would write it, and years before I understood the profound impact multicultural literature can have on students.

The importance of this capstone is cemented by the changing demographics of a country that has often been slow to embrace change. Playing a small role in shifting the needle from vilification or indifference to acceptance of marginalized populations is equal parts frustrating and humbling. But it reminds me of a quote by the late Gandhi: "Whatever you do in life will be insignificant, but it is important that you do it, because nobody else will" (as cited in Bloomingdale, 2016). With that in mind, I am looking forward to not only sharing what I have created, but also continuing to embrace multicultural literature in my classroom -- leveraging its ability to help students see themselves in what they're reading while building empathy for their classmates, fellow citizens, and the human race as a whole.

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