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Effectively Teaching Reading and Social Studies That Students Will Meaningfully Connect to Their Lives and Experiences

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EFFECTIVELY TEACHING READING AND SOCIAL STUDIES THAT STUDENTS
WILL MEANINGFULLY CONNECT TO THEIR LIVES AND EXPERIENCES

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive. Only if we face these open wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people.

—James Baldwin, *Life*, Telling Talk From a Negro Writer, May 24, 1963

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Opening Remarks

In 2018, my third year of teaching, I had the wonderfully challenging task of teaching 13 third grade students and 10 fourth grade students. I was the White minority teacher with 21 of the 23 students being people of color. I regularly read aloud to them, usually after lunch and recess. I sought out books that I thought my students would enjoy and would have characters with whom they could connect. One day I had a teacher moment that I'll always remember, as a student who worked earnestly but struggled tremendously, absolutely lit up when I read *Starring Carmen!*, written by Anika Denise and illustrated by Lorena Alvarez Gómez (2017). The book tells the story of a dramatic Latinx girl named Carmen and her brother Eduardo. Carmen is introduced on page one as “a one-girl sensación.” As soon as I uttered *sensación* this student burst into an ear-to-ear grin and listened rapturously. She was from a family that spoke exclusively Spanish at home. At conferences, her mother, via an interpreter, had told me that she wanted her daughter to be able to read and write in both Spanish and English, because she is unable to read the notes she writes for her in Spanish. The girl was in reading intervention and was working hard, but was one of more than several emergent readers in the class. When

I was done reading the story, this third grader told me that she loved the story, but that my Spanish accent needed some work.

I have pondered her reaction that day to the read aloud. Was it simply the bilingual aspect of the book? Was it the Latinx family portrayed? As I thought more about her response to my reading *Starring Carmen!*, I considered the question: *How can I effectively teach reading and social studies that all students will meaningfully connect to their own lives and experiences?*

Chapter Overview

In this chapter I began with an anecdote about reading a picture book sprinkled with Spanish words to third and fourth grade students and having one Latinx girl meaningfully connect to it. As a teacher, this experience caused me to reflect on the impact that reading the story had on her. Next, I look at the fifth grade language arts curriculum and the fifth grade social studies curriculum used in the school district I have taught in during my four years as a teacher. As a new teacher, in four years I have taught fifth, sixth, blended third and fourth, blended fifth and sixth, and in 2020-2021 I will be teaching fifth grade students again. I delve into the relative cultural relevance of the fifth grade language arts curriculum compared to the fifth grade social studies curriculum. Due to the ineffectiveness of the social studies curriculum in this regard, I plan to create a curriculum that can be used in conjunction with, or at some points in lieu of, the currently used curriculum. The result will be a social studies curriculum that covers the critical standards for fifth grade social studies, but does so in a more culturally relevant way. This will benefit all students, as well as teachers and district administrators.

Curricular Background

The school district I have worked in since 2016 is located in a first ring suburb in a major metropolitan area in the Midwest. The district has done extensive equity training and has an equity vision statement posted in all classrooms and translated on the district website in Karen, Somali, and Spanish (2020). Since 2015, a selection of criteria has been in place, for reviewing and selecting curriculum, that includes the categories:

Exclusion/Invisibility, Stereotyping, Imbalance and Selectivity, Unreality, Fragmentation/Isolation, Linguistic Bias, Resource Data, and Alignment with Program Purpose, Goals and Outcomes (2015).

The language arts curriculum, which was purchased and implemented in 2010, does reasonably well with these categories even though it was not reviewed with this system. The main text book for fifth grade students is *Daybook for Critical Reading and Writing* (Claggett et al., 1998), published by a division of Houghton Mifflin Company. The fifth grade *Daybook* includes selections by Pam Muñoz Ryan, Carole Boston Weatherford, Julius Lester, Jacqueline Woodson, Yoshiko Uchida, Joseph Bruchac, Christopher Paul Curtis, and Nikki Grimes, alongside Rodman Philbrick, Jennifer Armstrong, Sharon Creech, Robert Frost, Russell Freedman, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, Karen Blumenthal, Cynthia Lord, and Louis Sachar (Claggett et al., 1998). The guided reading books primarily used are the *Voices Leveled Library* series (2011). This series, published by Zane-Bloser, has 48 books covering six themes which, besides teaching reading fluency and comprehension, help students with the following social skills: identity awareness; perspective taking; conflict resolution, friends, family and

community; social awareness; and democracy (2011). The relative success of the language arts curriculum, with diverse authors telling culturally authentic stories is not repeated with the social studies curriculum.

I feel that the social studies curriculum currently being used by most fifth grade teachers in my district, *Social Studies Alive! America's Past (2016)*, is ineffective in helping to connect students, especially people of color, to history in a culturally relevant way, and in some instances it is offensive. This textbook is published by Teachers' Curriculum Institute (TCI), based in Mountain View, CA. During my first year as a teacher, I recall teaching about the slave trade and the middle passage. There were sections of the textbook that I announced to the class that we would be omitting due to what I felt was an undercurrent of slavery apologism. Since choosing this curriculum in 2014, this district has done extensive professional development in equity training, and in social studies particularly, in Culturally Responsive Competent Teaching (CRCT). The CRCT training for social studies that the district began in 2018, looked at incorporating absent narratives into the content. I am planning to create a social studies curriculum, incorporating culturally relevant texts and materials that will contribute to an effort that has already begun.

Rationale

I feel that it is critical for students of color to see themselves in the books they are reading, whether it is textbooks, selections in the media center, or books I have acquired for the classroom library. Their lives and experiences should not be something that they have to check at the door when they enter the classroom. The fifth grade language arts

curriculum used in my school district does reasonably well in this area. The fifth grade social studies curriculum, however, misses the mark in many key areas. The references to Native Americans in *Social Studies Alive! America's Past (2016)* are almost exclusively to their existence in the distant past. Exploration and colonization are mentioned primarily in terms of being a contest between the leading countries of Europe, and there are numerous instances in the chapters that mention slavery that dehumanizes African Americans and portrays the importance of the cotton economy as being a justification for slavery.

History can be a powerful storyteller. The stories are not always easy to hear as U.S. history is full of atrocities. But even a horrific story, if told authentically with multiple perspectives, can elicit connection. In the spring of 2017, in my second year of teaching, I was wrapping up a chapter on the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. I was using *Northern Lights: The Stories of Minnesota's Past* (Kenney, 2013), my district's textbook for 6th grade social studies. On the last day of teaching, we watched a short video showing Dakota people and White ancestors of European people commemorating the 150 year anniversary of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 and of the public hanging in Mankato, MN of 38 Dakota men (Minnesota Historical Society, 2012). The video concludes with Chief Arvol Looking Horse saying, "All of us have to work together. It doesn't matter how that person is, try to see the goodness in every person. If the whole world can do that, we can create an energy shift here" (2012). My sixth grade class, made up of Latinx, Hmong, African American, Bhutanese, Indian and European American students spontaneously erupted into applause at the sentiment.

Stories, themes, and topics that students can connect with and that affirm one's identity have transformative power. My hope is that through creating a social studies curriculum that draws on stories, themes, and topics that are culturally relevant, fifth grade students in my class and in my district will connect historical events to their own lives and experiences the way that my sixth grade students did that spring afternoon. The curriculum that I am creating will assist teachers in my district who have been using *Social Studies Alive! America's Past (2016)* since the district first chose it, but have said that from the first year teachers were already rewriting the curriculum or heavily supplementing it (S. Jordan, personal communication, August 24, 2020).

Summary

This introductory chapter began looking at how a story that a child connects with can be a moment of joy and inspiration for both student and teacher. I went on to look at the fifth grade language arts curriculum and the fifth grade social studies curriculum in the school district I have taught in for four years. The fifth grade social studies curriculum is not as effective in connecting students to the content in a culturally relevant manner. I looked at my brief career in teaching and reflected on how a social studies curriculum that succeeds in connecting students' lives and experiences to the stories, themes and topics of history can be transformative. I plan to design a curriculum that teachers can efficiently and effectively use to cover fifth grade social studies standards in a more culturally relevant way.

Capstone Overview

The next chapters will cover the research and the methodology that will attempt to address the question: *How can I effectively teach reading and social studies that all students will meaningfully connect to their own lives and experiences?* In my next chapter, the review of literature looks at multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching. It also covers the opportunity gap, particularly as it pertains to reading development, and how connecting students to culturally relevant texts can have an impact in both their reading comprehension and their motivation to read. The third chapter looks at the methodology of the project, covering the rationale, setting, and timeline for creating a fifth grade social studies curriculum that incorporates culturally relevant texts in order to better help students to connect to U.S. history. The fourth chapter lays out the project in detail from beginning to completion.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Overview

When considering the guiding research question: *How can I effectively teach reading and social studies that all students will meaningfully connect to their own lives and experiences?* there is a wealth of knowledge to explore. In the first part of this chapter, I will look at the gradual increase in multicultural education in use in schools over the last generation or two, which has evolved into culturally responsive teaching. Even with this gradual increase, which has been instituted in an effort to reflect the demographic changes in the student population in the United States, there exists an opportunity gap between predominantly White middle-class students, and students of color and predominantly White students who are lower socioeconomically that tends to increase over time (Károly et al., 2005, p.2). My second section will delve into some of the reasons for opportunity gaps, particularly in reading development, and I will address some of the attempts at remedying the gaps. One of these efforts is to connect students to culturally relevant texts. My third section will focus on the benefits for all students when culturally relevant texts are used in classrooms, how teachers and students can select texts, and how they can be incorporated into instruction. My hope is that in looking at multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching, as well as studying the

opportunity gap, I can learn how assisting students in finding culturally relevant texts that connect to their own lives and experiences can assist them in numerous academic and cultural ways. This will culminate in creating a social studies curriculum for fifth grade social studies that incorporates culturally relevant texts.

Multicultural Education and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Multicultural education in schools in the U.S. looks at individual students, and groups of students, especially those from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups, with the intent of linking curriculum that will have relevance to their lives and their cultural experiences (Banks, 2016, p. 3). Culturally responsive teaching grew out of multicultural education and focuses on integrating home and community cultures of students with the academic environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, pp. 466-469). The use of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching has gradually increased in U.S. schools.

Historical Backdrop of Multicultural Education

Over the last 30 years or more there has been an increasing number of school districts that have recognized the importance of having a diverse reading curriculum that reflects the ethnic, racial and socioeconomic identity of the students. This movement toward multicultural education can be viewed as a way that all students will benefit and prepare them for a future where people of color are a majority of the population in the United States. By the middle of this century, some say as soon as 2043 (Sarraj et al., 2015, p. 39), more than half of the United States population will be people of color (Cortés, 1996 p.16). In the U.S. public school system, between fall 2000 and fall 2017,

there was a decrease from 61 to 48 percent of public school students who were White, and a decrease from 17 to 15 percent of students who were Black. In contrast, there was an increase during the same period from 16 to 27 percent of public school students who were Latinx (NCES 2020-144 & U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, p.32). As the multicultural education trend grew in the 1990s and into the 2000s, there was opposition to it, as well as proponents who felt that multicultural education was not enough. Where one stood in the debate said a great deal about one's beliefs philosophically about the place of cultural diversity in education (Gay, 1994. p.31). Particularly since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, "racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, transphobia, sexism, anti-environmentalism, anti-indigeneity, and white supremacy are all on the rise" (Au, 2017, p. 147) and many proponents of multicultural education feel that it is more imperative than even before.

Defining Multicultural Education

Gay, in the landmark 1994 book *At the Essence of Learning: Multicultural Education*, defined multicultural education thusly:

the policies, programs, and practices employed in schools to celebrate cultural diversity. It builds on the assumption that teaching and learning are invariably cultural processes. Since schools are composed of students and teachers from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, the best way for the educational process to be most effective for the greatest number of students is to be multicultural. (p.3)

Nieto had a somewhat more detailed definition in the 1992 textbook *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*:

a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers represent. Multicultural education permeates the curriculum and instructional strategies used in schools, the interaction among teacher, students, and parents, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education furthers the democratic principles of social justice. (p. 208)

Multicultural theorists, whichever definition they may hew to and whichever variable they may most focus on, look at how the interaction of race, class, and gender influences education (Banks, 2016, p.4). Most proponents of multicultural education view it not as an agenda, but rather as the way education should be in a demographically evolving society.

Proponents and Opponents of Multicultural Education

Proponents look at the demographic changes in the population in the United States and see multicultural learning as a necessity. One thought is that if students do not study diversity in schools, they will be exposed to it anyway via the societal curriculum, “that massive, ongoing, informal curriculum of family, peer groups, neighborhoods, churches, organizations, institutions, mass media, and other socializing forces that

educate all of us throughout our lives” (Cortés, 1981, p.24). Without constructive multicultural education, societal divisiveness based on ignorance and ethnocentrism can be a likely consequence (Cortés, 1996, p.18). Citizens can develop an identity with a narrow perspective and less flexible attitude when it comes to any kind of nonconformity (Pires, 2011, p.253). Gay (1994), in looking at the arguments of the various proponents and opponents summed it up saying, “Multicultural education’s goals for schools are not radically different from those embedded in the ideals of U.S. democratic values. But multicultural education asks that they be reinterpreted within the context of cultural diversity” (p.43).

Opponents to multicultural education have been present as long as the proponents. Banks (1993, as paraphrased by Gay [1994]) wrote that the opponents rely on three commonly held misconceptions—that multicultural education is : (1) an entitlement program and curriculum movement only for and about groups of color, the powerless, women, and other “victims”; (2) contradictory to Western cultural and democratic ideals; and (3) a divisive force that will destroy the national unity. (as cited in Gay, 1994, p. 33)

Greene talked of those who raged against multiculturalism, demonizing it as akin to communism not very long ago (1993, p. 212). Greene said that patriarchal thinking about curriculum posited that the “lesser” cultures would not be capable of writing *King Lear* or painting the Sistine ceiling (p. 215). Bloom, in the bestselling book *The Closing of the American Mind* bemoaned the devaluing of the transcendent values of Western civilization, particularly where the literary canon was concerned (Bloom, 1987).

Additionally, many viewed legislation such as No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) as moving further toward standardization at the very time that student populations are becoming increasingly diverse (Seaman, 2011, p.1). The tension between proponents and opponents continues as the United States demographic trends continue toward students of color becoming more of a majority.

Effects on Literacy Curriculum and Education

Boyd wrote of an American educational system that has held steadfastly to the literary canon to the exclusion of any literature written by and about people of color, women, people who are disabled, those with diverse religious doctrines, people who are non-heteronormative, and those from non-western countries and cultures (2002, p.63). The result, with some cultures' stories absent, while the stories of European Americans are prevalent, leaves all children with a perception that privileges one group and virtually excludes all other groups (p.63). When students of color do not hear their stories or see their culture represented, and when they have teachers who make little effort to understand or respect their culture and ways of being, school becomes an unfamiliar and alienating place (Pan, 2006, p.22).

Literature is an area where multicultural education is especially apt. Multicultural literature may include narrative stories, folktales, and poetry that incorporate themes, images, characters, and dialogue representing diverse cultures and languages other than English (Bui & Fagan, 2013, p.60). Bringing multicultural literature into a classroom, particularly a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom, can allow students to connect their own lives and experiences to what they are reading. When students feel

validated by curriculum that reflects their life experiences, they feel more motivated and they learn better (Banks, 1990). Thus revising curricula so that it reflects the backgrounds of the students should not be considered merely a good idea, or something to try from time to time. It should be required (Pan, 2006, p.25).

Multicultural Literature in Social Studies

Goudvis and Harvey (2012) remarked that many elementary schools have cut back on the minutes that they are teaching social studies with the result being that the curriculum has become wide in scope, but narrow in depth. Thus students are taking in a lot of information, but not necessarily synthesizing it into new knowledge. Harvey observed a fifth grade classroom where foundational literacy practices and social studies curriculum were combined. Students were using four generative practices that the authors espouse. Students were interacting with multiple texts to build knowledge, asking purposeful questions, evaluating authors' purposes and perspectives, and working on inferring important ideas using picture books. The authors found that the students learned many compelling ways to understand people and topics from history. The students were able to both link these people and topics to the present and connect history to their own lives and experiences (pp. 52-57).

Reidel and Draper (2013) also looked at an interdisciplinary approach to social studies and language arts in an effort to improve what they viewed as the superficial understanding most U.S. adolescents have of other cultures. Their approach to learning more about world cultures focuses on confronting stereotypes and dispelling misconceptions in order to gain in-depth knowledge of cultures other than one's own (p.

116). Ladson-Billings (2012) argues that it is necessary to tear down the prescribed curriculum and then build it back up, filling in the holes that emerge from students examining it, questioning it, and trying to understand it. This requires teachers to be culturally competent to the degree that they weave back and forth between the lives of their students and the curriculum of the school (pp. 36-40). Martell (2018) views social studies as being a subject that is well positioned to help students sustain their cultures while developing an understanding for how their culture connects to U.S. history (p.64). This connection between a student's life outside of school, and the academic content being taught inside of school, is critical for all learners.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching uses cultural knowledge and prior knowledge in an effort to make learning more effective. In 1978 Cortés looked at the concept of the Multicultural Person as being one “with the multicultural competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) for living with effectiveness, sensitivity, self-fulfillment, and understanding in a culturally pluralistic nation and increasingly interdependent world” (pp. 20-22). Developing these *multicultural persons* will not happen without being integrated into the training and education of teacher candidates, as well as professional development of current teachers. Training of culturally responsive teachers would need to include being attentive to how student learning is influenced by home language, family culture, as well as the realities of race and class privilege and the ongoing manifestations of institutional racism within the educational system (Schnellert & Kozak, 2019, p.75). Prior to the arrival of training in multicultural education, teachers (and others in many

different parts of society) would often talk of seeing no differences in their students, or stating that everyone is an individual and should be treated as such. Gay (1994) views this as implicitly equating social, racial and cultural differences with inferiority and discrimination. Multicultural education views accepting diverse ethnic identities and cultural experiences is a necessity in order to address the individuality and humanity of students.

Culturally relevant teaching has its roots in the early 1980s. Teachers in Hawaiian classrooms were observed using *talk-story*, which is a language interaction style that was common among Native Hawaiian children (Au, 1980, pp. 93-95) and in an Odawa reserve community classroom in Northern Ontario, Mohatt and Erickson studied teachers using language interaction patterns that closely matched the students' home cultural patterns (1981, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p.466). These early studies used terms such as culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, and culturally compatible that had some connotations of accommodation. This arena of study and terminology evolved to culturally responsive teaching which is "a more dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p.467).

Culturally responsive teachers are able to recognize some of the societal inequities that exist that adversely affect students. The teachers demonstrate an ability to support furthering academic success and encouraging cultural competence in their students while assisting them in learning how to identify, understand, and critique current social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 476). In 2014, Ladson-Billings looked back on the years since first pioneering culturally relevant pedagogy. The three domains

Ladson-Billings felt were needed in the work of successful purveyors include academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. The author stressed that incorporating these three domains into one's teaching is not a recipe or a formula that one can apply a single time to achieve results. An evolving, continuously observing theory of culturally *sustaining* pedagogy, with "rebooting" as required, is what is needed (Ladson-Billings, 2014, pp.75-76).

Montgomery believed so strongly in culturally responsive classrooms that the author began a 2001 article by twice stating, "Culturally responsive classrooms specifically acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and the tasks teachers ask them to perform." Montgomery provides guidelines for districts, schools, and teachers to follow in setting up classrooms that will be culturally responsive and inclusive. It is first stressed that a critical self-assessment of one's own culture and values, as well as one's assumptions and biases, is important. Secondly, culturally responsive instructional methods and materials that will suit the specific needs of the classroom are needed. This includes explicit, strategic instruction as well as interdisciplinary units and instructional scaffolding. Montgomery notes that the atmosphere of the classroom needs to reflect the respective cultures of the students in that year's class. Knowing and respecting individuals and their cultural differences is critical. Different strategies to accomplish that—cross-cultural literature discussion groups, cooperative learning groups, guided and informal group discussions—may also serve to foster an interactive classroom learning environment. The author also stresses that this is

an ongoing effort with culturally aware assessments, continual collaboration with other professionals, with families, and with the community (pp. 4-8).

Summary of Multicultural Education

The increase of multicultural education in schools in the U.S. does not reflect the demographic changes in the student population, but the disparity is not as pronounced as it had been a generation ago. There will always be some tension between those who desire to hew to tradition and those who see change as a requirement. Multicultural education, which spawned culturally responsive teaching, looks at individual students, and groups of students, and seeks out ways to connect curriculum, especially literacy, that will be relevant to their lives and experiences.

Opportunity Gap in Reading Development

The performance in reading of students from different socio-economic backgrounds and different racial and ethnic backgrounds tends to show some difference when students enter school. As students finish elementary school and enter middle school and high school, the opportunity gap in reading increases between predominantly White middle-class students, and students of color and predominantly White students who are lower socioeconomically (Karoly et al., 2005, pp.1-2). The educational system has looked at numerous factors that have contributed to this issue and there have been many remedies that have been attempted.

Historical Background and Contributing Factors

In the early 1970s, DeStafano (1973) documented several educational researchers who looked at “cultural clash” in school situations due to teachers and students coming

from different cultural backgrounds, accompanied by different verbal and nonverbal behavioral patterns. DeStafano looked at how these patterns were viewed and judged from the perspective of one's own culture with little knowledge, and sometimes little care, for the other's cultural value system. It was observed that cultural clash can block learning. From the teacher's perspective, they don't make an effort to get to know the students and from the student's perspective the teachers are possibly viewed as racist or sexist. DeStafano reported that in the United States, the dominant culture valued a literary tradition, where Black culture, Native American culture and some aspects of Latinx culture valued oral traditions. The author commented, "In an orally based culture, reading has little place or may be seen as peripheral to the cultural reward system (pp. 3-6).

In 1990 Lucas and Schecter argued that non-mainstream students (the authors' term that they defined as mostly non-White, mostly non-middle class students who may or may not be native speakers of English) do not perform as well in schools than mainstream students (their term that they defined as predominantly White, middle-class, native English speakers) (pp. 2-9). (Rueda et al., 2001) looked more deeply at motivational aspects of reading and literacy in poor non-English speaking Latinx first and second grade students. They viewed motivation as being not solely an individual's characteristic, but more a sociocultural construct of personal, interpersonal, and institutional, or community planes. The authors felt then that their analysis was looking much broader than studies that looked solely at the individual plane of development. Thus they looked beyond a single child's motivation, engagement, and performance outcomes, to include the interrelationships between the single child and other students

and the single child and teachers, as well as family practices, values and beliefs. Their conclusions were that when looking at children's individual motivations toward engaged reading, the individual characteristics cannot be considered in isolation, but rather should be viewed simultaneously through the lens of the classroom, and how families' values, beliefs, resources, and constraints intertwine, being that these are the basis of children's daily practices (Rueda et al., pp. 6-21). More recently, a 5-year longitudinal study looking at the growth in reading skills between native English speakers and English-language learners in a U.S. school district found that the significant differences present in kindergarten in early literacy skills were found to be negligible by fourth grade (Lesaux et al., 2007, pp. 821-829).

The Rand Corporation in 2005 looked at school readiness and the consequences for those children who do not have the same access to resources and support due to low income and a myriad of other factors. They found that it can impede their ability to develop at the same pace as peers who had more access. Opportunity gaps tend to increase as students move through elementary school and into middle school and high school. "National assessments at grades eight and 12 show that about 50 percent of children from at-risk backgrounds (e.g., low parental education or low family income) score below the "basic" level of reading and math achievement" (Karoly et al., pp. 1-2). These studies over the decades demonstrate an issue that continues to garner needed *attention in school districts across the country.*

Attempts at Remediating the Opportunity Gap in Reading

During the administration of President George W. Bush, as part of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited-English Proficient Students (OELA) was formed with a mission to “ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation” (Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (ED), Washington, DC., 2002, p. 2). Looking at the statistics about the growth in enrollment of students in the 1990s with limited English proficiency, the OELA’s brochure glowingly said, “public school enrollments were transformed by an increase in the number of students who brought the richness of linguistic and cultural diversity with them to our schools” (p. 2). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also mandated that each state have an accountability system for all students, particularly focused on closing the opportunity gap between European American students and students of color (Bui & Fagan, 2013, p. 59). Bui and Fagan observed that a majority of teachers are from a White European background while increasingly there are more students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who may find difficulty with the expectations, routines, and culture of schools (Bui & Fagan, 2013, p. 60 as cited in Boykin, 1992; Garcia, 1988; Weisner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988).

In 1988 Ladson-Billings noticed that many were writing about cultural differences in classrooms and how it resulted in student failure. Ladson-Billings looked for schools where there was academic success among African-American students to try to discover what was working effectively at those schools. The study looked at eight teachers who

were teaching in a small (less than 3,000 students) predominantly African-American, low-income elementary school district in Northern California. These teachers were adept because they were able to help students achieve academic success and maintain cultural competence, while learning more about social inequities. The essential qualities Ladson-Billings saw in these effective teachers were that they believed all students were capable of academic success, they saw a certain art to their pedagogy, they viewed themselves as being a part of the community, and they felt that teaching was a contribution that gave back to the community (1995, pp. 471-483).

Ebe wrote in 2010 about English Language Learners (ELLs) and culturally relevant texts. Ebe looked at connection, as other cited studies previously had, as the ability to draw on students' background knowledge and their experiences to make meaning. Additionally, use of literature that students connect to their lives and their experiences, can foster pride which can lead to increased commitment and success. Ebe found that when students had little or no connection to the text, they were less proficient in their reading fluency and comprehension. Ebe, giving much credit to Goodman's 1982 work, devised a rubric looking at eight factors for teachers and students to consider when choosing a culturally relevant text. The factors are to be considered in "using this rubric: 1) the ethnicity of the characters, 2) the setting, 3) the year the story takes place, 4) age of the characters, 5) gender of the characters, 6) the language or dialect used in the story, 7) the genre and exposure to this type of text, 8) the reader's background experiences" (pp. 193-209).

Summary of Opportunity Gap

Since the 1970s and researchers' identification of "culture clash," there have been an innumerable number of studies looking at the innumerable number of reasons and making an innumerable number of recommendations on how to remedy the gaps in academic achievement between predominantly White middle-class students, and students of color and predominantly White students who are lower socioeconomically. Focusing specifically on literacy, culturally relevant texts have been found to make an impact on students' motivation to read and their ability to comprehend what they are reading.

Culturally Relevant Texts

Culturally diverse literature generally has looked at themes centered on race, ethnicity, culture, and language, with more recent advocates also including themes on physical and mental disabilities, socioeconomic status, and differences in language, dialect, religion. Additional characteristics of cultural diversity included in more recent literature are various family structures, such as foster families, and sexual and gender identity (Boyd et al., 2015, p.379). All of these themes help students find connection to either what they are personally experiencing or to what someone else in the classroom community may be experiencing. Culturally relevant texts are becoming more readily available.

Historical Perspective on the Need for Culturally Relevant Texts

In 1965, the year I was born in Lily White, Green Bay, Wisconsin, 98.82 % White to be exact (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1970), Larrick, a writer and former president of the International Reading Association, wrote an article for the Saturday Review entitled, "The All-White World of Children's Books," looking at the

dearth of books for children that depict any children of color. In 1965 Larrick noted that there were 6,340,000 children of color who were learning to read and to understand the American way of life while reading books that either omitted them entirely or scarcely mentioned them. Larrick commented on both the damage on children of color, as well as the impact on the 39,600,000 White children. The author delved into the reluctance on the part of publishers, with one sales manager saying, “Why jeopardize sales by putting one or two Negro faces in an illustration?” Salesmen of books as well as individual citizens made their oppositional thoughts and opinions heard and authors and illustrators were at times implored to change a book that was well into preparation to an all-white cast. Larrick noted that there is a glimmer of hope for change with The Council for Interracial Books for Children, which was formed in 1965 (pp. 63-65, 84-85).

The importance of connecting students to culturally relevant texts can not be overstated. When students have background knowledge and familiarity with a text’s subject, they are more likely to be able to make predictions, make inferences, and most importantly, make connections to what they are reading.

Benefits for Students

Feger discovered the value of culturally relevant literature when working with a high school second language classroom. Feger found that it led to increased student engagement and gave students opportunities to explore their bilingual and bicultural identities (2006, p. 18). Y. Freeman, working with middle school students in Arizona, found that when a text contains familiar elements, readers can more easily construct meaning because their background knowledge helps them make predictions and

inferences about the story (Freeman, Y. & Freeman, D., 2004, p.7). Research Y. Freeman conducted on miscue analysis showed students were able to comprehend better, through retellings of the story, and their fluency was better, based on higher quality miscues, when the story was culturally relevant. These improvements then lead to increased engagement with texts and increased motivation to read. Additionally, connection to identity is integral to development and can be improved with culturally relevant texts. The authors point out that multicultural literature is not to be confused with culturally relevant literature. “Culturally relevant books connect to students’ lives, not just to their cultural heritage” (2004, p.8).

Clark and Fleming (2019) studied 13 preschool to third-grade classroom experiences with using culturally relevant texts in a large urban school district. They viewed these texts as opportunities for children to connect their everyday lives and experiences with the primary characters. Additionally, they noted that via the texts personal identities were affirmed and reading engagement increased among marginalized children” (p. 25). The study was focused on the use of culturally relevant texts as mirror texts, where kids see themselves reflected in the characters. The teachers in the study provided many examples of the texts also serving as window texts, where students from the dominant sociocultural background enjoyed reading the texts, thus expanding their understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity (p. 40). Overall their study demonstrated that culturally relevant texts can positively impact children’s reading engagement and their comprehension (p. 43). Additionally, identity affirmation was

evident for students who saw the texts as mirrors and increased understanding of other cultures was evident for students who saw the texts as windows (pp. 36-43).

Criteria for Selecting Texts

In order for students to garner the benefits culturally relevant texts can provide, they need to be able to access texts with which they can explore their identities and connect with the characters. Many know about the Newbery Award and the Caldecott Award, given by the American Library Association each year for excellent literature written and illustrated for children. Boyd et al. (2015) notes there are many other awards that are given out that can assist teachers in selecting culturally diverse literature that reflects the general population of their school, their classroom in a given year, or even a particular student or group of students. The Coretta Scott King Award honors authors and illustrators portraying the lives and experiences of African Americans. The Pura Belpré Award for Latinx children's literature, The Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award for stories depicting the lives of Mexican Americans, The American Indian Youth Literature Award given for writing and illustrating books for Native Americans, The Asian Pacific American Award for Literature, The Arab American Book Award, The Schneider Family Book Award given to books that depict the experience of living with a disability, The Batchelder Award for books originally published outside the United States in other languages and translated to English, and the Stonewall Book Award honoring books about LGBTQ identity (pp. 381-382). These sources are among many others available to teachers and students in the quest to locate texts that individual students will find relevant to their lives.

Incorporating Texts into Classroom

Kibler and Chapman (2019) acknowledged how in many studies, it has been shown that the use of culturally relevant texts could improve the outcomes for reading and help to affirm the identities of students. They came up with a list of six items teachers can look to do in their individual classrooms. Their first tip “Examine Your Positionality” looks at how it is important to first look at one’s own identity in terms of race, gender, social class, and values to see how it shapes our own understanding of the world. Next is to “Create a Safe Learning Environment” which will engender in students the ability to discuss their personal perspectives and diverse backgrounds. It is critical with the third tip, “Get to Know Your Students’ Backgrounds,” to get to know each student individually, as well as to get to know their families and communities. With the fourth tip, “Carefully Select Culturally Relevant Texts,” they stress to be certain to not make assumptions and to be careful to avoid stereotypes. They cite Ebe’s rubric as a helpful tool and encourage teachers to have older students contribute to the selection process. The fifth tip, “Create Transformative Experiences During Reading,” encourages teachers to use more than just a text to connect with students. The final tip, “Extend Beyond the Text,” speaks of the need for not just adding multicultural texts, but for examining the entire literacy curriculum (pp. 742-744).

Sharma and Christ (2017) presented five steps toward successfully selecting and integrating culturally relevant texts into a classroom. Their article has some overlap with Kibler and Chapman’s article, but they used a real example to illustrate how a third-grade teacher deftly altered lesson plans for a typical Thanksgiving unit to meet the needs of her particular students that year. In the case study, the pseudonymous Ms. Misoni 1)

recognizes the need for culturally responsive instruction with her group of students and chooses *Molly's Pilgrim*, a book by Barbara Cohen that tells a current day tale of an immigrant girl. Ms. Misoni 2) has learned a lot about her students' lives through one-on-one reader interviews, student created digital stories, and encouraging them to seek out texts that they feel are culturally relevant to them. Using this information, she 3) searches for culturally relevant texts for her students. She plans "to move beyond the typical white-culture-coming-to-America theme into a crossing-borders theme that will" (p. 298) link to Thanksgiving while giving her nonwhite immigrant students an opportunity to see themselves in the literacy curriculum. She 4) selects culturally relevant texts using a rubric based mostly on Ebe's work (Ebe, 2010). Finally, Ms. Misoni 5) creates opportunities for students to discuss during her crossing-borders unit by coming up with critical questions before instruction (Sharma & Christ, 2017 pp. 295-305).

Summary of Culturally Relevant Texts

Culturally relevant texts are critical for all students, as they contribute to affirming and forming identities and to expanding knowledge of diverse cultures and values. Culturally relevant texts increase students' motivation to read, help with improving reading strategies, and allow students to meaningfully connect what they are reading to their own lives. Selecting texts for students to read and for whole class instruction requires some knowledge. Several studies and articles have included guidelines to adhere to or lists to follow that will assist a teacher in incorporating culturally relevant texts into their classroom every school year.

Conclusion

The second chapter began with examining the gradual increase of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching in classrooms in the United States where there is a rapidly changing student population in terms of ethnic, racial and socioeconomic diversity. I then looked at the opportunity gap that exists between predominantly White middle-class students, and students of color and predominantly White students who are lower socioeconomically. In reading development, this gap widens from elementary school to middle school and high school. Lastly, I looked at the impact culturally relevant texts can have on students. They can learn more about themselves and their identity, as well as learning about other cultures. This leads to increased motivation to read and to improved reading comprehension. The project that I will be discussing in the methodology chapter deals with using culturally relevant texts to meaningfully connect students to their own lives and experiences. The principal objective will be to use chapters of the social studies textbook, *Social Studies Alive! America's Past* (2016), as a jumping off point for students to read and research culturally relevant material, with a focus on absent narratives, that they find meaningful.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching continue to increase gradually in their use in public schools in the U.S., while demographic changes continue to occur rapidly. An opportunity gap in reading development exists between predominantly White middle-class students, and students of color and predominantly White students who are lower socioeconomically. This opportunity gap tends to increase as students move from elementary school to middle school and high school. With this in mind it is critical to consider: *How can I effectively teach reading and social studies that all students will meaningfully connect to their own lives and experiences?*

One remedy for this issue in reading development is to link students to books that are more culturally relevant so that they can better connect to what they are reading. All students can benefit from having culturally relevant texts used in their classrooms. When teachers and students know how to select texts and teachers are able to integrate them into the curriculum and instruction, students profit. Bringing culturally responsive competent teaching into literacy and social studies by using culturally relevant texts will allow students to connect these texts to their own lives and experiences.

This chapter begins with an overview of the project and the educational paradigms that will be utilized. Next, the rationale explains why using culturally relevant texts in an interdisciplinary approach will have benefits for students and teachers. Following that is a description of the setting for the project, which provides context that further demonstrates reasons for the project. The last section explains the timeline for creating the project.

Project Overview

For this capstone project, I will be creating a fifth grade social studies curriculum for use in a school district located in a first ring suburb of a major metropolitan area in the Midwest. This curriculum can be used in conjunction with *Social Studies Alive! America's Past* or in some instances, in place of *Social Studies Alive! America's Past* (2016), which is the current textbook primarily used in fifth grade classrooms. The thrust of the curriculum would relate to my research question: *How can I effectively teach reading that all students will meaningfully connect to their own lives and experiences?* The principal objective would be to use chapters of the textbook as a starting point for students to read and research other more culturally relevant material, with a focus on absent narratives that they find meaningful. The interdisciplinary nature of linking language arts to social studies allows teachers to effectively and efficiently teach more social studies standards.

Several paradigms potentially overlap in this project. There will be cognitive constructivism, as well as social constructivism, especially if students are together in a classroom setting rather than online. Through whole group discussion and small group

discussion, students will be encouraged to share what they already know and build new knowledge. Humanism and the potential for transformation enter in as students learn about their histories and thus about themselves (Baker et al., 2019). Engaged students will use critical thinking and creativity as they expand their knowledge and increase their responsibility socially, culturally and globally.

Understanding by Design will be used to guide the curriculum creation. I will begin looking at fifth grade social studies standards that are deemed power standards by the school district. With this end result in mind, working backwards from there, I will determine instructional strategies and learning activities for students. As I create lesson plans, I will focus on what meanings and understandings are critical for students to make. I will look at how students will be able to convey that they have indeed acquired new knowledge and understanding. The lesson plans and activities will then be geared toward students achieving the desired results of the assessments (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Keeping this process in the forefront of my mind while planning will ensure that students are receiving learning activities that are creating meaning for them and that connect to their lives and experiences.

Rationale

I selected this project because the instructional strategies and learning activities with the current curriculum are ineffective at connecting with all students. Having taught the current curriculum being used by most fifth grade teachers in my district, *Social Studies Alive! America's Past* (2016), I felt it was ineffective in helping to connect students to history in a relevant way, and in some instances it was offensive. Portrayals of

Native Americans are fraught with well-worn myths and half-truths, and are part of what Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker (2016) refer to as narratives of erasure, as if Native Americans existed in history, but not in the present (pp. 3-11). The chapter on slavery has an undercurrent of apologism, with nearly a third of the chapter covering life in West Africa and placing the onus of responsibility for slavery in America on those who enslaved people in West Africa. Before those who were enslaved came to the United States, the textbook refers to them as enslaved West Africans, newly enslaved Africans, and enslaved people. After surviving the passage across the Atlantic Ocean and arriving in the United States, there are 44 references to slaves, without ever referring to them as people or enslaved people. The line I found most offensive was regarding the passage, where the text says “One slave recounted that he was relieved when he found out that he was going to the Americas to work. He had feared that his captors would eat him!” (2016). These examples are instances that marginalize people. For young students, especially students of color, possibly hearing these stories for the first time, feeling marginalized or excluded from U.S. history has a profound negative impact.

This district has since done extensive professional development in equity training since this curriculum was purchased in 2014. In Culturally Responsive Competent Teaching (CRCT) professional development in 2018, the social studies curriculum has been examined by grade level in order to incorporate absent narratives into the content. This curriculum project, integrating culturally relevant texts, will contribute to an effort that has already begun.

In my four years of teaching, I have used *Social Studies Alive! America's Past* once, my first year of teaching, which was a fifth grade classroom. I have once used *Social Studies Alive! Regions of Our Country*, which is TCI's fourth grade textbook. I have also twice taught using *Northern Lights: The Stories of Minnesota's Past* (Kenney, 2013), which our district uses for sixth grade. This textbook is published by the Minnesota Historical Society. *Northern Lights: The Stories of Minnesota's Past* does a far better job of finding absent narratives using primary sources, telling the stories of Dakota and Ojibwe men and women, the Métis (mixed-race) people during the fur trading era, the interpreter George Bonga who was the son of an African American fur trader and an Ojibwe woman, Eliza Winston and Dred and Mary Scott's fights for freedom, Good Star Woman's remembrances of the U.S.-Dakota War, and immigrant families from the late 19th century to throughout the 20th century and 21st century. I will be teaching fifth grade social studies again this coming school year. The goal of the curriculum I will be developing is to find and read about absent narratives, or to assist fifth grade students in finding them. The class list I received in August 2020 for the 2020-2021 school year shows that 31 of my 33 fifth grade students are kids of color. I want to teach U.S. history with culturally relevant texts that can affirm each student's personal identity and increase their reading engagement (Clark and Fleming, 2019, p.25).

I was compelled to the idea of an interdisciplinary project with literacy and social studies curriculum creation. I will focus first on the social studies standards covering historical thinking skills. These skills, interpreting connections, posing questions, drawing conclusions from evidence, explaining a historical event from multiple

perspectives, analyzing causes and outcomes (Education World, 2020), cross over into different topics in social studies, but also cross into many other subjects, particularly language arts. Through looking at the topics and themes in social studies, students will read and research culturally relevant texts and material that will assist them in transferring this new knowledge and these new skills to their lives (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

Students will use cognitive constructivism as they gain new culturally relevant knowledge, through working and discussing together, that they connect to their own lives and experiences. Social constructivism will be more challenging with distance learning, but small groups, whether face-to-face or in a virtual setting, will share findings and discuss varying perspectives. Humanism will come from students experiencing personal growth as they see themselves, their families, and their cultures in the texts and materials they are reading and researching (Baker et al., 2019). As students continue to grow, creating new knowledge, synthesizing ideas, and owning their education, they will potentially be transformed as they see how history can be used to affect change. This curriculum project flows from the research I reviewed, it is needed in the classroom I will have this coming year, and it will dovetail nicely with the work that is already being done by others in the district.

Setting

The first-ring suburban district that I work in has seven of the eight elementary schools using *Social Studies Alive! America's Past*. District wide the student ethnicity is 44% White, 20% Asian, 16% Black, 14% Hispanic, 6% Multiracial, and less than 1%

American Indian. 31% of students have a language other than English spoken at home, with Spanish, Karen and Hmong the most prevalent home languages (Public School Review, 2020). At my particular elementary school, the student ethnicity is 29% White, 19% Asian, 11% Black, 34% Hispanic, 7% Multiracial, and effectively 0% American Indian.

Reading proficiency district wide for K-12 is 57%, compared to the state wide proficiency of 60%. The elementary school I will launch this curriculum at has a reading proficiency of 44% (Public School Review, 2020). Improving reading comprehension and fluency is an educational focus of the school, with teacher growth and evaluation goals annually linked to reading proficiency.

Project Timeline

This curriculum will be developed and launched in the fall of 2020 and will be used throughout the school year at the initial school. Due to COVID-19, this curriculum will have built into it modifications for distance learning, blended learning, which combines distance-learning and in-person learning, and in-person instruction. There are 23 chapters in *Social Studies Alive! America's Past*. The pacing guide put out by the district places the chapters into four different categories: Core 1, Core 2, Optional, and Not Required. There are 15 chapters in Core 1 and 2, which are deemed to be the chapters that cover the most critical grade level content. The district gives teachers two options. Option 1 covers, on a rather superficial level, all 15 chapters. Option 2, prioritizes ten of the chapters, allowing for more instructional depth.

I will focus on the chapters in Option 2. I will look at the themes, topics, people, and places covered in each of these ten chapters. I will take into account the fifth grade state social studies standards, particularly the district's power standards. I will also look at literacy standards as this curriculum will consume all of the allotted instructional minutes for social studies, but may also use some language arts minutes. Working from there, I will create learning opportunities for students that will cover the social studies power standards and some literacy standards, while focusing on the ten chapters.

Students demonstrating success with this curriculum will grow in their critical thinking and historical thinking skills. They will be able to analyze causes and outcomes of historical events and explain events from multiple perspectives. Using culturally relevant texts, they will be able to describe ways in which people throughout U.S. history developed and maintained their cultural identities (Education World, 2020). They will increase in their awareness of their own identities, their motivation to read, and their reading proficiency, as measured by state assessments.

The curriculum will be created during the first trimester of the 2020-2021 school year, which runs from September 8 to December 3. It will be implemented as it is created at the initial elementary school. Necessary modifications will be made to increase effectiveness. It will be shared with all schools in the district possibly in the 2020-2021 school year, but certainly no later than the 2021-2022 school year.

Chapter Summary

To begin this project, I demonstrated a need for more culturally relevant texts to be used in the ethnically, racially and socioeconomically diverse classrooms in U.S

public schools. The use of culturally relevant texts can contribute to closing the opportunity gap and be part of answering the question: *How can I effectively teach reading and social studies that all students will meaningfully connect to their own lives and experiences?* I provided a rationale for why incorporating culturally relevant texts and other materials into the prescribed curriculum for fifth grade social studies is an efficient and effective way to benefit students and teachers. I described the setting where the project will be launched which gave more credence to the necessity of the project. Finally, I explained the timeline for creating the project.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROJECT

Introduction

My project focused on the question: *How can I effectively teach reading and social studies that all students will meaningfully connect to their own lives and experiences?* In this chapter, I will reflect on the process of arriving at this question and what it meant personally and professionally to me and to students and teachers in my school district. I will revisit the literature that I reviewed to prepare me to embark on this work. I will conclude by looking at the possible ways in which my project will be used, by colleagues at my school and in my district, to engage and educate students.

Critical Reflection

Arriving at my research question proved to be a rather arduous task, to say nothing of the task of attempting to address said research question. I began with advice from teacher colleagues, internet searches and professors who encouraged me to look for a topic I was passionate about and one that I could put to use in my teaching career. I began with thinking about the decided differences between teaching at the first two schools I worked at and the school I have been teaching at now for four years. Although all are in the same first-ring suburban school district, family socioeconomic status, racial

and ethnic diversity, and standardized test score performance vary considerably from the first two schools to the third.

The school I am working at is a Title I school and in my four years teaching there, I have learned a tremendous amount about how to engage and educate elementary school students. However, when thinking about my teaching practices when I was a new teacher, I feel there were students at my first two schools who had opportunities afforded them that my current students have not had. These differences mean, among many other things, that teaching begins at a very different starting point. As I dug into my research, my research question evolved through a few iterations, all the while focusing on connecting students' lives and experiences outside the classroom to the academic content being discussed inside the classroom.

When researching multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching I found myself dismayed by the opposition to incorporating it into increasingly diverse classrooms in the United States. Ladson-Billings, when talking about sharing their findings on culturally responsive teaching with school administrators, teachers and teacher educators, often hears the response, "But that's just good teaching!" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a), and that is precisely how I felt reading much of the research on culturally responsive teaching.

I focused on those studies that looked at successes. How might I replicate those successes in my classroom? I was particularly drawn to Ladson-Billings' 1988 study about teachers who were effective in helping students achieve academic success while maintaining cultural competence (1995, pp. 471-483) and Ebe's 2010 findings regarding

how the use of culturally relevant texts can foster pride in students, leading to increased commitment and success (pp. 193-209). With these and other studies in mind, I thought about the student population I work with and how I have seen some of those successes when our class discussions and learnings are connectable to their lives and experiences.

The benefits for students of increased reading comprehension and fluency were borne out in study after study. Identity affirmation and increased understanding of other cultures was also seen in several articles (Feger, 2006, p. 18; Freeman, Y. & Freeman, D., 2004, p.7; Clark and Fleming, 2019). Using culturally relevant texts seemed so much more than just a good idea to trot out on occasion. It seemed imperative to work it into planning and curriculum at every opportunity.

Curriculum Project

The most immediate need that I saw in my teaching was in the social studies curriculum that is used in my school district. I had used *Social Studies Alive! America's Past*, the textbook for fifth grade, just once before. In my first full year as a teacher I had found the curriculum to be problematic at best. Put most simply, it is told through a White male European perspective, relegating other perspectives to sidebars and an end of chapter section "Reading Further" (2016). Looking at the prospect of teaching it again with a class consisting of over 90% students of color was unconscionable.

The idea of incorporating more culturally relevant material into the social studies curriculum, using the textbook as a chronological framework, would allow me to satisfy state social studies standards, focusing especially on those the school district has deemed power standards. Eventually I plan to use the lesson plan template I developed for this

project to rewrite the curriculum for the entire book. More than memorizing dates and places, students will grow in their critical thinking and historical thinking skills. Using culturally relevant texts will help students connect to U.S. history, while increasing their awareness of their own identities.

In my research, I came across a passage that was instrumental in helping me shape my template for the project. Martell looked at the possibilities for history classrooms

...where students investigate different historical accounts intentionally chosen to include the experiences of groups often marginalized in U.S society and acknowledge that certain groups have been left out or removed from the historical record. They challenge students to specifically think about how past events contributed to their lives and society, learn not only their own histories but also the histories of others, and examine past inequity and its relationship to present inequity and possible solutions. (2018)

I felt that this articulately captured many of the musings that were in my head. It included marginalized groups, being included in the historical narrative, so that students could potentially relate historical events, to the present day, and to their own lives and experiences.

Implications

In 2018, the district held Culturally Responsive Competent Teaching (CRCT) professional development with the objective of incorporating absent narratives into the social studies curriculum. Work was begun on some of the chapters and was left in

various states of completion. My curriculum project, integrating culturally relevant texts, will contribute greatly to the effort begun in 2018. This year it is being taught to 5th grade students at my elementary school. It will be shared with all teachers in the district as each lesson is completed. It will also be shared with the elementary program administrator, who I have been in contact with from the beginning stages of my project.

Given that in the 2020-2021 school year we are teaching primarily online, and that our social studies textbooks are fraught with problematic passages for a school district that is approaching 60% students of color (Public School Review, 2020), I feel there could be a realization that a social studies textbook is somewhat anachronistic. Using an online approach would allow for the school district, or individual schools and teachers, to modify portions of the lesson plans annually. Books and other primary sources could be added that would engage and connect with each specific population of students.

Limitations

My first thought, when pondering the limitations, was something along the lines of, “Whaddya mean? There aren’t any!” After thinking a little further and reflecting on some of the research studied in my literature review, I can see numerous potential pitfalls. Ladson-Billings (2014) stressed that culturally relevant teaching is not a recipe or a formula that one can put into place and be set. It is constantly evolving and continuous observation and tweaking is what is needed (pp.75-76). Often teachers prefer the efficiency of installing something that can then run indefinitely.

Kibler and Chapman stressed that when selecting culturally relevant texts for students, one must be certain to not make assumptions and to be careful to avoid stereotypes. Just because a student is part of a racial or ethnic group, does not mean that they share all the values or general interests of the group. They also encourage teachers to have older students contribute to the selection process (2019). I see this as a critical step so that it is not solely a teacher-centered process.

With social studies in general, and U.S. history in particular, inclusivity of all groups has limitations. A Latinx student may or may not connect with stories about the involvement of African-Americans during the Revolutionary War. A Hmong student may not feel that the experiences of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century have any relevance in their lives. Teachers must be aware of their students and help them in making connections with history that will be relevant in their lives.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter serves as a reflection for the capstone project that delved into the research question: *How can I effectively teach reading and social studies that all students will meaningfully connect to their own lives and experiences?* I began with looking at the literature review, and what I learned from the research that guided me in writing and creating this project. I continued with the curriculum project creation and how the knowledge gained from the research could help address a need for my teaching. I finished with exploring the possible implications of this project for teachers and students, and the potential limitations of the project. My sincere hope is that this curriculum will inspire

and encourage teachers to help students meaningfully connect their lives and experiences to their academic endeavors.

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