

Spring 2023

Creating a Culturally Inclusive American Literature Classroom

Holly R. Bradshaw

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bradshaw, H. R.(2023). *Creating a Culturally Inclusive American Literature Classroom*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/7333>

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

CREATING A CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE CLASSROOM

by

Holly R. Bradshaw

Bachelor of Arts
Carson-Newman University, 1998

Master of Education
Walden University, 2008

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in

Educational Practice and Innovation

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2023

Accepted by:

Elizabeth Currin, Major Professor

Todd Lilly, Committee Member

Terrance McAdoo, Committee Member

H. Kay Thomas, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Interim Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Holly R. Bradshaw, 2023
All Rights Reserved.

DEDICATION

To my son, Sam, because without his watchful eye, I might not have had the courage to take on this task and see it to completion. He will accomplish so many amazing things in his lifetime; I hope my perseverance shows him that determination and grit are two of his greatest assets.

To the memory of my father, Tom Bradshaw, who never let me forget that education in all forms is essential. He planted the seed of attaining my doctorate even before I completed my bachelor's degree.

To my mother, Kathy Harveston, who first taught me that love, friendship, and community have no racial or cultural barriers. She continues to teach me how to love others.

To the amazing teachers I've had throughout my lifetime for being torchbearers of imagination, empathy, and inspiration to me and countless others they have influenced.

To my students for listening to my stories, allowing me space on a soapbox, and believing they can effect change in our world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to recognize my committee members for supporting and challenging me throughout this process. I'm appreciative of the time and energy Dr. Todd Lilly, Dr. Terrance McAdoo, and Dr. Kay Thomas put into seeing me to the finish line. A special thank you goes to Dr. Elizabeth Currin, my committee chair, for being an example of professionalism, integrity, and grace. I am indebted to her for questioning my choices and demanding my best, especially in my writing.

I'm thankful for those who encouraged me along the way. My forever friend, Garret Schweitzer, would not let me give up on this dream, and with his never-ending help, I have stayed the course. My family members, many of whom are educators, cheered me on at each milestone, and those educator-friends who sent notes of encouragement, talked with me about my work, gave advice, checked in at just the right times, and allowed me to cry on their shoulders were the most appreciated supports. I simply cannot put into words my gratefulness.

Lastly, I want to send a very heartfelt note of gratitude to my dear friend, Denise Facey, who was a sounding board and a voice of reason from the very start. Her honesty, open heart, and point of view allowed me to learn and grow far more than I thought possible.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine what curricular and pedagogical changes connect with diverse high school students in an American literature course. Using a participatory action research approach, I collected qualitative data through interviews, observation, and narratives from a student focus group and myself. Data collection spanned an 18-week semester and involved students of varying racial and cultural backgrounds who identified as male, female, and nonbinary. The 12 focus group members were 11th-grade students at a public high school near Charlotte, North Carolina. The results signified that to increase student agency, teachers should offer diverse texts, pieces written by contemporary authors, high-interest writings, and hands-on activities. These findings informed an action plan for creating a classroom setting that promotes cultural inclusivity while employing a diverse curriculum.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
List of Abbreviations.....	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	14
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	41
Chapter 4: Findings.....	59
Chapter 5: Implications	86
References	98
Appendix A: Acknowledgement of Study	107
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Screener.....	108
Appendix C: Guardian Permission Form.....	111
Appendix D: Notice of Selection.....	113
Appendix E: Notice of Standby	114
Appendix F: Focus Group Interview Questions.....	115
Appendix G: Interview Record Chart.....	116
Appendix H: Narrative Essay Assignment	117

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Recruitment Timeline	44
Table 3.2 Focus Group Demographics	48
Table 3.3 Chronology of Study	49

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1 Notes From Week 4 Interview.....	61
Figure 4.2 Notes From Week 11 Interviews.....	63
Figure 4.3 Rae’s Narrative	65
Figure 4.4 Units of Study	67
Figure 4.5 Excerpt From James’s Narrative.....	69
Figure 4.6 Authors of Traditional English III Texts	78
Figure 4.7 Authors of Diversified English III Texts	79
Figure 4.8 Excerpt From Sputnik’s Narrative	84

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRP	culturally relevant pedagogy
CRT	culturally responsive teaching
CSP	culturally sustaining pedagogy
FLEX.....	Flexible Educational Experience
PAR	participatory action research

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“All we read is old, dead, White guys!” I had heard this more than once from the students in my English III classes, and for the most part, they were exactly right. At my school, English III, as the study of American literature, traces the history of the United States through a literary lens, from the writings of Puritan leaders to modernism, landing somewhere in the early 1920s by the semester’s end.

The curriculum in this course has, for many years, focused on the experience of White Europeans coming to the New World and establishing a unique form of government. Following the progression of politics, society, and industry as the United States grew, the literature study changes accordingly, yet the nation’s story taught to schoolchildren is decidedly White. Although people of various ethnicities, races, and cultures have blended to create America, the triumphant voice throughout the curriculum remains, to this day, White. Among the few stories of people of color students encounter are slave narratives, focused on tragedy and oppression. Consequently, students have learned about their own country from a singular point of view, one that omits the rich depth and breadth of a multicultural society.

My classroom is diverse, comprised of varying ethnicities, sexual orientations, religious beliefs, and cultural experiences. I have students who,

despite their efforts to engage, cannot find themselves in the traditional Western canon of literature upon which my course is built, and my students, no matter their assigned race, suffer because of it. By their own admission, my students have difficulty connecting to literature that does not speak to their lived experiences, culture, or understanding of themselves as members of a diverse society, which, in turn, minimizes student agency. This omission especially marginalizes BIPOC students, and my White students are missing information that is vital for understanding and embracing the diversity of our nation.

Problem of Practice

My problem of practice was the need for curricular and pedagogical changes in my classroom to provide a more effective, multicultural educational setting for all students. The need for racially inclusive educational settings is a decades-old discussion (Alexander, 1970). From literature related to this problem, two compelling themes emerged: innate bias in teaching an Anglocentric curriculum and the relevance of Black literature to the study of American literary history (Adichie, 2009; Alexander, 1970; Leider, 2006). I began to wonder what unintentional biases and teaching methodologies I, as a White person, employed in my classroom that prohibited my students from connecting to and engaging with the literary history of their country. Beyond my classroom, I wondered why curricular beliefs that hinder minoritized students from seeing themselves in the creation of this nation have endured.

The traditional literary canon tells the story of America from a decidedly White viewpoint (Alexander, 1970; Anderson, 2019; Leider, 2006). This

Anglocentric narrative was created by those in power at the time of the nation's inception: White, Protestant, republican, capitalists (Leider, 2006). Adherence to the Western canon is rooted in the idea that it represents the "depth and breadth of our national common experience" (Mason, as quoted in Anderson, 2019, para. 7), yet Whites defined this commonality. The omission of voices of color, clearly integral to the creation of the nation, has created a learning environment disparate in treatment of students, does not allow for personal connections to the texts, and can be perceived as hostile to BIPOC learners (Adichie, 2009; Strayhorn, 2009; Teuton, 2018; Yuen, 2016).

Alexander (1970) advocated for changes to the traditional curriculum, specifically in literature and history courses, because "the black experience is a fundamental element of American culture and, therefore, cannot logically be deleted from American literature" (p. 99). Despite broad agreement that telling the story of a people or place from only one viewpoint is incomplete, very little change has occurred in most U.S. classrooms (Adichie, 2009; Anderson, 2019; Teuton, 2018), including mine. For far too long, teachers have created learning spaces that demand their students, regardless of differences, conform to an Anglocentric standard of curriculum and pedagogy, yet "if American society is to understand and appreciate the problems, aspirations and contributions of its black citizens, the inclusion of black literature as an integral part of the curriculum is axiomatic" (Alexander, 1970, p. 99).

The traditional Western literary canon did not speak to the diversity of U.S. classrooms in the 1970s (Alexander, 1970), and as Anderson (2019) noted,

“Considering that the American student population is now 50% nonwhite, the need . . . for opportunities for children to see themselves and navigate a more diverse world — seems more pressing” (para. 13). Teaching the literary evolution of the United States solely from an Anglocentric stance is historically inaccurate (Anderson, 2019), and focusing on the White perspective robs the people of color who were instrumental in shaping the history and literature of the United States of their contributions and dignity (Adichie, 2009).

In my experience, teachers complain that one of the greatest difficulties in educating today’s youth is students’ distinct lack of motivation to succeed. The marked decrease in attendance, submitted assignments, passing grades, and college placements suggests the decline of a student population burdened by numerous changes amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Being back in the classroom with the normalized routines and expectations of a pre-COVID setting, students are struggling to keep up with the rigors of school; however, though the pandemic and the subsequent return to the classroom provided a definite obstacle, student apathy is certainly not novel. For decades, scholars have carefully considered how and why apathy exists, seeking to understand why people feel an indifference to work, engage in social situations, enjoy the company of other people, or excel in educational pursuits. Existing research points to choice and environmental situations as key (Bandura, 2018; Klemenčič, 2015; Moses et al, 2020; Rappa & Tang, 2016; Vaughn et al., 2020). Indeed, to understand—and eliminate—apathy, researchers have explored the converse notion of agency—loosely defined as a person’s ability to affect the world around

them by voluntary actions and choices (Bandura, 2018; Klemenčič, 2015; Moore, 2016; Moses et al., 2020; Rappa & Tang, 2016; Vaughn et al., 2020).

These principles shaped my efforts as an educator to provide an inclusive educational setting that offers multiple stories of American history and incorporates voices of color (Adichie, 2009; Alexander, 1970; Yuen, 2016).

Students' interest in and engagement with literature depend upon texts' diversity (Alexander, 1970; Anderson, 2019; Strayhorn, 2009; Teuton, 2018; Yuen, 2016).

Thus, by implementing curricular and pedagogical changes designed to create an inclusive education setting, I could ensure my English III curriculum represents voices of color in a positive and triumphant way so all students—regardless of ethnicity, race, or culture—find greater agency as readers.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework defined the philosophical lens through which I addressed my problem of practice (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Because this study focused on curricular change and diversifying my teaching methods, critical race theory (Hiraldo, 2010; Howard & Navarro, 2016), which positions race as a determining factor in the way humans interact with one another, or whiteness theory (McMahon, 2015; Nichols, 2010), which examines White privilege and White centrality, would naturally align. However, I opted for pedagogical theories to drill down to a more specific view of the problem of practice. Specifically, I applied the lenses of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Likewise, I employed the theory of student agency to better understand each learner's connections to texts and activities within my

classroom. Each theory helped define and shape my research questions and methodology and assisted me in deciphering and reflecting on the results.

Both CRT and CSP began with the seminal work of Ladson-Billings (1994), who studied Black teachers and identified a set of effective teaching strategies. Called culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), these practices required honoring academic results, developing positive cultural and ethnic identities, and fostering discernment of social inequality (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris, 2012). Ladson-Billings (2014) believed learners can be sources and resources of both knowledge and skill and worked to move educators' thinking from a deficit model toward celebrating the abilities of Black learners.

For many years, the BIPOC students enrolled in my classes were victims of my faulty thinking, which was rooted in the deficit model. I neither recognized nor celebrated the differences in culture, points of view, or ability these students bring to the table and often dismissed them as unwilling to put in the necessary effort to connect to the traditional literary canon. I was asking them to do all the heavy lifting in understanding centuries-old writings that simply did not connect to their modern lives.

CRT and CSP, which share similar origins, speak directly to the necessity of recognizing and honoring each student's culture so students can find themselves in the texts they study. As I elaborate in Chapter 2, CRT provided a framework for me, as a teacher, to plan activities and institute curricular changes, with the aim to create an inclusive, multicultural environment where all students can engage and thrive. Also, by understanding and applying the principles of

CSP, I could create a welcoming learning environment that provides all students the opportunity to actualize their agency, regardless of their differences.

When considering student agency, the greatest concern is how to motivate students as they learn. Student agency theory thus guides educators in looking at their classroom relationships, pedagogy, and practices. In a particular case study, Rappa and Tang (2016) concluded that agency is more than allowing students to choose the texts they want to study; rather, it connects students to prior learning, interests, other people, and objects with which they interact in their day-to-day lives. To adopt practices that support student engagement, I viewed agency “not as an individual notion bounded within a person but as networked relations between people and/or objects across diverse settings” (Rappa & Tang, 2016, p. 682). Understanding the interrelation among my students’ lived experiences, their social groups, their family constructs, their jobs, and our classroom activities allowed me to attempt to foster their personal agency toward a richer, more robust learning opportunity.

Research Questions and Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study—to determine what curricular and pedagogical changes in my American literature courses connect with diverse populations—was born of two understandings: (a) students learn best when they can establish meaningful, personal associations with the curriculum, and (b) the texts in my classes should mirror the students’ diversity (Alexander, 2019; Yuen, 2016). The three research questions guiding my study were:

1. How does diversifying my curriculum and pedagogy impact students' agency in American literature class?
2. How do my students, both BIPOC and White, respond to diverse texts?
3. What pedagogical methods help high school students connect their lived experiences to the literature they study in their formal school lives?

Each question guided my curricular and pedagogical choices so my students, especially those of color, could have greater agency in a class traditionally taught from an Anglocentric viewpoint and my White students could become more aware of diversity's crucial role in society.

Positionality

The study of diversity through history and literature has always come easily for me. Rather than completing the requisite classes in these subjects and moving along, I have consistently chosen to enroll in as many of these courses as possible. Consequently, when I decided to become an English teacher and landed my first teaching position, I enthusiastically requested to teach English III, the study of American literature.

For the most part, I have taught the curriculum the same way as it was taught to me, almost 30 years ago, just as it was taught to my mother and her mother before her. Employing educational perennialism as my viewpoint, I believed the established Western literary canon must be a mainstay of proper instruction for a child in the United States (Edupedia, 2018). When I was in high school and college, my educators' lecture-based methods of instruction and the time-tested curriculum they presented inspired me. I have learned, in transferring

from the role of student to teacher, that the educational experiences that resonated with me may not do the same for my students. All students, however, should experience a relationship with their learning just like I did.

Because of this realization and desire to offer more to my students, I conducted my study between the roles of insider studying her own practice and insider in collaboration with other insiders using Herr and Anderson's (2015) continuum of positionality. Positionality, or the stance I held as the action researcher, influenced how I conducted my research, the biases by which my study might be skewed, and the viewpoint I took in interpreting the results. I am a middle-aged, White woman who lives in a middle-class, suburban area roughly 20 miles south of Charlotte, North Carolina. The high school where I teach English II and English III is in the top 5% of high-performing schools in South Carolina and demographically is 79% White. I have now been in the classroom for 16 years, 14 of which I taught at least one, if not six, sections of English III. Despite my current classroom placement in a suburban, middle-class community, I have experience teaching at both a rural, lower-middle class area in East Tennessee and a suburban, upper-middle class school in the Metro Atlanta area.

At first glance, my study might appear to have an inherent bias as I sought to review my own curricular choices and teaching practices, yet action research allows for this type of self-reflective work. More specifically, a participatory action research (PAR) approach enabled me to learn from a focus group of my students through surveys, interviews, and observations (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016). This method provided data less focused on my personal inclinations and targeted the needs of my students.

My students range from 15 to 19 years old, and the focus group consisted of 12 students. Because I focused on connecting to my students on a personal level, most data I gathered came directly from my students themselves. This focus group was representative for the whole of my student population, aiding me in the discovery of what curricular elements and pedagogical practices support students in relating their own life experiences to the greater concepts I teach.

I asked both BIPOC students and White students to serve as members of this participant group so diverse communities, ethnicities, and cultures would be represented in our discussions, and the changes I began to implement in my classroom would be based upon inclusivity. Not only do my life experiences and those of my students vary greatly, but I had to be cognizant of my personal points of view in relationship to the literature I teach and the activities I assign. Because I can connect to the traditional texts in my course as a result of my cultural and ethnic makeup, I had to rely on the students' experiences, feelings, and positions to guide my curricular and pedagogical changes.

Brief Overview of Methodology

Considering my own positionality, I decided to employ a qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by selecting a focus group of students, meeting with them to gain insights for my curriculum and pedagogy, changing my approach based on those insights, and observing how the students responded. At the end of the semester, I asked them to create a narrative of their

experiences in my class throughout the semester. All the while, I noted my observations, realizations, and ideas relating to the study. A diverse group of participants helped me identify the teaching strategies and texts that enable a broad range of students to connect their personal lives to our study of literature.

In trying to understand the focus group's experiences in English III, I was in a better position to help all students find a greater sense of agency and personal buy-in. By applying principles of CRT and CSP, I could foster students' sense of ownership for their work in my class. Also, my students and I could seek out texts that tell the history of the United States through various voices better matched to the cultural range of our classroom population.

Significance

In pursuit of an inclusive, multicultural classroom to promote students' agency in their learning, I had the opportunity to explore, through action research, the effect of targeted pedagogical and curricular changes. Consistent with critical action research, my study had a strong focus on social justice that can transcend my local situation and provide direction for a larger audience because of my intention "to expose repression, domination, and inequities and bring about social change" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 42). Infusing my Anglocentric curriculum with texts that have cultural and contemporary relevance is fundamental in the fight for all students to have equal access to education.

Action research was ideal for resolving this problem of practice. By reflecting upon my own work and the texts I provide for my students, I could

determine how to provide a more multicultural environment on a local level. As Herr and Anderson (2015) argued:

The goals of action research deliberately blur the lines of terms such as expert, participant, and researcher. [Action researchers] seek authentic collaborations with others invested in constructing knowledge valued by various constituencies but with a particular aim of knowledge that is generative for the community from which it is derived. (p. 130)

As study participants, my focus group students stood to gain ownership of the connections between their primary discourse of home and their secondary discourse of formal schooling (Gee, 1989). Because my students were members of the community our school serves, they were the most appropriate participants to aid me in reflection on my curricular and pedagogical choices in relation to the cultural and social impact they have.

Determining what texts could help my BIPOC students engage in a positive, culturally relevant learning experience was not the sum of the study. Multicultural study provides gains for all students, no matter their differences in race, ethnicity, or culture (Cherry-Paul, 2019). While some might think that the traditional Anglocentric view of American literature study remains appropriate for White students, U.S. diversity necessitates classroom changes. Because White students may “think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 10), a multicultural learning environment can challenge the long-standing idea that White people set societal norms. I wanted to expand White students’ perspectives on the racism, oppression, and inequality their

classmates of color face daily, and incorporating diverse and inclusive texts and activities can serve that goal.

Reading a variety of texts gave my students opportunities to freely discuss race and culture while focusing on the implications these issues have for a modern, diverse society. The ability to discuss such social concerns can be a valuable lifelong skill, especially for White students, who “have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). All students need to learn how to have these serious and potentially life-changing conversations with one another, and what better place to begin that process than in a study of American literature!

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

My problem of practice was the need for curricular and pedagogical changes to provide a more multicultural learning experience and promote students' agency in my English III American literature class. This chapter elaborates on the theoretical framework I introduced in Chapter 1 and explores historical perspectives concerning my problem of practice along with the obstacles students of color face when studying American literature. In addition, this literature review establishes connections between curricular and pedagogical changes and advancing social justice for minoritized students.

Literature Review Methodology

After determining my problem of practice, I began to search for information about race, culture, and diversity in the classroom. As research goes, I often found information online that defined a topic or theory, which, in turn, led me to more robust searches of primary sources and other scholarship. These initial, rudimentary searches surfaced topics such as Whiteness theory, Anglocentrism, White privilege, critical race theory, culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, primary discourse theory, funds of knowledge, and learner agency. In my quest to understand each of these topics and how they relate to my problem of practice, I gathered information from various avenues of inquiry. I watched TED Talks found through

Google searches. I read online blogs, educational periodicals, book chapters, and dissertations. To locate peer-reviewed texts of interest, I used Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE, EBSCO, and ERIC. ProQuest Dissertations yielded several previous studies on agency, multiculturalism in the classroom, and social justice through curricular change. These texts provided a framework, firmly situated in scholarly content, on which to build my study.

Theoretical Framework

As Chapter 1 explained, CRP honors academics, promotes positive cultural and ethnic identities, and fosters discernment of social inequality (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris, 2012). Emphasizing students' need to see themselves in the curriculum, Ladson-Billings (1994) also noted the "negative effects" of "seeing one's history, culture, or background . . . distorted" (p. 19). As other scholars studied CRP and refined their own visions of the instructional theory, CRT, and a learning theory, CSP, emerged (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012).

CRT

Gay (2002) proposed CRT as an instructional theory to guide teachers in creating multicultural classrooms that honor all students. Gay (2003) focused on curricular design that promotes multicultural awareness and celebrates diversity, whereas Ladson-Billings's (1994) work centered on Black students. Moreover, Gay (2013) explored the importance of pedagogy rather than Ladson-Billings's target of curricular change. CRT has five essential elements: developing a knowledge base about diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity in the

curriculum, demonstrating caring while building learning communities, communicating with diverse students, and responding to diversity through instruction (Gay, 2002). CRT thus details steps for achieving a classroom that embraces multiculturalism. Focusing on the actions of the teacher as the impetus of change, CRT offers students an experience with educators who are knowledgeable, caring, and inclusive.

The first element of CRT indicates teachers should actively engage in learning about their students' culture, which "encompasses . . . values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns" (Gay, 2002, p. 107). Learning about students' cultural norms helps teachers understand why students behave in certain ways and how they learn, but beyond cursory understandings of cultural standards, a teacher should know how members of the students' cultures contributed to the subject matter. When teachers connect curricular concepts to people from diverse backgrounds, students benefit from learning about those with whom they share cultural similarities (Gay, 2002).

The second element of CRT, including ethnic and cultural diversity in the curriculum, thus builds from the first. Three types of curricula—formal, symbolic, and societal—give teachers an opportunity to infuse cultural diversity into their instruction. Formal curriculum is the standardized, textbook information with which teachers must work (Gay, 2002). These parameters, as provided by state, local, and in-school administration, may be nonnegotiable, yet teachers have plenty of room for improvement. Choosing texts that honor the diversity in the

classroom is a step toward creating a multicultural learning environment. In addition, teachers can consider their symbolic curriculum, which consists of images, awards, celebrations, and artifacts that convey knowledge, skills, morals, and values (Gay, 2002). Teachers who want to infuse more diversity in the classroom must pay attention to the bulletin boards, posters, and graphics they display. Lastly, societal curriculum encompasses information about an ethnicity, sexuality, or culture as provided by mass media (Gay, 2002). Teachers cannot control such messages but can facilitate real, candid discussions and use them as teaching tools to help students identify biases or counterpoints.

Demonstrating caring while building a learning community is the third essential aspect of CRT because “Pedagogical actions are as important as (if not more important than) multicultural curriculum designs” (Gay, 2002, p. 109). Gay suggested teachers should care so much about their diverse students that they expect nothing less than the highest level of success. To help students achieve that success, a teacher employing CRT should design more communal learning opportunities, wherein the needs of the group supersede those of the individual, as is the case in many students’ cultures.

The next pillar of CRT, communicating with diverse learners, is one of the most difficult because communication comes in a variety of forms. It can range from intellectual thought to methods of organization, and modes can vary within and among cultures (Gay, 2002). A teacher committed to CRT will learn about and work within the parameters of these various modes of communication so students can learn and demonstrate their learning effectively.

The fifth and final tenet of CRT is responding to diversity through instructional practices in the classroom, a process that begins with understanding the role and prominence of examples in the instructional process, knowing the cultures and experiences of different ethnic groups, harvesting teaching examples from these critical sources, and learning how to apply multicultural examples in teaching other knowledge and skills. (Gay, 2002, p. 113)

The teacher working to achieve a multicultural classroom must actively study to understand various pedagogical activities that speak to the cultures in the classroom. By doing so, teachers enable their students to connect their primary cultural competence to what they are learning in the formal school setting. Thus, using CRT had the potential to ameliorate my problem of practice by illuminating curricular changes that acknowledge learners' agency. In a classroom where BIPOC students had not found a cultural identity and presence in the past, framing my instruction through CRT allowed me to provide an inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of their cultural differences.

I expected prioritizing opportunities for students to see themselves in the literature we read to foster a stronger connection between their lives outside of school—or their initial culture of knowledge—and their lives inside of school. Ultimately, following the tenets of CRT could ensure my BIPOC students connected their life experiences with America's literary past while my White students recognized their place and responsibilities in an increasingly diverse world. With a stronger connection to their coursework and the texts we read,

students would be in a better position to actualize their agency. By viewing my data through the lens of CRT, I could assess my effort to provide a more culturally inclusive educational experience.

CSP

Like CRT, CSP also builds on Ladson-Billings's work, as Paris (2012) sought a more open view of culture and how students use culture in their learning process. First, Paris recognized the fluidity of the definition of culture, which can transcend references to a sovereign nation or country to acknowledge group memberships such as young people, African American Language speakers, or transgender men. Paris (2012) warned against essentializing or being "overdeterministic in our linkages of language and other cultural practices to certain racial and ethnic groups in approaching what it is we are seeking to sustain" (p. 95). Instead, culture includes a variety of groups by which people self-identify and can be viewed as a choice rather than something determined by outside sources such as birth, nationality, ethnicity, education level, or socioeconomic status. Bridging the gap between students' home cultures and the culture of dominance at school is one focus of CSP.

Second, Paris (2012) replaced Ladson-Billings's use of "relevant" with "sustaining" to emphasize supporting and encouraging students' native cultures while providing access to the dominant cultural competence, such that CSP has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers. That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—

linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. (Paris, 2012, p. 95)

Honoring the primary culture within the secondary culture of school is not enough; a student's culture must be sustained, promoted, and fed throughout the process of formal schooling.

CSP, therefore, can create and maintain multicultural classrooms, which have broader implications:

Multicultural education may be the solution to problems that currently appear insolvable: closing the achievement gap; genuinely not leaving any children behind academically; revitalizing faith and trust in the promises of democracy, equality, and justice; building systems that reflect the diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, and social contributions that forge society; and providing better opportunities for all students. (Gay, 2003, p. 34)

Teachers like me are in a unique position to expose children to other cultures while also celebrating the cultures to which the students belong. Students may learn about, join, and participate with other cultures without abandoning their own, chosen or assigned. Therefore, I used CSP during data analysis because understanding how students use their culture as a basis of knowledge was an explicit link to resolving my problem of practice.

In a traditional research setting, I might look solely at test scores or final averages in correlation to demographic information to determine what pedagogical practices and texts best suit the students in each class; however, because my students and I engaged in a PAR study (Herr & Anderson, 2015), I

was able to interview my students, have candid discussions about the various texts with which they engaged, and reflect upon my own practices as a teacher. Centering my work on CRT and CSP, I used the tenets of each as guidelines when synthesizing my data. The authenticity of the data supported changes to my curriculum and pedagogical practices that speak to a level of social justice my past educational decisions precluded.

Student Agency

Scholars have taken psychological, social, and educational approaches to theorizing agency (Bandura, 2006; Moore, 2016; Moses et al., 2020). For example, some scholars have considered agency from the standpoint of mental health and overall well-being, others have explored agency from a business standpoint, and others have viewed agency as a factor for success in the classroom (Ghasemi, 2021; Moore, 2016; Vaughn et al., 2020). These studies have resulted in the following theoretical constructs: learned helplessness theory, human agency theory, and student agency theory.

Among early experiments that defined the theory of learned helplessness, Maier and Seligman (1976) researched the effects of an inescapable shock on various animals and posited that motivation, cognition, and emotion contribute to learned helplessness. To put this theory into a classroom perspective, Ghasemi (2021) explained that some students have difficulty connecting actions to eventual outcomes, and when such students experience discouragement, disengagement, or demotivation, problematic behaviors manifest in the

classroom. Learned helplessness theory goes hand-in-hand with theories of human and student agency because agency is the resolution to helplessness.

A secondary theory—of human agency—established how and why people act and react to various social and emotional stimuli. Bandura (2006) presented the four properties of human agency as intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Agency is not based solely upon an individual's will or environmental situations, but rather is determined by the confluence of choice, desire, opportunity, behaviors, social norms, ability, and outside influence (Bandura, 2006; Kim, 2021). While human agency theory describes how people act and react in various settings, student agency theory goes a step further and zeroes in on how learners move from passive to active participants in their own education.

The theory of student agency extends the principles of human agency to the needs and concerns of learners in a classroom setting and builds upon Bandura's social cognitive theory, which holds that people develop at personal, social, and collective levels (Bandura, 2006; Kim, 2021; Klemenčič, 2015; Moses et al., 2020). Vaughn et al. (2020) referred to these levels as “personal agency, reflective of the individual, proxy agency, in which outcomes are influenced by others to act, and collective agency in which people collectively engage to act and shape their future” (p. 535). As the defining characteristics of student agency, individual reflection, how a person reacts to environmental forces, and the ability to work within a group are key elements of motivation.

As a multifaceted construct, student agency is self-reflection with intention through action and reaction to create the power to learn and the will to take ownership of that learning (Klemenčič 2015; Moses et al., 2020; Vaughn et al., 2020). Students are imbued with curiosity for knowledge and the drive to sustain themselves as they become stewards of their learning when teachers foster and nurture their agency. Some students have learned to exhibit a stronger sense of agency than others, yet everyone can act on their own behalf as an inquirer and problem-solver in a way that removes constraints toward the realization of desired outcomes, and because of that ability, agency should apply to the whole classroom rather than individual students alone (Kim, 2021; Klemenčič 2015; Rappa & Tang, 2016). Teachers can mitigate apathy and lack of motivation by engaging all learners in the process of understanding and validating their agency, thereby giving students the chance to change the trajectory of their learning and subsequently their lives by learning how they relate to people, communities, and artifacts in their social surroundings (Klemenčič 2015; Rappa & Tang, 2016). Student agency theory informs a person's ability to prepare a space for knowledge where there was none and to realize the potential of individuals in building the life they want.

Historical Perspectives

Understanding concepts like multicultural education, CSP, and CRT requires a long view. Specifically, an overview of the varied history concerning BIPOC education in the United States is necessary. The shameful treatment of African Americans is central to this story, but multicultural education emerged as

a means of encompassing various cultural backgrounds (Banks, 1993) and seeking equity for all marginalized populations.

Centering instruction on students' specific needs may seem like a modern concept, but as Harmon (2012) explained, "early African American schools were using culturally responsive teaching, a multicultural curriculum, differentiation, and critical thinking" (p. 19), even as enslaved populations were strictly forbidden from learning to read and write. Teachers in these early classrooms connected lessons to students' lives. Without a set curriculum, standardized testing, or federal mandates, teachers drew from life-lessons and cultural experiences. By using their students' pre-formed knowledge and understanding of the world around them, the teachers were better able to activate their learners' agency than many of today's teachers (Harmon, 2012).

After the abolition of slavery, formal education for Black students throughout the United States became a national responsibility rather than one taken on by private groups such as missionary societies (Harmon, 2012). In the South, the attitude that Black children should not have the same type of education as White children reinforced the concept of "separate but equal" as established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and continued in the form of Jim Crow legislation well into the 1960s. Indicative of this paradigm, schools for Black children, like those established by Civil War veteran Samuel Chapman Armstrong, encouraged a strong work ethic, discipline, and character while focusing classroom time on practical life skills (Harmon, 2012).

Armstrong's most famous student, Booker T. Washington (1907), a former slave who became an educator and advocate for Black education, promoted this style of trade-based education, reasoning, "No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem" (p. 220). Like Armstrong, Washington advocated for the education of freed slaves, though in a manner clearly subpar to instruction in White schools. Given the tenuous and often violent relationship between White society and the newly emancipated Black society, Washington believed quiet subordination of the Black man was not only suitable but necessary for survival. Other Black leaders disagreed; Washington's most outspoken critic, W. E. B. Du Bois, contended that African American success in industry, business, housing, education, science, and politics demanded an elite group of highly educated Black persons that he named "the Talented Tenth" (Frontline, 1998). Disagreements within the Black community concerning the best ways to combat racism, attain equality, and educate the populace ignited the fire leading to the mid-century civil rights movements.

Amid the social unrest in the 1950s and 1960s, which sought to challenge discriminatory actions against African Americans, the process of school desegregation began when the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) ruling overturned the "separate but equal" concept as established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). According to Harmon (2012), the *Brown* decision "began initiating the migration of African American students to predominantly White schools, the closing of a substantial number of African American schools, and the displacement of hundreds of African American teachers" (p. 19), with long-lasting

repercussions. The positive impacts notwithstanding, Black students bused to White schools were forced to assimilate into a different culture, and I observed this same mismatch between the primary culture of BIPOC students and the dominant, Anglocentric school culture in my 21st-century classroom.

The late 1960s and 1970s saw continued racial strife in the United States, prompting Alexander's (1970) advocacy for Black literature in all English courses:

School curriculums that include materials which accurately reflect the contributions of the various ethnic groups represented in American society will do much to reduce the human relations gap between whites and non-whites. The inclusion of materials that adequately reflect cultural uniqueness in a positive manner will greatly promote an 'appreciation' for difference. (p. 97)

Simply changing the curriculum was insufficient, as many African Americans felt marginalized by cursory studies of Black contributions to society and pushed for culturally appropriate education for their children, marked by "community control" and the presence of "African American teachers and administrators" (Banks, 1993, pp. 17–18). The later part of the 20th century gave rise to theories about multicultural education that sparked many iterations of change to attempt to bring about culturally inclusive learning. As I have already explained, CRP emerged at this time and set the stage for CRT and CSP.

Inheriting the legacy of inequitable education in the United States, the BIPOC students in my classroom may struggle to make meaningful connections to the literature we study and my pedagogical practices. English III uses texts

mostly written by White men and some White women, omitting the cultural history of BIPOC children even though their cultures are a vital part of the nation's social fabric. Alim and Paris (2017) described this omission as an "assimilationist and often violent White imperial project," whereby students are "asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools" (p. 1). Preserving my students' culture is integral to their success in school and in later life. Creating a classroom environment that includes rather than excludes diverse cultural experiences honors and sustains the heritage that each student brings into the classroom. Not only is inclusion necessary for students of color, but it also enables White students to understand how they can be agents of change in response to systemic racism.

As history has proven, students whose cultures differ from those presented in the school setting are at a marked disadvantage to their peers. When the curriculum fails to "include important information and deep study about a wide range of diverse ethnic groups," then ensuing "disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes among ethnic groups" may swell to "crisis proportions" (Gay, 2003, p. 30). Consequently, interventions based upon the tenets of CRT and CSP are not only appropriate but essential. As Ladson-Billings (2014) explained, "focusing on student learning and academic achievement versus classroom and behavior management, cultural competence versus cultural assimilation or eradication, and sociopolitical consciousness rather than school-based tasks that have no beyond-school application" can foster students' "responsibility for and deep interest in their education" (p. 76). Students with a

strong sense of agency have the greatest chances of academic success. The interventions I designed as an action researcher reflected my intention to adopt more socially just pedagogical practices that speak to my students on a meaningful, cultural level.

Related Research

In addition to conceptual and historical literature, I also examined studies on multicultural classroom experiences from a variety of contexts. Because my study encompassed two interrelated aspects of classroom interaction, pedagogy and curriculum, my search concentrated on these facets, although I located more research on pedagogy than curriculum. Two case studies also provided insight into student agency as a concept for both younger and older students.

Pedagogy

Ford and Sassi (2012) linked the concept of a “warm demander,” as coined by Kleinfeld (1975), and multicultural education. The idea of the teacher as a warm demander indicates the teacher’s belief that “The student is infinitely more important than the subject matter” (Noddings, 2013, p. 176). Warm demanders can balance “high expectations” with “culturally responsive authority relationships that promote teaching and learning with their African American students” (Ford & Sassi, 2012, p. 43). Observing the relationship between a White teacher and her Black students and a Black teacher and her Black students, Ford and Sassi sought to determine any differences relative to the racial divide between teacher and student in terms of culturally responsive practices in the classroom.

The study revealed that teachers from different racial constructs view authority differently. White teachers favor relying on administrative support to establish authority in a classroom while Black teachers enable their personal connections with the students and their culture to assert command (Ford & Sassi, 2012). The Black teacher attended to “how her authority is constructed through shared language, experience, and history” (Ford & Sassi, 2012, p. 50), while the White teacher had to rely on other methods to create a classroom atmosphere where her students of color could connect to her. The White teacher, seen as an exemplary teacher of Black students, practiced alliance-building strategies, and aligning herself with her students against racism created otherwise inaccessible connections (Ford & Sassi, 2012). This study, therefore, exemplifies differences in how White and Black teachers educate BIPOC students. With almost 80% of the U.S. teaching force identifying as White (Education Week, 2021), students of color seldom have teachers who match their ethnic and cultural makeup, creating a marked disconnect. Warm demander pedagogy, a component of CRT (Ware, 2006), enables White educators to connect with BIPOC students.

In another study on racial differences between teachers and their students, Borck (2020) examined the use of CSP at an alternative high school in Brooklyn, New York. The students were older than typical high school students and came from marginalized cultures, including experiences with homelessness and incarceration. To assess how the teachers connected to this underserved population, Borck focused on how teachers’ race, culture, or ethnicity influenced their discussion of structural racism and socioeconomic inequalities, especially

when the teacher's identity did not match that of the students. Borck (2020) "noticed that this work required different teachers (specifically racially, ethnically, and/or culturally different teachers) to practice this pedagogy in different ways, requiring a high degree of self-awareness and reflexivity" (p. 386). In other words, Black teachers could share their experiences of racism with their students while White teachers had to learn and communicate how systemic racism has affected their students for generations. Teachers must be aware of their own racial, ethnic, and cultural biases when they interact with students who differ from them, and self-reflection is essential to this endeavor. Borck's (2020) ethnographic data captured "teachers' reflexive strategies for engaging with students in meaningful ways that facilitated student belonging, resilience, and empowerment toward positive self-conception and more livable chances" (p. 378). Borck's study shows how a teacher's self-awareness can influence students' views of themselves as learners.

CSP can bridge the gap between teachers and students of varying races, and it can also reveal similarities among those with ethnic differences. Laster et al. (2020) focused on ethnic pedagogy as a CSP approach to explore connections between the Black religious community and the Jewish religious community in a mixed-race and mixed-culture classroom. The authors considered the effectiveness of the two language and learning systems as sources of literacy and comprehension skills that teachers could use to engage students in active learning. Promoting "multimodal and multicultural learning," they recommended using "ethnic pedagogies to help students with understanding

texts, learning new concepts, and self-checking their knowledge and learning” (Laster et al., 2020, p. 91). Adopting pedagogies from various cultures to provide greater learning opportunities for all students is the foundation of ethnic pedagogy. From the Black community, the call-and-response method of engagement equalized the relationship between teacher and student, positioning the teacher as a fellow shareholder in the learning process. The study also recognized the Jewish tradition of *havruta*, or paired study, as another ethnic pedagogical practice aligned with CSP. Laster et al. (2020) contended that such practices “intentionally create close communities, while cherishing the individual. They give voice and democratize learning environments, while they bring marginalized practices to a more dominant place in classroom learning” (p. 99). Both examples made learning interactive and strengthened students’ comprehension skills.

In another recent study related to multicultural practices and CSP, Baker-Bell (2020) examined anti-racist Black pedagogy in response to linguistic racism, (i.e., students’ need to code-switch to succeed in school). Baker-Bell (2020) described this experience as “the linguistic violence, persecution, dehumanization, and marginalization that Black Language (BL) speakers endure when using their language in schools and in everyday life” (p. 9). The conventions of academic language thus discriminate against Black students and perpetuate White culture and linguistic hegemony, placing some students “at a disadvantage because their language and culture do not reflect the dominant white culture that counts as academic” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 10).

In a ninth-grade English classroom in Detroit, Michigan, where all students identified as Black or African American girls, Baker-Bell (2020) used dialogic activity to understand the students' thoughts after reading texts in both Black and White vernacular. Baker-Bell concluded that critical language pedagogy was not enough to work toward equity for BIPOC students and conceptualized anti-racist Black language pedagogy as a more promising alternative, which

provides space for other linguistically marginalized students of color and white students to develop useful critical capacities regarding anti-Black linguistic racism as well as the historical, cultural, political, racial, grammatical, and rhetorical underpinnings of Black Language. Beyond Black Language, an Anti-Racist Black Language Pedagogy offers all students a critical linguistic awareness and windows into broader conversations about the intersections between language and identity, language and power, language and history, linguistic racism, and white linguistic and cultural hegemony. (p. 18)

This pedagogical practice takes deliberate steps toward social justice in English classrooms by recognizing various forms of language as legitimate and appropriate. Accepting multiple modes of communication can further bridge the gap between Anglocentric educational expectations and multicultural students.

Curriculum

Curriculum can connect to inclusive practices that foster a multicultural classroom. One curricular trend that has been gaining momentum is using hip-hop not only as a pedagogy but as a program of study to engage students by

connecting to their interests outside of school, consistent with the tenets of CRP and CRT. For example, according to Kruse (2020), “Hip-Hop has the potential for contributing to the development of critical consciousness and culturally responsive teaching, and in turn, this teaching has the potential to be transformative for students, teachers, schools, and communities” (p. 498). However, Kim and Pulido (2015) warned, “two movements that have promise [in] addressing the needs of students of color—culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and hip-hop pedagogy—have floundered and become corrupted” (p. 18). Kim and Pulido examined the intersections of CRP and hip-hop pedagogy, explaining to what extent hip-hop pedagogy is culturally relevant and how hip-hop mirrors the tension of CRP in providing for students of color, whereas Kruse (2020), who studied a new music course taught by a White teacher, wondered “how the students saw their teacher, what they experienced as strengths and weaknesses of the course, and what they felt they took away from the experience” (p. 495).

As participant observers in two 10th-grade English classes taught by a Black teacher in Chicago, Kim and Pulido (2015) collected “field notes, audio and video recordings of classes, individual and small group interviews, and class artifacts” from the Black and Hispanic students (p. 22). The researchers found the teacher’s “attempt to reconfigure a traditional American Literature class to be more culturally relevant for her all-Black classroom [was] too disparate from her students’ previous experiences with English classrooms and those of their peers” (Kim & Pulido, 2015, p. 24). Using hip-hop as a pedagogical method without becoming fully immersed in the students’ culture was insufficient.

Kruse's (2020) study also took place in a large Midwestern city but focused on the Black and Hispanic students' perceptions of their White teacher. Kruse found that a hip-hop curriculum, even with a White teacher, proved to be effective. The students felt they had gained valuable musical experience and attained cross-cultural competence in better understanding their peers. Though they were skeptical of the course because it was taught by a White music educator, they connected to the curriculum in ways they had not previously been able to do.

Hip-hop can be a powerful tool to engage youth of color, but educators must first truly grasp students' realities; develop strong relationships with students, families, and communities; and commit to social justice for the process to work as intended. To that end, Galloway et al. (2019) studied the usage of terms such as CRP as compared to antiracist or anti-oppressive pedagogy. The authors explained how "few studies have examined how practitioners understand the concepts or how using the terms in professional learning and school change efforts may guide the kinds of practices educators identify as embodied in cultural responsiveness" (p. 486). The scope of the study extended beyond pedagogy to encompass how perceived differences in the naming conventions of pedagogical practices help teachers make sense of their willingness to create and use a multicultural curriculum.

Within an inquiry team model at three public high schools, Galloway et al. (2019) noted the prevailing assumption that teachers who are moving toward multicultural curricular choices understand the nuances and tenets of CRP while

demonstrating how concepts like antiracist pedagogy or anti-oppressive pedagogy result in different instructional foci:

the phrase ‘culturally responsive’ led educators to emphasize individual practices to be inclusive; develop positive interactions and relationships in the classroom; and bring students’ cultures and voices into the curriculum. In contrast, educators felt the terms ‘antiracist’ and ‘anti-oppressive’ entailed enacting practices to call out and engage in critical dialogue around race, racism, and oppression in the classroom and to highlight the systemic barriers that maintain gaps for minoritized students. (p. 485)

The study also showed how teachers whose curricula infuse anti-racist and anti-oppressive opportunities can be integral to holistic school change.

Finally, I also reviewed Cherry-Paul’s (2019) dissertation, which sought insights from “teachers who develop and teach racial-justice curriculum” (p. 28). Noting that research on teaching race and racism to White students is far less common than doing the same with BIPOC students, Cherry-Paul (2019) focused on teachers with experience “engaging in dialogue about race and racism with White, affluent, middle-school students,” with an emphasis on the community’s “collective past . . . as a mobilizing force” (pp. 6–7). Citing the need for candid discussions about race, racism, and social justice as curriculum rather than blending these topics into the pedagogical practices of various courses, Cherry-Paul (2019) explained, “a racial-justice curriculum is one that is fluid—where teachers have considered what the topics might be based on the backgrounds of their students, but their order can be dramatically altered in response to what

students need” (p. 176). A racial-justice curriculum can even speak to racially charged events that occur at the school, local, and national level.

These recent studies, conducted throughout the United States, show that inclusive practices for a multicultural classroom are not only important but necessary. Demographic disparities between teachers and students are surmountable, but changes do not come naturally. The teachers in the studies I reviewed tried a variety of methods to connect their subject matter and their understanding of the world to their students’ own worldviews and experiences. Given my aim to have a more inclusive classroom, the work of those who have come before me suggested some steps I should take.

Student Agency

I also consulted empirical scholarship on student agency and its implications in the classroom. One case study examined three teachers’ understanding of student agency as a catalyst for learning in their elementary science classes. A second case study discussed agency through independent study for high school students enrolled in physics courses in both the United States and in Singapore. These two studies highlight agency as a concept for both young and older students, indicating that all learners benefit from teachers who understand that student agency is an influential factor in the classroom.

The first case spanned a 2-year time frame in two elementary classes located in Western Canada. Kim (2021) worked with Teacher A in Grades 4–6 and Teacher B in Grades 5–6. Teacher A had 19 students, some with special needs, and Teacher B had both ELLs and students with special needs out of a

classroom of 21. In addition to the researcher and the main teacher, both classrooms had teaching assistants. This study revolved around classroom talk as it pertains to providing agency to the students in the class. The correlation between teacher authority and student agency in an inquiry-based learning setting was also of particular interest.

For the study, Kim (2021) observed and interacted with students during science lessons that tested their understanding of scientific reasoning and problem-solving. Kim (2021) asserted, “When teacher authority as power dominance is evident, it positions students as passive learners and there is less student agency for interactive, co-constructive participation and knowledge building in classroom discourse” (p. 18). The study illustrated that welcoming student voice and autonomy does not undermine the teacher’s position as an authority figure or knowledge specialist. In fact, Kim found that switching between dialogic and authoritative interactions allowed the teachers to create space for growth in student agency while guiding the learning opportunities in pathways that match the intended curricular focus. In this manner, the students were able to create meaning-making opportunities of discovery while the teacher was able to field changes in the trajectory of the discussion based upon the students’ actions, reactions, and discussions. The teacher guided the classroom by offering praise and questioning students’ assumptions, which firmly situated the teacher as an expert in the field of study. Kim (2021) learned that “teacher authority and student agency co-existed and developed together through

classroom talk by positioning the teachers and students as having certain roles and responsibilities during the inquiry process” (pp. 18–19).

Both teachers in this study acknowledged the innate tension existing between student discovery with autonomy and the knowledge base of a teacher (Kim, 2021). Given this dichotomy, teachers must decide how they want to guide their students. One of the two teachers chose to gently guide the class back to what they needed to be studying when their discovery was not in line with the objectives she had selected, and the other teacher allowed the class to learn through trial and error, despite her curricular goals. Though each teacher allowed different levels of student autonomy, the researcher indicated that both teachers moved seamlessly between the students as problem solvers and the teacher as the content knowledge expert. They fostered student agency by using their authority through pedagogy to promote student ownership and scientific curiosity, rather than in a traditional sense, which would have positioned students as passive learners of transmitted knowledge. The case study also examined “student agency as a collective notion, taking students as a whole in classroom talk, rather than focusing on individual student agency” (Kim, 2021, p. 19). Rather than considering everyone’s personal experience with agency, Kim’s work focused on the collective whole of young learners.

In the second study, Rappa and Tang (2016) examined agency among high school physics students. One group of 33 students, Grades 10–12, lived in the United States and was enrolled in an honors physics course. A second group of 53 students in the 11th grade lived in Singapore and was completing the first

of a 2-year course of study. The students were asked to select a text from an outside-of-school source to which they would apply the physics lessons and concepts they had studied in the formal school setting. The students also kept journals of their work, their thinking, and the movements they made between and among informal and formal education concepts. The researchers sought to understand how student agency is realized when students are asked to apply formal information to informal situations.

Rappa and Tang (2016) highlighted the experiences of two students named Lucy and Shen. Like all participants, they chose topics of interest to them and applied their understandings of physics, keeping journals about how they interacted with the texts they chose and how their thinking led to new hypotheses. The researchers realized Shen's work was anomalous in that he completed several circuitous evolutions from one hypothesis to another as he pulled in more and more texts to understand his chosen problem. Lucy, on the other hand, completed her work in a far more linear fashion, and as the authors noted, Lucy's pathway was far more similar to that of the other participants.

Rappa and Tang (2016) set out to learn how students in an upper-level science course "address questions of student agency, that is, when and how young people decide to engage in learning and extend their own learning across contexts" (p. 674). Using the information as provided by the students, the researchers traced the students' choices to determine their thought processes in solving the issues they had originally selected. The study thus allowed the researchers to "ascertain whether there are teaching practices or learning

environments that could be leveraged to enhance the sense of agency in adolescents who do not achieve at high levels in school” (Rappa & Tang, 2016, p. 674). They found that teachers need to understand agency as influenced by relationships among people and objects; simply allowing student choice is not enough to foster agency in most students. Students need agency to be producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information. Although the study focused on the situations and experiences of two students, the results can be generalized to students of this same age and ability.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 elaborated on my theoretical framework and cited previous studies that informed my plans for better understanding my students, my teaching, and my broader social responsibilities. Every eight out of 10 students at my school identifies as White, yet the cultural makeup of the school is changing rapidly with an influx of families from other parts of the country. Moreover, as students move out of my community and into the world at large, they will experience a nation blended with scores of different races and cultures. My action research study could inform other teachers at majority-White schools who struggle to integrate cultural diversity in the study of American literature. To that end, Chapter 3 illustrates how the literature I reviewed prepared me to choose interventions devoted to creating a welcoming, multicultural classroom that fosters a greater sense of agency for all my students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The prior chapters established the conceptual framework of my study (Kivunja, 2018), illustrating how the pieces interact and come together to form the overall puzzle I worked as I sought to resolve my problem of practice toward transforming my classroom into a multicultural setting where all students engage in the literature we read and actualize their agency. My theoretical framework, comprised of CRT, CSP, and student agency, substantiated my work and helped me make sense of the data (Kivunja, 2018), constituting a focused lens so I could avoid a mishmash of random observations. Everything I did— every lesson I planned and every question I asked participants—was grounded in the tenets of CRT and CSP with a particular interest in fostering student agency.

I believed CRT and CSP could provide all students with rich learning opportunities, but I had to ensure my students' experiences matched my suppositions and worked with them to determine what pedagogical practices positively impacted their engagement with literature. The only way to know what worked best for them was to ask and interact with them to create opportunities for learning that are both enticing and meet local and state standards. I am an expert in providing various texts to teach different genres and time periods of American literary history, but involving my students in the selection of texts

provided more high-level engagement. This chapter explains how my research questions and the data I collected address these concerns.

Research Design

Using a qualitative approach, wherein “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Stillisano et al., 2011, p. 173), I collected data via focus group interviews, observations, and students’ personal narratives of their experiences with literary diversity, along with a personal journal recording my own thoughts, ideas, and realizations. A qualitative design was most appropriate for my study because it incorporated the kinds of data that naturally emerged in my practice as a teacher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, quantifying the kind of engagement and agency I hoped to see in my students seemed unfeasible.

A PAR design guided my work with a focus group of students to discuss and understand their points of view concerning my teaching practices and the texts they read in class. PAR allows a community—my students, in this case—to work with the researcher in creating solutions for issues faced by that community (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The students’ stories, concerns, individual expressions of race and culture, and primary discourses informed the decisions I made concerning my curriculum and pedagogy during the study and for the future.

More specifically, my study lent itself to an ethnographic, narrative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethnographic studies are not limited to preexisting data and account for “the interaction of individuals not just with others, but also with the culture of the society in which they live” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24),

which aligned with my study's focus on cultural diversity. Secondly, narrative studies welcome participants' unadulterated points of view, and I intended to treat my students' "stories as data . . . [as] first-person accounts of experience told in story form" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34).

These methods directly aligned with my research questions. I wanted to know whether diversifying both my curriculum and pedagogy actualizes students' agency, and the students themselves were the best sources of such information. Likewise, I researched how my students, BIPOC and White, responded to diverse texts. Student participants had opportunities to react to the texts both in a group setting (i.e., focus group interviews), and individually, in writing their autoethnographic narratives. Finally, I also sought to learn whether my intervention helped students connect their outside lives to their school lives, and a qualitative, ethnographic design effectively captured their experiences with my adapted pedagogy.

Sampling Plan

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) advised researchers to determine "an adequate number of participants" (p. 101) before commencing participant recruitment. I knew I did not need a large focus group to answer my research questions, so I planned to select 6 to 10 students of various cultural backgrounds. The guidance department randomly assigned my English III students, and in the fall semester, I had two classes consisting of 22 for first block and 24 in fourth block. The process of recruiting participants took 2 weeks at the beginning of the semester, as indicated in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 *Recruitment Timeline*

Time frame	Stakeholders	Mode	Document
first day of class	all guardians	email	acknowledgement of study
first week of school	all students	online	screener
Week 2	focus group guardians	online	permission form
end of Week 2	interested students, focus group, and focus group guardians	email	notice of standby/selection

Acknowledgement of Study

On the first day of the semester, I sent an email to all students' guardians, explaining the study I planned to conduct throughout the semester, detailing my role as an action researcher and allowing them to opt out of any data collection on behalf of their student (Appendix A). This email instructed guardians to respond and indicate if they would like their student to be omitted from consideration for the focus group and/or they would like to opt out of data being collected about their student, even as a general classroom observation. Any student whose guardian did not respond with a written request to be omitted was considered for the next step of the process, participant screening.

Screening

From the students whose guardians did not remove them from data collection, I used the purposeful sampling method of criterion-based selection (Biggs & Snodgrass, 2020) by administering a voluntary 10-question screener about their race, culture, experiences in previous English courses, and experiences with social injustice (Appendix B). I explained to the class what my

study entailed and how I would choose the members of the focus group. I encouraged them to fill out the screener to be considered for participation if they were interested in helping. With roughly 50 students enrolled in English III, if only 50% of them voluntarily filled out the survey, the prospect of 25-student focus group seemed too large for openly conversational interviews.

Because the responses were closed, I could quickly determine which students were most appropriate for my study. The first question of the screener asked if the student would like to participate in the study, needed more information about the study, or was not interested in participation. I personally spoke with any student needing more information to make an informed decision about joining the study, and if any of those students wished to remove themselves from consideration, I destroyed their screener responses. After destroying the replies of any student choosing not to participate, I created a Google Sheet of the remaining responses. With this table of information, I narrowed down the participant pool to those who were most disparate in their answers, as diversity was of utmost importance to me.

The screener asked about previous experiences in English courses, what cultural identities the student claims, if the student felt motivated in school, if the student enjoys reading, whether the student had experienced discrimination, and if our school is respectful of the student's cultural associations. The screener was straightforward, not overly personal, and gave me the information I needed to choose the best participants for my study. Participation in the initial screener was

completely voluntary, and students who elected not to engage with the study faced no repercussions.

Permission Form

As the students in my class indicated their interest in participating in the study, I sent their guardians a reminder explanation of my study, what expectations I had of the student participants, and the basic timeline for the research (Appendix C). This permission form asked guardians to decide if they were willing to allow their student to participate or if they preferred to decline. It also detailed how a student or their guardians could opt out of the study once it had begun and what would happen with any and all data collected to that point. As I alluded earlier, parental support is a necessary aspect of working with students in a PAR setting (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Selection and Standby

As I have indicated, I planned to select 6–10 willing student participants, but the actual PAR focus group included 12 students. I chose to invite these 12 because each of them was eager to join, and as a whole, they formed an accurate representation of our school's diversity, which is a necessary aspect of a successful focus group. Such focus groups are "particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299), yielding rich qualitative data that connected to my three research questions. These students were appropriate participants because of their specific and

valued points of view in discovering students' experiences in response to curricular and pedagogical methods for connecting to diverse populations.

I emailed the 12 students whom I had selected for the PAR focus group, officially requesting that they attend an informational meeting the third week of school during FLEX, a 30-minute Flexible Educational Experience period of each school day. I also informed their guardians via email that they were selected to participate (Appendix D). I sent an email to five remaining students and their guardians who showed some interest in participation that they were on standby (Appendix E) for a spot in the group to open, should one become available. Both emails included instructions for a guardian or student to email me if they would prefer to remove their student or themselves from the focus group or consideration thereof. Though no one chose to do so, I would have immediately destroyed any information, including screening values, pertaining to that student.

Focus Group Members

The resulting focus group consisted of 12 students representing various cultural designations. As Table 3.2 indicates, 41.67% of the students identified as female, 41.67% identified as male, and 16.67% were nonbinary. From a racial standpoint, 50% of the focus group claimed to be White, 25% identified as Black, 16.67% identified as mixed-race, and 8.33% was Hispanic. My initial meeting with the group was a quick introduction to ensure they understood participation was voluntary and their personal details would be confidential. I had intended to create identifiers for the students, but they asked to create their own pseudonyms, which appear in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 *Focus Group Demographics*

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender
Finnley	White	female
Iris	Hispanic	female
James	White	male
Levi	White	male
Matthew	White	male
Nova	Black	female
Oak	Black	nonbinary
Rae	White	female
Reggie	mixed-race	male
Rose	mixed-race	female
Sputnik	White	male
Tsukishima	Black	nonbinary

Intervention

My study took place during the Fall 2022 semester. My school operates on an 80-minute block schedule consisting of 18-week courses, providing sufficient time in which to focus on various pedagogical changes I could make to improve student engagement, namely the inclusion of multicultural texts and culturally responsive and sustaining practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris, 2012). Given my PAR approach (Efron & Ravid, 2013), I wanted my student focus group to have a voice in the changes.

Prior to participant recruitment, I contemplated choice-driven activities, such as selecting a novel and engaging in a Socratic seminar in a small-group setting or providing more opportunities for group work. I thought of including a 5-week novel study with weekly meetings when I could observe and interact with each group as they discussed their novel. The group work options I envisioned included answering reading comprehension questions with a partner or in a

group of three rather than being solely responsible for the work. My ideas notwithstanding, giving the students the ability to speak on their own behalf about what they would most like to experience was an important element of my study. Likely, these needs will transform from semester to semester and year to year as the demographics of my students fluctuate. Moreover, I wanted to focus on curricular changes to create a more inclusive curriculum by choosing BIPOC texts, ideally by young adult authors, that feature stories of victory rather than of minoritized oppression. The focus group of PAR students helped me determine which texts would be most interesting for them and their peers to read in class, thereby providing a stronger sense of agency for all students.

Data Collection Procedures

As I have indicated, I used multiple methods of data collection. Interviews, observations, and narrative accounts provided pertinent information for my study. Table 3.3 lists the order in which I collected the data throughout the semester.

Table 3.3 *Chronology of Study*

Time frame	Stakeholders	Location	Information
Week 3	focus group	FLEX	initial meeting
Week 4	focus group	FLEX	group interview questions
Weeks 4 and 9	researcher	chart	notes during interviews
Weeks 4–17	researcher	in class	observations of all students
Week 9	focus group	FLEX	group interview questions
Week 17	all students	in class	narrative essay assignment
bi-weekly	researcher	online	journal

After establishing the focus group, I met with the participants to explain the study timeline and process. I conducted two group interviews with these students (Appendix F), one near the beginning of the semester and a second one in the middle of the semester, recording their responses on an Interview Record Chart (Appendix G). I implemented curricular and pedagogical changes based on the group's insights and observed their interactions with their peers in response to the interventions between these two interviews. Finally, I asked them to reflect upon their experiences with the texts and my teaching methods in a personal narrative (Appendix H).

Interviews

My initial meeting with the focus group lasted about 10 minutes and allowed the students to get a very clear picture of the questions I would ask during the group interviews (Appendix F). The first interview, at the beginning of the semester, elicited students' past level of engagement in English courses, what methods of learning have worked best for them, and how they saw and experienced cultural discrimination. Such semi-structured interviews "assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110) and allow participants to discuss the topics of interest without the researcher looking for a particular answer.

When the students met with me, I presented a few texts and options for engaging with the texts to determine what held their interest. My interview questions allowed students to discuss what genres, styles, and time periods of literature they most enjoyed reading to that point in the semester. Student choice

is generally, in my experience, a motivating factor for engagement in class, and because this group had the ability to voice their opinions, they were excited to participate. The PAR approach, by involving the students in making decisions about the curricular and pedagogical choices I made as the teacher, also fell under the category of culturally responsive practice. I conducted a follow-up interview with these students in Week 9 of the semester, asking the same questions (Appendix F) to ascertain any changes in their points of view after implementing curricular and pedagogical changes based on the initial interview.

For both conversations, I used an Interview Record Chart (Appendix G) to document the focus group members' verbal responses. With the questions along the top and the participants' chosen identifiers down the side, this chart was an easy way for me to quickly record the students' feedback during our semi-structured discussions. I initially wanted to assign color names such as Peach, Violet, Aquamarine, and Cobalt for each of the students rather than displaying their names and planned to keep the key in a safe location; however, after learning that their real names would not appear in my final report, the students requested to create their own pseudonyms. The sixth column on the sheet allowed me to make general comments about the interactions among participants, including me. I anticipated that students would not use terms like agency, engagement, curriculum, or pedagogy, but I listened for and recorded references to these concepts in the student vernacular. After each interview, I highlighted and tallied these occurrences of specific words and concepts.

The interviews were an appropriate means of data collection in that speaking directly to the students to understand their experiences with literature was highly valuable information that I could not provide because of my innate biases as a teacher. Moreover, the focus group was representative of my classroom diversity. Consequently, they connected their primary discourse of home life and their secondary discourse of formal schooling in ways that informed my decisions during and beyond the scope of my study (Gee, 1989).

Observations

Throughout the course, I observed all my students while they engaged with the texts the focus group and I chose and participated in the activities we determined to be conducive to engagement and agency. I conducted these observations through the role of participant as observer because my students were aware that I was noting their actions and reactions throughout this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I recorded my findings during class, as the situation allowed, or immediately after class.

Observing my students' interactions with diverse texts was an appropriate method because I was able to record in real time which literature piqued students' interest and which pedagogical strategies yielded high levels of participation. While I was noting the actions and reactions of all my students, I did not record information of any student who had opted out of the study or did not have permission from a guardian to participate. Also, any data that I gathered concerning a student who was not in the focus group was considered anecdotal because my observations targeted the focus group students. I gathered

observational data as a natural aspect of the day-to-day operations of the class, requiring no extraneous work or time of the focus group.

Observational data confirmed my ability to connect students' primary and secondary discourses (Gee, 1989). Such linkages provide conduits for stronger learning opportunities, even in difficult subject matter or areas of little interest. As Chapter 4 illustrates, using prior knowledge, the students created more sustainable connections to the course material.

Narrative Accounts

As a third source of data, I turned to two types of narrative accounts. First, I felt that collecting narrative accounts of students' experiences in my class throughout the semester would show me the degree to which they were able to connect to the texts we read and what teaching strategies or activities they most enjoyed. All students were asked to complete the narrative essay assignment at the end of the semester (Appendix H), but only the submissions from focus group members constituted data. Using their own words as testimony for understanding my study's impact was extremely important. The intention was for my students' stories to provide the most authentic evidence of my teaching methods' success and the extent to which diverse texts provided a greater sense of student agency. I took these essays and gleaned from them the impact this study had on the students who participated in it. I then wrote a report of this experience, using the students' words as evidence.

The second narrative form came from my own revelations and understandings of this process. From the beginning of the study throughout the

final days, I kept a personal journal of all aspects of the research I undertook. This journal reminded me of interactions with my PAR students, teaching methods I attempted, and even texts we used throughout the semester. Keeping this journal on a bi-weekly basis, not at all a cumbersome task, facilitated coding the data as the study progressed. At the culmination of the semester, I used these notes to create my own personal narrative of my observations and understandings concerning this study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis often begins on the first day of a study, and as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, researchers should not expect a moment “when everything else stops and writing begins” (p. 267). For help along the way, I leaned heavily on the fact that “The findings of a qualitative study are inductively derived from the data collected through interviews, observations, or documents” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 284). Trusting that my inductive skills coupled with my narrative writing skills would pull me through this process, I analyzed my data using three methods: grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and ethnographic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Using grounded theory, identifying “categories, properties, and hypotheses that are the conceptual links between and among the categories and properties” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 228), I constructed a coding mechanism that employed open, axial, and selective coding at various points. I also coded and sorted the data from my observations of students as they participated in various textual studies throughout the semester. The focus group helped me

select the most interesting texts and methods of interacting with those texts, so to gauge their agency with these selections, classroom observations were appropriate. I located recurrent words, phrases, and concepts, yielding a list of considerations. For example, when I noticed that I wrote a student was disengaged or a group was off-task, I tagged those notes and determined what activities or texts the class was studying when those events took place. I created a spreadsheet listing both positive and negative connotations in reference to the texts and activities observed. This approach allowed me to draw hypothetical explanations for the patterns I discovered.

To complement my interpretations of the prior data sources, I synthesized the narrative accounts from the focus group members, resulting in the kind of “rich, thick description” expected of ethnographic studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 230). To process this data, I employed both narrative inquiry and ethnographic analysis, resulting in a written account of my students’ experiences. Chapter 4 presents my findings as a report, using words and phrases directly from students’ essays as indicators of engagement and interest with our literature study. I also present problems or frustrations my students faced as included in their narratives. This report synthesizes my students’ writing into one cohesive piece that recounts their involvement in the study. To ensure I accurately represented each focus group member’s reality, I invited the students to read my writing before I included it in my dissertation.

Finally, I processed my own thoughts, notes, and comments from my bi-weekly journal using grounded theory and narrative theory. First, I coded the

notes and placed them in the proper categories as defined earlier in the study from the focus group interviews. Then, using my journal, I synthesized this study through a narrative lens, fully aware of my personal positionality within the research process. Chapter 4 presents a narrative of these experiences and the insights they yielded. My own story of processing the hypotheses, interventions, and data I collected is highly valuable as a first-person narrative.

These complementary methods of data analysis produced information that speaks to the validity and reliability of this study, reinforced by the triangulation, disciplined subjectivity, and thick description I used in the analysis and reporting of my data (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Through grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and an ethnographic approach, I was able to sort and analyze the data I gathered into conclusions about my pedagogical practice. Specifically, I assessed the extent to which I succeeded in my aim to determine what curricular and pedagogical changes in my courses connect with diverse populations.

Ethical Considerations

Because of my PAR approach, gathering the necessary permissions from my local school and district were equally as important as obtaining consent from the students and their guardians. My district has a policy that all educational studies involving children be read and approved directly by the superintendent of schools. I submitted my proposal as a letter detailing the degree I was seeking, the granting institution, the anticipated duration of the study, and all aspects of interaction I planned to have with student participants. The superintendent had the option to respond with any questions, and I would have been required to

resubmit my request. However, my study was granted approval within 2 weeks of my submission to the superintendent's office. All the communication between me and the superintendent, including his final approval, is housed in my personnel file at the district office. On a local level, my principal stipulated that any student participants must have permission from their guardians to join the study.

All aspects of this study took place online or in person during school hours in my classroom. Students did not receive extra credit or lose points for participation or lack thereof. From all standpoints, my study included multiple checks to ensure the safety and ethical treatment of the student participants.

Chapter Summary

By involving students in the process of reviewing and changing the texts and pedagogical practices in my classroom, I anticipated student engagement and agency would flourish, resolving my problem of practice regarding the limitations of the traditional curriculum. Ideally, engagement with the texts would manifest in students' desire to read, interact with, and discuss the literature they encountered in class. Beyond the classroom, these engaging experiences might enable students to discover deep personal meaning, make historical and present-day connections, or look at any topic in a new way. By showcasing cultural similarities between literature and my students' lives, I also endeavored to honor their agency.

This chapter presented my systematic plan to achieve these aims. My research questions focused my collection and analysis of data so I could

understand students' needs and preferences when creating a more culturally inclusive classroom. Chapter 4 reveals the outcome of this plan.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study took place at a high school south of Charlotte, North Carolina. Of the approximately 2200 students in Grades 9–12, 79% identify as White, while the other 21% identify as Black, Hispanic, Asian, or of mixed-race, yet the faculty is 97% White and 3% BIPOC. Echoing the fact that 80% of the U.S. teaching force is White (Education Week, 2021), yet more than half of U.S. students are BIPOC (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), adopting multicultural curricula is not only important but essential for all students to thrive.

Action research helps practitioners resist the status quo hindering social justice. Herr and Anderson (2015) defined the stance of action researchers, people who, though they may work within mainstream organizations and professions, also want to transform them. They are individuals who identify with a vision that is fundamentally different and probably at odds with the dominant culture of their organization and/or culture. (p. 159)

This is true for public school teachers like me who recognize Anglocentrism is problematic for students, and through action research, teachers can be agents of change. The purpose of this action research was to determine what curricular and pedagogical changes in an American literature classroom could provide effective multicultural education for my students. Three research questions aligned with this aim:

1. How does diversifying my curriculum and pedagogy impact students' agency in American literature class?
2. How do my students, both BIPOC and White, respond to diverse texts?
3. What pedagogical methods help high school students connect their lived experiences to the literature they study in their formal school lives?

This chapter presents my analysis of the data I collected through interviews, observations, and ethnographic accounts of the semester-long study.

Data Collection

Throughout the study, I collected data through interviews, observations, and narrative accounts. During the 18-week span, the focus group met three times, and each member wrote a narrative about their experiences with the curriculum and pedagogy employed in the study of American literature. Likewise, I kept a journal of observations and notes. The interviews, observations, and narratives served as collection methods for a larger-scale, thematic synthesis of data. Each method held roughly equal weight in yielding answers to my research questions. The following sections detail how the study transpired, reflecting slight adjustments I made to the plan presented in Chapter 3.

Focus Group Interviews

At the beginning of the first group interview, in Week 4 of the semester, the students listed their chosen identifier on individual note cards. I created a key of the participants' names and their aliases in a password-protected Google Sheet. Two members of the focus group were absent the day of the meeting, but

10 of the 12 met with me during the 30-minute study period called FLEX. The room was closed to other students, so our conversation was private.

I read the five questions (Appendix F) to spur a conversation among the students. I wanted to know their perspectives on racism, their experiences with literature, and what changes they would like to see to increase the likelihood of connecting their lives to what they are studying. As the students discussed each question, I took notes on a chart that I later coded to determine common themes.

The interview helped me understand my students better and revealed some results I had not anticipated. However, I had hoped the conversation among the students would be more natural, synergistic, and free-flowing. A few times, I prompted individual students to answer the questions. As is often the case in my classes, a few students were more talkative than others and dominated the conversation. Figure 4.1 shows how some students responded more frequently, as opposed to others who answered only one or two questions.

Engagement in class	Personal connection to texts	Changes to make to texts	Diversity	Literature preferences
		The old words		Five Mask
Every year is a repeat	Trauma connections	Outsiders	Wants more diversity	Outsiders Mask
Historical stuff	not connected because of time period			
LOVES the Poe wants more modern things				Wonder/Wight M of R Death
		contemporary pieces		TKAM Raven
	Connect to pop culture			TKAM M of Red Death Equiano

Figure 4.1 Notes From Week 4 Interview

The second group interview was scheduled to take place at the midpoint of the semester, Week 9. I intended to conduct the second interview in the same manner as the first, but two school-wide events warranted some changes to my procedure. First, the administration removed the FLEX period from the daily schedule for 2 weeks because of a series of threats written on bathroom walls around the building. In Week 10, FLEX resumed, but a second obstacle, Spirit Week activities, hindered my ability to meet with the students. During the week leading up to the annual Homecoming game, students are encouraged to participate in various activities around campus to earn points for their class, and most of those events take place during FLEX time.

Because I could not force the students to attend my focus group interview, I decided to forego meeting with all 12 participants at once. Instead, I conducted smaller, less formal interviews with two or three members at a time. However, I used the same questions (Appendix F) as the first interview and recorded the students' answers on the same kind of chart to discover common themes among the responses. Modifications in the proposed methodology of a classroom-based research study are expected as much of a typical school day is subject to change. Efron and Ravid (2013) explained that action research is iterative and requires practitioners to be flexible as they progress through a study.

Though I was initially frustrated that I was unable to interview the focus group as a whole, this method of meeting with just a few students at a time produced more valuable information than the first interview. The students were more willing to speak openly about their experiences when only two or three of

them were talking with me. In comparison to Figure 4.1, my handwritten notes in Figure 4.2 confirm that the altered approach dramatically increased the amount of information each student provided.

	Engagement in class	Personal connection to texts	Changes to make to texts	Diversity	Literature preferences	N
	yes reading a play	Witch Hunt on Twitter... connection to pop culture	no changes	not yet	To Build A Fire Descriptive nature	
	yes really need to pass.	Gatsby People	will read any stories	not yet	Crucible religious not utopia	
	yes because the activities are varied and the writing is engaging	Person in power using their authority	poetry real history of black people	all the same types of characters	The Crucible	
	yes having a part makes a diff.	Connecting to previous classes AP Euro Hist.	goes with the flow	not yet	Crucible easy to enjoy group aspect	
	yes more interesting than most	no relationship brother locked in shower	books that I can understand		The Crucible Masque	
	yes because of the personal connection of the students	no relation but they were interesting	more poetry black people songs of triumph	no	The Crucible	
	yes I love English. I'm inspired to write.	the deep thinking connects to me because there is a deeper meaning to things.	wants more diversity. subtle LGBT. various personality	no we don't read texts that rep. ↓	Imagism	
<p>ethnicity and race should be considered "normal"</p> <p>minority = struggle but not always neurodivergent +</p>						

Figure 4.2 Notes From Week 11 Interviews

Observations

I kept detailed notes throughout the semester on interactions with and among my students, their reactions to class texts, and their level of engagement with various activities. I also noted any parental feedback I received either in person or through email. This process began on the first day of school when I explained my study to my students and emailed information to their guardians and concluded on the last day of the semester when I collected their individual narrative accounts.

My observational data largely captured what typically happens in my course, yet the interactions I documented among my students reinforced how critical multicultural education is. Several times, our class discussion transformed from a generalized talk about the basic plot or historical context of a text to very personal anecdotes from the students on topics as varied as gender inequality, cultural misconceptions, socioeconomic disparities, and political choices. I noted these observations as a bullet-pointed list at the end of the day rather than during class. Some weeks, I added daily entries; at other times, a 3-week span would only yield one entry. This fluid approach allowed me to reflect upon the events before I made notations about them as data points. I focused on student engagement and agency as evidenced by whole-class discussions and effective time-management with the curricular and pedagogical choices made throughout the semester. These observations allowed me to adjust my plans as the students showed me what texts and activities were most interesting to them. I coded all the notes in search of themes as determined by the focus group interviews.

Narratives

Chapter 3 explained my intention to collect narratives from each of my students and create one of my own involvement and insights, as well. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated, a narrative that produces “rich, thick description” details a participant’s experience (p. 230). My hope for this method of data collection was to determine if my students felt a strong connection between their lives and what they learned in my classroom; I designed the instructions accordingly (Appendix H). However, the narratives from my focus group were superficial, lacking the depth I had anticipated. In Figure 4.3, for example, knowing which texts Rae found most enjoyable is helpful, yet Rae does not indicate why *The Crucible* was interesting, why “*Désirée’s Baby*” was enjoyable, or what made Poe’s work different from other texts. I cannot tell whether the subject matter, the interactive nature of theater, or some other factor prompted Rae to write about these texts.

My favorite unit of study was the Conspiracy Theory unit. I really like individual work; so, the essay was an assignment I looked forward to. English is usually my hardest subject and I almost found *The Crucible* “easy”. *The Crucible* was interesting and I was excited to read it every day.

I enjoyed *The Crucible* and *Desiree’s Baby*. I did not enjoy reading the poems. Poems are hard for me to understand and these were no different. I like Edgar Allen Poe because it was different than any other author I had read.

Figure 4.3 *Rae’s Narrative*

Another problem with the narrative assignment was that some students chose not to participate. Nova, for example, never submitted a narrative. Outside

of the interviews, Nova and I discussed the class several times, and she shared great insights about the texts, interactions with peers, and learning through cultural diversity, so I was disappointed that Nova never took the time to write down her experiences. Nevertheless, the information that the students provided did help me better understand their point of view in studying American literature.

My own narrative became an extended journal entry where I detailed what my hopes were in creating an assignment or teaching a text and then described how students reacted to the lesson. I included moments of collaboration with a colleague, as well, that bolstered my confidence in making curricular and pedagogical changes quickly as a response to my students' feedback. Collectively, my observational notes and the narratives provided data that supported the themes I discovered from the focus group interviews, but they also yielded considerations for subsequent iterations of my curricula and practices.

Themes

Consistent with the qualitative analysis plan described in Chapter 3, I coded all data from the interviews, observations, and narratives. Four themes emerged. Three themes spoke directly to the curricular choices I made: contemporary texts, diversity, and interest. One theme, classroom activities, connected to the pedagogical practices I employed. The various data sources span the four themes, illuminating how the students conveyed the themes as interconnected. None of them stands alone, and each one is supported by evidence associated with the others. The themes also reflect the theoretical

framework undergirding this study. The theories of CSP, CRT, and student agency informed my research questions, data collection, and interpretation.

At points, students refer to specific texts or units of study. For this course, there are four units organized thematically. While not exhaustive, Figure 4.4 provides an overview of the semester to contextualize these references.

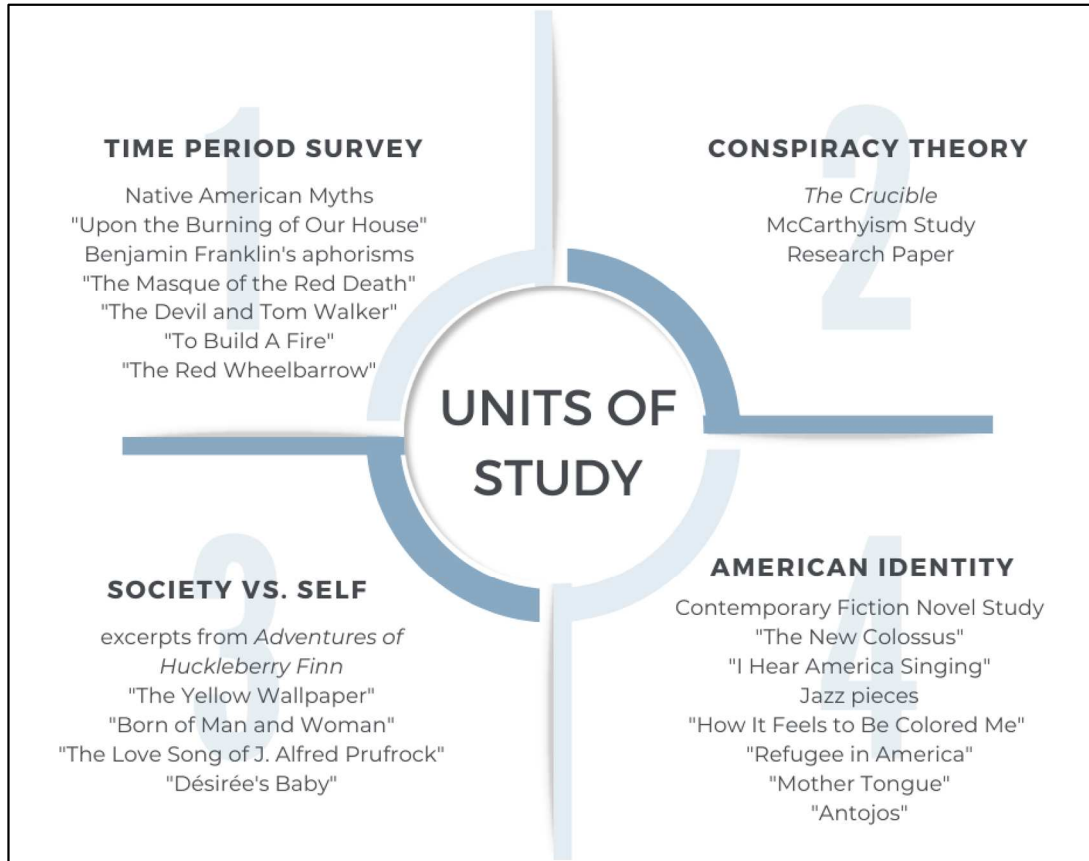


Figure 4.4 *Units of Study*

Theme 1: Contemporary Texts

Across the data, I saw evidence that contemporary texts are more conducive to students' connecting their lived experiences to what they are reading than the set of classics I traditionally taught in American literature. Contemporary texts are generally recognized as pieces written in the present. To

my students, this descriptor applied to works written within the past 10 years; they indicated that stories depicting life as they experience it are contemporary. However, scholars are split upon defining a time period for contemporary literature favoring instead to focus on the content and style of a text to categorize it (Shaw & Upstone, 2021). One of the difficulties in teaching English is that many scholars and practitioners rely on a canon of texts to which, arguably, all students should have exposure. For American literature, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are just a few of examples. However, students have increasing difficulty engaging with such pieces because the characters do not sound or act like them. In short, there is no clear connection between students' lived experiences and what they read in class. Israel (1997) agreed: "students need literature that is relevant, that is accessible, that is well written, and that they can 'enjoy'" (p. 23).

In the first interview, Reggie said, "Old words kill me, and I can't get into the story. Why can't they just talk like normal?" Throughout the semester, students echoed Reggie's comment by asking if a text was written in "plain English" as I introduced a story. Archaic language was not the only problem for the students, though, and to promote student agency, a teacher must be aware of contextual elements from language to societal norms. In my observations, I noted that if I had to explain too much about objects in a story, such as what a rotary telephone looked like and how it worked, the students would quickly become disinterested. Not only did students specifically say they preferred reading pieces in modernized language, but my own observations suggested

students were much more engaged when a story was easy to comprehend and provided the students with relatable context.

Student agency, as explained by Rappa and Tang (2016), depends upon a teacher's ability to provide texts that activate prior knowledge, describe the types of people students know, or emphasize objects they use daily. Figure 4.5, an excerpt from James's narrative, illustrates this point. Though this unit was the least interesting to my students in general, James explained that colonial writings were his favorite. The reason behind James's choice is compelling; he liked these texts because he had prior knowledge of them. James connected to these pieces, though they are written in difficult language, because of his previous studies and his interest in the subject matter.

My favorite unit to study was Colonialism because. I have always been interested in government and historical events within the United States. I enjoyed reading the Declaration of Independence because for me it's easy to connect to and understand because I have studied the Revolutionary War, & the founding of the U.S government before, and documents leading up to the starting of our country.

Figure 4.5 *Excerpt From James's Narrative*

A disconnect between my student population and the texts I taught was students' struggle to understand past conventions of U.S. society. According to the notes I took about our class discussions, my students had no previous experiences to connect to the story of Huckleberry Finn. Out from under the watchful eye of a parent, Huck is a 13-year-old boy who rafts down the Mississippi River, steals for food, and sleeps under the stars. That a child could

travel through multiple states, accompanied only by a runaway slave, and exercise the freedom to roam where he chose was unfathomable to my students, some of whom already have adult responsibilities upon their shoulders. Students who have never had a yard to play in, who must work after-school jobs to help pay rent, or who have never left the state of their birth simply cannot find themselves in Huck's story. Similarly, my students argued with me throughout reading *The Crucible* that John and Elizabeth Proctor should have simply moved away from Salem when Abigail Williams and the girls began accusing people of witchcraft. Considering present-day mobility and our ability to begin lives anew, my students could not connect to a period in time when people were tethered to their land and bound by societal constraints.

During the first interview, Matthew said, "I'd be much more interested in stories about modern-day stuff." Many of the students agreed with his sentiment during those first weeks of class, yet the texts they enjoyed spanned a 100-year time frame. Specifically, they mentioned enjoying Modernist works like Imagist poetry from the 1950's, Harlem Renaissance writings from the 1920's, and young adult fiction from the 2010's. Definitions of contemporary might seem subjective, yet my students' preference for literature written in easily decodable language and featuring relatable situations was clear.

Theme 2: Diversity

Diversifying my American literature curriculum was one of the primary concerns of this study. From a CRT standpoint, learning about each student's culture and connecting that culture to the curriculum is paramount to promoting

student agency (Gay, 2002; Rappa & Tang, 2016). Diversity refers to the ways humans categorize one another. Among others, these categories include gender, sexual orientation, economic status, education level, ability, race, and culture. At first, my students considered diversity in terms of race alone as they mentioned wanting to read texts that moved away from slave narratives as the sole history of Black Americans. During the first interview, there was no discussion of diversity in terms of sexuality, brain function, ability, or culture. The students in my classes represent each of these areas of difference but their instruction has been limited to dominant culture, specifically the White, able, heterosexual, male point of view. Creating a culturally diverse classroom allows students from all walks of life to correlate their lived experiences with what they study in school.

Gay (2002) encouraged teachers to be aware of how members of each student's culture contributed to the subject matter. Students who learn about members of their community as strong, celebrated writers feel a sense of associative pride. This type of allyship fosters student agency and allows learners to recognize a teacher who acknowledges the input of various cultures to the whole of the American experience.

From the interviews, my students exhibited a clear desire to learn about cultures that were not their own. They were particularly interested in learning about their fellow classmates and others they see in our community; however, the first interview revealed that many of them considered diversity in terms of Black and White only. Oak called the group's attention to this fact, saying, "It would be really amazing if we could study about the cultures of people we see in

the hallway each day. You know, like I see that there's more than just White people and Black people."

The final unit of the semester, called American Identity, highlighted texts by American authors from various cultures. The students' narratives showed appreciation for the perspectives they gained from studying these cultures. Matthew wrote, "My favorite unit of study was American identity because it helped me get a better understanding on how important different immigrant experiences" (i.e., during colonization, at the turn of the 20th century, and at present) formed our nation. Reggie agreed that reading various texts "helped [him] with the perspectives of other cultures." This unit encompassed texts and cultural studies of modern Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Chinese Americans. Additionally, in groups of three to five students, the class read novels by American authors who identify as one or more of the following: mixed-race, Black, Mexican, Korean, Japanese, Muslim, LGBTQ, nonbinary, and neurodivergent.

My students told me that before this class, they had not encountered many works by BIPOC authors. Of the few exceptions, most were stories of enslavement and marginalization. Levi explained, "We've been sort of desensitized to slavery. We've heard it a million times." The group agreed that by 11th grade, they have been subjected to plenty of slave narratives and are tired of being taught the same stories year after year.

Consequently, when the class studied the poets of The Harlem Renaissance and the jazz musicians of that time, many students, regardless of

racial identity, were highly engaged. Black students learned about thinkers, artists, and entertainers who looked like them, and White students learned about music they had not previously heard. Oak, the same student who wanted to study the cultures of those who walk the halls of our school, said that this part of class was by far the most interesting and enjoyable.

Theme 3: Interest

The third theme I discovered was the important role of interest in student enjoyment. I recognized interest was the greatest determiner of whether a student engaged with a text because so many students mentioned it in their interviews and narratives. Surprisingly, no matter the student's cultural identity, they preferred particular writers and pieces over others. Rappa and Tang (2016) suggest the role of student interest in engagement is a tenet of student agency. Both contemporary texts and diversity can increase a student's interest, yet without interest in the subject matter, students may struggle to connect to assigned readings and take ownership of their learning.

Two of the interview questions led students to think about their personal connections to texts and what literature they preferred. For both questions, more than half of the focus group members mentioned interest, in some form, as a factor. I had expected students to favor texts by younger, more contemporary authors and stories that portrayed BIPOC characters, and my students were initially very eager to read modern-day writing and learn about various cultures; however, the focus group indicated that real-life situations featuring traumatic experiences or unexpected plot twists were the pieces they most enjoyed. For

example, Sputnik's narrative expressed how he most enjoyed the Romantic literature (1800–1850) we studied during the survey of American literature unit. Those works, written by White men using syntax and vocabulary that are not easily accessible to 21st-century students, nevertheless attracted students' interest. Of note, students mentioned Edgar Allan Poe as their favorite more than any other author. During the group interview at the beginning of the semester, Tsukishima said, "I loved the Edgar Allan Poe stuff we read. It's like he gets my pain!" Oak agreed, adding, "We have a sort of shared sense of trauma with [Poe]. We are dark and creepy in our souls."

My observation notes from later in the semester mention two other pieces that grabbed students' attention. The short stories "Born of Man and Woman" by Richard Matheson and "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman elicited lively classroom conversations with several probing questions from my students. Matheson's sci-fi piece, 100 years removed from the works of Poe, gives clues throughout the story that the main character is not what readers may expect. In the end, the reader is left to piece together what the main character is—a human who oozes green and has legs like a spider—and come to terms with how they feel about the parents' treatment of their child. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," written in 1892, a woman slowly descends into insanity after the birth of her child. In both cases, my students wanted to debate what they would do in each situation, how they would feel if they were one of the characters, and what the story says about the state of U.S. society—each talking point an indicator of strong student agency and engagement in their studies.

Clearly, none of my students have experienced being haunted by a raven, being locked in a basement because they are half-spider children, or the overwhelming burden of postpartum depression. Nevertheless, stories of the dark and twisted aspects of human psychology fascinated them. As teenagers, they are encountering new emotional spaces to which they have not previously been exposed, and many of them find comfort in reading texts that normalize the pains and difficulties they face.

Theme 4: Classroom Activities

Classroom activities can teach and reinforce a lesson. Because I built this study on tenets of CSP and CRT and I wanted to know what exercises were most beneficial in increasing my students' agency, this theme readily emerged from the data. Just as important as curricular changes toward diversity, assignments and activities a teacher facilitates can bridge the gap between a student's primary and preferred culture and their secondary culture of formal schooling (Paris, 2012). Using variety when selecting pedagogical practices is necessary to increase student engagement for subject matter that is required rather than selected.

As stated in Chapter 3, I had initially considered providing my students with choice-driven opportunities centered on a novel study. By employing Socratic seminar, the students created small groups in which they would study a novel in a unit called American Identity. Although the students chose their texts, they did not select the way they were assessed both formally and informally throughout the unit. My thought was that by choosing the novel they read, even if

from a curated list of 15 options, my students would feel empowered and excited to learn about the subject matter. However, through my observations and conversations with the students, I discovered that choice with texts is not as important as is the modality in which they present their understanding of the novel or general unit of study.

The data affirmed what CSP warrants; students enjoyed incorporating their interests and talents into their learning experiences. Infusing elements of primary culture into the classroom increases student engagement (Paris, 2012). During an interview, James, a physical young man by nature, said, “I really like hands-on activities and to be able to move around the room.” Echoing that sentiment, my own notes showed that students were more likely to be actively working on an assignment if it involved physical movement. Something as simple as asking students to arrange their desks into small groups was often enough of a change in modality to cause a rise in engagement.

In an English class, students may not expect to be able to move freely around the room or incorporate abilities other than reading and writing in their day-to-day activities. As noted in my observations and affirmed by my students’ narratives, writing notes from teacher-centric lectures was not well-received, but activities that connected to the arts were. Finnley stated in her narrative that she did not enjoy the survey of American literature unit because it was full of notes about literary time periods. She had difficulty staying interested in the information I presented, but during subsequent units, when activities included listening to music and drawing, she was far more interested. Similarly, James reported being

much more interested in creating a bumper sticker or drawing an example of figurative language than taking notes or responding to questions about a text.

In harmony with CSP, the lens of CRT illuminates my students' desires to participate in group work rather than learning alone. Communal learning opportunities focus on the needs of the group rather than the individual (Gay, 2002). When I asked my students what types of activities most helped them enjoy literature and English class, the results varied. Hands-on, group activities were the most interesting to the focus group participants with few exceptions. For example, Iris said she liked hands-on activities where she was allowed to move around the room, and Rose expressed a preference for "activities where we all connected and talked amongst each other." Though in agreement about the necessity of movement to learn best, Oak and Rae differed by saying they would rather work alone than with group members.

Regardless, they all agreed that read-then-respond activities, such as reading comprehension questions, were tedious and helped only to prepare for a test. Likewise, they concurred that the more interactive a text is, the more they enjoyed it. Reading a play, for example, is communal by nature, and the students preferred this type of learning to solitary options. A statement from Tsukishima's narrative encapsulates this view: "This was the most interactive English class I've been in and I really enjoyed it."

Answers to the Research Questions

After coding the data and determining the emerging themes, I revisited my research questions. These three questions guided my study by asking how my

curricular and pedagogical choices impacted my students' agency, how White and BIPOC students respond to diverse texts, and how pedagogy can help students connect their home lives to their school lives. This study was born of a desire to discover how creating a culturally inclusive American literature classroom would benefit my students regardless of their identities.

Question 1

I sought to understand how diversifying my curriculum and pedagogy impacted students' agency. The data showed students were more engaged when I included more diverse texts and activities. The traditional canon I used in English III is heavily Anglocentric (Figure 4.6). Conversely, my theoretical framework indicated that students, especially those who identify as BIPOC, experience more belonging and exhibit more engagement in culturally inclusive courses. My action research confirmed the need to change this dynamic.

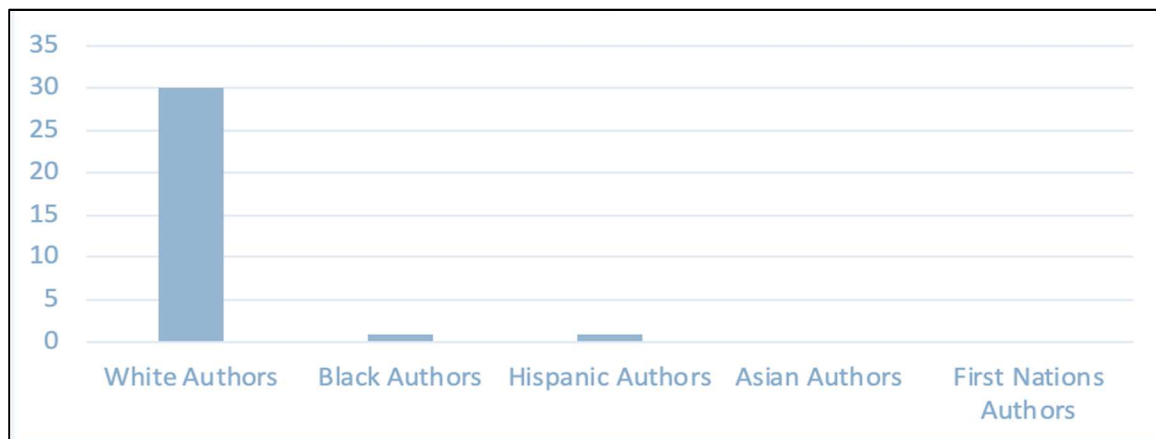


Figure 4.6 *Authors of Traditional English III Texts*

In line with my theoretical framework, the data from students indicate that when they cannot identify with texts or authors, they easily disengage. To begin the work of changing this dynamic, incorporating texts by diverse authors is

necessary. After meeting with the focus group and understanding their collective desire to learn about various cultures, I made the changes reflected in Figure 4.7. At the semester's end, my students referenced the units with more diverse texts as the most engaging and interesting.

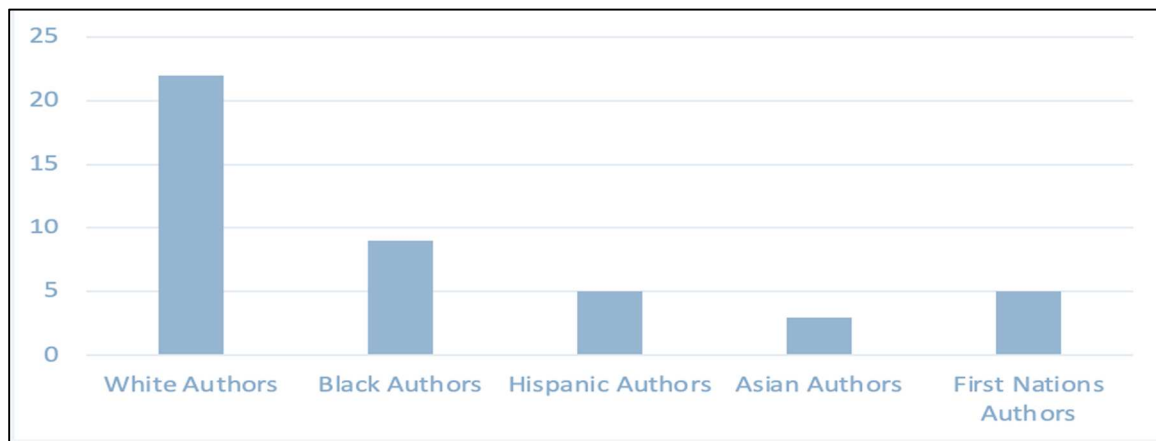


Figure 4.7 *Authors of Diversified English III Texts*

Although replacing texts by White authors with those by BIPOC authors is a start in increasing student agency, the pedagogical choices a teacher makes also heavily influence how students engage with the curriculum. When students are not interested in assigned activities, they become disengaged. The final unit of the semester incorporated a small-group novel study through weekly Socratic seminars. I chose this approach because of what I learned from the mid-semester interviews. Levi said he enjoyed the conversational style of the class and wanted more opportunities to discuss the readings. My observations in class echoed Levi's comments in that group activities and class discussions seemed more interesting and elicited more action to complete work than when students worked alone or completed reading comprehension questions.

Question 2

I also sought to explore how my students, both BIPOC and White, respond to diverse texts. The data showed that both White and BIPOC students enjoyed learning about various cultures. While the White students were not as vocal about their initial desires to read about those from different cultures, in the end, they indicated an appreciation of understanding how cultures of which they are not a part are woven into the American fabric. For example, the last unit of the semester, called American Identity, is a thematic study of what makes an American an American. During this unit, students watch documentaries, TED Talks, video shorts, and music videos that highlight different aspects of American cultural experiences. A lesson my students particularly enjoyed was when I played six YouTube videos of famous jazz performers from the Harlem Renaissance era while the students filled in a sensory detail chart as they experienced both the music and the lyrics of the songs. At first, the Black students were excited that the class was going to focus on pieces by Black performers, thinking I had provided this lesson just for them, and the White students were eager to learn about a type of music new to them; however, both groups quickly learned that this lesson was for all students as I was able to link performers such as Cab Calloway and Bessie Smith to modern musicians such as Usher, Miley Cyrus, and Lady Gaga. Tsukishima wrote in their narrative: “Learning about the Harlem Renaissance and music were my favorite things to learn. I love learning about African American influence on music and art.” Beyond learning about the artistic explosion of the Harlem Renaissance, I also wanted to

show my students how their own concept of American culture is an amalgam of cultural influence dating back more than 100 years.

For my White students, this study was necessary to open a safe conversation for exploring concepts like marginalization, anti-racism, and White privilege through multicultural texts. My students learned that our country, known as the melting pot of the world, is and has always been a mixture of races, ethnicities, and cultures. Through our studies, I created a place where questions were welcomed and misunderstandings could be cleared away. Because my students felt comfortable respectfully challenging assumptions of one another, discussions about experiences that BIPOC students have and what role their White friends can play to recognize and support anti-racism occurred. As Jewell (2020) wrote, “Listening when BIPoC talk is necessary for building strong coalitions. We all have a different story to tell and perspective to share. This gives us a deeper understanding of how racism affects our lives” (pp. 130–131).

At the end of the semester, Nova, who identifies as Black, and James, who identifies as White, talked about different experiences they have in doing something simple like going shopping at the local Walmart. James had difficulty understanding why Nova said that shopping in our town can be dangerous for Black people like her, yet with a very open mind, he was able to listen and ask questions. In turn, Nova talked about stereotypes and how they can vastly alter a person’s lived reality. Because James wears boots and a belt buckle to school, Nova asked if he had ever been called a redneck and how the stereotype of a redneck as unintelligent and automatically racist made him feel. These students

navigated waters that many adults cannot in truly listening to one another and trying to understand what life is like from someone else's perspective. Nova later told me that this conversation with James changed the way she sees and talks to White people. She discovered that James did not understand her fears because he had never lived her experiences, and for him to understand what she goes through, he had to find a personal connection to her story.

On the other hand, my BIPOC students were the most eager to learn about various cultures; moreover, they wanted their own cultural practices and texts to be normalized. The students said they were not interested in writers of their culture being categorized as a subgroup of American literature and preferred that texts which represented them be included as part of a whole unit. They did not like the idea of studying Black literature or Hispanic literature as separate entities.

Again, Nova explained how being in a mostly White classroom while studying race-specific texts becomes awkward:

It's like a spotlight is all the sudden on me, and everybody turns around to see my reaction to know how they are supposed to act. Or it's like I have to back up what the teacher is saying about 'my people.'

Others in the focus group agreed they had seen this type of treatment of BIPOC students in the past, even to the point of a teacher calling on the few Black students in the room to talk about their thoughts on subjects like slavery, affirmative action, and defunding the police. Though she did not use the word tokenized (Haymarket Books, 2020), Nova explained the feeling.

Likewise, Iris wondered at the necessity to separate literature by the racial or ethnic background of the writer or characters. She reminded the group that if this course was the study of American literature, then having texts from different cultures made sense, asking, “Why would there even be a ‘Hispanic literature’ unit or a ‘Black literature’ unit? We are all American, so it should all be mixed up just like us. Isn’t that the point?” Calling particular attention to a group of authors because of their cultural identity further reinforces both tokenism and the idea that this group is not a part of the whole.

Question 3

Finally, I aimed to discover what pedagogical methods help high school students connect their lived experiences to their study of literature. Based on the data, discussions, activities, and opportunities for practice that respected students’ lives outside of the regular school day were most conducive to authentic connections. Though building note-taking skills through teacher-led lecture is important in preparing for college, students indicated they learn better and are far more engaged when they have the freedom to work in groups, with artistic modalities, through hands-on opportunities, and using electronic devices.

Because of the data concerning the pedagogical methods that most resonated with the students, I allowed students to work in pairs or groups of three on assignments that had previously been solo activities. I also added artistic activities such as creating a bumper sticker to illustrate an understanding of Benjamin Franklin’s aphorisms and writing a short story in first person based upon myriorama cards. Because so many students talked about hands-on

learning throughout the interview process, I created assignments that asked students to create an e-poster and present research about the Red Scare to small groups of their peers before reading *The Crucible*, and after reading “The Masque of the Red Death,” I assigned a project where the students created masks complete with symbols representing their current situation in life. Figure 4.8 shows how Sputnik felt about creating his mask.

One of the activities that stuck with me the most in this class was the mask project. I don't exactly know why but it was oddly pleasant to reflect on myself and try to put my personal character on a piece of art. Not only that but I also ended up choosing my current conflict at the time to inspire the design on my mask, which in a way was kind of therapeutic. It was a slight bother to have a project due on top of the homework from my other classes but nevertheless it was a fun assignment and definitely stuck with me the most.

Figure 4.8 *Excerpt From Sputnik's Narrative*

Because teenagers have experienced instant gratification using electronics since they were young children, classroom activities that are outside the realm of reading comprehension questions are not only more challenging but also more favored overall. As an example, one of students' regular assignments is a discussion board article. Each week, I provide a current events article, which the students annotate electronically. Then, they answer a question I have posted in Google Classroom. Finally, they respond to their classmates' posts, facilitating discussion about the nonfiction piece. The articles they most enjoy and even talk about outside of the online community space are the ones that most connect to their current lives: about a school's ability to monitor a student's social media, why gas prices are rising, and how much time young adults spend on electronic devices in a typical day. Not only are the topics interesting to the students, but the act of debating the article among their peers is also engaging.

Chapter Summary

Scholars have studied the need for cultural inclusivity in myriad ways, but few studies have looked specifically at curriculum, pedagogy, and student agency in a high school American literature course. Although the approach is not novel, revisiting traditional ways of thinking to establish norms more consistent with a changing society is useful for higher rates of student engagement. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine what curricular and pedagogical changes most spur student agency while honoring students' various identities. Teachers who can make changes to the curriculum they teach have a unique opportunity to tap into a student's primary culture, lessening the span between it and the secondary culture of school.

The analysis of data in this chapter shows that students prefer contemporary texts, diversity, and high-interest pieces when teachers give them options. The focus group also indicated classroom activities should be fun and highly engaging through hands-on experiences. Chapter 5 expands on this study's informative and surprising results and identifies space and need for further study on similar topics.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

My problem of practice was the need for curricular and pedagogical changes to provide a diverse learning experience and promote students' agency in my English III American literature class. Enlisting a focus group of 12 student volunteers, I triangulated interview, observation, and narrative data to understand my students' experiences with diverse texts and various learning opportunities and answer the following research questions:

1. How does diversifying my curriculum and pedagogy impact students' agency in American literature class?
2. How do my students, both BIPOC and White, respond to diverse texts?
3. What pedagogical methods help high school students connect their lived experiences to the literature they study in their formal school lives?

This chapter details the implications of my 18-week study.

Reflections on Existing Literature

In general, my findings are consistent with my theoretical framework. In Chapter 2, I outlined how the theories of CRT, CSP, and student agency informed my study, my data collection methods, and the analysis of the data. Throughout the semester-long study, I saw clear evidence that focusing on cultural diversity promotes student agency. These results were not surprising.

The tenets of CRT, as outlined by Gay (2002), indicate curricular design should focus on multiculturalism to connect to as many students as possible. Specifically, the second tenet emphasizes teachers' need to demonstrate caring to build a learning community that honors all students and their modes of learning. Incorporating communal learning opportunities, texts about diverse peoples, and honest discussions about diversity confers recognition and appreciation for students' cultures. During a class discussion of a poem about a biracial girl trying to come to grips with her duality, Reggie, a mixed-race young man, said he understood exactly how she felt because some days he identifies more as one race than the other. His comment surprised Finnley and Matthew, neither of whom knew Reggie was mixed-race. The safe environment established earlier in the semester enabled students to discuss race openly, questioning presumptions based on physical appearance and navigating cultural norms in a way that many classes cannot. Providing a safe place for my students to ask and answer questions while learning about experiences among those who are different than them is putting CRT into action.

The second theory upon which I built this study is CSP. The definition of culture through a CSP lens allowed me to provide bridges between my students and the literature we read. Understanding that people categorize themselves through their associations with a variety of influences, such as music, language, their environment, or other people (Paris, 2012), helps teachers and students create connections among these cultures. In their second interviews, both Sputnik and Rose mentioned how they connected to the literature we read in

class through pop culture. When the class discussed a piece of writing, the conversation typically morphed from discussing facts or events to something interesting or timely for the students. Two examples arose during our study of Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Masque of the Red Death." Before reading the story, we discussed what life was like during the pandemic and how offended we would have been if, for Halloween in 2020, a friend had dressed as someone who had died of COVID-19. Immediately, the students connected to this story because of their lived experiences over the past 3 years. To help them relate further to Poe, I explained the controversy surrounding Poe's death in Baltimore and how the football team of that city came to be called the Ravens. Small opportunities like these to tap into experiential knowledge the students have in relationship to the authors and texts they study is core to the theory of CSP.

Though there are distinct parallels between these theories and what my students reported as supports for their own agency, CRT and CSP stopped short of addressing some of the issues the students disclosed. For example, students insisted they cared more about the subject matter of a text than when it was written, who wrote it, or the culture of the characters. Both CSP and CRT focus heavily on a student's primary culture, which typically includes an element of ethnicity or race. A teacher might assume that simply changing texts from old, White writers to contemporary, BIPOC authors would suffice; however, my students said that interest in the content was more powerful as an impetus for engagement than anything else. It could be argued, and I would agree, that contemporary texts by BIPOC writers by nature would be more interesting to

students of diverse cultural backgrounds than Anglocentric pieces written in a time period that is not accessible to today's student.

Secondly, neither CRT nor CSP addresses influences outside of culture as reasons why students become engaged in their classwork. For example, when I asked what motivated students, some admitted the only reason they cared about the class or their grades was the need to pass. In fact, rather than expressing an intrinsic desire to pass, they viewed good grades as a means of pleasing their parents or guardians. Vaughn et al. (2020) referred to this notion of outside forces causing a person to act upon their own behalf as proxy agency, whereas I had expected the ideas espoused by CRT and CSP to be stronger influences on student engagement.

Diverse curriculum and pedagogy are important for student agency, yet my students revealed that interest in a text and a personal desire to succeed are factors in their success. Additional research that speaks directly to these components is warranted. Understanding how they factor into students' overall agency would enhance teachers' ability to be culturally inclusive.

Recommendations for Practice

My findings indicate diverse curricular and pedagogical opportunities positively influence and interest students. Whether a student body is diverse or homogeneous, moving away from the Anglocentrism that has plagued U.S. schools is appropriate. Teachers who want to prepare their students to be respectable stewards of this nation, and the world at large, must understand that teaching empathy, community, and recognition of others is key. The most

appropriate way to achieve that aim is to create a classroom that honors and promotes cultural diversity.

First, a teacher should take stock of the Anglocentric texts and ideas they teach. Then, the teacher must actively learn about the cultures of the students in their care. Becoming educated about diverse groups by reading and asking questions of adult members of those cultures—especially fellow teachers and members of the community—is the teacher’s responsibility. Student involvement, as is the case with PAR, is appropriate only after a teacher has learned about the various cultures present throughout the community. To make sound curricular and pedagogical decisions, even with the help of PAR members, the teacher must have a strong foundation in community culture. If the teacher relies upon the students for this understanding, the teacher runs the risk of severely damaging their relationship with PAR team members. Making comments or asking questions a teenager could perceive as offensive may sever lines of communication between the teacher and the students beyond repair. Finally, the teacher should infuse texts and activities that speak to the cultures in the classroom, and as the class responds to those adaptations, the teacher should note what works well and what additional changes are necessary. This iterative process can continue as more texts by diverse authors become available.

Implementation Plan

Now that I have completed the study and see what elements of the semester were most compelling to my students, I want to capitalize upon that information. My students were very clear about the units of study, particular texts,

and activities that most resonated with them and which ones were almost unbearable. In the short week and a half between the fall and spring semesters at my school, I read the feedback from my study group students and began to consider what changes to make for the following fall. I envisioned dedicating one more semester to experiment with the changed curriculum and further hone my proficiency with some of the pedagogical methods that were new to me. However, sharing my students' comments with a colleague inspired me not to wait to make further changes.

At the start of the year, I was selected to serve as a mentor for a teacher who is new to our school and the profession. The young lady with whom I was partnered is very creative, inspired, and willing to jump in with both feet to reach her students. Though she is a first-year teacher, so much of her teaching practice shows years of maturity, and I feel very fortunate to have her as a member of my professional learning community. She and I worked together to learn from my focus group and adjust our collective plans as we became aware of their needs and desires. My colleague pushes me to think outside of the box and attempt something new at a moment's notice. We keep our English III classes on a similar schedule so we can ensure continuity between our courses.

At the semester's end, the unit of study with the most negative reviews was the survey of American literary time periods at the beginning of the semester. The 4-week unit, designed to give an overview of the social and political climates that shaped various literary movements in the United States, is lecture-heavy and Anglocentric. In one day, my colleague and I determined how

to condense the unit to 1.5 weeks, freeing time we can devote to literature from Latinx and Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American authors.

In addition to constantly revising what we are teaching and how we are teaching it, my colleague and I have shared our plans with a third teacher in my department who is teaching two sections of English III. She, too, is a first-year teacher. Throughout their teaching careers, these two young ladies will be able to apply and extend the insight from this study.

The three of us are collaborating by re-working the units of study so they are not homogenized in any way other than to create an overarching theme. For example, during the fall semester, the American Identity unit was planned so students studied Latinx-American literature for a few days, then moved on to Black literature, followed by Asian-American literature. After reviewing my students' comments, my colleagues and I decided to eliminate these subcategory groupings because they dilute the whole American experience. With that in mind, this next semester's study of American Identity will flow differently. Smaller themes such as generational differences, language barriers, and artistic expressions will help to loosely connect texts within the larger unit of study.

Beyond the scope of my school, all English III teachers in my district are involved in professional learning communities to share classroom resources and long-term plans. At the last meeting of this group, I briefly explained my study and there was a great deal of interest in my findings. Through a shared folder in Google Drive, my district-wide colleagues have access to the units of study I design as they evolve and become more robust. Because the English III teachers

meet to align our curricula, assessments, and grading policies, I will provide evidence, through my students' experiences, proving why a multi-cultural shift is necessary in the study of American literature. Although I know that some teachers have already begun to incorporate my work in their courses, I welcome conversations that address the fears and celebrate the victories other teachers experience in shifting from Anglo-centrism to diversity.

To further my work toward social justice for BIPOC in American literature classrooms, I want to collaborate with colleagues across the state who have studied or created professional development sessions speaking to the need for cultural diversity. In discussions with educators at my school, I learned many teachers are reluctant to discuss race, diversity, or cultural difference for fear of offending a student or being reprimanded by parents, administration, or state-level decision makers. To ameliorate these concerns, teachers need opportunities to learn how to facilitate uncomfortable conversations and navigate classrooms where diversity is celebrated. The administration and the district at large must support those efforts. So that my administration and district coordinators understand the necessity of a concerted move toward inclusivity, I will share my findings and my students' experiences.

Reflection on Methodology

Overall, the methodology for this study was solid. However, I would consider a few alterations if I were to attempt the same study again. Specifically, I would change some aspects of my work with the students as participants.

I continue to believe that involving students in research is the most authentic way to understand their views, yet the most difficult aspect of this study was measuring student agency. I realized many of my students had no idea what agency is. Perhaps teaching them what agency is, demonstrating how to identify it, and leading them thorough metacognitive exercises would have allowed my students to be more aware of their learning and what processes facilitate it. Though my interview questions were designed to ask about agency without using the word “agency” (Appendix F), being more explicit in my questioning might have yielded better responses from the students than those I received.

I would also consider having more opportunities for the focus group to meet with me. Beginning with a group meeting was beneficial as an orientation to their role in the work; however, because the more private interviews I had with only one or two students yielded much more information, I would rely upon those more heavily than in my current study. Conducting multiple individual interviews might make students more willing to discuss these topics with me. I suspect that as my relationship with them grew throughout the semester, the students felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts.

I would make similar adaptations to the instructions for students’ final narratives (Appendix H). My students understood that I was changing the curriculum to include more diverse authors and they understood my reasoning for doing so, but when I asked them to tell me about their experiences in class, the responses were weak and lacked the depth I had wanted to elicit. My students had no reference to the curriculum I taught before they arrived, hindering their

reflection about the changes in our curriculum. If I were to repeat this study, I would consider teaching one section of the course with the Anglocentric curriculum and another with a diversified curriculum, inviting members of both sections to constitute the focus group, thereby facilitating clearer comparison. However, in that scenario, I would be denying one section the opportunity to experience American literature with a diversified curriculum.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because action research is never fully complete, a few topics of interest have arisen from this study. One of the most compelling to me is how BIPOC students, teachers, and families feel about White teachers who are working to transform historically Anglocentric curricula. I became keenly aware of the appearance of White saviorism while learning about diversity in the classroom. In most cases, no matter who the agent of change is, the implementation toward multiculturalism is welcomed; however, White teachers, especially, must be cognizant of White saviorism and how to avoid it. Learning how a White teacher can begin dismantling years of Anglocentrism at mostly White institutions would be very rewarding and thought-provoking while extending the relatedness of this study in terms of educational leadership and diversifying the curricula for all students' sake, regardless of race.

A second study that would relate to creating culturally diverse American literature classrooms would be reviewing literature courses in my district from elementary school up to high school for evidence of multiculturalism. As my students mentioned in their initial interviews, many of them were tired of

encountering slave narratives. Such texts are appropriate for teaching the nation's history, yet stories of triumph and power are far more compelling. Along the same lines, a study of multiculturalism across various subjects in a high school setting would provide insight as to how one department can bolster the work in others. English and history teachers can readily include diverse texts, but how do science, mathematics, physical education, or arts programs support diversity in their classrooms?

Finally, critical race theory is currently one of the most polarizing issues in educational politics. Amid this context, my study could be a catalyst for other studies about the necessity or pitfalls of reversing centuries of long-held beliefs about race. There is plenty of room to study and discuss how teachers' actions are governed by the prospect of political ramifications as opposed to meeting the needs of our diverse students, especially in conservative areas like the South.

Summary

This study was about creating a culturally inclusive classroom to bolster student agency. Over an 18-week semester, 12 members of a PAR student focus group in an 11th-grade American literature course identified contemporaneity, diversity, and interest as the most important aspects of the texts they read. Further, they articulated how certain types of classroom activities stimulated their engagement. These themes—gleaned from interviews, observational notes, and narratives through the lenses of CSP, CRT, and student agency—demonstrate that through curricular and pedagogical changes, teachers can create positive connections between their students' home cultures and those they experience in

school. Ultimately, this study affirms belonging as a tool for learning. Students who feel seen and heard, through their cultural identities, have a stronger sense of themselves as active learners. Tapping into a student's basic need for inclusion is powerful and creates bonds between home and school that are essential for growth and success.

REFERENCES

- Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
- Alexander, J. (1970). Black literature for the “culturally deprived” curriculum: Who are the losers? *Negro American Literature Forum*, 4(3), 96–103.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3041428>
- Alim, H. S., & Paris, D. (2017). What is culturally sustaining pedagogy and why does it matter? In D. Paris & H. S. Alim (Eds.), *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 1–21). Teachers College Press.
- Anderson, J. (2019, Fall). Hooked on classics. *Ed*.
<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/ed/19/08/hooked-classics>
- Baker-Bell, A. (2020) Dismantling anti-black linguistic racism in English language arts classrooms: Toward an anti-racist black language pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 59(1), 8–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1665415>
- Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1(2), 164–180.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00011.x>

- Bandura, A. (2018). Toward a psychology of human agency: Pathways and reflections. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(2), 130–136.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617699280>
- Banks, J. (1993). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. *Review of Research in Education*, 19, 3–49.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1167339>
- Biggs, E. E., & Snodgrass, M. R. (2020). Children’s perspectives on their relationships with friends with and without complex communication needs. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 45(2), 81–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919901271>
- Borck, C. R. (2020). “I belong here.”: Culturally sustaining pedagogical praxes from an alternative high school in Brooklyn. *The Urban Review*, 52, 376–391. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-019-00536-z>
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=87&page=transcript>
- Cherry-Paul, S. (2019). *Sparkling courageous conversations: Exploring the racial-justice curriculum development and instructional processes of teachers for predominantly White middle-school students* [Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University]. Columbia Academic Commons.
<https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/d8-syrf-7b03>
- DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3(3), 54–70. <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/249/116>

- Education Week. (2021, December 8). *Explainer: Why is America's teaching force so White?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/ZsH7g45Xtsg>
- Edupeia. (2018, June 13). *What is perennialism?*
<https://www.theedadvocate.org/edupedia/content/what-is-perennialism/>
- Efron, S. E., & Ravid, R. (2013). *Action research in education: A practical guide*. The Guilford Press.
- Ford, A. C., & Sassi, K. (2012). Authority in cross-racial teaching and learning: (Re)considering the transferability of warm demander approaches. *Urban Education*, 49(1), 39–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912464790>
- Frontline. (1998, February 10). *The debate between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington*. PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/debate-w-e-b-du-bois-and-booker-t-washington/>
- Galloway, M., Callin, P., James, S., Vimegnon, H., & McCall, L. (2019). Culturally responsive, antiracist, or anti-oppressive? How language matters for school change efforts, *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(4), 485–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1691959>
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106–116.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003>
- Gay, G. (2003, December 1). The importance of multicultural education. *Educational Leadership*, 61(4), 30–35.
<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-importance-of-multicultural-education>

- Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), 48–70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23524357>
- Gee, J. P. (1989). What is literacy? *Journal of Education*, 171(1), 18–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748917100102>
- Ghasemi, F. (2021). A motivational response to the inefficiency of teachers' practices towards students with learned helplessness. *Learning and Motivation*, 73, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lmot.2020.101705>
- Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your “house.” *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 4(2), 12–26. <https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.9>
- Harmon, D. (2012). Culturally responsive teaching though a historical lens: Will history repeat itself? *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 2(1), 12–22. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1056428.pdf>
- Haymarket Books. (2020, June 23). *Abolitionist teaching and the future of our schools* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJZ3RPJ2rNc>
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2015). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Hirald, P. (2010). The role of critical race theory in higher education. *The Vermont Connection*, 31(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol31/iss1/7>

- Howard, T. C., & Navarro, O. (2016). Critical race theory 20 years later: Where do we go from here? *Urban Education*, 51(3), 253–273.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915622541>
- Israel, E. (1997). What contemporary authors can teach us. *English Journal*, 86(8), 21–23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/821615>
- Jewell, T. (2020). *This book is anti-racist: 20 lessons on how to wake up, take action, and do the work*. Frances Lincoln Children's Books.
- Kim, J., & Pulido, I. (2015). Examining hip-hop as culturally relevant pedagogy. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 12(1), 17–35.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2015.1008077>
- Kim, M. (2021). Student agency and teacher authority in inquiry-based classrooms: Cases of elementary teachers' classroom talk. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*,
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10763-021-10233-7>
- Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative research: Introducing focus groups. *BMJ*, 311, 299–302. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299>
- Kivunja, C. (2018). Distinguishing between theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework: A systematic review of lessons from the field. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 7(6), 44–53.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1198682.pdf>
- Kleinfeld, J. (1975). Effective teachers of Eskimo and Indian students. *School Review*, 83, 301–344. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1084645>

- Klemenčič, M. (2015). What is student agency? An ontological exploration in the context of research on student engagement. In M. Klemenčič, S. Bergan, & R. Primožič (Eds.), *Student engagement in Europe: Society, higher education and student governance* (pp. 11–29). Council of Europe Publishing.
- Kruse, A. J. (2020). “He didn’t know what he was doin’”: Student perspectives of a White teacher’s hip-hop class. *International Journal of Music Education*, 38(4), 495–512. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761420924316>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014, Spring). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A.K.A. the remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751>
- Laster, B., Shargel, R., & Watson-Vandiver, M., (2020). Culturally sustaining pedagogy extended: Ethnic pedagogies. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 22(2), 91–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2020.1741366>
- Leider, P. (2006). Does Huck Finn belong in my classroom? Reflections of curricular choice, multicultural education, and diversity. *Multicultural Education*, 13(4), 49–50.
- Maier, S. F. & Seligman, M. E. P. (1976). Learned helplessness: Theory and evidence. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 105(1), 3–46. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.105.1.3>

- McIntosh, P. (1989, July/August). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Peace and Freedom*, 10–12.
- McMahon, C. T. (2015). The pages of whiteness: Theory, evidence, and the American immigration debate. *Race & Class*, 56(4), 40–55.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396814567407>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey Bass.
- Moore, J. W. (2016). What is the sense of agency and why does it matter? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7(1272).
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01272>
- Moses, L., Rylak, D., Reader, T., Hertz, C., & Ogden, M. (2020). Educators' perspectives on supporting student agency. *Theory Into Practice*, 59(2), 213–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1705106>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Racial/ethnic enrollment in public schools*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cge>
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
- Nichols, D. (2010). Teaching critical whiteness theory: What college and university teachers need to know. *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*, 1(1), 1–12.

- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244>
- Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=52&page=transcript>
- Rappa, N. A., & Tang, K. S. (2017). Student agency: An analysis of students' networked relations across the informal and formal learning domains. *Research in Science Education*, 47(3), 673–684.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-016-9523-0>
- Shaw, K., & Upstone, S. (2021). The transglossic: Contemporary fiction and the limitations of the modern. *English Studies*, 102(5), 573–600.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2021.1943894>
- Stillisano, J. R., Waxman, H. C., Hostrup, J., & Rollins, K. B., (2011). Case studies of eight Texas schools implementing International Baccalaureate programs. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 5(3), 171–185.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2009). Different folks, different hopes: The educational aspirations of Black males in urban, suburban, and rural high schools. *Urban Education*, 44(6), 710–731.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085908322705>
- Teuton, L. (2018). *Teaching social justice with literature circles to improve reading discussions: An action research study* [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina]. <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/5004>

- Vaughn, M., Premo, J., Erickson, D., & McManus, C. (2020). Student agency in literacy: Validation of the student agency profile (StAP). *Reading Psychology, 41*(6), 533–558.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2020.1783147>
- Ware, F. (2006). Warm demander pedagogy: Culturally responsive teaching that supports a culture of achievement for African American students. *Urban Education, 41*(4), 427–456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085906289710>
- Washington, B. T. (1907). *Up from slavery: An autobiography*. Doubleday.
- Yuen, L. (2016, April 6). Bridging the gap: When the teachers are white, but the students are not. *MPR News*.
<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2016/04/06/bridging-the-gap-race-disparities-education>

APPENDIX A

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF STUDY

I emailed the Acknowledgement of Study information to all guardians of all my English III students. The email read as follows:

Hello families!

I hope this email finds all of you rested and ready for an excellent semester in English III CP. I wanted to quickly introduce myself as your student's teacher and tell you about an exciting opportunity your student has this fall.

My name is Holly Bradshaw, and this is my 16th year teaching high school English. Two years ago, I decided to return to school to attain my Doctor of Education degree from The University of South Carolina, and I'm very happy to say that this is my last year in that program as I anticipate graduating in May of 2023.

I tell you all of this to let you know that this semester, I will conduct my research for my final dissertation. My work is focused on bringing diversity into the study of American literature. To complete my work, I will need the help of a few select students to give me their points of view about what texts we read and what activities we do in class. This group will meet with me during FLEX three times throughout the semester, and we will discuss several topics from racism to experiences of discrimination and what young people enjoy reading to what methods of teaching they most prefer in school.

I will choose 6-10 students to form this group, all volunteers, but if you would prefer your student not be considered for participation, please reply to this email me to let me know. I will remove your student from any data collecting methods I might apply to the entire class if that is your desire. Also, please note that I will keep confidential the identities of any students who participate with my study. Their names will never be published in my work.

Please feel free to reach out to me to ask any questions you may have about this study.

Thank you!

Holly R. Bradshaw

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SCREENER

I administered this survey via Google Forms, but the form is locked for participant security. The survey directions and questions are as follows:

English III CP Student Screener

As you know, I am currently working toward a Doctorate of Education degree from the University of South Carolina. As a part of my studies, I have chosen to research the need to include more diverse texts in American literature classes. I'm inviting all of my English III CP students to fill out the form below so that I may form a focus group of students to work with me in creating change for our class.

Your participation is completely voluntary and will in no way impact your grade in my class this semester. If you agree to participate, I will contact your guardians to get their permission for you to join the focus group.

Thank you so much for your consideration in working with me on this project.

Schweitzer

Participation agreement

So that I can best choose a group of students to work with me this semester, I need gauge your interest in joining the focus group. I plan to select 6-10 students to create this focus group.

Your responsibilities would be the following: meet with me as a group (during FLEX) at the beginning of the semester, participate in two group interviews (during FLEX) in the beginning and in the middle of the semester, and write a narrative detailing your experience in this study at the end of the semester.

Participation is 100% voluntary, and you can choose to withdraw at any time (detailed information will be sent to your guardians).

1. Please indicate your level of interest in being included as a member of my focus group. I will be looking for diversity (ages, grade levels, race/ethnicities, gender identification, experiences in English, cultural identities, etc.) in creating this group.

- A. Please do not consider me for participation.
- B. I might be interested in participation, but I need more information to decide.
- C. Please consider me for participation.

Demographic information

Please select the options which most closely describe you.

2. In what grade are you currently enrolled?

- A. Freshman, 9th
- B. Sophomore, 10th
- C. Junior, 11th
- D. Senior, 12th

3. How old are you?

- A. 15
- B. 16
- C. 17
- D. 18
- E. 19

4. With what gender classification do you identify?

- A. non-binary
- B. male
- C. female
- D. other

5. Select the option(s) which best match your identified race: (If mixed, please choose the races to which you belong)

- A. White
- B. Black
- C. Hispanic
- D. Native American
- E. Pacific Islander
- F. Asian
- G. Mixed
- H. Other

Experiences in school

Choose the answer to the following questions about your experiences in high school.

6. Choose the option which most closely matches your current motivation concerning school.

- A. I'm not at all motivated to attend school, pass, or graduate.
- B. My motivation comes only from my desire not to anger my parents.
- C. My motivation changes from time to time, but for the most part, I enjoy learning.

D. I'm highly motivated to learn as much as I can, have a high GPA, or be accepted to colleges.

7. Think about your general experiences in high school. Can you think of a time when you have felt you were discriminated against?

- A. I have never experienced, nor have I seen discrimination in school.
- B. I have never felt discriminated against, but I have seen others experience it.
- C. I have been discriminated against, but I've not seen it happen to others.
- D. I have experienced discrimination, and I've seen others discriminated against, too.

8. Do you believe that our school is accepting of differences among the student population?

- A. I do not think our school accepts diversity among the population.
- B. I do not think that students accept diversity, but the teachers are accepting of all students.
- C. I do not think that teachers accept diversity, but the students are accepting of all students.
- D. I think that our school accepts diversity among the population.

Experiences in English

Choose the answer for the following questions about your experiences in English class.

9. Think about English classes you've taken in high school. Which of the following options most fits your experience?

- A. I do not at all enjoy English class.
- B. English class is not among my favorites.
- C. English class is okay.
- D. English class is among my favorites.
- E. I truly enjoy English class.

10. Of the options below, choose the one that best describes your experiences with the texts you are assigned in English class.

- A. I have not connected to the texts I've been assigned.
- B. Some of the literature is okay, but it is difficult for me to find a connection.
- C. Most of the literature is okay, so I am able to find connections with it.
- D. I connect to the texts I've been assigned.

APPENDIX C

GUARDIAN PERMISSION FORM

I sent this permission form via Google Forms, but the form is locked for participant security. The permission form directions and questions are as follows:

Guardian Permission Form

Hello, English III families! I am currently working toward a Doctorate of Education degree from the University of South Carolina. As a part of my studies, I have chosen to research the need to include more diverse texts in American literature classes. I've invited all of my English III CP students to fill out a survey so that I may form a focus group of students to work with me in creating change for our class.

Your student has indicated an interest to help me with this work, so I'm asking you to complete the permission form below so that your student can participate. Please reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns with this project.
(bradshawh@fortmillschools.org)

Thank you so much for filling this out and helping me with my coursework.

Bradshaw

Participation agreement

I plan to select 6-10 students from my fall 2022 English III CP courses to create a focus group, but I must have consent from all guardians for the students to participate. There is no penalty for choosing not to participate nor is there any direct benefit (extra credit) for joining. Participation is 100% voluntary, and you or your student can choose to withdraw at any time. (See next section for details.)

The responsibilities for the student would be the following: meet with me as a group (during FLEX) at the beginning of the semester to get an overview of the process, participate in two group interviews (during FLEX) in the beginning and in the middle of the semester, and write a narrative detailing their experience in this study at the end of the semester.

1. Choose one of the following options:

- A. I do not consent for my student to participate in this study.
- B. I consent for my student to participate in this study.

Withdrawing from the study

At any time, you or your student may withdraw from the study. To do so, please send me a message (email or by hand) which indicates your desire to leave the study. Any information that has already been gathered about you or your student will be destroyed upon my receiving your desire to withdraw.

2. Please indicate which best fits for you:

- A. I don't understand how to withdraw from the study.
- B. I have questions about the withdrawal process.
- C. I understand how to withdraw from the study.

APPENDIX D

NOTICE OF SELECTION

When I selected a student to participate as a focus group member, the guardian and the student received an email as an official invitation to join the study. The text of the email is as follows:

Hi students and families!

Let me be the first to say thank you so much for your willingness to participate in my research study. This semester is going to be a great one with your help! I'm very excited to invite you to be a member of the focus group of students who will help me make decisions about what we study this semester.

Your insights and information will be used when I write my dissertation for my doctorate, but please know that your identity will be kept private. Please feel free to tell me exactly how you feel and what your experiences are with the texts we read and the activities we do in class.

To begin, please meet in my room during FLEX next Tuesday so that we can talk about our plans. If you (or your guardian) have decided that you do not want to participate as a focus group member, please let me know as soon as possible, so I can extend this opportunity to another student.

Thank you again, and I can't wait to get started!

Ms. Bradshaw

APPENDIX E

NOTICE OF STANDBY

When I selected a student as a standby participant for the focus group, the guardian and the student received this email notification. The text of the email is as follows:

Hi students and families!

Let me be the first to say thank you so much for your willingness to participate in my research study. I think this is going to be a great semester where we all learn a lot about American literature. While I appreciate your interest in this project, all seats are currently filled for the focus group, but I'd like to ask you to serve on standby in case I need you to join.

If you do join, your insights and information will be used when I write my dissertation for my doctorate, but please know that your identity will be kept private. Please feel free to tell me exactly how you feel and what your experiences are with the texts we read and the activities we do in class.

If you (or your guardian) have decided that you do not want to be considered for participation, please let me know, and I can remove your name from the standby list.

Thank you again for your interest in helping with my study.

Ms. Bradshaw

APPENDIX F

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I used these questions at the beginning and the middle of the semester to begin a dialogue with my focus group students. The students answered orally, and I took notes during the interview process.

1. Do you feel like you are engaged in English class? Explain.
2. Think about the texts we've studied so far in English class. Do you feel like you connect to these pieces on a personal level? Please explain.
3. If you were to make changes in the literature we read, what would you change?
4. Consider the diversity we have at our school. Consider the diversity we have as a nation. Do you feel that you are reading literature that includes everyone? Do you think that's important?
5. Tell me the piece of literature that you've read that you most enjoyed. Why did you like it?

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW RECORD CHART

I used this chart to record focus group members' responses. The students answered orally, and I took notes during the interview process.

Participant Identifier <input type="checkbox"/>	Engagement in class	Personal connection to texts	Changes to make to texts	Diversity	Literature preferences	Notes/comments

APPENDIX H

NARRATIVE ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

I used this assignment at the end of the semester. The students wrote a narrative expounding upon their learning experiences for the semester. They received the following instructions.

English III End of Semester Narrative Essay Assignment

Now that we've completed four units of American literature study, tell me what your experience has been this semester. Open a new Google Doc and write a narrative that tells me the story of your learning. Be sure to submit it in Google Classroom when you have finished.

Consider the following questions as you write:

What was your favorite unit of study and why? Were there any texts that you preferred more than others or what authors did you enjoy studying?

Think about the activities we did in class. Which ones did you connect with the most and why?