Critical Literacy and Student Engagement: Disrupting the Canon in the Secondary English Classroom

Katherine Burdick Ramp

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CRITICAL LITERACY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: EMPLOYING CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS AS A BRIDGE TO CANONICAL LITERATURE

by

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DEDICATION

To my children who repeatedly crawled all over me, picked locks to get to me, and kicked on doors while yelling at me to come out as I desperately attempted to get my drafts in on time – I wanted to be on the other side of that door with you. Since I missed some of those moments, however, for the sake of this dissertation, I dedicate it to all four of you, my wild and lovely children – for Henry, Eleanor, Adelaide, and Molly Rose:

“My heart is and always will be yours.” – *Pride and Prejudice*
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When I was admitted to this program in December of 2020, I told my friends that I was excited to “become relevant again,” as I knew I was embarking on three years of growth and learning as a doctoral student. I was unaware of the fact that I was newly pregnant with Adelaide, my fourth child, and when I learned of her impending arrival amidst the COVID19 pandemic, I felt my excitement turn into despair. I was certain that I would have to leave the program, putting my family’s needs ahead of my aspirations as I had always done. But I chose to stay and keep moving forward for as long as I was able. As a woman who prides herself on being invulnerable, I had to admit that the cracks in my ability to “do it all” were beginning to show themselves. I had to lean heavily on my family; my husband Jason, my parents Steve and Nydia, my sister Erin, and my mother-in-law Sharon were the pillars that kept our household (and my degree) afloat over the last three years, affording me the chance to “do it all.” This journey would have ended many miles back had it not been for the countless acts of service that they lovingly provided.

My husband Jason specifically, despite a highly stressful career, learned how to juggle a mob of small and needy children, remembered how to cook full meals, and gave up his already limited free time so that he could provide me with the gift of uninterrupted time to write. I am thankful, too for the little note of pride that I always detected in his voice whenever I overheard him talking about my degree program – I hope that you are always proud of me, Jason.
Dr. Linda Silvernail, queen of revision and figurative handholding, not only taught the greatest classes of my academic career but also provided me with wonderful writing feedback as she guided me through the dissertation process. As a teacher of writing, I understand the time and depth of knowledge required to give such thorough feedback, and I am grateful for all of it.

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ABSTRACT

Canonical literature, works that have been deemed essential due to their stylistic merit and long-term influence, is typically featured on the required texts list of secondary English classes while culturally relevant literature is frequently eschewed. Students struggle to understand and connect with the canonical literature as there are limited cultural connections that are relevant to their lives. As a result of this lack of culturally relevant literature in modern English curriculums, there has been a decrease in student engagement. The purpose of this study was to determine whether students’ engagement and their critical reading skills increased through the inclusion of these culturally relevant texts. Two research questions guided this study: (1) What effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy have on student engagement? (2) How does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical literature?

This action research study utilized a convergent, mixed methods experimental design approach and included 91 student participants who were taking English 2 classes at a suburban high school in the southeastern region of the United States. Participants engaged in an intervention unit study that paired a canonical text and a culturally relevant text; data was collected through pre- and post-intervention surveys, summative scores, weekly exit slips, and observations. The results of the study indicated that the use of culturally relevant texts had a positive impact on student engagement, student learning
and, to a lesser degree, student achievement. Following a review of the data analysis, implications and recommendations for future research are discussed.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CP.................................................................College Preparatory Course
CRT..............................................................Culturally Relevant Text
SRG.................................................................Small Reading Group
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In 2010, I was hired to teach middle school English and social studies at a small, American preparatory school on the island of St. Maarten. I began teaching with Eurocentric ideals of education that were matched with a curriculum that focused on Western ideas and classical literature. The education that I was providing mirrored the education that I had received as a young White person growing up in the American South.

The students that I taught in St. Maarten were from diverse backgrounds; within a single class of 24, I had students from Australia, Canada, China, France, Haiti, Guadeloupe, India, Iran, Mexico, the Netherlands, Sint Maarten, St. Kitts, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They worked to conform to the dominant culture standards that were set forth, but whenever the course content overlapped with their culture, they were quick to add to our learning by sharing their lived, cultural experiences. I found that their contributions were as often as valuable as my teaching materials, and it was the beginning of my understanding that the standard for education, a Eurocentric education, is not accommodating for all learners. It also marked the beginning of my work to include culturally relevant material in my classes. Eventually, I moved back to the United States and taught in several public schools in the Southeast, but
my desire to incorporate the cultures of my students into our class content did not diminish.

I began diversifying my classroom library, ensuring that the shelves contained varied and relevant young adult novels, but I began to see the incongruities between standard educational practices and my own beliefs about teaching practices. The texts that I used to teach the curriculum were not diverse – they were texts from the literary canon, a collection of texts that are esteemed for their aesthetic value and considered to be essential by many elite scholars, texts like *The Canterbury Tales, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Anna Karenina,* and *As I Lay Dying* These were the same texts that I had been taught in school, and with one or two exceptions, they were the same texts that my parents were taught in school as well. After seeing the depth that culturally relevant materials added to my classroom in Sint Maarten, I aimed to include culturally relevant texts within my English classroom. Culturally relevant texts are books in which students’ backgrounds and lived experiences are reflected within the plot, and there are many potential intersectional layers in which this can occur. Race, ethnicity, language, generation, and gender identity can all constitute one’s cultural identity, but the culture that is continually reflected in canonical literature is White, male, and cisgender.

At each school in which I taught, I worked to replace some of the required canonical texts, but I was rarely successful since my colleagues and the general expectations of the system were resistant to modifying the curriculum. They wanted to teach the classics that they had always taught; when they did include newer literary fiction that they had connected with as readers, the texts that were still typically about White heroes and middle-class conflicts. When works by authors of color were included,
they were smaller, supplemental texts that often detailed pain or traumas, with central characters or narrators as objects of pity. In response to my desire to include culturally relevant texts, I heard phrases from my White colleagues such as *we do not have money to purchase a class set of books that no one else will teach*, and *yeah, that sounds nice, but I don’t see my students getting into books like that*, and *let me play devil’s advocate and say that there are not enough books of quality by authors of color* [as opposed to the canon] *for us to teach them*.

At the same time, I also heard my colleagues lament that the students did not understand the texts that they were reading in class, that the struggle to keep students awake and off their phones was increasing every year, that they needed the texts to be “dumbed-down” for them, and so on. As a teacher, I was not immune to this. I noticed that I had to work hard to engage students when we read texts like *Antigone* or *A Tale of Two Cities*; I also noticed that students did not struggle to stay engaged when they read texts like *Dear Martin, Everything, Everything*, or *Long Way Down*.

The literary canon is not outmoded or ineffective; indeed, there are several canonical texts that students enjoy even though they initially struggle to access the text due to archaic contexts or difficult language. Most of these texts belong to the canon because academics consider them to be well-written and to hold cultural value; consequently, they are taught, read, and remembered by multiple generations of students. However, there are a range of voices that are not represented among canonized works since most classical authors were White males. Bishop (1990) said that one of the chief purposes of literature is to transform and transmit the human experience to readers, reflecting it back to us so that we can better understand what it means to be a human. If
the texts that we teach reflect only one type of human experience, are we “broadening their understanding” through a “variety of texts” as stated in my state’s English 2 reading standards? The scholars and clergymen who compiled their own varying versions of the canon essentially were creating the first literary curriculum for a population of students who were White and male (Lauter, 1985). The required text list within my setting is almost entirely composed of canonical texts. Because required text lists like ours can quietly advance Eurocentric perspectives (Dyches, 2018), we should be aware that we are not yet presenting our students with a curriculum that represents a true variety of texts and as such, we may be implicitly promoting the values of dominant culture.

Until the year 2014, the majority of American public-school students were White. Since 2014, however, White students no longer hold the majority in United States classrooms—students of color have surpassed their numbers (Strauss, 2014; de Brey, Musu, McFarland, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) examined long term trends of public elementary and secondary school enrollment, finding that the total enrollment has increased since 1995 but that the growth was uneven across racial groups (NCES, 2020). Hispanic students, who represented 13.5% of public school enrollment in 1995, have increased significantly and now make up 26.8% of total enrollment. Conversely, the number of White students has decreased; in 1995, White students represented 64.8% of public school enrollment, but that number dipped to 49.5% by 2017 (de Brey et al., 2019). Minority students are now the global majority; the resources that are integrated in classrooms should include the cultural experiences of this majority, “much as these have always been seamlessly integrated into the education of privileged White children” (Moll, 2010, p. 454).
Including culturally relevant texts can be difficult for teachers when they are asked to meet traditional curricular demands from their school, their district, and their states, especially when the values of these institutions are in opposition to cultural relevancy (Dyches, 2018). Some systems in the United States go as far as enacting bans on teaching perspectives and understandings that diverge from Eurocentric values (Alim & Paris, 2017), an occurrence that is escalating even as this paper is being written. The inclusion of culturally relevant texts in the English curriculum is a facet of culturally and linguistically responsive instruction which is designed to give students more opportunities to understand the relationships that exist between their experiences and the language and concepts they encounter in school. As students become aware of these relationships, they are better able to deal with the demands of the mandated texts. In addressing these objectives, students develop stronger academic literacy skills. (Hollie, 2017, pp. 143)

In modern classrooms, skills and standards can be taught with a variety of texts – so too can universal themes and motifs. The 2015 South Carolina State Standards that are currently employed are noticeably silent in regard to inclusive, global literature; still, there is not a standard that is wholly dependent on any given text – some teachers can teach their courses with high interest texts from a variety of voices – and representation does matter to our students.

When culturally relevant texts are used in the K-12 classroom, student engagement and buy-in increase (Alim & Paris, 2017). Students of color are largely asked to read and dissect canonical texts and to solely communicate in standard English; White authors are centered in the curriculum and deemed exemplary while authors of
color are largely omitted from the curriculum (Sinclair, 2018). This implicitly creates an assumption that great works are written by White men; other groups must not be as capable of writing noteworthy literature. Literature, though, can serve as a window to new perspectives of the human experience. When their voices and life experiences are not valued in the classroom, students tend to disengage with the content (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Students bring their individual perspective to school – their life experiences, their multiple identities – and this creates a lens through which they consume information. When students are allowed to explore different ways of thinking and doing alongside their peers, they are expanding that lens and becoming critical consumers of information (Ervin, 2021). This can positively reshape their outlook on the world and of the humans that they will interact with throughout their lives.

Providing students with the opportunity to explore different perspectives through literature and to read texts that mirror their own lives and allows them to become critical consumers of information (Bishop, 1990). Bishop noted that literature serves as a window into other worlds, allowing the reader to see “worlds real and imagined, familiar or strange.” Bishop went on to include that, when lighting conditions are right, that literature can serve not as a window, but as a mirror: “Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading then becomes a means of self-affirmation” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). Exploring multiple perspectives beyond the Eurocentric norms that dominate American classrooms is important; for some students, that means exploring windows that were unknown to them before. For other students, it might mean that they need to explore a mirror in literature for the very first time to
understand that their ways of knowing and doing are valid. There is a connection between self-affirmation and student achievement: “The fallacy of measuring ourselves and the young people in our communities solely against White middle-class norms of knowing and being that continue to dominate notions of educational achievement (Alim & Paris, 2014, p. 1). Readers bring their unique experiences to the reading experience itself, and if they are able to connect with the literature, they are better able to immerse themselves in it (Rosenblatt, 1988). As a result of this immersion, they are better able to develop skills and literary competence that can impact achievement.

The problem of practice guiding this study is that the lack of culturally relevant literature in current English curriculums is leading to a decrease in student engagement, and the aim of this study is to determine whether the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy has a positive impact on student engagement and if culturally relevant texts can serve as a lens for critically examining canonical literature. To address the problem of practice, I used two units of study in an intervention that paired canonical texts (traditionally taught in isolation) with culturally relevant texts in the hope that students would be able to connect with both the content and the skills being taught.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theories that formed the framework for this action research study were culturally sustaining pedagogy and critical literacy. The three pillars of engagement were also employed within the framework to support the study.

The concept of culturally relevant literature stems from culturally relevant pedagogy, a theory that works to support students’ cultural identities within education (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy provided avenues for educators
and students alike to learn about and appreciate the cultural identity of all students, asking students to share their culture in school instead of the standard practice of assimilating students to the dominant ways of thinking and doing (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) was born out of Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy and builds upon it, adding that “it requires that they [educators] support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to create a bridge between student’s cultural identity at home and the academic demands of dominant culture at school (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally sustaining pedagogy works to allow the student’s cultural identity to become part of the academic demands of school (Paris, 2012). Students are not asked to decenter or discard their cultural ways of speaking, knowing, and doing in order to adopt the practices of dominant culture that are disseminated in public schools (Paris, 2012). This theory supports the inclusion of culturally relevant texts; by centering a text that includes different cultural perspectives, there is an implicit understanding that this culture is as worthy of study as the canonical texts that are centered and taught with regularity. It also supports the need to develop students’ cultural competence so that they can successfully navigate the complex geopolitical and economic landscape of their future lives: “White, mainstream students are not exempt from the need to develop cultural competence. If they are to operate in a diverse, globally interconnected, democratic society, they need to know much more than their own culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2021).
Unlike culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy makes allowances for cultural shifts that are common in a pluralistic society (Paris, 2012). For the inclusion of culturally relevant texts in the English classroom, this is an important distinction for future research: the culturally relevant texts of today are not permanent. Texts that are considered culturally relevant now may become less relevant to students as time goes on and as society undergoes cultural shifts (Paris, 2012).

Freire’s (1970) theory of critical literacy is similarly dependent on learners constructing their knowledge rather than having knowledge transmitted to them. When students construct their knowledge and share their understandings with others, they are not passively receiving knowledge, but actively engaging in becoming “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Critical literacy also engages students in discussing “contemporary social issues, about ideologies in the context of learning how to handle texts in more complex ways (Luke, 2017, p. 14). Critical literacy framed the intervention within this study; as they read the paired texts and engaged in dialectical and dialogic work with their peers, students were asked to question their existing knowledge, their assumptions, and the power structures that exist in their daily sphere. Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) noted that Freire’s theory of critical literacy promotes action for social justice through disrupting commonly held viewpoints and critically examining multiple perspectives.

A final construct that guides this study is that of the three pillars of engagement: behavior, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Students' motivation and achievement in school is declining; understanding the link between self-efficacy and engagement, as well as working to heighten intellectual engagement may
serve to ameliorate this decline (Fredricks et al., 2004). Fredricks et al. synthesized relevant literature involving engagement theories and concluded that it is a multifaceted construct that includes three main categories: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Within each of these components there are “qualitative differences” that range in degree, intensity, and duration (Fredricks et al., p. 60). These three components of engagement were measured before, during, and at the end of the study through surveys, exit tickets, and student assessments.

Together, these theories and constructs created a blueprint for this study; culturally sustaining pedagogy created an opportunity for all students to examine new perspectives that shifted their thinking about their position within an unequal system. Their new knowledge permitted them to critically examine other perspectives, including their own formerly held beliefs, and it made a number of participants question this unequal system and their role within it. Their work as readers, questioners, and dialogic investigators had impact on their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement with the content and lead to positive academic results.

**Purpose and Rationale**

The purpose of my study is to increase student engagement and student learning by using culturally relevant texts as a bridge to critically reading canonical texts. When the bulk of veteran educators began their careers, the majority of students in American schools were White, and the texts that were typically studied were “White” as well (Sinclair, 2018). Demographics have shifted both inside and outside of school (Ukpokodu, 2011, de Brey et al., 2019). Student engagement and motivation are in decline, and schools are hastening to find solutions for increasing both (Lester, 2013).
One viable solution would be to use literary texts that reflect the population of students that we teach (Anderson, 2019). Culturally relevant texts can be used as a foothold to bridge teacher and student relationships (Ladson-Billings, 1995), which in turn may increase student engagement and scholastic success (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Making the content relevant to students’ lives and their cultures is an effective strategy for increasing engagement (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Alim & Paris, 2017; Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Teachers and curriculum specialists “need to be certain that today’s curriculum contains connections to [students’] past experiences, not just ours” (Sousa, 2001, p. 49). Students who are involved and engaged in course content are more likely to succeed academically (Carbonaro, 2005, Lee, 2012, Finn & Voelkl, 1993).

Alim and Paris (2017) emphasize that “promoting linguistic and cultural dexterity is no longer only about equally valuing all of our communities -- it is also about the skills, knowledges, and ways of being needed for success in the present and the future” (p. 113). However, it is difficult to shift the English curriculum away from the literary canon, which can quietly perpetuate the perceived superiority of canonical texts and the White experience (Dyches, 2018). Furthermore, “An uncritical acceptance of the canon prevents students from addressing racism in its contemporary contexts” (Miller & Worlds, 2019, p. 43). The voices of BIPOC individuals are often unheard in schools that favor canonical texts within their curriculum (Johnson, 2018) as they typically center the voices and experiences of dominant culture; one important component of critical race theory is that it stresses the importance centering the voices of people who are marginalized by systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
Teaching texts that include characters of color in a tokenistic format is not culturally authentic as it does not center their voices – these texts often engender the “otherness” of students of color and depicts them as a cluster of common, negative stereotypes. Some educators consider their usage of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Othello* to be culturally authentic, and then absolve themselves of the responsibility to discuss racism or the experiences of the BIPOC community. Texts such as these limit the voices of BIPOC characters or requires a White savior to speak for them. One tenet of critical race theory describes the importance of exposure to stories, myths, and experiences of multiple races and cultures because it offers realistic depictions of various communities. This exposure is as important for the students of color who require equitable representation as it is for White students who require a broad, truthful depiction of the world they live in (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1999, Johnson, 2018).

The lack of culturally relevant literature in the ELA curriculum has led to a decrease in student engagement. Students of all backgrounds work with canonical texts in English class, a text set that largely centers one set of values and beliefs; the lack of relevance in many of these texts may be connected to levels of disengagement. The aim of this study was to determine the impact of the inclusion of culturally relevant texts on student engagement. The following questions guided this study:

1. What effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy have on student engagement?
2. How does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical texts?
If students are taught skills and standards with culturally relevant texts, educators may encounter more buy-in from their disengaged students. According to Alim and Paris (2017), “When sufficient trust and rapport has been built, and interesting material and activities presented, people often become productively involved, sometimes despite themselves” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 113). Teachers may be able to bypass some of their curricular obstacles if they are armed with data that shows a connection between culturally relevant text choices, engagement, and increased student learning. Answering these research questions has the potential to better inform teaching practices and result in greater student engagement.

**Significance and Limitations**

One significant limitation of this study was that the texts used within the intervention were representative of only two additional cultures – African-American and Dominican-American; they are texts with diverse voices, but they were not culturally relevant for all students. Another limitation of this study was the time allotted for the study; as it is difficult to gauge participants’ behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, the study would have benefitted from a longitudinal approach in which data could have been procured from multiple groups over a longer period.

This research study has significance because it is connected to the systemic culture of power that exists within both schools and society; academic success is connected to student engagement (Lester, 2013; Fredricks et. al 2004); when examining behavioral and emotional engagement, there is a connection between engagement and students’ perception of the relevance of academic content to their lives (Lester, 2013; Fredricks et. al 2004). When discussing the significance of culturally relevant pedagogy
in the classroom, Gay (2002) too argued that students can be more successful academically if the content and instruction is connected to their lived experiences.

The canon is the core of literary curriculums in high schools and universities across the United States (Al-Shalabi et. al, 2011) and has been for generations; the needs of 21st century learners, however, are not identical to generations of the past. As paradigms shift and an increasingly multicultural population of students attend public schools in America (Strauss, 2014), school leaders are reexamining what it means for students to be college and career ready. English educators too must continue to reexamine our definitions of literacy and what it means to be literate in a world that is beginning to topple traditional power structures:

At the center of critical pedagogy is the examination of educations’ role in reifying existing power relations in order to transform them. Its educational aims are to teach students to become critically conscious so that they can rethink what they think they already know in order to exercise their agency to disrupt oppressive social, political, and economic relations at the interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels.

(Campangian, 2013, p. 3)

The texts within the literary canon are well-written and rich works, but they tend to center one set of values, “one dimension of cultural voice and development when the human story is far richer and more complex. Prioritizing only the works of Western literature fails to consider the myriad of voices that can shape a meaningful classroom experience” (DeHart, 2020, p. 1).

Within the secondary English classroom, critical pedagogy relies on the texts with which students interact day-to-day. If students are given texts that are canonical and
validate only White experiences, they may continue in the ingrained belief that dominant, White culture is superior to the cultural norms and writings of the “other.” Gay (2010) found that textbooks and mandated, canonical novels “reflect the values, norms, and biases of disciplines and societies . . . and construct images and impressions that become explanations and understandings for students” (Gay, 2003, p. 280). Sinclair (2018) suggests that students might find more connection to school and engagement in class if they were allowed a more relevant choice of texts, disrupting the canon. In addition, students are more likely to be academically successful if they trust the teacher in the room with them, and that trust could be boosted through choosing texts that reflect the student population (Sinclair, 2018).

It is expected that in the current climate of the United States, culturally sustaining pedagogy would face resistance from community members, but there are additional barriers within school systems that prevent the inclusion of culturally relevant texts. These barriers range in scale from individual teacher resistance all the way up to statewide mandates, and they uphold the status quo, preventing shifts to culturally sustaining pedagogy. It is these individuals who are part of the intended audience of this study. There are numerous explanations as to why educators might be hesitant to change or add to the content that they teach. For some teachers, the idea of teaching culturally relevant texts alongside or in place of canonical texts might evoke feelings of antipathy. For others, though, this study could evoke feelings of liberation.

**Positionality**

Positionality, according to Takacs (2002), is an understanding of my identity, an awareness of where I stand in relation to others, and how both of these shape my
worldview. As a cisgender, White female in my 30s, I am not marginalized by systemic inequalities based on race or ethnic group. Overall, my worldview and how I know what I know has been shaped by dominant culture, but like Takacs, I am eager to challenge my assumptions in order to gain a clearer, realistic perspective of our world and its inhabitants. I was raised in a strict, Catholic, and conservative household where education, reading, and critical thinking were encouraged. It is because of the education I received that many views I had previously held began to shift, and I questioned the teachings of my youth. Because I underwent a revolution of beliefs, I often believe that others should as well, and this is a bias of which I am mindful.

The texts that I read in middle school, high school, and undergraduate were nearly all from the literary canon. That experience led me to assign many of the same texts that I had been taught – even now, I feel the pressure to prioritize these books because they are rigorous, tried, and true. On the classroom wall next to my desk, however, I have two framed pictures hung there. The first picture includes words of the late honorable John R. Lewis; he said that “If you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have a moral obligation to do something about it.” The second framed picture quotes the former Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg: “Fight for the things you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” Together, I feel that these are the foundation of my purpose: to increase equity and fairness in the English classroom and to do it in a way that inspires other teachers to intensify social justice in their classrooms and reexamine their curriculums through a critical lens.

During the study, I worked with secondary students from multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds in my English 2 CP and English 2 Honors courses. Although I do
not share the same sex, generation, or ethnic background as all of my participants (thus an outsider), I was an active and involved researcher with this group of participants with whom I already have an established rapport; therefore, I was also an insider. Because I could not separate my role as teacher and my role as researcher, I was cognizant of being in a position of power over my participants and their assessments. As such, I exercised caution in my interactions with my students, in my data collection, and in my analysis of that data to ensure that I was equitable and objective. As a White woman whose background in centered in dominant culture, I was aware that my interpretations of the participants’ feedback could follow dominant ways of thinking and doing. I worked to be careful, measured, and critical in all of my interactions with participants and in the analysis of those interactions.

**Research Design**

This was a convergent mixed-methods action research study; a mixed-methods study integrates both qualitative and quantitative components to provide additional insight into a problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The convergent design involves the researcher collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in a single phase, analyzing each component separately, then comparing the results to see if they confirm or disprove each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study also employs an action research approach. Unlike traditional research processes, an action research design allowed me to be a hands-on insider so that I could work with my participants as co-researchers to solve a problem within our setting that could improve practices for their benefit (Herr and Anderson, 2015; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Action research is an inquiry-based process in which researchers seek to “understand how participants make meaning or interpret a
particular phenomenon or problem in their workplace, community, or practice” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 49). Action researchers seek to engage in actions that they “have taken, are taking, or wish to take” to solve a practical problem within their setting (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 5). The cyclical nature, reflective practices, and participatory qualities of action research make it ideal for this study.

This mixed methods action research study involved the students in my English 2 CP and English 2 Honors classes. I collected preliminary data from the previous units’ summative scores, a unit in which a canonical text was taught in isolation. Additional preliminary data was collected with a survey based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Student Questionnaire. This was then used to determine students’ attitudes toward reading and their self-reported levels of engagement with ELA content both prior to and after the intervention.

To protect the identity of the participants and setting, pseudonyms are used throughout the discussion. Research for this study was conducted in a suburban public school in the southeast United States. It is a large school that contains an application-based STEM magnet program within the overall setting (a school within a school) and serves grades 9–12; it is one of four high schools serving the area. The school has approximately 1700 students, comprised of the following ethnicities: 47.9% Caucasian, 36.4% African American, 5.2% Asian, 5.2% Biracial, 4.9% Hispanic, and .5% Native American and Pacific Islanders.

In order to participate, students had to be English 2 CP or English 2 Honors students who had been in the course since August of 2022. I gave all students and parents an overview of the two units and the study itself through a consent to participate letter. It
was made clear to both parents and students that they would not be penalized if they chose not to participate. Students and parents were also given an overview of the unit that they could have done in lieu of the intervention units if they chose not to provide consent. As most of the intervention was conducted through small reading groups, the students who chose not to participate engaged in their own small groups based on the canonical text alone – non-participants in English 2 Honors read *A Tale of Two Cities* and non-participants in English 2 CP read *The Princess Bride*. A total of 91 students participated in the study; their demographic breakdown was as follows: 50% male, 48.3% female, and 1.7 percent transexual or non-binary; 41 participants were Black (45%), 39 were White (42.8%), 3 were biracial (3.3%), 3 were Hispanic (3.3%), 2 were American Indians (2.2%), 2 were Asian (2.2%), and 1 was Pacific Islander (1.1%).

The intervention was framed through the theory of constructivism. All learners enter the classroom with their own set of ideas and assumptions that are based upon their lived experiences (Applefield et al., 2000); in this intervention, they were asked to consider new ideas from diverse perspectives. Between their individual work within the unit and their collaborative work with their small reading groups, students engaged in exogeneous constructivism (external reality reconstructed), endogenous constructivism (internal, individual construction) and dialectical constructivism (sharing, comparing, debating, and social negotiation) (Applefield et al., 2000). This creates a reciprocal relationship between participant, text, and their small groups; each entity influences the others, leaving participants with a new and layered understanding of “the literary, social, cultural, and perhaps political contexts” (Styslinger, 2017, p. 50) of the text. Upon completion of the intervention, their new knowledge was not the result of transmission
from the teacher; rather, it was acquired and constructed through reading and discussion with their peers (Applefield et al., 2000, Styslinger, 2017). The goal of this constructivist intervention was that the learners would relate their textual experiences to their personal lives and apply their new understandings of these diverse perspectives to solve problems in real-world, ambiguous situations that they will face in the future.

The intervention itself consisted of “disrupting” canonical texts with novels that are culturally relevant to a significant percentage of the participants in this research study. The strategy of disrupting a text varies in practice; for some educators, it alludes to a replacement – this for that. For others, it might include a workshopping model based on a canonical text that supports readers through additional, related but accessible texts (Styslinger, 2017). This intervention blended these two approaches, centering each unit on two texts: one text from the literary canon and one text that is labeled as culturally relevant. In each unit, the canonical text was abridged; large and relevant sections of the canonical text served as a frame, and it was paired with a culturally relevant text that students read in its entirety.

The intervention lasted six weeks and utilized reciprocal teaching and small reading groups as reading strategies. Data was collected before, throughout, and at the end of the intervention; student feedback was collected weekly from focus question-based exit slips (Appendix C). Participants in English 2 Honors classes disrupted A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens with The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas; participants in English 2 CP classes disrupted Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare with The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo. The unit that disrupted A Tale of Two Cities with The Hate U Give focused on the thematic elements and motifs that occur in both texts: social
protest and social action, dual identities, power and brutality, and the cyclical nature of poverty and crime. Likewise, the unit that disrupted Romeo and Juliet with The Poet X focused on the ideas of voice and agency, coming of age, obedience versus independence, family and obligation, communication, self-worth, and the power of language as thematic elements and motifs that were present in both texts.

**Data Collection Methods**

To determine the effectiveness of culturally relevant texts on students’ engagement, I utilized several instruments to collect data including pre- and post-intervention surveys, researcher field notes, student feedback and summative scores from both the text disruption intervention and from their previous units in which a canonical text was taught in isolation. The student feedback included teacher observations, student reflections, and exit slips from the unit. Observations were conducted daily in class; when students were working in their small reading groups, I took on the role of observer. While I observed, Ms. Buffett, my graduate intern, facilitated the class itself. I kept a reflection journal in which I included both a formal daily observation checklist and additional informal, observational notes.

The first data instrument that I used was a survey that was based upon the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Long Term Reading Trend Student Questionnaire; its purpose was to determine attitudes and perceptions of student engagement with English content. At the end of the study, students took the NAEP-based survey for a second time. Their responses from these two surveys were compared to determine the impact, if any, of culturally relevant texts on their engagement with the course content.
Next, students participated in the intervention itself. Throughout the unit, data was collected through both field notes and student feedback. Each day of the intervention, I used a field journal to make formal observations via checklist and include additional informal notes during class and a fuller reflection on the day’s lesson after each class. At the end of each week, I also collected student feedback and reflections through exit slips.

To analyze the data of this study, I coded the discrete quantitative data of this study using a task success rate approach; I used scores from their unit summative and compared them to the summative scores from their three previous units (mythology, Antigone, and Othello). For this comparison, I looked at both the whole class average as well as individual students as this provided an opportunity to identify students who were outliers within the data. Qualitative analysis of student feedback data and my field notes were based on grounded theory.

**Organization of the dissertation**

The second chapter of this study details the literature surrounding the problem of practice – the issue of declining engagement, the prevalence of the canon in English classrooms, the incorporation of culturally relevant pedagogy in the English classroom, and the application of culturally relevant texts as a lens through which canonical texts can be critically examined and understood. Chapter three includes the methodological design, research design, and data collection methods. Chapter four will discuss the findings of the study, and finally, chapter five will discuss the implications of the research and any suggestions for future study.

**List of definitions**

*BIPOC* – black and indigenous people of color
*Canon* - a body of texts that are considered superior, important, essential, and influential (DeHart, 2020).

*CP* – an abbreviation for “College Prep,” a course level that denotes students to be at or below grade-level proficiency.

*Critical literacy* – the use of texts to analyze and transform relations of cultural, social, and political power; the process of becoming aware of one’s experience relative to sources of power, typically through reading and writing (Luke, 2012).

*Cultural competence* - the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own (NEA, 2009).

*Culturally relevant pedagogy* – a theoretical model and approach to teaching that focuses on students increasing their cultural competence, their sociopolitical consciousness, and their learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

*Culturally relevant text* - texts that connect to students’ cultural backgrounds

*Culturally sustaining pedagogy* – Based on Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasizes the necessity of equitable schooling through school curriculum, climate, and policies (Paris, 2012).

*Eurocentric* - focusing on European culture and history to the exclusion of other views and perspectives (Paris, 2012).

Student engagement - the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students exhibit when they are learning (The Glossary of Education Reform); a student’s investment in their learning.
CHAPTER 2
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The problem of practice guiding this study is that the lack of culturally relevant literature in the ELA curriculum has led to a decrease in student engagement. Students of all backgrounds work with canonical texts in English class, a text set that largely centers one set of values and beliefs; the lack of relevance in many of these texts may be connected to levels of disengagement. The aim of this study is to determine the impact of the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement and the effect of using culturally relevant literature as a bridge for critically examining canonical literature.

The intervention that was employed in this study revolves around the idea of “disrupting” the text, a teaching strategy that pairs culturally relevant texts with canonical texts, bridging thematic content with a text that students can readily engage in reading. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy have on student engagement?

2. How does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical literature?

The purpose of this literature review is to provide in-depth documentation and analysis of systemic inequities that marginalize students and how they are connected to the use of canonical texts in English classrooms. Literature reviews are important because
they provide a balanced, relevant, and peer reviewed perspective of the area of research
(Winchester & Salji, 2016); this is the foundation for the researchers’ ability to contribute
their study to the overall body of research.

For this literature review, I consulted a number of peer-reviewed journals,
credible articles, and textbooks that were provided to me through my coursework in the
doctoral program, my membership in the National Council of Teachers of English, as
well as the University of South Carolina’s library databases. The Educational Resources
Information Center (ERIC) was the primary source of the literature for this review. In
addition to databases, I referred to chapters from textbooks that I read throughout my
coursework, as well books that I owned for self-directed professional development. The
sources themselves were peer-reviewed studies, dissertations, textbook chapters, or
journal articles. For each chapter and article that I read, I examined the author’s list of
references and resources to find additional sources of quality information that was related
to my problem of practice and research questions.

The literature review is organized purposefully by topic. The first section will
provide background on the problem of practice with a key focus on the lack of diversity
of literary texts in high school English classes and its impact (Paris & Alim, 2017,
Cooper et. Al 2011). I will follow this with a discussion of the theoretical framework
Following this will be an examination of Freire’s critical literacy (Freire, 1970, 1985) and
its connection to students’ understanding of culturally relevant literature and the actions
they may take once they are equipped with new knowledge and understanding that they
have constructed throughout the intervention. Finally, I will discuss the three pillars of

**Background of the Problem of Practice**

The literary canon dominates the syllabi of English classrooms across the United States; for many scholars and educators, the canon represents the greatest representation of the human experience conveyed through language (Al-Shalabi et. al, 2011). The universality of the canon allows a common “set of references and resonances, a public vocabulary of narratives and discourse” (Jenkyns, 2007 in Al-Shalabi et. al, 2011). The literary canon is not universal, however, as it almost entirely omits the voices of non-Western authors. The lack of representation in the reading lists of American students subtly promotes the idea that the works of White and Western authors are superior (Dyches, 2018).

Demographics have shifted both inside and outside of school (Strauss, 2014; Cooper, He & Levin, 2011), so promoting linguistic and cultural dexterity is no longer only about equally valuing all communities -- it is also about the skills, knowledges, and ways of being needed for success in the present and the future (Alim & Paris, 2017). As globalization increases, the importance of cultural competency as a 21st century skill will only continue to increase as well (Cooper et. al, 2011). Additionally, cultural competence in the classroom can improved the success of diverse students in school (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is becoming increasingly imperative that students be exposed to quality, culturally relevant literature from a variety of communities so that
they have more cultural dexterity and understanding upon leaving school (Cooper et al., 2011).

The use of culturally relevant texts can have a positive impact on student progress and achievement: “When curriculum affirms the identities of students through the development of critical intellectualism, students increase their motivation and engagement in schooling contexts (Paris & Alim, 2017). A study by Clark (2017) provides empirical support for the idea that representation matters and that diversifying the canon to represent all students and their cultures can have a positive impact on students’ literacy skills and overall achievement. The study investigated the achievement gains of African American students who took part in a 10-week study of an afterschool reading program. In this study, three separate control groups were taught with three different text sets; one group used a text set that was entirely comprised of culturally relevant texts, the second group used a text set that did not include any culturally relevant texts, and the third group used a text set in which culturally relevant texts were used intermittently. The findings of Clark revealed three items: first, children who read culturally relevant texts exclusively experienced growth in their reading comprehension, outpacing their peers in control groups who did not read them or read them intermittently. Second, Clark found that students who read culturally relevant texts experienced an increase in their contextual vocabulary skills, an increase that was not experienced by children in the other two control groups. Finally, the study found that children’s word recognition in isolation growth did not differ significantly no matter the group. Culturally relevant texts may not always impact achievement, but it has been found to impact engagement.
Another study conducted by Chisolm (2020) utilized an action research approach to determine the effect that culturally relevant texts have on student engagement. The researcher chose six students, all of whom were deemed to be proficient writers, to observe during the study. During eight weeks of observation, the students read texts that the researcher determined to be culturally relevant: S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Sharon M. Draper’s *Romiette and Julio*. The six students responded to journal prompts about the texts as they read, which were collected and analyzed by the researcher. In addition, the researcher conducted a series of interviews with the students to determine their engagement and willingness to engage with the culturally relevant texts. The findings of this study pointed to a positive trend with students’ engagement as they read *The Outsiders* and *Romiette and Julio*.

An additional action research case study conducted by Glass (2019) researched the connections between academic achievement and engagement with culturally relevant texts. A critical theory model was used by the researcher to support their qualitative methodology, drawing data from interviews, observations, and surveys. The purpose of Glass’s study was to gauge student engagement with diverse texts, and to determine if negative, painful reading experiences of the participants’ past could be replaced, reengaging them as a first step toward growth in comprehension. Although the study did not find evidence of growth in regard to students’ literacy skills or achievement, it did conclude that students’ engagement with the text, with the teacher, and with the class increased when they were given culturally relevant texts to read. In terms of purpose, Glass was successful in using critically relevant texts to engage participants – the
researcher noted that students’ participation in literature discussions increased, ensuring that all felt empowered to speak about the text.

One mixed methods action research study conducted by Tan and Mante-Estacio (2021) also found a connection between culturally relevant texts and engagement. This study used student feedback and surveys to determine which characteristics of a text made it more culturally relevant, and therefore more interesting, to the student participants. The study was conducted over five class periods in which a different culturally relevant text was taught each day; students then rated the cultural relevance using a Likert scale. The characteristics that drew students to culturally relevant literature were the level of realism and the content of character discussions within the text. They determined that students considered texts to be more culturally relevant if they “tap into their existing background or previous firsthand experiences” (Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2021, p. 358). The researchers noted that throughout this study, there was an “unprecedented level of focus…during independent reading and self-stimulated engagement in text discussion” (Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2021, p. 359).

Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, and Petrone (2014) noted that there is still value in the literary canon – the value lies not in the standard teaching of canonical texts (or teaching “with the canon”), but rather, engaging students in critical literacy to read and write against the canon, disrupting dominant ideas about race, poverty, sex, gender, etc. Using this method of critical literacy to teach against the canon “focuses on teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and re-mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students toward active position-takings with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work” (Borsheim-Black
et. al, 2014, p. 124) Critical literacy also encourages students to ask why this piece of literature has made it to the canon and what makes it a quality piece of literature; applying a critical lens to the canon compels students to consider what other authors, voices, and texts are left out of the canon (Borsheim-Black et. al, 2014). This can help students detect dominant ideologies that typically go unnoticed since they are woven into both society and schools.

There is literary value in both the high school canon and in culturally relevant texts. The value of the canon can be extended through the practice of disrupting texts, a strategy employs both canonical and culturally relevant literature and seeks to develop students’ critical consciousness. In each study, there were positive connections between the use of culturally relevant texts, students’ engagement, and students’ motivation. Alim and Paris (2017) echo this connection between culturally relevant material, engagement and motivation: “When sufficient trust and rapport has been built, and interesting material and activities presented, people often become productively involved, sometimes despite themselves” (p. 113). According to Fredricks et. al (2004), the act of being motivated falls under the umbrella of cognitive engagement, a “psychological investment in learning…that describes measures such as flexible problem solving, preference for hard work” as well as “being committed to understanding the work” (p. 67). Engagement and motivation have the potential to impact academic success. Still, the current concept of academic success is based on “how closely students can perform White middle-class norms” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 101) and does not measure students’ critical consciousness or intellectualism.
One limitation of past research is that there are theoretical claims that suggest a connection between culturally relevant literature, increased engagement, and improved academic achievement, but the results of the studies are inconclusive. Additionally, the texts that researchers have provided to students are indeed culturally relevant, but the cultures reflected in these texts are not necessarily aligned with the cultures of students who struggle with engagement and achievement. This might suggest that a study should be conducted in which multiple cultures are reflected through choice novels in a book club setting.

Another limitation of these studies is the timing – with the exception of Hostetler (2021), the majority of studies that discuss culturally relevant literature were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, student motivation and engagement has plummeted – the baseline of those studies is not consistent with the current field. My study was conducted in the midst of this “new low” period, a time in which students and teachers have faced additional barriers to engagement, including pandemic depressed achievement (Di Pietro, 2023) and decreased adolescent wellness, adaptability, and resilience (Nadeem, E.R. & Van Meter, A., 2023).

Teachers who struggle to engage their students with canonical texts may benefit from this study, particularly teachers whose student demographics have shifted in recent years. There are numerous veteran and pre-service teachers who see both the value of and the problems associated with teaching canonical works. Having a tested strategy that works to increase cultural relevance and engagement while maintaining valuable slices of the literary canon may be beneficial in this period of educational transition that we find ourselves in. As culturally relevant texts are threatened by groups and districts that seek
to ban them, evidence that points to their ability to increase engagement and achievement may be a means of saving them.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theories that form the framework for this action research study are culturally sustaining pedagogy and critical literacy. The three pillars of engagement – behavioral, emotional, and cognitive – are also employed within the framework to support the study.

*Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*

Culturally sustaining pedagogy was born out of Ladson-Billings’ (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, a practice which works to empower students’ individual cultural identity and requires that students develop a critical understanding of other cultures, thereby increasing their cultural competency (Adams & Glass, 2018). Culturally relevant pedagogy provided avenues for educators and students alike to learn about and appreciate the cultural identity of all students, asking students to share their culture in school instead of the standard practice of assimilating students to the dominant ways of thinking and doing (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) was born out of Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy and builds upon it, adding that “it requires that they [educators] support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to create a bridge between student’s cultural identity at home and the academic demands of dominant culture at school (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally sustaining pedagogy works to allow the student’s cultural identity to become part of the academic demands of school (Paris, 2012). Students are not asked to decenter or discard
their cultural ways of speaking, knowing, and doing in order to adopt the practices of dominant culture that are disseminated in public schools (Paris, 2012). This theory supports the inclusion of culturally relevant texts; by centering a text that includes different cultural perspectives, there is an implicit understanding that this culture is as worthy of study as the canonical texts that are centered and taught with regularity.

Unlike culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy makes allowances for cultural shifts that are common in a pluralistic society (Paris, 2012). For the inclusion of culturally relevant texts in the English classroom, this is an important distinction for future research: the culturally relevant texts of today are not permanent. Texts that are considered culturally relevant now may become less relevant to students as time goes on and as society undergoes cultural shifts (Paris, 2012).

**Critical Literacy**

The theory of critical literacy also framed the intervention within this study. Critical literacy is based on Freirean pedagogy and first appeared in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). It is grounded in the idea that literacy involves “reading the world” in addition to “reading the word” (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and requires learners to explore “personal, sociopolitical, economic, and intellectual border identities” (Bishop, 2014, p. 52). Critical literacy is dependent on learners constructing their knowledge; it is in stark contrast to the banking modeling of learning in which students are “empty vessels to be filled” (Freire, 1970, p. 79) and knowledge is transmitted, not constructed.

The banking model purports that the teachers know everything, the teacher thinks, the teacher talks, the teacher disciplines, and the teacher chooses; students, on the other hand, know nothing, listens meekly, is disciplined, and complies (Freire, 1970). This
model stagnates their upward mobility, stifling the students’ creativity and their ability to challenge the interests of their oppressors (Freire, 1970, p. 73). As a result of this transmissive model, dominant groups are able to maintain the power and further influence the dissemination of knowledge.

Freire (1970) contends that real, liberating education occurs when students construct their knowledge and share their understandings with others. By doing this, they are not passively receiving knowledge, but actively engaging in becoming “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Learners do not unassumingly accept what they are told, but instead question and investigate new sources of information.

Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) noted that Freire’s theory of critical literacy promotes action for social justice through disrupting commonly held viewpoints and critically examining multiple perspectives. Critical literacy works to develop a critical consciousness within individuals and increases their cultural competency. Increasing cultural competency through literature is aligned with Freire’s (1985) notion that literacy is “not only about reading the word but also about reading the world; s, we see how reading is a matter of studying reality that is alive, reality that we are living inside of, reality as history being made and also making us” (p. 18).

This theory emphasizes an “action-reflection-action cycle of “praxis” (Bishop, 2014) that supports students’ literacy and engages them in direct action to transform the world. Lankshear & McLaren (1993) identified several ways that critical literacy can take shape in practice: a liberal education, pluralism, and transformative praxis (Bishop, 2014). Here, liberal education refers to the content of a course and is defined by the
allowance of multiple interpretations of knowledge and the intellectual freedom to
question and challenge rationally (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Pluralism refers to the
act of learning tolerance for diversity and benevolence toward the diverse, concepts that
are that learned through reading (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Finally, transformative
praxis is the ability to take what has been learned through liberal education and pluralism
and use it to take direct action for social justice (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). To
oppressors, this kind of literacy is “potentially subversive” (Bishop, 2014). To the
oppressed, it has the potential to be emancipatory.

Freire (1985) argues that education is political; although teachers should not
impose an agenda on their students, they should not hide their beliefs, either: “Students
have the right to know what our political dream is. They are then free to accept it, reject
it, or modify it Our task is not to impose our dreams on them, but to challenge them to
have their own dreams, to define their choices, not just to uncritically assume them
(Freire, 1985, p.18). The curricular choice to promote the literary canon is also a political
choice; like the banking model, it ensures that one set of cultural values is “uncritically
assumed” (Freire, 1985) by students across generations.

A more recent version of this model states that in contemporary settings, an
understanding of power dynamics is at the heart of critical literacy: learners must be able
to “go beyond skill acquisition and engage in the analysis and reconstruction of social
fields” (Luke, 2017, p. 8). Luke proposes that in order to truly engage in critical literacy,
there are four sets of social practices that learners should employ as they read texts:
coding practices, text-meaning practices, pragmatic practices, and critical practices.
Taken together, these social practices require students to interrogate the texts that they
read. They must consider the structure, patterns, and conventions of the text; they must consider how the ideas within the text work together; they must determine any cultural meanings that they might elicit from the text; they have to consider the uses of the text and how different audiences might use it as well; they have to consider which audiences might be able to understand the text freely and easily, what the text is trying to impart upon the reader, whose ideas and beliefs are central to the text, and whose voices and perspectives are missing from the text (Luke, 2017, p. 8).

As new literacies emerge alongside new technologies and increasingly complex, global relations, critical literacy may now be defined as the “use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Learners must now develop the ability to analyze power and engage in discussing the social issues that are pertinent to their current lives and their future lives, all while learning how to read critically and consider the complex lenses that can be applied to every text they encounter.

**Engagement Theory**

Behavioral engagement consists of rule-following practices such as following school guidelines, focusing in class, participating in activities, and other small behaviors that are connected to positive conduct (Lester, 2013). The qualitative differences of behavioral engagement can range from “simply doing the work and following the rules to participating in student council” (Fredricks et. Al, 2004, p. 60). This dimension of engagement is often categorized as “on-task behavior” and includes observable traits that are most often noticed by teachers and parents alike (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, &
Kindermann, 2008) as there is a clear connection between behavioral engagement and the value that students place on learning (Lester, 2013).

Emotional engagement is defined by “students’ attitudes, interests, and values particularly related to positive or negative interactions with faculty, staff, students, academics, or the institution” (Fredericks et al., 2004 in Lester, 2013). This type of engagement measures students’ sense of belonging and membership within the school culture, and it can range from a student simply liking the day’s lesson or content to the student deeply identifying with the school itself. Students who are emotionally engaged display characteristics like enthusiasm, fun, satisfaction, and enjoyment. These traits are desirable in any given learning scenario, but they are often seen as subordinate in importance when compared to the characteristics of behavioral or cognitive engagement. Emotional engagement, however, may be a key ingredient to student success: “Although behavioral engagement seems to be the primary driver of actual performance, emotion is likely the fuel for the kind of behavioral and cognitive engagement that leads to high quality learning” (Skinner et. al., 2008, p. 771).

Cognitive engagement is split into two dimensions. The first is psychological, a measure of students’ investment in their learning – their willingness to be careful and thoughtful in their work so that they can achieve a greater understanding of the skills and concepts put before them. The second is cognitive, a measure of students’ self-regulation, metacognition, and strategic thinking (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lester, 2013,). Cognitive engagement can range from students memorizing facts to students’ desire to become an expert in the field (Fredricks et. Al, 2004). A complete lack of cognitive engagement can lead to disaffection or burnout (Skinner et. al., 2008) while the presence of cognitive
engagement is denoted by “focus, absorption, heads-on participation, and a willingness to go beyond what is required” (Skinner et. al., 2008, p. 770).

Together, these theories and constructs formed a frame for this study; culturally sustaining pedagogy created an opportunity for all students to examine new perspectives that shifted their thinking about their position within an unequal system. In addition to shifting their thinking, critical literacy asks them to use their new knowledge to examine other perspectives, including their own formerly held beliefs. By examining multiple ways of thinking and doing through literature, students may develop a tolerance for diversity and a compassion toward the diverse. Their work as readers, questioners, and dialogic investigators may have an impact on their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement with the content and lead to positive academic results.

**Culturally Relevant Texts**

“At the center of critical pedagogy is the examination of education’s role in reifying existing power relations in order to transform them. Its educational aims are to teach students to become critically conscious so they rethink what they think they already know in order to exercise their agency to disrupt oppressive social, political, and economic relations at the interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels” Campangian (2013, p. 3).

Within the secondary English classroom, critical pedagogy relies on the texts that students interact with day-to-day. If students are given texts that are Eurocentric and validate only White experiences, they will continue in the ingrained belief that dominant, White culture is superior to the cultural norms and writings of the “other.” Gay (2010) found that textbooks and mandated, canonical novels “reflect the values, norms, and
biases of disciplines and societies . . . and construct images and impressions that become explanations and understandings for students. Their largely uncontested authority and pervasiveness are important reasons why understanding how they treat ethnic and cultural diversity and the effects on student learning are fundamental to culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2010, p. 216).

The theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy that when culturally relevant texts are used in lieu of the canon in K-12 classrooms, student engagement and buy-in increases (Paris, 2012). There are numerous studies that discuss the relationship between student engagement and academic achievement. In addition, there are several studies that suggest a positive correlation between culturally relevant literature and engagement (Hostetler, 2021; Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2021). One such study is a mixed methods action research study conducted by Tan and Mante-Estacio (2021) found a connection between culturally relevant texts and engagement using student feedback and surveys to determine which characteristics of a text made it more culturally relevant, and therefore more interesting, to the student participants. This study was conducted in the Philippines, however, with participants that were somewhat homogenous in ethnic makeup; this study could benefit from being reapplied in a more diverse setting.

English education can often act as a gatekeeper of perceived respectability and the ladder of success, narrowing students’ opportunities rather than providing multiple paths to success or social action (Johnson, 2018). It is expected that in the current climate of the United States, culturally sustaining pedagogy would face resistance from community members. The resistance to culturally sustaining pedagogy, however is woven throughout
almost all educational institutions, maintaining the cultural norms of colonizers through Eurocentric textbooks and canonical literature.

One study suggests that when culturally relevant texts are used in the K-12 classroom, student engagement and buy-in increases. Alim and Paris (2017) discussed an anecdote that illustrates this increased engagement: a Native American high school student, on the verge of dropping out, recommitted to driving the long distance and attending high school because of a new class that was being offered: Native American literature. Seeing himself and his culture represented interested him enough to make this significant shift when Eurocentric lessons could not. Culturally relevant texts and basic representation inspired this student to persevere through high school onto graduation – how might this inclusion affect other students who have been marginalized by systemic inequities based on race or ethnicity?

Tatum (2008) noted that students of color were more likely to be disengaged and struggle with reading, but that this struggle was potentially linked to the lack of diverse authors whose work reflected the collective identity and experiences (Tatum, 2008). Continuing in a canonical tradition, one that centers the literature of dominant culture and disregards stories of the “other” does little to reduce the achievement gap (Cooper et al., 2011).

This study seeks to understand the connections between current practices in the English classroom and their connection to decreasing student engagement. Student engagement and achievement is an issue throughout the larger field of education; increasing the cultural relevancy of students’ coursework may shift their engagement and increase students’ academic buy-in.
Historical Perspectives

In this section, I will discuss historical perspectives that are connected to the problem of practice. First, I will discuss the literary canon itself – the history of the canon, support for the canon, and critique of the canon – as well as the decades-long debate over the canon’s lack of inclusivity. Next, I will examine culturally relevant literature and its growing acceptance in literary study. Finally, I will explore the connection between literature, the opportunity gap, and equity.

The Literary Canon

The canon is an “institutionally sanctioned standard of literature” that affects literary scholarship at every level; it “structures the scope of course programs and the forms of classroom instruction, it conditions departmental reading lists and exam requirements,” providing the academic world with assumptions about how literature should be and what is valuable in literature (Loffler, 2017, p. 4). Fowler (1979)

In the Catholic tradition, the process of canonization is the addition of a dead person into sainthood; the process of a text being added to the literary canon is not dissimilar. Although Harold Bloom is credited with creating a physical list of canonical texts in his 1994 book title *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, the literary canon has existed for centuries long before the creation of English departments as they are now known (Loffler, 2017). While a physical list did not exist prior to 1994, nearly every scholar of literature could name the texts that comprise the canon, and they shaped literary study from the beginning of literary study itself. Canonical texts were essentially “sainted” and put above all other texts in a value hierarchy (Fowler, 1979).
According to Loffler (2017), the rise of deconstruction and poststructuralism led numerous scholars and students to question the integrity of the canon and reassess its central role in academic institutions; critics of the canon note that the canon “is a reflection of the ways in which a particular ideological consensus is transmitted via central cultural institutions to the reading public” (2017, p. 5).

Supporters of the canon believe that one should be able to distinguish between the aesthetics of canonical texts and the political context surrounding canonical texts. Scholars appreciate canonical texts either because of or in spite of these facets, keeping the texts’ periodization—an organization of literary periods that shapes literary study—in mind and accepting the text as it is instead of problematizing the text with political agendas (Loffler, 2017). They argue that canonical texts deserve the esteem they are granted because many texts on the list are credited with the foundation of entire genres (Fowler, 1979); Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is recognized as the text that incited the Southern Gothic genre while Sylvia Path’s *Ariel* founded confessional poetry (Fowler, 1979).

The debate over which texts and authors should belong to the literary canon is ongoing and has shifted with the times. At an NAIS (2008) roundtable discussing that critically examined the canon, Johnson reflected on teaching the canon in the early 1980s: “At the time, the fight was over whether or not to include Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf on the reading list. The first African-American writer to appear in the curriculum was Zora Neale Hurston, but she appeared only as an option for the professors.” (NAIS, 2008, p. 53). Culture and its impact on classroom literature, the participants agreed, has undergone a huge shift in the last 25-30 years, and that is to be expected: “Education is
not meant to support the society, the status quo. In many ways, it's meant to help us be critical thinkers about the world in which we live” (NAIS, 2008, p. 68).

**Including Culturally Relevant Literature**

The English syllabi of my setting are not dissimilar to the syllabi that are distributed across the United States. They feature great works of literature and authors like William Shakespeare, Harper Lee, William Golding, George Orwell, Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Homer, Dante, Steinbeck, and Alice Walker. The debate the encircles the literary canon and its prevalence in high school literature classes is not new; in an NAIS (2008) roundtable discussion among educators, Johnson noted that the “way in which the difference between canonical and noncanonical books is set up is a false dichotomy. We're told that a work is either a great work of literature in which language is difficult and beautiful or it's just a minor work about personal identity. “(NAIS, 2008, p. 52). In that same discussion, Nelson discussed the popularity of the canon with English educators and their enduring place in Anglo-American classrooms, stating that it is connected to their own histories as readers. He states that it is “presumptuous of us to think that, because we had a good experience, all students will have a similar interest or even the capacity to be drawn into it. Maybe the better experience for them is to enter the world of literature through some other doorway” (NAIS, 2008, p. 53). One other doorway is likely intertextuality, or the relationships between texts by bridging canonical and culturally relevant literature. Including culturally relevant texts can be a doorway to comprehending great literature as they can serve as a “way to connect lived experiences, itself a form of text, to other textual iterations” (Dyches, 2018).
Campbell and Wirtenberg (1980) completed a study in which they examined the usage of inclusive literature (of both race and gender) in the classroom. The researchers noted a few effects on the students. First, they found that books do transmit values to readers. Second, the use of multicultural readings produced markedly “more favorable attitudes toward nondominant groups” than did the usage of solely White texts. Third, the usage of nonsexist and multicultural curriculum produced a positive correlation to the students’ academic achievement. Finally, sex-role stereotyping was reduced in students who learned under the non-sexist curriculum (Campbell & Wirtenberg, 1980). A more inclusive curriculum has the potential to increase both their tolerance of the diverse and benevolence toward the diverse (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

Education has long been hailed as the great equalizer – for many individuals, education is a means of upward social mobility, of financial stability, of opportunities that would otherwise be prohibited without the requisite degrees. For people of color, however, the education system in America is still not yet equal. An in-depth examination of the history of the education system reveals a long record of BIPOC groups who were habitually mistreated and denied equal access to education for most of America’s history (Howard, 2010). This is the past, but it continues to affect the present schooling of students in America, easily identified in opportunity gap that afflicts BIPOC and impoverished students throughout the nation. Although the opportunity gap affecting students from poorer home may be attributed to factors like parental involvement, low-quality schools, lack of resources, etc. the same cannot be said for students of color. African-American, Latino, and Indigenous students perform worse than their white counterparts across socioeconomic classes and communities (Jencks & Phillips, 1998),
and this suggests that despite schools’ professions of colorblindness, statistically, education is still impacted by race.

**Equity and Achievement**

The lack of diversity in English-Language Arts texts is widespread across American classrooms. Reading lists and curriculum guides are still largely centered around the literary canon, a collection of writings that have status and value to western culture, but whose ranks often fail to included authors who are not male or of European descent. Agee (2000) asserted that “a focus on canonical literature . . . in high school English classrooms valorizes not just certain literature but also certain ways of thinking about the world” (p. 307). Borsheim-Black (2015) explored the Whiteness in literature curriculum and noted that decades of research have documented the lack of non-White authors in secondary English classrooms. Although the occasional author of color has been added to reading lists or the canon itself – i.e. Hughes, Morrison, Hurston, Walker - but white authors still continue to dominate by a large margin. Textbooks and mandated, canonical novels “reflect the values, norms, and biases of disciplines and societies . . . and construct images and impressions that become explanations and understandings for students. Their largely uncontested authority and pervasiveness are important reasons why understanding how they treat ethnic and cultural diversity and the effects on student learning are fundamental to culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2010, p. 216).

Within education, one of the most significant predictors of success is that of strong literacy skills (Cunningham, 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998 in Howard, 2010). In 2010, the National Center for Education Statistics founds that among fourth graders, 58% of African-American, 54% of Latino, and 52% of American Indian students
were reading below a basic level (as set forth by the NAEP) - in comparison, only 24% of white and 27% of Asian students were considered below basic – that means that double the percentage of BIPOC students struggle with following brief written directions and carrying out simple, discrete reading tasks. These levels remain largely unchanged by Grade 8 and again at Grade 12 (Howard, 2010). Reading proficiency is one of the most glaring parts of the opportunity gap as reading plays a significant part in overall academic success and post-secondary achievement (Oakes et al. 2006).

The diversity of school populations is now incongruous with the lack of diversity in the required texts that students are asked to read. Implications of this incongruity and potential solutions are complex, and there are numerous factors that contribute to this lack of diversity. American students are diverse, but their teachers are not. Although school populations have become “intensely made up mostly of students of color,” teacher populations and teacher education programs are still overwhelmingly white (Cross, 2003). This incongruity is often problematic for students of color as they are more likely to underperform or miss educational outcome goals under the influence of their predominantly white teachers and administrators, many of whom still hold harmful notions that an “individual’s biological traits pre-determine his or her abilities” (Carr & Klassen, 1997).

Diversifying the English-Language Arts curriculum is directly connected to issues of equity and social justice in the classroom. Despite the growing BIPOC population within American schools and the efforts of teacher education programs to instill anti-racist practices in pre-service teachers, the literary canon is still overrepresented on reading lists and within school units across the country (Hollie, 2018). Becoming a
multicultural educator is a journey that involves multiple encounters, ongoing conversations, and individual reflection (Gray, 2003) and this journey is contingent upon an individual’s ability to question their beliefs, their values, and themselves. The shift to include culturally relevant texts may be difficult for some White teachers because these texts sometimes tackle difficult subjects, like race, oppression, and systemic inequities; race is not often spoken about by those from racially privileged or dominant positions (Howard, 2010); White teachers who are already in the field often limit race discussion due to discomfort, express racial contradictions and double standards, and prioritize White values over those of people of color. (Marcy, 2010).

Dominant culture assumes that society is equal and that racism is limited to rare, outward signs of bigotry, but subtleties often perpetuate the continuation of invisible systems that confirms their dominance as a single group (Ladson-Billings, 1999). The white gaze is a fallacy that does not appear in dictionaries. Pitchford (2020) states that “it occurs when people view Black creations under the scope of White ethnocentrism, which involves the idea of looking at one’s own culture as the highest standard of “good” culture” and when people of color “Need to neglect their own Black consciousness in favor of White Ethnocentric standards” (2020, para. 3). Toni Morrison defined the white gaze as “the assumption that the reader is white and the resulting self-consciousness in your thinking and writing” (1998) but the white gaze affects the reader as well. When students only read about white heroes and white experience, the invisible system that holds Eurocentric behaviors as superior is on full display. Students of color are left bereft without seeing heroes of color and the BIPOC experience reflected in the required literature they read, continuing to measure themselves and their achievement in an
inequitable system that does not benefit them: “Educators must understand that choosing Eurocentric texts that omit the lived realities of Black people or misrepresent the multiple ways of being Black leads to anti-blackness and the devaluation of Black life” (Johnson, 2019, p. 109).

Because of the omnipresent White gaze, people of color feel a necessity to change their behavior and conform to white, Eurocentric standards in order to be successful or accepted by dominant culture (Kendi, 2016). Colonialist practices have ensured that the education system and the very ladder of success - a construct that many aspire to ascend for financial and societal security - have been defined by Eurocentric standards. Students, workers, and artists alike are measured against these dominant culture standards and perceived as inadequate because they fail to conform to these standards according to the white gaze (Kendi, 2016).

**Student Engagement and Achievement**

When students are provided with literature that is relevant to them to their experiences, and to their culture, their engagement with the material and their buy-in with the curriculum increases (Alim & Paris, 2017). Struggling with outdated and unfamiliar contexts can inhibit literacy skills or turn off struggling readers (Hollie, 2018). Readers are better able to deal with conceptual demands of texts with which they already have a contextual connection established. As a result of being able to handle the texts with more directness, students develop stronger academic literacy skills (Hollie, 2018). When students are given access to high quality material that relates to their cultural knowledge and experiences, they use it as they develop their literary understandings: “These findings suggest that culturally influenced textual features have the potential to become important
pedagogical tools for literacy instruction” (Brooks, 2006). For students who are part of dominant culture, diverse texts may serve as a springboard to increasing their cultural competency, which is defined as the ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own (Howard, 2010); it is not a skill that one does or does not have – instead, it is a spectrum and individuals are at different points in their competency. With exposure to diverse and multicultural materials, competency tends to shift and increase (Howard, 2010).

Summary

This chapter reviewed how pairing culturally relevant texts with canonical literature has the potential to increase student engagement, student learning, and students’ cultural competency. Including diverse texts that reflect the experiences of all of their students is equitable, and as the demographic makeup of the American classrooms continues to shift, educators must critically examine our current pedagogies in order to make our classrooms equitable settings for learning.

This review also explored how the literary canon has been steadfastly used throughout the history of compulsory public education. Although the canon has been criticized over time for its lack of inclusivity, it continues to dominate reading lists because much of the literature is both timeless and well-written. Still, these texts often disengage students and are difficult to access for a number of young people who lack the cultural connections needed to make sense of them. Therefore, disrupting canonical texts and using culturally relevant texts as a bridge to great literature may provide an opportunity to minimize disengagement and increase student learning. In the next
chapter, I will explain the methodology that I will use in my mixed-methods action research study.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the study methodology designed to address the problem of practice: the lack of culturally relevant literature in current English curriculums is leading to a decrease in student engagement, and students are becoming increasingly disconnected with the canonical literature that they are taught. The literary canon is replete with pieces of great literature; therefore, they are habitually taught in American classrooms. The absence of diverse voices within the canon, however, intuitively reinforces the perceived superiority of canonical texts and the White experiences within them. Culturally relevant texts, on the other hand, are books in which students’ backgrounds and lived experiences are reflected within the plot. Cultural relevancy has layers – ethnic, linguistic, generational, racial, gendered – and more layers may be applicable to one group of students than others. This study, connected to the systemic culture of power that exists within both schools and society, explored the following research questions:

1. What effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy have on student engagement?

2. How does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical literature?
To determine the impact that the use of culturally relevant texts has on students’ engagement in the secondary English classroom, the study drew on culturally sustaining pedagogy, critical literacy, and engagement theory. The goal of the intervention was to increase student engagement and enhance students’ critical reading through the use of disrupting canonical texts with texts that are more culturally relevant to students. The method of disrupting texts is based on the idea that the literary canon should be challenged in order to create a more diverse and equitable curriculum for all students. For this intervention, traditional texts are pared down and thematically linked to diverse texts that challenge and expand upon the concepts found within the canonical books.

This chapter will discuss the design of the study and the intervention and how they aligned to address the research questions and draw out authentic data from the participants. Next, the setting of the study and an overview of the participants will be described together with the role of the researcher and limitations that might exist between the researcher and participants. The strategies and protocols that were used within the intervention are defined in the research procedure section along with the data collection methods that were embedded in the study. The final section of this chapter explains the intended treatment, process, and analysis of the data.

**Research Design and Intervention**

Action research is an inquiry-based process in which researchers seek to “understand how participants make meaning or interpret a particular phenomenon or problem in their workplace, community, or practice, but it usually seeks to engage participants at some level in the process in order to solve a practical problem” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 49). This action research study utilized a convergent, mixed methods
experimental design. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in a single phase, analyzed separately, and then compared to determine if the results from each part either confirm or contradict each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In a basic qualitative study, a central characteristic is that researchers seek to understand how “people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). In a mixed-methods approach, however, there is a strong qualitative component that is combined with quantitative, closed-ended data. In this study, qualitative and quantitative approaches work in tandem to create a fuller picture of the problem of practice and the impact of the intervention (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative and quantitative data were collected before, during, and after the intervention in the form of summative data, observational data, open-ended questions, and Likert scales that are used to determine the impact that culturally relevant literature has on the participants’ engagement as well as their critical reading competences. In an attempt to provide accuracy, varied voices, and ensure validity by having an equal number of participants for the qualitative and the quantitative portions, every eligible student from my English 2 and English 2 Honors classes were recruited to participate.

A qualitative component within a mixed method study best lends itself to “discovery, insight, and understanding the perspectives of those being studied” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 1). This study focused on the experiences of students and their engagement with culturally relevant texts in the secondary classroom prior to their incorporation, during the unit study, and after they completed the unit with culturally relevant texts. In order to fully understand the participants’ engagement with culturally
relevant texts, I chose to collect data from multiple sources: surveys, observations, exit slips, and comparative test scores. Having multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data helped me ensure validity through triangulation.

Following the action research cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Lewin, 1946), the participants began the study with a survey that asked questions about their current level of engagement in English class, with the content of the class, and with reading in general. The action commenced with the teaching of the intervention unit. I then observed students’ levels of engagement through day-to-day conversations with students, exit slips, and classroom observations. At the end of the unit, students took a post-intervention survey and completed a summative assessment. The scores of the assessment were then compared to their summative scores from the previous three units. Throughout the process, I collected and analyzed data and use it to inform both the current study and future research.

**Research Setting and Participants**

German River High School (pseudonym) is a suburban public school in the southeast United States. One of four high schools serving the area, it is a large school that contains an application-based STEM magnet program within the overall setting (a school within a school) and serves grades 9–12. The school has approximately 1700 students who are 47.9% Caucasian, 36.4% African American, 5.2% Asian, 5.2% Biracial, Hispanic, and .5% Native American and Pacific Islander.
Table 3.1 – *Ethnicity of school*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Certified Faculty</th>
<th>Administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teacher population of this setting does not reflect the diverse student population of the school: more than half the students are non-White, yet the majority of their teachers are White. When this study began, the English department was approximately 94.45% White and 5.55% Asian. The course syllabi of these teachers are overwhelmingly full of White authors; the required common syllabi of the core English classes include traditional, canonical texts written by authors such William Shakespeare, George Orwell, Charles Dickens, John Steinbeck et cetera.

The participants of this study were selected due to their proximity to me as their teacher – a convenience sampling. To achieve accuracy in my study, I wanted a large sample size, so I recruited every student in my English 2 CP and English 2 Honors classes. The only additional exclusion criteria were that students had to have been enrolled in the class since August so that summative scores from the three previous units could be equitably compared. These classes primarily consisted of 10th grade students; the two English 2 Honors courses also contained a moderate number of advanced 9th
grade students, and the English 2 CP courses also contained a small number of 11th grade students who were retaking the course.

I worked to recruit participants by introducing the unit choices to each of my classes. Students had the option to choose between a unit in which a canonical text is “disrupted” by a culturally relevant text or a unit that included the canonical text in isolation. After obtaining approval from the department of accountability within my district, I sent a letter of consent to potential participants and their parents and guardians that outlined students’ choices for the upcoming unit. In the letter, parents were informed that students would not be penalized for declining to participate and that both units required an equivalent volume of work. The majority of my students and their guardians consented to take part in the intervention unit and research study. Six students opted out of the study, choosing to study the canonical text alone; two students failed to return the consent form and were therefore excluded from data collection.

The participants in both the CP and the Honors courses represented a wide variety of race and academic proficiency. Of the 114 students in these five classes, 97 students were eligible for the study. Of those 97, 91 students and guardians consented to take part in the study; their demographic breakdown was as follows: 50% male, 48.3% female, and 1.7 percent transexual or non-binary; 41 participants were Black (45%), 39 were White (42.8%), 3 were Biracial (3.3%), 3 were Hispanic (3.3%), 2 were American Indians (2.2%), 2 were Asian (2.2%), and 1 was Pacific Islander (1.1%).

**Positionality**

My role as the researcher was to implement the intervention within my own classroom and help students access the canonical text through the culturally relevant text.
The participants acted as active collaborators throughout the study, and I used their stories, experiences, and observations to construct my data. Although my role was that of a researcher, I understood that I was in a position of authority over the participants due to my role as their teacher. Without mitigation, my dual position as teacher and researcher might have negatively impacted or skewed the data collection: students may not have been authentic in their surveys or exit slip feedback. To diminish this effect, all surveys and exit slips were collected anonymously. It was important to protect the study’s participants by avoiding identifying information (Efron & Ravid, 2019), so I consistently communicated to every participant that all surveys and exit slips would come to me without any identifying information beyond demographic data.

I used two units of study as interventions that utilized the strategy of text disruption, a strategy in which canonical texts that are traditionally taught in isolation are paired with culturally relevant texts. Both units were guided by the theory of critical literacy; as the participants read the paired texts and engaged in dialectical and dialogic work with their peers, they were asked to question their existing knowledge, their assumptions, and the power structures that exist in their daily sphere. The units lasted for six weeks; both units utilized reciprocal teaching and small reading groups as reading strategies. Data was collected during and at the end of the intervention; student feedback was collected weekly from focus question exit slips (Appendix C).

Students in English 2 Honors classes disrupted *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens with *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, and students in English 2 CP disrupted *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare with *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo. These texts pairings were intentional and motivated by the theory of culturally sustaining
pedagogy in that they sought to “build on students’ evolving identities and simultaneously prepares youth to challenge social injustices” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 7). By bridging canonical texts and culturally relevant texts, the intervention encompassed the culturally sustaining concept of embracing “the understanding of culture as dynamic and fluid, while also allowing for the past and present to be seen as merging, a continuum” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 8).

The unit that disrupted *A Tale of Two Cities* with *The Hate U Give* was focused on thematic elements and motifs that occur in both texts: social protest and social action, dual identities, power and brutality, and the poverty and crime cycle. In this unit, students read parts of Book the First, parts of Book the Second, and all of Book the Third in *A Tale of Two Cities*; at the same time, students read *The Hate U Give* in its entirety. Likewise, the unit that disrupted *Romeo and Juliet* with *The Poet X* was focused on the ideas of voice and agency, coming of age, obedience versus independence, family and obligation, communication, self-worth, and the power of language as thematic elements and motifs that are present in both texts. Similar to the Honors units, students read selected scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* while simultaneously reading all of *The Poet X*. Through this intervention, I sought to address the of practice and engage students by providing them with a high interest, culturally relevant text that was used as a thematic bridge to critically examine canonical literature.

**Data Collection**

To determine the effectiveness of culturally relevant texts on students’ engagement and critical reading development, I chose to apply quantitative variables and
qualitative constructs that afforded me a clearer picture of the intervention’s impact. First, I employed pre-intervention surveys to collect data regarding participants’ background, perceptions of reading, and attitudes toward English content. Throughout the unit, I observed students formally with a checklist that is grounded in engagement theory and recorded informal observations and reflections in a field journal. To gain student insight and feedback regarding their understanding of the texts and their levels of engagement, students submitted exit slips at the end of each reading cycle. At the end of the unit, a post-survey that is identical to the pre-survey was distributed to reassess students’ perceptions of reading and English content. To strengthen the data and better understand the problem of practice (Creswell, 2015), these qualitative methods of data collection were added to a quantitative comparison of their unit summative scores. I then analyzed these sets of data and compared their results.

Table 3.2 – Data Sources and Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy have on student engagement?</td>
<td>• Field journal observations&lt;br&gt;• Student observation checklist&lt;br&gt;• Weekly exit slips&lt;br&gt;• Pre-Intervention Survey&lt;br&gt;• Post-Intervention Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical literature?</td>
<td>• Field journal observations&lt;br&gt;• Weekly exit slips&lt;br&gt;• Summative assessment</td>
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**Surveys**

Surveys can be a common and efficient methods for gathering a variety of information about participants’ perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (Efron & Ravid, 2019).
In order to have a clear understanding of students’ perceptions of canonical literature, reading, and English course content, I distributed surveys prior to the intervention and again once the intervention has finished (Appendix A). The pre-survey and post-survey were identical with one exception: at the end of the post survey, I added a question that specifically asked participants about their engagement in this unit of study in comparison to past units of study. Both surveys were modeled on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Long Term Trend Reading Student Questionnaire.

For all of the participants, I began with demographic questions (ethnicity, number of books in the home) that provided me with a reference point of student’s ethnic background, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, and the value that their household places on reading (Heppt, Olczyk, & Volodina, 2022). The number of books in a household has consistently been found to relate to students’ academic achievement, as measured, for instance, by their reading comprehension, academic language proficiency, or years of schooling. It also shows substantial relations to other indicators of SES thus pointing to its general appropriateness for capturing students’ socioeconomic background” (Heppt et. al, 2022, p. 904). I also included a question about students’ unexcused absences as these can be an indicator of students’ behavioral and emotional engagement and enjoyment of the course (Lester, 2013). These questions were asked before shifting to questions about students’ perceptions of reading and English class content; each question in this second part of the survey utilizes a Likert scale. See Appendix A for the full pre- and post- intervention surveys.
Observations

Semi-structured qualitative observations took place during every class period in which students engaged in small reading groups; the observation form was divided into two sections: observation checklist (Appendix B) and Cornell notes (Appendix G). Semi-structured observational tools are typically developed with a set of issues in mind. For this study, the observational checklist tool was developed and aligned with the engagement theory of Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004).

The checklist is divided by the three domains of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. The indicators for behavioral engagement included students asking questions, focusing on task, paying attention to the lesson, following rules, showing effort and persistence in their work, and following rules. The indicators for observing emotional engagement were signs of either a positive or negative attitude toward the content, signs of boredom (sleeping, off-task behaviors), and signs of interest (emotional reactions toward the content, expressing enjoyment), and the indicators for observing cognitive engagement are student’s ability to self-regulate (staying on-task despite distractions), application of knowledge (applying learned concepts from the course and using them during reading or discussion), metacognition (students share their mental processes during discussions, reflect on past discussions and shifts in thinking), and willingness to go beyond requirements. In each section, there is a space for each participant’s name so that both the group and each individual’s engagement can be assessed. Next to their names is a rating of that individual’s engagement; students may be checked as being consistently engaged (all behaviors noted; 4 data points), moderately engaged (most behaviors noted; 3 data points), minimally engaged (one or two behaviors noted; 2 data points).
noted; 2 data points), or absent engagement (zero behaviors noted; 1 data point). At the bottom of the checklist is a separate section for denoting which specific behaviors, under each domain of engagement, were observed in the time given.

This checklist observation form provided me with consistency in assessing student’s engagement and will inhibit any inclinations to give too much focus to any one domain of engagement. I chose to rank students’ engagement on a scale of four-point scale so that I could observe patterns and trends in their engagement across the unit. In addition to the checklist observation, I took descriptive and reflective notes during reading sessions using the Cornell method. My aim was to write them in a manner that clearly separated the descriptive notes from reflective notes (Efron & Ravid, 2019). By assigning data points and using the Cornell notes, I was also able to combine individual and group points for averages, as well as make comparisons to the narrative notes (see Appendix B for the full student observation checklist).

I piloted this observation checklist before the intervention with both of my English 2 Honors classes as they engaged in small group reading and discussion. With both classes, the groups who had a higher average of data points also tended to have a richer discussion of the day’s reading on their ticket out the door, with one exception. After the first trial with observation checklist, I decided to go back and separate the checklist of specific observed behaviors into three columns and reformat the checklist so that everything fit onto one page. I used the checklist again the next day with a different English 2 Honors course, and I was pleased at how quickly and efficiently I was able to summarize their engagement. During the study, this observation checklist allowed me to maximize my observation time and to take additional notes in the field journal.
Exit Slips

At the end of each weekly reading cycle, students anonymously submitted exit slips (Appendix C). These exit slips contained students’ written reflections on the cycles’ content as well as personal questions about their enjoyment of and connection to the content. These qualitative, personal artifacts were used to determine students behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement with the paired texts. These exit slips allowed me to “construct a layered and contextual understanding” (Efron & Ravid, p. 127) of students’ understanding and engagement. As a data collection tool, exit slips provided more insight into student’s emotional engagement with the texts; emotional engagement is difficult to observe and quantify with assuredness (Lester, 2013), so I relied on their self-reported levels of engagement in their weekly exit slips.

In addition to measuring levels of engagement, the exit slips gave students space to reflect and anonymously voice their beliefs and understandings as they related to the readings and the focus question of each reading cycle. Because some of the focus questions had the potential to lead to discussions of sensitive topics within small reading groups, individuals may not have felt secure in sharing their learning, their beliefs, or their lived experiences. It was my hope that with the promise of anonymity, they would find the exit slips to be a secure place to share their authentic responses.

Summative Assessments

The summative assessment at the conclusion of the intervention was a multigenre project (Appendix D), the results of which served as quantitative data. Performance tasks, like those that appear in multigenre work, allow students to take part in an authentic assessment that allows them to fully display their knowledge and abilities. Additionally,
performance tasks usually involve more creative, strategic, and higher-order thinking skills that can create positive attitudes toward assessment, keeping students actively engaged (Chapman & King, 2012). Multigenre work allows students to select genres of writing and performance in order to demonstrate their learning; participants can use their voices and choices to make their learning contextually relevant which aligns with practices of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Similar to the previous summative assessments that the participants completed in preceding units, this multigenre summative allowed me to measure the growth of students’ critical reading skills and their ability to read, synthesize, interpret, and question what they have read (Paul, 1992).

There are a number of advantages when using teacher-made performance tasks, like increased creativity and “open-ended thinking” (Efron & Ravid, 2019, p. 157), opportunities for the practical application of knowledge and skills, and student’s ability to demonstrate their knowledge through their individual strengths. The performance tasks within this multigenre paper were aligned with the South Carolina College- and Career-Ready Standards and Indicators for English 2; to eliminate barriers to learning, students were given multiple means of action and expression through a universal design approach that seeks to produce “assessments that not only fairly assess those students, but fairly assess all students” (Frey, 2013, p. 246). Universally designed assessments should improve not just the fairness of an assessment, but its validity and reliability as well (American Educational Research Association [AERA], American Psychological Association [APA], and National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME], 2014). The Universal design approach embraces consequential validity, a modern approach to determining validity through the assessment’s ability to “accurately represent a particular
domain of knowledge or skill,” but also to determine whether “the use of an assessment is fair and just in a social sense” (Frey, 2013, p. 246).

The multigenre summative for this intervention asked students to choose one of the thematic connections that linked their canonical and culturally relevant texts. Students then used that thematic connection to frame their multigenre work. The multigenre summative required students to create pieces that were relevant to their paired texts and that showed evidence of critical reading. Honors students created a song analysis connected to both texts, a protest piece that addressed challenges in one or both texts, a conversation between two characters from each text that discussed an issue of equity and justice, an introduction to the multigenre paper, thematic cover art, and a genre piece of their choosing. College prep students also created a song analysis and a conversation between characters, but they added on a free verse poem that was connected to the texts’ theme; like the Honors students, they too wrote an introduction to the paper and created thematic cover art.

Each performance task had a number of points attached to it that were based on the cognitive and taxonomic demands of the task (i.e. tasks that ask students to produce new or original work are worth more points than a task that asks students to connect, synthesize or interpret ideas from the texts). To create a more authentic presentation component and to diminish the fear associated with large group presentations, the multigenre project culminated in a gallery-style presentation in the media center; parents, teachers, administrators, and other students were invited to participate (Appendix E).

To ensure that my data was protected, I stored all associated documents in a digital folder that I encrypted and password protected; in addition, the secured data folder
was stored on a personal, password-protected laptop; I was the only user and the only person who had access to both the laptop and the encrypted folder. I made certain to close all data documents and to close my laptop when I had to step away from my computer so that student data was not accidentally disclosed to anyone beyond myself. Since I collected all of the data digitally, I chose to maintain students’ authentic voices by presenting their actual wordings and spellings as they were originally submitted to me throughout the study.

**Benefits and Limitations**

One benefit of this study was that by reading two texts together, students were exposed to themes across generations and across genres, a strategy that can decompartmentalize English content while helping students see patterns in literature. By reading two thematically connected texts, students had an ideal setting to employ their critical reading skills. There were numerous opportunities for synthesis between the texts, for students to question the texts and determine how each treats a specific subject, to compare and contrast the stance that each text takes, and et cetera. Another benefit of using culturally relevant literature as a bridge to canonical literature is that it helped students see the works of the past as still being relevant; understanding themes across generations and genres also helped students access the more complex ideas within canonical literature.

One significant limitation of this study was that the texts used within the intervention were representative of only two additional cultures – African-American and Dominican-American; they are texts with diverse voices, but they were not culturally relevant for all students. Another limitation was the time allotted for the study; as it is
difficult to gauge students’ emotional and cognitive engagement, the study would have benefitted from a longitudinal approach.

A limitation within the data collection process exists in the observation portion. As the teacher of the participants, I was in a position of authority over them. I was cognizant that the behaviors I observed were affected by my presence, especially as I sat with each group during small reading groups. Students may have shifted their behaviors or adopted different personas when I was in close proximity and when they were aware that they were being observed.

**Procedure**

The study took place over a 6-week period. Initially, I collected anonymous surveys using Google Forms from all student participants to establish a baseline of attitudes toward English class, canonical literature, and culturally relevant literature. Students who chose not to participate in the study took part in the canonical unit that is commonly taught by teachers within my PLC.

After obtaining consent from the participants and their guardians, I introduced each of the units to their respective classes. Although I originally planned on allowing students to choose their disruption unit, it was not logistically feasible to facilitate both book studies while I engaged in observation. English 2 Honors students participated in a unit that disrupted *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens with *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas while English 2 CP students participated in unit that disrupted *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare with *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo. I divided students into small reading groups, putting students into groups of four or five. Students’ race,
gender, and Winter MAP scores were considered when grouping students to ensure that students were in heterogenous groups with ability-compatible peers.

After students received their group assignments, I distributed the pre-survey via Google Forms to each student participant. The pre-survey, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Long Term Trend Reading Student Questionnaire asked participants about their feelings toward English content, the kinds of texts that they enjoy reading, and the texts they typically read in their English classes. I reviewed the responses of this initial survey, using them to adjust two groups that were lopsided in their attitudes toward literature.

Students then began the intervention study. The study included small group reading, reciprocal teaching, text annotations (Appendix F), small group discussion of focus questions, a multigenre paper (Appendix D), exit slips (Appendix C), and a summative assessment on the text set. At the beginning of the intervention, each group participated in a pre-reading activity. In English 2 Honors, students were first asked to write about social protest: "What is social protest? What are some examples of social protest? Have you ever participated in some form of social protest? What are your thoughts or feelings regarding social protest?" Next, students were shown multiple pictures that depicted different instances of social protest: an image of Elizabeth Eckford attempting to enter Little Rock Central High, an image of American citizens at voting booths, an image of students from a neighboring high school during a recent walkout, an image of 1,100 bodybags that spelled out "Thoughts and Prayers" on the National Mall, an image of a riot in Iran during September of 2022, an image depicting cancel culture, and an image of a banned books display. As the class viewed each picture, they were
asked to answer one question with their small groups: "Is this social protest?" After the small groups spoke and argued, the question was then posed to the whole class; this culminated in a class-created definition of social protest.

English 2 CP students began with a pre-reading activity that asked them to engage in a reflection on their identities and their biases. Students created a confidential list of the parts of their identity: gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity/culture, religion, health conditions, who they lived with, where they had lived, groups they were part of, et cetera. Students did not share this list with any teachers or classmates, and they were instructed to only complete the parts that they felt comfortable writing down. After reflecting on their lists, I led a discussion about how identities and biases are created. Students then took one or several implicit bias tests, the results of which were also confidential. Students reflected on the biases they held and considered why they might hold these biases. This reflection worked as a segue into the *The Poet X* where we began to consider how teenagers' self-concepts are shaped by their upbringing.

Next, students in each class were introduced to their literature circle roles. Each class, students took on a different role within their group: the questioner (poses thoughtful questions about the reading), the commentator (makes a thoughtful comment about the reading), the predictor (makes inferences about what will happen in our next reading), and the connector (makes connections to other texts, current events, or personal experiences). As we read, students were asked to make sticky-note annotations that were connected to their role for that day. To ensure that students understood their role and literature circle expectations, students watched a video of students engaging in literature circles and then shared the behaviors and actions that they noticed during the modeled
literature circle. Students were instructed to create annotations based on their daily role and the weekly focus question.

The last step in their pre-reading work was adding in the contextual background knowledge necessary to support their reading. English 2 Honors students reviewed information on the French Revolution while English 2 CP students studied poetic elements and the concept of a book in verse. Although English 2 Honors students did read some sections from *A Tale of Two Cities'* Book the First and Book the Second, the majority of these two sections were summarized so that they could focus on Book the Third and its connection to *The Hate U Give*. Similarly, some scenes of *Romeo and Juliet* were summarized for students so that they could engage in more close readings of important scenes and consider their thematic alignment with *The Poet X*.

Once the pre-reading was completed, the students engaged in weekly reading cycles. German River High School has an A/B block schedule; classes met for 90 minutes 2-3 times a week. At the first class meeting of the week, students would read and discuss the canonical book in class; for homework, they would read the culturally relevant text. When they returned for the second class meeting, students would discuss their homework reading and then would continue to read and discuss the culturally relevant text in class that day; their homework that night would consist of reading the canonical text. The following Monday, a new cycle began with additional readings and a new focus question. Students were held accountable for their reading through annotation checks and reading checks. Throughout the unit, mini-lessons based on the anchor texts were used to strengthen students' mastery of standards-based skills: Inferencing,
characterization, summarizing and paraphrasing, and author's craft were some of the topics of these mini-lessons.

The focus questions were central to the execution of this unit, and they served multiple functions. They connected the thematic content of the canonical text with the culturally relevant text, and they helped students find commonalities among characters in both texts and that the traits of these characters were not limited to these pages, but rather existing among humankind. The focus questions also worked to guide students' daily reading and discussion, letting students find patterns and understand main points quickly. These questions were also aligned to students' multigenre projects. Most importantly, the focus questions served as critical lenses for students to apply to both texts, allowing them to see that these events and ideas were not isolated, but rather existing within a continuum across generations.

As students engaged in book clubs, I sat with a different group each day, collecting observational data by recording notes about the student-to-text and student-to-student interactions. Next, I began teaching the disrupted text units. I shared expectations for small reading groups and the work cycle that would allow them to read both texts. For each cycle, students were given a focus question to consider, answer, and discuss within their group that was connected to the days’ readings. A different question was applied for each reading cycle, and students were expected to be prepared to discuss it at the beginning of each session. Their reading cycle shifted between both texts, and each reading cycle lasted for two class periods.

Students read Text A during the first class with their group; for homework that night, they read from Text B. In their second class of the week, they read Text B during
class with their group, and their homework included reading from Text A. Students rotated reading both texts throughout the week, focusing their reading, small group discussion, and annotations on singular a focus question that bridged the two texts. At the end of the week, reading groups merged for a discussion that included their perspectives on the reading and the focus question. Then, students responded to an exit slip that included both open-ended questions and Likert scales that gauged their emotional and cognitive engagement. The exit slip (Appendix C) asked them to share:

1. Their individual perspective on that cycle’s discussion question
2. Any new understandings that they acquired in the reading cycle
3. Their enjoyment or connection to this unit, rated on a scale of one (I am not enjoying or connecting to the content of this unit) to five (I am enjoying this unit and I feel a connection to its content).

Students were given the last ten minutes of their final class each week to complete the exit slip. The exit slips were collected via Google Forms and students did not put their name on their exit slips. Students were encouraged to use the full amount of time to complete their exit slips. Each reading cycle lasted approximately one week, and exit slips were collected once a week for the duration of the unit.

Sitting with a different small group each day as a silent observer in twenty-minute increments allowed me to complete an engagement observation checklist grounded in engagement theory. The checklist rated students’ levels of engagement from one (absent engagement) to four (consistent engagement) in three categories: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. In addition to the rating of each type
of engagement, there was a checklist of specific observed behaviors aligned with each
domain of engagement.

Using this checklist with each group during each observation permitted me to be
more consistent in my evaluation of their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive
engagement. Since the checklist utilized a rubric that awarded data points, I was able to
combine data points from multiple observations and average them. In addition to the
observation checklist, I took Cornell notes in my field journal and recorded observations
about each group discussion.

Once the intervention ended, I provided student participants with a survey that
asks about their engagement and enjoyment of both the canonical text and the culturally
relevant text. Students then completed their summative assessment that measured their
critical reading through multigenre work; their scores were then compared to the
summative scores from their three previous units that were centered on critical reading in
canonical texts: *Othello* (Shakespeare), *Antigone* (Sophocles), and Greek Mythology. The
results from each class average and each individual students’ scores were compared. At
the conclusion of the study, I acquired data from the pre-survey, student exit slips,
researcher observations and field notes, the post-survey, and summative assessments.

**Data Analysis**

At the completion of the study, I used qualitative and quantitative analysis. The
qualitative data analysis was an appropriate fit for this study as it was largely centered on
students’ engagement and connection with culturally relevant literature, a concept that
would be difficult to quantify. The quantitative data analysis served to support the
findings of the qualitative data and further extended my understanding of the intervention’s effect.

I had three goals for the analysis of my data, all of which were based upon my research questions. First, I wanted to gain a clear understanding of how students engaged with the culturally relevant text as opposed to the canonical text and to examine their level of engagement with the coursework when they worked with culturally relevant texts. The second goal was to determine themes regarding student preference and engagement from the student surveys, teacher observation checklists, field journal notes, and exit slips. Finally, I wanted to examine quantitative data, a comparison of summative scores from past units, to understand the impact that culturally relevant literature had on students’ academic success, if any.

I used qualitative coding, a process in which I systematically categorized words and phrases in my qualitative data, to help me sift through the survey responses. The surveys were distributed via Google Forms which provided me with a spreadsheet that includes each students’ response. I then compared their responses, both individual and whole group, of the pre- and post- survey to determine if there had been a shift in student perceptions. This inductive process allowed me to examine the trends among individual participants and it allowed me to analyze the whole group to gain a general understanding of the intervention’s effect (Efron & Ravid, 2019).

The observation checklist and my field notes were recorded digitally and organized by reading cycle so that I could retrieve data with more ease and forgo additional transcription. The data from the exit slips was also digitally recorded; I distributed exit slips each week via Google Form so that I could organize and sort the
data that I receive on the response spreadsheet. I chose to sort the data in a few ways – by level, by demographic identifiers, and by date – and color coded the responses accordingly. I immersed myself in the data of the field journal, the observation checklists, and the weekly student exit slips in order to identify data that belongs to each of the pre-determined categories (Efron & Ravid, 2019). The predetermined categories for my qualitative data were behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement, and they are connected to my first research question: What effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant literature have on student engagement? As I immersed myself in the data, I identified segments in the data that represented themes connected to students’ behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement with the texts (Efron & Ravid, 2019). I recorded the themes and wove in quotations from the data sets that were representative of each dimension of engagement.

Following the first phase of qualitative data that largely sought to answer my first research question, the second phase of quantitative data supported the qualitative data sets and was used to answer the second research question: How does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical literature? This quantitative data helped me achieve triangulation and further my understanding about the first phase of the study. I averaged the summative scores for each class from the intervention unit in a spreadsheet alongside their averaged summative scores from the previous three units of study. This allowed me to examine numerical trends by class. I plotted this data in a line graph that created a visual comparison of pre- and post-intervention scores. I also recorded relevant data from the pre- and post-survey in a table, comparing students’ attitudes toward reading and English content from before and after
the intervention. These data sets served to support my interpretation of the qualitative data as I worked to combine my findings from both phases of data collection.

In attending to validity and trustworthiness of this study, I followed Tracy’s (2013) criteria for conducting qualitative research: I worked to make my study rigorous and sincere, ensuring that my methods were ethical and transparent. I effected to ensure that my research was credible and honest and to have a meaningful coherence for a variety of audiences (Tracy, 2013, in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 240). I reported and constructed my findings accurately, neutrally, and honestly in order to best align my findings with reality. I employed member checking, asking my participants to check the data I collected, coded, and summarized from them during individual interviews and focus group discussions to ensure that I represented their words, feelings, and perceptions with accuracy and fairness.

Summary

This chapter described the design of this mixed-methods action research study which sought to understand the impact that culturally relevant literature had on student engagement and academic success in a secondary English classroom. The intervention was designed to pair a culturally relevant text with a canonical text in order to increase the relevancy of both and allow students to see these concepts as existing within a continuum across generations. It also included diverse voices that are traditionally absent in canonical texts in the hopes that it would engage more students; the work within the intervention unit also obliged participants to critically examine the power structures that frame our society and institutions. Qualitative data for this study was collected through student observations, field notes, post-survey responses, and student exit slips.
Quantitative data was collected through a comparison of pre- and post-surveys and unit summative scores. Together, all of these data sources provided a complete picture of the impact of the intervention and allowed for interpretation and analysis.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The problem of practice guiding this mixed methods action research study is that the lack of culturally relevant literature in the ELA curriculum has led to a decrease in student engagement. This study examined the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on students’ engagement and the use of culturally relevant literature as a bridge to critically examining canonical literature in a secondary English class. Typically, students in secondary English courses are provided with canonical texts - texts that traditionally are considered worthy of studying – but as these typically reflect the culture and values of a dominant, Eurocentric perspective, many students struggle to engage with them as they hold less resemblance and relevance to their lives (Lester, 2013; Fredricks et. al 2004, Sinclair, 2018). This intervention included two units of study in which canonical texts were “disrupted” or paired with culturally relevant texts; the culturally relevant text served as a bridge, allowing participants to critically examine canonical works through that lens. The purpose of this study was to determine whether students’ engagement and their learning increased through the inclusion of these culturally relevant texts.

The research questions that guided this study were:
1. What effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy have on student engagement?

2. How does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical literature?

The theoretical framework of this study was based upon the theories of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), critical literacy (Freire, 1970, Luke, 2012), and engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2004). Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) framed the intervention, generating opportunities for students to examine additional perspectives and dialogically share their understandings in addition to creating an occasion to consider their role in society in relation to others and the inequalities that exist among them. Reflecting critical literacy, students use culturally relevant literature as a vehicle for examining multiple ways of thinking and doing, exploring the new perspectives they have been introduced to and reassessing reevaluating their own beliefs. To determine the impact of the work that students did as they read and discussed culturally relevant literature, I incorporated the theory of school engagement (Fredricks et. Al, 2004).

In this chapter, I will discuss the data collection process of this mixed-methods experimental action research study. Beginning with a discussion of my qualitative data, I will examine each of the themes that emerged from the collected data including specific pieces of data that illustrate these themes, connecting the recorded information to the research questions that guided this study. After I discuss the themes of my qualitative data, I will communicate the findings from my quantitative data in two sections: summative score comparisons and pre- and post-intervention surveys. Next, I will discuss
the process of member-checking the data and data triangulation. Finally, I will discuss the overall findings of the study.

**Data Presentation and Interpretation**

In this study, I attempted to understand the effect that culturally relevant literature has on student engagement. Engagement is difficult to observe in an individual, especially since it has multiple components. Using the concept of school engagement designed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), I sought to determine participants’ levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement through surveys, exit slips, and observations. To collect qualitative data for this study, I developed a student observation checklist (Appendix B), I compiled students’ self-reported levels of interest and engagement in weekly exit slips (Appendix C), and I kept a field journal in which I took notes of daily classroom observations and reflected on the intervention.

I tracked the traits of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during my small group observations as students read. I kept a tallied record (see figure 4.1) during each class on the Student Observation Checklist (Appendix B), keeping separate tallies for days on which we read the canonical text and days on which we read the culturally relevant text. The data collected from the behavior checklists revealed two prominent trends in students’ engagement: first, it showed an upward trend in individual engagement with the culturally relevant texts at the beginning of the unit. After the initial increase, the levels of engagement remained consistent for the remainder of the intervention unit. Second, the data reflected minimal levels of engagement when students were working with the canonical text; the levels of engagement increased from absent and minimal to minimal and moderate as we reached the end of the canonical text,
however. I found that this method for data collection, when used over a longer period of time, provided little insight in regard to students’ engagement. It worked to note students’ behavioral engagement, and sometimes it was effective in marking students’ emotional engagement. Still, it did not provide me with additional understandings that I could not already glean from classroom observations recorded in my field journal and in self-reported levels of engagement in students’ exit slips.

Figure 4.1 Student Observation Checklist - Culturally Relevant Text Class Period
In addition to observational data, I gave participants the opportunity to share their feelings directly through weekly exit slips. At the end of each week, students responded to an exit slip to self-report their enjoyment of each text, their interest in each of the texts, their ability to focus on the course content, their overall attitude toward the current course content, and a reflection on their understanding of the course content.

The themes that I generated from both the exit slips data and the observational data were consistent with one another. In both sets of data, I noticed patterns that repeated across classes over the course of the intervention: relatability as a bridge to understanding, personal connection and engagement, shifts in engagement, accessibility, engaging with social issues, and empathy.

**Relatability as a bridge to understanding**

Many students noted that they were better able to relate to the culturally relevant text, and that this enhanced their understanding of the canonical book. Relatability is
defined as the quality of being easy to understand, to sympathize, and to connect with. Students were able to connect with the content of the culturally relevant text; because cultural relevance has layers, many participants were able to relate to the generational similarities between their lives and the lives of the protagonist. These shared experiences between characters and students lead to a straightforward understanding of the content; students did not necessarily have to work to create schema in order to meet the conceptual demands of the culturally relevant text. When the two paired texts were aligned thematically, there were numerous opportunities to link the content of both, using the relatability of the culturally relevant texts to aid students in better comprehending the canonical text and its conceptual demands.

Although the connections between Romeo and Juliet and teenagers’ lives might be apparent to instructors, it was not as easily relatable for the teenagers reading the play. The Poet X helped students see connections between the protagonist Xiomara, Juliet Capulet, and themselves. Benjamin noted,

What prevents us from speaking our truth is our parents judging us – like it relates to real life though – most girls can’t have a boyfriend at a certain age. They get caught and they get in trouble. Both Xio’s mom and Juliet’s mom want them to be pure and to be with a certain type of guy – or no guy at all. But then you sometimes catch feelings so now, you have to hide it.

Benjamin, a White boy in a CP class, deftly connected the theme to both texts and to reality. In the same class, Eli, a Black boy said that he liked that “she’s talking about stuff in her teenage years like we are – we’re going through it like them. Xio made a choice without thinking; Romeo made a choice without thinking…. sometimes [we] just ain’t
thinking, you know?” These were unprompted comments volunteered by students who were typically silent in class, who rarely completed work in class, and who were on the brink of failure. They did not share the same sex or race as the protagonist of The Poet X, but they were able to have comparatively deep conversations about both of the texts because they were able to relate to Xiomara’s experiences.

The phenomenon occurred with the Honors group as well when they read The Hate U Give paired with A Tale of Two Cities. As the students discussed the differences between justice and revenge, they connected their discussion to both texts and were able to think deeply about the character’s motivations:

**Brandon:** When you want justice, you want someone to be held accountable.

Revenge is like, you want to punish someone.

**Joshua:** Starr definitely wants Officer 115 to be charged, but she doesn’t want him to be killed . . . so she wants justice.

**Melody:** Revenge is personal . . . you want to take things into your own hands.

Justice is kind of like . . . someone did something legally wrong and the government and the people get justice.

**Brooke:** The DeFarges though – they want revenge on Darnay. Starr wants justice, but the DeFarges . . . they hate Darnay. They want him dead.

**Brandon:** All Darnay did was like, be born and come back to France. There must be more . . . something we’re missing. Starr’s best friend was killed in front of her, but she just wants justice.

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Melody: Yeah . . . all Darnay did was show up – why do the DeFarges want revenge and not justice? It must be personal.

This group of Honors students made their distaste for *A Tale of Two Cities* clear throughout the unit, yet they were able to connect to the text and make an accurate prediction about *A Tale of Two Cities* through their discussion about both texts. Moments like these occurred throughout the unit; because students were reading two parallel texts and asked to connect them -- they were forced to think critically about both. Another such moment occurred in a different Honors class as students were discussing the prevalence of stereotyping:

**Niyana:** You also see teenagers being stereotyped as reckless

**Lauren:** Yes, and she said she had to talk proper because they were going to stereotype her.

**Edward:** Um yeah she is having two identities – she is reliving Kalil being shot and then having to go to school. There’s pre-Kalil and post-Kalil…she has like a new identity shaded by grief.

**Phoebe:** Even when the officer is like, nah ooh no ma’am - like she’s trying to be proper.

**Edward:** Charles too - he’s with the prisoners because they automatically think he’s a bad aristocrat.

**Gabby:** To answer the question, just because he’s from an aristocratic family, they assume that he has done something wrong. I think they’re going to kill him for it.
Phoebe: I feel this way all of the time. They gonna kill Darnay but Kalil, they gonna use it to justify why he’s dead. Like, it’s okay because he was a drug dealer, he was at a party.

Several students excitedly apologized for reading ahead in *The Hate U Give*; one student said: “I’m sorry Mrs. Ramp, I had to [read ahead] – I ain’t gonna spoil it though [laughter].” Likewise, many students unabashedly admitted they used Sparknotes or that they skipped the assigned reading altogether for *A Tale of Two Cities*: “I’m not gonna lie, I didn’t even read it.”

Something unique occurred when students were asked to take part in activities that required them to discuss both texts. Because they enjoyed *The Hate U Give*, many students had the urge to read it quickly, blowing past small details and big ideas alike. Because they disliked *A Tale of Two Cities*, many students avoided the reading altogether or sought out reading shortcuts. When students were tracing a single theme in both texts for their multigenre work and when they were discussing focus questions, however, they used the culturally relevant text as a springboard in the discussion, eventually pulling in the canonical text and discussing it with the same level of complexity and nuance that they afforded the culturally relevant text. In the middle of the unit, groups were asked to answer one of these focus questions:

1. Do you think Starr has a moral obligation to speak to the police? What does Starr sacrifice by speaking up in this situation? Is the sacrifice worth the risk?

2. Should Charles Darnay pay the ultimate price because of his aristocrat status? Should officer One-Fifteen have to pay a price as just a part of a flawed system?
One group chose to answer both, connecting their responses to both as they spoke; this group was comprised of Chloe and Simone (Black girls), Olivia (White girl), and Joshua and Marshall (White boys). In their conversation, the students pulled knowledge from a previous focus question discussion in which they had debated the differences between justice and revenge.

This group agreed that Starr did not have a moral obligation to speak to the police about what she witnessed the night that Khalil was murdered by Officer 115, but they admired that she did it anyway for Khalil’s grandmother, Ms. Rosalie. They noted that if Khalil received justice and Officer 115 was found guilty, then her sacrifice of going to the police would have been worth it. They agreed that Officer 115 was part of a flawed system that likely led to the tragic events in the book and that he needed to pay a price for taking Khalil’s life, but that he likely would not because he was a White police officer:

**Chloe:** There could have been a lot of things - tase him, warn him — he’d already been searched so it’s a lot different than being part of a family who has bad people in it. He pulled the trigger. Since he’s a cop, he’s not automatically in jail.

**Simone:** We said he has to pay the price and he’s part of a flawed system. He needs to be locked away and throw the key. It’s like Darnay’s situation, but then again, it’s not.

When the group began to connect the two focus questions together, they also began to connect the two texts, as can be seen in this excerpt from their conversation in which they used *The Hate U Give* as the foundation for their discussion of both texts:
**Simone:** They had everything – her witness account – everything. Do we understand how Darnay’s situation is similar? The people of France see him as like an Officer 115. That line is blurred – how can one person be asked to pay the price for the whole system? If this is the justice system and we are seeing that as potentially flawed – the people see Darnay as someone like 115 who is able to get away with it. The people of France see the aristocracy as a system.

**Joshua:** When they see Charles, they see him as a representative of the system. He’s not Charles, he’s an aristocrat.

The group wrapped up their conversation by comparing Starr’s reaction to the officers at the police station to the reaction of the French peasants’ to Darnay’s presence – they noted that both groups could not help their reactions because they could not discern the officers or Darnay as individuals, but saw them only as flawed parts of a flawed, oppressive system:

**Chloe:** It’s not really an obligation but if she wants justice, it’s a cop I don’t know - I guess she has to speak to the other side.

**Simone:** I know it’s her safety - she’s already still traumatized by it and having to relive it over again for them. She walks into the station and all she sees are the guns on each cop and…she doesn’t trust it.

**Olivia:** She knows Uncle Carlos is good but she doesn’t trust these cops, they killed her friend.

**Marshall:** Not all but
**Olivia:** Like she sees them all as being 115, they’re all bad even though she knows they’re not, like Carlos.

**Marshall:** Yeah and she freaks out and shuts down.

**Chloe:** Like the French people – his [Darnay] uncle was bad and the aristocrats were bad and they see that.

At the end of their discussion, Marshall sighed, saying “I like this *The Hate U Give* a lot better than *A Tale of Two Cities*.”

Students gave their own account of this phenomenon, using the culturally relevant text as a bridge for understanding the canonical text, in their exit slips as well. One student said that the disrupting texts strategy compelled students to reflect on how two completely different books with characters of completely different backgrounds could still have distinct similarities. The student went on to say that they learned from reading the two texts that a “rich white person and a poor black person can both go threw a lot of the same things in life. My thinking shifted because even though i didnt like the tail of two citites i felt like it was a necessary because it gives us something to relate to with the hate u give and its actually fun trying to get the two books to relate to each other.”

**Personal Connection and Engagement**

In addition to students’ ability to connect to the canonical text through the culturally relevant text, I noted a pattern of students who enjoyed the culturally relevant text because of their ability to relate to and connect with the characters. Personal connection, in this instance, refers to the students feeling seen, heard, and understood through the characters’ experiences in the texts. In some of these moments, students began to realize that their experiences and feelings were not singular, but that they were
part of a larger, human experience. One example of this was recurrent in *The Hate U Give*: the protagonist Starr Carter ruminates on her propensity to codeswitch when she moves between her life in Garden Heights and her life at Williamson Prep. This section was remarked on by a number of students both in class discussions and in their exit slips: “This weeks focus questions have helped me think deeply about some of the experiences I have had in my life and then relate them back to the text. For example, Starr's experience of code switching and having to act a certain way around certain groups of people is something that I relate to. We both feel a bit like traitors to our homes but also angry that we even have to. Like, why do I do it and why did she do it when we both know its not right.”

Although the protagonists in both *The Poet X* and *The Hate U Give* were young women of color, many students were still able to connect to them because of their shared experiences as teenagers and their experiences living through current events that were mirrored in the texts. Students in every class vocalized their connection to the characters and to the experiences of the protagonist as they read the culturally relevant novel. The most frequently noted connection that students made to the culturally relevant texts was that the characters were relatable; one student remarked that “I really enjoy the book and I think It connects to a lot of things that are happening in our lives right now.” In their exit slip responses, 36 students said that *The Poet X* and *The Hate U Give* were relevant to their lives.

Behavioral engagement was present throughout the unit and increased as the unit went on. This was evident in the external behaviors that I observed: rule following, focus, active participation in class were the norm; there were few exceptions to this in both the
CP and the Honors classes. In the CP classes, there were four separate class periods in which I noted that either a student had their head down, a student was exhibiting avoidant behavior, or the class as a whole was “dragging,” roughly 8% of all class meetings during the unit. In the Honors classes, the most common infraction was students’ failure to do the assigned reading for *A Tale of Two Cities* or failure to complete it without assistance (i.e. reading the Sparknotes summary instead of the text itself). Beyond these exceptions, students were awake, they followed the rules, they focused on the text and discussion, and they actively participated.

Emotional engagement was present throughout the intervention as well. Although it is not always externally apparent, students who are emotionally engaged might display characteristics of enthusiasm, enjoyment, or satisfaction. In my classroom observations, I noted 46 instances of a class-wide reaction to the text while the text was being read aloud. These reactions were both audible and physical, with students making noises of shock, anger, excitement, grief, relief, and exultation (Appendix F).

One memorable instance of emotional engagement in class occurred as the class finished reading chapter four of *The Hate U Give*, a chapter in which the protagonist Starr Carter goes to visit the family of her friend Khalil shortly after he is gunned down by a police officer. As we read, one student called Simone began to cry in reaction to Starr’s description of her childhood relationship with Kahlil. During her small group discussion later, she began to cry a second time:

That “see you later, alligator” part really got to me. Aw man – her friend is gone.

Her little friend [student begins to cry again]. They were friends and they had
snaggle teeth. And she already lost her other friend Natasha – Khalil was there with her for that – and now she’s lost both of them.

Later, when I spoke to the student at length, she told me that she felt like she could “see the characters as children” and that she could “see the tragedy, but people like Officer 115” could not. This emotional moment occurred days after Ralph Yarl, a 16-year-old black teenager in Kansas City, had been shot twice after ringing the wrong doorbell (Sullivan & Diaz, 2023). Simone, like Yarl, was Black and played bass clarinet; she mentioned that she was additionally overcome with emotion because she could see herself in Ralph just as she could see herself in Starr Carter.

Not all of the moments of outward emotional engagement were sad; a number of these moments were centered around feelings of humor; as the class read parts of The Hate U Give in which Starr Carter discusses her relationship with her White boyfriend Chris, laughter and vocal commentary erupted from both classes each time it arose in the text: laughing, Brandon said, “This is funny!” while another student, Chloe, laughed saying, “Y’all do do that -- y’all love hiking at butt-dark-thirty!” in reaction to the characters joking about White and Black stereotypes. Both of these comments were met with additional laughter from their classmates. There were other moments of humor and additional commentary, but they were lost to my ears among the general amusement.

Most of the outward emotional eruptions, however, were connected to feelings of shock or outrage. Students would often gasp or utter phrases of indignation when the protagonists faced injustice: Oh this is gonna be some bullshit!, Why does that matter?, Why is that relevant to the case?!., and What the hell!?.. Some of the shocked responses bordered on astonishment: several Black girls in one of the Honors classes had already
seen the film version of *The Hate U Give*, but they were reading it for the first time with the class. They collectively expressed their surprise when the book did not align with the film. Chloe was vocal throughout the days’ reading and said, “Oh my god – Khalil WASN’T a Kinglord?” Her friend Madison responded, “What the hell?! Man, he was a sweet boy, selling to save his mama.” Another girl, Brooke chimed in, saying, “I am shocked – this wasn’t even in the movie. They left out some stuff – the book is way better than the movie, hold up!” Chloe responded by saying, “They should have put that in the movie – it’s a key part! What’s the author’s name, Angie Thomas? We need a THUG part two, part three movie!” Emotional engagement was present for a number of students throughout the intervention.

As I began this intervention with students, I was uncertain whether or not I would be able to detect signs of cognitive engagement in students. Individuals who are cognitively engaged are those who are psychologically invested in their learning – they choose to go beyond requirements, to take care with their work, and to pursue a deeper understanding of their learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lester, 2013). I did, however, see proof of cognitive engagement through students’ absorption of the material, their willingness to learn and go beyond what I required of them, and in their consistent heads-on participation in small group and whole-class discussions.

Several times during the unit, students’ cognitive engagement was displayed through their requests to read the culturally relevant text or to eschew other class activities and continue reading the culturally relevant text. One day, I asked students to get their sticky notes for annotations and to grab a copy of *The Poet X*; in response, one student, a Black girl called Destiny who is on a graduation plan, began clapping and said
“I can’t help it – when we read this book, I get excited.” Several times, when the CP students were reading independently, they would go beyond the required pages. I recorded an instance of this during my observations when one student, a Pacific Islander boy called Jaxon who receives special services was still reading even though his small reading group had finished and were ready to discuss the assigned section.

When I checked on him to approximate how much time he needed, I noted that he had already finished the required reading and was 7 or 8 pages beyond it. Thinking that he had made a mistake, I told him that he was actually done with the reading and could now move on to his small group discussion. Jaxon intimated that he knew he was done, but that he’d chosen to keep reading: “Oh, sorry Mrs. Ramp – I was invested,” he said.

As we finished Book 2 of The Poet X in one CP class, the students broke out into applause; at this point several students requested that we continue reading: “NO, don’t stop! It’s getting good!” and “Can we please read to page 233….please!?” and “I can only read ahead a little bit? I want to read the rest of the BOOK.” At this point, one student in this class, a Black girl called Sasha, got on her knees, folded her hands together, and asked if the class could continue reading the book.

In another class a week later, we were scheduled to read pages 283-314 of The Poet X. When we reached the end of page 314, the class protested when we stopped; students said “Oh, naw -- we can’t stop there,” “Keep going!” and “I’m a read to the end.” One student, a Black girl called Sasha, insisted on continuing to the end; when I reminded her that we were spending the rest of class working on their multigenre assignment, she had a plan: “I have study hall next class – I can work on the free verse poem then and send you what I have at the end of the period so you know I didn’t slack.”
She then said “When I find a good book, I get into it and I can’t stop and this is the second one I’ve ever had like this.” After she completed the novel, she asked to check out another by the same author, Elizabeth Acevedo. Another student, a biracial girl called Amaya who is typically truant, said “Mrs. Ramp, you’re going to have to pick out all of my books for me now.” Many students showed signs and uttered phrases that indicated that they were willing to go beyond what was required of them and that they were absorbed in the content, signs that they were cognitively engaged.

Signs of cognitive engagement appeared in the weekly exit slips as well: “My thinking about books has shifted,” one student said, “because every time we stop reading I want to read more; I like how for the girls it could help and they boys... its abt a girl around our age.” Several students noted that they were excited about the [multigenre] projects we were doing; one said “What I’m liking most are the projects we’re doing – it’s not like any other writing project I’ve done and its making me be creative and I’m having fun writing it.”

Engagement Shifts

Throughout the intervention unit, I observed that off-task and avoidant behaviors were minimal; several students who had previously been unengaged in the class were now awake and participating. Shifts in engagement—or a change in students’ feelings, interest, and investment—occurred at several points during the intervention. Several students noted that despite preconceived notions about the books or reading in general, they were interested in the culturally relevant text or they outright enjoyed the book. Some of these student respondents are individuals whom I would categorize as struggling
or reluctant readers, while others were strong readers who believed that they would not enjoy the text at the outset.

On the first day of reading, there was an unmistakable negative reaction from a handful of students in two of the three CP classes as the unit was introduced. In one class, students began to audibly groan as I began handing out books and Post-It Note pads to each table. In another class, one student, a Black boy called DJ made noises of frustration – especially when *Romeo & Juliet* was mentioned - while another student, a Black boy called Daniel, automatically put his head down as the books were placed on their table.

On the first day of the unit, I wrote in my field journal:

As Ms. Buffett began introducing the book club, seat one DJ made vocal sounds of frustration especially when *Romeo and Juliet* was mentioned. Daniel went ahead and put his head down. Pulled it up though a few minutes later. There is a feeling of frustration and boredom from several individuals across the room (7 people have their heads down during instructions) but this is all prior to reading. This is also the last block of the day.

During reading on the first day, I had to prompt a few students to write their first sticky-note annotation – DJ again audibly scoffed when prompted while Daniel responded by putting his head back down.

From the beginning of class to the end of the lesson, however, there was a noticeable shift in their attitude toward the book. When discussing *The Poet X* after the first day of reading, one White girl participant called McKenzie said “I think I actually really like this book.” Another Black boy participant called Devin said “This actually
wasn’t bad – this was an interesting section.” DJ, the student that scoffed at having to annotate, ended up being an active participant in the post-reading discussion.

After the initial day of reading, the majority of students in my CP classes had a positive reaction to the book and our readings in class. In their exit slip responses, most of the students enjoyed *The Poet X* from the beginning. One student said that they “really start to like poetx because in the beginning it was boring but it start getting good in the middle cause Xiomara got some juicy stuff in her journal.” Another said that they have “actually started to like this book more and more each time we read and can’t wait to see what happens next! I love the constant tension between Xiomara and her mom.” Another non-binary student called Edward noted during class that they were:

skeptical of the book at first, when we first read it – I sometimes am, I wonder whether or not I will enjoy a book, but the moment we started it, I fell in love with it. I love the structure, it told a story but the story was told through poems that were interconnected with each other. Building blocks. I’ve never seen anything like it, but I love it.

In the same class, a White boy called Weston admitted that “I don’t like many books. That was a good book.”

In the Honors classes, a similar shift occurred for the canonical text. *The Hate U Give* was well-liked from the start – 45 of 47 students ranked their interest in the text as high for the duration of the unit. At the beginning of the unit, only one participant ranked their interest in *A Tale of Two Cities* as high. By the end of the unit, however, that number increased to eleven. For the majority of the unit, students vocally expressed their
frustration; in their initial weekly exit slips, I noted fifteen unique responses that said that they were not enjoying *A Tale of Two Cities* and seventeen respondents remarked that they “didn’t get” *A Tale of Two Cities* and that it was “hard” and “confusing.” In the final two exit slips, however, there were 21 responses in which individuals noted that *A Tale of Two Cities* was “getting better,” “getting more interesting,” or that they “understand it more.”

**Accessibility**

The relatability, the modern setting, and the modern language of the culturally relevant text yielded increased accessibility, and students were able to reach the content and enter conversations surrounding the text with minimal difficulty. The majority of participants found the culturally relevant text to be easier to understand and easier to relate to. They acknowledged the literary and educational value of *A Tale of Two Cities*, but it was a difficult and complex text which had an influence on their understanding and engagement. Although the number of students who enjoyed *A Tale of Two Cities* increased as they neared the end, many students noted that they would have dropped it if we had not employed strategies – read alouds, pairing video clips with difficult sections, focus question discussions, shame-free review of difficult sections – that forced them to continue.

The students who read *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Poet X* had similar feelings; during class times in which we worked with *Romeo and Juliet*, I observed that overall and individual engagement dipped, especially early on in the unit before they were able to make connections between the characters and conflicts of the two texts. During one CP class, I noted that several students had their heads down, were drawing, were trying to
access Youtube, etc. instead of participating during our reading and discussion of Act II, scene 2 in *Romeo and Juliet*. This surprised me because typically, the balcony scene is usually of interest to students either because it is romantic or because they have seen it replicated across popular culture and already have a baseline of understanding. When we switched to reading *The Poet X* in that same class period, the students were more engaged with several students having verbal reactions and commentary to share after reading the poem titled “Notes with Aman.” Students gasped audibly at the events of this chapter and later discussed the unjust nature of Mami’s treatment of Xiomara, forcing her to kneel on rice as penance for kissing Aman. The next class period, three male students brought in a bag of dry rice and asked if they could try kneeling on it to experience Xiomara’s punishment for themselves; they each spent a minute or more kneeling on it, inviting myself and other students to try it out as well.

Although a handful of CP students often displayed off-task or avoidant behaviors while we read *Romeo and Juliet*, their complaints about the difficulty of the text were limited. The Honors students, however, were forthright in their disregard for *A Tale of Two Cities*; this was evident in their vocal frustration, their unabashed discussion of using Sparknotes to replace their reading of the text, and in their exit slip responses. “I’m not gonna lie,” said Javion, a straight-A participant, “I didn’t even read it.” This response was not uncommon in both Honors classes; when students had assigned homework reading for *A Tale of Two Cities*, some students struggled through the reading, some students relied on Sparknotes, and some students chose not to read at all. This behavior was not replicated, however, on nights that they had assigned homework reading for *The Hate U Give*. After the first night of assigned reading home for THUG, I overheard one group
talking about it as they began pulling out their books: “Damn this is a good book,”
Amaya said to her group. Another student in the group agreed saying “Yeah this was
actually really good – damn the action was just starting.” I heard similar reactions being
expressed across the room in other groups; in my field journal reflection that night, I
wrote “There is a STARK difference in how the students interact between T2C and
THUG.”

The students read the books that were accessible and struggled through the texts
that were not; this was consistent with their exit slip responses. The majority of the
participants disliked or were confused by the canonical text for most of the unit; in his
exit slip, one boy wrote “T2C has gotten a lot easier to follow as the story went on. I
think it has gotten a lot more interesting but I find it more enjoyable to read THUG. The
story line of the 2 books are both good but I feel like I have to force myself to read T2C
while THUG is a fun read.”

**Engaging with social issues**

The authors of the intervention unit texts – Angie Thomas, Elizabeth Acevedo,
William Shakespeare, and Charles Dickens – all entwined social commentary within the
plots of their works. Within these four texts, the authors explored issues of injustice, class
disparities, racism, the consequences of unchecked power, the use of stereotypes to
justify violence and mistreatment, et cetera, and this provided ample opportunities for
participants to engage in critical literacy as they studied and discussed social issues that
were pertinent to their current and future lives (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Through these
texts, the students forged new connections to these social issues and worked to
understand the power dynamics that are connected to poverty, discrimination, sexism, and racism.

In their exit slip responses, many students noted that the combination of paired texts and the weeks’ focus questions discussed in their fixed groups worked well to create a space in which they could explore difficult topics presented in the texts. As an observer, I recognized that the presence of two texts in the discussion might have been the foundation of that safe discussion space. Each week, students read from both texts and they discussed a focus question that bridged the content of the canonical and culturally relevant text. This enhanced their dialogic learning because it gave students an additional source to pull from in their discussion and it gave some students a “harbor” when they did not feel comfortable discussing these difficult topics – they could discuss the focus question in relation to the canonical text when they did not feel that they could talk about the focus question as it related to the culturally relevant text.

Several students noted the importance of being able to use literature as a catalyst for these discussions. One student said that the books we were reading were important because they discussed “a huge topic that doesn’t get talked about in schools or in general and I love that we are discussing this in class and bringing awareness to this topic through popular books like the hate you give.” Two students in separate classes both said they found that reading the two texts together helped them better understand systemic corruption and how they should focus more on the system than the individual who is a product of the system; one student said, “This week our focus questions allowed me to see a better view of both of the texts by reflecting them against each other and talking about system corruption instead of just looking at the characters as individuals.”
Overall, a number of students said that the focus questions made them think deeply about the text and analyze multiple perspectives. In my CP class, students were discussing the first days’ reading and answering the focus question that asked “What expectations are placed on us by our families and/or communities?” when two boy participants, Benjamin and Darius, ended up in a conversation about gender roles, commenting that they “aren’t allowed to express how we feel in public [as males]” and that “if dudes get a lot of women, they’re a player, but if girls have a lot of dudes, they’re looked down on.” A third student in this group called Eli, a Black boy who typically remains silent in class, added “Like it relates to real life though – most girls can’t have a boyfriend at a certain age. Zee – what’s her name? She the same. They get caught and they get in trouble.” These boys were examining the gender expectations placed upon them, but also the gender expectations placed upon girls – both fictional characters in the text and the girls they knew in reality. Another group in a different CP class had a similar discussion as they answered a focus question about the concept of unspoken rules in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Poet X*; the group, comprised of three Black boys and one Black girl, were discussing Romeo’s inability to court Rosaline and a moment in *The Poet X* in which Xiomara is catcalled. Two of the boys were trying to argue that girls secretly do enjoy being catcalled when the other two students offered a different perspective: “Most girls feel like that [as Xiomara felt]; they don’t like being catcalled” said Serenity. Antonio agreed, offering “She like it but she doesn’t like it – she wants attention but she doesn’t want sexual attention or for people to think she’s too fast.” The first two boys held a sexist view that, until this text, may never have been challenged. Through reading and discussion, they were then given three perspectives that conflicted
with their beliefs and they were asked to think more deeply about what they thought they knew.

Of all of the students who commented on their engagement with social issues, the majority found the texts and discussions to be empowering, validating, or illuminating; however, not every student shared these attitudes. When responding to surveys and exit slips throughout the intervention, students’ identities were anonymous, but they did share their race and their gender. After I completed my initial round of coding qualitative data from the exit slips, I used these demographic identifiers to sort the exit slip data. I chose to create subgroups by race and gender in order to determine if there were patterns among these groups. Based on their text rankings and their written responses, I found that there were four participants who did not enjoy *The Hate U Give, The Poet X*, or the discussions connected to social issues: all four participants were White; three were male and one was female. For three of these participants, though, there was a shift mentioned in the final exit slip. Toward the beginning of the intervention, one of these students said he assumed students would prefer a modern text “but the political mess entangled with it makes me very mixed on this.” The White girl participant ranked her interest in *The Hate U Give* as a 3 out of 5; she left her written response blank on the first exit slip and wrote, “My thinking did not shift” on the second exit slip. At the end of the intervention, however, one of the boys noted that he did not really believe that his thinking on social issues had changed, but then he followed that up by saying “The Hate U Give was a bit of a window into understanding impoverished communities.” Another of the boys admitted that his perspective had changed since he was first introduced to the novel. On her final exit slip,
the girl participant said that as she read both texts, she’d gained an understanding of social justice and that she better understood how “different racial groups see things.”

These resistant students who learned from the paired texts despite themselves are an indicator of a trend that I saw among the White students: this was the group that had the highest percentage of self-reported shifts in thinking in connection with social issues. For some students, this was the first time that they had taken the time to read and to think about these different perspectives. In his exit slip response, one student said “Before reading THUG i had heard stuff about police brutality but THUG really broadens perspectives. My thinking about police brutality in THUG has shifted a lot this week in terms of gaining more knowledge about the subject.” Sentiments like this were echoed throughout several students’ exit slip responses; they knew that there were problems with racial inequality and police brutality but as it did not affect them, they knew very little of the context surrounding the controversy. “I see another side of things,” one White girl participant said, a response that reflects the views of 26 other White participants who gave similar responses at some point throughout the intervention.

**Empathy**

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. For this unit, literature was a window into unfamiliar perspectives of the world (Bishop, 1990) and it not only increased the cultural competencies of the participants (Paris, 2012), but also it lead to an increase in empathy. In this unit, students frequently discussed social issues: racism, gender double standards, stereotyping as a justification for violence, class disparities, cyclical connections between race and poverty, and dehumanization were discussed throughout the unit. One outcome of these discussions that was repeatedly
articulated by students in the exit slip data was an increase in empathy. Many students noted that they felt increased empathy for the characters and for real people who live through circumstances like the characters. A number of students could make the connection between characters and their real-life counterparts and understood more of the hidden cruelties and injustices that others face. For the honors students who read *The Hate U Give*, most of the participants who showed increased empathy were White boys and girls. One Black student wrote that her “think hasnt really shifted because I have already learned and been taught and been through whats going through these topics”; similar sentiments were written by other students of color, although several noted that they were thinking more deeply about their real-life experiences now after reading about Starr and Xiomara’s experiences in the two culturally relevant texts.

The students who did express increased empathy noted that the characters faced “unfair” challenges throughout the texts. They made connections between the conflicts that the characters faced, noting that the inequalities between races and genders that they read about in the books were also happening in the real world; one girl said the texts “represent very important problems that are actively happening in the world; there is so much more stereotyping” and that she did not believe people of color deserved to be stereotyped. In their exit slip responses, several students of color communicated that they could relate to Starr having to codeswitch while several White students said that they had not thought about codeswitching before, but now they could see how Starr felt that she had to change her personality to fit into different spaces and how unfair it was to live like that.
Additionally, a number of students expressed empathy for the real people who have faced cruelties similar to those faced by Starr, Xiomara, and Khalil. Many expressed newfound understandings of the traumatic experiences that are unique to women and people of color as they face systemic oppression; “This is just one story,” one girl said, “and so many other innocent black people have been killed by the cops just like Khalil.” A couple of students expressed their desire to be more aware, to be helpful toward the BIPOC community, and to work to for change by using their voice. One student, remembering a discussion that we had on the very first day of the unit during which I quoted Rudine Sims Bishop’s metaphor about literature, included her words in their final exit slip response saying that *The Hate U Give* served as a window into the lives of others. It showed her that the movements and marches that she saw trending on social media or discussed on the news “don’t just die when the trend goes away,” but that they are continually felt by the communities that are affected. Like one of the tenets of critical race theory, this study acknowledged the importance of this story and how it “helped to humanize people in similar situations and show that there are actually real people behind those posts, and everyone in a community is affected” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

**Summative Score Comparison**

German River High School follows a block schedule. Each class is approximately 90 minutes long and most academic core classes begin in August and end in June. Periods 1-4 occur on an A-Day and periods 5-8 occur on a B-day. This year, my English 2 CP classes took place during 1A, 4A, and 7B; my English 2 Honors classes took place during 3A and 5B.
I compared the class average of scores on the summative assessment of the 3 previous units of study to the class average on the summative assessment for the intervention unit to better understand the impact of the intervention unit on student learning and critical reading skills.

Table 4.1 – Comparison of summative score class averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summative</th>
<th>College Prep</th>
<th>Honors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1A 4A 7B</td>
<td>3A 5B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summative 1</td>
<td>69.1 67.4 63.7</td>
<td>70.4 78.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summative 2</td>
<td>52.8 68.6 56.1</td>
<td>78.0 72.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summative 3</td>
<td>60.1 62.2 61.1</td>
<td>79.3 77.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention Summative</td>
<td>64.2 72.1 65.8</td>
<td>82.2 82.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since each of the summative assignments was created with the intention of assessing mastery of different standards for English 2, each summative listed in the table above is unique in design and composition. For the intervention summative, summative 1, and summative 2, the assignment was chunked for students using the workshop model. The workshop model consisted of a mini-lesson that targeted a specific skill they needed to employ in the summative; this was then followed up with time to work on that skill while I circled the classroom providing written and verbal feedback.

Summative 1 was a narrative piece that the students created at the end of their Mythology and Antigone unit; for this piece, students had to write and retell a myth or folk story from the civilization of their choice. Summative 2 was the final summative for the unit titled “Believe Me,” the focus of which was rhetoric, literary analysis, and
Othello. Summative 2 had two parts to it: a Socratic seminar discussion and the preparation work for the seminar which consisted of literary and rhetorical analysis of selected texts that we read throughout the unit. Summative 3 was given by all teachers in my professional learning community and was a traditional, multiple choice exam that was created to mimic the English 2 End of Course exam. Each summative assignment was designed to be an authentic assessment that required students to show mastery of standards and demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills; the primary focus of every summative assignment was to determine students’ ability to read critically. The thread that connected all of these summative assignments is critical reading: the method and skills that students used to demonstrate their critical reading skills differed from each assignment, but all of the summative assignments measured students’ critical reading skills.

The summative for the intervention, a multigenre project and presentation, was designed to be an authentic assessment that was appropriately rigorous for the sequence of learning; it too sought to measure students’ critical reading skills. Like the summative assessments that preceded it, students followed the workshop model described in the previous paragraph as they created their projects; they were given adequate work time in class in addition to frequent and prescriptive feedback from myself and my intern, Ms. Buffett. Of the 91 participants, 10 students chose not to submit a final project. For the 2022-2023 school year, this appeared to be standard practice among students even when late work was accepted and not penalized. For summative 1, the myth retelling, 17 students chose not to submit their work; for summative 2, the Socratic seminar and written analysis, 19 students chose not to submit their work. The zeros earned by these
students were averaged in with the scores of their classmates. The high number of zeros is likely connected to pandemic depressed achievement (Di Pietro, 2023) and decreased adolescent wellness, adaptability, and resilience (Nadeem, E.R. & Van Meter, A., 2023).

In each class, the mean score for the intervention summative was the highest when compared to the three previous summative assessments. Each class saw growth; the only exception was 1A in which the mean score for Summative 1 was the highest class average. Upon examination of the Summative 1 scores for 1A, I noted that only one student failed to submit their narrative myth retelling; only one zero was averaged in with student scores for that class.

**Pre- and Post-Intervention Surveys**

Table 4.2 – *Comparison of Pre- and Post-Intervention Attitudes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Intervention</th>
<th>Post-Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read a good book in the last month.</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed a book that I enjoyed this month.</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read for fun at least once a week</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the beginning of the intervention, all participants received a survey that was based upon the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Long Term Trend Reading Student Questionnaire; its purpose was to determine attitudes and perceptions of student engagement with English content and reading. Responses to the pre-intervention survey indicated that almost half of the participants (47.3%) said they read for fun in their own time *never or hardly ever* or a *few times a year*. In addition, a third of students
(33%) said that the last time they read a book they enjoyed was last year or never or hardly ever, and almost half (44%) said that they had discussed a book that they enjoyed either never or hardly ever or last year.

After the intervention, all participants received a post-survey that was nearly identical to the pre-survey. The only alteration to the post-survey was the addition of one question that asked students to assess their overall engagement with the material they studied throughout the intervention unit. Overall, there were some notable shifts between students’ pre-surveys and their post-surveys. At the beginning of the unit, approximately one third of participants (37.4%) answered This month when asked “When was the last time that you read a book you enjoyed?” In the post-survey, nearly three-quarters (71.4%) of participants answered This month to the same question. “Enjoyment” is a primary indicator of emotional engagement (Fredricks et. Al. 2004) – the 34% difference between the pre-survey attitudes and post-survey attitudes indicates that the culturally relevant literature they were provided during the intervention may have had an impact on students’ engagement.

There was similar shift for the survey question that asked students “When was the last time that you had a discussion about a book that you enjoyed?” In the pre-survey, 28.6% of participants answered This month to this question; in the post-survey, 67% of participants answered This month – a 38.4% increase. When students were asked to discuss both required texts and connect them through each focus question, they were thoughtful in their work and strategic in their thinking, both of which suggest the presence of behavioral and cognitive engagement. The shifts in opinion from both of
these questions parallel each other; together, they imply that the inclusion of culturally relevant literature had a positive impact on student engagement.

The final question on the post-survey asked participants to describe their level of engagement during the unit of study when compared to our past units of study. The term ‘engagement’ was defined for them as the interest you felt toward the content and/or the amount of attention and focus you gave to the content. In their responses (Table 4.3), 87.9% of participants reported that they were generally more engaged or much more engaged in the content from the intervention units compared to past units in which canonical literature served as the mentor texts. 8.8% of participants said that they were neither more nor less engaged during this unit, and 3.3% of participants said that they were either generally less engaged or much less engaged in the content from the intervention unit.

Table 4.3 – Self-reported levels of engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was much more engaged throughout this unit compared to past units</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was generally more engaged throughout this unit compared to past units</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was neither more nor less engaged during this unit than I have been during past units</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was generally less engaged throughout this unit compared to past units</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was much less engaged throughout this unit compared to past units</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results of the pre- and post- surveys illustrated that the majority of students (85%) were more engaged throughout this unit than they were during past units; zero students of color noted that they were “generally less” or “much less” engaged throughout this unit compared to past units. The students enjoyed the unit, they enjoyed the texts, and they discussed texts that they enjoyed. Predictably, there was a negligible increase in the percentage of students who remarked that they read for fun on their own time; this indicates that although they enjoyed the unit and the texts, it did not transform the participants into bibliophiles. Overall, the surveys indicated that the text disruption unit was successful in engaging more students than past units that employed a single canonical text.

**Triangulation**

The validity and reliability of the data was ensured through member checking and triangulation. Throughout the study and at the completion of the intervention, participants engaged in dialogue surrounding my interpretations of the data. I felt that it was important that I give the data back to my students so that they could verify that my interpretation matched their reality and experiences during the unit, ensuring the internal validity of the data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To ensure maximum variation, the data from outlier participants was included in the aggregate. Triangulation of data also serves to ensure internal validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); therefore, data was collected through exit slips, observations, surveys, and summative scores. I wanted to ensure that my findings were accurate and to minimize researcher bias data, and these separate sources of data gave me a clearer understanding of students’ levels of engagement throughout the intervention.
I reviewed the qualitative data from the students’ exit slip responses and my field journal observations, and then I summarized the emerging codes and the summary of the qualitative data to each student and asked them to carefully read it. After reading the data, the students completed an anonymous survey that asked them one closed question and three open-ended questions:

1. Were the results of the data an accurate summary of your experience as a student during the study?
2. Did any of the data surprise you, and if so, in what way was it surprising?
3. If some of the study results were not accurate, what did I get wrong?
4. What are your final thoughts on the study?

For the first question, 94.3% of participants answered “Yes,” indicating that they believed the data that I collected, analyzed, and summarized was an accurate depiction of their experiences during the study; 5.7% of participants responded “No/Not quite” and provided a rationale in the subsequent open-ended questions.

The student responses to the open-ended questions served to validate my thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Nearly all of the students agreed that the summary of the data was an accurate representation of their experiences throughout the study. The majority of respondents went beyond authenticating the data and provided an additional review of their feelings as they related to the intervention unit; their responses were consistent with the study. A number of students mentioned not liking the canonical texts at all or as much as they liked the culturally relevant texts; several students said that the only thing they found to be surprising about the data was some students ended up enjoying A Tale of Two Cities: “Some data that really surprised me was the fact that at
the end of the reading more people started to like the *Tale of Two cities*” said one student. The general attitude was that the ending of *A Tale of Two Cities* had some merit, that it was challenging, and that the book became easier to understand as we progressed, but overall, the students stated repeatedly that it was a difficult text to relate to, it was difficult to comprehend the context, and it was not enjoyable to read.

**General Findings**

The first question that I sought to answer is this study was *what effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant literature have on student engagement?* In an attempt to achieve validity in this study, a large number of participants were recruited. Their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement was measured over the course of six weeks through classroom observations, exit slips, and surveys. The students considered themselves to be more engaged throughout the intervention unit that employed culturally relevant literature through a text disruption model than they were in other units. The culturally relevant literature and text disruption model improved the levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in both Honors and College Prep students.

Across all collected qualitative data – classroom observations, exit slips, post-survey data, member-checking responses – one similarity was that students overwhelmingly preferred the culturally relevant text over the canonical text. There was a stark contrast in their treatment of each text, both inside and outside of the classroom. The students noted that they were excited to complete reading homework for *The Hate U Give*; instead of persevering through *A Tale of Two Cities*, students frequently skipped reading or relied on Sparknotes to replace their reading. When engaging with the culturally relevant text, students exhibited signs of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive
engagement; their self-perceived levels of engagement were consistent with my observations of their academic behaviors, the content of their discussions, their reactions to the texts, and their general enthusiasm toward the content.

My second research question was how does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical literature? Students exhibited behavioral engagement throughout the unit; students completed literacy activities and formative assessments with increased enthusiasm and limited prompting. As a result of their engagement, there was an increase in summative averages across all classes. The increase was not substantial, but it does align with and reflect the growth in students’ behavioral engagement.

Summary

Chapter four detailed the impact of culturally relevant literature on student engagement and students’ development of critical reading skills. The most noteworthy findings were that students enjoyed the culturally relevant text and used it as a bridge to relate to the more difficult, canonical text. Students also felt that they could better connect to the culturally relevant text and the majority of them were engaged with the content, sometimes despite themselves. The accessibility of the text gave students who typically struggle a chance to enjoy the course readings. For some students, the chance to discuss current social issues in a structured environment was validating and empowering; for other students, these discussions led to new understandings and an increase in empathy for some marginalized groups. I will discuss these findings, the implications of these findings, recommendations, and potential uses for this data in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS

The lack of culturally relevant literature is connected to the decrease in student engagement in English classrooms. For years, canonical novels have been a fundamental component of a standard English education, but students are increasingly detached and indifferent to the literary offerings of their core English classes. The purpose of this study was to determine if the addition of culturally relevant pedagogy had an impact on student engagement and, as a result, an impact on student learning. Using the Disrupting Texts methods, students participated in a six-week long intervention that paired canonical literature with culturally relevant literature that served as a thematic bridge in order to determine the impact, if any, that the culturally relevant literature had on student engagement and student learning. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What effect does the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy have on student engagement?

2. How does pairing culturally relevant and canonical texts enhance students’ critical reading of canonical literature?

The findings of this study suggested that the majority of students were more engaged during the intervention and that they understood more of the canonical content because it was paired with a culturally relevant text.
This chapter will discuss the implications of the study and will reflect on the research findings, the methodology, and the potential opportunities for maximizing the effect of this approach to teaching literature.

**Summary of the Findings**

In chapter two, I discussed how the theories of culturally sustaining pedagogy and critical literacy combined with the construct of the three pillars of engagement merged into a framework that informed my methodology and intervention. My findings were consistent with my theoretical framework. Throughout the intervention, I saw evidence of students including their cultural identity and cultural knowledge in the class discussions and academic assignments; indeed, many of my students of color took the lead in group discussions that were connected to current social issues, sharing their experiences alongside those of the texts’ protagonists. In addition to these indicators of culturally sustaining pedagogy, there were elements of critical literacy throughout the study. By reading culturally relevant texts, students critically examined multiple perspectives and disrupted commonly held viewpoints regarding race and gender, adding these new ideas to their existing schema and constructing their own knowledge.

Furthermore, one tenet of critical race theory — centering the voices of people who are marginalized by systemic inequities — had a positive impact on individual students; it empowered the students of color and led to an increase in empathy and understanding for the majority of participants. Finally, the three pillars of engagement assisted me in determining students’ depth of engagement and isolating the source and impetus of their engagement.
One theme that emerged was the personal connection and engagement that participants felt as they engaged with the culturally relevant texts. Although a number of participants repeatedly said that they disliked the canonical text and there was a noticeable difference in students’ treatment of each text, many students noted that they were better able to understand and enjoy the canonical text because of its connection to the culturally relevant text. When students read and discussed the culturally relevant text, they consistently showed signs of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement; these indicators were not consistently present when students read and discussed the paired canonical text. Students also felt that the paired texts and the weekly focus questions worked to deepen their understanding of both texts and the world around them. The paired texts served an unexpected purpose: students were able to discuss difficult social issues by using evidence from the canonical text if they were not comfortable tackling the same issues in the modern and culturally relevant text.

This action research study adds to the existing body of literature by examining the impact of culturally relevant literature when it is thematically paired with canonical literature. The findings of this study were aligned with Clark’s (2017) study in which three separate control groups were taught with three different text sets; one group received no culturally relevant texts, the second group read culturally relevant texts intermittently, and the third read culturally relevant texts exclusively. The students in this third group experienced more growth in reading comprehension and contextual vocabulary skills than their peers in the first and second group, a result that Clark linked directly to their increased engagement. The children’s word recognition in isolation did not differ significantly among the groups, however. My findings were similar; students
were more engaged throughout this unit and they experienced growth in their critical reading skills. When comparing scores of participants’ summative assessments, however, the impact on their achievement was negligible. In both studies, culturally relevant texts had an impact on engagement and on some critical skills, but it did not have a significant impact on achievement.

The results of my study also supported the findings of Chisholm’s (2020) study on the relationship between culturally relevant literature and student engagement. In this action research study, Chisholm followed the experiences of six students over the course of eight weeks. All six students were proficient writers prior to the study as Chisholm’s intent was not to measure their academic growth – only their engagement with the texts. Through journal responses and interviews that the researcher conducted with participants, Chisholm determined that there was a positive trend with students’ engagement as they read *The Outsiders* and *Romiette and Julio*. I measured a similar trend in my participants through their pre- and post- surveys as well as their exit slips. At the beginning of the unit, a number of students had either neutral or negative feelings toward the book study. In my CP classes, more than half of my students were not eager to begin a unit that required them to read two texts; several students were visibly agitated and spoke negatively about the impending unit.

When we began reading the culturally relevant text in earnest, however, their attitudes toward reading shifted. On page one, 75% (18) of students were reading along; this was measured using the student observation checklist (Appendix B). At the beginning of the read-aloud, 6 students were displaying off-task behaviors (head down, looking at their phone, talking to another student) and 18 students had their book open
with their eyes on the page we were reading. By the time the class reached page four, several students were audibly gasping in reaction to the book’s events and all students save one were reading along. Akin to Chisholm’s (2020) study, this positive trend in their attitude toward the text continued steadily for the remainder of the study.

Glass (2019) also noted that culturally relevant texts had a noticeable impact on student engagement. The purpose of Glass’s study was to measure student engagement as they interacted with diverse texts, and to determine if their enjoyment of culturally relevant texts could negate the adverse effects of the painful reading experiences of the participants’ past. If students could be reengaged with reading, Glass believed that they could increase participants’ reading comprehension skills. Similar to the results of my study, Glass wrote that students’ ability to actively discuss and critically examine the texts grew throughout the study, but that this growth did not necessarily translate to increased achievement scores.

At the beginning of my study, students in both CP and Honors classes were hesitant to talk about the texts with their small reading groups and with the class, particularly when the culturally relevant texts touched on the difficult topics of systemic racism, gender stereotyping, and racialized police violence. In addition to their hesitance with the content, the students were also unsure of how to synthesize the content of the canonical text and the culturally relevant text in their conversations and in their work. Through the employment of reading, annotating, and speaking strategies, however, students’ confidence and skills increased. As students built these skills, I observed that the choice to pair a canonical text with a culturally relevant text led to an unforeseen advantage: students were able to use the canonical text as a discussion harbor. When
classes engaged in small and whole group discussions, the students who were uncomfortable with discussing the difficult topics that arose in the culturally relevant text were still able to participate by using evidence and events from the canonical text to answer the focus questions. The majority of students were inclined to center their discussions on the culturally relevant text; however, by having a population of students who preferred to engage with the canonical text, the class was better able to maintain a balanced conversation and synthesize the events from both texts.

In Tan and Mante-Estacio’s (2021) study, the researchers also established a connection between culturally relevant texts and student engagement. To determine which elements of culturally relevant texts were the most appealing to young readers, the researchers offered different culturally relevant texts to their students over the course of five class periods and surveyed the participants after each lesson. Students noted that they found the level of realism and the texts’ ability to “tap into their existing background or previous firsthand experiences” (Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2021, p. 358) to be the most engaging facets of culturally relevant literature; the data from this study relates to a number of comments, both written and spoken, made by the participants during this study: “I love that I can relate to this book and see how others deal with it” one student remarked on their exit slip at the end of the second week of reading.

Sentiments similar to this were repeated throughout the exit slip data; another student said that reading The Hate U Give “helped me think deeply about some of the experiences I have had in my life and then relate them back to the text. For example, Starr’s experience of code switching and having to act a certain way around certain groups of people is something that I can relate to.” One student echoed the findings of
Tan and Mante-Estacio when they wrote about reading *The Poet X*: “I like that it is more realistic and deals with real world problems and that you can relate to the text easier than other things we have read.” Tan and Mante-Estacio (2021) also found that while reading the culturally relevant texts, there was an unprecedented level of focus during both independent reading and discussion of the text; this level of focus was also present during my study. One example of this focus occurred during my fourth block, a CP class; in my field journal, I observed that the students protested when we reached the end of the days’ scheduled reading for *The Poet X*. The participants protested so much that we allowed them to continue reading independently for an additional twenty minutes; when we reached the end of the additional time, one student insisted on reading until the end. When students were reading a text that they found relevant and compelling, they were focused, they were on task, and they took initiative.

**Conclusions**

Synthesizing the findings of these studies with the results of my own study revealed two conclusions. First, my study suggests that there is a strong correlation between cultural relevance and literary engagement. When students are provided texts that are accessible and relevant to their lives, their ability to engage with the course content is improved (Clark, 2017, Chisholm, 2020, Glass, 2019, Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2021, Styslinger, 2017). In chapter four, I shared data that showed an acute difference in student engagement when they worked with culturally relevant texts as opposed to when they worked with canonical literature. When students read and discussed texts that were accessible and relevant, they were focused and eager in their work (Chisholm, 2020, Glass 2019, Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2022).
The second conclusion that emerged was that use of culturally relevant literature can have a significant impact on student learning, particularly their competency in critical reading. Students’ enjoyment of the culturally relevant text led to a greater focus on task completion (Clark, 2017) and growth in their critical reading skills (Glass, 2019). At the onset of this study, I was skeptical of the intervention’s ability to increase student achievement scores, but it logically followed: If students experience an increase in engagement, it may lead to an increase in their scores and student learning. During the study, there was an increase in student engagement, in task completion, and in skill progression (Clark, 2017, Glass, 2019), but these increases had a minimal positive impact on students’ average summative scores. I speculate that the reason for this is connected to the negative reading experiences of the participants’ past (Glass, 2019). The intervention showed evidence of increased student achievement and skill progression, but in isolation, it was not enough to undo the negative reading experiences of the past. Although the unit had a clear impact on student engagement and interest in class content, further research on linking culturally relevant literature, student agency, and student achievement is necessary to maximize these benefits.

**Practice Recommendations**

The conclusions that emerged from the data led me to reflect on the implications of the findings and their transferability among other classrooms. Teaching diverse literature that reflects the cultures of students in our classrooms has a positive impact on their engagement with the course content; it is appropriate for teachers to shift away from a wholly Eurocentric literary curriculum toward a curriculum that is inclusive of multiple viewpoints. As I am writing this in August of 2023, however, I acknowledge that English
classrooms within my setting and geographic location are subject to hostile outside pressures that have an effect on curriculum decisions. South Carolina lawmakers passed a fiscal proviso H630-1.82 that prohibits “teaching certain literary and historical concepts or issues related to the impacts of historical or past discriminatory policies” (South Carolina 2023), an action that has an impact on the texts that teachers are willing to teach without fear of reprimand. This legislative censorship could result in inequitable opportunities for non-White students. Therefore, my recommendations are centered on an authentic approach to using critical literacy and culturally relevant literature in the current secondary English classroom.

First, it is critical that educators examine the students who are sitting in their classrooms; this could begin with an analysis of demographic data, but it should naturally shift to a more comprehensive and personable understanding of who students are based on information they are willing to disclose. By knowing who it is we are teaching, we can better understand how we might be able to reach them, using this knowledge to provide text options that can serve as a mirror, a window, or a sliding glass door for our students.

Second, educators must consider the current texts that they teach and reflect on the intended learning outcomes, skills, and ideas that are associated with each text. Then, they need to reflect on other texts that could be used to reach the same learning outcomes, to teach the same skills, or that could be paired thematically with the original, canonical text. This may require the educator to read young adult literature that presents diverse perspectives and represents a multitude of cultures and to seek out logical connections between these texts and the canonical texts that they already teach. Teachers may also want to consider multiple modalities – audio, visual, kinesthetic – that offer opportunities
to disrupt the literary canon and make the course content culturally relevant for students. One important distinction that educators must bear in mind is the continuity of cultural change; texts that are considered culturally relevant today may become less relevant to students as society undergoes cultural shifts. Therefore, educators should continue to keep their finger on the pulse of changes in culture and respond accordingly.

Third, educators must contemplate offering a choice of culturally relevant texts that are all thematically connected to a canonical text. Offering multiple lenses through which students can critically examine themes or concepts not only has the potential to disrupt commonly held viewpoints and enrich the discussions surrounding the canonical text, but also provide additional points of cultural relevance and connection for students of the global majority. By including a range of alternative texts, educators also have the opportunity to provide texts of varying difficulty while conceivably avoiding a dilemma or objection related to the content of a single culturally relevant text. In addition, providing a choice of culturally relevant texts places the student at the center of learning and allows them added independence to construct their own knowledge.

My final recommendation is intended for educators at all levels, classroom teachers, district curriculum coordinators, school administrators, and district leadership: support the inclusion of culturally relevant lessons and materials and protect academic freedom in the face of rising censorship efforts. “In the first nine months of 2022 alone, the American Library Association’s (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 681 attempts to ban or restrict library resources” (Zalusky, 2023, p. 14). Under the guise of parents’ rights, groups are lobbying to ban books that they have never read, and lawmakers are conceding, limiting the right to read texts and threatening criminal charges.
against teachers and librarians who share them. Culturally relevant texts are heavily represented among these banned and challenged books: One of my colleagues, Mary Wood, made national news when she faced administrative censure for defining systemic racism while she taught Ta’Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, a book that detailed the author’s experiences as a young black man growing up amid racism in America (Natanson, 2023); subsequently, she has been the target of both local and national persecution, inspiring other parents to challenge and intimidate teachers and librarians alike. Attacks like this are becoming more commonplace amid ongoing efforts to create distrust of educators with the intention to defund public education.

Intellectual freedom cannot exist in the presence of fear and prejudice-based censorship – these actions are counter to the findings of my study and other academic studies that detail the positive impact that culturally relevant literature can have on student engagement and student learning. Teachers are appropriately apprehensive to teach culturally relevant texts and as a result, are likely to miss opportunities to engage their students with culturally relevant literature. Teachers, administrators, and district officials must go beyond supporting culturally relevant classrooms and libraries – they must publicly advocate for the inclusion of culturally relevant literature and actively oppose threats that undermine academic freedom.

**Implementation Plan**

Action research is cyclical, and although this study provides educators with a rationale for teaching culturally relevant literature and strategies for practical application, there are additional actions that I wish to take to further solve problems with literary engagement within my setting (Herr & Anderson, 2015).
In my classroom, I am following my own recommendations for increasing student engagement through the use of culturally relevant texts. I have taken stock of the students that I am teaching this year, working to understand not only their demographic details, but also the individual facets of their self and their community that they have chosen to disclose to me through surveys, conversations, and community building. The intervention units were successful, but they were only one of many units that my students progressed through during the school year. I am now reflecting on the other commonly taught canonical texts and working to find multiple culturally relevant texts and modalities that are suitable for disrupting the canon. The unit that I am working through now is based upon William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, a text that has been an English 2 staple in my setting for many years. Pairing the play with the young adult novel *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam, the unit will center on the pervasiveness of wrongful accusations, the credibility of sources and speakers, and the power of rhetorical choices. To avoid outside objections to the text, I am working with my media specialist and student intern to find additional text choices that provide differing perspectives while maintaining the unit’s focus. In future action research cycles, I must endeavor to further develop my own critical literacy strategies and to work with other veteran teachers within my setting to address the problem of practice by crafting units that are engaging and relevant for the students in our building.

I am fortunate to have the opportunity to serve as a coaching teacher for prospective English teachers pursuing a Master’s in Education at the University of South Carolina. This pre-service program is exceptional, and I often receive interns who are already eager to apply their knowledge of culturally relevant texts and social justice
education in a real classroom. As their coaching teacher, I am obligated to facilitate their transfer of knowledge from theory to application, and this is an ideal context in which to implement the findings of my study. To bridge the gap between theory and application, I can guide pre-service teachers through practical strategies for implementation, sharing the outcomes that the intervention had on student engagement, reiterating the rationale for disrupting the literary canon, and teaching them how to apply their learning without sacrificing their career. Additionally, I can engage them in creative problem-solving and additional action research as we seek to refine our methods for pairing canonical and culturally relevant literature.

Beyond my classroom, I hope to present my findings to a larger audience that includes veteran English teachers within my school, within my district, and within the state of South Carolina. I am cognizant of the risks that South Carolina teachers face when teaching texts that lawmakers might deem objectionable, but I feel that the findings of this study – and others that are like it – have the potential to aid in the necessary shift from a Eurocentric curriculum to a curriculum that is inclusive of all cultures. I have already applied to present at the annual conference for the South Carolina Council of Teachers of English (SCCTE), and I aspire to share a written account of my study with educational publications.

Our current educational climate is beleaguered by book banning and Critical Race Theory investigations. Being a culturally responsive educator requires me to take risks for the sake of other people’s children, though, and one risk that I endeavor to take is presenting my findings to district administrators and school board members. I am aware that this will be a complicated undertaking and that it may end in my censure by the
community members who believe equity and inclusion are detrimental to public education. My results, however, may provide information that counters their attempts to suppress academic freedom. I may be able to advocate for culturally relevant literature and provide these decision-makers with data that they can use to effect change.

**Reflection on the Methodology**

I am satisfied with my choice to conduct a mixed-methods study; the integration of both qualitative and quantitative components provided additional insight into student engagement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), a quality that I believed would be difficult to measure. At the beginning of this study, I expected that the majority of participants would find the culturally relevant text to be more appealing than the canonical text; I hoped that I might see measurable growth in their critical reading skills. I did not expect to observe a significant shift in students’ achievement scores or an increase in the number of students who read for enjoyment. The data from the post-survey supported my expectations; after the intervention, there were two students who showed a newfound interest in reading and checking out books like *The Hate U Give* and *The Poet X*. The number of students who showed this increased interest in class was aligned with the percentage increase of students who communicated that they enjoy “Reading for fun” on the post-survey. This was an unexpected gain – I had not expected to observe an increase in the number of self-reported readers whatsoever as the intervention unit included only one culturally relevant text. When considering ideas for future research, I am interested in attempting a longitudinal approach in which data could be procured from multiple groups over a longer period of time. If units like the intervention were common in English-Language Arts
classes, I wonder if the number of students who read for fun or by choice would increase and nullify students’ past negative experiences with reading.

I did not expect to see an increase in students’ achievement scores; as I reviewed the literature, I noted that most of the studies that I read showed there was either no increase in achievement at all or, if their scores did increase, that the growth was not substantial. When I compared the summative class averages (Table 4.1), there was an increase, but it was small. Within each of these classes, however, there were a number of significant increases. Although all of the summative assessments measured students’ ability to read critically, I believe that this section of the study would have been strengthened if there had been increased alignment among all of the summative assessments.

For the majority of participants, the grade that they earned on the multigenre project was their highest summative score of the year. Still, there were a few participants who, as they had for previous summative assessments, did not submit their project at all despite actively working on the components during class, earning a score of 0%. For example, one of the participants who earned a zero on the final summative was a Black girl who enjoyed *The Poet X*; this student was active in all group discussions, she had a number of vocal reactions to the text as we read, she was one of the students who insisted on reading ahead, and I witnessed her working on the multigenre project. An additional recommendation for future research is connected to this second group: if these students were largely engaged throughout the unit, if I witnessed them working on parts of the summative project, I wonder what prevented them from following through with completion and submission of the assignment. Was this incongruity connected to
motivation, to learned behaviors, to past negative experiences, or is there another explanation?

One unexpected finding of this study was students’ enjoyment of the weekly focus questions. I wanted students to spend time considering and discussing the thematic connections between the paired texts, so I chose to create thematic bridges between them by employing focus questions. The questions were aligned with the reading schedule so that students could consider the weeks’ question as it applied to both texts. My intention was to help students find the commonalities that connected the texts while allowing room for students to add their own experiences and interpretations to the discussion; I did not expect to see that more than half of the participants noted that they enjoyed the focus questions and they felt that they grew because of the reflections and discussions connected to the focus questions.

Another unexpected finding was that I observed some students used the canonical text as a kind of safe “harbor” during focus question discussions. Several students appeared to be hesitant when the focus questions shifted toward uncomfortable topics; initially, these students were nearly silent during discussions, but they adapted over time. When these students felt uneasy discussing social issues in relation to the culturally relevant text, they had the option to discuss it in terms of the canonical text while still remaining adjacent to the more difficult conversations surrounding power, race, and gender. It was a harbor for these students, but it also may have protected me from a curricular quandary as well. With the increased in scrutiny from lawmakers and stakeholders, teachers are understandably wary to teach texts or topics that might cause parents to challenge their lessons or cause students to sit with discomfort. This strategy
for teaching culturally relevant texts with a canonical text could as a protective measure for teacher desire inclusivity and diversity in their curriculum.

In the fall of 2013, I had my 7th grade honors students read selections from How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America, a collection of essays centered on post-9/11 Islamophobia. My students engaged in a Socratic seminar, and I was amazed at both the depth of conversation that we were able to have among a group of 12-year-old students and the impact that this discussion had on their collective empathy. I believed it to be a chance occurrence that was unreproducible; now, I know that I was mistaken in my suppositions. Much like the participants of this study, those seventh graders experienced behavioral and emotional engagement during a lesson that incorporated culturally relevant texts, and their engagement was evident in their discussion and in their work.

There is value in the literary canon, and there will always be a population of students who are behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively engaged with canonical literature. It is from their ranks that we will likely find the next generation of English teachers; however, they are the exceptional students, not the median. Our goal as English teachers is to help students grow in their critical reading and writing skills so that they can be knowledgeable and critical consumers of information in a rapidly-shifting world. I like to compare teaching canonical literature to feeding vegetables to my small children – Would we stop feeding vegetables to children because they do not like them? No – we keep offering them because we know there is value in eating vegetables, just as there is value in reading canonical literature. I will continue to put manageable portions on their plates, and perhaps I will add some culturally relevant literature to make it more
palatable. Perhaps I will hide the canonical literature in a meal that they already enjoy – but I will not force them to sit at the table and eat every boiled lima bean that I have put on their plate until they throw up or fall asleep at the table. That practice teaches a clear lesson - that canonical literature is awful, boring, and must be avoided at all costs.

**Summary**

Prior to this study, I was troubled by the lack of diverse texts in the curriculums of the multiple schools and systems in which I taught. I knew that this deficiency was inequitable, but beyond that, I could see that it was a struggle for the majority of our students, at all levels, to connect with and enjoy the canonical texts that were offered in their English classes. I realized that although I had been asking for class sets of culturally relevant texts, I too was part of the problem: I rarely offered culturally relevant texts to my classes and adhered to the established curriculum set forth by my settings. Now, I have seen the positive impact that teaching culturally relevant literature had on my students and their ability to read critically; I am resolved to continue this practice and offer diverse voices and perspectives to the diverse groups of students that I teach.

There is a great deal of value in canonical literature, but it is not the superior conduit for teaching skills through texts or engaging students. This study demonstrated that there is increased behavioral and emotional engagement when students are working with texts that are relevant to their lives and realities.
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APPENDIX A

PRE-INTERVENTION SURVEY

Pre-Intervention Survey
Based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Long Term Trend:
Reading Student Questionnaire - 2020

In this section, please tell us about yourself and your family. The section has 13 questions.

1. Are you Hispanic or Latino? Fill in one or more squares
   • No, I am not Hispanic or Latino.
   • Yes, I am Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano.
   • Yes, I am Puerto Rican or Puerto Rican American.
   • Yes, I am Cuban or Cuban American.
   • Yes, I am from some other Hispanic or Latino background

2. Which of the following best describes you? Fill in one or more squares.
   • White
   • Black or African American
   • Asian
   • American Indian or Alaska Native
   • Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

3. About how many books are there in your home? Fill in only one square.
   • Few (0-10)
   • Enough to fill one shelf (11-25)
   • Enough to fill one book case (26-100)
   • Enough to fill several bookcases (more than 100)

4. About how many unexcused absences did you incur in your English class during the first semester of the 2022-2023 school year?
   • 0-1
   • 2-3
   • 4-5
   • 5-6
   • 7 or more
5. About how many pages a day do you have to read in school and for homework?
   - 5 or fewer
   - 6-10
   - 11-15
   - 16-20
   - More than 20

6. How much time did you spend on homework yesterday?
   - No homework was assigned
   - I had homework but didn’t do it
   - Less than 1 hour
   - 1 to 2 hours
   - More than 2 hours

7. How often do you talk about things you have studied or read in school with someone in your family?
   - Never or hardly ever
   - Once every few weeks
   - About once a week
   - Two or three times a week
   - Every day

8. How many days were you absent from school in the last month?
   - None
   - 1 or 2 days
   - 3 or 4 days
   - 5 to 10 days
   - More than 10 days

9. How far in school did your mother go?
   - She did not finish high school.
   - She graduated from high school.
   - She had some education after high school.
   - She graduated from college.
   - I don’t know.

10. How far in school did your father go?
    - He did not finish high school.
    - He graduated from high school.
    - He had some education after high school.
    - He graduated from college.
    - I don’t know.

11. How often do people in your home talk to each other in a language other than English?
    - Never
• Once in a while
• About half of the time
• All or most of the time

12. Which of the following best describes your core high school courses?
• A mix of college prep and learning strategies
• All college prep
• A mix of college prep and honors courses
• All honors and/or AP courses

13. Typically, how often do you do each of the following things?

A. Read for fun on your own time.
   • Almost every day
   • Once or twice a week
   • Once or twice a month
   • A few times a year
   • Never or hardly ever

B. Tell a friend about a good book.
   • Almost every day
   • Once or twice a week
   • Once or twice a month
   • A few times a year
   • Never or hardly ever

14. When was the last time that you:

A. Read a book that you enjoyed.
   • This month
   • Three months ago
   • Six months ago
   • Last year
   • Never or hardly ever

B. Had a discussion about a book that you enjoyed.
   • This month
   • Three months ago
   • Six months ago
   • Last year
   • Never or hardly ever
APPENDIX B

STUDENT OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

K. Ramp - Student Observation Checklist

Student Observation Checklist

The engagement theory of Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) was used to develop this student observation checklist. Each item is based on either behavioral engagement (students' involvement in learning: following class rules, concentration, attention, persistence, effort, asking questions, and contributing to class discussions), emotional engagement (student interest or boredom and positive/negative feelings toward the content and the instructor), and cognitive engagement (self-regulated learning, metacognition, application of knowledge, and strategic thinking and studying). As emotional engagement is difficult to fully assess through a checklist, additional data on students' emotional engagement will be collected through student reflection exit slips and researcher field notes.

After multiple observations, data points for individual students can be combined and averaged to determine a percentage of engagement over the course of a specific period of study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observer</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Engagement</td>
<td>Absent (1)</td>
<td>Minimal (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zero behaviors noted</td>
<td>One or two behaviors noted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Engagement</td>
<td>Absent (1)</td>
<td>Minimal (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zero behaviors noted</td>
<td>One or two behaviors noted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Engagement</td>
<td>Absent (1)</td>
<td>Minimal (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zero behaviors noted</td>
<td>One or two behaviors noted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Behaviors noted in this observation:

- □ Asking questions
- □ Focus/Concentration/Attention
- □ Contributing to discussion
- □ Following rules
- □ Effort/Persistence
- □ Positive attitude
- □ Negative attitude
- □ Boredom
- □ Interest
- □ Self-regulation
- □ Application of knowledge
- □ Metacognition
- □ Strategic thinking
APPENDIX C

WEEKLY EXIT SLIP

**Weekly Exit Slip**

1. Generally, how would you rank your current enjoyment of the canonical text?
   
<p>| | | | | |</p>
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</table>
   1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I am not enjoying the text   I am thoroughly enjoying the text

2. Generally, how would you rank your current enjoyment of the culturally relevant text?
   
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</table>
   1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I am not enjoying the text   I am thoroughly enjoying the text

3. Compared to past texts you’ve read in English classes, how would you rank your interest in the canonical text?
   
<p>| | | | | |</p>
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</thead>
</table>
   1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I am bored by the text   I am interested in the text

4. Compared to past texts you’ve read in English classes, how would you rank your interest in the culturally relevant text?
   
<p>| | | | | |</p>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
</table>
   1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I am bored by the text   I am interested in the text

5. I feel _________ about the current course content.

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</table>
   1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Negative   Positive

6. In this unit, I feel able to regulate myself in order to focus and move through the content.

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</table>
   1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Never/rarely   All the time/consistently

7. Written Response: Consider this week’s readings (from both texts) and the discussions and reflect on your takeaways from both this week. You can choose to use the prompts below to guide your reflection or you can choose to reflect in your own, individual manner:

- What do you think/believe about this week’s reading or the discussions you had (about the readings, the focus questions, etc.)?
- What new understanding or knowledge do you have now after this week’s work?
- Has your thinking shifted this week? If so, how?
APPENDIX D

MULTIGENRE PERFORMANCE TASK

A Tale of Two Cities & The Hate U Give Multi-Genre Performance Task

In both The Hate U Give and A Tale of Two Cities, we see social movements taking place and as a result, the themes within both texts are similar and arguably, interchangeable. You will choose a theme that connects both texts - A Tale of Two Cities and The Hate U Give - and work to demonstrate your knowledge of the thematic connection through multigenre work. It is your task to explore your themes in depth and create a multi-genre paper. A multi-genre performance task is just as it sounds: a performance task that contains multiple genres. This is your chance to be creative and demonstrate what you know through your unique strengths and abilities! Create a recipe, a map, a video, a poem; your possibilities are endless. I have included a list of potential genres for you to explore and we will discuss this more in class. There are two parts to this project:

1. The multi-genre project which explores your themes through different genres and mediums.
2. A presentation of your multi-genre work - this can be in any format.

The presentation portion should include:
1. A thorough discussion of your themes
2. A discussion of the themes’ connection to each other and both texts (synthesis)
3. The work you chose to create to represent them

Themes
Social Protest and Social Action
Dual Identities
Power and brutality
The Cyclical Nature of Poverty and Crime

Due Dates:
May ___, 2023 (A Day)
May ___, 2023 (B Day)

Points Breakdown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multi-Genre Performance</th>
<th>____/80</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Presentation</td>
<td>____/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>____/100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Partners are optional. If you choose to work as an individual, you’ll create projects that add up to 30 points instead of 50 points.
** You are exploring one theme and its appearance in both texts. The performance tasks that you choose to do can cover both texts at the same time, or cover them separately. Both texts need to be represented in your work. **The formal synthesis will occur in the presentation** (in which you will combine the ideas and themes that you traced in both texts to form a theory about how they are connected and how these concepts span generations).

Ex. I decide to create a children’s book (40 points) about the theme “Cyclical Nature of Poverty and Crime”

I could:

A. Create a children’s book about the theme and be broad in the text, but include illustrations that make references to both books and instances where racialized poverty occurs in Garden Heights and France.
B. Create a children’s book about the theme of racialized poverty and just include textual/visual references to THUG

**Multi-Genre Rubric**

*To receive full credit for this portion of the assignment, you must complete a combination of activities that could total a maximum of **80 points**. If you would like to propose an activity not listed, please see me so that you can describe your vision and together, we can assign a numerical value for that project. All projects must be accompanied by a bibliography in MLA format.

**If you have specific questions about the requirements of a project (i.e. how long does ____ need to be? How many stanzas are you looking for in ____ task?) come and see me so that we can discuss what you have in mind. It’s better to ask in advance than underestimate the requirements and struggle in the end.**

A visual timeline of the development of your theme throughout the text. (10 pts): _____

An artistic “character map” that depicts key people in who are part of your theme’s development and how they are connected (10 pts): _____

A playlist of 8-10 songs from multiple genres that describe your theme; each song needs an accompanied explanation of the thematic connection of the song/genre/lyrics to the texts’ theme (15 pts): _____

Write a poem or a song about your theme, an event pertaining to your themes, or about a major character connected to your themes. This could also be from the perspective of a major character. (15 pts): _____

Write a one-page, single space letter from a key character in the text to a person of authority, explaining issues connected to the theme and the plot in general. This letter must be in proper letter format (20 pts): _____

Complete a 4-page newspaper that shows understanding of the cultural and societal issues occurring during and pertaining to the social movements within the text (in connection to the theme) Include as many features as you can. (30 pts) _____
Write or “tape” an interview with a major character from the text. The content of the interview must address your theme at some point. If you “tape” your interview, you must provide a transcript. (30 pts): ______

Write a 4 paragraph literary analysis argument that elaborates on your theme (40 pts): ______

Create a 10 page children’s book that discusses your theme and includes references/illustrations of the text(s). (40 pts) ______

Create a 30 minute podcast detailing all important information about the social movement within the text and its connection to your theme. You must provide a script. This is in addition to your oral presentation. (40 pts): ______

Total: _______/80

Final Presentation Rubric
Presentations will take place on May __, 2023 in the media center in the form of a museum gallery. Students will set up their presentation on their devices alongside their physical artifacts and present to small groups or individual audience members who attend. A number of your parents, teachers, peers, and administrators will be in attendance, so create your presentation with your audience members and the gallery format in mind.

Student discussed the themes in both texts independently and in-depth ______/6
Student synthesized the themes and their connection in both texts ______/6
Student presentation was between 2 and 4 minutes ______/2
Student was prepared
  • Student did not read from slide
  • Student maintained appropriate amount of eye contact with audience
  • Student was confident in material
Student participated in the presentation of others ______/2
  • Student remained attentive to other presentations
  • Student did not put his/her head down
  • Student did not work on other material
  • Student was supportive of others
Students had an organized and creative visual aid ______/4
  • Student’s visual aid contained only necessary material
  • Student’s visual aid included all multigenre work

Total ________/20
APPENDIX E

MULTIGENRE PROJECTS AND PRESENTATIONS

Figure E1 Participants Presenting to Members of Student Body
Figure E2 Participant Shares Thematic Connections with Faculty

Figure E3 Participant Shares Multigenre Work
Figure E4 Participant Presents Multigenre Work to Parents and Administrators
APPENDIX F

CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

Figure F1 Student Exhibits Emotional Reaction During The Poet X
Figure F2 Student Kneels on Rice to Emulate the Protagonist of The Poet X

Figure F3 Students Show Emotional Reaction as They Read and Annotate
Figure F4  Sample Student Annotations from an English 2 CP Participant
### Observation Notes:
Class read 283-314. When we got to the end of 314, where we planned to stop, the class protested and wanted to continue reading. “Oh naw we can’t stop there” “Keep going!” “Imma read to the end” - even kids like X who is often disengaged and dislikes the class.

Allowed them to continue reading independently. See picture. As students read, there were numerous vocal reactions: gasps, squeaks, and attempts to chat (“NO!” “Oh my god!”) as they were reading 316-335.

One student insisted on continuing to the end (as far as she could get) and said “When I find a good book, I get into it and I can’t stop and this is the second one I’ve ever had.” She asked me if she could check out another book by Acevedo.

| Student A: “I was skeptical of the book at first, when we first read it - I sometimes am, I wonder whether or not I will enjoy a book or not, but the moment we started it, I fell in love with it. I loved the structure, it told a story but the story was told through poems that were interconnected with each other. Building blocks. I’ve never seen anything like it, but I love it. |
| Student B: “I was thinking, you know we were talking about narratives and poems - I don’t know if you consider it an epic poem. I’ve never really read poems before, but I loved this.” |
| Student C: “Mrs. Ramp, you’re going to have to pick out all of my books for me now” |
| Student D: I feel like I talked a lot today but - I feel like what I took away from this was that both parties need to listen. Adults and kids so we can understand each other. I feel like they both need to you know come together and not be so against each other. (The class gave her snaps for this comment) |
| Student E: “I don’t like many books. That was a good book.” |
| Student A: “This reminds me of philosophy - like when she says God might be a metaphor. It reminds me of Niezsche - about man or something like that.” |
| Student D: Mami - I feel like she’s still holding a grudge. It took a whole book for her to understand. It shouldn’t have taken that long to talk to her daughter. That’s literally you in her. |
| Student F: “I agree. It shouldn’t take that long to change as a person - it shouldn’t take her leaving the house for y’all to have a rational conversation with her.” |
Student B: “Mami and Xio are like strangers and at the end, it’s like they’re meeting each other again for the first time. It’s hard to forget what Mami did - the book burning, that was a little too far.”

Reflection: Today was the last day of reading *The Poet X* – I thought it would be next class, but they insisted on continuing, so we put off our vocabulary work for later and kept on reading. I had a fairly good idea of how they felt about the text, but now that we have finished reading, it was satisfying to hear them vocalize their enjoyment. It was particularly satisfying to see the students who were skeptical at the beginning - the students who I constantly have to push to and encourage to do the reading in other units - say that they enjoyed the book. I was surprised to find that I did not have to push them as much to complete their annotation sticky notes; at the beginning of the unit, I assumed that I would have to circulate and prompt students to complete their sticky note annotations as we read. That was rare, though - and I have found that by doing the sticky note annotations, they were much more self-sufficient when it came to group discussions about the days’ reading and the focus question. Only two of twenty-four students did not have a completed sticky note annotation chart and that is a huge win.
14B. When was the last time that you had a discussion about a book that you enjoyed?
91 responses

- 67% This month
- 13.2% Three months ago
- 6.8% Six months ago
- 3.3% Last year
- 1.1% Never or hardly ever

15. Describe your level of engagement* during this unit of study when compared to our past units of study. *Engagement is defined as the interest you...unit of attention and focus you paid to the content.
91 responses

- 47.3% I was much more engaged throughout this unit compared to past units.
- 37.4% I was generally more engaged throughout this unit compared to past...
- 12.1% I was neither more nor less engaged during this unit than I was during other...
- 4.4% I was generally less engaged throughout this unit than I have been during other...
- 1.1% I was much less engaged throughout this unit than I have been during other...
APPENDIX I

STUDENT MULTIGENRE WORK

Figure II
CONVERSATION BETWEEN CHARACTERS

X: Hey do have the notes from English?

J: No, I wasn't there today.

X: You were with Romeo, weren't you?

J: Yes, but stop acting like you weren't with Cody.

X: That's none of your business. Anyways, it's not like we both aren't secretly dating someone.

J: True, if my mom finds out, she'll force me to date this creep named 'Paris'.

X: He probably is, ngl.

X: If my parents found out I was dating a guy, I'll most likely be forced to repent.

J: That sounds awful.

X: My sister is very brave for putting up with everything.

J: Wdym?

X: She's always fighting for someone, here or me, but I don't need her to but that doesn't mean I don't love her, I do ofc, but it seems she's too tough to show weakness in front of someone.

J: She sounds very brave. I hope I can be brave like her, but it's just hard sometimes, yk?

X: Ik, I just want her to know that I don't need her to fight for me anymore.

J: have you tried telling her that?
X: No, we didn't talk for little bit after she saw me with Cody.
X: When she first saw him, she called him, "White boy."

J: She was probably shocked you were with someone who isn't from your ethnicity.
J: I'm sure she meant well and since she's your twin, she feels like she should be the one to protect you.

X: Ikk! I just wish she could also see that I can be there for her too.
X: But she doesn't listen to me.

J: Maybe you could try talking to her.
J: Romeo came to my house last night, he was throwing pebbles at my window.

X: Really? Did he wake up your parents?
J: No, surprisingly, we just talked.

X: Ew, that's so cheesy.
J: Yea, alright.

X: What would you do if you two are forced apart.
J: I think I might die if we are ever pulled apart.
X: Lose the theatrics, pls.
J: Tbh, idk.
X: Why dont tell your parents?
J: Are you joking? I would be sent away.

X: Honestly same, my mami would lose it. She'll say, "Será mejor que ores para ser perdonado por este pecado rebelde."
For my project I chose the second focus question: “What expectations are placed on us by our families and/or communities?”. I chose this question because it had interested me in many ways, because of how many expectations are actually placed on people, whether it’s in stories or real life. I related to this question the most because of how many expectations my parents gave me ranging from them wanting me to do perfect in school, being kind to people, only getting A’s and B’s even when it’s sometimes a struggle. In these stories (Poet X and Romeo and Juliet) almost most of the characters had some sort of expectations placed on them because of either family drama, or their parents were just really strict. The things I’ve experienced because of the failed expectations I received from my parents took a huge toll on my mental health. Always having to only get A’s and B’s in school, if I got worse than a A or B I got in trouble.

The things I learned from this focus question is that at least every community is expected to follow a certain rule or expectation to be perfect. The things I least expected was how harse most expectations in Romeo and Juliet were. Juliet was expected to not even be near the Montague family let alone marry one, but she did anyways. Juliet (in Romeo and Juliet) was also expected to hate the Montagues even though she didn’t know what the whole family feuds were about. Juliet was also expected to marry a man she didn’t even love. Xiomara on the other hand she was expected to be the perfect young lady for her mother. She was expected to go to confirmation classes without complaining, have good grades, be religious like her mother, and she was expected to keep her house cleaned. According to her mom she was supposed to stick with her “gender role”. Both Juliet and Xiomara probably feels the same about everything because of how much things their parents had expected from them. If either character messed up with their expectations they had a harsh punishment from either of their parents.
WEEKLY FOCUS QUESTIONS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week One</th>
<th><strong>A Tale of Two Cities and The Hate U Give</strong></th>
<th><strong>Romeo and Juliet and The Poet X</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>1. In the opening scene of Angie Thomas’s novel, <em>The Hate U Give</em>, Starr reflects, “There are just some places where it’s not enough to be me. Either version of me.” In what places have you felt this same tension? In what ways is this tension particular to people from historically oppressed groups?*&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;*In his book, <em>The Souls of Black Folk</em>, W.E.B. DuBois referred to this tension as “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;Charles Darnay, the nephew of the Marquis, has been imprisoned at La Force. We discover in this chapter that there is a plan to murder the prisoners. Do you think it is fair for Darnay to pay this price even if his intentions were pure? Does his aristocrat status and relation to the Marquis make him guilty by default?</td>
<td>1. Xiomara wrote “As I got older/ I began to really see/ the way that church/ treats a girl like me different.” Similarly, through their actions, Romeo and Juliet both began to question what they’d been taught. As a teenager, when have you questioned the things you have been taught? What have you learned that is worth holding onto?</td>
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<td>2. Do you think Starr has a moral obligation to speak to the police? What does Starr sacrifice by speaking</td>
<td>2. Compare/contrast the lives of both sets of young people. What expectations are placed upon them by their families and</td>
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<td>Week  Three</td>
<td>3. In this chapter, Starr struggles to share her perspective on Khalil’s murder without having her words “twisted” by the officer leading the interview. Have you ever felt this frustration when dealing with an authority figure - like a parent or teacher? Like no matter what you say, they have already made up their mind about you? How could you compare this interaction to our reading of <em>A Tale of Two Cities</em>?</td>
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<td>Week  Four</td>
<td>4. How is revenge different than justice? Do you think the Defarge’s want revenge and/or justice against Charles Darnay? Do you think Starr wants revenge and/or justice against Officer One-Fifteen? 4. Consider both Act III, scene 1 of <em>Romeo and Juliet</em> and our reading of <em>Poet X</em>. What were the consequences of keeping secrets? Who held the secret and who paid the consequences in each reading? Do you think things will change for better or worse in Xiomara’s case now that her secret about Aman is out?</td>
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<td>Week  Five</td>
<td>5. At the beginning of this chapter, Starr describes the “riots and tear gas” that is happening beyond her door. How does this compare to the setting in <em>A Tale of Two Cities</em> for the Darnay’s? 5. There is conflict and distance between the teenage main characters and their families in both texts. What is the source of these conflicts? What do you think would have happened had Romeo and Juliet gone to their parents and explained their love,</td>
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<td>Do you think the responses from the protestors and the officers are justified? Necessary? Explain.</td>
<td>asking their families to work out their differences? What about Xiomara and Twin? What prevents us from speaking our truths to the adults in our lives?</td>
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<td><strong>Week Six</strong> 6. Consider Khalil and DeVante’s situations. What factors make it difficult for him to turn down or leave the gang? Do you think Maverick has an obligation to help him out of the King Lords? Did Charles Darnay have an obligation to help free Gabelle or did Sydney Carton have an obligation to free Charles Darnay? Explain.</td>
<td>6. How does poetry comment on what it is to be human?</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution</strong> 7. How is Starr’s struggle to be her authentic self resolved (or not) in our reading—through her fight with Hailey, her testimony to the grand jury, or her family’s upcoming move? Do you think there is a solution? How have Dr. Manette and Sydney Carton endeavored to prove themselves worthy through social rebirth? Are their struggles to redeem themselves resolved in our reading?</td>
<td>Students returned to previous questions as they worked on multigenre tasks: • To what extent should we question the things we have been taught? • What expectations are placed on us by our families and/or communities? • What prevents us from speaking our truths to the adults in our lives? • How can writing help empower us?</td>
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<td><strong>Unit Reflection</strong> Sacrifice is said to be an offering for the good of something or someone. Consider the sacrifices made in these texts by characters like Maverick, Charles Darnay, Khalil, and Sydney Carton. What was exchanged for their sacrifices, and was it worth the offering they gave?</td>
<td>Students returned to previous questions as they worked on multigenre tasks: • To what extent should we question the things we have been taught? • What expectations are placed on us by our families and/or communities? • What prevents us from speaking our truths to the adults in our lives?</td>
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<td>How can writing help empower us?</td>
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APPENDIX K

UNIT TEXT DESCRIPTIONS


After rescuing her father from prison in Paris, Lucie Manette brings him back home to London. There, she is wooed by two similar-looking men: Charles Darney is a Frenchman recently acquitted of being a spy, while Sydney Carton is a drunken lawyer's assistant. Eventually, Lucie and Charles marry. Not long after the French Revolution begins, Charles is called back to Paris to help someone in prison. Unfortunately, Charles is the nephew of a cruel nobleman, and the revolutionaries sentence him to death for his uncle's crimes. Sydney's love for Lucie may be the only thing that can save Charles's life. This unabridged version of Charles Dickens's classic tale, first published in England in 1859, explores the best and worst in human nature.


For Romeo and Juliet, it's love at first sight. But there's a problem: Romeo belongs to the Montague family, while Juliet is a Capulet. In Verona, these noble families are constantly feuding. In fact, they hate each other so much that the prince of Verona has stepped in and declared death to anyone
who disturbs the peace again. Forced to hide their love, the two secretly wed and plan to leave together. A string of miscommunication, however, may lead to a tragic end. This is an unabridged version of William Shakespeare's famous romantic tragedy, first published in England in 1599.


The book tells the story of 16-year-old Starr Carter, an African American who lives in a poor neighbourhood and goes to a private school in a wealthy, predominantly white suburb. Each day, Starr “code-switches”—the practice of shifting one’s style of speech, behaviour, or expression, often in order to fit in or to make others feel more comfortable. The gap between her home life and her school identity is further widened when Starr witnesses a white police officer shoot and kill her friend Khalil. She later learns that Khalil was unarmed but may have been a drug dealer. The rest of the story follows Starr as she navigates shock, grief, and betrayal and finally finds empowerment.


Sophomore Xiomara Batista is simultaneously invisible and hyper visible at home, at school, and in her largely Dominican community in Harlem—her body is "unhide-able" she tells readers early on, and she bristles at how others project their desires, insecurities, failures, and patriarchal attitudes toward her. Though she is quick to battle and defend herself and her twin brother Xavier, Xiomara's
inner life sensitively grapples with these projections and the expectations of her strict, religious mother. Acevedo's depiction of a faith in crisis is exceedingly relatable and teens, especially those going through the sacrament of Confirmation, will deeply appreciate Xiomara's thoughtful questioning of the Church and how it treats women. Forbidden kisses with a crush and an impromptu performance at an open mic prove to be euphoric, affirming moments for Xiomara. This book-inverse explores familial and religious expectations, burgeoning sexuality, gender roles, voice, identity, and agency.