

Meeting Diversity With a Multicultural English Elective  
Course

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Abstract

High school English teachers need to respond to the diversity of cultures that our schools possess, and be open-minded in our construction of the curriculum that English classes should encompass. There is a disconnect between the “core” books that drive curriculum and what really interests students. I am invested in the process of altering the “traditional” English curriculum at a suburban high school north of San Francisco by implementing a multicultural/ethnic literature course. My research examines student engagement in English classes when multicultural/ethnic texts are included, and whether or not an elective class with such texts would be of interest to students

Several theorists and researchers support multicultural education such as Sonia Nieto, Joan Rasool, Cheryl Curtis, James Banks, and Christine Sleeter to name a few. I am looking to adapt a multicultural approach in the formation of an English elective course. I will anchor my curriculum with the research and theoretical justifications that surround multicultural education, resistance theory, and critical/feminist pedagogies.

## Introduction

I began teaching at a suburban high school located in a suburban community north of San Francisco a year ago as an intern teacher, and I was immediately faced with the reality that I am at the bottom of hierarchical status within the English Department. Knowing this, I decided to keep a low profile and focus my attention on my grade level – 9th grade. At this level the core novels are engaging and interesting to high school students in general, and especially to our current population of students.

In the Curriculum Binder for the English Department, one will find the core books for each grade level and then “appropriate” supplemental texts that may be used in conjunction to the core books. However, supplemental texts are left to individual teacher’s preferences and time constraints. The core books for each grade level are as follows:

### **9th Grade**

*To Kill a Mocking Bird*, Harper Lee  
*The Odyssey*, Homer  
*Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare

### **10<sup>th</sup> Grade**

*Cry of the Beloved Country*, Alan Paton  
*Julius Caesar*, William Shakespeare  
*Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens  
*All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Remarque

### **11<sup>th</sup> Grade**

*The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald  
*Huck Finn*, Mark Twain  
*The Crucible* or *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller

### **12<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Elective Courses: Film as Literature, Futures, and Myth and Fantasy (texts vary)

Clearly, the core reading list is dominated by white, male authors from the United States. Alan Paton is from South Africa, Erich Remarque is from Germany, and Harper Lee is the only female writer. Realistically, students may go through four years in high school English classes without reading literature from an author of color or a female other than Harper Lee. Additionally, these core books have remained in the curriculum outline for decades. Thus, I am compelled to take an extensive look at an alternative curriculum, and for a way to introduce multicultural works in a “noninvasive” way.

I took some time to interview veteran teachers and the English Department chair, and it has become even clearer to me that I will have to introduce an elective course first before any changes will be made to the existing “core” pieces of Literature. There is an overwhelming traditional sense of the canon, the classics, and what the students should be reading. I am concerned with these larger questions such as: What is the canon? What is English, and I want to create intersectional routes for these questions to be explored and discussed within a multiethnic literature elective course. It would be my goal to infuse the existing curriculum with multicultural, more contemporary texts, but in order to avoid skepticism and opposition; I will go the elective route first. I also anticipate opposition from teachers who “try” to use multicultural/ethnic texts but find that they are “ineffective” because they feel unqualified to teach multicultural literature. This pattern of thought emerges as a result of teachers not only being engaged in multicultural approaches to secondary curriculum dialogue, but also as a result of their dualistic thinking patterns. School structures often emphasize binary thinking and stress oppositional terms – i.e. yes/no, right/wrong, and pro/con. Moving toward dualistic thinking means thinking “outside the box” and offering multiplicity to discussion.

Ultimately, I want to design an elective course based on multicultural/ethnic literature that can be implemented at my school. While I intend to map out the theoretical anchors of multicultural education, I also want to take an extensive look at the structure of the existing curriculum at my high school and compare this to the changing demographics. It is my hope that by creating a Multicultural/Ethnic Literature Course that includes authors representative of the current student population will serve as a catalyst to introduce new material into the “core” reading across all grade levels.

*Statement of Problem*

The core literature list currently used by the high school English Department does not include literature which is engaging for the growing and changing student body. “Core” pieces must be exhausted before “supplemental,” usually high interest texts, are introduced to students. Is there research which would support a call to revamp the curriculum?

*Purpose Statement*

I explore research related to the use of multicultural literature with high school students; its role in engaging students and leading them to higher levels of achievement– the strengths, debates, various formats, methods, and results. I want to use this research as a rationale for my design of an elective course based on multicultural/ethnic literature. I hope that an elective which is successful will lead to a change in the high school curriculum

*Research Question*

Are high school students more engaged when multicultural/ethnic texts are embedded within the curriculum, and would a course that focuses solely on multicultural texts be of interest to students?

### Theoretical Rationale

Multicultural education has been conceptualized in many ways, mainly as both a comprehensive and “add-on” approach to developing curriculum. Multicultural education gives educators the opportunity to respond to diversity within a classroom, and it gives students the ability to sensitively respond to one another. Sonia Nieto defines multicultural education as:

A process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the schools’ curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions among teachers, students, families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice (2004, p. 346).

This working definition poses the opportunity to introduce a more inclusive and balanced curriculum. It can then transform the school environment, and use student’s experiences and backgrounds to promote an understanding about our global society. In short, Nieto claims that the main characteristic of multicultural education is that it is antiracist education, basic education, important for all students, pervasive, education for social justice, a process, and critical pedagogy.

Multicultural education and the ideas surrounding its implementation come with a history. While it is commonly believed that multicultural education had its formal beginning in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement, there was in fact discussion about cultural pluralism in the 1900s. “Cultural pluralism refers to a belief that different ethnic or cultural groups should retain their heritage and culture while becoming part of mainstream culture.

Cultural and linguistic differences are accepted by the dominant culture” (Rasool, 2000, p. 2). Waves of immigration from people of eastern and southern Europe came to the United States beginning in the 1880s, and the question became how should the U.S. deal with the changing demographics? This question is still prevalent today, but immigrants come to the U.S. from all over the globe. Cultural pluralists then look at ways to balance the process of assimilation and maintaining one’s culture. Today, educators look at the inequities within the education system, but they also look beyond just racial and ethnic groups because it has now expanded to include “issues of gender, class, language, ability, religion, and sexual orientation, although not uniformly” (Rasool, 2000, p. 4).

An important aspect of multicultural education discussed by Rasool and Curtis (2000) is “equal opportunity defined by equal outcomes for marginalized groups, rather than just equal access” (p.9). This means that multicultural education must emphasize social action. It does not just celebrate diversity, but it takes an extensive look at the interlocking systems of oppression that inherently exist in society.

Using multicultural education as foundational thought has prompted James Banks (Rasool, 2000) to consider a “reinterpretation of western civilization” (p.26). Banks explains:

rather than excluding Western civilization from the curriculum, multiculturalists want a more truthful, complex, and diverse version of the West taught in schools [...] they also want schools to discuss not only the diversity and democratic ideals of Western civilization, but also its failures, tensions, dilemmas, and struggles by various groups in Western societies to realize their dreams against great odds (p. 26).

Banks notion advocates an environment that legitimizes all types of topics, texts, and authors. Hence, a literature class in a secondary setting that promotes multiple voices, ethnicities, authors, and ways of knowing would reflect the experiences and perspectives of all students, while responding to the cultural diversity within public schools.

Feminist and critical pedagogies foster change in both sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts to advocate voice, change, and an appreciation for diversity. These pedagogies focus on liberation and concentrate on larger societal structures that prohibit the construction of knowledge. In order to facilitate student voices, these theories emphasize and recognize the “significance of diverse perspectives and multiple voices. Feminists ask, how is knowledge constructed? Whose stories get to be told?”(Rasool, 2000, p. 19)

Emphasis on personal identity and voice in classrooms additionally draws upon an understanding of resistance theory. Essentially, resistance theory explains why students are often engaged in a form of resistance against the education to which they are exposed. Although there is not a simple answer as to why students participate in behaviors that reject the learning process, there is the “probable element of a school climate that rejects students’ identities” (Nieto, 2004, p. 268). Probing through multiculturalists’ theories, feminist and critical pedagogy, and finally resistance theory, emphasizes the need to critically examine existing curriculum within high schools.

### *Assumptions*

If students can identify with what they read, and see themselves in the “window and the mirror” (1988, p. 1) as Emily Style coined the phrase, then students will want to learn. Style argues that students should have a balance of windows that frame others lives and mirrors that reflect their own. In the existing curriculum, particularly for female and

minority students, they have been trained to look through windows not mirrors. Given this opportunity, students will immediately embrace the texts, and display heightened interest.

Another key assumption is that before I can begin to articulate the development of a multicultural curriculum, I must first address my own positionality. Positionality refers to the construction of meaning through experiences and interactions. While positionality is influenced by a variety of contexts, it does have the capacity to change over time. Martin addresses that when multicultural education is included “it is most likely in a single course often taught by people of color and/or untenured female faculty members whose efforts are tokenized and marginalized” (1995, p. 147). How can I avoid a tokenistic perception of this course? Furthermore, I am not only female, but White and middle class which purports the fact that I have been embedded within a framework that enforces classic literature and standard English.

While, I have been invested throughout my undergraduate experience at University of California, Davis to understand different ways of knowing outside of dominant pedagogies, and minored in Social and Ethnic relations in conjunction with my English major – I still come from a background of White privilege. From the social positionality perspective, it must be understood that “social positionality has both subjective and objective dimensions” (Howard, 1999, p. 29). I may not see myself as dominant, but I have to acknowledge that collectively Whites have as Howard explains, “been allocated disproportionate amounts of power, authority, wealth, control, and dominance” (1999, p. 29). Essentially, my role as a White teacher focusing on multicultural education is to provide my students and myself with a clearer understanding of the dynamics of dominance. I want to be instrumental in shifting education to a more equitable and inclusive position.

With awareness of my own positionality comes my own feminist pedagogy which will inevitably be submerged within my proposed course. For me, basic tenets of feminist pedagogy include: challenging particular hierarchies that create and distribute knowledge -, i.e. the canon, and department curriculum; recognizing the essential importance of examining the experiences of women and marginalized groups; and being attentive to issues of differences, which includes questioning social power and the notion that there is no universal truth. Curtis and Rasool claim “Feminist pedagogy emphasizes personal relationships, aesthetics, and affect in the construction of knowledge” (2000, p 19). This foundational thinking has led me to questions such as whose stories get told, and whose don’t? Therefore, my premise for a multicultural elective course will be to have multiple voices heard and explored.

### *Background and Need*

In 2006, there was a quantitative and qualitative study done to investigate the questions: 1) What are the book-length works most frequently taught in the state’s [Alabama] public secondary schools? 2) What are English teachers’ reasons for including or excluding multicultural literature in their curricula? (Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2006, p. 481) This project began as a follow-up to an earlier 1997 study that investigated the extent to which English language arts teachers in one southern U.S. state’s public schools integrate multicultural literature with the curriculum. The 2006 study extended the earlier research by again using a survey to “identify the book-length works they include in their curriculum” (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, p. 479)

Also, in 2006 the High School Survey of Student Engagement used a mixed qualitative and quantitative survey to examine student engagement and boredom in class. It

was an effort to understand what students say about their involvement in the school community to better articulate the process of exploring student engagement. Student responses were analyzed to review patterns and trends about what students internalize as their priorities and experiences in high school.

Seeing the need to infuse more multicultural texts into English curriculum, a research team charted students “literary engagement in two diverse settings: a technology magnet school in the urban southwest and a rural high school in Hawaii” (Bean, Valerio, p.32) This was a qualitative study done with twenty-two 9th grade students’ in 2001 to investigate reading engagement and interpretation of a young adult multicultural novel dealing with biethnic identity. The research question was: What are the characteristics of students’ writing during the reading and interpretation of a multicultural young adult novel?

## Review of the Literature

To interpret the empirical research that analyzes student engagement and the use of multicultural literature in high school, there are four main categories: *Engagement Defined*, *Engagement Perspective*, and *Multiculturalism and the “good literature” debate*, and finally *Establishing a Multicultural Course*. *Engagement Defined* includes the investigation of The High School Survey of Student Engagement to understand attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs that students have about their school environments. Student responses in the survey can then be used to guide changes to the existing curriculum and call for school reform. *Engagement Perspective* investigates student’s ability and interest to think critically and write about multicultural texts in a charted study on literary engagement. *Multiculturalism and the “good literature” debate* analyzes in a mixed quantitative and qualitative study, what is the perception of multicultural literature? Finally, *Establishing a Multicultural Course* examines approaches to the development of a multicultural literature course utilizing models from Leadership High in San Francisco, and Downingtown High School in Philadelphia.

### *Engagement Defined*

Student engagement can be described as the student’s relationship with the school community: the people (adults and peers), the structures (rules, facilities, schedules), the curriculum and content, the pedagogy, and the opportunities” (Yazzie-Mintz, date p.1) While it is acknowledged by both schools and researchers that understanding student engagement is a challenge, it nevertheless is of tremendous benefit to attempt to give schools the opportunity to bring to light student voices regarding their learning environments. In the

High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) researchers wanted to build a foundation for understanding how students engage with their school communities.

In Spring 2006, 110 schools from 26 different states in the U.S. participated in the HSSSE survey. The participating schools ranged from 37 students to 3881 students, 27% of the respondents were in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 29% were in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 25% were 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and 19% were in grade 12. In terms of racial/ethnic identification, students were asked to identify themselves by race and or ethnicity and 54% identified themselves as White, White American, or European, 16% preferred not to respond, 9% identified as Black or African American, 7% identified as Latino, Hispanic, or Spanish origin, 7% identified as multiracial, 2% identified as American Indian, Alaska Native, or Hawaiian, 4% identified as Middle Eastern, and finally 1% identified as Asian American or Pacific Islander. (Yazzie-Mintz 2006)

The study began with an attempt to understand the foundational reasoning of why students go to the school. For the question: *Why do you go to school?* 73% said “Because I want to get a degree and go to college.” 68% replied with “Because of my peers/friends” and 58% responded with “Because it is the law.” Only 39% said “Because of what I learn in classes” (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006)

Students were asked, *Have you ever been bored in class in high school?* Most of the students claimed they were bored at least every day, if not in every class. “Two out of three students are bored in class in high school at least every day.” (Yazzie-Mintz:5) 17% of the respondents are bored in every class in high school, and only 2% of the students surveyed claimed they have never been bored.

In the question that asked students, *If you have thought about dropping out of high school, why?* In reply, the reasons included, 60% saying, “I didn’t see the value in the work I was being asked to do, 42% said because of family issues, 35% said, I needed to work for money, and 24% said, no adults at the school cared about me” (Yazzie-Mintz, p. 5).

### *Engagement Perspective*

Researchers explored secondary English students’ interpretation of the young adult novel, *Heartbeat, Drumbeat* from an engagement perspective. Specifically, the researchers looked at the question: What are the characteristics of students’ writing during the reading and interpretation of a multicultural young adult novel?

Twenty-two 9th grade high school students in two different high schools – a technology magnet school in the southwest, and a rural high school in Hawaii were charted on their performance on interpretation journals and research papers as they read a young adult multicultural novel.

The research team consisted of a literacy professor, a doctoral student in literacy, and two high school English teachers. They took on the role of participant-observers, and each author kept a “journal of reflections and field notes, along with printed copies of all e-mail conversations. Student data included journal free writing, including autobiographies, character interpretation dialogue journal entries responding to key probe questions; and a research paper on the cultural authenticity of the Navajo ceremonies in the novel” (Bean, Valerio, 2001, p. 34).

“On the basis of 21 journal entries from 7 of the students considered in the analysis, 48% of the of entries fell into the interpretive category, and 23% demonstrated personal reactions.” (Bean & Valerio, 2001, p.34) Throughout the student journal entries, the

researchers claimed that holistically, “the students treated the characters and events as if they were real. The novel captivated their interest and enthusiasm, despite some professed disdain for reading” (Bean & Valerio, 2001, p. 35) The research paper assigned to other students based on the multicultural text were described as, “carefully and reflectively discerning problems in some areas of cultural representation” (Bean & Valerio 2001, p. 34-36). In short, the qualitative analysis of student journal entries and research papers showed that they “felt a sense of agency in reading and interpreting the novel. Students in both sites felt empowered to agree or disagree among themselves and with their teachers” (Bean, Valerio, p. 37).

#### *Multiculturalism and the “Good Literature” Debate*

Many English teachers hold the belief that good literature is classic literature, and therefore multicultural literature would not be considered “good literature.” In a 2006 study led by Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber, they focus on teacher’s selections of book-length works and their “perspectives on teaching multicultural literature versus traditional literature” (p. 479).

The study involved 142 English language arts teachers employed in 72 different public secondary schools in Alabama. The racial makeup of the public school population is 60.2% white, 36.3% black, 1.8% Hispanic, 0.9% Asian, and 0.8% American Indian. (Stallworth, Gibbons, Fauber, p. 481). The researchers looked at the question: Which English books are taught most frequently in Alabama high schools? The quantitative data was analyzed to create the lists of top 10 works and view existing patterns. Included in the top 10 were: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Crucible*, *Macbeth*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Animal Farm*,

*and Wuthering Heights*. This list reflects a “traditional pattern and promotes a Eurocentric and patriarchal bias” (Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2001, p. 482)

Qualitative analysis done by Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2001) examined the question, “What are English teachers’ reasons for including or excluding multicultural literature in their curricula?” The researchers found, that “many teachers who otherwise want to include noncanonical works do not because they fear the potential (real or imagined) problems when parents, colleagues, administrators, students, and the community disagree with the content of the literature curriculum” (p. 484). Another theme that emerged in the qualitative analysis was that teachers can not include multicultural texts because of the lack of resources. In other words, teachers have to work with what is in the book room. Lastly, researchers asked teachers whether they included book-length works from authors of non-European descent, “several teachers reported that their own lack of knowledge about multicultural literature restricted their curricular choices” (p. 485).

#### *Establishing a Multicultural Literature Course*

Through my observations and communication with the English Department at Leadership High School in San Francisco, I became familiar with their multicultural approach to literature. The school structure stresses interdisciplinary study and students read texts about or by people of color all four years in their English classes (T. Johnston, personal communication, October 24, 2007). “World Studies is a ninth grade humanities course that combines World History and English 9 to study people from all over the world” (Johnston p.1). In this way, students are reading books about the lives of the people they are studying in history. Johnston writes, “This helps us put a human face to the history we are learning” (p.1). “The world studies course has essential goals which include fostering a community of

ninth graders with a shared experience, exposing students to new places, people, and ideas and pushing them to think about the human rights in the world, and to give students an academic foundation in reading, writing, speaking, critical thinking, group work, and personal responsibility – to be successful in high school in high school and adult life” (p.1). It was clear through my observations that students had a sense of purpose and were intimately involved with the texts.

The World Studies English 9 course focuses on several historical moments. When students are learning about Nigeria, South Africa, and the colonization of Africa they are reading *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. As students study Latin America, The Dominican Republic, dictatorship and democracy they read *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez. Students discover China and the Cultural Revolution and simultaneously read *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Dai Sijie. While students learn about Communism and Revolutionary Russia they read *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. The last unit of study involves World War I and II in Europe and the Holocaust, and students read *Night* by Elie Wiesel.

During tenth students read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat, and *Othello* by William Shakespeare. English 11 is called American Literature and focuses on literature written in and about the Americas, with a focus on what has become the United States. “It looks extensively on what makes American Literature “American,” what authors and characters from various time periods, geographical locations, and identities say about American history and culture, and what literature has to tell us about justice, equality, and freedom in the Americas” (Johnston p. 5). In this class students read *The Joy Luck Club* by

Amy Tan, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told by Alex Haley, *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston.

This emphasis on multicultural literature at Leadership High continues through twelfth grade, yet more “traditional” pieces of canon literature are introduced during their last year. However, as Johnston states, “these seniors spend three years reading books about people who look like them, so by the time they get to British Literature they don’t feel as much of a need for a book to connect to in that sense.”

In terms of multicultural literature at Downingtown High School in suburban Philadelphia it was more of an integrated approach. In other words, this school supported traditional canonical pieces of literature and did not organize their school for interdisciplinary study or opportunities to read authors of color as Leadership High School established. Nancy Robinson in the *English Journal* in 2001 states, “Holding fast to our traditional canon at the secondary level was no longer an option. As a result of Pennsylvania State Standards that emerged in the 1990s [...] it became obvious to our English Department that the curriculum we had been working with was outdated” (p. 69). Robinson continues to explain that minority writers were not positively represented and students lacked a clear picture of the real world. She exclaims, “We taught the works of dead white guys in a world that was no longer predominately white and male and certainly not dead” (p. 69).

Robinson expressed interest to add minority writers to the English curriculum at a school board meeting. She explained that that the timing was right and a board member said, “Challenge us. I think we’re ready” (p. 69). Obviously, this signifies a shift in philosophical thinking about what an English curriculum should and should not encompass. Robinson gathered a team of teachers to research different possibilities. They found that their students

read so many American and British authors “that it is no wonder they believe that there are no other writers of merit” (p.69). They decided to alter the curriculum across grade levels. For ninth grade they added *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe to replace *The Red Badge of Courage*, and for tenth grade they added *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *The Color of Water* by James McBride to replace *A Separate Peace*. For eleventh grade they added *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Meyers and *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingslover to replace *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Heart in a Lonely Hunter*. In twelfth grade they added *My Children, My Africa* by Athol Fugard to replace *Cry the Beloved Country*. (p.69)

These additions provided their students with a different world view and introduced them to authors outside the canon. After three years of success with this multicultural literature program, they are now offering a multicultural literature elective course that is open to seniors. This course stresses modern works and takes a thematic approach.

## Multicultural Literature Curriculum

It is my intention to provide a culturally relevant curriculum that is both conducive to a suburban high school's demographic climate and multicultural in terms of the teaching approach. In other words, I am not just simply providing a course description that centers on multicultural texts to read, but I am including ways to integrate a multicultural teaching approach to become a culturally relevant teacher.

In the *Assumptions* portion, I reflected on my own cultural/ethnic background to be aware of my positionality and how I have been taught to read and study Language Arts. I have to become aware of both my students and my own racial identity and its instructional implications. Rasool and Curtis emphasize a few more steps to become a culturally relevant teacher:

- Review instructional approaches and cultural patterns of communication. Create a welcoming and affirming classroom environment.
- Set specific goals for pluralizing your content.
- Learn about culturally relevant literacy practices.
- Develop alternative ways of assessment.
- Reach out to families and communities to support your students' learning.
- Become knowledgeable about special education and students of color.
- Keep yourself informed. Listen to critics; their voices are valuable. They challenge and clarify your ideas.
- Remember that both you and your students are learners in the process. If empowerment is a goal you have for your students, then it's your goal too. (p. 147-148)

Ultimately, empowerment is my goal, and I want the course to focus on a transformative and social action approach rather than just an additive approach. This curriculum has students read about and investigate individuals historically omitted from the curriculum, it examines the American experience from a variety of perspectives (African-American, Native-American, Latin-American, etc.), and applies today's social issues to our reading material. Additionally, instead of choosing one Hispanic novel, one African American novel, etc. I have chosen to cover the literature by looking at one overarching essential question, and then setting up theme and issue based units that integrate various multicultural works.

### **Course goals/major student outcomes**

Students will develop their skills in reading, thinking, writing, listening, and speaking through in-depth study of multicultural literature and through researching informational materials. The course of study addresses California state standards for grade twelve. Specifically, students will 1) appreciate the value of non-canonical works, 2) develop and reinforce critical thinking and analytical skills, 3) be motivated to view literature critically rather passively and 4) feel empowered to make social change.

### **Objectives/Standards**

1. Students will read and respond to culturally or historically significant literature, analyzing recurrent themes in depth. Focus is also on subgenres (e.g. parody, allegory, satire), analysis of irony, tone, mood, style, imagery, etc. Standards: Grade 11/12 Reading 3.1-3.7, 3.8-3.9

2. Students will learn the difference between primary and secondary sources, and acknowledge how individual positionality affects how information is presented and understood. Standards: Grade 11/12 Reading 3.8-3.9
3. Students will learn how to recognize power and privilege inequities in society through awareness and exposure to many voices and perspectives. Standards: Grade 11/12 Reading 3.5-3.7
4. Students will write coherent and focused essays that convey a well-defined perspective and tightly reasoned argument, using clear, precise language. Major essays will include: narrative, response to literature, reflective composition, historical investigation report, multimedia presentation. Standards: Writing 1.1-1.3, 1.4-1.9, 2.1-2.4, 2.6
5. Students will analyze the effect of organizational patterns and the use of diction and syntax on clarity and meaning, as well as make warranted and reasonable assertion about the author's explicit and implicit assumptions and beliefs. Standards: Reading 2.1-2.6, Writing 1.1-1.3, 1.4-1.5, Listening/Speaking 1.1-1.10
6. Students will respond to multiple interpretations of works and make connections to current local and global issues. Standards: Reading 3.7-3.9
7. Students deliver polished formal and extemporaneous presentations that combine traditional rhetorical strategies of narration, exposition, persuasion, and description. Oral presentations will include reflective presentation, report on historical investigation, and multimedia presentation. Standards: Listening/Speaking 1.11-1.14, 2.1-2.5

## **Course Outline Topics/Themes**

Course Essential Question: “What can literature teach us about developing a consciousness towards realizing a just, equal, and free America?” (Johnston, p.1)

### Theme/Issue Based Units

#### 1. Identity

-excerpts from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

-excerpts from *When I was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago

- *My Invented Country* by Isabel Allende

- *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya

#### 2. Immigration

- *Paper Son: One Man's Story* by Tung Chin

- *Lives on the Line: Dispatches from the U.S.-Mexican Border* by Miriam Davidson

#### 3. Perspectives on Racism

- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told by Alex Haley

- *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

#### 4. Gender in Contemporary America

- *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth* by Jay Mechling

- *Free Your Mind: The Book for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth* by Ellen Bass; Kate Kaufman

## **Instructional Methods/Strategies**

-encourage students to think critically about inequality and raise awareness through:

\*lecture

\*discussion collectively and in small groups

- \* group work
- \* interviews from factions of the school community (parents, administrators, community leaders, and other students)
- \* journal writing
- \* film
- \* individual and group work oral presentations
- \* library/media center research
- \* role-play
- \* pen-pals with students outside of the United States
- \*debates/Socratic seminar
- \*community service
- \*class meetings

**Assessment Methods and/or Tools**

- Student portfolios to show student development and achievement over time with teacher annotations
- Formal seminars/debates
- Student Journals/Interactive Notebooks
- In-class writing, class activities
- Essays and Projects (Both individual and group)

**Assessment Criteria**

- Base each project/writing assignment on assessment rubrics that are authentic and address student's critical thinking capabilities

- Encourage self reflection and performance assessment by students to engage in a dialogue between teacher and students

**Expected Results**

- Heightened student response to Literature
- Increased student participation
- Student's feel empowered to address some of society's problems
- Student's become problem solvers and analyze the consequences of their actions  
(Rasool, Curtis, 2000, p.140)
- Students realize that this course is more than just an introduction to non-White authors
- Students are able to address the essential question with insightful and meaningful dialogue

## Discussion

Overall, the major findings in terms of multicultural literature in high school settings shows that students do take a more active role in their learning when they use a novel dealing with biethnic identity as defined by the Bean and Valerio study. Engagement is a major precursor to academic success and involvement in the school community, and the HSSSE Survey shows that there is an overwhelming sense of boredom in class, and many students feel like what they learn in school has no relevance to them. Furthermore, according to the Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber study, schools still use the same text names that have been popular for decades, and teachers feel that they lack the expertise in multicultural literature to diversify the current curriculum with more multicultural texts. Additionally, teachers said that they lack the resources to include different literature choices.

There needs to be more research investigating the potential link between the engagement gap and the achievement gap. Currently, there is more research needed to explore if a core English class that focuses exclusively on multicultural literature would increase engagement and scholastic achievement for high school students – especially with a demographically diverse student body. If multicultural texts increase engagement and scholastic achievement increases – why not create an English course that focuses exclusively on reading, analyzing, and discussing multicultural/ethnic works?

I designed a plan on how to implement a multicultural literature elective course at the high school level, based on my observations at Leadership High in San Francisco, and my research of the program at Downingtown High School in Philadelphia. This program caters to the needs and demographics of my students. I address questions such as: Who are my

students? What gaps exist in terms the literature they read throughout their four years of high school? What would benefit them? I then address expected results and ways to approach the novels I have selected for the course. It is my hope to introduce this course in the near future and continue to work with the English Department to integrate literature that empowers our students.

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