

**DIVERSITY IN LITERATURE AND STUDENTS' CONNECTION**

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### **Abstract**

The claim that most teachers at the middle-level grades do not have inclusive materials throughout their curriculum and may or may not understand the impact of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and thus, students of various ethnicities will not be as engaged in their learning was proved using questionnaires. These questionnaires were created in such a way as to provide reliable and valid results and were measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. A full literature review on the importance of the topic CRT has been conducted as to prove the need for this study. The results were processed through data analysis software to determine the descriptive and inferential statistics. These statistics were analyzed to determine if there is any correlation in the results of different groupings. The findings of this comparison were used to write recommendations to the unit office for future professional development opportunities for the staff to ensure diversity and inclusiveness of literary materials throughout the middle-level curriculum in all content areas and grade levels.

## INTRODUCTION

### Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to determine if students feel culturally represented in literature within their classrooms. In addition, determining if teachers use a diverse selection of materials for their curriculum proved that even though studies show the importance of students seeing themselves in the material, most teachers do not have a diverse enough selection.

Previous studies have shown that if students do not see themselves in the literary content that teachers use for lessons, then they will not engage as much which will hinder their learning (Handsfield, 2016). I believe that most teachers are unaware of this need and often get caught up in the need to get through standards so they pick what they are comfortable teaching. Since most teachers are Caucasian, this does not promote a lot of diversity in literary material. In this study, I have shed light on this as a problem and proved that students will be more engaged and thus, gain more knowledge when they see themselves in the content chosen. Personally, I have tried to diversify my texts in order for all students to connect and relate. Just using authors of varying ethnicities is not enough. We need to have discussions that incorporate the stories of all ethnicities so all students can engage and learn from one another. The world is still very full of white male privilege and teachers have a responsibility to change this. For example, author and researcher, Davis E. Kirkland, discusses in his book titled, *A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Black men*, the problem with just sharing one story on black history is that it becomes the only story that knowledge and stereotypes are based on for all students (2013). Students of color will remain silent as they have for years based on their “oppressors” (Kirkland, 2013). Kirkland professes that sharing narratives and real stories through discussions can bring deeper learning about different races and help end the oppression. (2013). It is important for all students

to be portrayed accurately and often in order for all students to gain a better understanding of one another and their cultures. Through varying literature in the classroom to include multiple ethnicities throughout the year, students of color will be more engaged as they will feel more connected to their learning. While this topic has been previously studied, the importance of the subject is worth repeating in order to create or elevate change as the data shows we are still promoting oppression in the classrooms for many students.

### **Background of Study**

My research is based on the Critical Race Theory from a book titled, Literacy Theory as Practice: Connecting Theory and Instruction in K-12 Classrooms by Lara J. Handsfield (2016). I issued a questionnaire to teachers and students throughout my school in order to show the need is present. I plan to share my findings with the appropriate individuals at the unit office in order to encourage future professional development for teachers.

### **Purpose of Study**

Students read more and learn best when they feel represented within their classroom and from their teachers however, most teachers' text materials are not diverse enough within their curriculum. Bringing a repeat awareness to the need for students to be represented in the literary materials is important if we are to help groups of students achieve success. Critical Race Theory (CRT) suggests that if you are not a white male you are negatively affected by the current educational system (Handsfield, 2016). Social cultures and historical experiences are not shared in lessons for students of all colors and this is having a negative impact on their learning and creating an unfair advantage for white students. The educational gap that is often discussed still exists and bringing an awareness of CRT in education will help educate the teachers and administrators and what more needs to be done.

## **Research Questions**

- Do students feel represented in the literary content their teachers use?
- Do students engage more when they feel represented in the literature?
- Do teachers attempt to use a diverse amount of literary content?
- Do teachers need more training to understand the need of diverse literary texts?

## **Hypothesis**

Middle-level students need diverse texts that represent themselves in order to want to engage and learn more. Those same students will learn better from a teacher that they feel acknowledges the diversity and works to include various, diverse texts within the lessons. Through the lens of CRT, I have shown that when students are not represented in the literary materials teachers use in class, they will not be as engaged in their learning. I also have shown that while teachers think they are being inclusive, they need more professional development training to ensure success.

## **Significance of the Study**

English teachers are always questioning when and how to encourage reading so that students will do more of it. I have read from experts who believe teachers need to have all students of all races and genders represented in the texts they use (Handsfield, 2016). I put an emphasis on the middle school level and especially entering 6th graders and hope my findings can be used by our school and/or district curriculum leaders so they can better stock our shared teacher library and so all teachers in all subjects will ensure their classroom library is diverse as well as the materials they choose in their curriculums. CRT is not new, but is new to be considered in planning curriculum so I hope that I shed more light on it in the middle-level area.

If we want all students to become productive members of society, than this topic is relevant and important in our current educational system. There is more than enough research done to prove that it is necessary to choose literary materials that all students can relate to in order to give them an equal opportunity at an education. For example, in a study conducted by M. Astolfi, where language arts teachers and students were interviewed, found there wasn't a significant diversity in the literature used for learning and asked teachers to change their texts (2012). As a result, students were discussing and reading more than before and the teachers agreed that students need to see themselves in the stories to develop connections and enjoy the reading (Astolfi, 2012). In another study of two 10<sup>th</sup>-grade English classes at an urban high school conducted by Steven Z. Athanases, students reported connecting to the diverse text more because they had shared experiences with the characters (1998). Martha Jean Goughnour also held a survey of teachers, parents, and students from a high school's English classes and the results concluded that the students felt teachers saw them as more than just students when diverse text was incorporated into their learning (2013). Proving my hypothesis by using my own school district to showcase the need for literary diversity is a step in the direction of creating necessary change both at my school's level and for local society.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Critical Race Theory and Literature**

#### **Introduction: Definition & Purpose**

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework in the social sciences that uses critical theory to examine society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race and power. It is "the view that race, instead of being biologically grounded and natural, is socially constructed and that race, as a socially constructed concept, functions as a means to maintain the

interests of the white population that constructed it in early history. According to CRT, racial inequality emerges from the social, economic, and legal differences that white people create between “races” to maintain elite white interest in labor markets and politics and as such create the circumstances that give rise to poverty and criminality in many minority communities. Though the intellectual origins of the movement go back much further, the CRT movement officially organized itself in July 1989.” (Curry, 2018)

“As marginalized people we should strive to increase our power, cohesiveness, and representation in all significant areas of society. We should do this though, because we are entitled to these things and because fundamental fairness requires this allocation of power.”(Delgado, 2009, p 110)

This paper is meant to bring to light the many ways CRT is affecting our educational system and society at large. It focuses on the ways history has set up races and socioeconomic groups to have a gap and the inequity of the fairness that is produced. It proves that the educational system needs to focus on appropriate changes and allowances in order to gain equity for all students. These findings are from a literature research review.

## **Literature Review**

Ford and Airhihenbuwa state, “Critical Race Theory is an emerging transdisciplinary, race-equity methodology that originated in legal studies and is grounded in social justice. Critical Race Theory's tools for conducting research and practice are intended to elucidate contemporary racial phenomena, expand the vocabulary with which to discuss complex racial concepts, and challenge racial hierarchies.” (2011)

Milner has concluded that poverty has an influence and affects the outcome of students. Using the Critical Race Theory lens to look at the educational system, it shows the “oppression,

marginalization, racism, inequity, hegemony, and discrimination” that are “ingrained in the fabric of policies, practices, institutions, and systems...that have important bearings on students.” (Milner, 2013) While people in poverty are not there based solely on their race, it is a factor when experiencing the world around them, including their education. We know that more students of color are in poverty than white students and therefore, the educational system needs to address the why behind this and find ways to support all students to have equity in education.

In another article Burton states, “In the millennium's inaugural decade, 2 interrelated trends influenced research on America's families of color: the need for new knowledge about America's growing ethnic/racial minority and immigrant populations and conceptual advances in critical race theories and perspectives on colorism.” (2010) Inequality and socioeconomic mobility along with the racial socialization of children were discovered trends that show education is still based on past white needs. To emphasize this claim Sablan states, “Critical race theory (CRT) has been used in educational literature to emphasize the influence of racism on educational opportunity and the assets of students of color. (2018) Quantitative methods and data prove results that show these inequities. This empirical study proves more quantitative methods should be used in future CRT studies.

The K-12 school system is not the only area of need. Harper’s article analyzes examples of people of color on their college campuses and if and how they are contributing to racial inequities. (2012) “The analysis found three consistent trends: (a) racial disparities are overwhelmingly attributed to factors other than racism, (b) scholars use semantic substitutes for "racism `` and "racist,” and (c) critical race theory is rarely used for conceptual sense-making.” (Harper, 2012)



Barnes journal article employs, “Sociologists, even those who may not readily identify as critical race theorists, generally acknowledge that racial inequality is the result of more than the collective pathology of individuals, that there is a "structure" in place-comprised of institutions, policies, and norms-that reproduces and maintains inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2015). (2016) Social scientists agree that there needs to be more empirical data on this subject so we can then learn where and how to make changes that will lead to an equity for all races. Barnes had three suggestions for how to reshape the research for fairness and validity and they are: “(1) race should be studied as a process rather than as an outcome; (2) researchers should design more comparative studies that look at race, racism, and racialization across racial groups; and (3) researchers should pay careful attention to the conceptualization of race being used in research” (2016)

Research and empirical data are far and few between but do exist. In the study by Paul-Emile it provides “groundbreaking research that distinguishes the impact of race from that of other variables affecting individuals’ social experiences to demonstrate the ways in which race has a significant, and often negative, independent effect.” (2015) Scholars used statistical analysis to show the following situations where race was the dominating factor that provided inequity amongst the races: “law enforcement officers are more likely to erroneously identify as criminal faces with features suggestive of black or African American heritage than faces with features suggestive of white ancestry; when sent emails requesting opportunities to discuss research, university professors across disciplines are more likely to respond to emails sent by students with stereotypically white names than students with stereotypically black, Latino, or Asian names; among job applicants with similar qualifications and criminal histories, whites receive job offers at higher rates than blacks and Latinos; and whites with a purported recent

felony conviction are more likely to receive a job offer than blacks and Latinos without criminal records.” (Paul-Emile, 2015)

In regards to education, this inequity shows itself in Artiles writing whereas, “The author argues for an interdisciplinary perspective to study the complexities of educational equity and transcend the limits of previous research.” (2011) He examines that student’s answers to assessments can vary based on their racial culture and in the case of a possible scholarship, it may provide a window into the student’s ethnicity wherein then bias could be a factor in choosing recipients. The author agrees that there needs to be much more research and analysis of data to see where the breakdown starts and study how to right it.

One way to improve on the inequity is in our educational literacy curriculum. Children learn best when they see themselves in the stories and lessons. Coretta Scott King knew this best and many have followed her insight. Using materials that incorporate learning for all races is critical to begin to lessen the current divide. In an article by Brooks that analyzes King’s beliefs to use the CRT as a tool and when done the following themes emerged from the book: “(1) inspiration and adoration, (2) entitlement and privilege, and (3) freedom and security.” (2008) “The conclusion [of the article] addresses the importance of applying Critical Race Theory to literary studies as well as identifying ways to purposefully incorporate African American young adult historical fiction within today’s classrooms.” (Brooks, 2008)

In conclusion, the evidence shows that there is definitely a need for the Critical Race Theory to be used when developing any reform both inside and outside of the educational system. Without this lens, we will continue to grow a gap and provide an unfair advantage to white people over people of color. While the proof is there, the research is poor. More empirical and statistical data and research analysis needs to be done quickly so that we can make changes

where appropriate and provide a just learning environment for all students and not just a select group. Working on using literature that looks like the students and having classroom discussions on the differences of cultures and classes is a start that educators can use to begin to make things equitable. Changing curriculum is not enough however, assessments need to be created through the CRT lens as well so that all students have a chance at the same future.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

Using a mixed method approach, this study incorporated survey research as a quantitative approach to a determined number of middle-level teachers and students (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2016, p. 11). Teachers were asked questions to determine the degree to which their literacy materials are diverse and inclusive of all groups of students. Students were questioned on their feelings of inclusion and acceptance within their classroom literature used in the curriculum.

The survey was also qualitative as the results/answers varied by person and allowed for explanation of answers as well as open-ended questions.

### **Participants**

My sample consisted of middle-level students (independent variable) that have various diversities, and a sampling of middle-level teachers (independent variable). The subject matter surveyed was the diversity of text selections (dependent variable). My sampling procedure was a nonrandom convenience sample, as I asked for volunteers from the school where I teach to participate in the study. My sample size was seven teachers of various middle-level grades and subjects as well as 139 students in order to gain opinions from a variety of ethnicities and classroom environments. The unit of analysis used was diverse groupings of students and a

grouping of teachers by content area. Student responses were grouped by various types of diversity so as to see if one group feels differently than another. As a result, I chose the same number of students from each ethnicity so as to keep the comparison reliable and valid. Teachers were grouped by subject matter so as to ascertain if certain subjects are more diverse than others. As a result, I chose the same number of teachers for each subject area in order to keep the results reliable and valid.

### **Instrumentation**

A questionnaire containing questions about the diversity and inclusiveness of texts used in curriculum lessons as well as the teachers' knowledge of CRT was used on the teacher sample. The results were categorized by content area and grade level taught by the teachers. Names were not be used but instead participants labelled their grade level and content area. The statements contained in the questionnaire were indicated by the level upon which they agree or disagree using a four-point scale as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. There was also an optional opportunity to further explain their choice on each statement.

A questionnaire containing questions about the inclusiveness of text used in curriculum lessons and engagement based on inclusion was used on the student sample. The results were categorized by the ethnicity of the student as well as the content area and grade level they are evaluating. Names and personal information were not included but instead ethnicity and grade level will be given. The statements contained in the questionnaire were indicated by the level upon which they agree or disagree using a four-point scale as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. There was also an optional opportunity to further explain their choice on each statement.

Since the topic of the study is relevant to both teachers and students, their answers were genuine and thus provide validity for the interpretation of the results. The number of participants in the study allowed for any invalid responses as those survey results that are skewed were eliminated from the final data analysis thus, ensuring the reliability of the results as well. In addition, the statements reflected in the survey contained enough options for proving the validity and reliability of the answers. Validity was also ensured when comparing the results from the teachers' questionnaire to the results from the students' questionnaire which is an example of criterion-related evidence (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2016, p. 153). In order to ensure reliability, the statements participants answered were repeated with different wording several times throughout the survey to as to test whether or not the participant answers consistently. Calculating the alpha coefficient (Cronbach alpha) helped prove the reliability of the statements and responses to the statements (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2016, p. 159). As a result, if a statement is proven to be unreliable, it was eliminated from the final data analysis. Another factor to keep reliability and thus, validity, positive is in the consent that was provided to participants wherein the details of the study and instructions for answering the survey were thoroughly explained.

## **Procedures**

I used Google Forms to keep entries anonymous (no names but ethnicity, content area, and grade level for students; content area and grade level for teachers) so all can feel free to share honest answers. I got parents' permission as well. Google Forms allowed me to access the data in Google Sheets where I sorted and used the data for calculating mean, standard deviation, Cronbach alpha, and run other data analysis formulas to obtain the results of the study and prove my hypothesis. The survey repeated statements several times with different wording each time

and was broken into sections with regards to subject matter: teachers' CRT knowledge, teachers' diversity in classroom libraries and literary content used in curriculum, students' judging inclusiveness in each content area, and students' answering engagement questions. There was a place to explain choices with each statement—this was optional.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Quantitative Data analyzed using Google Sheets software:**

Point biserial correlation was used to compare the teachers' responses regarding inclusiveness in literary content used and the students' view on the inclusiveness of texts used in content areas and grade levels. Determining the descriptive statistics and then analyzing the findings helped prove the hypothesis.

### **Qualitative Data analyzed using Google Sheets software:**

Inferential statistics were used to assess the written responses that were given by participants. Inference data fell under certain categories that was then calculated and used in the overall data analysis.

### **Interpretation of Statistics:**

Once all of the data was analyzed and the descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were gathered, a comparison of the groupings was performed. This comparison confirmed correlation between the groupings and helped prove the hypothesis. These results were explained and recommendations will be made to the unit office in regards to the professional development that needs to be offered in order to gain a desired result of full diversity and inclusion in all content areas at all grade levels.

## **Results**

The purpose of this quantitative and qualitative study was to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions of the need for diversity training and to discover if their classroom libraries are representing all diverse groups of students. In addition, it was to gain another in-depth insight into hearing if students feel represented in their classrooms and if this affects their engagement in lessons. These findings are categorized into the following four questions:

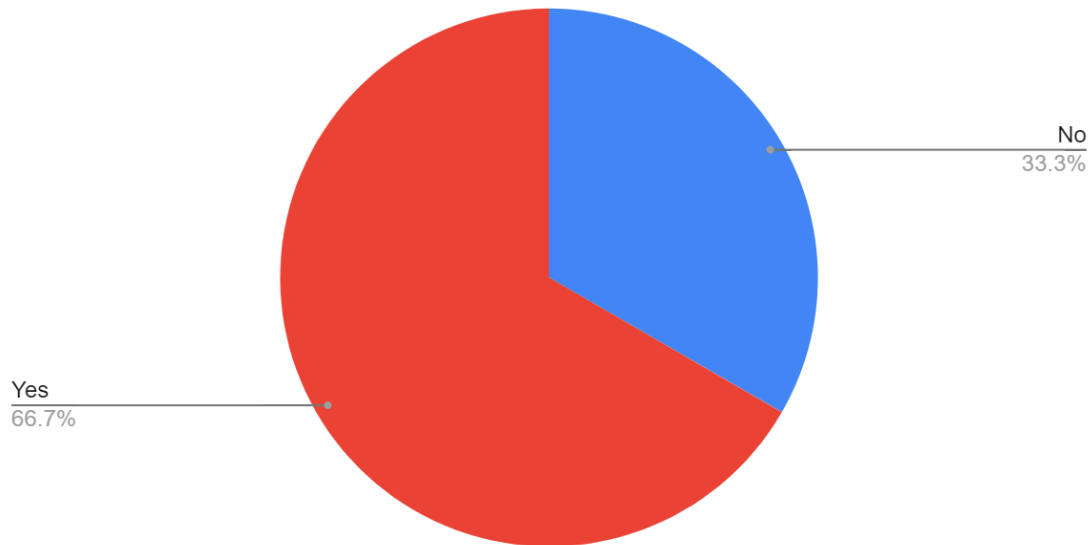
- Do students feel represented in the literary content their teachers use?
- Do students engage more when they feel represented in the literature?
- Do teachers attempt to use a diverse amount of literary content?
- Do teachers need more training to understand the need of diverse literary texts?

Ultimately, this study included seven middle school teachers; three sixth grade, one seventh grade, and three eighth grade. They were all female teachers and included; two math teachers, two science teachers, and three literature and composition teachers. Answers to these questions were elicited in a questionnaire for both teachers and students that allowed for written responses in addition to a ranking for each question.

### **Teacher Results**

**In regards to the thesis question: Do teachers need more training to understand the need of diverse literary texts?** Of the seven teachers surveyed, only two claim to not have received training to teach culturally diverse students as seen in the following pie chart:

### Count of Have you received training to teach culturally diverse students?

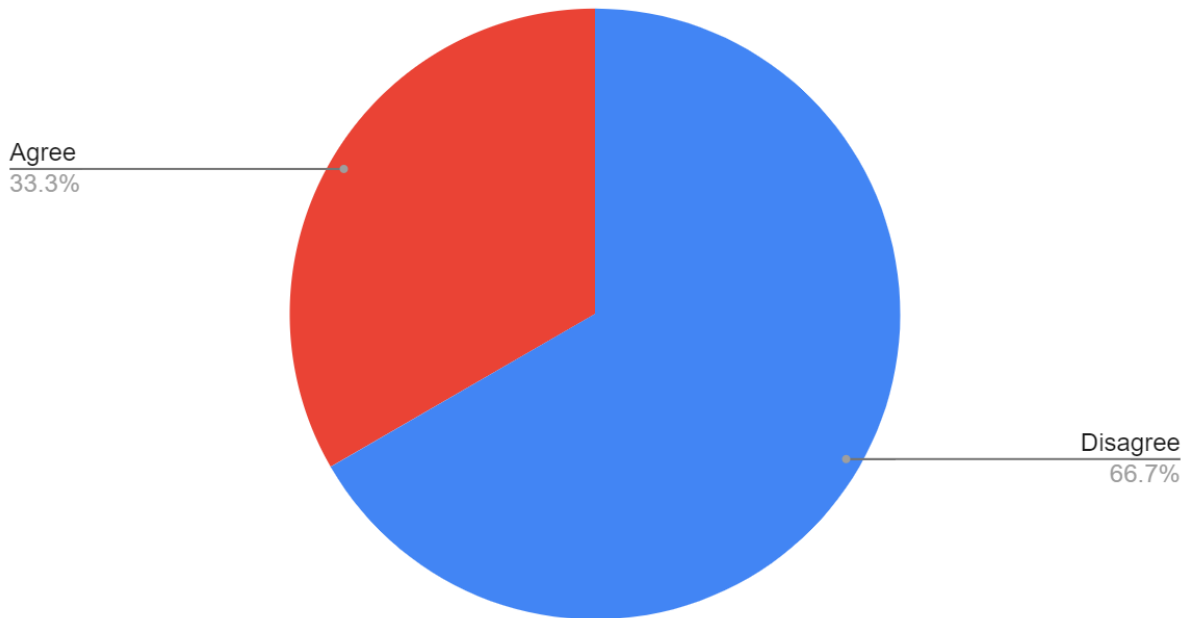


However, three claim to not have received sensitivity training for the same grouping of students. Of those that received training, all but one stated they received it in their college coursework while the other one says it was under ACEs and Restorative Practice training since college. The average years taught by these teachers was over ten years. All but one teacher stated that they do not feel prepared for teaching to diverse populations. The last one claims to have been extensively trained for this purpose. The teachers all agree they want more training and feel it is a need not want in order to help their students. One teacher even states that the diversity of the staff is a problem--they are predominantly white, middle class people.

**In regards to the thesis question: Do teachers attempt to use a diverse amount of literary content?** When it came to the questions on classroom libraries, over half of the teachers agreed there are not enough students of color represented or characters with disabilities as seen in the pie chart that follows.



The classroom library/literary content used contains numerous books that feature a person of color or a Native/Indigenous person on the front cover.



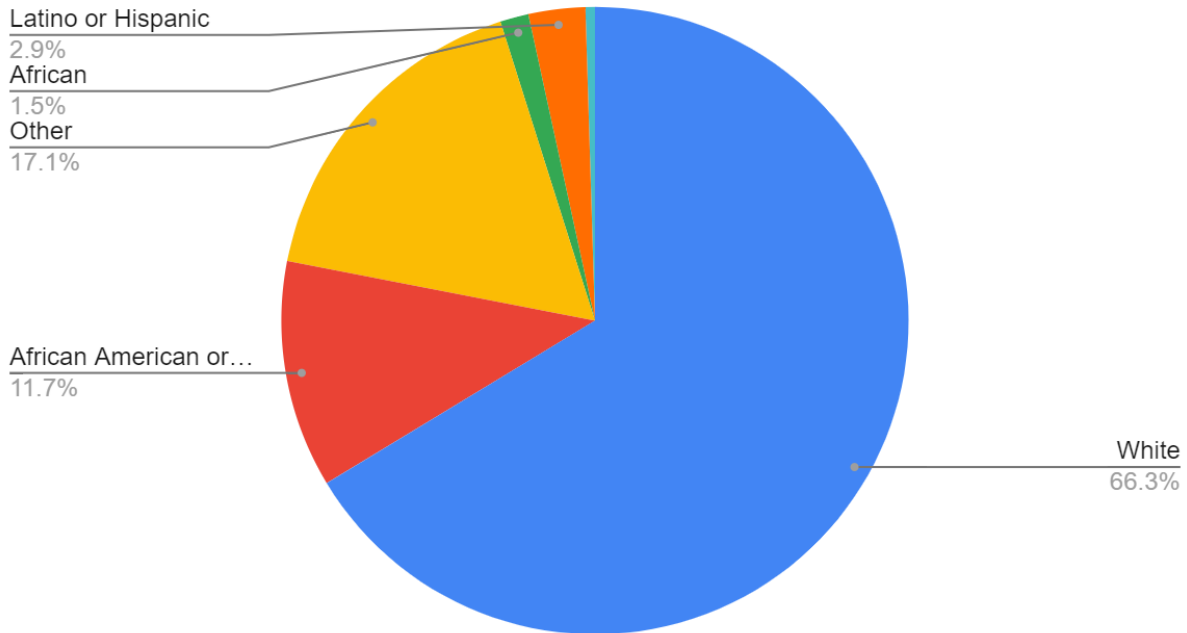
They also believe there is not enough books featuring a range of family structures, religions, fostering community, diverse contributions to history, stereotypes and generalizations, books about multiple areas of the world, or books representing the community their school is located. All but one teacher stated there are not LGBTQIA or immigration options and most think they have enough books representing different socioeconomic groups.

In summary, my initial assumptions are proven with these results that teachers libraries are not diverse enough and that more training is necessary.

### **Student Results**

Of the 207 students surveyed, exactly half were male and half were female. As for ethnicity: twenty-seven noted they are African American, six were Latinx or Hispanic, one Native American, thirty-five marked other, and 138 registered as White.

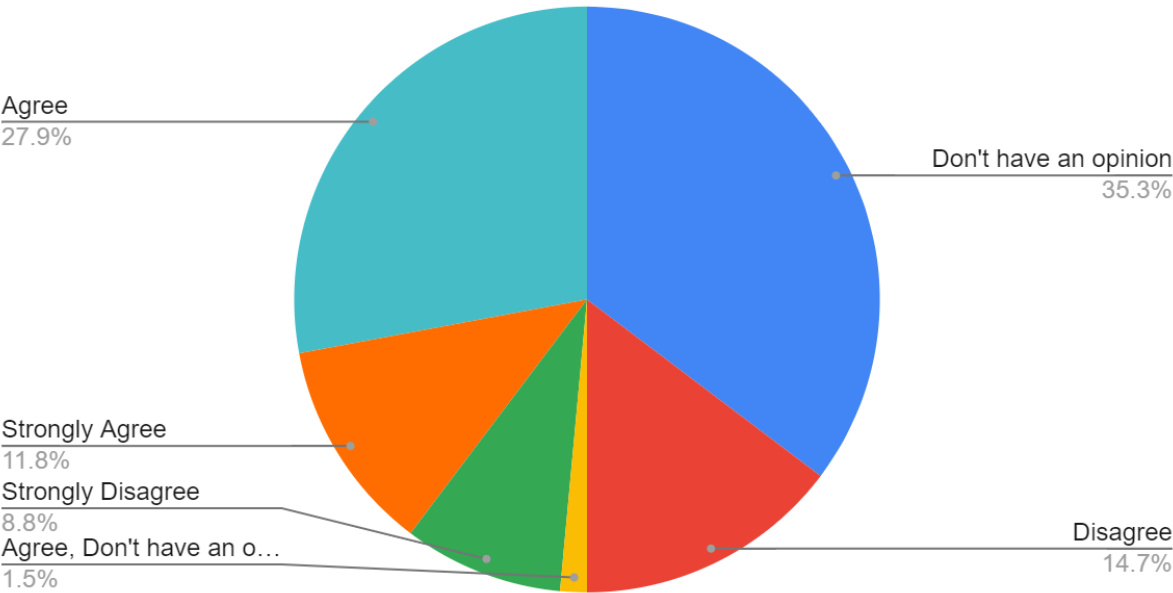
## Count of Ethnicity



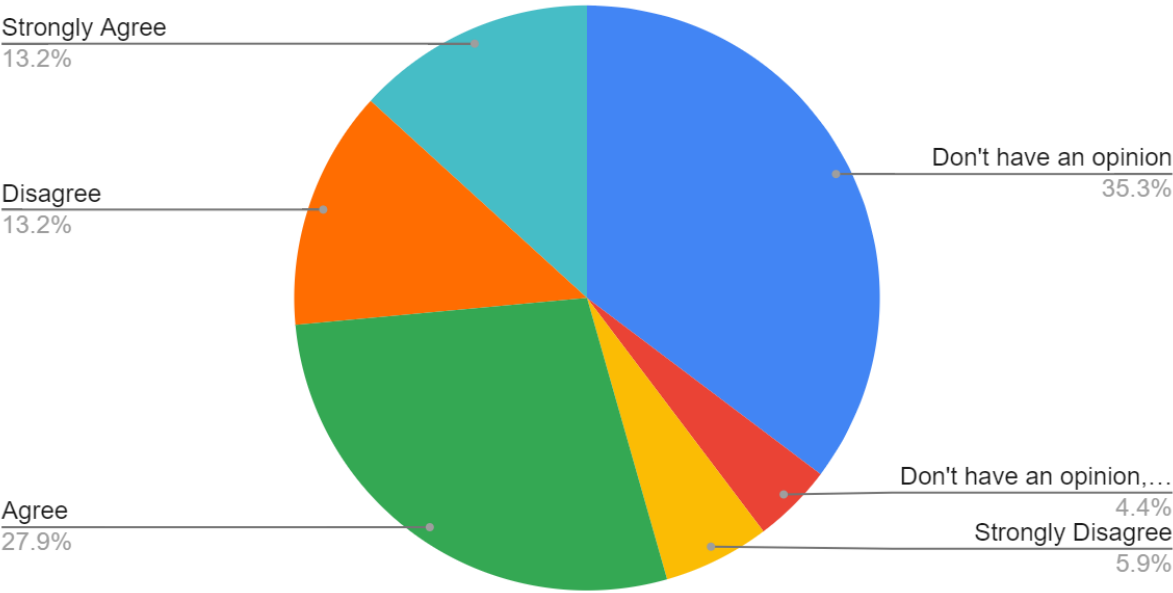
Out of the same group of students, forty-six stated they speak another language at home. The vast majority of students marked that they like their school, their teachers, and their administrators.

**In regards to the thesis question: Do students feel represented in the literary content their teachers use?** There is a large amount of students that feel like they are not represented in their school culture or in the texts used at their school. This allows them to feel that maybe their cultural group isn't understood as well. Given that 66.3% of the population are White students, most of the students feel heard, represented, and fit in at Chiddix. In contrast, the number of students of ethnicity other than White are not feeling this way confirming the thesis that Chiddix doesn't account for enough diversity in its culture and literary texts offerings for curriculum and classroom libraries.

My teachers include my home culture and language in their classes.



I see people like me in school text books, pictures, posters, and leadership positions around the school.



**In regards to the thesis question: Do students engage more when they feel represented in the literature?** The students written qualitative results state that they prefer books that have characters that represent their backgrounds. They also commented that they will participate more when they feel respected and being represented in texts is one way to accomplish this.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Findings**

The above results of the thesis study coincide with the existing research that has been conducted on diversity in literature in the classrooms. For instance, in regards to teachers needing more training on diversity in their classrooms, Mara Rose Williams states, “Across the country public schools...which often have student populations that are far more diverse than their predominantly white and female teaching and administrative staff, are investing in equity training to help assure every child is getting a fair shot in the classroom.” (2019) The need is present, and proven by data every year, that diversity in literature is an important influence on students as also claimed by Williams, “Research confirms that teachers — with their implicit biases — can be a barrier to students of color reaching their full academic potential.” (2019) Professional development on using diverse literature is a must and, “It’s been said that culturally diverse books can act both as windows (into others’ lives) and mirrors (reflections of a reader’s life)—a theory spelled out by Rudine Sims Bishop, an Emerita education professor at Ohio State University, in an influential 1990 article in *Perspectives*. And indeed, the conversation about the importance of diverse literature has been going on for decades. Yet the relative shortage of diverse texts persists—as do other challenges facing teachers who try to include them in the classroom.” (Collier, 2016) The need for more diverse texts and education for teachers to know

how to implement them is crucial for students of color and within other diverse groups as well. Collier replies, “When students read books and they are able to empathize, then they are able to grow as readers and also able to grow as critical thinkers— and they will begin to gradually see diverse issues in more complex ways,” Yenika-Agbaw says. Diverse texts can reflect many kinds of diversity, from racial, ethnic and cultural differences to disability, sexual orientation, and religious belief.” (2016) As a result of more training on diversity teachers “conversations can openly be about race and class and not in a coded way but in a critically conscious way and that is a shift,” Homiak said. “For teachers to go from coded language to openly curious questioning, that’s a really important shift.” (Williams, 2019) Currently, most teachers are uncomfortable with teaching and discussing diversity in their classrooms but not because they do not want to, but because they do not know how to do it effectively. As a result, “Despite the proven benefits of a diverse history education, many students still receive Eurocentric instruction.” (Washington, 2018)

“In a comprehensive study of the benefits students of color accrue from multicultural education, Celestial Zaldana of Claremont McKenna University found overwhelming evidence for the positive social and emotional effects of diverse curricula. Reading texts written by members of the ethnic groups that are underrepresented in school curricula improves the self esteem of students of that ethnic group, and caused all students to have a greater appreciation for cultural difference.” (Washington, 2018) This quote from Samantha Washington proves that students need to have diverse literature in their classrooms. This need further backed by Sandra Osorio, assistant professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University when she says, “When students don’t see themselves reflected in their classroom curriculum, it gives them the impression that they are not valued, that something must be wrong with them.”

(Collier, 2016) Students need to feel a connection to a book in order to have buy in and participate in class discussions which will lead to better reading and critical thinking skills.

The studies have proven that when students are asked, they prefer to have authors and characters that they can connect with and understand. In order to make this possible for all children, we cannot just keep the majority of our literature focused on White, middle-class characters written by White, middle-class authors. “The National Center for Education Statistics says that by 2023, the majority (50.5 percent) of K–12 students will be Hispanic, African American, or Asian/Pacific Islander.” (Collier, 2016) The browning of America calls for a shift in literature used for curriculum if our students are to have a fair academic experience. There needs to be a variety of cultural voices shared so that all students in class can have a voice as well, “No longer invisible in the literature that’s being discussed, students from diverse cultures are empowered to “express their views, to make connections with the text and make connections with each other and with themselves, so by the end, everybody wants a piece of that literary and cultural experience.” (Collier, 2016) All students can benefit from literary diversity which grows their level of empathy and understanding, skills necessary for societal success.

### **Limitations**

This study had a couple of limitations. First, out of 60 plus teachers, only seven participated in the questionnaire which doesn’t give an overall impression--just a small section. In addition, all of the participants are middle-class, White teachers so they may not fully understand the impact in their classroom. In addition, there were some rumblings from a couple of teachers who did not take the questionnaire that they were worried there was a hidden agenda. This may be a reason that participation was low. Lastly, given that teachers are busy and they

answered the questionnaire on their own timeframe, there was not an opportunity for follow up questions for clarity and deeper conversation.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Given the fact that teachers lack a knowledge base upon which to completely discuss what is considered a diverse library, more research is needed to provide a thorough understanding of the array of what is considered diverse texts. In addition, further research on the effects of not having a diverse library and the impact on student learning needs to be done. This knowledge will create an awareness for school districts and thus, increase the amount of professional development offered to the teachers.

### **Recommendations Based on Findings**

**Recommendation 1: hire a more diverse staff.** While there is a current teacher shortage, especially those of color, the district needs to work closely with the local universities to help create a culturally sensitive environment to attract more people of color into the teaching program. In addition, the district needs to create more opportunities for job shadowing for high school and college students interested in education as early as possible so they can be inspired by experienced teachers in the field. The community, news, and social media is riddled with negativity for the profession right now, so job shadowing can counteract this discussion.

**Recommendation 2: keep professional development current and often.** The district needs to offer consistent training for diversity and inclusion. It should be a part of the school culture discussions and offered both in person and online to accommodate the teacher's schedules. The professional development training should also be free to the teacher as often as possible so a district fund must be established. Training can be offered both internally and externally as experts are more often outside of the organization.

**Recommendation 3: find resources for teachers to gain a more diverse text selection.**

Districts should set up a fund that teachers can use to acquire more diverse and inclusive books and materials for their curriculum. They can offer grants and find grant opportunities to help keep costs low and not on the financial burden of the staff. In addition, they can connect teachers together online where resources can be shared for free in order to encourage growth of diversity in the classrooms. Reaching out to organizations already with some of these means should be the first step for the schools. Teaching Tolerance is a great and useful organization that would help as is the local Not in Our Town groups.

**Recommendation 4: schools and teachers should create a safe and inclusive space in their classrooms for students to share differences.** Community circles for discussing diversity and letting kids feel heard is a great way to bridge the gap between what students need teachers to know and to show students teachers are trying and do care about all of them. Having welcoming signs on staff doors and a banner in the school lobby is a first step to opening the conversation. Start with circles that are fun and light until the groups get to know each other more and trust more. Then, ask difficult questions on occasion and let the conversation naturally develop. It may feel uncomfortable for a minute, but it gets easier with time and once a teacher sees the positive impact, they will continue these conversations. Honesty and vulnerability on the teacher's part is key for the students to feel safe and want to share. Staff should be trained by certified personnel on these community circles before they can begin implementing.

**Recommendation 5: students should be involved in the training and research of resources.** When students share their testimonials to staff it has a far greater impact. Allowing students an opportunity to share at faculty meetings and having a student panel for staff to approach when necessary can help build positive, trusting relationships and acts as a precipice



for change. In addition, students can share their own personal resources on the subject of diversity and give teachers a list of items they can use in their curriculum. Asking students what they are reading and what they like to read can be a valuable tool.

### **Internal Validity**

The biggest threat to internal validity was the age and maturity of the students to have integrity throughout the questionnaire and give all statements equal consideration. Middle-level students often work for completion and rush through lessons. They may start strong but get bored and choose answers impulsively. Also, because the survey can be completed anywhere, anytime by the participants, there was a risk that the location was not conducive to focusing or may have had another person present helping them answer the statements.

In order to avoid these possibilities, I offered incentives to participants to keep them interested. For example, I had teachers who were administering the questionnaire give Charger Cash to students once they completed the survey. Chiddix Charger Cash is a PBIS incentive and students can use the cash on various opportunities throughout the year such as school supplies and room service days where they choose a snack and drink. As for the maturity factor, I had teachers and staff eliminate any that have a history of behavioral issues or other factors that could have negatively affected my results. The timing and location was easily remedied by having teachers and students participate during the common hour of language arts class.

### **External Validity**

Planning the timing and placement of the survey was key for eliminating factors that could have caused issues for the participants. For example, checking if any other groups will be present in or around the location for surveying eliminated noises and such from being a problem.

Also, cell phones were not allowed into the classrooms while the questionnaire was given to avoid any interruptions and distractions.

## **Conclusion**

Making diversity training a priority is necessary and long overdue in the school systems in order to provide all students of all diverse groups to have a voice and share their personal connections in order to improve their reading and critical thinking skills. Research has shown for years that there is a need for diversity in classroom literature but the gains are painfully slow growing. With the browning of society a reality in the short term, it is crucial that school districts provide teachers with the necessary training to make these shifts in their classrooms. Students of color will then have a more fair advantage and all students of any color will gain a well-rounded understanding and empathy for all people. Instead of avoiding or quickly ending diversity conversations that appear in classroom discussions, teachers will have the skills to maneuver these sensitive topics and the discussion will be enriched for all participants.

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