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EMBRACING AND CREATING CULTURE: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SECONDARY READING EDUCATION

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Abstract and Key Words

This thesis explored the role of culture in secondary reading education, especially as it relates to educating struggling readers. Through an extended review of literature, this thesis first explores the statistics surrounding struggling readers in the state of Florida, along with the demographics of struggling readers. Next, student and teacher culture is explored as it relates to their perspectives of and interactions with academic content and other students. Finally, this thesis proposes the use of embracing and creating culture in secondary reading classrooms through multicultural education and classroom culture and community in order to improve proficiency.

KEY WORDS: struggling readers, culture, reading education, multicultural education, classroom culture, classroom community

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Introduction

Connection is what drives the human experience. From birth to death, humans long for relationship and belonging with the desire to be valued and understood. As humans strive for connection, shared opinions, beliefs, and behaviors bring people together, but differences in opinions, beliefs, and behaviors just as easily drive people apart.

The United States, in recent years, has experienced a resurgence of diversity among its citizens. According the United States Census Bureau, by the year 2020, more than half of the nation's children are expected to be part of a minority race or ethnic group (New Census Bureau Report Analyzes U.S. Population Projections, 2015). These children are the students that participate in the American education system, so this diversity of culture cannot be ignored in the field of education. The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as "the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society" (Culture, n.d.). Because culture refers to the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of a group of people, the role of culture, as it relates to education, must be a focus in both the content taught and the relationships formed within classrooms.

Teachers and students enter school with unique perceptions of and experiences with the world around them based on their culture; these perceptions and experiences influence the way teachers and students interact with each other and the content in their classrooms. Culture can either benefit or hinder learning, depending on the ways in

which teachers utilize it to create a common, yet unique, learning experience for all students within a classroom.

Specifically in the field of secondary English education, a rising topic of conversation has been the prominence of struggling readers in the United States as students struggle to keep up with the demands of reading proficiency. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, in 2015, only 30 percent of students in Florida performed at or above the proficient level of reading (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2015). That means 70 percent of students in Florida are struggling to meet reading demands of statewide, standardized assessments, and the implementation of increased literacy standards across all content areas in public schools makes it difficult for students to catch up. Year after year, students fall behind in learning the required reading skills; meanwhile, literacy standards become increasingly more demanding. This cycle causes students to slip through the disparaging gaps of reading achievement, eventually causing them to leave high school with poor reading skills and great frustration.

While academic success is of the utmost importance in education, the rising population of struggling readers is further troubling because poor reading performance is one of the primary predictors of school dropout (Vaughn et al., 2015, p. 120). Each teacher carries the sole responsibility of doing his or her best to most effectively educate every student who enters his or her classroom. The education system must look within itself to find a way to change students' experience with reading education throughout their secondary school years in order to help the struggling students improve their reading proficiency.

Since culture impacts the way people perceive and interact with the world, it is imperative that teachers prioritize finding ways to embrace students' cultures through their classrooms and content. Allowing students the space to perceive academic text and literature through their own cultural schema and experiences, all the while creating a classroom community that supports and encourages all diverse students, is one way teachers can use culture to academically benefit students in their classrooms.

This thesis will specifically explore how culture can be embraced and created in secondary reading environments by focusing on the "what," "how," and "why" of education. The "what" factor of education will refer to the content teachers choose to teach in their classrooms, along with what students learn from the content based on their cultural perspectives. The "how" factor will refer to the implementation of culturally sensitive content by focusing on how teachers can create culture within a classroom to build a sense of community. Lastly, the "why" factor will refer to motivation and agency by focusing on how can teachers use culture to motivate students to increase their self-efficacy when reading.

With these considerations in mind, research has been gathered to propose the use of multicultural education and the building of classroom culture and community to increase motivation, agency, and a sense of belonging among secondary struggling readers, with the goal of improving their reading proficiency. Research first focused on the role of culture among secondary students and teachers and then explored specific strategies and impacts of multicultural education and community building in secondary English classrooms. The extended literature review is organized by the following three research questions:

1. How does culture impact secondary students and teachers?

2. How can secondary reading education embrace culture in the classroom through multicultural education?

3. How can secondary reading education be used to create a classroom culture and community to improve reading proficiency among students?

By understanding the role of culture among teachers and students, secondary English teachers can harness culture as a tool for improvement rather than allowing it to be a stumbling block for learning. When students feel understood and valued, the hope is to increase their academic motivation, improving overall reading proficiency.

Methodology

Because this thesis proposes the concept of teaching struggling readers with the culture in mind, the methodology will take the form of an extended literature review.

The first step of the process involves conducting research on the prominence of secondary struggling readers in the United States and in Florida specifically. Statistics will also be gathered about a breakdown of student performance in reading at the secondary level based on race. Comparing student performance based on ethnicity is relevant to this thesis as a whole because it offers insight into cultural differences in the classrooms along with achievement gaps between students of different races.

The research then will lead into exploring the impacts of culture in secondary English education classrooms, specifically as it relates to teachers and students, in a section titled "Student and Teacher Culture". This section will focus on how culture shapes both what and how students learn in the classroom in relation to the content and to one another. The research will also focus on how culture impacts teachers' perceptions of and interactions with students, along with the academic choices the teachers make in their classrooms. Lastly, in this section of student and teacher culture, the idea of an overall "teacher culture" will also be explored. Instead of looking at a teacher's individual culture as it relates to his or her racial, religious, or social experiences, this subsection will focus on how attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in the classroom are shaped by their perspectives and identities as members of the "social group" of teachers in Florida.

As previously mentioned, the "what," "how," and "why" of education will be explored in depth as it relates to culture and struggling readers. The students' "what" and

"how" will be researched in the section about culture. Specifically, research will focus on how culture influences what students learn from the content presented to them and how students interact with that content, other students, and the teacher. The next two sections of the literature review create a framework for answering how teachers can use the "what"—content—and "how"—implementation—to create a "why"—motivation in students.

A potential cultural solution to the content aspect of teaching struggling readers is researched through the avenue of multicultural education. The second factor, implementation, is researched through the potential cultural solution of building culture and community in the classroom. The motivation portion will be addressed in the conclusion, as this thesis will argue that proper culturally-aware content and implementation within classrooms will lead to a greater sense of motivation for struggling readers.

After conducting all of the research for the extended literature review, the research will be analyzed for patterns, trends, and themes in order to draw overarching analysis and conclusions on the topic of the role of culture when working with secondary struggling readers.

Review of Literature

Before examining the role of culture in reading education, it is important to first note the body of research describing the number of struggling readers at the secondary level. Struggling readers are defined as students who have a reading comprehension level below the grade level average, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for 2009 and 2011 indicate that only 34% of eighth graders are reading at a proficient level or higher based on the reading standards set in place (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2015). The problem with these statistics is that poor reading performance is one of the most prominent indicators of dropout in high school (Vaughn et al., 2015, p. 120). As dropout rates rise, teachers must look for ways to change the method of reading instruction in order to support struggling readers. Research from the article titled "Exploring Reading Nightmares of Middle and Secondary School Teachers" (Blintz, 1997, p. 13) also indicates that although students make gains in reading comprehension skills in elementary school, these skills plateau in middle school, then they begin to decline when the students enter high school. Student interest in, attitude towards, and motivation for reading decline across the board, so teachers must learn how to adapt to students' needs in order to help them improve proficiency in reading.

In the state of Florida specifically, the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA) is used to track students' performance in English Language Arts and mathematics. On the English Language Arts test, a passing score of three means satisfactory (which indicates the student may need additional support to move onto the next grade level), and a four is considered to be proficient. According to the 2017 FSA Results Packet released by the

Florida Department of Education (2017), only 53 percent of students in grades six through eight scored a three or higher on the Florida Standards Assessment, and only 30 percent of students scored a four or higher. Broken down by race, 64 percent of white students scored a three or higher, 49 percent of Hispanic students scored a three or higher, and only 34 percent of African American students scored a three or higher. When making the same comparison in grades nine through ten, 51 percent of students scored a three or higher, and only 30 percent of students scored a four or higher. Again, breaking these statistics down by race, 63 percent of white students scored a three or higher, 47 percent of Hispanic students scored a three or higher, and only 33 percent of African American students scored a three or higher. The achievement gap between students of different races increases further when looking at students who scored a four or higher at both grade levels, indicating that white students are proving to be statistically more proficient in English Language Arts than Hispanic and African American students.

To further add to these statistics, according to the United States Department of Education (2004), almost 87 percent of United States elementary and secondary teachers were reportedly white in the year of 2004. This teacher demographic does not properly reflect or represent the student population. Given the previous statistics about the achievement gap in reading performance, it is important for teachers to be aware of and to prepare for educating students with diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Student and Teacher Culture

Florida's public schools contain a highly diverse student population. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), 40.9 percent of the student population is white, 30 percent is Hispanic, 22.9 percent is African American, 2.6 is Asian, and .3

percent is American Indian; additionally, English language learners comprise of 9.6 percent of the student population. These numbers reveal a diverse population in terms of race and ethnicity, and every student represented by these numbers carries a unique cultural identity with them into the classroom.

Because of this diversity, it is imperative that teachers acknowledge the cultural differences of the students within their classrooms, emphasizing inclusion and understanding, since every culture has a unique approach to education. "It is crucially important to be aware that students from diverse cultural backgrounds bring different ways of knowing, different styles of questioning, and different patterns of interaction to school. For example, different cultures may have different attitudes, expectations, and assumptions about the value of reading and writing and what it means to be a reader and writer" (Vacca & Vacca, 2011, p. 59). The emphasis here rests on differences, and that is precisely what culture brings into the classroom: different attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Vacca and Vacca (2011) further describe how culture impacts students in secondary classrooms by shaping their perception of cooperative learning, methods of motivation, competition in academics, and questioning techniques (p. 59). These factors all determine how students interact with the teacher, other students, the learning activities, and the content itself.

In addition to the impact culture has on students, another primary aspect of culture in education is its impact on teachers. Santoro (2009) describes how teachers must not only be aware of their own cultural identities, but they must also be aware of how their personal cultural identities interact with those of their students. Santoro breaks teachers' culture into three primary categories of importance: "knowledge of pedagogy and

practice, knowledge of students, and knowledge of self" (p. 34). Santoro came to this conclusion after conducting a study in which eight pre-service teachers were asked to describe their own identities based on ethnicity and socioeconomic class, and the teachers were then observed on how they interacted with secondary students coming from different ethnic and socioeconomic identities from their own. Teaching in multicultural environments, Santoro found, relies on knowing the "ethnic self" and the "ethnic other" along with how the two interact in classroom environments. He writes, " . . . in order really to know students of ethnic difference, teachers need to understand the nature of their students' 'ethnic identities', that is, what their cultural practices, values and beliefs are and how these shape them as learners and members of ethnic communities" (Santoro, 2009, p. 36).

Culture in the classroom, though, does not begin and end with understanding the ethnic identities of the students; rather, it begins with teachers truly understanding their own identities, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are both explicit and implicit. All of these aspects of teachers' cultures impact the way in which text is taught. As part of Santoro's (2009) study, the pre-service teachers were observed analyzing a text using discourse analysis. This analysis highlighted the importance of both what was "said" and "unsaid" when teaching a text or piece of literature. What is "said" represents explicit cultural understanding, but what is "said" always rests on the shoulders of "unsaid" assumptions—assumptions that reveal underlying cultural perspectives. Because teachers convey their cultural beliefs through both spoken and unspoken words, it is important for teachers to recognize the cultural lenses through which they see and teach

literature. Teachers will not be able to connect with a diverse student population until they become aware of the cultural gaps and differences that exist within their classrooms.

Santoro and Allard (2006) further explore the important role of teachers' culture in the classroom in an article titled "Troubling Identities: Teacher Education Students' Constructions of Class and Ethnicity." The authors write that although cultural identity is a widely discussed topic within teacher education, it is often done so "in terms of identities—not with regards to teaching identities" (p. 116). The authors discuss the prominent research about aspects such as race and gender within classroom environments, but they acknowledge that the ways in which teachers interact with differences between and among students are under-researched. Classrooms contain complex social interactions due to the influence of culture from both the teacher and the students. During Santoro and Allard's (2006) study, eight pre-service teachers discussed how they developed their own cultural identities and how they handle students with different cultural identities from their own. The researchers concluded, after working with the students, that the pre-service teachers viewed the experience of exploring their own identities as an "awareness raising exercise rather than an explicit development of necessary professional knowledge and pedagogical skills" (Santoro & Allard, 2006, p. 127). These findings mirror a common thread that lies throughout much of the research when it comes to the impact of culture on teachers: teachers see culture as an added awareness instead of the necessary component of teaching that it is. The researchers of the study ultimately uncovered a lack of awareness among the eight pre-service teachers in regards to the impact of their own culture on their interaction with students and their teaching styles.

Not only do teachers bring their own culture into classrooms from a religious, racial, and socioeconomic perspective, but teachers also become a part of a "teacher culture", developing a cultural identity within the social group of the profession.

Edwards and Edwards (2017) explored this concept in a longitudinal study on the role of teacher identity when discussing culture in secondary classrooms. The study took place in a secondary science classroom in New Zealand. "Teachers develop a professional identity as they learn a multitude of skills, gain a breadth of knowledge and move from novice to experienced practitioners, and this journey is a complex and idiosyncratic one. It has been observed that 'the journey of becoming and being a teacher is unique for each teacher and yet depends on others'" (p. 191). Edwards and Edwards' (2017) article highlights another important aspect of "teacher culture": it continues to be transformed and shaped by teachers' ongoing and changing professional roles, identities, and experiences. Because teachers often adapt their practices to the context in which they are teaching, Edwards and Edwards write, "Teacher identity develops in ways that mirror the unique combination of culture, contexts and experiences that they possess" (p. 193). Because of this, it is important for teachers to be aware of their own cultural identities in contrast to and in cohesion with their teacher identities. Both of these components work together to bring students unique learning experiences, but in order for teachers to utilize their cultural and teacher identities in a classroom, teachers must spend time reflecting on their own experiences and beliefs.

Another component of "teacher culture" that is often pervasive based on experiences shared among teachers is their attitudes towards students. On the subject of struggling readers, teacher attitudes are often addressed based on whether or not teachers

believe it is their job to educate the struggling readers in their classrooms. These beliefs

are often created and shaped by the teacher culture and school environment. Due to lack

of time and a demanding curriculum, secondary teachers tend to develop negative

attitudes towards struggling readers, which in turn negatively impacts student

achievement in the classroom. In a testing-focused environment, teachers often work

within a school culture that is performance and assessment-based, leaving little time to

invest in the reading skills of struggling readers. In the article titled "These Kids Just

Aren't Motivated to Read: The Influence of Preservice Teachers' Beliefs on Their

Expectations, Instructions, and Evaluations of Struggling Readers" (Scharlach, 2008),

researchers studied pre-service teachers' attitudes towards struggling readers in the

context of tutoring. The results of the study revealed a trend that the pre-service teachers

did not feel as though it was their responsibility to teach the struggling readers how to

improve their reading. Instead, the pre-service teachers placed the responsibility on the

students themselves, their families, or past teachers. The study also revealed that the less

responsibility the teachers took for educating the students, the less the students improved

over the course of the tutoring. This lack of responsibility when it comes to addressing

the needs of struggling readers is a dangerous component of "teacher culture."

Lastly, another way in which culture impacts teachers is that oftentimes, if not

purposefully combated, a teacher's culture will largely determine the students he or she

chooses to teach, along with the strategies he or she uses to teach (Nelson, 1998). In a

study conducted by Nelson, education students readily admitted, "they do not know how

to interact with children who have different ethnic or social backgrounds than their own"

(p. 566). This is alarming, especially considering that in reading education, students

interpret text differently based on their ethnic and social backgrounds. Teachers cannot be so blinded by their own culture and experiences that they neglect to acknowledge other students' points of views in the classroom. Nelson's study examined the impacts of cultural differences in the classroom by placing four student teachers at a field study in a suburban school and six student teachers at a field study in an urban school. Among the ten student teachers, six of the teachers grew up with little to no interaction with people of other cultures; three grew up with limited interaction with people of other cultures; only one of the student teachers was an African-American who grew up in a culturally-diverse academic and social surrounding. The researcher discovered that the student teachers who had a culturally diverse background were more open to working with students in urban schools; on the other hand, student teachers who had not grown up in culturally diverse communities were uncomfortable working with students in urban schools. Regardless of their backgrounds and experiences, though, at the end of the study, all of the student teachers expressed an increased understanding of urban populations and a desire to teach with more cultural diversity in mind. Based on his findings, Nelson recommends increased exposure, for student teachers to work with diverse populations, and more professional development on information about other cultures. Culture impacts every aspect of the classroom, including how teachers teach and how students learn, so educating teachers on culturally responsive methods of educating diverse populations is necessary in order to effectively educate every student.

Multicultural Education

With an undeniable need to prepare teachers to embrace the role of culture in their classrooms, one proposed method of doing so is implementing multicultural education.

With a broad definition, Banks (1993) compiled research from literature in the field to develop one overarching goal of multicultural education: "to reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality" (p. 3). Banks' proposed method of implementing multicultural education, as outlined in his article titled "Multicultural Education: Historical Development, Dimensions, and Practice" (Banks, 1993), is to make changes to "curriculum; the teaching materials; teaching and learning styles; the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of teachers and administrators; and the goals, norms, and culture of the school" (p. 4). By embracing the role of diversity and culture within secondary classrooms, the goal is for teachers to connect to students in a more authentic manner, providing them with a more effective reading education.

Multicultural education is not limited to secondary schools; it can be implemented at all grade levels. Gayle-Evans (2006) explores the extent to which multicultural education is present in kindergarten classrooms in Florida in an article titled "It Is Never Too Soon: A Study of Kindergarten Teachers' Implementation of Multicultural Education in Florida's Classrooms." Gayle-Evans used a questionnaire to survey one thousand kindergarten teachers about the physical classroom environment, instructional practices, curriculum, various content areas, and their students (p. 1). Based on the 477 responses she received, Gayle-Evans lists recommendations for multicultural education based on her findings. The first recommendation is to allow students' cultures to drive curriculum by involving families and incorporating cultural values and practices into instruction (p. 12). Another recommendation is to create space in the classroom to reflect the cultures of all people; for example, bulletin boards can be used to display people from different

cultures, and classroom libraries can contain books in other languages. When selecting

text or allowing students time for dramatic play, Gayle-Evans recommends providing

students with authentic artifacts and literature from different cultures in order to expose

students to a variety of cultures, all the while representing every student in the classroom.

Lastly, Gayle-Evans recommends that both pre-service and in-service teachers experience

second-language acquisition in order to relate to the frustration of cultural differences,

and she recommends that teachers learn as much as possible about different cultures in

order to understand how to teach all students. This knowledge, she states, will likely help

teachers "develop a positive attitude toward diversity" (p. 13).

Just as Gayle-Evans discussed the importance of selecting text that is reflective of

cultural diversity in kindergarten classrooms, another researcher explores how this

principle is applied in her secondary English classroom. The article titled "Does Huck

Finn Belong in My Classroom? Reflections of Curricular Choice, Multicultural

Education, and Diversity" (Leider, 2006) explores the positive and negative aspects of

introducing a culturally sensitive text in a secondary English classroom. After Mark

Twain's book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was removed from her curriculum

due to the book's use of racial slurs, Leider notes that by eliminating text due to cultural

sensitivity, the opportunity to discuss cultural differences is also removed from the

classroom. Part of multicultural education is "understanding issues of racism, slavery,

genocide, etc. and their effects on culture," (p. 1), and she notes that by removing this

piece of literature that provides examples of racism, students are losing out on

"experiential knowledge of what it means to be persecuted due to race, ethnicity, religion,

or sexual orientation" (p. 1). As such, teachers can embrace culture in secondary English

classrooms by using multicultural education to select literature that gives students experiential knowledge with and about other cultures that they would otherwise not have based on their personal life experiences alone (p. 2).

Bruna (2007) further examines this concept of gaining experiential knowledge through critical literacy by exploring the idea of training pre-service teachers with the use of multicultural education. Bruna argues that using a critical literacy approach to multicultural teacher education can help pre-service teachers change their perspective of teaching diverse students instead of inciting guilt about their lack of cultural awareness. Critical literacy, as defined in the article, is "the social messages and meanings that shape our lives . . . as they relate to difference, similarity, and educational equity, and then to write new messages and meanings that better fit our understanding of how the world is or ought to be" (p. 115). In order to accomplish critical literacy in multicultural teacher education, the researcher highlights four levels of thinking: description, analysis, vision, and strategy. The purpose of these four steps is to generate cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction, and to promote ongoing critical thinking (Bruna, 2007, p. 116). During the first two levels of thinking, deconstruction will take place as the pre-service teachers first describe how they perceive race (including the physical properties of race), and then they will analyze the influence of race in their own lives and the world around them. Next, reconstruction will take place as the pre-service teachers create a vision for the future in terms of discrimination, and then they will enter the strategy level of thinking by creating personal and professional goals to achieve the vision (p. 117). This four-step approach to multicultural education seeks to remove guilt and frustration, and it instead empowers teachers with strategies for developing a multicultural approach to education.

Bruna's (2007) model can also be applied in a secondary context where students can use the paradigm as a way to bridge the gap of cultures among students in the classroom. It can also become a foundational stage of building experiential knowledge with racism and culture among students in a classroom.

Dilg (1999), in the article "Race and Culture in the Classroom: Teaching and Learning Through Multicultural Education," describes her experience with multicultural education as a secondary English teacher. "Teaching about race, culture, or ethnicity remains a complex and at-risk instructional activity that many teachers feel uncomfortable or ill-equipped to take on" (p. 1). Using dialogue and problem-posing approaches to teaching, Dilg opens up the conversation to allow students to feel contention, tension, agreement, pain, and joy as teacher and students' cultural identities meet in the classroom. Dilg writes that academic, instructional, emotional, social, and cultural preparation is required in order for teachers to use instruction to help students become aware of their biases and learned cultural assumptions (p. 1). Lastly, teachers must be willing to face their own biases and assumptions as they engage students in multicultural discussions and approaches to learning (p. 1).

Multicultural education is important not only to help students connect with the content, but it also exposes students to other cultures. "Today's teachers need to provide students with literacy and learning experiences that will provide them with the cross-cultural knowledge and skills they will need as future adults in a nation that has become increasingly divers" (Vacca & Vacca, 2011, p. 55). Content, especially within literature in secondary English classrooms, must reflect the cultures of the world the students live in. Before teachers can implement multicultural education, though, they must first

educate themselves. Vacca and Vacca write, "While it is important for teachers to integrate multicultural literature for their students, it is also important that they read multicultural texts themselves to help foster new perspectives and become more sociologically mindful" (p. 56). Since everything that takes place within a classroom begins with the teacher, teachers should work to develop a multicultural mindset and awareness prior to implementing multicultural education with their students.

In the article titled "Infusing Multicultural Literature into Teacher Education Programs: Three Instructional Approaches," Howlett, Bowles, and Lincoln (2017) outline three specific instructional approaches that can be used to practically implement multicultural education into reading education. These three instructional strategies are a read-aloud strategy, topic-based selections, and a modified literature circles strategy. Whether or not teachers choose to implement these three specific strategies, the authors simply believe that "by modeling and exposing our students to the purposeful selection of high quality and engaging multicultural literature that is meaningful and relevant, those students will begin to reflect and ask themselves deep questions which will encourage critical thinking" (p. 14). Guiding students into deep, reflective thinking about a variety of cultural viewpoints is the goal of multicultural education, and it is crucial for secondary reading teachers to use these methods to assist struggling readers in the classroom.

Classroom Culture and Community

In addition to embracing culture through multicultural education, teachers can further bridge cultural differences among their students by creating an accepting and unifying classroom culture. In an article titled "Learning Together: The Instinct to Do

Good and Peer-Assisted Strategies That Work," Jellison (2017) explores the idea of creating a classroom culture that promotes pro-social behavior—"behaviors that promote positive social interactions" (p. 15). Since children with pro-social skills are "more likely to have academic success in school and experience positive outcomes in their adult lives" (p. 16), teachers should be aware of the types of activities that promote pro-social behaviors and then provide students with opportunities to teach, help, cooperate, and empathize with their peers. Throughout the research, Jellison first outlines the benefits of creating a classroom culture that incorporates peer-assisted learning. According to the research, peer-assisted learning has a positive academic and social impact on all students, especially the at-risk population (p. 16). In order to establish a classroom culture that embraces peer-assisted learning, Jellison recommends providing students with "frequent, positive, reciprocal partner and group experiences early in the year to increase positive attitudes towards classmates and decrease stereotypes" (p. 18). Recommended activities for engaging students in peer-assisted learning include reciprocal peer tutoring; think, pair, share; cooperative learning; and collaborative reasoning. Each of these activities, according to Jellison, are effective for creating an inclusive and accepting classroom culture that promotes pro-social behavior.

Within a reading classroom specifically, one researcher explores the ways in which classroom culture impacts independent reading. In an article titled "Reimagining Reading: Creating a Classroom Culture That Embraces Independent Choice Reading," Dickerson (2015) conducted a two-year study to explore the impact of independent and choice reading in a secondary English classroom. Dickerson identifies her school as being diverse: 22 percent of the students receive special education services; 25 percent of

the students are English language learners; 83 percent of the students are from families whose income is below the line of poverty (p. 1). The student population is not only diverse, but it is also different from Dickerson's own cultural perspective and identity. Over the course of the two years, Dickerson built a culture of reading within the classroom by implementing a Reading Zone—ten minutes dedicated to reading every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. After the first year, Dickerson introduced five rules for Reading Zone to increase student choice and independence: "a book is a book; [the teacher] reads too; we talk about our books; we write about our books; we are free to ditch our books" (p. 2). Additionally, the students tracked their progress through journal responses and a class-wide book tracker poster in the back of the classroom. After the two-year period was over, the most notable of Dickerson's findings was increased classroom management due to the relationships that were built with the students during the Reading Zone time. "Rather than seeing me as a teacher who gives mandates, my students see me as a fellow reader with whom they can talk about books. I also see my students differently: Through these conversations, I see my students' natural analytical strengths, remember their passion for learning, and better understand their lives and their personalities" (p. 3). In this case study, Dickerson was able to create a classroom culture that increased student motivation to read by implementing sustained silent reading paired with choice reading. These activities also resulted in increased respect between the teacher and the students.

In an article titled "Creating Classroom Cultures that Foster Reading Motivation," Gambrell (1996) "discusses what research and theory suggest about the role of motivation in literacy development" (p. 14). Based on previous research, Gambrell states

that in order for students to read effectively, they cannot just have the cognitive aspects of reading; instead, students must have the "skill and will to read" (p. 15). Gambrell outlines six research-based factors, which can be used to create a classroom culture that increases literacy motivation. These six factors are: the teacher as an explicit reading model, a book-rich classroom environment, opportunities for choice, opportunities to interact socially with others, opportunities to become familiar with lots of books, and appropriate reading-related incentives (Gambrell, 1996, pp. 20-22). According to Gambrell, these six factors, when implemented strategically into a reading classroom, will promote a culture that fosters reading motivation in all students.

The idea of creating a classroom culture and community to promote effective learning also extends to pedagogical practices in college classrooms. In an article titled "Creating Learning Communities in the Classroom," Bryan (2012) states that, "students who are more engaged in college, both in and out of the classroom, typically have more successful academic experiences than those who are less engaged" (p. 57). One pedagogical practice that Bryan explores in this article that seeks to increase student engagement to produce positive outcomes is classroom-based learning communities. Classroom-based learning communities contain two subtypes: total-classroom learning communities and within-classroom learning communities (p. 58). These subtypes both contain "a culture in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding" (p. 58). In the article, Bryan focuses on three strategies for creating classroom-based learning communities, the first of which being inter-teaching. In this strategy, students receive prep guides prior to class, which involves reading and some form of interacting with the reading. Once the students come to class, they discuss and compare their

findings, then fill out a record sheet where they evaluate their discussion and highlight areas in which they desire clarification. The teacher then lectures on that highlighted content. This strategy builds a strong classroom culture because it places two-thirds of the learning into the students' hands where they must work both independently and rely on each other to learn and discuss the material.

Bryan's second strategy creates within-classroom learning communities, and it is called team-based learning. In this strategy, students work with the same group of approximately five students for an entire semester to complete application-based assignments. The research reveals that this strategy is effective at increasing more learner-to-learner interaction and less learner-to-instructor interaction, which improved students' overall performance (p. 62). Cooperative learning is the third strategy discussed in this article, and it simply involves students working together to process learning throughout class. The key to this strategy, according to Bryan, is accountability for student participation; otherwise, students will not engage in the community-building process. Overall these three strategies can be implemented at even the secondary level in order to build a classroom culture and sense of community among the students.

Aside from implementing strategies to create a classroom culture around the content, another important aspect of classroom culture is trust. In the article titled "Creating Urban Classroom Communities Worthy of Trust" (Ennis & McCauley, 2002), teachers were both observed and interviewed for the ways in which they build trust within their classroom in order to create a positive classroom culture. Eighteen teachers were regularly observed in four of their classes over the course of four months. Trust is an important aspect of classroom culture, especially within urban communities, because

students often come from distrusting familial backgrounds (p. 151). Teachers must create a culture in their classroom that overcomes this distrust and instead teaches students how to trust. "Teachers' ability to teach content meaningfully relies in part on being 'in-relation' with students. Teaching from this perspective is a personal and emotional process that creates a web of trust through the relational interactions between two persons" (p. 152). After observing the teachers, the researchers noticed a pattern of the teachers creating a classroom environment that was so interesting and engaging that students did not want to miss out; this engagement with the content led to a slow process of building a trusting relationship with students. The teachers, through interviews, also expressed the need to prove their authenticity and sincerity to the students who distrusted them by expressing interest in getting to know the students as people outside of academics (p. 155). Encouraging these students to engage in the classroom community proved to be effective for most of the teachers. In order to build trust with failing students, providing second chances where students could safely take risks without fear of failing also proved to be effective. Furthermore, when building trust with failing students, the teachers experienced success with "effort optimism": rewarding students for both the process and the product (p. 161). The teachers lastly expressed the importance of providing students with positive interactions by demonstrating caring behavior. The teachers found success with treating students with integrity and respect, joking with them, and making them feel important and valued (p. 163). Creating positive classroom culture cannot take place without trusting relationships between the teacher and students in the classroom, so focusing on implementing strategies such as these are critical to create an accepting learning community that meets the needs of all diverse students.

The article titled "Creating Classroom Communities and Networks for Student Support" (Korinek, 1999) also explores strategies to create a classroom culture in which all students get a "sense that everyone belongs, is valued, has something to contribute, and has rights but also responsibilities for the welfare of others in the class and school" (p. 3). In order to naturally create a support network in the classroom for positive behavior, Korinek suggests that teachers must be willing to model good behavior between themselves and their students, provide direct instruction on pro-social behavior when necessary, feedback in natural situations, and involve students in decision-making in the classroom (p. 4). The author further suggests that in order for a positive classroom culture to be established, the teacher must model positive behavior in all interactions with students that celebrate and promote diversity, spending more time rewarding positive behavior that correcting poor behavior (p. 5). This, in turn, teaches students what behavior they should demonstrate and focus on by following the example of the teacher. Korinek emphasizes, though, that classroom culture and community cannot just be an ideal that is longed for in the abstract; instead, a positive classroom culture is achieved through concrete procedures, practices, and expectations. As such, the article offers concrete advice on creating a positive classroom culture. The first step is taking time the first few weeks of school to get to know the students and to allow the students to get to know each other's names, cultures, and personalities. The author also suggests that allowing students to help brainstorm a list of classroom rules and expectations can promote a positive classroom community by giving the students ownership in the expectations for one another. After the expectations have been set, Korinek expresses the importance of continually clarifying and practicing expectations the first few weeks of

school. For secondary students, the same concept can be applied by having students

practice providing feedback to one another, actively listening to each other, resolving

conflicts, and encouraging participation. "Being positive, encouraging, and specific . . .

sets the tone for building classroom community" (p. 6). Another important factor to

consider when building classroom community is the role of culture when setting

expectations. The author describes how some behaviors, such as avoidance of eye

contact and use of slang and dialect, may be interpreted as misbehavior or disrespect

when they actually reflect cultural differences (p. 7). Because of this, it is important for

the teacher to know his or her students and their cultural backgrounds when establishing

the rules and expectations of the classroom. Korinek determined that building a network

of student support in the classroom requires "adult commitment to providing supports

needed for student success, careful planning, and consistent implementation over time"

(p. 7). When successfully implemented, this student support will enhance the classroom

community, motivation of students, and academic and social learning (p. 7).

　　　　In another secondary English classroom, language arts can be harnessed to create

a positive classroom community among students. In the article titled "Creating

Classroom Community with Reflective Blogs" (Alexander & Bach, 2013), the authors

discuss how technology can be used to accelerate community formation in classrooms.

Not only is community building important for educating the "whole" learner, but the

authors also cite literature that points the "benefits of learning through writing and the

continuous engagement with a subject to ensure lasting learning" (p. 17). The authors

outline ways in which teachers can utilize students' interests in social media to build a

positive classroom community and culture, all the while helping students engage with the

content in a way that allows for authentic learning to take place. The authors conducted a case study working with pre-service teachers at the University of Virginia. As part of this case study, the pre-service teachers were asked to respond to young adult fiction through blogs that incited deep, reflective interaction with the text and with other students' responses. This type of activity, the authors explain, gives students agency over their own learning, cultivates self-reflection and collaborative meaning making, and builds an engaged learning community (p. 18). First and foremost, this literature course utilized a dynamic syllabus, which allowed for student input on course content and structure based on the changing needs and interests of students throughout the semester. In order for the community building to be effective, though, active, ongoing individual writing was crucial for helping students become comfortable with writing reflectively for other students to read (p. 20).

Another important component of the literature course as described by Alexander and Bach's (2013) case study was an ongoing online discussion among classmates by responding to one another's blogs through comments. These comments helped the students get to know one another, and it built a sense of community in the classroom by extending the class discussion beyond one's own writing (p. 21). By the end of the case study, the researchers found, through course evaluations, that utilizing blogs to engage reflectively with the reading for the course was successful in accelerating the formation of a classroom community, deepening interaction with the content by extending discussion beyond the allotted class time, and increasing student comfort with writing informally and reflectively for others to read (p. 27). This shows that for students of all ages, in both secondary and post-secondary education, technology can be a useful tool to

draw students into the content all while building a stronger sense of classroom community.

Another article, titled "Survivor: Satis House: Creating Classroom Community while Teaching Dickens in a Reality-TV World" (Bucolo, 2011), also examines the concept of using language arts to build classroom community. When studying Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations,* Bucolo engages students with the text by drawing comparisons between characters in the book to characters in popular reality television shows. A number of activities are used to help students engage with the literature on a deeper level by making meaningful connections to their own lives, as well as the lives of people they watch on the television. One activity that is specifically designed to build a stronger classroom community is called Food for Thought. Based on a concept from the reality show titled *My Antonio*, Bucolo and his students created an activity where the students analyze the characters who are present at every meal that is described throughout the novel. Since meals, especially at holidays, are considered a significant part of reflecting family relationships and dynamics, the students analyze who is present at every meal throughout the book, and they also analyze how the characters change from one meal to the next, depending on their interactions. This activity from *Great Expectations* is then used to build classroom community among the students as they themselves analyze the meals in their own lives, especially around the holidays, and they examine what an observer would learn about the people that are present at the table based on what takes place during the meals (p. 31). The students then share these observations with one-another during a whole-class discussion. These discussions build a strong sense of classroom community as the students share information about their families and cultures

with their classmates. This activity is another creative way secondary English teachers can utilize language arts to promote a positive classroom community.

In an article titled "Building Literacy and the Classroom Community" (Blooms, 1986), the social and community-building aspects of literacy are explored, along with implications for secondary English classes. "New conceptions of reading and writing emphasize (a) the active role of the reader and writer in constructing meaning and (b) the inherently social nature of reading and writing" (p. 71). As students construct meaning, they often do so through discussion of text with other students, creating a social environment. Even beyond the classroom, Blooms argues, people use literacy to form communities because groups of people use similar vocabulary and read similar texts as those they are surrounded by. In a classroom, even if students come from different cultural backgrounds, they are expected to form community by sharing common vocabulary as they discuss similar texts. In order to use reading and writing activities to build a classroom culture, "it must be viewed within the context of building or rebuilding the classroom community. Educators must consider the inherent and implied goals, social structure, and history" (p. 75). The goals of classroom activities must range beyond the simple act of reading and writing in order to effectively build community, always attempting to include all students from every culture. Through discussion of common texts with a consistent vocabulary, students can begin to enter into community with one another in the classroom, creating a classroom culture that unifies and celebrates cultural differences.

Greene and Mitcham (2012), in their article titled "Community in the Classroom," describe teachers as "architects of community" (p. 13), exploring the ways in which

teachers can use literature to create an environment where students feel safe to respect others' differing opinions, collaborate with other students, and take intellectual risks. One of the key factors in creating this safe classroom community is the role of the teacher as a facilitator: someone who actively participates in and contributes to the conversation that takes place regarding the literature that is studied in the classroom. "We are facilitators, and we help model for our students the importance of exchanging ideas in a respectful manner, challenging one another to discover new knowledges, and creating spaces in which students can succeed in becoming critical thinkers" (p. 14). The authors state the definition of community as "respecting individual voices within the context of shared goals" (p. 14), so just as students are encouraged to enter into community with one another in a classroom, the authors emphasize the importance of teachers entering into community with one another as well to strengthen each other with different ideas and practices. In relation to literature specifically, one of the educators described in this article videotaped a conversation the students had surrounding the process of writing a synthesis essay for an advanced placement class. The next day, the students watched the video and analyzed their discussion for displays of respect and the thoughtful exchange of ideas (p. 13). This, in turn, helped the students to grow in community as they saw themselves as effective communicators, speaking with respect to one another about intelligent, academic subjects. The key to this community as described by Greene and Mitcham (2012) is the teacher as a facilitator and role model, continually guiding the students in what true classroom culture and community looks like.

Conclusion

First and foremost, the statistics regarding struggling readers in Florida bring about implications that create important foundational conclusions for the remainder of the research. The first implication is gathered from the achievement gap in performance among the three listed races on the English Language Arts Florida Standards Assessments. When comparing the data between white students scoring a three in grades six through ten to African American students in the same category, the achievement gap is a 30 percent difference. Likewise, when comparing the same data for grades nine through ten, there is, again, exactly a 30 percent difference in achievement between the white and African American students. This trend exists in all of the data, and it poses questions about why white students in Florida are performing so much higher than the African American students on the reading portion of the Florida Standards Assessment. One of the potential reasons for this disparity is a difference in culture both from the perspective of teachers and students. Since white students only make up 40.9 percent of the student population in Florida, it is crucial for teachers to step outside of the cultural box to meet the cultural needs of all students represented within the classroom, especially struggling readers.

Because there is an achievement gap among students of different races, teachers must find a new approach to effectively educate a diverse student population. The first theme that was consistently revealed throughout the research was the importance of raising teacher and student awareness of cultural identities, and further viewing them as foundational building blocks of education that must be explicitly taught and discussed when teaching reading. In order to prevent cultural biases, language arts teachers must

not only be aware of what texts they choose to teach and how they choose to teach them, but they must also be aware of what is said and unsaid while teaching (Santoro, 2009) because this aspect of instruction can uncover implicit and explicit cultural biases.

When further analyzing how teachers can more effectively educate struggling readers from different cultural backgrounds, the research consistently suggests that teachers should participate in pre-service training that educates about different cultures and provides experience working with students from a variety of cultures. In a study conducted by Nelson (1998), it was determined, through surveying education students during their pre-service training, that they were uncomfortable with working with students from different cultural backgrounds from their own. When Nelson then assigned these education students to gain field experience in suburban schools, the students admitted that by being exposed to working with diverse students, their comfort levels educating these students increased. Since culture does impact teachers and students, and pre-service teachers are more likely to choose to educate students from similar cultural backgrounds from their own (Nelson, 1998), one implication from this research is providing pre-service teachers with more exposure to cultural diversity in classrooms. The key to bridging cultural gaps is knowledge, so providing pre-service teachers with education about a variety of cultures will empower them to educate students with greater confidence. The more exposure teachers have to other cultures, the more comfortable they will be educating diverse students.

Another theme throughout the research is the benefit of selecting culturally diverse content using multicultural education principles or practices. Multicultural education refers to reforming "the school and other educational institutions so that

students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational

equality" (Banks, 1993, p. 3). In reading classrooms specifically, a multicultural

approach to education involves selecting a variety of texts that represent the cultures of

all students in the classroom. Providing students with a safe space to engage in deep,

reflective thinking about a variety of cultural viewpoints is the goal of multicultural

education, and it is crucial for secondary reading teachers to use these methods to assist

struggling readers in the classroom. In order to engage with the content, it is important

for struggling readers to feel as though they are heard and reflected through the literature

selected by the teacher.

Continuing with multicultural education, researchers further describe the

importance of using multicultural education to provide students with experiential

knowledge about other cultures (Bruna, 2007; Leider, 2006; Vacca & Vacca, 2011).

Literature can provide students an experience with cultures they may never otherwise

encounter, and using diverse texts in this way will not only enrich students' worldviews,

but using these texts as discussion points will also engage struggling readers in secondary

reading classrooms.

Another implication for secondary reading teachers is the importance of choice

when establishing a classroom culture that supports struggling readers (Dickerson, 2015;

Gambrell, 1996). Providing students with choice allows them to infuse their own cultural

identities into the classroom by choosing what they want to read. Consistent

opportunities for choice reading, along with discussions regarding the reading, can bring

about increased classroom management, increased trust between teachers and students,

and increased motivation for the students to read (Dickerson, 2015). These factors can all

increase the motivation, agency, and self-efficacy of struggling readers, thus improving their reading proficiency.

Lastly, the overall most prominent theme that is present throughout all of the literature is the importance of creating classroom culture and community by socially interacting with text (Alexander & Bach, 2013; Blooms, 1986; Bryan, 2012; Bucolo, 2011; Gambrell, 1996; Greene & Mitcham, 2012). By discussing texts from a variety of cultural perspectives, students learn to trust the teacher and one another, all the while learning that their perspective is valued and important to the learning of their classmates. This idea of building classroom culture and community by discussing texts will benefit struggling readers as it engages them socially in reading and promotes their sense of worth and motivation by allowing them to share their viewpoints with others. When conducting these conversations, though, the research also highlights the important role of the teacher. Instead of being a passive listener, the teacher must actively participate in the discussion, model good community-building skills, and facilitate the direction of the conversation (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Korinek, 1999). As the teacher gets involved in these community-building discussions surrounding texts, it further benefits struggling readers by increasing their trust with the teacher as they see one another as equal contributors of perspectives (Korinek, 1999).

As the research has clearly demonstrated, there are a multitude of benefits for incorporating multicultural content and community building strategies in diverse classrooms. The intention behind this thesis is that secondary reading teachers can use culturally aware content and implementation in their classrooms in order to increase student motivation to learn in order to increase reading proficiency. When diverse

students see themselves and their cultural identities represented in the texts they read, an automatic, personal connection will be established with the content. This will likely increase their motivation because they feel a sense of equity and authority. Teachers cannot make students want to learn, but teachers can give each student an equal voice through the content that is selected in the class.

Building community through a variety of strategies will further increase motivation because it gives each student a place to belong within the classroom. If students know that their opinions and perspectives are not only valuable to their classmates, but also integral to the overall cognitive functioning of the class as a whole, then they are more likely to contribute and participate in conversation. The key to engaging diverse, secondary struggling readers is to give them a voice through the content and in the classroom by approaching culturally diverse texts with each student's cultural identity in mind. Allowing students to explore their own culture and other's perspectives in the safe context of a classroom will increase their motivation to learn by exposing students to content that is meaningful to their own identities and relevant to their future encounters with a diverse world.

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