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A Qualitative Study to Further Explore Student Perceptions of Identities and Representations within A Social Studies Classroom

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A Qualitative Study to Further Explore Student Perceptions of Identities and Representations
within A Social Studies Classroom

A Project Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead
By
Jason Blanshan |

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In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in
Curriculum & Instruction

December 2021
Moorhead, Minnesota

Students Identities and Their Impact

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Dedication

With pleasure, I dedicate this action research to the passionate educators that continue to advocate for educational equity during unprecedeted times. During a difficult time for education, you continue to show up for your students. Although they may not always show appreciation, your dedication is making a difference.

Students Identities and Their Impact

Abstract

Through a qualitative study, the researcher explored student identity. Students enter into schools with diverse identities and perspectives. To make learning meaningful, engaging, and relevant teachers need to learn about their students' unique identities. Students deserve a place where they feel safe and empowered to explore themselves, the curriculum, and their futures.

This study focused on two research questions; 1) What impact does learning about students' identities have on the teacher? 2) How do students perceive their identities are reflected in the curriculum? Qualitative data was collected through a series of journals. Participants in an eighth-grade social studies classroom were asked to share and reflect on their unique and diverse perspectives. Over three weeks, students' journal entries were analyzed for themes and allowed the researcher to reflect on improving the curriculum and school community. This research concluded that students are aware of their identities, reflected in the curriculum, and students' desire to have better representation. The researcher found that engaging with students' identities allowed them to be more aware of the needs of students along with a new dedication to creating relevant learning opportunities for all students.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Education has fallen under increased scrutiny under the microscope of society.

Communities are calling for educational reform that allows students to be engaged through diverse perspectives, gain a better understanding of the world and how they fit into society.

Multicultural education reform is not a new fad; however, it has gotten more attention as the United States continues to tackle systemic racism; both in society and in the school system. As students learn about their unique and individual identities, they are put into schools that do not always reflect them.

It is not enough to provide information to students anymore. Students need to be exposed and engage with a diverse set of perspectives that they can identify with and learn from those that are different from their own to prepare them for the globalized world. Although many schools, districts, and states are starting to diversify standards, curriculum, and practices, the problem is identifying the perspectives that are needed. In order to develop a meaningful curriculum that students can identify with, those developing the curriculum must know their student's diverse backgrounds.

The push for a culturally relevant curriculum can be seen in Minnesota with the work being done on the social studies standards. In their first draft, they placed a large emphasis on diversity and teaching students to think critically about the information they are consuming. There is still a question for many educators on the next steps for progress. Educators continue to strive to how to create a curriculum that will relate to all students. How do educators create a

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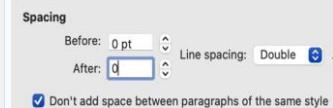
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Students Identities and Their Impact

curriculum that their students can relate to? How do educators introduce students to a globalized world? How do educators reflect on their students' identities and needs and implement authentic learning opportunities?

Brief Literature Review

A buzz in professional development surrounds the need to diversify the curriculum.

There are two common approaches to multicultural education reform, the concept of windows and mirrors and a leveled approach.¹ The windows and mirrors approach involves a perspective taking approach so that students can see their reflection in (mirrors) and view new perspectives to broaden their world view (windows; Style, 1996). The Leveled Approach, by Banks (2007), is defined by the complexity and meaning of the reform.

There is a plethora of information on the Banks¹ (2007) model. Each level progresses allowing for deeper and higher quality multiculturalism within the curriculum (Banks, 2007). Starting with the contributions approach, the curriculum highlights heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements. The additive approach adds content, concepts, themes, and perspective to the existing curriculum without changing the structure. The transformation approach changes the structure of the curriculum to allow students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives. The social action approach asks students to make decisions on important social issues and develop solutions to them.

The United States is a mosaic of cultures, identities, and backgrounds. Every student, regardless of gender, social class, ethnicity, race, or cultural background deserves access to an equal education (Bank & McGee Banks, 2007).¹ Researchers have found a positive correlation for minority students when multicultural education is implemented (Gay, 2002; Huerta, 1999 Moremen, 1997; and Thomas, 2007). Multicultural education is needed, research indicates the

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Students Identities and Their Impact

need [to know] students' identities, but the barrier exists in identifying the perspectives in the classroom to authentically develop a curriculum.

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Statement of the Problem

George Floyd's death on May 25, 2020, was a monumental event that will shape a generation of students. Following Floyd's death, a commitment to social justice and educational reform was taken by many. Americans [devoured] books like *Why Are All the Black Students Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* by Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017), [White Fragility] by Robin DiAngelo (2018), *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds (2020), *I am Still Here* by Austin Channing Brown (2018), [and *Between the World and Me*] by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015). Their stories were being told; their perspectives were listened to. It was a start, but now is the time to make systemic changes to education that allow for diverse perspectives to flourish in the classroom. It is time for our diverse set of learners to see their identities in the curriculum the education system is asking them to know.

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Although there are many layers to multicultural education and its reform, this study will focus on engaging with student identity and how that can assist educators in creating a curriculum that students can relate to. The goal will be to understand how students see their identities reflected in their curriculum and how it impacts the teacher's development of curriculum that can fit into James Banks' (2007) Transformational Approach to multicultural education. In order to do that, the barrier of knowing your students' [diverse identities will have to be overcome.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify students' diverse backgrounds, experiences and characteristics. Additionally, this study was designed for the researcher to engage with student voice to hear how students perceive their identities are being reflected in the curriculum. Thus,

Students Identities and Their Impact

allowing teachers to transform their curriculum to represent the students, community, and society in which they teach.

Research Question(s)

1. What impact does learning about students' identities have on the teacher?
2. How do students perceive their identities are reflected in the curriculum?

Definition of Variables. This study's independent variable is the multicultural perspectives and culturally responsive curriculum that the researcher implemented in their eighth-grade social studies class. The dependent variable was the students' identities and feelings toward multicultural perspectives. Furthermore, the teacher's reaction and thoughts about students' identities and feelings toward multicultural perspectives is a second layer of the study.

Significance of the Study

The value of this study is apparent in the current climate of American society. A divide has been drawn between the issues of systemic racism, inequity, and lack of diverse representation has continued to be highlighted in the media in which students are seeing their identities portrayed every day. These issues have been placed on the shoulders of society to fix and educators can play a significant role. This study, which will focus on transforming the curriculum eighth grade students receive in their social studies classroom, will benefit a range of professionals. Social studies educators are taking on the important work of providing a multicultural education to students. This study will help social studies teachers engage with their students' diverse perspectives and transform their curriculum.

Students participating in this study are given a unique opportunity to share their voices on multiculturalism. By providing their diverse perspectives and experiences, they will lay the foundation needed to transform the curriculum. Students will be able to continually provide input

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on the perspectives they identify with, but also provide suggestions on personal identification they would like to see more of in the curriculum.[t]

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Research Ethics

Permission and IRB Approval

In order to conduct this study, the researcher will seek MSUM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Mills & Gay, 2019). Likewise, authorization to conduct this study within the classroom of the researchers was granted by the principal of the school.

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Research Ethics

Permission and IRB Approval

In order to conduct this study, the researcher will....

Informed Consent

Protection of human subjects participating in research will be assured. Participant minors will be informed of the purpose of the study via the Method of Assent (See Appendix X) that the researcher will read to participants before the beginning of the study. Participants will be aware that this study is conducted as part of the researcher's master degree program and that it will benefit his teaching practice. Informed consent means that the parents of participants have been fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study for which consent is sought and that parents understood and agreed, in writing, to their child participating in the study (Rothstein & Johnson, 2014). Confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Student 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time will be outlined both verbally and in writing.

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Limitations

Push back from students and families could limit the ability of the researcher to find conclusive connections between students' identities and their reflection in the social studies curriculum. Furthermore, the ability for a 13- and 14-year-old to form connections around their identity could be difficult for some. The diversity within the classroom will lend itself to a wide

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range of perspectives but will be limited upon their ability to comprehend how their race, gender, sexuality, etc. are reflected in society.

Conclusions

The time is now to implement multicultural education. With the spotlight on education to do a better job to implement diverse perspectives in curriculum, this study will focus on providing meaningful perspectives for students. In the next chapter, a comprehensive review of multicultural literature will be provided.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Social studies education has fallen under the microscope in recent years. A call for educational reform regarding how social studies it is taught, what is taught in social studies, and the impact of what is taught in the social studies curriculum has come under intense scrutinization. From claims of indoctrination to claims of underrepresentation, social studies education has become center of attention for reform debate.

As a result of George Floyd's death on May 25, 2020, many educators committed themselves to gaining a better understanding of their role in educational reform. In addition to the books listed in Chapter 1, teachers listened to podcasts such as [Teaching While White](#) (2017-present), [Teaching for Justice' Queer America](#) (2019) and [Teaching Hard History](#) (2018-present). It was a start, but their desire to do better for their students still burns within.

During professional development sessions, social studies departments often look at two approaches for multicultural education reform. First, the curriculum including the "windows and mirrors" approach outlines providing perspectives that students can see their reflection in (mirrors) and view new perspectives to broaden their world view (windows; [Style, 1996](#)). Second, they look at James A. Banks' (1989) four leveled approach in which levels are defined by the complexity of implementation.

Body of the Review

Context

Every student, regardless of gender, social class, ethnicity, race, or cultural background deserves access to an equal education ([Bank & McGee Banks, 2007](#)). The United States is a mosaic of cultures, identities, and backgrounds. Students' cultures, identities, and backgrounds play a huge role in how they approach and interpret their schooling. thus, teachers should

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approach educating the diverse population within their classroom appropriately. The means by which we reach equality are different. Two theories are commonly used to assist educators implement multicultural education into their curriculum. Both focus on representation and student identity, they analyze who is in the curriculum, and what does that representation tell the students about the perspective (Style, 1996 and Banks, 1989).

James A. Banks (1989) approach focuses on levels of implementation. Each level progresses allowing for higher quality multicultural education reform.

Level 1: The Contributions Approach - Highlighting heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements.

Level 2: The Additive Approach - Content, concepts, themes, and perspective are added to the curriculum without changing its structure.

Level 3: The Transformation Approach - The structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

Level 4: The social Action Approach - Students make decision on important social issues and help solve them. (Bank & McGee Banks, 2007, 251-261)

These levels can be mixed and blended to provide students with a thoughtful and meaningful learning experience. In either approach, students can see their identity and be exposed to other identities to strengthen their understanding of the world.

Equity in education was taken to a new level recently by Gholiday Muhammad (2020) in her text *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. Her research focused on 19th Century Black Literacy Societies and their relevance to 21st Century education. Throughout her research, she made connections between culturally responsive and multicultural education with a push for building learning around identity

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building, skills, intellect, and criticality (Muhammad, 2020). For 19th Century Black Literacy Societies, identity was the means of social and personal change. These literacy societies focused on the empowerment and growth of the whole, not the individual. Knowledge was to be shared, not kept. Dr. Muhammad explained the identity is at the core of motivation, thus identity drives us in everything people do. Identity is continually being defined and redefined and can be greatly influenced by the environments in which one interacts with.

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The context of this research was to look at the earlier findings of multicultural curriculum implementation and culturally responsive practices. Researchers have found a positive correlation for minority students' outcomes when they have a curriculum that is relevant to them, but most also emphasize the benefits for students from the majority (Gay, 2002, pp. 106-116; Huerta, 1999, pp. 150-165; Moremen, 1997, pp. 107-119; and Thomas, 2007, pp. 113-129). Students in the majority can engage with diverse perspectives; they can make connections between their identity with those that are different and gain a better understanding of those that are different from them. Although the need and benefits of multicultural education are proven, the concept of why it is not happening is another aspect of this research. The questions that come from this research look at how students perceive their identities are reflected in the curriculum and the impact that engaging with student voice has on the instructor. Most researchers have identified common themes of why teachers are hesitant to implement major reforms to their curriculum; a lack of preparation, knowledge, and comfortability are highlighted in earlier research. Previous research also indicated the need-to-know students' identities in order to provide representation within curriculum.

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Theme 1: Representation Matters

A common theme throughout multicultural education reform is the importance of providing representation within curriculum. Researchers have identified that students who feel

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represented in their curriculum have more sense of belonging in the school community and that representation of minority students positively affects the majority students by introducing them to new perspectives (Gay, 2002; Hanvey, 1975; Huerta, 1999; Moremen, 1997; Schachner et al., 2019; Stanley, 2007). Although research has different goals, the common theme of the importance of diverse representation was glaring. It is hard to ignore the need for a diverse curriculum.

The burden of the task to implement a diverse curriculum often gets placed onto social studies and English teachers. The most relevant is within the social studies curriculum as the standards deal with culture and history. English gets tasked to include more diverse authors and characters in the literature they use to instruct students. However, research that includes science, math, and elective courses is less available, but the research found these subjects can also play a significant role in providing representation for our historically marginalized students. Research done by Grace C. Huerta (1997) highlighted that multicultural education goes beyond the social studies and English classroom. She noted from her research that science and math teachers were more likely to argue that issues of diversity do not affect their disciplines (Huerta, 1999). The argument can be made that the lack of diverse representation within these subjects and other subjects is in fact the problem. Students rarely see the achievements of Black, Indigenous, or People of Color in math or science.

Most school mission statements or goals are to prepare students to become productive citizens of the community they live in. By providing them with multicultural education, students are more prepared for the diverse world they interact with. Teaching them a global perspective by providing representation of diverse perspectives will allow for students to be more engaged with civic duty and to be equipped with the skills necessary to navigate and be successful in the diverse world in which they live.

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Theme 2: Barriers to Implementation

Culturally responsive and multicultural education has been proven to be successful, but why is not universally implemented in the education system? While researching, the common themes of lack of preparation, knowledge, and comfortability in multicultural education are a result of the systemic problem. Researchers found that teachers lacked the foundational understanding of culturally relevant curriculum or effective pedagogy strategies to implement culturally relevant or multicultural education (Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, 2008; Gay, 2002, 106-202; Glock et al., 2019, pp. 616-634; Gormon, 2004; Huerta, 1999, 150-165; and Thomas, 2007, pp. 113-129). Teachers have a challenging time teaching what they do not know, if a teacher is unfamiliar with a topic or does not understand the foundation of it, the process of teaching it is difficult. In terms of multicultural education, if a teacher does not know the cultural background and their students' diverse identities it becomes extremely difficult to provide a curriculum that is relevant to them students, then their ability to teach them is hindered.

Geneva Gay (2002) emphasized cross-cultural communication in her research on culturally responsive teaching. She approached communication as a barrier for teachers to implement the curriculum. Students are observant. They noticed what teachers are saying and how they are saying it. Students are learning about their identities; these identities can be reaffirmed in the curriculum. Educators often expect students to fit into the educational system or get left behind. Gay (2002) used the example of setting up norms for taking part in class: Often teachers want a passive-receptive style of communication in where teacher-student communication is teacher-centered and students raise their hand and wait to be called on. However, this is not common across all cultures' norms for communication, call-response, talk-story, and rapport talk where communication is more fluid and builds off what is previously said (Gay, 2002, pp. 110-111). Identifying this cultural difference when designing a culturally

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Students Identities and Their Impact

responsive curriculum may include different discussion strategies that reflect the styles of communication in the room.

Often teachers are hesitant to implement a multicultural education and culturally responsive curriculum because they are uncomfortable. Variants to comfortability range from views on diversity (Glock et al., 2019; Gormon, 2004) to opinions of controversial topics (Hess, 2004, pp. 257-261). Views on diversity can affect what, how, and if a multicultural curriculum is implemented into the classroom. In their study in Germany, Glock et al., (2019) found a correlation between teachers attitudes towards ethnic minority students and implementation of curriculum that reflected the diverse needs of its student body (Glock et al., 2019).

Diane Hess (2004, pp. 259-260) highlighted four approaches to controversial issues in the curriculum: denial, privilege, avoidance, and balance. Denial focuses on the teacher not thinking the issue is controversial, that one side is correct, and the other is not. Privilege identifies the topic is controversial but emphasizes one side over the other. The avoidance approach takes the form of not including the topic in the curriculum. Finally, the balanced approach finds that a topic is controversial, but gives equal treatment to both sides. Hess also summarized in her article that teachers' fear of indoctrinating only one side makes them hesitant to implement issues that may be controversial. Teachers also fear repercussions from parents, administration, and community for including controversial issues. In today's America, it is deeply divided. Students see this--they see what is said about their identities on social media, in film and television shows, in the news, and even in school curriculum. The power of providing students with curriculum that reflects their identities while also providing opportunities for learning about others and making connections with other identities can benefit all students and educators.

Theoretical Framework

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Students Identities and Their Impact

The focus of this action research was to engage with student voice to learn about their identities, how they perceive their identities are portrayed in the curriculum, the school, and society. The researcher was able to reflect on their practices and identify areas of improvement. The goal was to follow the Banks (2007) leveled theory of multicultural education. The researcher has included multiple perspectives and organized their curriculum in a way that introduces their students to a global perspective but still takes a basic structure. Now, the curriculum is at Level 2, they have incorporated new perspectives into their curriculum that highlight the need from diverse population. From engaging with students voices on identity and the ability to reflect on the researchers' current practices in their classroom, the goal of this action research is to transform curriculum to level 3 - The Transformational Approach.

To approach level 3, identifying the students' linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, identities, and perspectives is needed. Successful implementation of culturally and historically relevant curriculum starts with identifying who the students are. These backgrounds can range from European, African, Kurdish, Somali, Spanish, and Native American. The curriculum will focus on providing perspectives on the problem, concepts, and issues of diverse topics using multiple viewpoints that reflect the students in the classroom. The outcome of this variable will be a stronger sense of belonging in the classroom and higher rate of engagement.

Research Question(s)

1. What impact does learning about students' identities have on the teacher?
2. How do students perceive their identities are reflected in the curriculum?

Conclusions

The time is now to commit to the implementation of multicultural education. Through the lens of representation, the goal of this research is to engage with students' voices to help the educator learn about their students' identities. Knowing this will allow the educator to reflect on

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Students Identities and Their Impact

how they could change the curriculum to better reflect the identities of their diverse student body. Through the guidance of students, an analysis on the impact of providing multicultural perspectives can be drawn. This will allow historically underserved students to have a voice in curriculum development and have a chance to truly see themselves in the learning. This approach will also greatly affect students from the majority as they will gain a larger perspective of the classroom, school, and community they live in. Additionally, to improve curriculum barriers, an expansion of understanding and knowledge of the researcher's|students' cultural backgrounds will be necessary to know to properly implement a curriculum that is relevant to them and reflects their cultural backgrounds. The research methods will be outlined in the following chapter.

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CHAPTER 3 METHODS

Introduction

Research confirms the benefit of multicultural education, in which students are introduced to and engage with diverse perspectives, literature, text, and topics (Gay, 2002, pp. 106-116; Huerta, 1999, pp. 150-165; Moremen, 1997, pp. 107-119; Thomas, 2007, pp. 113-129). Research also indicated the benefit of a culturally responsive and relevant curriculum where students can see their identities reflected in the text, perspectives, and topics discussed in class. Although research can conclude the benefits, teachers are still falling short. Teachers must first start by engaging in student voices and hearing from them. Educators must know the development of their student's identities to inform their curriculum building to ensure that a culturally responsive curriculum is being implemented.

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Research Question(s)

1. What impact does learning about students' identities have on the teacher?
2. How do students perceive their identities are reflected in the curriculum?

Research Design

This study was completed using a qualitative research design with a secondary focus on teacher self-reflection. This design was constructed to collect data on the researcher's student's identities, development of identity, and thoughts on multicultural curriculum, while also being able to analyze the impact the student's engagement with identity has on the researcher. A longitudinal journal was used to conduct this research along with a series of journals that helped identify students' identities, perspectives, and perceptions as they relate to the social studies curriculum. This study will use a longitudinal journal in which multiple journal prompts are used over a period of time. This structure of the study was selected to help engage with students' voices, thus allowing for the teacher to reflect on their practice and make authentic changes in the social studies curriculum based on student identities within the classroom.

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Setting

Students Identities and Their Impact

This study was conducted within an eighth-grade social studies classroom. The school is situated in the largest city in northwest Minnesota with 38,065 people: 90.7% white, 2% black, 1.5% American Indian, 2% Asian, less than 1% Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander, 1.1% other, and 2.6% identifying with 2 or more races (Vision Internet, 2021). In recent years, the city's demographics have started to become more diverse, creating a shift in demographics within the public school system. The district has grown considerably and houses four elementary schools (K-4), an intermediate school (5-6), a middle school (7-8), and a high school (9-12). Graduating class sizes average around 500 students, with several above 600 coming through the district.

The middle school this research was conducted in has an enrollment of 1,056 students in grades 7-8. The student body is 72% white, 12% black, 6% Native American, 6% Hispanic, and 2% Asian. Forty-three percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and 15% qualify for special education services. Students' home lives varied; 53% live with both parents in the same household, 6% live with both parents in separate households, 16% live with a single parent, and 25% other (foster care, parent/stepparent, grandparent).

Each grade is divided into four teams where they receive their core classes (math, science, social studies, and language arts). Students are placed in teams randomly by administration. With students in teams, it allows school staff opportunities to implement multi-tiered levels of support such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), BARR (Building Assets, Reducing Risks), REACH, and PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention System). The goal of these tiers is to provide each student opportunity to receive the support they need to be successful.

Participants

The participants in this study were between the ages of 13 and 14. They are enrolled as eighth-graders in the 7-8 school building. These students were randomly assigned to the

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Students Identities and Their Impact

researchers' eighth-grade houses (out of four). This team is located on the first of three floors of students. The gender identity of these students is split 52% female and 47% male. About 15% of the students receive special education services, and 35% will receive additional academic or social-emotional support through the multilevels of support provided at the middle school.

Sampling

This sample was selected through a convenience sample. Students are randomly placed in one of four eighth-grade teams. Therefore, they were selected to participate because they are the researchers' students. Each student that took the class was provided the journal prompts.

Selection of journal data used was based on the school demographics. As culturally responsive pedagogy asks for students to see representation in their curriculum, the sampling of this study was selected to represent the perspectives, identities, and characteristics of the school culture.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation of this study followed the guidance of Gholy Muhammad (2020) in her book *Cultivating Genius an Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. Students will complete three journals throughout the study to help the educator understand the identities of their students. See Appendix A for journal prompts.

Data Collection

Data was collected through the first journal to help the educator identify the students' perspectives and identities. The researcher categories the data and found themes regarding similarities and differences in students' identities and perspectives. This gave the educator a baseline understanding of who was in the classroom. For example, it gave the educator an understanding of the gender, racial, social, and socioeconomic identity of each student. Identities can change throughout a school year, either through self-discovery, seeing new perspectives in class, and comfortability sharing, thus why data will be collected during the study to engage with

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Students Identities and Their Impact

how students perceive multicultural perspectives, how they are relating to the curriculum, and parts of their identity they would like to see in the class. A second journal was conducted to help the researchers see how students were seeing their identity reflected in the curriculum. Finally, a third journal was used to collect data on how the students saw their identity reflected in the school and community. This allowed the researcher to reflect on their practice and determine areas for improvement.

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Data Analysis

The first set of data will be analyzed to show commonalities among student's identities and help the educator implement a culturally responsive curriculum that reflects the student's identities. This is analyzed using the collected data on themes and categories found in the journal. It will also be analyzed to see what perspectives that they are not familiar with and help the implementation of new and diverse perspectives.

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The second set of data will be looking at the impact the voices of the students had on the researcher. The researcher will take notes while going through each journal. For each student, the researcher wrote the first thing that came to their mind. These thoughts were used to determine how the researcher was impacted by the student's ability to share their identities and perceptions of multicultural education and if it moves them forward in developing better learning opportunities for all their students.

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Research Questions and System Alignment

Table 3.1 provides a description of the alignment between the study Research Question(s) and the methods used in this study to ensure that all variables of study have been accounted for adequately.

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Questions

Students Identities and Their Impact

Research Question	Variables	Design	Instrument	Validity & Reliability	Technique (e.g., interview)	Source
RQ1	Students Identities and Feeling Researchers Reflection	Qualitative	Journal Notes	The validity and reliability of this question will depend on students' ability to self-identify various characteristics.	Analysis of Journal Notes	Student Journals
RQ2	Students Identities and Feelings Culturally Relevant and Multicultural Perspectives in Curriculum	Qualitative	Student Journal	The validity and reliability of this question will depend on students' ability to self-identify various characteristics.	Student Journal Responses	Student Journals

Procedures

Students will be given the first journal within the first two months of school. The journal will be conducted in paper form to allow student information to be collected and kept in a lockbox in the researcher's desk. The design of the first journal prompt is to assist the researcher to determine who is in the classroom. Students will be encouraged to share preferred pronouns, family backgrounds, educational backgrounds, hobbies, interests, and activities they are interested in.

The researcher then analyzed the first journal responses looking for themes of information. These themes first included similarities between students' identities. Secondly, the researcher looked for differences between students' identities. The researcher then looked for

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... first journal responses looking for themes...

Students Identities and Their Impact

perspectives and identities that were already in upcoming units of study. The last part of first journal was looking for new perspectives or parts of the students' identities that could potentially fit into the curriculum.

The second journal was given two weeks after the initial journal. This journal is designed to see how students see their identities reflected in social studies curriculum. Students were encouraged to share connections between the curriculum and their identities. Students were also encouraged to reflect on how this made them feel about themselves and the curriculum.

Once students submitted the journals, the researcher read the responses and took notes. For each response, the researcher determined if it was a positive or negative response to the prompt. Additionally, the researcher reacted to the student's ability to connect with the curriculum.

The third and final journal was given two weeks following the second journal. This journal asked students to share how they want to see their identity reflected in the curriculum. Students were encouraged to share a part of the identity they see is missing within the curriculum and suggest how it could be used in future units. For each response, the researcher determined if the student could share a part of their identity that was missing from the curriculum. Pseudonyms, such as Student A, protected students' identities. Additionally, students will submit journals without identifiers to add another level of ethical control and increase the validity of the study. The researcher determined if the student gave potential for improvement of curriculum.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations in this study involve confidentiality of student's identities. Students are trusting the educator with personal information that can include immigration history, family backgrounds, non-conforming gender identity, sexuality, race, and socioeconomic

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Students Identities and Their Impact

status information. Their use of this information can transform curriculum to be more meaningful and powerful but can be hard for some students to share.[\[1\]](#)

Conclusions

This chapter described the study in detail. This included the process for collection and analysis of data. This research study will be looking at students' identities, how they can be reflected in social studies curriculum and how students feel about multicultural perspectives. The next chapter will include the results.

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Will there be alternate journal questions to do?

Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Building relationships with students is pivotal in creating a learning environment that fosters growth, acceptance, and respect. Teachers are continually reminded by administrators, educational researchers, and other stakeholders to build relationships with students, get to know what motivates them, understand their unique identities, and provide relevant learning opportunities. However, many strategies exist to learn about students and build relationships. Teachers struggle with what to do with the information once they have collected it.

If educators are unwilling to identify students' diverse backgrounds, experiences, and characteristics, the achievement gap will continue to expand and impact educational outcomes. The researcher in this study was interested in learning how students perceived their identity, how it was reflected in the social studies curriculum, and how it impacted the teacher.

Data Collection

Through three journals, the researcher collected qualitative data that allowed them to reflect on their practices and learn about the unique identities in their eighth-grade social studies classroom. For three consecutive weeks, the researcher provided participants in the study with journal prompts. Through students' writing, the researcher identified themes, observations, and important student quotes.

Overall, participants provided the researcher with fascinating insights into what made each unique. At times, it struck the researcher how open and honest some of the students were. By providing the researcher with this information, they were able to solidify the need for relevant and authentic learning opportunities so students could feel supported in their identity exploration.

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Participants. The tables show the demographics of the forty-two participants compared to the demographics of the 1,056 students of the school it the research was conducted in. Table 4.1 breaks down the sex identification of the participants. Table 4.2 show the comparison of the participants race to the schools.

Table 4.1

Gender Identification

	Participants	School
Male	35.7%	47%
Female	64.3%	52%
Total	42	1,056

Table 4.2

Race/Ethnicity Identification

	Participants	School
White	80%	72%
Black or African American	9.5%	12%
American Indian	2.4%	6%
Asian	2.4%	2%
Hispanic	0%	6%

Results

RQ 1: What impact does learning about students' identities have on the teacher?

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While reading the students' journal entries, it was apparent that the students who participated in the research felt comfortable sharing their identities. It often struck the researcher with what they were willing to share. Three major themes arose while analyzing the journals to answer Research Question 1; the need for a relevant curriculum, building connections and relationships, and the importance of mental health. Each of these topics was continually mentioned throughout the journal series and resonated with the researcher the most.

Need for Relevant Curriculum. As a system, education is underrepresenting or misrepresenting many of our students. Particularly students that do not conform to societal norms. Student A said,

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I would like to see Black/African people shown as leaders instead of followers and their smarts and hardships shown as their worth. For schools to teach and LEARN from different African American cultures and African ones as well. For young Black (African) kids to be proud and respected for their hair or skin, for them to be shown by not only their people but others that they are worthy and can do everything just as white people can do. They are not always the bad guy, they have many rights and a future in this country, and they are people too.

A profound statement for an eighth-grader to share makes one stop and think about the experiences of this individual and how curriculum and a system can change to help them achieve their goals.

The need for relevant curriculum was mentioned throughout many journal entries. Students talked about learning about the history of sexuality, immigration, and acceptance of differences. Student B said, "I try my best to make sure to include everyone, but it is difficult when we are not given accurate information or sometimes no information on the backgrounds of

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other people.” This student’s desire to take in knowledge about other people solidifies the need for a relevant curriculum. For example, how do we encourage students to learn about each other and their backgrounds? Many just come into the classroom, sit in their seat, do their work, leave and repeat in another class. But we are not creating connections and fostering relationships.

Building Connections and Relationships. Students desire a safe place to learn. One where they feel the adults and the students accept them for who they are. Students walk into the school doors afraid, nervous, and anxious about how others will treat them. Student C said, “I am more than just my sexuality. I wish people saw me for more than that.” Identity is fluid and complex. It is allowed to change and be defined by multiple characteristics. Student C wants their peers and teachers’ perceptions of them to be more than one characteristic. All students deserve the opportunity to explore their identities and build connections with peers.

Building connections and relationships with students and between students creates a sense of community. Student D asked, “Why can’t the diversity of our school be celebrated? It seems like we always want to brush it under the table.” Many participants echoed this desire to learn about and celebrate our diversity. They expressed curiosity in learning using diverse perspectives. Student E even mentioned, “I think it is important to learn history, not just as it’s taught at schools but also through diverse sources.”

Mental Health Awareness. An outcry of support for mental health awareness was present the second week of journaling. So much so that the researcher wondered the reasons for its continued mentioning. Upon further observation and conversations with students and faculty, the topic was mentioned in students’ Healthy Lifestyles class and a recent death of a student.

“We never learn about how to help people who are struggling or about people with disorders,” stated Student F. Mental health was mentioned by many students. Participants said

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things like, “We only learn a little bit about mental health, but it impacts a lot of us,” or “my history of depression is often pushed off.” One of the pandemic’s significant impacts on our students is the increased awareness of mental health and making sure our students are doing alright. Student G said, “Mental health is interesting, and it could help me train for the career I want. Isn’t that what school is for?” Interesting question, if school is designed to prepare students for careers, this topic should be present in our curriculum.

Data Analysis. I expected to be overcome by emotions while reading these journals. I was hoping to identify areas of concern and potential for growth. However, I was not expecting to feel like I was not servicing the needs of my students. I am left with many questions about where to go from here and what I can do to be what my students need me to be.

The statements participants made reenforces the need for diverse perspectives and curriculum that students can relate to, from seeing themselves in the curriculum to having an insight into others identities (Styles, 1996) along with the importance of providing access to an equal education (Banks & McGee Banks, 2007).

RQ 2: How do students perceive their identities are reflected in the curriculum?

From the journals provided by the participants, the data contradicted the diversity of the classroom. At times, it seemed through the journal responses that religion, language, race, and ethnicities were moderately homogenous. The journal responses were overwhelmingly dominated by mentions of being white, English speaking, Christians. Although this was the case, four major themes arose during the data collection: students were unaware if their identities were reflected in the curriculum, students identified with the LGBTQIA+ community, students felt underrepresented or misrepresented, and they felt like they were ordinary.

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Unaware of How their Identities Reflected in Curriculum. As thirteen- and fourteen-year-old, eighth-grade students, a common theme was their inability to connect their identity with the curriculum, along with the unmistakable sense of the participant's continued development of identity. Many used vague language like, "I am smart" or "I am funny" when providing information about their identity. Some students did not grasp the whole meaning of the prompt and were unable to make connections between them and the past or current curriculum. Student G summarized most of their classmates when writing, "I guess I don't pay enough attention to how my identity is portrayed in the curriculum." For some students, it is essential to remember that they are still trying to figure out who they are. But still, foster learning opportunities for them to explore possibilities.

LGBTQIA+. Over and over again, students reflected on their identification with the LGBTQIA+ community and how it was never a topic of conversation in the curriculum. Although they did not feel represented in the curriculum, many participants still felt expressed through the student group Straight and Gay Alliance (SAGA). Mentioning that SAGA provided them "a safe place to be themselves" or "an opportunity to explore their identity."

Students felt that the struggles and hardships of the LGBTQIA+ community should be present in the curriculum for the benefit of themselves and others. Student H explained, "Learning about the history of Gay people would help me feel comfortable with my sexuality and potentially normalize it with those that do not accept it." This statement reinforces the research that has found a correlation for minority students' outcomes when they have a relevant curriculum, along with the benefit it has on the students from the majority (Gay, 2002, pp. 106-116; Huerta, 1999, pp. 150-165; Moremen, 1997, pp. 107-119; Thomas, 2007, pp. 113-129).

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Underrepresented and Misrepresented. Student H brings light to the theme of misrepresentation or underrepresentation in the school curriculum. As indicated in their writing, they identified as Black and said,

We are depicted as slaves and people who have water problems. But that is not our entire story. Some people like me are respected and have their privacy and freedom respected. Others don't, like no matter the situation we have, we can never fully speak our minds. It is seen as violent or offensive, highly referring to police officers, teachers, doctors, etc. No matter what my people do, we still become oppressed by the people who think they are higher or above us for whatever reason. Skin tone should not be seen as an offensive thing or a problem. The way Black people are depicted in the curriculum is wrong.

This student's honest and sincere reflection on how they feel represented in the curriculum solidifies the need for teachers to reflect and for systemic change to our school systems, and to ensure that students like Student H do not have to continue to feel misrepresented, stereotyped, and underrepresented.

Student E echoes the misrepresentation, but this time focuses on her identity as a woman. She explained:

People like me (women) are represented poorly throughout history. We're present, but not all the time. Mostly we're side characters or damsels in distress, or servants, or submissive, or dumb. Women in history have done amazing things and few people will know it.

This student professes her frustration that the curriculum continually reinforces the male contribution to society and the need to highlight female achievement. Her honest reflection of

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her perception of identity in the curriculum raises concerns about creating a school and classroom culture of inclusivity and growth.

Ordinary or the Standard. Some participants could explain how they were portrayed or depicted in the curriculum as the standard, ordinary.

Student F said, "People like me are depicted like basic people and others treat us fine."

Student I said, "People like me are portrayed as normal."

Student J said, "People that look like me in the curriculum are treated like any other white person."

Student K said, "People like me have a subject in social studies and are the main focus."

These four of these participants also provided insight into their religion or race. Showing that Christianity or their whiteness are reinforced as the norm through learning opportunities.

Data Analysis. In general, I was hoping for more diverse perspectives to be shared. However, given the set of participants, I am impressed with the overall ability to reflect and identify how curriculum and school could improve. There is an opportunity for more significant improvement in creating learning opportunities and a school environment conducive to inclusive, relevant, and meaningful learning.

Through this study, the notion that representation matters was reinforced. Students are aware of how you treat them, how they are represented and feel supported. The findings coincided with the research done by Gay (2002), Huerta (1999), Moremen (1997), Schachner et al. (2019), Muhammad (2020), and Banks (2007). Students' identities are essential. If educators fail to know who their students are, they will continue to create learning opportunities that students will be unwilling to engage and participate in.

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Students Identities and Their Impact

The major problem I encountered while conducting this research was the participant pool. It was observed that the participants that returned a signed Consent Form did not reflect the diversity of the general classroom. This lack of diverse participants significantly impacted the data collected on how students felt about school and how they were represented.

At times, the journal prompts had to be explained and reworded for participants to understand them. Rewording and reexplaining impacted the data provided by participants. It may have worked better if done in an interview setting or through more informal conversations.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is understood that the results of this action research are relative to the setting of the researcher's classroom and the environment they have created for students to feel comfortable sharing this information. This limits the generalization of the study. The following steps of this research would be to create learning opportunities with parts of students' identities that have been unrepresented or misrepresented and evaluate their effectiveness.

To improve this action research, a better effort to have the participants reflect on the overall diversity in the classroom would be beneficial. Through the investigation, it would indicate that few students speak a language other than English. When in fact, a significant population of the classroom speaks Kurdish, Somali, or another language. This is observed through informal conversations with students to get to know them. Additionally, the format of written journals was a hindrance to some students. It would be beneficial for students who prefer to type or have poor penmanship, have a more effective means to participate.

When conducting the study, the question of 'now what?' continued to be contemplated. Once teachers get to know their students, teachers can identify what is relevant to them and create learning opportunities students are more likely to engage with. Additionally, what effect

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Once teachers get to know their students, teachers can identify....

Students Identities and Their Impact

do relevant learning opportunities have on student achievement and active participation in school (both in the classroom and in activities)? Lastly, what impact does engaging with students' voices have on creating a school environment where students feel safe, respected, and encouraged to achieve high standards?

Conclusion

There are plenty of ways to engage with student identity and learn who students are in the classroom. Through this research, it can be concluded that there is a need for this in classrooms. Teachers and educators need to know who is in their classrooms and buildings to create learning opportunities and environments that students want to participate in. As a system, students' perspectives and thoughts are often left out of curriculum building, community building, and decisions that impact them. How teachers get to know our students does not matter. What is essential is the time, effort, and willingness to get to know all the students.

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Chapter 5

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Through this qualitative study, the researcher analyzed the written responses of eighth-grade students to three journal prompts in their social studies classroom. Participants were asked to reflect on their identity, how they thought their identities reflected in school, and areas they wished to see improvement. Teachers are told repeatedly by administration, stakeholders, and researchers of the importance of building relationships and learning about our students. This study reinforced the need for engaging with students' identities and creating relevant learning opportunities for students.

Action Plan

Where will I go from here? Well, first, celebrate and share the diversity of the students in the classroom. The plan to do this is to create a visual representation of the diversity within the school, with a map titled "The Journey to Horizon Middle School." Students will place a pin in their home country, city, or state. Students will be encouraged to write short stories or provide visuals to show their path to our school. Secondly, highlighting and sharing the achievements and advancements of diverse peoples. The bulletin board, located at the front of the classroom, will share these achievements as we work through our regional units in Global Studies. It will highlight the successes and advancements in science, math, literature, and social studies.

This study proved that students are still discovering who they are. So, continued efforts throughout the school year will be made to learn about them. Every Monday is a 'Monday Meeting' in the classroom. During this, we review the week, discuss our weekends, and answer a question of the day. Dominique Smith, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey (2015) offer suggestions for questions in their book *Better Than Carrots or Sticks*;

Students Identities and Their Impact

If you had one week to travel for free, where would you go and why?

What is your favorite quality? Why?

When you have an hour to yourself, what do you like to do?

When people want to know about _____, they ask you.

This consistent routine creates helps create a community of caring, trust, and respect in the classroom. It allows students to share, make connections, and learn communication skills. Plus, through this, I can identify interests and create learning opportunities relevant to my students.

When students are listened to, their concerns, considerations, and suggestions are taken seriously, the realm of possibility for school is endless. Teachers, administrators, building support staff, and more can learn a lot from student reflection. I imagine if there is a problem concerning the school, such as offensive language, if you took the time to engage with students' perspectives on the issue, you would learn a lot and discover ways to improve.

Plan for Sharing

This study will be shared with my team of teachers, our climate and culture specialist, and administration. Early on, they expressed interest in the results and have been huge supporters of my research. They have been a sounding board for questions, problem solvers, and eager to hear my thoughts through the entire research process.

Major points to share are the need to celebrate diversity and take considerable action in creating a climate of empowerment, high achievement, and respect amongst students, teachers, and other staff. I will do this through informal conversations as I move forward.

Students Identities and Their Impact

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Journal 1: Who are you?

- What is your name? What does it mean?
- What are your cultural identities? (Think about how cultural identities typically have beliefs, languages that are used, literature read and written, power structure/social organization at home, rites of passage, rituals, traditions, celebrations, practices, and histories)
- How would you describe yourself to someone who didn't know you?
- What would your friends say about you?
- What do you read, write, or think about in your home and community?

Journal 2: Identity in School and Society

- How is social studies important in your culture/ethnicity?
- How are people like you depicted in social studies curriculum?
- How are people like you depicted in school?
- How are people like you depicted in society? (Think about media and how it portrays people like you)

Journal 3: Identity in Future Curriculum

- What part of your identity is not present in current curriculum?
- How would you like to see your identity implemented in future learning opportunities?

Students Identities and Their Impact

Students Identities and Their Impact

[Appendix X]

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March 20, 2021

3601 12th Ave S
Moorhead, MN 56560

Dear Parents and Guardians,

I have invited your child to participate in a study to determine the value of identifying the diverse perspectives in my classroom to develop a relative and meaningful curriculum.

If you decide to let your student participate in the study, your student will participate in two sets of inquiry:

1. An initial survey to identify their diverse perspectives.
2. A series of journals will be used to assess how they identify with the curriculum.

This study will expand the already gathered data on ethnic, racial, and gender identity that is provided in PowerSchool. The additional information granted involved no risk to your student.

I have received permission from Assistant Principal Meagan Blake to conduct this study in my classroom this fall. The data gathered from this study will help me complete my final paper to obtain my master's degree from Minnesota State University Moorhead. By signing this form you are giving me consent to use the information I gather. This information will be confidential, and your student's name will not be attached to the study. Your student can opt-out of this study at any time without any consequences.

Commented [TB137]: and

If you have any questions, please reach out to me at jblanshan@moorheadschools.org or 218-284-2774 or Principal Investigator Dr. Tiffany Bockelmann at 218-780-0757, or by email at tiffany.bockelmann@mnstate.edu. Any questions about your student's rights may be directed to Dr. Lisa I. Karch, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board, at 218-477-2699 or by email at irb@mnstate.edu.

Your signature indicates that you have read the above information and allow your student to participate in this study. You may withdraw your student at any time.

Parent or Guardian Signature

Date

Students Identities and Their Impact

Investigator Signature

Date