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**Rationale:**

**Minority Adolescents in Search for Identity**

The everyday culture represents an infinite version of a white person; in movies and television shows, white people, especially men, dominate roles of soldiers, office workers, doctors, blue-collar workers, political leaders, pop-stars, and heroes. Therefore, texts that present different experiences from different ethnicities are helpful for minority adolescents to identify with characters that are hardly portrayed. Not only do young adults develop an ongoing interest for literature by being able to recognize themselves in the text they read, but they also benefit by gaining insights into their own lives. In these texts, ethnic minority students can identify similar experiences and challenges, which assist them in finding solutions they may face. Though some readers may not share the exact same ethnic background as the main character of a story, they have a shared connection in the experiences of being marginalized, misunderstood, and not being able to fit with a majority group.

How a person identifies himself or herself shapes the individual’s worldviews. My unit of study is on the experience of being of an ethnic minority and how it affects his or her personal identity. When a person does not resemble the people that surround him or her, it can create an internal conflict about how he or she fits in his or her community. Young minority students may feel a sense of exclusion as their classmates and teachers do not share the same ethnic background. Moreover, minority students can be subjected to marginalization inside of their school and in their own communities outside of school based on their differences.

I find the subject important personally because of my own experience of being biracial and being an immigrant. Growing up, not only was it difficult for me to understand the world around me, but what was more challenging is that the world around me had a hard time understanding me. Like many other minorities, I did not fit well into a category and became more susceptible to experience discrimination. It led me to be more isolated, which affected my confidence and consequently made me doubt whether I was inferior because of my ethnicity. This reinforces the idea that if readers are able to discover their experience in a book, they can find new ways to navigate their own lives. Through stories where the central character faces discrimination for being a minority, readers can understand how to overcome the judgments of others and their own judgments they have from themselves that resulted from being a minority.

**Centerpiece Work**

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Source: http://mattdelapena.com/books/mexican-whiteboy/

My centerpiece work for the unit of study is *Mexican WhiteBoy* by Matt de la Pena. Not only was the book taught in my class observation, but it was also apparent that the students reacted well to the character and the style of writing. *Mexican WhiteBoy* uses Spanglish throughout the book as the main character is of Mexican heritage as the title suggests, and lives in San Diego, which borders Mexico. In my class observation, the students who were reading this book live in a similar predicament as Danny, the main character. The students also live California, in the city of San Jose that is highly populated with Hispanic ethnicities. Many of the students in the class were of Mexican heritage, spoke some Spanglish, and revealed to experience a similar type of cultural identity crisis the main character Danny experiences in the book.

Spanglish, as the word infers, is a slang that inserts Spanish words in English sentences that is commonly spoken in Hispanic communities throughout America. According to an article in Signal Journal, the diversity in the classrooms in America creates a range in the ability to speak English. Students’ confidence to speak in class is impeded by their inability to master the English language. The article articulates that teachers who taught the book observed an increase of cultural pride in minority students, which resulted in higher participation. They note that *Mexican WhiteBoy* drives positive cultural attitudes, provides depths to understanding different cultural backgrounds, and stirs interest in language diversity. Comparing the criteria found in the Exeter study on the qualities that makes young adult book good, the success of the *Mexican WhiteBoy* demonstrates that the wider themes that speak truthfully about the world can compensate for the simplicity and grammatically incorrectness of the language used to write the story. In the class I observed, though not every student were of Hispanic ethnicity, most of the students, regardless of their own ethnicity, showed interest in Danny’s experience. *Mexican WhiteBoy,* not only helps young readers who can identify with being of an ethnic minority, but according to Signal Journal, the story also makes a meaningful impact to the classroom at large for exposing a multicultural experience that allows more appreciation for diversity.

Danny the protagonist of the story is half white and half Mexican who longs to be accepted. His parents live apart and though the distance between them isn’t far, there is a stark contrast between the environments they are in. When Danny lives with his white mother, he goes to an elite private school. In that upper, wealthier part of San Diego, he feels isolated as he struggles with exclusion because he is a shade darker than his white classmates who do not accept him. “Nobody paid him any attention anyway because he was Mexican. He roamed the school halls with his head down like a ghost. Drifted in and out of classrooms without a peep. Nobody even saw him as a real person.”(Pena, 16) When he visits his Mexican side of the family who are located closer to Mexico, Danny continues to feel isolated. With his Mexican family, he gets lost in the Spanish language they speak and feels estranged by the Hispanic culture. As a result, Danny remains silent and withdraws deeper in himself. Therefore, no matter where Danny is, he is an outsider. Danny’s sanctuary becomes the baseball fields where he is more certain of himself. As a prodigal baseball player, Danny finds refuge in baseball and hopes to find acceptance for his athletic talents.

Matt de la Pena drew from his own life experiences of being biracial when he wrote *Mexican Whiteboy*. Like Danny in the story, de la Pena grew up poor and was able to find opportunities with his talents in sports, but he also experienced the daunting task of modifying himself according to which group he was in. According to a lecture he gave in San Jose State, one of his aims in his writings is to show how a multiracial character responds differently according to the different ethnic groups he or she belongs to. When everyone else looks and acts different than an individual, it is only natural for him or her to have the impulse to conform to his or her environment. In *Mexican WhiteBoy*, Danny’s demeanor changes as he navigates through different ethnic groups, especially with the two sides of his family. He enhances one half of his culture while simultaneously reducing the other half.

In the same lecture, Matt de la Pena shared another inspiration that led him to write stories about multiracial characters. It came from a lecture from Dominican author Junot Diaz at a national teacher conference de la Pena attended. The phrases that echoed in de la Pena’s head were, “The monsters in the story often don’t see a reflection of themselves in the mirror…The quickest way to create monsters in our inner cities is to never show those kids a reflection of themselves in literature because it doesn’t validate their lives.”(Pena, 2018) Since then, its became more important for Matt de la Pena to expose minorities as heroes of a character as to prevent the adverse affect for minority adolescents to either become no one or a monster in society.

Since people of color are more often marginalized and exposed to discrimination, multiracial people are likely to identify more to the part of themselves that is not white. The story demonstrates this as Danny makes a continuous effort to assimilate to his Mexican heritage and harbors resentment for being white. “Back in Leucadia, he made a pact with himself. NO more words. Or as few as he could possibly get away with. When his dad spoke at all, he mostly spoke spanish, but Danny never learned. All he had was his mom’s English.” (Pena, 16) Unfortunately, multiracial people can only partially belong to an ethnic community and cannot reap the same benefit of being fully included in an ethnic minority group. This is found when Danny’s uncles and cousins make him feel different from them by pointing out that he is white, "D-man, Li'l D, D-money, roll it up right, man. Fold it up at the end. Here do like this, homey, with your fingers. Don't hold it like no white boys now or else the butter's gonna drip out the bottom, get all over your hand." (Pena, 18)

Figuring out what it means to be biracial and who to be in each group approaches the existential questions: where does a person begin to identify who he or she is and how does it affect his or her agency over his or her own life*?* *Mexican WhiteBoy* exhibits Danny losing agency of his own life when he prevents himself from speaking throughout the story and refrains from intellectual pursuits around his family. Also, Danny mysteriously loses his ability to accurately pitch a baseball, the thing that he usually has the most control over in his life. A multiracial person being suspended in limbo in search for his or her identity helps offer insight to the existential crisis and the debilitating effect it has on him or her.

At the end of *Mexican WhiteBoy,* Danny forgoes the idea of being accepted for the color of his skin or his abilities as he starts searching for acceptance elsewhere. Danny finds friends who accept him for who he is and looks to his own character in his new path to be at peace with his identity. Adolescent readers are assisted to find agency in their own lives as they are moved by Danny’s ability to act out of his own will. Therefore, the message of self-acceptance is universal and is not limited to one certain group. *Mexican WhiteBoy* is a story of self-discovery that provides a way to cross the boundaries of ethnicities and serve as a key to understanding the universal feeling of isolation, identity crisis and the multiple levels of rejection young adolescents can experience.

**Introducing the topic**

“I’m Not Racist,” a video made by Joyner Lucas went viral in 2017 and gained over a hundred million views on YouTube for exposing ideas of racism. It received a more positive respond from viewers as more than two million likes were given compared to the dislikes that did not even reach two hundred thousand counts. The music video is a discourse dispelling certain preconceived ideas of a race that leads to racist beliefs. The title of the rap song, “I’m Not Racist” is ironic as two people of two different ethnicities berate hateful, stereotypical comments on the opposing ethnicity while self-proclaiming that they are not racist.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/E1VMWKRLKkMHk6rB9>, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/a.jpg

The video shows two characters, one black man and one white man, confrontationally staring straight into each other’s eyes. Each man depicts the generalization of his own race. The archetypical image of the white man wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat opposing the archetypical image a black man wearing loose clothes, gold jewelry and braided hair signifies the duality of the two races; one man is showing to belong to the blue collar, right conservative culture while the other man is showing to belong to a marginalized, leftist, liberal, urban culture. The image of the confrontation is powerful as it manifests the belief system that they rap about. The conclusion of the song ends as their heated argument gets pacified as they take turn listening to their counterparts, which leads to an embrace. The video serves as a great lesson that ignorance does not cease to exist unless a subject is exposed.

The genre of rap is relatable to young teens, but more importantly it can be served as a great way to introduce poetic devices like rhyme, alliteration, and metaphors.

The lyrics for the song are also useful for the topic of racism. The content of the song offers a variety of topics like the effects of derogative words, white privilege, and political views. Teachers can break down the song at a poetic level, but also break down the meaning of the lyrics. As a class, the students can categorize what they consider stereotypes and racist remarks. The teacher can elaborate further by facilitating the students find counter arguments based on the lyrics, but also find more counter arguments from their own opinions. Teachers can also assign students homework to share other rap songs or other genre of songs that they are familiar with and elaborate on the poetry devices used and that illustrates the subjects of race, hate, and ignorance.

**During the Unit of Study**

**Harlem**

By Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

      Does it dry up

      like a raisin in the sun?

      Or fester like a sore—

      And then run?

      Does it stink like rotten meat?

      Or crust and sugar over—

      like a syrupy sweet?

      Maybe it just sags

      like a heavy load.

      *Or does it explode?*

“Harlem” written by Langston Hughes is another canonical work that can assist to teach themes of identity, discrimination and struggles while living as a minority. The poem begins with a question, “What happens to a dream deferred?”(1) Hughes keeps the poem ambiguous about what the dream is and what happens when it is deferred. However, Hughes infers to the possible effects of the oppressions of African Americans and how the conditions set against them does not allow them to achieve in life, let alone even dream. Hughes uses powerful imageries to describe possible outcomes of what can happen while keeping the message ambiguous.

Teachers can use the poem to create a conversation about what all the imageries could mean. In poetry, where each word is significant, multiple interpretations can be derived from a line or a word. Teachers can use a mind map to create a web of ideas of all the possible meanings the students can draw from the poem. The use of “Harlem” not only works well to supplement the theme of discrimination from *Mexican WhiteBoy*, but it also builds on the poetic devices learned from the “I’m Not Racist” introduction. Also the short length and the simplicity of the language in the poem make the assignment less daunting for students to keep them interested.

**Continuing the Study Unit**



source: <https://www.thehateugive.com/>

*The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas is a great book to continue the unit of study because it centers on a teenager, Starr who deals with racism in different aspects of her life. The death of her friend Khalil demonstrates the violence and dangers certain minorities have to deal with because of the color of their skin. The book demonstrate how Starr, like Danny in *Mexican WhiteBoy,* deals with the difficulty of her own identification in her private school as she feels pressured to act differently and unnaturally to assimilate to the white culture of her school. The book also exhibits a spectrum of discrimination from the violent death of Khalid that resulted from racial profiling, to a subtle narrative shift of how the victim was blamed for looking thuggish and not acting more appropriately like the white people in his town. As a result, Starr finds a voice for herself and is resolved to remain unsilent about the impeding injustice of black people who are victims of hate crimes. This ties back to the same solution delivered in the introduction of the topic, “I’m Not Racist” of exposing ideas of racism instead of keeping these ideas obscured.

**Continuing the Study Unit**

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https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/92057.The\_Autobiography\_of\_Malcolm\_X

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* co-authored by Alex Haley is a canonical nonfiction book that speaks greatly on the critical period of American history during the civil rights movement. The book made an impact on society for revealing the blatant violence against black people that was driven by racism. Malcolm X, who was a key figure for the black movement, shared his voice to be the unfiltered anger of a generation of black people who suffered injustice. He stood as a force against suppression, yet relied on his intellect to get his message across. What students can observe in reading this important novel is how Malcolm X goes through four identity shifts from his youth all the way to the end of his life.

In his youth, he is known as Malcolm Little who is a bright kid but is not granted equal opportunities to succeed because of the systematic segregation and racism. Malcolm Little has ambitions of becoming a doctor until he is discouraged from that course and is redirected to be more realistic about becoming a carpenter, like Jesus. This aspect of the book can reconnect back to “Harlem” by Langston Hughes of having “a dream deferred.”

In his second phase of life, he is nicknamed Detroit Red. During that period of time he puts his intelligence to use but uses it to be a prolific street hustler. Detroit Red steals, sells drugs, and comes up with high-level heists to survive. In that period of his life, Detroit Red is unconsciously assimilating to the white identity. This aspect of the book reconnects back to the characters in *Mexican WhiteBoy* and *The Hate U Give* who go to lengths to fit in. Detroit Red fashions his image like white people, finds romantic partners who are white, and goes to more extreme painful conditions to straighten his natural curly hair. His life of crime eventually catches up to him as he goes to prison. Unfortunately, he receives a harsher punishment for involving white women for the pity crime he is caught for.

Under the transformation he experiences in prison, he relinquishes his past that was affected by the root of slavery and racism. Hence, he also relinquishes his birth name and comes out as Malcolm X. “X” signifies the unknown identity that was taken from the outcomes of slavery. Malcolm X quickly turns into a polished activist for the civil rights movement because of his intelligence and articulate speech. Malcolm X also shows the power of speech that generated the expansion of the black movement. Speech is significant in both of the works *Mexican WhiteBoy* and *The Hate U Give*, where both characters experienced a pressure to remain mute by the force of discrimination. However, Malcolm X is more extreme in his speech. He becomes controversial for being a revolutionary figure who would go to any means necessary, including violent ones, to protect his rights. Labeled as a radical hate preacher, he becomes target to both his adversaries and eventually his own Muslim black community.

After being banished by his own black community, Malcolm X makes a spiritual pilgrimage to the Mecca. Being outside of the violent and divided culture of the United States, he is exposed to a more tolerant and peaceful diversity of people. The Muslim practitioners around him were of different ethnicities, but united by the same rituals and beliefs. This exposure that is strikingly different from the divided culture in America is significant to how he transcends to become el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. In this last phase of his life, he becomes more accepting to his white counterparts, seeking peace. Even in his last day when he was assassinated, he told his killers that gunned him down, “"Now, now, brothers, break it up, be cool, be calm,"

Each transformation Malcolm X experience can reference to previously mentioned works mentioned. The effects of having a dream deferred since he was Malcolm Little, which turned him to a criminal who was a threat to society and also a man who angrily revolted against society. The disparity in the transformations Malcolm X experiences in the book can demonstrate to students the different levels of how racism and discrimination can affect a person’s identity.

**Concluding the Unit**

As America is increasingly getting more diverse, young adolescents should go beyond tolerance and should be stirred in the direction to celebrate America’s multiculturalism as much as individualism is already celebrated as part of America’s culture. In chapter six of *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*, book topics of “identity, discrimination, and struggles with decisions” are introduced and they reveal why it is important to expose these kinds of topics in literature to young adults. The list goes beyond the experience of being from a different ethnic background and shows that identity crisis transcends race. The chapter shows that a person may experience a similar crisis because of their sexual orientation, religion and multiple other reasons. *Mexican WhiteBoy* and the supporting literature works provided*,* help serve to addresses the universal topic of the identity crisis and can resonate with any young adult readers who deal with challenges with their own identity. The message buried beneath the universal of discrimination is the deeper essential universal need for humans to be accepted.

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