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Abstract

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An Examination of Race and Sexuality Perspectives of High-School

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Abstract

This study asked the question: how does narrative writing reflect students' personal experiences with race and sexuality? Students expressed their underlying opinions of both groups by writing a short story involving characters created using their personal experiences. With minimal guidance, students drafted their characters, wrote their story and responded to interview questions related to the personal experiences behind their creations. Also, students were exposed to different perspectives and tasked with creating new characters after reflection. Students with fewer interactions relied on media portrayals, which reinforced stereotypes. Exposure to different perspectives was not completely successful, as they lacked the real life interactions students need to challenge negative viewpoints. Teachers should find opportunities for students to reflect and interact with diversity.

An Examination of Perspectives on Race and Sexuality through Narrative Writing

In today's modern world, interacting with other human beings is inevitable and unavoidable. Using the internet in as little as a few mouse clicks, one can be connected with complete strangers from all over the world. Driving a vehicle in any direction for a half hour will lead to some facet of civilization. As graduates of college begin searching for work, their search will take them as far as they are willing to move, to personally unexplored wonders of the world. In all these scenarios, one idea is constant: humans will interact with other humans in some form every single day.

Whether that interaction between other individuals becomes positive or negative is entirely up to the parties involved. How one group views another group can be based on a multitude of different factors. Every individual has a bias that is unique or shared by others in the same group. The purpose of this action research project is to examine students' viewpoints and possible biases towards different social groups other than their own. In this case, the study is focused on how members of the White middle-class view the African-American and LGBT community.

It is important for students to understand the power that their viewpoints can have in society. As the dominant group and influencer on culture in United States society, the White community has influence over values, morals, what is considered "right" and what is considered "wrong." The belief that other group's beliefs and culture is wrong is stemmed from the historical systematic racism present in society. As noted by Yosso (2005), racism has played a role in subordinating minority groups while at the same time building institutions that do not value the knowledge and ideas of said groups. As society perpetuates this belief through school, media and other influences, it becomes increasingly difficult for members of the dominant group

to become aware and advocate for change. Without such change, minority groups will continue living in a system that diminishes their cultural knowledge, skills and abilities. In contrast, if this problem is explored it can shed light on the situation and bring awareness to individuals who do not know of its existence. It also has the potential to shift the mindset of members in the dominant group to see the value within other groups, instead of through a deficit perspective. Finally, it opens the opportunity for students to be exposed to different ideas other than their own and for minority groups to begin communicating ideas not as inferior but as equal in society.

However, many students may not recognize their own personal biases towards other groups. Since their perspectives have grown and developed through the flawed system, students may not have the awareness or opportunities necessary to expose these biases. Living in a pluralistic society demands that learners are exposed to multiple differences between groups of people in order to gain a better perspective on ourselves (Ikpeze, 2015). Students must be exposed to different perspectives on groups in order to see that their own personal viewpoint may not be the only viewpoint. Furthermore, exposure to those differences can increase awareness for that student that his/her own viewpoint on a group may be negatively biased (Keehn, 2015). Students should not be allowed to enter the real world harboring biases that may undermine minority groups solely based on miscued, misinterpreted or narrow-minded information. They must have the opportunity to take a real look into their own perspectives and decide whether what to do with the knowledge they receive.

In regards to this action research project, students will examine their own bias towards the African American and LGBT community. A straightforward survey about their specific viewpoints would distort results, as students would not want to implicate themselves as prejudiced. Anyone would become defensive if they were labeled as prejudice and would not add

to discussion. Instead of an explicit approach, I developed an implicit method for students' personal biases to become evident.

If given the opportunity for students to describe members of the African-American and LGBT community, would their personal biases shape those descriptions? Inspired by the notion that an author writes what he/she knows; would students exhibit the same performance? In other words, it would be noteworthy to research how students might insert their own perspectives into a story, especially if they had control over every aspect. Students would be responsible for the setting and the creation of the characters. In this instance, students would have free roam to create characters however they see fit. This includes how those characters speak, think and act along with any other descriptions that they may include in their writing.

Narrative writing can allow for students to reflect on their own lives and their surroundings. Since the process revolves around their own personal experiences and is often written first person, it prompts anyone writing to reflect on their experiences if given the proper prompting (Schwind, Santa-Mina, Metersky, & Patterson, 2015; Levine, Kern, & Wright, 2007). It must be noted that to avoid bias, students must have appropriately free reign in their writing so avoid writing for the author, and not actually reflecting. A simple prompt such as reflecting on a day can allow for students to input as much information without a narrow set of mind for completing the writing. From a researcher stance, the prompts must be designed to allow for as little bias as possible but still completing the goal. Peterson and Calovini (2004) designed writing prompts for students without bringing too much attention to the possibility of analyzing bias or prejudice. Students must feel safe and comfortable to reflect, without the possibility of consequences for sharing their viewpoint. Only after the assignment can different ideas be used with the student.

Students feel more attached and invested with narrative writing projects, as it allows them to tell their story and their perspective as an expression or extension of their experiences (King, 2015). The proper narrative writing project can allow students to share their personal journeys, thoughts and beliefs they may not express in typical normal conversation or interaction. This information allows onlookers to learn more about the student and how they view the world (Peterson, & Calovini, 2004). Perspective is unique to every student and can be shaped by their own personal experiences. Narrative writing allows for those perspectives to be expressed in written form. However, narrative writing must be properly taught to students. As Corden (2007) notes, the quality of narrative writing is based on a student's understanding of formatting, writing mechanics and expression, to name a few. Students must have the proper tools and knowledge to use narrative writing effectively to express their perspectives.

Students would be responsible for crafting the discourses of the African-American and LGBT members, based on what they already know about those groups. These can easily be influenced by personal experiences with each group. If a student has predominantly negative experiences with a group, it can be postulated that his/her character creation will exhibit traits from those experiences. In comparison, a student who has little to no experience interacting with a group will most likely rely on knowledge from others, hearsay, media influences and any other vat of information that will provide insight in creating a character to represent that group. Both instances have the capabilities in reinforcing stereotypes. In contrast, a student who has multiple diverse experiences with both groups may have the ability to portray characters closer to reality and authenticity, relying little on stereotypical features or knowledge from others who may harbor biases. In either case, students will have freedom to craft characters of the African-American and LGBT community using their personal experiences and knowledge as a guide.

Literacy is a partly a social process that occurs in many different mediums daily (Kucer, 2014). With this knowledge in mind, it is believable that literacy also works parallel with the social interactions that teenagers perform on a daily basis. They way students speak; think and act are all products of their experiences within the environment they have developed. Although developing in a similar environment, each student will bring his/her own unique set of discourses, containing perspective influenced by personal experiences, to social interactions.

In this action research project, I asked: how does narrative writing reflect students' personal experiences with race and sexuality? Using narrative writing as a focus, I had students create an African-American character and a Gay/Lesbian character based on their own personal experiences. Traits such as physical characteristics, personality and dialogue had to be linked to people they have met and interacted with in their lives and if not, to outside influences such as media. Students created a first set of character using a chart outlined, wrote their stories and then discussed why they portrayed their characters as they did and what influenced those decisions. Additionally, students were exposed to interventions in which they became familiar with different perspectives on race and sexuality through the use of stories and videos. Then, students were asked to create a new set of characters and explain their character in a new chart and summary. Students were allowed to use the perspectives from the interventions and other personal experiences. In my study, I found that students were able to reflect on their own viewpoints of other people given the opportunity. Also, students indicated that community and media play large influences in shaping their viewpoints on race and sexuality. Finally, diversity interventions are effective at aiding students in accepting different perspectives but based on design, will not reach all students. The implications for this study indicate that students do not have enough opportunities to reflect on their self, including personal biases or what they believe

in. Additionally, teachers must be conscious of the media students consume and the influence the local community may have over student's perceptions of other groups. Finally, the interventions which mainly used real people to demonstrate different perspectives may indicate that more real life experiences will aid students in developing more personal experiences and exposure to diversity.

Theoretical Framework

There is a specific definition of literacy which forms an idea of how outside influences are present in construction of viewpoints. James Gee defines literacy as the control of secondary discourses, or use of language (Gee, 1989). Discourse means "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member" of a specific social group (Gee, 1989, p. 18). All people have a primary discourse, which is how we talk to family and friends in a social, non-professional setting. It is the first set of discourses that we master and becomes the basic way most people speak, especially on an intimate level. We gain this discourse through acquisition in natural settings through experiences.

In reference to Gee (1989), every student has a type of discourse that places him/her as a member in a specific group. In that group, students use that discourse to interact socially with each other but also with other groups as well. But discourse can also change the interaction between different groups. A negative interaction between groups can occur if that discourse undermines another group. After all, discourse relates to the use of language, thinking and acting and if those features place a different group as subordinate, then it will also influence the viewpoint on that group as a whole. If students have developed a discourse that harbors negative portrayals and use of language against members of minority groups, then it is possible that their viewpoints align with that discourse.

Discourse is developed through natural experiences of the individual, and those experiences can be shaped by culture. McDermott and Varenne (1995) discuss how culture plays a role on viewpoints concerning disabilities, but their ideas can also be attributed to any type of group that is stigmatized by the dominant. Through their analysis of the deprivation approach, some groups can be seen as developing less efficiently compared to the dominant group. Those groups do not receive the same rewards that more developed groups can achieve and thus, they are not able to be part of the same culture since they lack all aspects. The authors note that this perception exists in public institutions such as school, where I.Q. tests and other forms of measurement benefit the dominant group but are constructed to not take into account those with different experiences.

By establishing that groups are deprived of culture, the authors describe how that way of thinking subordinates other groups, especially minorities. Channeling the challenge made by anthropologists to this thinking, the authors assert "…that all groups, however interesting their differences, are essentially equivalent (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 334). By no means are groups deprived of culture, they are simply demonized for being different. Some students may feel that their own culture is the only appropriate one available. This thinking perpetuates the notion that certain skills, abilities and beliefs of the dominant culture are the best. Groups that do not share or exhibit those same values are seen as not equal. This thinking demonstrates the notion of "If you're not one of us, you are against us" which further subordinates other groups as inferior. In regards to narrative writing, those beliefs could be evident if students are asked to portray people from different groups. How they portray others will depend upon their own perspectives which exhibit beliefs and attitudes towards the groups. Whether those beliefs and

attitudes will be positive or negative will partly depend on how each student values the culture of another group.

McDermott and Varenne (1995) offer an analysis on another step in thinking that acknowledges all groups have culture, but that they are separate and never overlapping. In the difference approach, each group possesses a culture and members develop based on the needs and abilities available in that culture. While compared to the deprivation approach makes this way of thinking seem more equal, the authors point out that this approach still perpetuates a segregation of the cultures and a hierarchy. In this case, different cultures have certain sets of skills and abilities. If a group cannot exhibit the right skills at the right time, then they are not capable of the rewards that follow. In regards to school, they see this thinking attributed to minority students in which they "suffer enough miscommunication and alienation to give up on school, this despite the fact that they are, at least potentially, fully capable (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 335). The difference approach changes the language slightly to include culture of minorities as equivalent in existence, but that they still lack the values of the mainstream culture. For students, this in terms presents a pity view where the problems and failures of other groups are based on the lack of exposure and development within the dominant culture. The approach in no way validates the wealth of different cultures, but reiterates the subordination of minorities below the dominant culture. Believing this approach could potentially have students feel superior in their writing compared to other groups. They could present groups in such a way that demonstrates that "if only they were like, they would be better" and establish a sense that they must be pitied for being different.

Finally, McDermott and Varenne (1995) discuss how looking at culture as a disability is the best approach to addressing social justice in establishing perspective. In this approach, every

culture teaches people aspirations, as well as offering positions to inhabit in the world. But this approach demands that people examine why they possess certain qualities and why others are treated differently. The authors relay that self-reflection in mind and society is needed for this approach to be successful. It challenges people to examine the institutions that perpetuate rankings, scores, tests and the notion of being skilled. Society creates the disability; it is not a natural occurrence for hierarchies that are present today. The authors simply state that "Not only are cultures occasions for disabilities, but they actively organize ways for persons to be disabled" (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 337). Minority groups are disabled by the institutions that deem what is best and what is not worthy. For students, this approach is crucial for an intervention in any biased perspective they may possess. This idea presents an opportunity for students to examine how their views on specifically race and sexuality are products of society, not from facts that are established from birth. It allows for students to be exposed to a different perspective on those groups that does not fit the mold of the deprivation or difference approach. In destroying the notion that there is a hierarchy, students can begin to see how differences make people unique, not inferior. With this information, they can begin to analyze their own personal biases and perhaps change their view to depict a more accurate perspective.

Literacy takes the form of many dimensions, but for the purpose of the action research project, there is a focus on literacy as a social practice. Kucer (2014) complements Gee's (1989) theory of literacy by acknowledging that literacy is a social practice that resides with the individual. Kucer (2014) further discusses how literacy events seen through a socio-cultural perspective, where the dominant group is unknowingly placed in a position where their beliefs are held higher than those of other groups. This focus of "others" discussed by Kucer becomes based on gender, socioeconomic status, race or any other characteristics that are deemed

different than the mainstream culture. By examining different uses of literacy, ranging from daily living, work related, social interactional and recreational, Kucer examines how group membership plays a role in how each type of literacy event is used. He also examines how social identity (e.g. gender, family, religion, socioeconomic status, etc) creates sub-groups within established groups. Kucer argues that while some people may belong to a group, they do not act as a collective. In contrast, individuality is present within members of the same group. This is crucial for research with students as the action research project is taking members of a similar group (White middle-class) and examining their individual biases towards race and sexuality. Just because someone is part of a social group does not mean that every member shares the exact same perspectives.

Social identity plays a large role in how individualized the discourse of students may be in regards to social interaction. This notion is how each student will bring their own uniqueness to creating his/her characters, as Gee (1989) complements the process by using the natural experiences of each student to reveal bias, if any. McDermott & Varenne (1995) explain how different thinking approaches created from society could lead to students developing biased notions on groups other than their own, especially if they belong to the mainstream culture. With prejudice institutionalized within the system that students develop, it is clear that they need to have some type of opportunity to examine their own personal biases. This action research project will examine how those biases can be unique to each individual and vary depending on personal experiences. Students from the White middle-class will craft the discourse, as well as other characteristics, of the African-American and LGBT community into a story. Using their story, we can begin analyzing how personal bias of each student may shape the portrayal of those groups. To reinforce the culture as a disability approach, students will have the opportunity to be

exposed to different perspectives on the topic of race and sexuality to compare to their original viewpoints seen in the story. By having more experiences with different perspectives, students may be able to adopt a viewpoint of African-American and LGBT groups that is rooted in diversity and reflective of a multicultural pluralistic word.

Research Question

Given that literacy develops from the mastery of discourses, which are influenced by natural settings through experiences and also contain certain language, thinking and acting uses that define group membership, this action research project asks, how does narrative writing reflect students' personal experiences with race and sexuality?

Literature Review

Narrative writing is a popular method for students to use in order to express their feelings, thoughts, and ideas. It is a method that can validate their creativity, while at the same time giving them the freedom to craft their own viewpoint in a story. With every student having a unique background, his/her own story is influenced by personal experiences in life. Rex and Schiller (2009) argue that students bring in cultural capital to their education. Depending on the culture and the experiences students have acquired or not, this idea can produce different results. In regards to narrative writing, this literature review investigates how the personal experiences of high school students can be a major influence on their perspectives of race and sexuality.

Three consistent themes appeared when researching information related to the topic. The first theme describes how narrative writing is a tool for students to reflect, as it encompasses their own personal experiences in some form. As an extension, this theme also discusses how narrative writing is developed constantly in a student's life to broaden his/her capabilities for expression of thoughts and ideas. The second theme that emerged from the research involved

how personal experiences can reinforce stereotypes and other negative viewpoints on race and sexuality. With many influences present in an adolescent's life, it is important to note that both positive and negative viewpoints of groups exist, especially with the prevalence of media. Finally, the research indicates that embracing diversity can lead to potential benefits. Multiple studies indicate that exposure to diverse ideas and people can only benefit the students involved.

Narrative Writing is a Tool for Reflection of Personal Experiences

No matter the discipline, narrative writing offers students the opportunity for reflection. Researchers in a yearlong study analyzed the weekly narratives of intern physicians, as well as a final narrative, in which the interns described how writing throughout the year encouraged reflecting deeper on their experiences and emotions (Levine, Kern, & Wright, 2007). Reflection was the key to the assignment, as the interns used their own everyday experiences to reflect upon their own practice in the hospital. The researchers cited several interns' reflection statements, including one intern who thought "It certainly has forced me to think more about how I have felt during internship and how things have affected me" (Levine, Kern, & Wright, 2007, p. 728). Extending on this statement, researchers concluded that consistent writing gave interns the chance to remember and recall meaningful events that allowed ultimately for reflection. In comparison, King (2015) used graphic novels as a form of narrative writing with immigrant students to reflect on personal experiences regarding their diaspora and identity creation. In her results, she found that students used these self-created graphic novels as an avenue to express their personal memory and reflect upon their life in a different culture. Furthermore, the combination of visuals and written language allowed the students own perspectives become visible for other readers. Levine, Kern and Wright (2007) discussed how narrative writing offered individuals with self-reflection on their experiences, while King (2015) went further to

illustrate that it allows those personal experiences to become apparent to other readers. In this sense, narrative writing is communication between the writer and self, as well as the writer and reader.

Having the ability to reflect is crucial for a positive well-being for any individual when they become active members of a society. According to Schwind, Santa-Mina, Metersky, and Patterson (2015), nurses in their study found that having a reflective practice was important to their personal and professional lives. A portion of the study included narrative writing, which allowed for the nurses to reflect on their caring practice. The researchers further state that having the time to reflect was incredibly beneficial, as "…practicing nurses become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and values, strengthening their personal knowledge development…" (Schwind et al., 2015, p. 398). Nurses in the study valued the opportunity for reflection, as it allowed their inner thoughts on their caring relationships to come forward for their own analysis. Conversely, Levine, Kern and Wright (2007) also discussed reflection for medical students on their practice and their own beliefs through narrative writing but did not specify exactly what they were looking for, as students had all reflected differently while Schwind et al. (2015) focused on the nurses caring relationships with their narratives, targeting the students to see the importance caring has in their personal and professional lives. A common trend between both studies is the suggestion that narrative writing can have profound positive impacts on the personal lives of those participants, as well as their professional career and incorporating multiple aspects of their lives.

Without the proper tools, narrative writing can be difficult for first timers. According to Corden (2007), supports from teachers including providing models, demonstrating, and bringing attention to mentor texts were crucial for students to become aware of how texts were

constructed. Without an awareness of text construction and storytelling, students could not be expected to accurately and fully demonstrate their writing capabilities. As with King (2015) she had to model how graphic stories were told for students in order to see how telling a story is presented in that medium. With any new format, students must be presented how to manipulate it to their own needs and practice until they produce writing that is acceptable. Corden (2007) attributed success to the literacy supports as students "…were able to integrate the stylistic and organizational features of mentor texts into their personal repertoires and use them successfully in their own writing" (p. 285). It is necessary for students to communicate effectively with their writing and providing literacy supports is beneficial for their overall expression. He noted that in his study, the study raised concerns if these literacy supports would diminish the creativity of students. But he found no diminishment of creativity with the combination of teacher support and independent writing. King (2015) found that even with structured supports, it was still sometimes difficult for reading and deconstructing the graphic narratives. However, she designed the assignment to connect into students' unique, personal experiences and allowed for freedom of expression with very little interference. It is possible for students to be provided a framework for writing, as long as students are still allowed to craft their stories with relative freedom.

Language use is an important aspect within narrative writing, as effective communication of ideas and thoughts are enhanced with a proficiency in expression through language. Sun and Nippold (2012) researched how age development played a factor in students' uses of abstract nouns and metacognitive verbs using narrative writing. Evidently, the use of complex syntax paralleled a higher use of abstract nouns and metacognitive verbs, which was found to develop from young children to more use in late adolescence. Formal schooling was a large factor in development, as students gained the knowledge and skills to write more challenging texts that

demanded an increased vocabulary of nouns and verbs. Similarly, Corden (2007) also

highlighted the development of text complexity with literacy supports in a formal school setting.

Since students were given support with text structure, as well as familiarity with literacy terms,

modeling and development, students were able to produce higher quality writing. Both studies

indicate that effective supports in formal schooling were factors that attributed to higher quality

and more complex writing as students aged into late adolescence. Older students wrote longer

essays and used more complex nouns and verbs, but analyzing all age groups found that narrative

writing to be enjoyable for all ages (Sun & Nippold, 2007). When students are given the

necessary supports to expand their writing capabilities to express more thoughts and ideas, they

become further invested in their work.

Peer interaction is a factor that can influence the narrative writing produced.

Researchers Sun and Nippold (2012) concluded that peer interaction was critical, as "Older

students, having had more life experience interacting with peers in social situations, have

probably acquired a larger store of memories from which to draw on as they produce stories…"

(p. 8). Utilizing their personal life experiences typically revolves around interaction with other

individuals, including peers. This study notes a correlation between peer interaction and the

quality of stories produced, suggesting that the more individual a student interacts with in their

life, the more information they can use when writing. This finding can also connect to language

students may experience interacting with someone different that expands their repertoire of

vocabulary. In contrast, Peterson and Calovini (2004) found peer interaction as collaboration to

be potentially beneficial and detrimental, especially in small groups producing a common

narrative instead of an independent writer. In their study, they analyzed how social ideologies of

four students in a small group setting had influence on the final narrative writing produced by

each student. As they observed the students talk in informal conversation regarding character creation for their stories based on a photograph, they noticed that students presented different ideas on gender, as well as race, socioeconomic status, age and ethnicity. Whether those ideas were evident in the final drafts depended on the direction of the conversation, length of discussion and assertiveness of each student. One conversation on a character's profession and age brought up the possibility that she could not be simultaneously rich, young and retired, which the student Meera saw as implausible and thus changed her character. Sun and Nippold (2012) indicated that peer interaction can expand memories and ideas as students write and rely on that information for future writing. It is important to note the impact that peer interaction can have on changing viewpoints. Peterson and Calovini (2004) take it a step further and provide an example of Meera using peer interaction to change her perspective on her own character. In future writings on gender, age and socioeconomic status, the student can use this memory to assist in her writing as it encompasses a broader perspective of reality regarding those topics.

However, Peterson and Calovini (2004) describe a negative encounter with peer collaboration. In a different conversation, another student David became assertive and reinforced stereotypes regarding socioeconomic status and ethnicity, and the other students aligned with his perspective and failed to "…incorporate details from the photograph, from their background knowledge about India, or from their understanding about poverty in their talk" (p. 134-135). Since David was the most assertive during the conversation, he did not create a culture of collaboration but one of dominance, in which the other students gave in. In this scenario, collaboration can be risky as it poses the possibility of one student taking control of the conversation, instead of contributing to an overall discussion. Sun and Nippold (2012) note that peer interaction is healthy for narrative writing when it comes to using those memories to aid in

writing, but they do not take into account whether those interactions were positive or negative, as Peterson and Calovini (2004) found that peer interaction, especially within a collaborative setting, can produce both results. When it comes to analyzing portrayals, researchers must be prepared to accept that both positive and negative outcomes can exist, and not rely on collecting data selectively. It is important to mention that the researchers used collaboration before students wrote their stories, while Sun and Nippold (2012) had students write largely independently without direct collaboration on stories but more indirect through past interaction with peers. Nevertheless, these must be thoughtful consideration when creating writing assignments and whether they should be designed independently or include some type of collaboration with peers directly or indirectly.

Narratives offer a different method for learning, especially stories that revolve around the topic within the classroom. A study performed by Keehn (2015) found that listening to personal stories about identity within a social diversity class led to a better understanding of the topic on racism. Students across identities could value the storytelling, as they described it as engaging but also enjoyable and integral to their learning. Personal storytelling facilitates student learning, as it allows for students to hear firsthand the perspective of the speaking individual and use that information to reflect upon their own lives. In this case, students reflected on their own privilege in society, connecting the story to the content in class. While this study uses face-to-face storytelling, its findings can still relate to narrative writing. Levine, Kern, and Wright (2007) indicate the power that reflection with narrative writing can have on core values and own thinking. Just as writing a narrative shares personal details and perspectives to a reader, a storyteller can produce the same effects to a listener. With this thought, a student writing a narrative can share their writings verbally to an audience and still include the emotion and

personal ideas that were written. The researchers note the positive effects of personal reflection with narrative writing, while Keehn (2015) takes a step further and finds that consumers of a personal narrative can also lead to their own reflection. As an example, she notes that a man of color began to reflect on his own perspectives after hearing a personal narrative in which the White individual described wrestling with becoming aware of the subtle racism in society and trying to do all she could to make people more accepted and comfortable. It is clear that reflection does not always stop at the writer, but can expand to others who read or listen to the personal story that offers a different viewpoint. While students should be given the opportunity for personal reflection, it would be amiss to not allow those perspectives to be shared with others so an exposure to multiple viewpoints can lead to a better understanding to a topic.

Negative Influences in an Adolescent's Life can Reinforce Stereotypes

Adolescents can be exposed to negative portrayals of groups through different influences in their daily lives and past personal experiences. Peterson and Calovini (2004) found interaction from peers to have a major influence over their decision making and viewpoints. Whether those viewpoints are factual and fair are left to the individual to decide. The researchers saw instances where the children in the study conversed with character creations using photographs through multiple drafts. In the final drafts, one instance that stood out was information regarding a photograph of a woman from India. In the conversation, socioeconomic stereotypes were reinforced as

> The contributions of Rachel, Jake and David were based on stereotypes of people living
> in distant environments. Rachel, Jake and David could not contribute information from
> their own experiences to refute the stereotypes. Meera, who had emigrated from Sri
> Lanka in second grade, and likely had background knowledge that her peers would not

have had about the region, provided additional information that Jake seems to have

supported but Rachel and David ignored. Meera's peers did not probe for details about

her suggestion, however. Instead, reinforcing his higher status within the group, David

interrupted Meera as she started to expand on what she meant. (p. 135)

Meera could have expanded upon the factual information she knew about India, but was

ultimately shut down by David, who was the dominant member of the conversation. The others

in the group chose to ignore the factual information due to David's dominance and thus, they

were ultimately reinforced with negative socioeconomic stereotypes. It is important to note the

power that peers have on influencing ideas and beliefs. Nicolls et al. (2014) investigated intimate

relationships and gender norms with High School students in the Bahamas. In their findings, they

found that both boys and girls tended to endorse gender stereotypes such as the males being the

controlling partner in a relationship and females restricted to housework. While both sexes had

different attitudes towards other aspects of the relationship, both endorsed stereotypes of sex-

related roles, especially as males were tended to be more aggressive. This finding implies that a

teenager's relationship can contain preconceived notions on gender that both parties ultimately

accept. The study suggested utilizing culturally sensitive training on peer relationships that could

address these issues in order to address and combat these stereotypes. Peterson and Calovini

(2004) described the dominant, aggressive behavior of David as a factor which made the other

members not question his authority. In this case, unfounded stereotypes were considered fact by

the majority of the group, while Meera's own personal experiences were widely ignored.

Nicholls et al. (2014) saw aggressive and controlling behavior in males as a defining

characteristic that shaped beliefs of both members in the relationship. Both studies confirm that

aggressive behavior, typically in males, will dominate conversation and reinforce perspectives.

Peer and intimate relationships have a major influence over perspectives if an individual has no personal experiences to recall on the topic.

Establishing that multiple influences can exist in an adolescent's life, this action research project focuses on how those influences relate directly to race and sexuality. Literature on parental influences of racial attitudes of children has yet to find a direct correlation. However, Castelli, Tomelleri and Zogmaister (2009) discovered that a mother's implicit attitudes on race play a significant role. The study was conducted on young children but in this case, we are connecting personal experiences to past reinforcement of beliefs. The researchers declared that this is one of the first empirical evidence linking parental attitudes to children's own perspectives, as "Both children's playmate preferences and the distribution of positive and negative traits to a Black child were significantly predicted by the others' implicit prejudicial levels" (Castelli, Tomelleri, & Zogmaister, 2009, p. 589). When racial prejudices of a young child can be linked to the influence of a parent, it can hold massive consequences for future development of that child's attitudes. The researchers also noted that if that child identified with the mother, that child will see that attitude as important and will become aligned with that influence, even if it is reinforcing prejudices. This research also has implications for other figures of authority in a child's life, such as teachers and other role models. The nonverbal cues given by the mother are some of the most powerful subconscious implicit attitudes that the child notices and emulates. Kahn, Unzueta, Davis, Alston, and Lee (2015) investigated how Blacks social identity is influenced by what is accepted within the group, especially if there are differences. Groups with mostly white members made many Blacks feel that their identity was not accepted and valued and that stereotypes were used against their social identity. However, the study did note that groups that valued diversity were beneficial for both Blacks and Whites. Making a

connection to Castelli et al. (2009), children will develop their perspectives on minority groups and eventually grow into adults potentially harboring those stereotypical attitudes they learned implicitly from their mothers. Those attitudes can play a role with peer interaction. As Kahn et al. (2015) found in their research, groups with mostly White members harbored prejudice and stereotypes towards minorities in the group, who in turn felt their own identity was not valued based on skin color. Racial attitudes learned at a young age can have damaging consequences, as those prejudices will reinforce stereotypes and take precedence in future interactions.

Kahn, Unzueta, Davis, Alston, and Lee (2015) investigated how Blacks felt devalued as the minority within groups of Whites. Their findings reported that racial stereotypes existed in groups that did not value diversity, often harboring prejudices based on skin color and group identification. But the study focused more on adults, rather than adolescents. When Fisher et al (2014) researched bullying habits of racially diverse schools, they found different results. Conversely, the researchers discovered that in one instance, African-American students faced more bullying and victimization by their peers as the dominant group in the school, while White students as the minority suffered bullying as well. Researchers noted that this could be due to the perceived ways each group should act, and while African-Americans were dominant, they could act "white" and still stray from the group norm. But Fisher et al. finds that "Although both groups are more likely to experience race-based victimization when in the minority, race-based victimization among African-Americans in settings with more African American students also poses a problem" (p.1248), implying that racial stereotypes are not limited to use by just whites. Understanding the privilege Whites possess in society is crucial, but it must not overlook the idea that prejudice exists between all groups of people. This information is useful as Kahn et al. (2015) focused on the prejudices on White-dominant groups while Fisher et al. (2014) looked at

prejudice of both African-Americans and Whites. The research relates influence back to peer relationships. In this instance, a dominant membership of a group in a school setting can harbor prejudices that can be used to bully other groups, but in this case as a catalyst to bully similar members for diverting away from group norms. The study conducted by Fisher et al. demonstrates that a lack of diversity can be detrimental for both racial groups when they are the dominant power. That lack of diversity perpetuates negative stereotypes and the group dynamic can continue to reinforce those beliefs.

Further research has been done to show how peer relationships, especially among group identity, can play a role on influences of an adolescent. Wilton, Sanchez, and Garcia (2012) conducted a study on biracial individuals and their relationships with identifying with both groups. They found that those overall, biracial individuals felt their minority identity was valued when interacting with other minorities of their racial group. Due to historical circumstances, some biracial individuals do not identify with their White heritage and "have psychologically distanced themselves from the devalued identity" (Wilton, Sanchez, & Garcia, 2012, p. 53). There is a conscious stigma against White groups, which makes it difficult for biracial individuals to identify with that group and can oftentimes experience negative attitudes about their white heritage. Adding to that is a unifying experience of being discriminated on for racial background, which further segregates individuals in both groups, even biracial members. This belief can perpetuate stereotypes as this type of segregation not only limits interaction, but also the flow of factual information. As Peterson and Calovini (2004) saw in their study, the children did not question the stereotypical perspective reinforced by the dominant David, even though Meera had the prior knowledge and personal experience to inform her peers of more factual information. Having emigrated from Sri Lanka, Meera was technically the minority of the mostly

White group of children, but the information she provided, while ultimately ignored, allowed for the children to be exposed to different and more accurate information. Connecting back to Wilton, Sanchez, and Garcia (2012), biracial students offer unique perspectives being members of both groups they can identify with personally. Their personal experiences encompass multiple social environments that a single member of a group may not have experienced. But without that connection between groups, there is a lower possibility for stereotypes to be addressed and corrected if members share similar beliefs. Therefore, an influence from one perspective as seen in Peterson and Calovini (2004) is not challenged and left to develop further negative portrayals of groups. An already present stigma within groups, in this case both African Americans and Whites, further separates the opportunity of multiple perspective exposure and thus perpetuates negative viewpoints.

Negative stereotypes regarding sexuality are also prevalent in the daily lives of adolescents and serve to further influence beliefs about the group. Waldron (2015) wrote of experiences of lesbian athletes and how stereotypes are perpetuated and dominate within athletics. She notes that many lesbians hide their true sexual orientation from the public, as the stigma against homosexuality is strong to invite harassment and potentially end careers. That stigma results in reinforcing stereotypes about women in sports and how lesbians should look and act in sports. This reinforcement values social inequality as deviation from the conformed identity of lesbians in sport can lead to exclusion, prejudice as well as lacking social acceptance. Crosby and Wilson (2015) investigated how people would confront imagining and actually witnessing discrimination of a man using a homophobic slur against a gay target. Using this study determined whether people would stand up for the victim of the slur or supports the confederate using the slur. The researchers found that the participants would say one thing, but

ultimately do the other as "…roughly half of participants who imagined hearing a homophobic slur claimed they would assertively confront the slur, none of the participants who actually witnessed the slur made an assertive confrontation" (Crosby, & Wilson, 2015, p. 966). The findings are troubling, as a lack of action to support LGBT individuals only further perpetuates the negative language as being acceptable to use. As Waldron (2015) notes, lesbian athletes need to challenge the dominant discourse surrounding their identity, including the language used by others but the lack of action that Crosby and Wilson (2015) researched makes it incredibly difficult for many to feel comfortable challenging dominant norms. A lack of action to support LGBT individuals in the face of discrimination legitimizes the homophobia tools as acceptable. Using homophobic slurs as common practice creates automatic negative associations and decreases the likelihood of positive interaction with that group. It creates a culture of fear where LGBT members are afraid to be themselves due to the negative stereotypes that are ever present.

Negative portrayals of the LGBT community hold significant power over those groups and how they deal with harassment and navigating a world where they are not accepted. Mason, Lewis, Winstead, and Derlega (2015) researched the effects of external and internal heterosexism on sexual minority women. Researchers indicated that in a negative social environment, lesbian women were subjugated to higher external heterosexism (such as harassment and discrimination), which in turn resulted in high levels of internal heterosexism (internalization of negative social attitudes). There is considerable more internal stress added onto LGBT individuals when discrimination is accepted within the social environment. As Crosby and Wilson (2015) had investigated, an unchallenged use of homophobic slurs and other forms of harassment only further discriminate against LGBT individuals and make it difficult to promote change. Continued practice of stereotypes and homophobic portrayals not only continue to

influence straight individuals but severely damages the internal mentality of LGBT members living in a heterosexual society. Without support, the internalization of heterosexism on sexual minorities as Mason et al. (2015) found that there could be repercussions that may convince those individuals that the negative stereotypes and abusive language is not only appropriate but correct. These influences are shown to be prevalent in society that not only affect how straight individuals may think and act but extends to how sexual minorities view themselves.

One of the largest influences on teenagers especially is consumption of media, being so prevalent in their lives. Fuller and Damico (2008) researched how media consumption has influence over a teen's health by the portrayal of certain activities within the media. Participants reflected on their own media consumption and explained how they believed media had influences over their perspectives on body images and sexual content. Cultural expectations can play a role on which type of activities has more influence over what a teen consumes to be accurate and the correct way to live life. In essence, media perpetuates a certain lifestyle as ideal and teens who see those messages as important in their own lives will accept that ideal but fictionalized lifestyle. But media consumption is not always bad, as students are also media producers when given the right context for expression. In contrast, Willet (2005) researched how children produced stories based on the media they were consuming. Her research indicated that students can produce their own media to examine the social and cultural context that it was consumed within in the first place. Using popular media culture allowed teachers to open discussion on the messages that were being reinforced. The discussions but also the students' creation process challenged students to think about violence and media and when becoming producers, they had to decide rules for using violence, when it was appropriate and why it should be used. Fuller and Damico (2008) indicated that direct media consumption can reproduce the

messages perpetuated, while Willet (2005) demonstrated that students given the chance to act as producers can serve as a reflective process on social and cultural contexts and also a critique on the information they had consumed. Adolescent students can be influenced by the media around them, but given the opportunity to use that media and becoming producers offers students a way to reflect on the internal and external messages that are prevalent in the media they consume.

Teenagers are consistent consumers of media, which also includes the underlying messages that are being perpetuated. An article by Scharrer and Ramasubramaniam (2015) discusses the media's influence on reinforcing stereotypes. Using the information a group of students used to create stories "Kavoori (2007) aimed to engage college students…they still relied on stereotypical racial portrayals of African Americans in constructing the plots and characters…" (Scharrer, & Ramasubramaniam, 2015, p.177). Even after engaging critically with counter material, it was still difficult for students to create characters without resorting to stereotypes that they have been conditioned through negative media consumption. Abraham and Appai (2006) conducted a study that used visual placing of Blacks and Whites next to news stories regarding three strike laws and school lunch vouchers. They found that White consumers of the media felt that the stories related more with Black individuals as "lawbreakers" than any other race. "…White participants possess and activate Black cultural stereotypes as a way of understanding populations that are most affected by public policy issues even when there are no visual images available to more directly attribute to a certain population" (Abraham & Appai, 2006, p. 196) highlighting how media can use visual imagery in subtle ways to activate racial attitudes. While it may not be obvious, the subtle ways in which visuals can reinforce perspectives cannot be ignored as media is consumed constantly. This information complements the work noted by Scharrer and Ramasubramaniam (2015) that media is a large influence on how

attitudes can be articulated towards a certain group, despite counter narratives being present. The role that media plays in perpetuating beliefs, especially of racial attitudes, only strengthens the argument for reflection on what ordinary individuals consume on a daily basis. While Abraham and Appai (2006) created the news stories using visuals of Whites and a group of Black and White people, the stories where only a single black individual was present resonated the most with participants as being accurate. Keeping this information in mind will help guide research on how prevalent media influence is involved with reinforcing not only stereotypes, but different attitudes associated to different groups.

Media continues to perpetuate negative stereotypes as an integral part of American society where racial, cultural and gender biases persist in the media produced and consumed. Adams-Bass, Stevenson and Kotzin (2014) sought to research how negative stereotypes of Black characters had influence over Black youths and their identity. Findings were mixed, as males were more likely to be unable to identify racial stereotypes and more likely to endorse the negative messages compared to females. Students who had a greater knowledge of Black history and awareness of racial inequalities were much less likely to support or endorse racial stereotypes found in media. A study by Klein and Shiffman (2006) initially conflicts this finding with their research showing that cartoons have generally become less racist. However, they emphasize that the appearance of minority character in cartoons is incredibly low compared to Caucasian characters and actively perpetuates stereotypes by not including minority characters with different roles. "By omitting characters reflecting true diversity of our society, the media symbolically annihilates certain types of characters, thereby contributing to the persistence of stereotypes" (p.178) which in media's attempt to reduce racism has ultimately reinforced stereotypes by including few diverse characters of minorities in cartoons. Without more diverse

portrayals, people will be consistently exposed to narrow portrayals that have plagued the media and will ultimately transfer to the people who consume the material. As Adams-Bass et al. (2014) described in their research, Black youths will ultimately endorse stereotypes that appear in media. Since there is a constant exposure to narrow portrayals, black youth will have a smaller pool of role models to choose or ideas of a different life than what the media is perpetuating. Klein and Shiffman (2006) report that a lack of many diverse characters leaves people with a very narrow perspective on how that minority character should act and that portrayal cannot be countered due to that lack of diversity. White individuals will be shown stereotypes with little to no challengers in the messages that appear in the media they consume while the minorities represented can ultimately perceive those portrayals as fact and endorse the stereotypes.

With the easy access of providing content to the masses, Guo and Harlow (2015) analyzed YouTube videos on how negative stereotypes were reinforced through the content created by the public. While the videos contained relatively equal representation of Whites to minorities, videos that contained minorities were more likely to contain racial stereotypes used as entertainment. But these entertaining features perpetuated the negative attitudes and rarely issued challenges to the negative messages. Videos including racial stereotypes typically generated more views and YouTube generally upholds a racial hierarchy with the overwhelming majority of stereotypes found in videos. Similarly, Klein and Shiffman (2006) found that a lack of diverse characters led a very narrow portrayal of racial minorities with very little challengers to the contrary; thus racial stereotypes are then reinforced through media content as Guo and Harlow (2015) found with YouTube videos. Anyone who views media should be conscious of the underlying messages being presented and whether those messages reflect reality. It is important to note that since teenagers are consumers of media (Fuller & Damico, 2008) they are ultimately

consuming the narrow portrayals and negative stereotypes of racial minorities. When conducting research, it must be assumed that adolescents bring in bias to any study.

Embracing Diversity Leads to Potential Positive Benefits

Students embracing diversity, taking into account different ideas and perspectives, can often lead to various positive benefits. As Peterson and Calovini (2004) noted in their study, the children benefited from the diverse knowledge that each child brought to the discussion. One discussion led to different viewpoints on socioeconomic status that helped a student reflect upon her character creation to become more plausible in regards to reality. While another conversation ignored the factual background knowledge that Meera brought to the discussion on India, her presence was still important. The fact that Meera could have challenged the stereotypical assumptions of another classmate with real background knowledge could have altered the group's mindsets. Keehn (2015) supports this idea of multiple perspectives as students found the personal storytelling of both Black and White panelists on privilege to aid in reflection on their own biases. Diversity allows participants to see a topic from a different point of view. The students in the classroom observed by Peterson and Calovini (2004) often used each other's background knowledge in drafting and finalizing their characters. Allowing students to interact with each other on a similar topic allowed the researchers to see the unique experiences each student brought to the discussion. While similarity, a White woman listening to the panels in the Keehn (2015) study found herself identifying with a White speaker on a topic she initially thought would not relate to her. In this instance, including diversity serves to allow others the opportunity to experience different viewpoints and ideas regarding a similar topic. In fact, Keehn notes that both Black and White students learning how oppression affects different types of social identities were more willing to discuss taking action in response to the student learning.

"…learning about the experiences of white people along with the experiences of people of color interrupts the idea that only people of color have a race or are the only people who can contribute to conversations about the topic, (p.388-389) which expands the dialogue for more people to contribute, become aware of the problem and learn to take action to curb the effects. Including a diverse narrative on a topic only leads to a better understanding of the material and expands the potential for individuals to reflect and relate to the topic.

Diversity has an impact on a student's academic capabilities, including critical thinking, self-confidence and engagement with the material. Laird (2005) discovered students who have been exposed to more diversity, such as completing a course on diversity, were typically found to have more self-confidence, social agency and critical thinking. Those students were also more likely to have positive interactions with diverse peers, which were found to "be mechanisms for promoting the 'habits of mind' of a critical thinker (Laird, 2005, p. 384). Diversity courses promote open-mindedness and the interaction with diverse peers develops critical thinking as students are exposed to different experiences. Academic self-confidence is also raised with exposure to diversity. Similar to Keehn (2015), students in that class exposed to diversity were able to think critically about their own privilege in society and how their actions can have consequences on others. Developing a reflecting ability coincides with critical thinking, as both demand the student to question rather than comply. Analyzing student discourse, Brooks and Ward (2007) investigated using multiple pedagogies in a diversity course, which students ultimately felt stimulated engagement of course concepts. Using diverse discussion formats along with diversity-specific videos, they noticed students became more engaged and also developed skills to analyze and evaluate mass media's representation of race and gender. "The majority of the students noted this was the first time had examined masculinity and whiteness,"

(p.253) indicating that diversity topics are typically restricted to diversity courses. But offering multiple pedagogies allows students to develop critical thinking on issues they may have never been exposed to before in their educational career. It expands their repertoire of knowledge that can be useful in future situations and overall understanding of the world. Laird (2005) and Keehn (2015) complement these findings that exposure to diverse materials is an engaging method that develops critical thinking for students. It exposes students to topics and perspectives they may not acquire in their typical daily schedule.

Bahns, Springer and The (2015) found that positive beliefs about diversity often led to diverse friendships and a more diverse social network. These findings shed light on how positive perceptions on diversity affect the social network of individuals, who often interact in groups that are not homogenous in background. In comparison, Malaney and Berger (2005) found that students with positive diversity perceptions not only had more diverse friend groups, but had a better handling of using diversity in other contexts outside of the classroom. According to the researchers, this also increases the likelihood for taking action for social change. This idea leads to a focus on democratic leadership abilities that are valuable to any student. Instructing students on diversity topics works well for students who already have positive views on diversity. As Bahns et al. (2015) found, students will have better background knowledge of different groups of people and be able to interact positively when they have an open mind for diversity that can lead to more diverse friend groups. Simply having a positive outlook on diversity will expose students to different cultures, ideas and beliefs they may have never experienced before in their lives. Malaney and Berger (2005) explain how college collects students all with different types of backgrounds and experiences, where no person is the same. Instructing students on diversity will not always be the same as some students will be more resistant than others. But having student

leaders who take on social action and understand the historical, psychological and behavioral issues will gain them a better sense on how to engage students with diversity. As Keehn (2015) noted, exposure to diversity can lead to students wanting to take up social action, but Malaney and Berger (2005) explain that is not the case for every student. A dialogue must be opened for student leaders invested in diverse ideas to be mindful of how to approach different students, otherwise tension may form. Diversity is not meant to be used as a mandatory conversion of conformity but instead an open dialogue for exposure to new ideas and perspectives to be considered in changing a way of thinking that could encompass more than a single viewpoint. Bahns et al. (2015) explains that not every student will come from a diverse community and may have little to no experience with diversity. Keeping this idea in mind, diversity cannot be taught in a one-size-fits-all model but must encompass different methods to reach all types of students.

Taking a page from Bahns, Springer and The (2015), students entering college will not share the same experiences, especially in regards to diversity. Different neighborhoods and school districts will have varying degrees of diversity and that can affect a student's perception of diversity as they enter higher education. Milem and Umbach (2003) agree and found that students from less diverse communities were less likely to engage in diversity activities. Their pre-collegial environment holds a significant impact on how diversity was treated in that community and will thus travel with the student as they move to college, interacting with diverse peers. The researchers also found that major choice has an influence on accepting diversity, as artistic and social majors are more likely to engage in diverse activities, while students in investigative and enterprising majors are more likely to perpetuate segregation. Saenz (2010) goes further to state that though "precollege racial environments and experiences indeed have notable perpetuation effects on college diversity outcomes…racially and ethnically diverse

college settings, as well as students' college diversity experiences, significantly mediate or interrupt these perpetuations effects" (p. 30) finding that if a university is structurally diverse and contains diverse curricular and co-curricular activities, they can have positive benefits for student interactions with diverse peers. Saenz found diversity to become a part of a student's life if the college had created an atmosphere where diversity could be exposed appropriately. This finding contrasts Milem and Umbach (2003) as their research indicated that students from less diverse communities would continue to reinforce segregation and not be open to diversity, but Saenz (2010) found otherwise and that diversity would eventually be introduced in a way that disrupts stereotypes and other perpetuating negative viewpoints. This disruption in findings could be attributed to the different ways diversity was presented to the student body. Malaney and Berger (2005) agree with the notion that a university that has student leaders and diversity programs aware of the multiple factors relating to students entering college will have more success. Negative personal experiences may have influence over an adolescent's cognitive thinking and social interactions with different groups, a college with a structured curriculum that values diversity throughout the disciplines will foster more success in their students to embrace diversity.

Park and Chang (2015) take a closer look at how the high school as a microsystem can give insight into racial diversity for precollege teenagers. They found that oftentimes precollege "environments often do not provide students with meaningful engagement around issues of race and diversity, even when students attend more diverse high schools" (p.359) which forfeits many valuable opportunities for students to learn about the diversity within their own community. This research included both schools where the population was homogenous and surprisingly, schools that were heterogeneous were also found to be lacking in diversity engagement amongst

students. These findings bring more attention to the need for colleges to prepare students to be exposed to diversity, as many homogenous high schools and subsequently heterogeneous schools have not experienced meaningful engagement. Bahns, Springer, and The (2015) discussed how positive perceptions on diversity lead to more diverse friendships, but even in a diverse environment that will not always be universal; as Park and Chang (2015) indicate with their findings, students coming for a diverse school setting may not be open to the idea of diversity due to a lack of engagement during high school. While the researchers promote college as the stepping stone for diversity exposure, it is curious how they did not push for more diversity involved curricula in general education. Malaney and Berger (2005) advocated for positive diversity programs for students. However, their focus was more on students entering college at that time and how to connect those students to a diversity structured campus. Park and Chang (2015) focused directly on the high-school experiences but seem to forgo the notion that diversity exposure cannot occur in the public education system and instead rely on colleges to be the only life raft for students to embrace diverse thinking. For students who do not enter college, they will not achieve the benefits compared to their collegiate counterparts.

In addressing the needs of public education in terms of diversity, Young, Madsen, and Young (2010) researched how principals implement diversity plans in their schools. Due to changing demographics in school district, there had to be a plan for implementing more diversity to keep up with the current student population, even when the faculty and staff does not reflect that information. Young et al. found that the district was not prepared to address diversity with a goal of creating awareness. Their focus on workshops underscored the importance and difficulty is it for many administrators to grapple with the idea of diversity and how to implement it into the school system. The district's failure to use a model of a nurturing diversity program

prompted Young et al. to predict its inevitable failure, and they felt "…the results would have been different, and ultimately a great benefit to the district as a whole, to individual schools and to every student," (p.153) if the district had considered an effective plan to address diversity, rather that workshop days. School officials failed to make diversity implementation a priority and without a full grasp of the content and responsibilities, resorting to a poorly planned and executed system. This failure may be prevalent in other school districts and why Park and Chang (2015) found many schools to be lacking in diversity, despite heterogeneous schools participating in the study as well and fining similar results to homogenous schools. Without an effective or universal diversity program, many schools will continually suffer when it comes to fostering diversity within the district. Young et al. (2010) cites lack in leadership as a huge factor for why diversity programs are not effective implemented into the schools and that many administrators are unprepared to take on such a daunting task. They note that they may not understand that diversity programs include complex theories on racial undertones, intergroup differences, social identities and organizational psychology to name a few. Malaney and Berger (2005) commented on the success universities have on creating diverse campuses with student leaders that are attuned to the needs of the student body. Perhaps school districts could take a page from universities on how they implement diversity within the curricula and address diversity needs. If universities can take teenagers and turn them into student affair officers with a cultural, historical and psychological understanding of diversity, then it is possible for administrators to look at colleges to achieve similar goals.

Cook and Callister (2010) investigated how diversity can be expanded to different types of students, in this case religious conservative students. They make the argument that "…if diversity is viewed as a strategic advantage to the firm, as a value-add for the organization, the

realization of potential benefits is probable" (p.93) making the argument that if the benefits can be seen to value not just the individual, but the organizational group that individual identifies, then the likelihood that diversity is embraced increases. Diversity exposure leads students to more perspectives and ultimately a more factual view on life, but students attached deeply to a group or organization would want to spread those benefits to their own peers. In their results, they declare that the college classroom has the ability for students to generate their own perspectives by engaging with multiple viewpoints, through exposure with diverse peers. As Keehn (2015) noted, diverse perspectives allow students to reflect upon their own lives, while Cook and Callister (2010) take it further to not focus solely on an individual, but also their identification into a social group, such as a religion. They also advocate for a focus on teamwork and group work when engaging religious students with diversity. It forces students to interact with diverse ideas and peers they may not have experience with before college. Students entering college may not have experienced diversity in their home and school communities (Milem, & Umbach, 2003; Park, & Chang, 2010) and may be unprepared to work with diverse ideas and interact with different people. That is why it is necessary for colleges to prepare for all types of students and how to address diversity using their prior background knowledge. Cook and Callister (2010) focus on one group of students colleges potentially may encounter during their attempts at implementing diversity to the campus. Their work presents an intriguing model to reach religious, conservative students that universities may find helpful in crafting diversity activities within the curricula. Having students embrace diversity will expose their mind to new ideas, people and perspectives that only serve to benefit their academic and personal goals as they move through life.

Method

Context

The primary environment the study will take place is in a neutral location of a public library in Upstate New York. The library is easily accessible for all student participants in terms of distance and open availability for scheduling around their busy schedules. Inside, there are many quiet work areas where the study can take place with little to no interruptions. The library resides within an affluent suburban district, with a population around 42,000. Around 94% of residents are White according to census numbers, while the median income for residents was hovering around $65,000.

The study will be conducted with High-School seniors. The participants attend one of three schools: The Eddie Yeet Academy, Garth High School and Emmanuel High School. Since the participants range from many different school districts, I will primarily describe demographic information in a general sense. For our purposes, the districts of each student are rather homogenous. The population is overwhelmingly Caucasian, with less than 5% minority. The population ranges from 20,000 to 45,000 for each district, respectively. The districts are middle-class suburban, with median income ranging from $35,000-$65,000. Most students who graduate from these schools attend college in some form after graduation.

Participants

The participants in this study included six high-school seniors from various suburban high schools in Upstate New York. All of the students are 17 years of age. The racial makeup of the students is rather homogenous, with five Caucasian students and one African-American student. Of the six participants, four are female and two are male. Every student is looking forward to applying to and attending colleges after graduation.

Emily (a pseudonym) is a senior at The Eddie Yeet Academy, a private all-girls school. She is an outgoing, adventurous girl whose passion for equestrian horse riding drives her to continue into college. She is very loyal to her friends and can often be found creating as many memories as possible with them. Her parents are currently divorced and have shared custody of Emily and her older sister, who attends college. Since both parents live in the same town, her commute between homes is less than five minutes. She initially struggles with reading and writing, generally due to lack of interest. However, she is able to produce great work when she focuses and feels particularly proud when she completes a difficult assignment.

Brie (a pseudonym) is a senior at Garth High School, a suburb in Upstate New York. She is very athletic, having done seasons in Cheerleading, as well as Track & Field. Lately, she has quit those sports to free up more time to working at her part time job at a local grocery store and participating in an internship at a hospital. Brie hopes to become a registered nurse and is taking a school-state collaboration of health classes, as well as interning at a hospital. She is incredibly social and is easy to talk to, as she typically leads conversations. In the past, Brie has struggled with social studies classes and had been tutored to prepare for the NYS regents examinations.

Ezio (a pseudonym) is a senior at Emmanuel High School, which resides in a suburban district in Upstate New York. His older twin brothers attend a local college, leaving him the youngest in the house with his family. Physical fitness is an important aspect of his life, as he regularly attends the gym at least five days a week. When it comes to academics, Ezio struggles with science and other technical subjects. While he does not hate reading and writing, they are not his favorite subjects.

Raven (a pseudonym) is also a senior at Emmanuel High School. She considers herself to be very creative, and enjoys writing stories and fanfiction. When it comes to academics, Raven

simply states that she is "Average" at everything. Music is precious to Raven and you can typically find headphones in her ears, jamming to an upbeat song. Her dream college is SUNY Oswego and has planned to attend since she was in elementary school. She currently takes classes in cosmetology and wants to couple that knowledge with sciences, so she can one day create her own makeups and other cosmetics. Initially quiet, taking an interest in anything related to music will instantly make her more outgoing. She lives with her parents and two younger siblings.

Violet (a pseudonym) is a senior at Garth High School with her friend, Brie. Very outgoing and incredibly friendly, she has been one of the most excited students to be a part of this study. Her goal is to be accepted into the nursing program at Penn State and help as many people as possible when she is older. Her love of meeting new people is only outmatched by the love she shares for her pit bulls. Academically, Violet is does well in the sciences, as she is interested in those subjects. She does not often read, but will actively seek out material if given suggestions.

Rico is a senior at Emmanuel High School. He enjoys being around other people and has an infectious personality, usually laughing and walking with a smile. While he enjoys school, he is ready to graduate and move into a new chapter in his life. He is the only African-American in the study and believes that will bring a unique perspective to his writing. His faith in Judaism is also a factor he believes will make his stories and perspectives different from the other students. Academically, Rico is strongest in ELA and Social Studies.

Researcher Stance

Currently, I am a graduate student in the Literacy program at St. John Fisher College, obtaining my Master's Degree in Literacy Education. Previously, I completed my Bachelor's

Degree in Adolescent Education, Special Education and Social Studies. At this time, I have not begun teaching full time. In my study, I was an active participant observer (Mills, 2007). In other words, I was directly responsible for the teaching of my students by providing materials, setting up sessions for interviews and discussing the work they produced. I presented the material to the students but served as a guide to achieve the minimum amount of interference in the study. As an observer, I wanted to see how students use the material given but I was still available if students had questions or were not following the directions correctly.

Method

In this study, students used their personal experiences interacting with African-American and LGBT individuals to create a short story. In their story, they created a fictionalized version of themselves interacting with a Black character and a Lesbian character. Students used their own personal experiences of interaction, which could have been negative or positive, to shape their characters to reflect those perspectives. Through narrative writing, it allowed students to reflect on their portrayals to see how their own personal experiences influenced the final result.

I met with each student one-on-one for a total of three sessions at the local public library. The purpose behind having one-on-one sessions was to minimize influence from peers on the final product. The sessions were at least 30 minutes long but others were longer depending on the situation with the student in each session. The first session included observing students use a guidebook created by me to create their characters and format their story. The guidebook included a generic story structure (e.g. Setting, introduce character #1, introduce character #2, insert problem, resolution, etc) to help students who struggle with writing in setting up a format to follow. It also included setting ideas, as well as a character creation chart to help students visualize and form characteristics from their personal experiences. The chart included traits to

remember as they wrote, including dialogue, physical characteristics, and behavior in the story. Next to each trait, they connected to a personal experience or interaction they have had. Alternatively, if they have had no interactions with black and/or gay individuals, they used their background knowledge on what they believe would fit the mold to complete those characters. When students had finished the chart and I had given approval, students had two weeks to complete their stories and submit it.

The second session took place after I had read all of the completed stories. Sitting down with each student one-on-one, I asked a predetermined list of questions (Appendix A) about their writing process, character creation and why they chose to portray their characters in the manner they did. The goal of this session was to have students reflect on their writing and think about their choices in making the characters.

After the first set of interview questions, students were given two interventions to become exposed to a different perspective on race and sexuality. The first intervention was a short story "Recitatif" by Toni Morrison which is written purposely to make it difficult for readers to decide the race of the two main characters, Roberta and Twyla. Using this story gave students the opportunity to examine their own beliefs on race and what being an African-American looks like in society. In addition, a video of young Black men from Ferguson, M.O. explaining their viewpoints on the protests and the world was viewed. The second intervention included a series of videos on the LGBT community, with the first highlighting stereotypes commonly found in media with real lesbians sharing their insight on the topic. The second a clip from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* contrasted two different perspectives on being gay. After each intervention, a list of prepared questions (Appendix A) was asked for student feedback. Using this new information, students were asked to create new characters and add the new perspectives

(if applicable) to those characters. They then had the opportunity to summarize how these new characters would fit into the story, and if they were similar or different to their first set of characters.

The third session included reviewing the final character chart that students wrote for their short story. Using a list of prepared questions, I looked for growth for students who needed exposure to new perspectives or reinforcement to students who already shared those perspectives in their stories. This comparison allowed me to see how different perspectives added into their personal experiences can change and develop a student's viewpoint on race and sexuality.

Quality and Credibility of Research

As with any action research project, it is essential that the quality and credibility of the study is the most professional. In his research, Mills (2014) cited the work of Guba (1981) to suggest that a researcher take into account four characteristics: Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Accurately meeting the standards of each characteristic is essential in ensuring trustworthiness within a study.

Not everything in the study went as planned, as I could not control every aspect to receive the results I wanted to find. In regards to credibility, there was a triangulation of data in order to use multiple data sources to cross check findings (Mills, 2014). This method ensured that the findings were concluded using different types of data and not solely on one single method that might not reflect the entire results accurately. Collecting the raw data, including recordings of sessions, artifacts and documents, ensured that I had accurate data to refer to during the study. This protection avoided any paraphrasing or manipulation by me, as I had concrete evidence to use as data.

Transferability is essential for other readers to identify with the research and be able to see the results in the context it was performed (Mills, 2014). In order to complete this goal, I collected detailed descriptive data of the context of the study, as well as developing detailed descriptions of the context so readers can fully understand the study. In order to prevent generalizing, I made it clear that the results are applicable in the context of the study.

In regards to dependability, Mills (2014) suggested to overlap methods to ensure a weakness is overcome and to establish an audit trail so an external observer can examine the methods, collecting data and analysis. I used multiple interviews to ensure an overlap of the methods used, as well as access to a critical colleague. I made it possible for outside observers to look at my data collection and know exactly what I did.

Finally confirmability describes how the data collected should be from a neutral perspective, one that cannot be objectified easily. According to Mills (2014), the researcher should triangulate the data sources and methods, as well as preventing bias and assumptions from driving the research to be formulated a certain way. I had planned using student sample work of the guidebook, audio recordings of each session, interviews and the draft as well as the final version of the short story with additional characters. In addition, the interview questions that were premade were prepared in a way that can lead to multiple answers, not just a single narrow result.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants

Since all the participants are minors, I had to collect two different forms of consent. The first form was informed assent for the child, to ensure that they are willing participants in the study. This process involved not coercing with consequences and ensuring the child understands the risks and benefits of participating in the study. Students also have a copy to reference and for

their records, as well as a list explaining their rights as a participant such as the right to not

answer a question and to know what I learned from conducting this study.

In addition, I also sought the permission from the parents of each child in the study. As

the primary caregiver, parents had the right not to allow their child into the study, even if the

child wanted to participate. They had the right to pull the child from the study without penalty, as

well as not have certain questions answered. They must have understood the purpose of the

study, as well as the risks and benefits that can be attained from participation. Also, they had the

right to learn of the final results of the study. The contact information for the researcher and the

supervisor was available, as well as in the copy that parents received. In both forms, it was

clearly stated that the identity of the child was protected through pseudonyms and only the

researcher knew the true identities of the participants. All identifying marks were removed from

artifacts, to further ensure anonymity. Both children and parents will be notified that the results

of the study will be shared.

Data Collection

In order to fulfill the triangulation method, three forms of data were collected. The first

data collection included the student's character chart that they had used the guide with during the

first session. This method allowed me to observe students interacting with the guide, interpreting

the directions and harnessing their personal experiences to create their characters on a physical

artifact. The session was be recorded for any further comments or questions made by the

participants.

The second piece of data was conducted by interviews. These interviews enquired

students on their reasoning behind their portrayals, reflecting on their completed work and

connecting personal experiences to their perspectives. In addition, there were interviews after

each intervention of a new perspective where students reflected on the introduced perspective, feelings towards the information, and connectedness to their own perspectives (Appendix A). The goal was for a schema change for individuals who did not have multiple experiences with race and sexuality, while reinforcing those who did have those personal experiences. The answers to each question were recorded and transferred accurately.

The third piece of data examined the draft and final version of their characters. This assignment allowed students to use the guide as a reference, but they were free to create the story how they chose. Using a before and after model, the character creation chart and character summaries allowed me to see how students implanted the new perspectives introduced in the interventions into their writing and ultimately compare the two pieces of material. While students were not being required to rewrite their stories, I gave them the opportunity to see it from a new perspective and open discussion on the topic.

Data Analysis

Multiple forms of data were collected in order to get a full picture of what actually occurred within the action research project. The data I examined included my field notes, transcripts of the interviews, the character charts before and after the interventions and the students' written stories and character summaries. With my research question in mind, I did a first initial run-through of all the data. Then, I carefully analyzed the data for specific information that related to my research question by underlining and highlighting specific pieces that supported or contradicted my research. Finally, a final reading allowed several themes to emerge that the data pieces all supported. My goal was to examine how students connected personal experiences to their characters: specifically, how those personal experiences influenced the characters physical appearances, personality and dialogue.

The character charts allowed me to examine the characteristics students would use in their stories. I looked at how students' used either personal experiences or outside influences such as other narratives or media to create physical appearances, personality and how their character would speak. I noted if certain characteristics came from personal experiences or outside influences.

The stories each student produced allowed me to see how those characters were described, their place in the story and other attitudes that were not explicit in the charts. I compared their stories back to their charts and determined if students used certain characteristics negatively, based on their own wording and descriptions. I also looked to see if those negative characteristics in the final story came from personal experiences or from outside sources based on the chart.

The interviews allowed students to speak on reflection, the writing process, why they portrayed the characters as they did and what influences prompted those portrayals. Additionally, the interview interventions exposed students to different perspective on race and sexuality and prompted questions allowed students to respond on the perspectives. I transcribed the interviews and examined how students spoke on the reflection process, their explanations behind their characters' creation and what influenced that creation. I examined if the personal experiences and outside information were negative or positive based on the students' responses and whether they felt their depictions were accurate.

I analyzed the interventions by breaking down each section and examining how students reacted to each intervention, their belief on stereotypes and if media plays a role. I read over the transcript from the Toni Morrison story to find how students used certain stereotypes to determine the race of each character, while the Ferguson video was used to see how students

responded to a different perspective on race and how media can influence those stereotypes. The Lesbian video and The Daily Show video allowed me to analyze how media plays a role in stereotyping the LGBT community and the students' thoughts on how gay and lesbian individuals are presented in society.

The field notes described students using the guidebook and reflecting for the first time. I wrote down observations and comments made during the session. I looked at those notes to see if students reacted positively to reflection and if they said and did anything during the session that offered information on the personal experiences that came to mind as they were brainstorming. The second character chart and summary allowed me to see if the media interventions made an impact in altering their portrayals. I looked at the personal experiences and outside information they used now to create their characters, if there was a change in characteristics used and if student relied less on outside information such as media and strictly more on personal experiences.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this action research project came directly from the analysis of several types of data. This included the field notes, student interviews, character creation charts, character summaries and the short story. The data was coded to relate to my research question. I focused on the character portrayals made by each student and how they connected characteristics such as physical appearance, personality and dialogue to personal experiences with race and sexuality from their own life. The interviews and field notes demonstrated the students' reflection capabilities on influences in their life and the opportunity for reflection. It also showed how students responded to an introduction of different perspectives into their schema. From this analysis, three distinct themes emerged. The first theme discusses how narrative writing

prompted students to reflect on their influences and biases. The second theme discusses how the community and media comprises the largest influences in perpetuating ideas and negative portrayals. The third theme takes into account that interventions cannot replace real life interactions.

Narrative Writing Prompts Reflection on Influences and Personal Bias

From the first session conducted with the students, it was clear that many of them had not reflected on their own personal experiences with race and sexuality, or more generally their perspectives on other groups of people. One student, Ezio, explained how the assignment was one of the few times he had thought about it, as "You just don't normally think about it, and then when you actually do this you have to think about it" (Student Interview, October 2015). Students have not before reflected on the influences in their own lives that determine their perspectives on other people. Reflection is necessary for personal and professional development (Levine, Kern, & Wright, 2007, Schwind, Santa-Mina, Metersky, & Patterson, 2015). It gives students the opportunity to reflect on their own lives and aspects they may not generally be given the chance for reflection. Other students echoed his thought, as they indicated they have not actually thought about reflecting on their own perspectives of other people. This assignment based on personal reflection was unfamiliar for the participants in the study.

Students read the guidebook silently, not asking questions as the assignment was straightforward. However, students completing the first character creation chart struggled. Ezio explained it was difficult to use his own personal experiences to shape his characters, as "The only lesbian I know is my aunt. I don't really know any black kids at Emmanuel" (Field Notes, October 2015). Sun and Nippold (2012) discussed that adolescents have more life experiences interacting with peers in social situations, compared to younger children. But the researchers did

not indicate whether those experiences were diverse. In this case, Ezio did not have vast life experiences interacting with different groups to draw upon, a fact that he concluded during reflection. With his lack of personal experiences relating to race and sexuality, his character chart exhibited mostly tropes from movies, television and other forms of media.

In contrast, other students had direct personal experiences (i.e. friend, family member) with African-Americans and LGBT individuals but had only one or two experiences to reference. For example, Brie, Raven, and Violet relied on someone they personally knew for each character but relied heavily on that single person for all their personal experiences (Field Notes, 2015). They also cited movies, television and other media as influences in helping to create their characters. Sun and Nippold (2012) indicated at their ages, students should have large amounts of memory to draw upon for writing, as they would have experienced multiple peer interactions in social settings. But it became evident as students began reflecting that they did not possess those multiple experiences to draw upon, or at least initially. Some students had no experiences to draw upon while others had only one or two, not replicating the vast experiences they should have acquired by late adolescence.

Creating their characters was difficult as students had not reflected on perspective before. Rico reflected on his multiple experiences creating his characters, noting that "I've had experiences with both kids who are hood and kids that are educated" (Field Notes, 2015). In his experience, reflecting was difficult as Rico had vast experiences to use on creating a single character for both race and sexuality. Sun and Nippold (2012) described in their study that older adolescents should have multiple peer interactions to refer to as they write. Rico struggled as he had many interactions to draw upon and his reflection during the first session challenged him to sort out those experiences. He had to decide which information from each experience to use,

rather than solely relying on one experience as other students had done. Reflecting on those experiences allowed Rico to categorize his interactions to draw upon as he created his characters.

Once students wrote their stories, they submitted their writings to me for review. In our second session, we discussed how this assignment may have prompted reflection on their perspectives. Overall, the students indicated that writing the story gave them the opportunity to reflect on how they view others. Ezio noted that the writing process forced him to reflect on his perspective, saying "You write it down, you look at what you know versus what is a stereotype and all that basically so it just helps you reflect over what you are thinking, which you may not normally do" (Student Interview, October 2015). Levine, Kern, and Wright (2007) found that interns who reflected on their own thinking by writing their experiences allowed them to see those experiences in a different perspective. Similarly, Ezio had reflected on his own perspective after writing down what he knows versus what could be misconstrued or stereotypical information. Having the opportunity to write down his thoughts demonstrated how reflection aided in his ability to interpret his perspective, which Ezio indicated he does not normally perform. Since students had to think of the characteristics while creating the character and then writing the story, it prompted students to review the portrayals they were representing through their writing.

For other students, reflecting was more profound. During the interview, Rico explained how the assignment helped him reflect on his own perspectives, stating

> It kind of just taught me that, you know just because I meet one or two people out of a
> large group of people doesn't mean that everyone in that group is like that and it kind of
> just taught me to have an open mind going into everything and don't really stereotype
> people into something that they're not so just basically have an open mind when I meet

people and not sort of "Alright, I've met one gay person that's all gay people now." So

yeah (Student Interview, October 2015).

Rico indicated that having the opportunity to reflect was beneficial for his future interactions

with different people. Bahns, Springer and The (2015) indicated that students with an open mind

for diversity will have the ability to interact positively. Rico's reflection on his own perspective

revealed that he believed heavily in and the connotations that surround group membership. Since

reflecting on his own perspective, he has chosen to identify personal experiences as individual

and not encompassing an entire group. Having an open mind to diversity that each individual

possesses a unique background despite group membership will allow Rico to appreciate the

individual experiences he encounters in his life and be open to more interactions.

Similarly, Raven encompassed this assignment with an overall personal reflection of her

entire life. She cites her family being a huge influence in treating others fairly, stating "It's my

senior year and I'm looking back on all the lessons they have taught me and all the lessons I've

learned myself when it comes to accepting other people and stuff like that" (Student Interview,

2015). Reflection aides in not only examining experiences but helps strengthen core values and

thinking, as well as personal and professional development while navigating the real world

(Levine, Kern, & Wright, 2007; Schwind, Santa-Mina, Metersky, & Patterson, 2015). Writing

the short story allowed Raven to reinforce her values by reflecting on how she depicts others in

written form extends to how you treat them. Reflecting on her own perspective gave Raven the

opportunity to strengthen her values on treating others fairly, a process she indicates as important

as she develops herself personally and professionally before graduating. Treating others fairly is

important to her, a value that reflection has helped strengthen as it became clear in her writing.

The second session interviews also contained interventions, which were different

perspectives on race and sexuality introduced to the students. These interventions included the

short story "Recitaf" by Toni Morrison, which is designed for readers to use personal judgements

on race to determine the races of each character which are not explicably known. A news report

filed by anchor Brian Williams entitled "Ferguson: Fear and Perception" highlights a panel of

young, Black men discussing race and how people perceive them. An video entitled "Don't be

such a Lesbian" interviews several lesbian women to discuss what being a lesbian looks like and

stereotypes associated. Finally, a segment from The Daily Show with Jon Stewart called

"Minneapolis is the new Gay" depicted different types of gay individuals, ranging from

stereotypes to the opposite. The purpose of these interventions was to expose students to

different perspectives on race and sexuality, and then critically examine what they read or saw.

Students responded to the videos and the perspectives introduced. Students indicated that they

were not aware of some ideas. For example, Brie responded to the Ferguson video saying "I

thought, well I never really thought about how blacks felt about the statistics about them and I

thought that was pretty shocking" (Student Interview, October 2015). Using a panel of

individuals discussing a topic can allow listeners to perceive perspectives that they normally

would not encounter (Keehn, 2015). Hearing the panel of young men describe their experiences

with race exposed Brie to a perspective other than her own. It can be difficult to think of

different perspectives on a topic without exposure to it previously. Brie indicated it was powerful

to hear different perspectives from real people to have a better understanding on the topic of race

in Ferguson. In this case, the reflection of other perspectives occurred as Brie learned a new

perspective on a topic she did not beforehand. Ezio had a similar thought, indicating that he

hadn't really thought of the perspective of those living in the town and that hearing the viewpoints of students his age was interesting.

The interventions in this study allowed students to be exposed to different viewpoints and reflect on their own perspectives. In reflecting on the "Don't be such a Lesbian" video, Brie was able to reflect on her own experiences with lesbian women, explaining

> Umm well when the lady said "it really annoys me when people ask me who the guy in the relationship is" and I've never realized how annoying that is cause I've asked that to a couple lesbians before, but I guess now like that she said that its like they are lesbians for a reason cause they both like girls, so why would they want a man in the relationship?
>
> That kinda makes sense to me (Student Interview, October 2015).

The format of the video involved multiple lesbian women discussing their own perspectives or discussing with others. Peterson and Calovini (2004) noted that students could potentially reflect as a group if someone presents a new perspective while similarly, Keehn (2015) examined how hearing different people discuss their experiences was beneficial for listeners to reflect on their own perspective. In this case, the women in the video used each other to reflect on stereotypes and discuss how lesbians are treated in society. Being introduced to multiple viewpoints on the man-woman dynamic in lesbian relationships prompted Brie to reflect on her own practices and realized her conduct was not always appropriate. Brie having that opportunity to listen to others speak about their experiences with each other demonstrated the universal familiarity with stereotypes and her own biases she may never noticed without reflection. Having the ability to reflect is crucial in examining biases the students may not have known they possessed beforehand.

Community and Media are the Largest Influences Reinforcing Stereotypes and Negative

Portrayals

It was surprising to see how vocal and easy it was for participants to connect media as a

major influence on how people view race and sexuality. Beginning with the first character charts,

the participants were allowed to use outside information such as televisions and movies to add to

their characters' traits/characteristics, as they were still experiences nonetheless. The purpose of

these charts was to have concrete evidence of students' thinking when creating their characters'

initial traits. It was also used to connect the personal experiences students were drawing upon to

create their character. Based on some of the charts, it was evident that students were also using

images displayed from media to use as information in creating their characters and not relying

predominantly on their own personal experiences.

Figure 1. Ezio's first character creation chart for his Black character, listing the traits and the

personal experiences he used to draw upon for inspiration.

In Figure 1, Ezio cited one personal experience with friend Steven as a source for characteristics, but also cited social media. Some of the characteristics used included: baggy clothes, smokes, drinks, short hair, used to city life. Teenagers are constant consumers of media, often taking into account the information being displayed (Fuller & Damico, 2008). This extends to different cultural expectations, creating ideals and demonizing different lifestyles. In conjunction, Guo and Harlow (2015) found that negative stereotypes of blacks were perpetuated and left unchallenged on social media websites, including YouTube. The characteristics being used in the chart are perpetuations of viewpoints on the African-American community. While those characteristics are not true for everyone, they are what resonate first and foremost to the student, citing social media as an influence.

Most participants used media as a source for characteristics, with some relying on it more than others depending on the vastness of the experiences for race and sexuality. During the character creation process, I noted several moments of students making sense of what they know and adding it to their characters. Violet struggled initially with the character creation chart and noted it was because "I'm trying not to stereotype. It's hard" (Field Notes, 2015). She noticed that the first thoughts that came into her head for African-Americans and LGBT individuals could be taken as stereotypical, which begins to demonstrate how implicit stereotypes have become in her perspective. Scharrer and Ramasubramaniam (2015) explained that when creating stories in their study, students still relied heavily on stereotypes in constructing plots and characters and cited media as the main culprit for that influence. This made it extremely difficult for students to create writing that did not rely solely on biased information. Since stereotypes are part Violet's perspective, it was initially difficult for her to create characters without instantly thinking of those media stereotypes.

When brainstorming personal experiences for a lesbian woman, Emily explained "Like Ellen and her wife. She doesn't dress weird, she dresses normal" (Field Notes, 2015). Emily's comment on dressing "normal" indicated that her perspective on lesbian women may be limited, as they would not typically dress in the way she believes they would. Waldron (2015) described how lesbians are attributed with negative stereotypes that are not part of the norm, which can perpetuate those beliefs, especially for female athletes. Stereotypes are often left unchallenged, with teenagers consuming that portrayal as different rather than a different lifestyle. For Emily, lesbians were deemed to be different as the way they could possibly dress is not related to how she thinks typical people would dress. While it is untrue that all lesbians dress differently or flamboyantly as stereotypes suggest, in Emily's mind her belief in stereotypes attributes to the whole group, citing only a few examples that do not fit that mold.

Reading their stories saw the characters they made come to life. Their situations ranged from enjoying a day at the beach to slaying a dragon. In each story, students wrote themselves interacting with their two characters they created. During the interview, I asked the students what personal experiences they used to create their characters. Each had a unique set of experiences to use, and all but one participant used media portrayals to add to their character. Raven chose not to use outside information as it was easier to write what she knew, as she had explained in the interviews. Malaney and Berger (2005) noted that positive beliefs towards diversity led students to have a better handling of diversity in other contexts outside of the classroom. Raven's diverse social network and beliefs about treating others fairly led her to use more personal experiences and not rely on media as an influence. Emily indicated that media played a large role in shaping both of her characters, especially her lesbian character with a spiked collar and smoking cigarettes. Stereotypes against lesbians are very prevalent in society and are often left

unchallenged (Waldron, 2015). Having a spiked collar and smoking is viewed negatively, and seen as different and not part of the ideal. For Emily, her characteristics were attributed to the entire group as perpetuated by the media stereotypes she has consumed in her life.

Violet made her African-American character based off of outside information such as media since she explains where she grew up, there was little to no diversity. Precollege racial environments can indicate a student's participation and knowledge with diversity (Saenz, 2010). Violet comes from a homogenous community, which makes it difficult for her to rely on personal experiences with African Americans to use for her character. She had to resort to using outside information such as media to supply information. Since the opportunity to create personal experiences was not possible due to her homogenous community, Violet had to search other avenues for information which may not always yield factual or accurate information. Ezio explained he used clothing and smoking from TV shows to help add to his African-American character, while using that to shape the physical appearance of his lesbian character. Students from less diverse communities are not knowledgeable about other groups from firsthand experience (Milem & Umbach, 2003). Based on Ezio's community, it is suggested that his use of media as an influence comes from the lack of diversity in his hometown and school district. Since he does not have multiple personal experiences to draw upon due to the diversity of his community, he had to rely on media information to fill in the gaps with his characters.

When I asked Rico if he used characteristics from outside sources to add to his character, he responded with "Hmm no, I was gonna but then I don't like the media's interpretation of most black people so I chose not to go with it" (Student Interview, October 2015). Rico had reflected on how the media displays black characteristics. Adams-Bass, Stevenson and Kotzin (2014) found that students who had a greater knowledge of racial inequalities were less likely to believe

in racial stereotypes depicted in media. Based on his answer, he was conscious enough to analyze the interpretations of race in the media and with his knowledge, reject them. While Rico was aware of media stereotypes, he chose not to use them which demonstrates not only his reflective skill but also acknowledges that the media contains obvious stereotypes.

The short story "Recitaf" by Toni Morrison depicts two female characters that grew up together disconnecting and reconnecting during different moments of their lives. Each character comes from a different background and lives different lifestyles as they grow older. The races of both characters are not explicit in the story, as the writer specifically designed the story for readers to use their own judgements and beliefs to ascertain the racial identity of the two girls. The point of the activity was for students to become aware of how they use certain stereotypes to make judgements. Students made varying decisions on the race of the two main characters. In each situation, they used what they believed about Black and White people to discern the races, while the true identity of each character is purposely hidden so readers would be forced to use personal experiences to make their decision. All of the participants noted they used what they had learned from media and their own beliefs about each race to make their final decisions. Brie summed up the group's feelings by stating "like, well, when you read it and you're trying to find out what the people are, you just think about typically what a white person is and what a black person is" (Student Interview, 2015). When prompted to make a decision on someone's race, students relied on their own personal beliefs to aid in their thinking. Scharrer and Ramasubramaniam (2015) noted that students can have difficulty not relying on stereotypes they have seen in the media. To generalize members of a race, students created in their mind characteristics of being White and characteristics of being Black. The characters had to be this race or the other according to descriptions, which connect certain features only to one race.

Additionally, several students cited social media as having just as much influence as traditional media such as television and movies. For example, Brie used a friend as the basis for her African-American character. That friend eventually moved to the city but she followed his social media accounts. In her story, her depiction of Tyler was negative, citing drug use, slang and being in a gang. When asked if there were biases in her writing, Brie replied "Maybe the part about Tyler being in a gang cause that's what you see on social media, a lot of Black people are a part of that. That's where I got, that's where I made it up as" (Student Interview, October 2015). Her main information is what was presented on social media, which negated the information she knew of him before. Abraham and Appai (2006) found that negative news stories featuring pictures of Blacks were seen by White populations as accurate, despite the stories being made up. Brie has taken the images she has seen on social media as accurate and pertaining to the entire Black population. While she did note there were biases with her character being in a gang, it indicates that Brie believes more into the cultural stereotype that the media depicts.

Ezio shared a similar sentiment, adding that "…ya know stuff on tv, stuff you see on the internet, social media, things like that helped to build the character" (Student Interview, 2015). Each student used media in varying levels to add to their characters. He relied more on outside information from the media to add to his character, not discerning if those portrayals were accurate to reality. Guo and Harlow (2015) discussed how negative stereotypes are perpetuated on social media and internet sites such as YouTube. As Ezio is a consumer of media, he is bombarded with constant negative depictions of race that help him paint a picture of what being Black looks like genuinely. With a lack of personal experiences, Ezio relied heavily on what the media displayed for information to complete his character.

The participants went further to claim that the portrayals displayed on media are not typically positive. When asked if she had any personal biases, Brie explained "Well yeah cause of like social media. Like I'm sure like stuff on social media isn't true but I do believe it…like blacks and homosexuals" (Student Interview, October 2015). For Brie, the images depicted on social media have become strong and etched into her own perspective, despite admitting that it may be false. Abraham and Appai (2006) found in their study that images of Blacks with negative headlines were often seen as accurate to the White population while Scharrer and Ramasubramaniam (2015) noted that the media's influence can articulate racial attitudes, despite counter narratives present. Brie's belief in what social media displays is solid, due to the negative images she consumes. Being told that certain racial groups act certain ways despite acknowledging falsehoods that exist demonstrates the large influence media has in shaping her perspective.

After each set of interventions divided by race and sexuality, students were asked if stereotypes exist and if those stereotypes are used too heavily to shape perspectives on the African-American and LGBT community. After watching the Ferguson video, Rico stated the media has a negative influence in reinforcing stereotypes, stating "…its like what the one kid was saying how all the negative stuff that happens, that comes out of the African-American group of people, that gets extreme, heavy media, super exploited" (Student Interview, 2015). The media typically portrays African-Americans in a negative light, which is generally accepted among the dominant group. Abraham and Appai (2006) explained that negative news reports contrasted with images of African-Americans incited language such as "Lawbreakers" to describe the group. Since members of the dominant White group believe in these media reports, they perpetuate negative stereotypes from the media while ignoring anything else. Rico used the

intervention to reflect and relate to the young men in the video, acknowledging their perspective. He follows up his statement by attacking the notion that all African-Americans are bad unless they are playing sports, as if they cannot be anything else. Klein and Shiffman (2006) found that minority characters in cartoons are very few and those that do exist continue to portray stereotypes. Without different roles available, there will be a certain set of characteristics that will always be attributed to the African-American community. Becoming producers of media and not solely consumers offers students the ability to critique the information they consume (Willet, 2005). By having an outlet to explain his thoughts in the interviews, Rico produced a critique of the media he has consumed in his lifetime to determine how it typically works against racial minorities. In his viewpoint, the media has only negative anecdotes to report on, but positive anecdotes are largely ignored.

The media discriminates against minority groups through the information they share and report. Violet expands upon this concept by explaining

> I believe that the media plays a huge role in that, social media as well. I feel like maybe White people or people of other races get more attention for the opportunities and their achievements and I feel like it's not exemplified as much, like when maybe an African American woman or man does well and I think that's not fair in the eyes of society and everything and that there's not a balance between races and that maybe the media likes to hide the good things that African American people do and they like to show maybe a select number of people are doing when in reality the same amount of White people could be doing that, but they just show it cause it's an African American man or woman and I feel like they're just trying to make the culture look bad (Student Interview, 2015).

Violet criticizes the media as a force that perpetuates negative stereotypes and prevents positive information from being accessible for the general public. Peterson and Calovini (2004) witnessed a group of students believe in stereotypes after one student dominated the conversation and perpetuated that viewpoint. Similarly, Violet noticed how the media is a dominating force within society that marginalizes groups with unfair portrayals and discredits other viewpoints. She demonstrates that without a loud, counter narrative to the positive achievements made by minorities, the general media will continue to dominate conversations on race. Not only is the media biased, but it purposely creates negative portrayals that have the potential for many people to believe wholeheartedly.

Sexuality and the LGBT community are also victims of the media's negative portrayals. Raven noted from the "Don't Be Such a Lesbian" video that many women were described by others as butch, who involved "Short hair, like they were saying they were all like that, short hair with piercings, tattoos, like that. That's just what they assumed immediately from the media" (Student Interview, 2015). Stereotypes of lesbians are so prevalent that it was easy for individuals in the video to cohesively describe experiences with stereotypes. Crosby and Wilson (2015) found that unchallenged use of slurs and discrimination in public perpetuated the belief that it was acceptable in society. Raven discusses that the media perpetuates a certain portrayal of lesbians that's become the norm, left unchallenged to descriptions such as butch. She describes how people have become so used to the ideas perpetuated from the media, that real lesbians denounce the stereotypes that have been placed upon them. Since there have been no challenges to the media's depictions of lesbians, Raven indicates that people believe wholeheartedly the negative stereotypes associated with being a lesbian.

Some students saw the LGBT interventions as a way to discuss what they see in their own lives. Brie explained how the stereotypes brought up in The Daily Show video resonated with her own viewpoints, stating "…like guys are flamboyant and then like guys talk like girls and then like use their hands when they're talking and then like his voice sounded gay. But then the other gay couple didn't seem gay at all" (Student Interview, 2015). By adding a new perspective of what it looks like to be gay, Brie noticed the stereotypes that she believed herself. Witnessing different people discuss their own experience with a topic can be beneficial in seeing different perspectives (Keehn, 2015). Brie was not used to seeing a different perspective of what it means to be gay that was different from the flamboyant depiction. She noticed that by seeing multiple perspectives on homosexuality that stereotypes do not apply to everyone. The video challenged her idea of what being gay looks like that encompasses people who do fit stereotypes and people who do not.

While stereotypes do exist, it is important for people to be able to discern that they do not represent the majority. Rico notes that is it tough for some people to not attribute stereotypes to gays, adding that "like you know you still find those people today that still make fun of people, like 'hahaha that kid, he must act like a girl' and stuff, even in school (Student Interview, 2015). He notes the prevalence of discriminatory behavior towards the LGBT community. Laird (2005) discussed how students who completed diversity courses were more likely to have positive interactions with diverse peers. Rico expressed concern with how stereotypes are still attributed to LGBT members as a whole. But his opinion expressed that people are still not receiving the proper knowledge on diversity that would discredit the stereotypes believed by some individuals. Without that knowledge, negative interactions will still persist and reinforce stereotypes. While

he does imply that more people are becoming accepting, it is still easy to find real examples of

people displaying their viewpoints that are rooted in those stereotypes.

The intervention of different perspectives on race and sexuality left students wondering

why stereotypes continue to exist if counter narratives are available. The interventions typically

discredited the idea of stereotyping as fact. To explain how some people still believe in

stereotypes, violet explains that

> Stereotypes do exist and people do heavily use these stereotypes to shape their
>
> perspectives. Um a lot of people don't necessarily grow up around outed gay people or
>
> people who greatly express their sexuality so I think they rely on the stereotypes that are
>
> presented in the media and everywhere else just to categorize the LGBT community as
>
> one thing, even if they aren't that thing (Student Interview, 2015).

Violet connects the influence that social media plays in shaping peoples viewpoints, especially

those who have little to no real experiences with gay and lesbian individuals. Park and Chang

(2010) found that most high schools are not prepared in addressing diversity, leaving many

students unprepared to deal with diversity in the real world. Violet indicates that community

diversity plays a role in how people view different groups, and those beliefs continue to exist.

Teenagers are consumers of media and without counter narratives, those messages of

discrimination against the LGBT community will not be questioned (Fuller & Damico, 2008;

Crosby & Wilson, 2015). Violet determined that since media plays a huge role in adolescent life,

negative stereotypes are then transferred as they consume media. The combination of the lack of

diversity as well at consuming negative media is how she determined why stereotypes persisted.

In essence, media fills the gap of information that exists due to lack of personal experiences in

the students' lives.

Interventions are Not Perfect in Changing Perspectives

While reviewing the final character creation charts made after the interventions and the summaries of the new characters, it struck me that their perspectives had changed but it an unexpected way while some stayed the same. Overall, the data was jumbled as almost every participant did something different to the new characters. Three categories emerged: Perspectives changed by the interventions, a combination of interventions and/or previously unmentioned personal experiences and perspectives that did not change after completion of the interventions in the previous sessions.

Character 1:

Greg is a black person who is very kind and friendly. He is short around 5 inches the sweetest person you will ever meet. He has dreads with brown eyes and a big smile. A very skinny boy. This character would fit in as my new perspective of a black person. This characters would be very different. I also do not believe that they would get along very well because there beliefs are opposites. After watching that video, I realized how painful it is for some blacks to actual be black. They get talked about so poorly when not every black person is the same.

Figure 2. Brie's post-intervention character summary explaining how her new character was different than her first creation.

In Figure 2, Brie explained that after watching the Ferguson video, she wanted to change her character to fit her new perspective. The mentioning of dreads, big smile and sweet attitude came directly from some of the young men featured in the Ferguson video. Many of the students used the perspectives from the interventions to add to their new characters, as exhibited by Brie in Figure 2. Laird (2005) found that students exposed to diversity issues and learning were more likely to interact positively around diverse peers and develop critical thinking skills. Brie was introduced to different perspectives on race during the intervention, which led her to think more critically about how she portrayed her character. Using the new perspective from the intervention added into her overall personal experiences, which ultimately shaped her new character. Brie

corrected her negative viewpoint she had on African-Americans with the introduction of the different perspective. Previously, I asked why she included her first Black character Tyler being in a gang, and Brie had explained that "Because that's what I think of when I think of Black people" (Student Interview, 2015). Tyler being in a gang made sense to Brie as that idea was her immediate thought when it came to minorities. The community where a student grows up has influence over how diversity is viewed by that student (Milem & Umbach, 2003). Brie lives in a rather White homogenous community with very little diversity to grow personal experiences. Because of this isolation, Brie's idea of minorities is left unchallenged and her idea is left to continue. When she had little to no information to use, she relied on stereotypes. Peterson and Calovini (2004) saw similar results when students were unaware of the culture of India, and relied on the stereotypes a student expressed for information. Brie's lack of practice with diversity and diverse people left her with little factual information to use; leading her to rely on the only information she knew which resulted in stereotypes. But after the interventions, she noted in Figure 2 that not all Black people are the same. The introduction of new perspectives in the interventions added new information for her to draw upon, which was enough to change her perspective.

Violet was slightly different, as she had wide experiences with LGBT individuals but not with African-American individuals. However, she primarily used the interventions to shape her new characters. In her case, she used less media influence in creating her second set of characters. Violet explained that she used the interventions primarily as they both helped shape her new perspective, mainly for African Americans since "Where I live, there's virtually no Black people and only a few Gay people so like, it was different seeing how everyone isn't the same. Especially with Black people because I really don't know any (Student Interview, 2015).

With her community not reflecting diversity, Violet had little personal experiences to draw upon initially. Students will come from backgrounds with varying levels of diversity exposure but proper exposure to diversity can be beneficial to seeing different perspectives, especially in communities where the population is homogenous in background (Malaney & Berger, 2005; Bahns, Springer, & The, 2015). It cannot be assumed that all students will have similar experiences with diversity. Violet indicated that her experiences were expanded from the interventions, seeing how people within groups are not always the same. The interventions were appropriate enough to give Violet new perspectives on the African-American community, which she used for her new character. Similarly, instead of using the multiple personal experiences she has with the LGBT community, she focused mainly on the interventions for creating her new Lesbian character as noted in her new character chart.

However, other students displayed a change by not only using the interventions, but expanding their personal experiences to involve people they did not use in the first character creation chart. The interventions in session 2 included different perspectives of the African-American and LGBT community through stories or video. These outlets were used to provide a different perspective to students that did not root in stereotypes or one point of view, but rather the opposite.

Rico and Emily included in their post-intervention character creation chart and summaries more interactions with people that they did not discuss the first time. In this case, the students used more interactions that did not support stereotypes to add to their new characters. When students are exposed to diversity, they develop sharper critical thinking skills and positive interactions with diverse peers (Laird, 2005; Saenz, 2010). Having the exposure to diverse perspectives may have attributed to the students' decision not to include stereotypes after

discussing different perspectives in the interventions. By excluding stereotypes in recalling personal experiences, students also developed critical thinking in regards to individuality that is present within group membership.

Rico used the few friends at Emmanuel that are black to add to his new character, which included living in the suburbs and attempting to act like they were raised in the city but do not speak with a dialect. He also used a friend's gay friend as a reference for a new LGBT character, which he did not use previously.

Black Character	Character Name: Tyron Jennings • Educated and tries in school • Good athlete • Tries to be "hood" • From the suburbs • Sags • Wear the same pair of Jordan's	Connect to Personal Experience Friends that I know from school Ferguson video with the group of teens
Lesbian/ Gay Character	Character Name: Nate Smith • Loud • Not very flamboyant • High pitched voice • Skinny jeans • Hangs out with lesbians	Connect to Personal Experience My friend's gay friend who isn't flamboyant and sassy The videos with the different types of gay people

Figure 3. Rico's post-intervention character creation chart included his new experiences and perspectives.

In Figure 3, Rico demonstrates that the characteristics he included were a combination of his own personal experiences and perspectives from the interventions. He makes a specific note that his new Gay character is not very flamboyant and that is directly influenced from his friend's gay friend. Brooks and Ward (2007) explain that diversity exposure can help students critique media interpretation of different groups of people. After watching the interventions, Rico may have decided which characteristics are relevant and which are not for his characters. It may

have also opened him up to the idea of different people he knows that did not fit the stereotype as shown in the interventions.

Rico explained that this change occurred after the interventions, explaining "Yeah, I was a bit hard stereotyping the first time and after watching the videos and such, I kinda decided that there are other people I could use, like my gay guy doesn't have to be so flamboyant" (Student Interview, 2015). Rico reflected on the interventions to make the conscious decision that his portrayals were not what he really wanted to display. Students who have more background knowledge on diverse groups will have an easier time interacting positively with those groups (Bahns, Springer, & The, 2015). Rico added information from the interventions to become more familiar with the different perspectives associated with race and sexuality and thus rely less on stereotypes with his new characters.

In the third session, Rico explained that the interventions helped connect other personal experiences to add to his new set of characters. After his first story, Rico explained "I thought it would be funny to use stereotypes but then I thought about it and I know people who don't really fit into that category, like the video with the gay guys who weren't in your face gay" (Student Interview, 2015) Rico indicated that the video segment from The Daily Show introduced a perspective on what it looked like to be gay that did not initially correspond with his viewpoint already established. Keehn (2005) noticed similar results after audience members reflected on their own viewpoints after hearing individuals from different background speak on a similar topic. Similarly, Rico saw different perspectives of what being gay can look like and realized he excluded people he knew because they did not fit that stereotypical mold. By including more experiences, he acknowledges the individuality that exists within groups.

Emily used experiences from her friend and her sister to craft her new African American and LGBT characters, respectively. When asked about why she did not use her sister beforehand as an experience for her LGBT character, she stated "I wasn't really comfortable at first because not a lot of people know but I thought 'she is actually a big influence in my life' so I included her the second time" (Student Interview, 2015). Levine, Kern and Wright (2007) explained how narrative writing offers self-reflection on personal and professional experiences while Laird (2005) noted that exposure to diversity aids in developing critical thinking. The addition of her sister as a personal experience demonstrated Emily becoming more comfortable sharing that information and acknowledging the positive personal experience her sister brings to her to draw upon. Emily used the interventions in her new characters to reflect the addition of her new perspective on lesbians, using less stereotypes and more information she believes to be factual from real experiences. Describing her new lesbian character in the post-intervention summaries, Emily states

> Nadine was based off personal experience with my sister, Michele. Michele is a very normal and casual looking girl who is very opinionated and stands for what she believes in. She is very nice and is open with her beliefs. She is a lesbian but from her looks not many people notice it. She wears it on her sleeve though, and has no issue hiding it. She dresses casually but does not dress up very often, only when forced too. The videos I watched showed different types of stereotypes that don't necessarily apply to everyone and I wanted to include that too. I also based Nadine off of TV shows and social media, which is the look that a girl dresses business casual with long hair and is very nice and normal, and not many people would know that she is a lesbian. I like to include that in the

story because the stereotype of lesbians can be very misconstrued and taken out of hand

with the cliché typical stereotype (Student Work, 2015).

Emily noticed that stereotypes of lesbians can be very misconstrued, so she wanted to create a

character that did not fit that mold. Brooks and Ward (2007) found that students exposed to

diversity-specific videos were able to analyze and develop how race and sexuality are presented

in the media. Emily used the interventions to develop a critique on the way media portrays

lesbians, using features she deemed to be appropriate that related to her experience with her

sister.

Similarly, Emily used a combination of personal experiences with a black friend she did

not previously mention and simultaneously used the interventions aid in forming her new

character.

Black Character	Character Name: Marcus Nicely dressed, well spoken guy 19 years old Attending local community college Getting Bachelors degree Wears brand clothing, attended private high school	Connect to Personal Experience Friend from high school similar to character Interviews on news of black men perspectives on how media portrays them

Figure 4. Emily's post-intervention character creation chart on her Black character, connecting

to a personal experience previously unmentioned.

In Figure 4, Emily stated that the personal experiences she used for her new character

included a friend from High-School and the inclusion of the Ferguson video from the

interventions. The traits see associated her new character with included going to college, earning

a degree, and nicely dressed. Witnessing different perspectives on a topic allows active listeners

to reflect on their own lives and perspectives (Keehn, 2015). Emily used the Ferguson videos as

inspiration for her to add a different perspective to her second Black character. Listening to the

young men in the video discuss their dreams, who they are and how they deal with negative

perceptions being young Black men had an impact on her to use that information to form her

character. A new perspective on Black men may have led her to use her friend she did not use

previously due to a difference of how she associated him with the African-American community.

Finally, the other two students did not cite the interventions as new personal experiences

and their new characters were either similar to the first set and/or they relied on media to create

their new characters. When connecting character traits to personal experiences, these students

highlighted similar characteristics with similar personal experiences, excluding the interventions

as new experiences used in the character creation.

Black Character	Character Name: Steven -Bigger/Stronger –Average wealth –No family -Baggy clothes –Smokes –Drinks -Short hair –Nice –used to city life/ghetto -slang –Religious	Connect to Personal Experience -People I know and have interacted with -TV and other media -What I see in public
Lesbian/ Gay Character	Character Name: Sara -Short hair -Tattoos -Wealthy -Works Hard -Confident -Guy/masculine clothing -Small/weak –Overweight –Nice -Easy to talk to	Connect to Personal Experience -Family -TV and other media -what I see in public

Figure 5. Ezio's post-intervention character creation chart showing little to no changes from his

first character creation chart.

In Figure 5, Ezio demonstrated similar characteristics for his Black character such as

baggy clothes, smokes, drinks, bigger/stronger with the only addition being the religious aspect.

This compared to his original character chart in Figure 1 is eerily similar. While diversity

exposure in the right context is helpful for students, there is not a one-size-fits all method to reaching every type of student (Bahns, Springer & The, 2015). This may explain why Ezio did not include the intervention perspectives in his final character charts but other students did. For him, the interventions did not reshape his perspective on race and sexuality, so he had to use what he already knew to create his new characters.

Raven similarly did not use the interventions in her new characters, but also did not use the personal experiences with the two individuals from her first character creation chart. In her second character chart, she relied solely on media to create her Black character.

Black Character	Character Name: Gwyn Slightly Heavy set Loud Always wearing bracelets Good fashion sense Make up always on, always looks good Can be snappy Happy Person Sassy	Connect to Personal Experience I've seen heavier set black characters on television Mostly on tv and in person I've seen black people with very nice clothes, good with fashion and makeup
Lesbian/ Gay Character	Character Name: Damian Sassy Snotty Vain Darker Tan skin with white teeth that stand out Fit Expensive designer clothing Very feminine Tall Part shaved head with side line cut	Connect to Personal Experience On television I've seen many tall guys who own nothing but designer clothing I've seen gay people who are darker skinned from tanning Some gay people I meet are very vain and sassy

Figure 6. Raven's post-intervention character creation chart connecting traits with primarily media experiences instead of real personal experiences.

In Figure 6, Raven specifically connected her characteristics to media. These characteristics included being loud, sassy, slightly heavy, snappy and having a good fashion sense. Typically, she used mostly media to influence her character creation or limited

experiences (i.e. acquaintances or people she has seen in public). There is no mention of the interventions as influences according to Figure 6, but there is plenty of media. Diversity exposure will not reach every student similarly, some will be affected by it more than others (Bahns, Springer & The, 2015). Interestingly, Raven used primarily personal experiences to form her first set of characters but did not do so in this instance. She may have attempted to demonstrate a different perspective in her new characters that she did not use the first time. Unfortunately, while stereotypes and media portrayals are different perspectives, it was the hope students would reject those images in their new characters and instead use more personal experiences and examples from the interventions.

Raven explained that "I didn't really think about using the videos and stuff and I only had those main experiences so it would have been the same thing (Student Interview, 2015). Park and Chang (2015) as well as Malaney and Berger (2005) suggest that diversity exposure is more applicable in a college setting, while Cook and Callister (2010) found that diversity learning can expand to more people if taught directly to certain groups of similar students. The failure of Raven to adopt the interventions into her personal experiences could be linked to the applicability of diversity lessons being effective in high school. Also, the participants were chosen at random, while the diversity exposure could have been more effective if targeted towards raven's social group or any similar organization she identifies with in her life. In her view, she relied so heavily on just limited interactions in her first set of characters that she was afraid she would repeat the same characters. But the diversity lessons did not instill the perspectives shown as meaningful or relevant to her general personal experiences she could use to create her characters.

With this information, it became somewhat clear that interventions work well for some but not with others. Additionally, it seems that real interactions have a greater impact on what is added into the characters. Keehn (2015) found that people listening to a live panel of individuals speaking about their personal experiences with race and privilege were able to relate to those individuals and understand a new point of view. This may indicate why students responded well to the interventions as they listened to real people tell their stories on race and sexuality. Rico and Emily used more personal experiences from real interactions they did not initially use to shape their new characters as seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4, respectively. The interventions were successful for some students as diversity exposure develops students' critical thinking skills (Brooks & Ward, 2007). Some students added perspectives from the interventions and also expanded their experiences to include people they did not use for their first set of characters. Scharrer and Ramasubramaniam (2015) found that media's heavy influence makes it difficult for students to change perspectives, even after interventions while Bahns, Springer and The (2015) noted that based on the construction of the diversity lesson, it may not reach every student. Ezio and Raven were not affected by the interventions and did not add those perspectives to their personal experiences to use, and so relied on media for their interpretations for one reason or another. For students, having the interventions been with real live people could have had a greater influence on creating a personal experience that they could use in the future. Instead of videos, students would have meaningful interactions with people. If students had completed this assignment again after collecting more personal experiences, the characters produced would be much different. This is important in using real life interactions as students will have a better grasp on their own perspective of the group that is rooted more in reality. This also has the

potential for students to use less media influence if more real interactions and growing of

personal experiences occurs.

Implications and Conclusions

In this action research project, I examined student's perspectives on race and sexuality

through the use of narrative writing. The importance of my findings will have importance for

teachers aiming to engage students and reflect upon their lives to become better human beings.

First, the findings indicate that students do not have enough opportunities for reflection upon

their selves. This reflection includes how they think, why they believe certain ideas and what

influences their thinking. The study found that the majority of students have had no opportunities

for self-reflection, including their perspectives on race and sexuality. Reflection is crucial for

developing young adults who will have personal and professional responsibilities in the real

world (Levine, Kern, & Wright, 2007, Schwind, Santa-Mina, Metersky, & Patterson, 2015). It

gives students the ability to not only reflect upon their own practice, but strengthen their core

values. Keehn (2015) discussed how panelists describing their experiences with privilege were

powerful for listeners to reflect and examine their own experiences with privilege. Audience

members walked out of the room reflecting on their own prejudices and realizing that not all of

them were rooted in fact. Similarly in this study, students examined their own perspectives

through reflection. Teachers must create more opportunities for students to reflect on their lives.

It is recommended that teachers use a diverse set of question prompts using a reflection journal

as a first step, but must be taken further. Students should have an area for open discussion,

trading of ideas based on experiences and time to conduct research on topics using multiple

sources. Reflection is ongoing, not a "one and done" type of situation. Developing core values

and perspectives is crucial as students become ever closer to becoming full-fledged global citizens in the world.

Second, teachers must be aware that media holds a large influence on portrayals of minority groups and ultimately shaping the perspectives of students who consume that media. Abraham and Appai (2006) discussed how media can influence how a person of color is viewed by how they are presented to the audience. Constant negative portrayals can have damaging effects on the population's viewpoints. Teens are large consumers of media and can often believe the messages that the media perpetuates (Fuller & Damico, 2008). These messages are not usually challenged, which leaves the teacher as a catalyst for change when given the right context to begin deconstructing negative portrayals. Klein and Shiffman (2006) found that negative portrayals are reinforced through media and intervention is difficult. But it is the moral duty of a teacher for his/her students to leave the classroom more intelligent and reflective than when they entered. Guo and Harlow (2015) bring into account the aspect of social media, focusing on the consumption of YouTube videos. Teachers must take into account the various social media that teens use in their daily lives. Constructing a discussion around how it is used could be helpful for students to begin seeing the bias behind certain images displayed on social media. Comparing and contrasting multiple YouTube videos on the same topic could be used to develop methods to examine perspectives and messages each video displays.

Finally, students need more interactions with real people from different racial and sexual groups. Many students lacked multiple personal experiences to use for their characters. Teachers can use guest speakers to discuss different cultures, disprove stereotypes and create real personal experiences for students to refer. Keehn (2015) used live panelists to discuss issues, which was more engaging for audience members and added a sense of realism to their learning. Seeking

local community agencies, interviewing local citizens or asking a student's parent to come into the class and discuss a topic they are knowledgeable in can offer opportunities for students to be exposed to diverse backgrounds they may normally not see. This lesson design has the potential to counteract the difficulty non real-life interventions have in changing perspectives, as Scharrer and Ramasubramaniam (2015) also found in their study. Teachers can look into the community for local leaders and figures who exhibit as great examples for challenging negative portrayals on race and sexuality. Cook and Callister (2010) discussed how viewpoints are more factual through real life interactions with people from different groups while Malaney and Berger (2005) note that meeting diverse people will lead to more diverse friend groups and knowledge interacting with different groups of people. Teachers should promote students' acquiring real life interactions, which benefits diversity and the students' capabilities in navigating a large and diverse world.

In this action research project, I asked: how does narrative writing reflect students' personal experiences with race and sexuality? Using narrative writing as a focus, I had students create an African-American character and a Gay/Lesbian character based on their own personal experiences. Traits such as physical characteristics, personality and dialogue had to be linked to people they have met and interacted with in their lives and if not, to outside influences such as media. Students created a first set of character using a chart outlined, wrote their stories and then discussed why they portrayed their characters as they did and what influenced those decisions. Additionally, students were exposed to interventions in which they became familiar with different perspectives on race and sexuality through the use of stories and videos. Then, students were asked to create a new set of characters and explain their character in a new chart and summary. Students were allowed to use the perspectives from the interventions and other

personal experiences. In my study, I found that students were able to reflect on their own viewpoints of other people given the opportunity. Also, students indicated that community and media play large influences in shaping their viewpoints on race and sexuality. Finally, diversity interventions are effective at aiding students in accepting different perspectives but based on design, will not reach all students. The implications for this study indicate that students do not have enough opportunities to reflect on their self, including personal biases or what they believe in. Additionally, teachers must be conscious of the media students consume and the influence the local community may have over student's perceptions of other groups. Finally, the interventions which mainly used real people to demonstrate different perspectives may indicate that more real life experiences will aid students in developing more personal experiences and exposure to diversity.

One of the limitations for this project was using only one set of characters for students to focus on. As Violet stated "it was kind of hard to generalize a person and make them seem a certain race or sexuality or anything because it's kind of hard to make someone seem generic…" (Student Interview, 2015). Since group membership can be diverse, I may have limited students in being as creative as possible in developing their characters by limiting it to only one character per group. Because writing is subjective to perspective, Ezio explained that "it may look that way in the writing that you might be biased but you're trying to show what you're thinking personally…you're creating a character that to some people could be biased, the way you're wording that character," referencing how a personal experience may contain a stereotype and be used in the writing (Student Interview, 2015). This discrepancy could be caused by limiting students to creating only one character to represent the entire group. In the future, I would change it so students would be tasked to develop multiple characters for race and sexuality at a

time. This change would help me see if students created similar characters or if each character was distinctly different, based upon their personal experiences.

Another limitation involved the pool of participants. While I only had six total participants, they were generally from similar communities with little to no diversity. If this study was conducted again in the future, it would be wise to include a larger number of participants from diverse communities in order to see different perspectives from various walks of life. Generally, students had more experiences with gays and lesbians than of people of color.

This study leaves me with the curiosity of what other findings would become evident if this was done on other groups such as ethnicity, gender, etc. It would be interesting to see if similar findings were concluded. It also has the potential for students to become reflective on more topics. I would like casual readers of this study to use these findings as raising awareness that everyone possesses bias. I urge readers to examine the media they consume; the messages they hear and the images they see and ask "Is that the whole story? What other perspectives can I find? What do I believe in?" Reflection should not be limited to a collegiate study or activities in a classroom. Reflection is a daily task that all human beings should use to not only understand the world transpiring around them, but developing a better sense of self when interacting with that great, big world. I focused on seniors in high school as they will shortly graduate and be whisked into the great unknown as they reach young adulthood. I want them to be prepared as best they can to interact with the diverse world population and have a greater sense of who they are, what they believe in and the ability to notice inaccuracies, nonfactual information and downright unsupportive interpretations. I want my students to leave this study with an enhanced ability to challenge what they know in order to acquire truth. Finally, I want students to understand they are one of many diverse, fascinating humans on this earth. Just as individuality

is important to one's self, that feeling extends to every human on this planet and thus everyone

should have the chance to be seen and judged fairly.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions: Discussion of first draft and summary

1. How did you feel completing this assignment?

2. What personal experiences of yours did you use to create Character #1? (Reference individual information)

3. Were there any traits or characteristics that did not come from your own personal experiences? In other words, did you use outside information such as media or other narratives to add to your character?

4. What personal experiences of yours did you use to create Character #2? (Reference individual information)

5. Were there any traits or characteristics that did not come from your own personal experiences? In other words, did you use outside information such as media or other narratives to add to your character?

6. How has this assignment helped you in reflecting on your own perspectives?

7. Do you believe you have any biases? It is okay if you do, we are not here to judge, just to reflect.

8. Do you feel any biases are evident in your writing? If so, explain how? If not, explain why?

Interview Questions: First Intervention

1. What was the story about?

2. What do you initially think the races of each character are?

3. What examples can you find to support that each character is a certain race? Are you sure?

4. Toni Morrison wrote this explicably to confuse readers to rely on personal judgements or stereotypes to ascertain the race of each character. While reading, do you feel you were relying on your personal experiences to make judgements on the race of each character?

5. What are your thoughts on the video of Ferguson?

6. In the Ferguson video, how do the young men view themselves compared to how the world may view them?

7. Do stereotypes exist and do people believe too heavily on stereotypes to shape their perspectives of the African American community?

Interview Questions: Second Intervention

1. What were your thoughts on the "Don't be such a Lesbian" video?

2. How do the media typically portray the LGBT community in the first video?

3. Have you had personal experiences interacting with similar people from the first video?

4. What were your thoughts on the "Minneapolis is the new Gay" video?

5. Regarding the second video from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,* how do they present homosexuality?

6. Why do you think the two types of portrayals were contrasted like that?

7. Do the portrayals represent the majority of gay men or two opposite ends of the spectrum?

8. Do stereotypes exist and do people believe too heavily on stereotypes to shape their perspectives of the LGBT community?