

The Role of Identity-Based Curriculum in Social-Emotional Learning

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Abstract

Identity is defined as a set of experiences and beliefs that make-up a sense of personhood. Markers of identity, such as gender, race and class are socially constructed and intersectional. They are influenced by self-curation, aspirations and how others perceive us. This interplay between the cultural identity of the students and hegemonic structures provides a tension that can and will play a role in classroom culture (Krzesni, 2015). I have chosen to focus on the importance of an educational program that advocates for the exploration of identity within the K-12 life stage because it is essential for young people's heritage and histories to be valued and represented. While they are growing intellectually and emotionally, this form of validation provides innumerable benefits both academically and socially. Methodologically, I have created two social science modules, at the elementary, middle and high school levels, to demonstrate how these values can be put into practice. This paper will contribute to the growing study of identity-conscious education and how to cultivate a respectful community in an institutional setting. It will detail the facets of this curriculum and showcase how students (n = 45) engaged with the scholarship, produced work and applied a critical lens at their respective developmental stages. The responsive classroom appreciates the distinctions that cosmopolitanism provides and the study of the leaders within activist movements for racial and indigenous justice, gender equality and ability rights will allow for the intentional and deliberate study of issues of power negotiation and systemic issues.

Keywords: education, identity, social-emotional, curriculum, multiculturalism

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Introduction

Identity is defined as a set of experiences and beliefs that make-up a sense of personhood; it's influenced by self-curation, aspirations and how others perceive us. It is multi-faceted in nature and can exist in opposition to various forms of self. Examples of markers of identity are gender, race and class but they are all socially constructed and we all perform a multitude of these markers with our intersectionality. This integral intersection between the cultural identity of the students and hegemonic structures provides a tension that can and will most often play a role in the classroom culture as well (Krziesni, 2015).

I have chosen to focus on the importance of a curriculum that is conscious and advocates for the exploration of identity within the K-12 grades because it is essential for children's heritage and histories to be valued and represented. While they are growing intellectually and emotionally, this form of validation and respect provides innumerable benefits both intellectually and socially. Having grown up in the multicultural setting that is Toronto, Canada, I feel indebted to the educators and institutions that created a safe and respectful environment to perform all aspects of my Asian American identity. I strive to cultivate a similar social and emotional space in my institutional community.

Within our increasingly cosmopolitan world, it is essential to curate and implement identity-conscious curriculum that recognizes the importance of cultural diversity. The responsive classroom appreciates the distinctions that multiculturalism provides and the study of the leaders within activist movements for racial and indigenous justice, gender equality and ability rights will allow for the intentional and deliberate study of issues of power negotiation and systemic issues. The changemakers unit for second graders will engage with a developmentally appropriate curriculum that is grounded in children's literature and art to make meaning from the critical engagement. Similarly, with middle schoolers engaging with memoirs and high schoolers creating cultural maps, they are provided with the intellectual and affective avenues to explore their positionality and become civic-minded.

Project Summary

The project aims to explore the theoretical underpinnings of why identity-conscious curriculum is beneficial from early childhood to high school for both intellectual and social-emotional development. Educators and their pupils exist in relation to one another within the classroom setting. The difference in power can bring forth problematic dynamics if the culture is not guided with respect and consideration of this differential. Emotional intelligence and the ability to discern the motivations of people's choices is key to fostering a positive learning environment. Having interest in delving into the nuances of human nature allows an educator to build this sensitivity and interact with students in a more effective manner. Educators should be committed to fostering a child's intellectual development and emotional maturity:

The prereflective or primitive form of the pedagogical relation is already found in various relations of everyday life: in the conversational relation, in the helping relation, and in every event where a certain influence toward formative growth is exercised by one person towards another.

The pedagogical relation differs from these incidental formative relations in that the pedagogue is 'given' special responsibility for the young person. (Van Manen, 1994, 11)

There is a history of problematic curriculum and the harm that it can cause will support the need for this respectful and reflexive approach. Indigenous children are often in search of curriculum that respectfully honors and acknowledges their histories. Problematic discourses such as portraying native people as uncivilized and destructors of human development are forms of oppression for the populations who are instructed with these racist and limited perspectives. Their forms of history, such as oral narratives or art, are not always acknowledged within formal academic circles of the discipline and certain voices are given precedence over others (Krziesni, 2015). It is important to make the distinction between respectfully incorporating these histories and knowledge into curriculum through asset pedagogies compared to curating lessons to simply assimilate children of color into larger frameworks of normative discourses to civilize and discipline them (Paris, 2012).

I will outline a two-week elementary curriculum that begins with the concept of power differentials and how this dynamic can create both conflict and the potential for social transformation. The students will then study the lives and work of leaders who combated racial discrimination and fought for gender and disability rights. Then, I will suggest how these principles can be extended through the study of memoirs for middle schoolers and cultural mapping for high school-aged students.

Through the activism of racialized students bringing their lived realities of thriving and existing in predominantly white schools, administrators and educators alike have had to re-examine the curriculum and their approach to teaching. Having the courage to have difficult discussions and feeling the discomfort of confronting past wrongs can lay the foundation for a more inclusive institution. Exploring these concepts can be difficult for white teachers who need professional development to grapple with these issues and may want to avoid conflict within the learning and professional environment. In spite of these feelings of apprehension, a teacher should examine his or her own identity since this impacts their approach to class management and pedagogical style (Talusán, 2022). The lack of diversity in the field of education itself needs to be recognized and further examined. The fact that eighty percent of teachers identify as white women who are mostly from middle-class backgrounds, while 7 percent of educators are Black, 6 percent are Latinx and an even smaller percentage of Asian American or Indigenous people, has implications for what children internalize about who is teaching them and the systemic reasons why (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Teachers of all identities need to grapple with and promote moving beyond deficit-based models but instead implement democratic and pluralist teaching approaches that integrate the multiculturalism that is now represented by the student population. This diversity in histories and skill sets within the classroom is an opportunity to go beyond marginalizing and viewing students of color as a liability (Paris, 2012).

Description of Setting and Population

The project is inspired by my time in a second grade classroom at The Pike School in Andover, Massachusetts that is a well-established independent school. Though the school is located in an affluent suburb, it attracts attendees from the greater Boston area and New Hampshire who are of varying financial standing. The lower school serves students from grades pre-K to 4 and then the upper school houses youth from grades 5 to 8. The student population is richly diverse. Within my second grade classroom, eight of the students are bi-racial or racialized and the school is committed to culturally diverse education that also focuses on social justice at a developmentally-appropriate age. There are monthly Diversity Equity Inclusion Justice professional development meetings for the faculty and staff to support the

implementation of this curriculum. The predominantly white faculty is a contrast to the increasingly racialized student population.

Project Statement

Why is it important to curate and implement an identity-conscious curriculum within the classroom at the elementary level?

- A. Students will feel that their identities are recognized and valued within larger knowledge systems.
- B. As children are refining their sense of self, they should be provided with a respectful and safe classroom culture in which to grow.
- C. The instability of identity formation and performativity further reinforces the importance of being a reflexive educator who is agile and can cultivate a responsive classroom.

Having the opportunity to further refine their identity in a group setting is beneficial for all of the students because they are guided on how to conduct themselves in a reflexive but mindful way. By finding historical and cultural commonalities, a culture of open-minded engagement is fostered and encouraged (Krzesni, 2015).

Previous Literature

Theories and research-based approaches relating to culturally responsive curriculum support the benefits of adopting and implementing these strategies within the classroom. Further refined by Emily Style (1988) for the National SEED project, the concept of *mirrors and windows* helps students to build empathy through reflexive self-examination and recognizing other nuanced perspectives. By framing this reflexivity through mirrors and windows, it allows educators to thoughtfully select material for children to see a reflection of themselves and further develop their identity and also use the window to gain perspective on other realities that may be unfamiliar but provide important personal growth. Being cognizant of biases and lowering the defensive walls can provide the space for important forms of transformation as educators. Reflecting on past practices guarantees discomfort and but facing this ugliness allows for new pedagogical pathways and honors the process (Nelson & Wilson, 2010).

Epistemology is influenced by the social conditions and the relational identities of the theorists themselves. Therefore, pedagogy should be cognizant of these biases when creating curriculum. Problematic epistemologies can reinforce discriminatory forms of dominant power relations that create subordinate positioning (Fanon, 1952). To counter these hegemonic beliefs, anti-oppression curriculum is student-directed that allows them to practice creativity and encourage nuanced ways to critically assess current theories and practices. The lives of the students themselves are embedded in the process to allow for the building of rapport and confidence between instructor and learner (Orr, 2002).

There are several foundational aspects of the identity-conscious curriculum, but at its crux is how the curriculum recognizes the role of positionality and how identity creates different realities for individuals within the social realm. The reckoning as a racialized person is reinforced by societal norms that dictate one's access and positioning within the hierarchy. An individual's identity allows them to negotiate the systemic norms and their access and advantages can vary according to the context. But for racialized persons, the fluidity and

possibilities can be more limited and troubling (Steele, 2010). The order of things often demands that people perform to make gains but the process of code switching can be oppressive and dehumanizing in itself. As an educator, being aware of stereotypes when interacting with students is essential to creating an inclusive environment. By acknowledging these biases, the reflexive teacher can build authentic connections with the children to ensure that they feel seen and heard. This especially comes into play during the creation and implementation of assessments to gauge learning gains. Certain racialized groups have to negotiate a psychological barrier that can impact their performance. They are dealing with what Steele (2010) and his colleagues term *identity contingencies* where one's identity enables and demands them to negotiate their social condition.

Goals, Objectives, Implementation Steps, and Timeline

- I. The goals of the Changemakers curriculum of students in the second grade include:
 - Objective Number 1:** To curate a developmentally-appropriate two-week unit that focuses on the role of Changemakers in political transformation to combat systemic issues and work towards equity.
 - Objective Number 2:** To put into practice the belief that identity-conscious curriculum is beneficial for the social-emotional development of children since representation and valuing the richness of a classroom's cultural composition enhances the intellectual and social outcomes for young people.
 - Objective Number 3:** Education plays an important role in challenging problematic and dominant narratives that reinforce discriminatory and reductionist conceptualizations of society.

Literature provides the avenue for young people to be reflexive and cultivate their empathy by gaining insight into identity and life situations that may be both familiar or far from their own realities. Cultural identity is always in the midst of being formed and it's this instability that allows for hybridity and nuance. The performativity of identity means that the presentation of certain aspects may shift according to the context and the norms required for that time and place. Cultural mapping is a practice that allows children to reflect and pinpoint some of these relational aspects of their identity (Enciso, 1994).


- I. The facets of a two-week unit on Changemakers for second graders
 - A. The unit will incorporate read-alouds that will allow the young people to explore more abstract concepts such as power inequalities and discriminatory practices. The titles and brief summaries can be found here:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/10kBxY9GJWhLqQHN2-CaOIBm7Dafd9v1PJCpgkSd-wXY/edit?tab=t.0>
 - B. Leaders in the activist movements throughout history that combat racism, gender equality and disability rights will be featured.
 - C. We will recognize the power of naming and language and will therefore be inspired by the artwork of the *Guerilla Girls*. The students will think of an adjective that describes a Changemaker, create a piece of art, a portrait and conduct research to write a paragraph about how the leader enacted change.
 - D. The unit will be mapped out in the curriculum development graphic organizer for the Understanding by Design model found here:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GgJ8NzsbupWBUwp2xZPD39F43teY3ZDh/view>

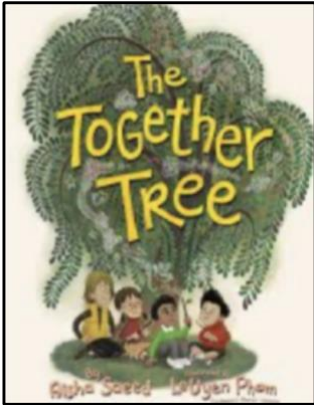
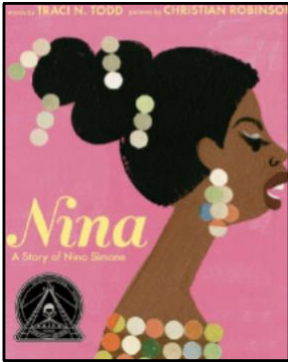
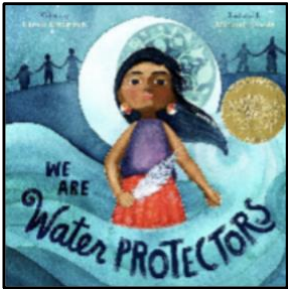
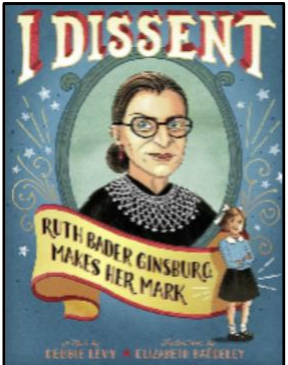
To build a collective sense of affinity, role models are an essential aspect of putting activism and social justice at the forefront of popular culture. Certain identities are provided with the privilege of not having to prove their social standing or worth. The ability to find one’s place in the social world through the examination and study of one’s identity allows them to make meaning about the global realm. This form of identity-conscious pedagogy enables students to have social-emotional health to thrive as individuals while pursuing their passions and interests (Krzesni, 2015).

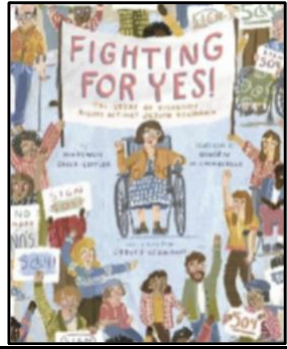

Figure 1
The Children’s Literature That Will Be Featured in the Changemakers Unit



Table 1
Children’s Literature for the Changemakers Unit

Title	Summary
	<p>There is a power differential between the different characters within this book where they define their distinctions through their shapes and colors. The stakeholders are intimidated by the aggression of red but it only takes one player to change the dynamic and ask empathetic questions to work towards equity and inclusion in the end. Through their innovative way of being, they shifted what it means to count.</p>

	<p>Starting at a new school is made even harder for Rumi who is bullied for being reserved and different. His fellow student Han, takes a stand and suggests for the aggressor to be inclusive and compassionate. It is with Rumi's willingness to build friendships that under the shade of a willow tree, all the children gather to find shelter and to cultivate the joy of playing together.</p>
	<p>Nina Simone is a talented musician who has longed for a place to practice her gifts and to belong. She is resilient in the face of discrimination and does not let exclusion define who she can become. As her fame rises she is called to a larger cause of fighting for the rights of African Americans with the Civil Rights movement. Her music speaks of the struggles but also the gloriousness of knowing precisely who you are and what you deserve.</p>
	<p>Water is of central importance for many Indigenous cultures and held as a source of sacred power. It is from water that we emerge as infants and it allows us to thrive and survive during our time on earth. With development, environments are being tested and Native Americans are asking us to take care and be cautious about how we should be caring for nature at large.</p>
	<p>The importance of critical engagement with the world has always been the crux of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's life and character. She has been able to recognize when healthy debate and collaboration can bring about conditions that are fair and just for many of the stakeholders involved. Moving from polarization towards greater understanding is how she existed in the world and how she inspired such spirit in others.</p>

	<p>Judy Heumann has used the physical and systemic barriers in her life to drive her desire to work towards greater access and rights for those with disabilities. She commits herself to a politics of peaceful dissent to collaborate and work towards enacting section 504 of the law that would create a more inclusive society.</p>
	<p>The conceptualization of a citizen is vast and open according to the authors but the most important aspect is that individuals are engaged and willing to work towards a respectful pluralist society. The actions can take on a multitude of options as long as they are committed to critically engage with existing systems and redefine barriers.</p>

Results and Outcomes

Eurocentric pedagogy can alienate students who feel excluded and underrepresented in the epistemology that is presented. By valuing and drawing on the culturally diverse classroom, the cultural capital of the identities who are part of the relational environment provides enrichment to both the educator and pupil alike. Accounting for the distinctions between the students is a linchpin of *culturally diverse pedagogy* and considers their perspectives and heritage. By fostering classroom practices that recognize and place this knowledge at the forefront empowers the students by providing representation of their rich cultural histories. Showcasing the work of role models from their affinity groups is one way to have a grounded and tangible way to study the social and political context of systemic issues. With the integration of the theories and experiential knowledge, the students will be compelled to critically engage with the political landscape (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011).

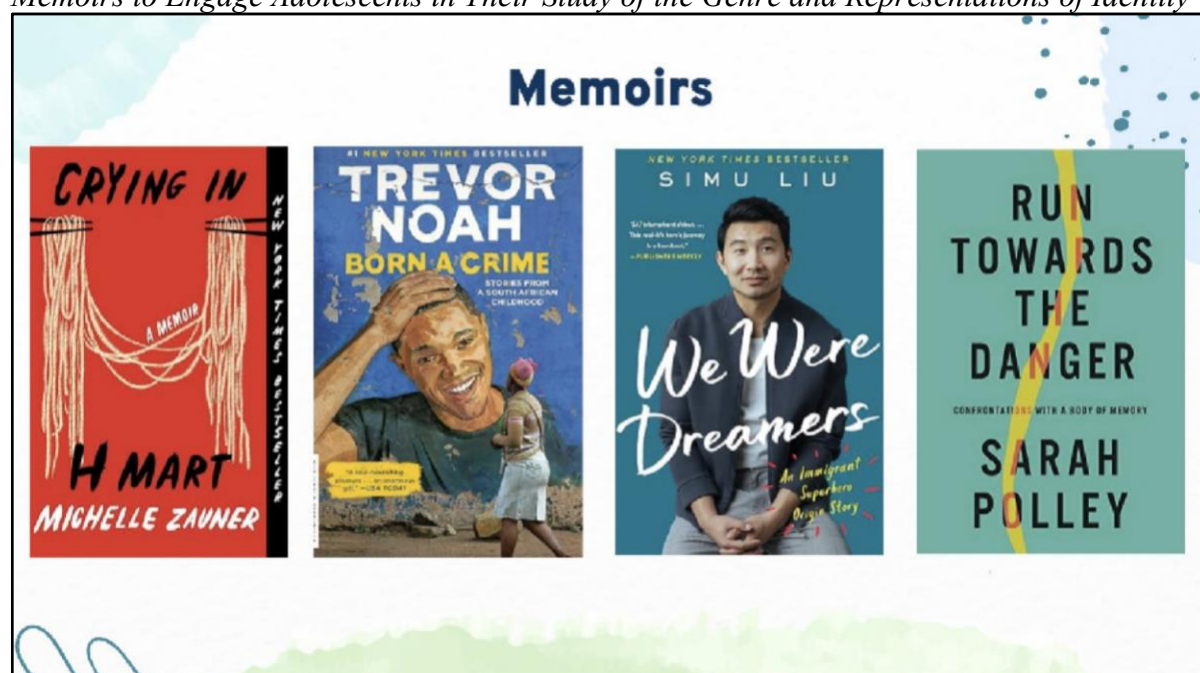
- I. With the detailed outline for the curriculum, an educator, both in the independent and public school setting could implement the analysis, discussions, art project and research project with their second grade students to guide and support important issues of social justice and the collaborative strategies of Changemakers.
- II. If educators do not have the same resources to purchase the books or materials, the titles can be borrowed from the library and adjustments can be made with regard to the art supplies that support the study of the leaders and systemic issues.
- III. In a developmentally appropriate manner, the students would have continued their engagement with social studies issues that are culturally diverse and deeply considers the importance of these histories of social and political change.

Middle-School Curriculum

Memoirs are a genre that will compel adolescents to be inspired by the journeys of aspirational leaders who share their cultural affinity. From Trevor Noah's examination of growing up as a multi-racial child in South Africa where the history of apartheid reverberates in every aspect of life to Simu's Liu's meditation on navigating the expectations of an Asian-Canadian family, these talents provide tangible examples of struggle, resilience and self-acceptance. They are also at the center of their story and can shape their narrative without intervention from public opinion or social pressures.

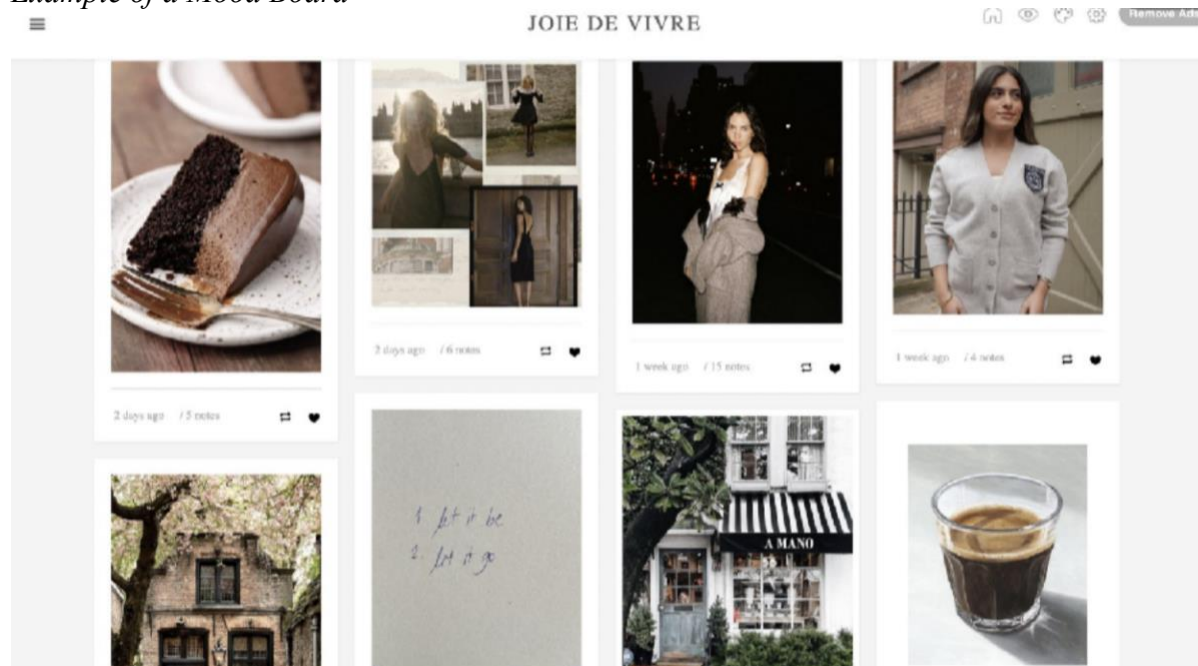
Figure 2

Memoirs to Engage Adolescents in Their Study of the Genre and Representations of Identity



After studying these texts, middle-schoolers can be encouraged to create their own visual mood boards to reflect on what influences their identity-formation and how these facets draw from family, educational community and the wider public. After this exercise, they can change the scale and write of one moment that they feel significantly impacted their sense of self. This will build the confidence to practice their voice, since they are the experts of their story, and they will practice the writing structure of providing context, citing evidence and then elaborating on why this moment was particularly impactful.

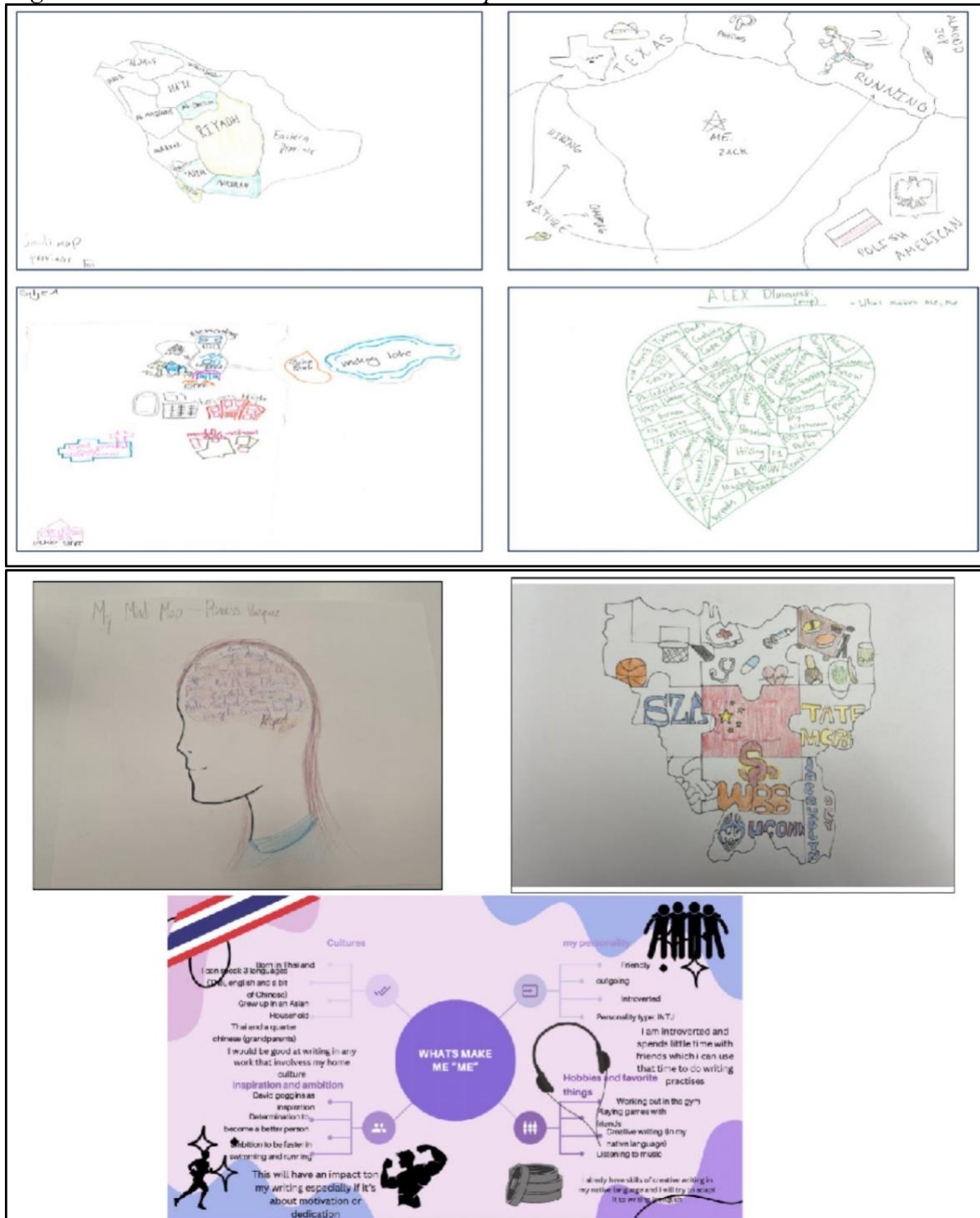
Figure 3
Example of a Mood Board



High School Curriculum

For older students in grades 9–12, they are ready to take on more abstract renderings of identity. Inspired by the work of Tim Cresswell (2011), students can create an identity map that demonstrates how places are given significance by the people who inhabit them. The cartography can range from the geopolitical, identity-based to cultural. The expansive scope of this project allows students to grapple with the challenge of working with a multitude of possibilities and rather than be daunted, instead be inspired. It can be challenging to feel that there is no concrete “right” answer and rather they need to revel in the discomfort that they are the agents of this meaning making.

Figure 4
High School Students and Their Cultural Maps



Conclusion

Upon re-examination and evaluation, the objectives of the curriculum and capstone project were successful according to the learning outcomes of the second grade class. Through representation, study and appreciation of cultural diversity and the leaders within the community, students will feel validation while further refining their sense of self. With the

examination of larger issues of power negotiation and the establishment of dominant narratives, the students can critically engage with the material and challenge existing inequalities.

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