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"These are normal people": White High School Students' Responses to Interracial Literary Fiction

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Abstract: When schools present texts through their explicit curricula, they infuse those stories with a certain perceived value (Eisner, 2002). When those accounts all ring with the same voice, they promote the merit of those people represented over those excluded (Haslem, 1998). In this study, we explored how White high school students responded to independently reading and discussing interracial literary fiction in an online forum. Drawing on narrative empathy and imagined intergroup contact theory, the study employed a theoretical framework based on critical reflection and reader response theory. The participants in this study were randomly assigned to White-normative male canon or interracial literary fiction groups, from which they selected texts and subgroups. Over the course of three weeks, the students independently read their books before engaging in an online discussion with their subgroups. In a qualitative analysis, we analyzed those discussions to explore how students responded to their texts. This study suggests that White high school seniors who read interracial literary fiction can achieve the same goals as their counterparts who read a White-normative canon; however, they also may explore issues of discrimination and prejudice—even independent of direct teacher intervention.

Keywords: diversifying the curriculum, prejudice, narrative empathy, imagined intergroup contact, online discussion

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Introduction[1]

"I already read a book about a slave girl," Dan said, plopping his copy of *The Color Purple* down on my desk. After explaining that the story isn't actually one of slavery, I asked if he'd already read a book about a rich White man. He laughed, rolled his eyes a little, picked up his book, and walked back to his seat. While he was more vocal, Dan wasn't alone in his response to the assignment. Like many others, these students were accustomed to the White-normative Western canon espoused by Bloom (1994), Arnold (1869), and Johnson (1765). This canon, composed almost entirely of White males (Bloom, 1994), is one of the most prevalent in the explicit English canon of schools today (Eisner, 2002; Skerrett, 2010; Thomas et al., 2017). When schools repeatedly present curricula that tell, again and again, the story of the same voice, the implicit message is clear: these are the voices—and people—that matter (Eisner, 2002; Haslem, 1998; Herrnstein Smith, 1988).

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This study investigated what happens when students are exposed to someone else's story, when an author and a protagonist do not look like the readers and many in their class. It explored the research question, "How do White high school seniors respond to interracial literary fiction, stories by and about people of other races than their own?" The participants, all proficient readers, were White students enrolled in predominantly White English classes (89% of the students in the classes were White) in a predominantly White high school (83% White; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). They were randomly assigned to either the control (White-male texts) or intervention (non-White-male texts) group before independently reading their books and discussing them online with a self-selected subgroup. The books and discussions were the only vehicles of change; the teachers did not directly instruct the students. In this article, the researchers examine how White high school students responded to multiracial literature compared to White-normative canon by conducting a document analysis on their online discussion posts and responses. We begin by situating this article among studies of narrative empathy (Keen, 2006, 2010; Hakemulder, 2000; Nussbaum, 2003) and imagined intergroup contact (Crisp & Turner, 2009), and framing the analysis through a reader response lens (Newton, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1964) that focuses on critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990; Beaufort, 2016). We then describe our methods of data collection and analysis, sharing findings and exemplars of student responses. Finally, we discuss our findings and the implications for the research.

These findings add to the national conversation regarding the role of education in systemic racism, suggesting that the inclusion of authors and protagonists from various demographics in the English classroom leads to lasting positive changes in ethnocultural empathy. As the first study to examine the impact on White high school students of diversifying the high school English curriculum independent of direct teacher intervention, this study adds to the literature on imagined intergroup contact and narrative empathy. Where other studies have explored the impacts of representation in curriculum

[1] We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

for those not as widely included (Gutiérrez, 2008; Kirkland, 2014), this study is unique in its exploration of the effects on those who are accustomed to seeing themselves on the page. Ultimately, our analysis suggests that diversifying the English curriculum may allow White high school students to connect to non-White characters. These connections allow them to wrestle with issues of ethnocultural empathy and prejudice in cases where direct intergroup contact may be difficult because of the homogeneity of their community. Importantly, because students still apply the skills associated with literary analysis and Common Core English standards, these positive affective effects come bundled with gains in students' cognitive academic skills, allowing for growth across multiple realms simultaneously.

Theoretical Framework

Narrative Empathy and Imagined Intergroup Contact

Stories have transformative power (Igartua & Vega, 2015). Readers frequently report feeling deep emotions while reading, reacting strongly to characters and situations (Oatley, 1994). In a story, the protagonist's actions, feelings, and thoughts splash across the page, revealing both the situational and dispositional factors that elicit a character's responses and reactions. As such, readers gain an unusual opportunity to "climb into [someone's] skin and walk around" (Lee, 2006, p. 30). These moments, which generate cognitive alignment between the character and reader of a story, create an empathic narrative (Hammond, 2014). Stories that achieve the character identification necessary for an empathic narrative elicit powerful emotions in the reader (Igartua & Vega, 2015; Oatley, 1994). Literary fiction may increase moral awareness by allowing readers to experience disparate lives, perhaps becoming more understanding and less cruel (Rorty, 1989). Books may do so from two vantages: those that help elucidate the effects of social practices and institutions and those that reveal the impact of personal traits on others (Rorty, 1989). Indeed, just as empathy may develop through mimicry, reaction, and conditioning (instruction by parents, for example), people also generate the feeling through active imaging (putting oneself in another's shoes) or language-mediated association (generating empathy for those about whom one reads or hears) (Hoffman, 2000), particularly because they do not "draw a bright line between the fictional and the real world" (Harris, 2004, pp. 49-51).

Readers may then transfer their empathic feelings from literature to real-world encounters (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Research has found that people who read about outgroup members (people from racial groups other than their own) may decrease stranger-induced anxiety as they develop a greater sense of familiarity and increase empathy (Hoffman, 2000; Keen, 2010; Mar & Oatley, 2008). In fact, the knowledge that a story is fiction may be what allows readers to open themselves to the vulnerability necessary to experience empathic change (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Keen, 2006). While literature may simulate a feeling the reader herself knows well, it does so from a safe aesthetic distance (Oatley, 1994). Such simulation may prepare readers to confront similar situations in their own lives, strengthening their social capabilities (Mar & Oatley, 2008). When readers live vicariously through the characters on the page, they mentally interact with them, regardless of race.

These interactions may include imagined intergroup contact, "the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category (Crisp & Turner, 2009, p. 234), which holds implications for reductions of prejudice and stereotyping. To experience imagined intergroup contact, subjects need only envision positive communication of some sort with a member of an

outgroup, perhaps considering how they would feel and act (Crisp & Turner, 2009). Those individuals may have better intentions in interactions with outgroup members in the future (Husnu & Crisp, 2010), though Vorauer & Sasaki (2009) found that some subjects exhibited increased prejudice when they expected to interact with members of other groups. Nevertheless, imagined contact has proven to improve explicit (Harwood et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2007) and implicit outgroup attitudes (Turner & Crisp, 2010; Vezzali et al., 2012), as well as reduce negative stereotyping (Brambilla et al., 2012; Stathi et al., 2012). Therefore, imagined intergroup contact may have positive effects on intergroup attitudes and relationships. That imagined intergroup contact may be stimulated by reading.

Importantly, these effects often generalize such that intergroup contact—imagined or direct—with an individual may lead to transformed opinions about the individual's group (McIntyre et al., 2016; Stark et al., 2013). Additionally, research has indicated the possibility of secondary transfer effects, augmentation of beliefs not only about the represented outgroup, but about other outgroups, as well (Harwood et al., 2011; Pettigrew, 2009). If reading creates imagined intergroup contact that decreases prejudice towards one individual, it may in turn decrease prejudice towards that individual's outgroup, as well as outgroups to which the individual does not belong (Harwood et al, 2011; McIntyre et al., 2016; Pettigrew, 2009; Stark et al., 2013), a momentous repercussion.

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Critical Reflection and Reader Response Theory

In order for books to elicit the effects of narrative empathy and imagined intergroup contact, students need to engage in critical reflection. It is through critical reflection that people make meaning of their experiences and the perspectives of others (Mezirow, 1990). Reflection allows for correction and adaptation of previously held beliefs, and it is through that process that people learn (Mezirow, 1990). Learning, in this model, requires a certain level of effort and discomfort. Reflection is strenuous. Dewey (1933) explained it as the action of "assessing the grounds of one's beliefs" (p. 9), a process by which people justify and evaluate their own positions. Critical reflection, then, involves a consideration of pre-suppositions and a willingness to transform assumptions (Mezirow, 1990). Vitally, written critical reflection may make thinking visible, aiding in critical transfer of skills and opinions (Yancey, 2016). The transfer enabled by critical reflection may lead to perspective transformation, the process by which people become acutely mindful of their perceptions and viewpoints (socio-cultural distortions in particular), and in which they reconstruct those biases better than they were before (Mezirow, 1990). In order for transfer to occur, students must engage in three steps: "(1) The individual must '*detect*' the *possibility of similarities* between prior tasks and the current one, (2) then '*elect*' to *be motivated to engage in the comparative thinking* necessary for transfer, and finally (3) '*connect*' (i.e., *find a relevant relationship*) [all emphases in original] between initial learning and the transfer situation" (Perkins & Salomon, 2012, p. 252). These steps often arise naturally when

students engage in critically reflective writing (Beaufort, 2016).

Such contemplation is a central tenet of the reader-response theory, which calls for students to reflect critically on their own viewpoints when making meaning of a piece of literature (Newton, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1964). The theory concerns itself with the reader's reception of the text, rather than the author's intent (Newton, 1997). In Fish's (1970) estimation, reading is an active process, involving constructivism and synthesis. As a reader works through a text, they experience initial responses that may later be tempered by shifts within the text itself or connections within the reader's mind alone; they self-correct and self-order, synthesizing new information with old (Rosenblatt, 1964). Rosenblatt (1964) explains how the text serves both as a stimulus and a control:

> "The poem" is what the reader, under the guidance of the text, crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, image, thought, and feeling which he brings to it. To do this, he does not erase his own past experience or his own present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources, and from them brings forth the new order, the new experience, which he sees as the poem. (p. 126)

Rosenblatt (1964) also emphasizes the impact of knowledge of how others have interpreted the text, a reflection that leads readers to reexamine elements they may have otherwise overlooked or exaggerated. Thus, knowledge of others' reactions and interpretations may be a critical component of Reader Response Theory.

Group Discussions and Online Discussion Platforms

Additionally, purposeful conversation itself may lead to critical thinking skills that enable students to connect new information with schema, interpret and synthesize others' opinions, and make inferences (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). Through dialogue, students collaborate and experience social negotiation, sharing various viewpoints and constructing their own (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). Indeed, "knowledge construction occurs when students explore issues, take positions, discuss those positions in an argumentative format and reflect on and reevaluate their positions" (Jonassen et al., 1995, p. 16). Accordingly, while stories alone may induce some narrative empathy, theorists speculate that reflection, perhaps through writing, is an integral piece of the process (Hakemulder, 2000; Keen, 2010). Unfortunately, academic written responses to literature may be aimed, in an earnest quest for a higher grade, more at what students believe the teacher would like to hear than at actual student beliefs (Standley & Standley, 1970). Teachers and parents exert considerable influence on student response to literature (Kimmel, 1970).

Likewise, and perhaps even more so, peers shape the manners in which adolescents view the world (Erikson, 1993). Adolescents may be particularly susceptible to persuasion by the perspectives of classmates (Erikson, 1993); additionally, people may be more vulnerable to social norms and the opinions of in-group members, a phenomenon known as *group effect* (Blocker & McIntosh, 2017). However, class discussions and perceptions of social norms may lead to shifts in prejudicial thoughts in juveniles (Bandura, 1977). Generally, research has demonstrated that people consider social norms when expressing intergroup attitudes (Blanchard, Crandell, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994), but while peers may hold different statuses within their groups, online discussions may

reduce the influence of high-status group members, leading to greater equality in influence by all group members (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 2009). Asynchronous discussion, a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) that exists in many online learning forums, allows students to respond when convenient, as well as to reflect further on points made by classmates, developing higher-level responses than they might have in a face-to-face interactions (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). The lack of teacher intervention in online discussions may lead students to digress from the curricular focus of an assigned discussion (Mikulecky, 1998), a fact that in this case may have been discourse that is more conducive to affective outcomes. While CMC discussions lack some personal qualities, such as gestures, eye-contact, and other physical interactions, Mikulecky (1998) found that they led to more constructivist, student-led suggestions than did in-class discussions, with a higher level of debate and interaction.

The variance between web-based and in-person discussions may be in part due to an online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). When people communicate online, they may behave in ways that they otherwise might not. Suler (2004) names six components that might lead to the behaviors disinhibition allows: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic interjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority (pp. 322-324). In class-based group chats, invisibility may allow students to avoid judgment for the manner in which they phrase a comment, as well as granting them the opportunity to evade the facial and body-language responses their comments may elicit. Likewise, the asynchronicity that prevents immediate backlash creates a safer space for the disclosure of potentially hazardous opinions. Solipsistic interjection, the merging of the self with the other (in such cases, subjects may imagine their own voices when reading others' comments, for example) that occurs in the mind, is more likely to transpire in an online environment, as well. Dissociative imagination allows people to believe (implicitly or explicitly) that the characters they become online are different from the people they are in real life. Finally, the online environment may minimize students' awareness of the teacher or authority figure, leading to more constructivist discussions (Suler, 2004). Thus, through online discussion forums, students may be more willing to discuss topics that might induce anxiety in face-to-face interactions. The format is not without its drawbacks, however; students in online courses cited technology "hiccups," "feeling lost in cyberspace," and a lack of personal connection as negatives for the model, even when their overall experiences were positive (Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). Additionally, online formats have wide ranges in effectiveness across socioeconomic levels, often leading to increased achievement gaps (Baum & McPherson, 2019), so online discussions may not be consistently impactful across various environments.

Context and Method

The data presented in this study are drawn from a broader mixed-methods study on the impact of interracial literary fiction on the ethnocultural empathy of White high school students (Findora, 2020). In that study, the researcher documented how, quantitatively, White high school students who read and discussed interracial literary fiction—unlike those who read White-normative canon or those who did not read at all—experienced a significant increase in ethnocultural empathy after reading and discussing only one text online. This analysis considers the qualitative aspect of that study, which revealed the manners in which students responded to the texts in their discussion posts and responses. Though this article focuses on the qualitative responses, it is framed by the greater context of the

mixed-methods study. We refer to this source to contextualize the qualitative findings.

Positionality

As qualitative researchers, our identities and experiences shape our analyses. As White Americans who attended primarily White schools from preschool through graduate school, we have always been members of the dominant and represented class in our education. When Jessie taught at a racially and socioeconomically diverse high school, she began to recognize the discrepancy between those faces she saw before her and those who were prominent in American politics and power structures, including the high school literary curriculum. She realized that, in class, she repeatedly asked students to read stories by and about people who looked like her and who were already well-represented in American society. Conversely, the school's curriculum included few or no stories by or about people of other races, genders, and backgrounds. When Jessie moved on to a predominantly White, high-socioeconomic-status high school, she saw and heard the ramifications of this exclusion. Students in this school, while often verbally asserting their open-mindedness, seemed to be ignorant of their repeated microaggressions and statements of implicit bias, sometimes arguing that privilege does not exist. Jessie's new students did not seem to realize that their generalizations were broad or inaccurate in myriad cases, and many of them were open to reviewing their perspectives when presented with evidence otherwise. Having been a White student exposed only to the stories of people like herself before working in her previous district, Jessie wondered if books could have effects similar to that of direct intergroup contact.

As an international-school teacher, Tom had encountered the same mismatches between the classroom community and the assigned curriculum, but with stark contrasts in race and nationality. After teaching a traditional American literature curriculum (Hawthorne, Hemingway, Salinger, Updike, and the like) in both the United States and then at a private school in Haiti, he began to reflect on the ways in which students approached the texts, whether as purely academic exercises or opportunities for personal connection and growth. The work of Edwidge Danticat and other Haitian authors became an emerging interest, particularly as contrasted with non-Haitians' writing about the country and its people. He also saw the opportunities for engaging students with issues of race, gender, socio-economic class, and language, even when reading seemingly in-group texts such as Jean-Robert Cadet's *Restavec*. In his current work, Tom encourages teacher education students at Lehigh University to view the curriculum as a vehicle for counter-socialization, along with other, more traditional academic aims. Jessie's research plan, framing students' literature reading as simulated intergroup contact, presented an opportunity to empirically examine this assertion.

Context and Participants

During this study, Jessie was employed in the predominantly White high school in which the study took place. As a teacher of twelfth-grade English (British literature), she regularly taught texts from the White-normative canon, as she had for the preceding ten years of her employment. The students to whom she taught these texts, however, now came from a racially and socioeconomically homogeneous population in southeastern Pennsylvania. The students in this school district were 82.9% White, 11.3% Asian, 5.8% any other race (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The 2018 median household income was $92,107 (Point2, 2020) compared to $60,905 for Pennsylvania as a whole (Department of Numbers, 2020), making the district well above average socioeconomically.

Table 1

Self-reported Reading Completion Consenting White Students

Group	n	Read All	Read More than Half	Read Half or Less	Read Online Sources Only	Did Not Read
Control	55	28	8	3	12	4
Treatment	54	27	14	4	8	1
Total	109	55	22	7	20	5

In total, approximately 200 high school seniors across ten classes (three teachers) were invited to participate, and 77 participants completed all parts of the study. While all students in the classes were assigned the readings and discussions, only the results of the White students who self-reported completing at least half of their assigned texts were considered in order to ascertain the effect of the literature on those who were accustomed to seeing their own race in the curriculum. Some groups were entirely racially homogeneous, and some groups contained non-White and White members; the researchers explored these possible confounds in their analyses of the data, reviewing the qualitative outcome of the difference by comparing and contrasting the racially homogeneous groups' responses with the racially heterogeneous groups' responses. Attrition also occurred due to lack of consent for analysis; students and parents received assent and consent forms that outlined the nature of the study, and some declined to have their data analyzed (See Table 1 for Self-Reported Reading Completion). The participants all demonstrated proficient or advanced reading and analysis skills according to the Keystone state assessment. They were members of ten Honors- or Academic-level classes with teachers who ranged in age from 37 to 66-years-old, with teaching experiences ranging from 14 years to 44 years. There was no difference across teachers in terms of student consent percentages, but there were dissimilarities in

terms of reading and survey completion, as is endemic to this type of research. As the students were all enrolled in an authentic setting in field research, they formed a convenience sample from which they were randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. Selected from ten classes across three teachers, these students were less likely to demonstrate effects from any potential influence of one teacher or set of classmates; likewise, the fact that the readings and discussions happened independent of teacher intervention decreased teacher impact on the intervention, as well.

Design and Data Collection

Prior to the study, the students were randomly assigned to either control (White-normative canon) or treatment (interracial literary fiction) groups. Within those larger groups, the students self-selected smaller groups with whom they chose independent reading books from assigned lists. All of the texts

were drawn from the school-board's approved list of independent reading choices, purposefully maintaining comparability between the option lists for each group. All of the texts have won renown through literary prizes or critical reviews; all enjoy success in popular reviews, as well. Within each group there were choices that were newer or older and shorter or longer. Groups selected their texts after examining physical copies of all of the books from their assigned lists. The students who were assigned to read interracial literary fiction selected *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, or *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Each of these books has both a non-White author and protagonist, and each book was selected by at least one group, though *The Color Purple* was by far the most popular selection with seventeen students electing it. The students who were assigned to read the White-normative canon selected *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, *Dune* by Frank Herbert, *Grendel* by John Gardner, *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White, or *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. Each of these texts is both by and about While males. No groups elected to read *The Once and Future King*, but at least one group chose each of the other texts, with *The Road* being the most popular selection with seventeen students picking it.

Once students had selected their groups and texts, they had three weeks to read their literature and discuss it in an online discussion forum, where only the students' self-selected groups were able to see their posts and responses. Students were to write one reader-response post of at least ten sentences before

Table 2

Categories and Subcategories in Qualitative Discussion Posts and Responses

Categories
1. Academic Education
2. Emotional Reaction
1. Positive Reaction
2. Negative Reaction
3. Novelty
3. Understanding
1. Individual Connection and Understanding
2. Cultural Awareness and Generalization
4. Contextualization
1. Distancing Contextualization
2. Empathizing Contextualization
5. Group-member Interaction

Note. This table details the categories derived from the qualitative data, broken by subcategories

selecting two other group members' posts to respond (also in at least ten sentences). The reader-response prompt, "Make an analytical/evaluative discussion post about your reading," was broadly constructed intentionally in order to allow the students and the texts themselves to drive the discussions, lessening teacher intervention. Students were unable to see their group members' posts until they posted their own responses.

Methods of Data Analysis

Examining both the discussion posts and responses, we conducted a document analysis to explore the students' critical reflections (Bowen, 2009) in order to discover themes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). We examined the length and content of posts and responses, quantitizing data and always striving for objectivity (Bowen, 2009, Creamer, 2010), constantly engaging in reflexivity (Pillow, 2003). Through the Constant Comparative technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we used open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016) and line-by-line analysis (Charmaz, 2008) to scrutinize how each post and response compared and contrasted with the others to determine inductively patterns and themes. Next, we conducted axial coding (Boeije, 2010), removing redundancies, identifying prominent concepts, and sorting codes into categories in an effort to produce synthesis (Saldaña, 2016). Going through the data through this lens, this sorting again included constant comparisons with previous incidents across groups within the category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and reflexive considerations (Pillow, 2003). Like the codes, some categories emerged from the literature review, and some emerged from the discussion posts themselves. Throughout this process, we constantly reflected on our own biases and strove to uphold objectivity. We peer-debriefed posts with colleagues and advisors of multiple races and looked for data that supported alternate explanations, including conducting discrepant case analyses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Pillow, 2003).

Deductively, we had initially expected categories and codes for individual posts to include mention of internal/external attribution or transportation, as well as those categories designated by the Scales of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang et al., 2003); these concepts all arose from the literature review in the larger mixed-methods study. In some cases, these codes and categories worked, and in others, they did not. Thus, we discarded those codes and categories that did not appear prominently in the data and inductively created new codes and categories through open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Some units required simultaneous coding (coding the same unit in two categories; Saldaña, 2016) because "social interaction does not occur in neat, isolated units" (Glesne, 2011, p. 192), primarily those units in which students were engaged in group-member interactions about other categories. At this point, we settled on the categories and subcategories in Table 2.

After determining the categories, we sorted the units that met the conditions of each category and analyzed the frequency, word count, and contents of each, leading to overarching themes. As Daley & Onwuegbuzie (2010) did, we dichotomized the themes and codes, scoring them as "1" if present and "0" if not present. Through these analyses, we were able to better understand how students experienced and reacted to the intergroup literature, and why they responded the way that they did. Additionally, we examined group interactions in order to consider the impact of group effect (Brauer et al., 2001), paying particular attention to the impact of an intergroup member on students' responses to one another's posts. Through an investigation of group effect, we were able to determine an impact of perceived social norms on the manners in which students experience

intergroup literature, including how some voices influence others.

Findings

After completing the document analyses, we determined four major findings: students still discussed topics traditionally covered in academic standards, made more positive comments about interracial literature than about White-normative literature, were able to make connections with characters regardless of race, and were more likely to discuss issues of discrimination—albeit with distancing contextualization—when reading interracial literary fiction.

Finding One: Academic Education

In both the intervention and the control group, all of the students discussed the literary elements: plot, setting, theme, characterization, conflict, point of view, symbolism, and archetypes. Students in both the control and treatment groups tended to default to these standards when responding to literature. Indeed, of the 77 students whose qualitative data we analyzed, all but one made at least passing reference to those narrative elements, with comments like "Jaja and Papa are interesting foils: Papa sends all his grace outward to strangers while Jaja focuses all of his strength on Mama and Kambili," "I don't think that there needed to be a greater focus on the setting. It could have distracted readers from all of the interactions between the characters and I think that the setting was also shown enough through the characters," and "The boy symbolizes the hope for humanity." *Academic Education* by far represented the most common topic of discussion: of the 63,369 words written on the discussion boards, 32,966 (52%) of them were about academic topics. There was a discrepancy between the control and treatment groups, however. Where Academic Education accounted for only 46% of treatment-group word counts, it comprised 58% of control-group word counts. The levels of analyses were similar between the two groups; both contained posts that consisted primarily of summary as well as posts that exhibited eloquent and profound analyses. For example, the treatment group posts contained contributions that were lower-level, "Incestuous and unfaithful relationships, such as that of Rebecca and José Arcadio, or Aureliano Segundo, Petra Cotes, and Fernanda del Carpio were frowned upon but not prevented" and higher-level,

> The vast character arc that Kambili travels is well done….for example, her laughter, and, really, her voice, is connected to her independence, and she only starts to speak and clear the "bubbles from her throat" when she is free to bloom like a Hibiscus.

Likewise, the control group also presented lower-level summaries:

> Dune takes place on an alien planet, with some characters being aliens. However, the characters have real things like a bible, But for some reason, the Bible is super tiny, and you can't read it without an e-reader type device, so I don't get the point of it. Think 'Honey I shrunk the kids' but now it's "Honey I shrunk the word of God'. Why not just have either a normal sized bible or a digital one.

The control group demonstrated higher-level analyses as well:

> At first I thought the "okay"s were to just show the lack of education or something along those lines, but then I thought more. Okay is not like a yes that has a sense of thought and confirmation; okay is more a kind of unknowing acceptance. I think that okay is supposed to show the blind acceptance of things in their journey and the

> trust that the boy and the man have in each other.

In lower-level posts, students tend to summarize events from the plot without adding any of their own insights or opinions, while in the higher-level posts, students dug deeper to add their own reader-response perspectives, breaking the text apart and analyzing individual components to solve the puzzle that is literature. Generally, students in both groups did what the common core English standards ask them to do: they analyzed the text in terms of literary elements and traditional scholarship.

Finding Two: Positive Comments about Interracial Literature

Where student responses did diverge sharply between the control and the treatment groups was in terms of positive and negative reactions. Among students who read White-normative literature, 61% made positive comments about their books and 67% made negative comments. (Some made both positive and negative comments.) Among readers of interracial literature, 83% expressed their positive reactions and only 20% made any negative comments. Among these readers, their described reactions were often effusive:

- "Wow. Simply, wow. Celie and her journal entries to God have officially found a spot on the list of one of the most important books I've ever read."
- "*The Color Purple* was an incredibly important book in my life."
- "I am not hesitant to say that this is one of the most astounding novels I have ever read."
- "I loved this book."
- "After reading *Kite Runner* I found this book to be one of the best I have ever read for school."

> Treatment-group students considered the books "important" (9 of the 41 treatment-group students used this exact word to describe their books, "eye-opening, hispanics [*sic*] and people with different skin color in 2019. I will say it again, I thought this book is incredibly important and still incredibly relevant in the issues we face today.

The student's capitalization error may result from a lack of instruction on this topic and points to the ongoing debate regarding it amongst scholars and journalists alike (Eligon, 2020). Twelve of the students who discussed these issues also commented on the worth of the texts themselves, explaining that books like these "demonstrate the power of literature and how it can truly open our eyes to a whole new world." In fact, 90% of the students who read interracial literary fiction broached topics of cultural appreciation or racial prejudice, expressing the necessity of discussing these books and learning about the topics contained therein. Forty-six percent of the students who read interracial literary fiction specifically commented on how the books helped them to feel "informed on other cultures more than usual" and suggested that they "could be a good way to let people realize all of the injustices that people face."

Students who read White-normative canon did not generally discuss issues of prejudice or culture. In the discrepant-case analysis, we found that the only five students who read White-normative canon and made comments of this kind did so in reference to the eponymous characters in *Grendel* and *Dracula.* Both of these characters represent races and species that are never actually identified, but both are excluded physically and socially from the rest of their societies. Students responded by saying that "A couple major lessons through this book are to not judge someone for their appearance and there is always two sides to every story." The few comments about prejudice and

culture in the White-normative canon group referred, without exception, to harmful bias directed at a character with physical differences who was excluded from the dominant class in his society.

The students who read the White-normative literature were not the only ones less likely to comment on cultural or racial issues; interestingly, White students who read the interracial literary fiction in subgroups that contained non-White classmates were also less likely to broach these topics. In these cases, group effect or intergroup anxiety may have had an impact—while 90% of the students who read interracial literary fiction did eventually discuss issues of race and culture, only 29% of those in heterogeneous groups did so before another group member raised the topic. Two of those who did buttressed their comments with reflections on their own ignorance: "However, I do acknowledge that I am judging all these events through my own perspective, from a different culture centuries later" and "which most people at [our school] don't get, because we are mostly white kids who have lived here our whole lives." Conversely, 81% of those students who discussed their interracial literary fiction with homogeneous, entirely White groups introduced the idea in their initial posts. The students in the homogeneous groups may not have demonstrated the increased prejudice Vorauer and Sasaki (2009) found in expecting interactions with interracial group members, but they may have still felt anxiety about discussing this topic with outgroup classmates (Crisp & Turner, 2009).

"Rather than recognizing that many of the same issues experienced by the characters on the page still exist in modern American society, students commented on how fortunate they were to live in a society where those issues do not occur, engaging in distancing contextualization that removed themselves from the societies represented."

Finding Four: Patterns of Contextualizing Interracial Literature

Though students who read interracial literature were more likely to generalize the discriminatory issues in their texts, commenting on their universal applications, they were also more likely to distance themselves from the texts through contextualization. Students who read interracial literature were about five times as likely (21 of 41 treatment-group students employed distancing contextualization as compared to 4 of 36 control-group students) to discuss their beliefs that the plot events occurred because of the setting in which they took place, making comments such as,

> When I first began to think about what I had just read, my initial feeling was an overall sense of luck and appreciation for the country I live in and grew up in. It was stunning to observe all of the events these children faced throughout their lives in Afghanistan.

Students described these reflections despite the fact that the settings in the White-normative literature were just as or more diverse than those in the interracial (Control: another planet in the future, an unstated country after an apocalyptic event, 19th century Romania; Treatment: 19th and 20th century Nigeria, 20th century Afghanistan, 20th century United States, an unidentified time in an imaginary country based on Colombia). Additionally, those students who discussed the setting in a contextualizing fashion for the interracial literature were more likely to do so to in a manner that dissociated themselves from the issues, as opposed to those students who

discussed the setting in a contextualizing manner in the White-normative literature, who were more likely to do so in a neutral or empathizing way: "The boy has only ever known the apocalypse, and for most of his life he has only known his Papa's apathetic view of other humans. I wonder who the boy would be . . . after having been nurtured on such misery."

Though they described being able to empathize with and connect to the characters in the interracial literature, students did not comment on the idea that the problems the characters faced might surmount the times and places in which the characters lived. Indeed, while students never questioned whether Grendel's struggles derived from norms in sixth-century Scandinavia, they frequently ascribed the slurs Hassan faced in Afghanistan or the restrictions Celie bucked in the American South to be products of their time and place: "Not only African-American women, but all women during this time were extremely mistreated and the book displays that women all over were not allowed an education or jobs like women are now." In fact, six of those same students who contextualized the settings in the interracial literature also remarked on the auspiciousness of their current settings, declaring ideas such as, "I believe that it is important to recognize how fortunate we are to live where we do and have what we have." Thus, rather than recognizing that many of the same issues experienced by the characters on the page still exist in modern American society, students commented on how fortunate they were to live in a society where those issues do not occur, engaging in distancing contextualization that removed themselves from the societies represented in the interracial texts in a manner in which students did not for the White-normative texts.

Discussion

The White high school students who read interracial literary fiction experienced their texts in some of the same ways as their peers experienced their White-normative canon, but they also went a step further. Where all students discussed those concepts outlined in the Common Core English standards, delving into symbolism, theme, characterization, and the like (and, in too many cases, summary), and students in both groups were able to connect with the characters on the pages, the students in the interracial literary fiction groups also discussed issues of discrimination and prejudice. Students explored these topics independent of direct teacher intervention, which may have in part led to the distancing contextualization that sometimes occurred. Without direction, students may not have seen the connections between the issues characters experienced in the texts and the issues so many people experience in the world today. Were students to read these books in class, teachers might be able to guide students to better see how such problems still exist in modern American society. In these conversations, with or without teacher intervention, students who read interracial literary fiction were able to wrestle with issues of discrimination and prejudice in a manner that may have allowed less anxiety and unease. Moreover, students were able to connect and imagine contact with intergroup characters in the same manner they were able to do so with ingroup characters. This imagined contact may in turn lead to less prejudice and more ethnocultural empathy, as many of these same students demonstrated quantitatively in the broader study from which these qualitative findings were drawn. In places where direct intergroup contact is difficult, the imagined contact of reading interracial literary fiction may allow students to connect with people unlike those physically around them.

Despite recent efforts, the curriculum continues to be a White-normative place; the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (2020) found that 84% of the books used in the curricula it reviewed were by White authors, a Massachusetts review found that 80% of the recommended history readings were by White writers (Washington, 2018), and publisher Lee & Low reports that 87% of children's literature published in the past twenty-four years is by White novelists (Anderson, 2019). This study reiterates the necessity of maintaining inclusion of multicultural literature, and, indeed, calls for more: one text was capable of prompting significant reflection from students; many texts may increase that effect. One author or character may be explained away as exceptional, in the same way some people with implicit biases announce their Black friendships or make peace with the election of Barack Obama (Carter & Dowe, 2015). Many texts, however, might create more three-dimensional, humanized images that derail the problem of Adichie's (2009) single story. Instead of imagining only the two-dimensional impoverished, crime-ridden images the media tend to present of non-White people (Adams & Stevenson, 2012), students who read many stories of all people of color may individualize their reactions to interracial persons, thus seeing them as discrete human beings with wide-ranging histories and personalities (Adichie, 2009). While people often focus on the "mirrors" that representation can effect for non-White students, there is also great value in the "windows" that allow people to see lives of people unlike themselves (Anderson, 2019; Sims-Bishop, 1990). Therefore, literature chosen for inclusion in the English curriculum that better reflects the demographics of the world would be beneficial for all students.

"Every time we select a book to teach in our high school English classes, we choose a voice to share. When that viewpoint consistently represents one class of people, students come to accept that point of view as valuable."

Finally, it cannot be overlooked that students simply seemed to enjoy multicultural literary fiction. Not only did more (more than 10% more) students self-report completing half or more of their assigned interracial readings than the White-normative canon, but they also effusively discussed enjoying the books. If books can grant readers opportunities to experience imagined contact and narrative empathy, it is imperative that students are motivated to actually read them.

There are some limitations to this research. Many of the students who read and discussed the multicultural literature also commented positively on the presentations of women in the texts, but the few times readers of the White-normative canon mentioned gender, it was usually negative. Thus, gender may have played a role in students' responses to the literature. Additionally, the study only explored the responses of White students from a high-achieving, majority-White, socioeconomically affluent school district in southeastern Pennsylvania. These results may be different in other locations, including those with less proficient readers, or greater diversity, particularly considering the research about achievement gaps in online learning. Finally, the study scrutinized students' responses to the introduction of one interracial text to the curriculum; as such, two opposite results may have occurred: a novelty effect may have influenced the reactions, or students may have only tapped the surface of the full possibility of multiple exposures to multicultural literature. Future studies might explore the effect of a true quilting of voices within the English curriculum, and they might include other textual options to disrupt any possible impact of one story

being inherently more engaging than another, independent of the racial identities of the characters.

This study was unique in that it explored the role of interracial literary fiction and students' online discussions independent of direct teacher intervention on White high school students' ethnocultural empathy. In this investigation, the books and the discussions were the vehicles for students' critical reflection. Even without direction, the students who read interracial literary fiction still connected and empathized with people who look, live, and act differently than they do. They were able to imagine contact with people with whom they might not otherwise have interacted, and they discussed topics that might be sensitive in other contexts. The study adds to the literature because it shows that simply reading and discussing interracial literary fiction has strong affective outcomes for White high school students.

This study suggests several implications for future research. First, these findings raise the need for longitudinal research on the impact of interracial literary fiction. Is there a novelty effect, or would reading more stories with more voices lead to greater discussion and more narrative empathy? Would those effects translate into real-world interactions through the imagined intergroup contact? Would the attitudinal changes last or would they decay? Second, there is a need for future research on the role of gender, sexuality, socioeconomics, ableism, or other aspects of diversity in affective responses to texts. Finally, researchers might explore how in-class discussions of the texts might prompt similar or dissimilar responses to the literature. Teacher intervention or the visibility of classmate reactions may impact students' responses, particularly considering the anxiety that may correspond with discussions of discrimination and prejudice.

Conclusion

Every time we select a book to teach in our high school English classes, we choose a voice to share. When that viewpoint consistently represents one class of people, students come to accept that point of view as valuable (Herrnstein Smith, 1988). When that perspective matches the one repeatedly shared through the news, movies, politics, and de facto segregation, children may be limited in their understanding of the world. Interracial literary fiction allows teachers the ability to share other voices and other perspectives in contexts that may otherwise be restrictive. While teachers may require training to better enable them to teach interracial literature independent of the White gaze (Morrison, 1992), this study revealed that students broach critical topics even when reading and discussing the texts without direct teacher intervention. These texts grant students the ability to discuss the elements of academic education, but to go a step further as well. Not only can they connect with the characters on the page, but they may also be able to empathize with people of other races, wrestle with issues of discrimination and prejudice, consider the universality of the challenges the characters face, and enjoy reading. Interracial literary fiction offers teachers and curriculum writers the opportunity to effect real change in the world simply by granting students the chance to step into the pages of a different kind of book.

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