Introduction:

For our curriculum project, we designed a week long unit that is based on reading, discussing, and writing personal memoirs. This comprehensive unit includes reading and analyzing works, participating in both small group, and all class discussions, preparing an oral presentation, and finally writing a short autobiography. We decided to focus on memoirs in hopes of challenging students to think about where they come from, and share their own story with the rest of the class. In doing so, our goal was for each student, and the teacher, to have a deepened understanding of who is in their class. We believe that teacher/student relationships are very important in the learning process. By writing personal memoirs, the student will have the chance to share a person insight into their lives with the teacher and strengthen their relationship.

While observing at our placements, we both found the unique diversity that was evident in the classroom. The students are providing an opportunity to capitalize on their differences by exploring them in depth. Each student has their own cultural capital, which Pierre Bourdieu defines as “the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next”. Through this unit, the students will develop an understanding of their own cultural capital, and hopefully feel confident about where they come from.
Context:

This unit is intended to be implemented at Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy (HMTCA). The goal of our curriculum is to create an engaging environment in which students can learn about themselves, and each other. We have decided to dedicate 5 different class periods to this topic, consecutive throughout one week. Each class period is 60 minutes long. By the completion of this unit, the students will have developed an understanding of community differences and create stronger student/teacher relationships that foster a stronger learning experience. According to the Connecticut State Department of Education of 2012-13, HMTCA has 71 percent of students labeled as minority. Additionally, 27.8 percent of the students speak a language other than English at home, and 53 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. These statistics adequately illustrate the clear diversity that is found within the classroom. The student groups for reading and discussing memoirs, will be chosen ahead of time to make sure the diverse backgrounds are spread out to form diverse conversations throughout each group.

Objectives:

The objectives for the week were deliberately created to ensure that the unit is meaningful and worthwhile for the students. We have used the Connecticut Common Core State Standards, as well as other relevant course readings to help guide and shape these objectives. We have also pulled vision points from the HMTCA website to highlight the importance of the school goals for their students.

1. Students will analyze the elements of a memoir

The purpose of this objective is to ensure that the students are capable of picking out the most important elements to a memoir. This is important because it will help them
when they are then writing their own memoirs. They will read excerpts from three diverse memoirs which will spark ideas about what to write about in their own memoirs.

2. **Students will be able to openly discuss and effectively communicate differences in social, cultural, and economic backgrounds**

   After reading and analyzing the elements of the memoirs they read, the students will present the main themes to the class. This objective is based on the Common Core standard where students must be able to “present claims and findings, in a coherent manner with descriptions, facts, and details; use eye contact, volume, and pronunciation” (SL.7.4). The purpose of this objective is to ensure that each student has gained a proficient understanding of the memoirs read, and so that each student in the class can hear the different themes from the other memoirs.

3. **Students will be able to suggest possible solutions to the problems identified in the memoirs**

   This objective is based on the Common Core standard where students must be able to “engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions” (SL.1). This is also an important part of James Bank's Four Levels of Integration of Multicultural Content. His fourth level, *The Social Action Approach*, says that “students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them”. By suggesting possible solutions to these problems, the students will become activists in their own lives.

4. **Students will be able to write a well rounded and provocative short story**

   This objective is based on the Common Core standard where students must be able to “write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences” (W.3). It is
assumed that a majority of the students have access to computers at home, but they will also have class time to use the available computers in the classroom, provided by the school.

5. Students will be able to relate their own experiences to those they have read about

   This is consistent with one of the vision points for HMTCA, which is to produce graduates who become a “Responsible citizen who shows willingness to work toward improvement of the community”. Jeff Duncan-Andrade, a university professor and high school teacher in Oakland, California, showed that “helping the students make personal connections to the characters enlivened the discussion”. In his article *Teaching Critical Analysis of Racial Oppression*, he provokes the students to engage in discussions of the material covered in class and relate experiences to those in their everyday lives.

Activities:

Day One:

On the first day of our unit, the students will begin class by silently reflecting on where they come from. The purpose of this is twofold. First, we want to introduce the students to the topic for week. Secondly, the students will begin the process of reflecting on where they come from. It is important that they start now, because they will be asked to continue to do so for the duration of the unit. After 15 minutes, the class will come together, and the teacher will assign to the students into smaller groups. The teacher will have previously designed these groups, ensuring that there is a mix of all students in each group. The teacher will vary “the composition of the groups to keep things interesting for students, help acquaint them with more of their classmates, and counter the sense that students are put in groups for particular racial or academic reasons” (Beth Rubin). It is
important to work in groups, as Vygotsky would agree, because "a key factor in social learning is the young person’s ability to learn by imitation. Interacting with adults and peers in cooperative social settings gave the young learners ample opportunities to observe, imitate, and subsequently develop higher mental functions" (“Perspectives of Learning”).

As mentioned earlier, HMTCA has 71.1 percent of students labeled as minority. Specifically, 21.6 percent Black, 42.2 percent Hispanic, and 28.9 percent White. Due to the diverse student body, pre organizing the groups to be as diverse as possible will spark differences between students in conversation. HMTCA also has 27.8 percent of students who come from homes where English is not the primary language, so the groups will make sure that those who are not as comfortable with the English language are with students who are. At this time, each group will read a different excerpt from the memoirs that the teacher has chosen. There are three groups of students and three memoirs. After each student has finished reading, they will remain in their small groups to discuss what they have read. To finish class, the students will be asked to personally reflect in their journal. We want the students to acknowledge how the memoir made them feel.

**Day Two:**

On the second day, each of the three groups will present the main points found in their memoir. The students in each group will share the most important themes they found with the class, so that each group is familiar with each story. This is similar to the idea of Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD). In STAD, the learning teams are “mixed in performance, level, gender, and ethnicity. The teacher presents a lesson, and then students work within their teams to make sure all team members have mastered the lesson” (Robert
Slaum). We have modified STAD in that the students will not be quizzed; however, we are emphasizing that they need to work together to make sure that each student in the group fully understands the concepts in the memoir that they were assigned. The students are encouraged to share their personal reflections to the memoirs, which they recorded at the end of the last class. After each group has presented, the teacher will open up discussion to link the common themes in each story, discussing possible similarities and differences. It is important that the teacher is a facilitator of the conversation and can help guide the students, but the main focus is for the students to be able to open on on their own.

**Day Three:**

This class will begin with an icebreaking exercise to provoke ideas from the students for their own memoirs. The exercise has two parts. The first part is to help students determine how privilege can affect a person’s life. The students are given a list of 20 terms with a number of points next to each one. If the student can answer yes to the term, he or she will add or subtract the amount of points instructed. Examples from this activity are, *If you are a white male: +3,* and *If you grew up in an urban setting: -1.* The students will record the points on a piece of paper, and total them up at the end. A higher score shows more privilege. The second activity is the same procedure, except the aim is to help determine how diversity can affect a person’s life. So that the less privileged students are not discouraged from the first exercise, in the second one the students with a more diverse and unique background will earn more points. Examples from this activity are, *If you speak a second language: +3,* and *If your family is from the U.S.: -1.* The goal of this activity is to spark ideas from the students for their own memoirs. Directly following the activity, the students will spend class time brainstorming and working on the outline for
their memoir. By the end of class, the students are expected to have a detailed outline for their memoir. Their homework for the night will be to turn the outline into a first draft.

**Day Four:**

The students will come to class on this day with a short first draft of their memoir. With their drafts, the students will spend the first half of class peer editing. With the peer editing rubric, students will partner up and read each other's memoirs and offer comments for revision. During the second half of class, students will use the classroom laptops provided by the school to make the revisions to their memoirs. During which the teacher will be going around the room having short meetings with each student. This class day is dedicated to allowing students time to work on their memoirs, with the goal of having them finish for homework.

**Day Five:**

The last day of the unit will focus on having students relate their own memoirs to themes in the excerpts they read on the first day. The students will begin class by sharing their memoirs. The students will relate common themes in their own lives to those in the original stories and be able to discuss possible solutions. The day will wrap up with discussions about themselves, their peers, and their community based off of themes that the students choose to write about. By the last day of this unit we hope to have successful incorporated approaches to multicultural curriculum reform. It can be detrimental to a student’s educational experience to only be taught a “curriculum that focuses on the experiences of mainstream Americans and largely ignores the experiences, cultures, and histories of other ethnic, racial, cultural, language, and religious groups”. This can have “negative consequences for both mainstream students and students of color” (James
Banks). That is why we hope to see *The Transformation Approach* in full effect by day five. This means that “the structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups” (James Banks). By having the students relate their own memoirs, to the other students, and the ones from the first day, they will be able see these stories and events from a new perspective.

**Evaluation:**

Throughout the week, students will be evaluated on both in-class and out-of-class work. To ensure that the students are given a fair chance to demonstrate their understanding and mastery of the unit, we have provided multiple different opportunities to be graded. First, the students will be graded on their participation during in class discussions. We have provided a rubric, that the students will be given as well, that fully details what is expected. Next, the students will be graded on their peer editing worksheet and in-class notes worksheet. Then, the students will be graded on their public speaking presentation. Lastly, the student’s will be graded on their personal memoirs, the final product of the week. The teacher will inform the students at the beginning of the week so that they are fully aware of the week’s expectations.

**Appendix:**

In the appendix, we have provided four different sheets. First, we have the writing prompt that we created to give the students for their final memoir piece. Next, we have the peer editing worksheet that the students will be given in class. Then, we have the in class worksheet. We created this to keep the students accountable and focused during their classmates’ presentations. Lastly, we included the participation rubric.
Resources:

- HMTCA provided computers
- Ice Breaking Game: www.tolerance.org
- Glory Road, by Don Haskins
- In My Hands, by Irene Gut Opdyke
- The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind, by William Kamkwamba

Works Cited:

“Piagetian Structures and Psychological Constructivism” Perspectives in Learning


Banks, James. “Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform”. Multicultural Education. 2004

Duncan-Andrade, Jeff. “Teaching Critical Analysis of Racial Oppression”

Rubin, Beth. “Grouping in Detracked Classrooms”