

Multicultural Literature:

Enhancing Students' Understanding of Themselves, Their Communities, and the World

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## **ABSTRACT**

Multicultural literature is a resource that teachers can use to enhance students' understanding of themselves, their communities, and the larger society. In this paper, the authors use research and their personal experiences to discuss ways that teachers can fully implement multicultural literature in the curriculum to teach social awareness and critical thinking skills.

## INTRODUCTION

At the Center of Excellence's Spring 2008 workshop, we gave a presentation to teachers about ways teachers of all subject areas can implement multicultural literature in the classroom. As educators, we shared our experiences with the teachers and were delighted to learn, as the teachers shared their experiences with us, that they were highly interested and committed to multicultural education. Two Spanish teachers expressed a need for students to value different cultures. An early childhood teacher described ways she promotes cultural awareness by including cultural artifacts through learning centers. In spite of their enthusiasm about the opportunities multicultural education can bring to the curriculum, the teachers had concerns about how parents, students, and their instructional leaders might receive it, particularly considering the demands of state standards, testing, and stringent pacing guides. As we advocated the use of multicultural literature as a means to spark student curiosity about the world beyond what they know, the major question on these teachers' minds was, "How do we incorporate multicultural literature in a curriculum that requires text sets or basal reading series?"

## PURPOSE

Our purpose in this article is to answer the above question through a discussion of the practices and findings of classroom teachers and researchers who have worked to infuse multicultural literature into the curriculum. Multicultural literature has been defined to include books and stories that reflect the vast diversity that is evident in our society and the world (Sims-Bishop, 1997). Although multicultural literature can be used to enhance the curriculum of other subjects, we have chosen to focus our discussion on the language arts curriculum because of the natural instructional fit. As James Banks's (1994) transformational approach in multicultural education emphasizes learning from the perspectives and experiences of others, literature offers

opportunities for learning life lessons from the voices and experiences of ordinary people—people very much like the students themselves. Students can explore different places and be introduced to many people by simply reading or hearing a story. McCarty and Dick (2003) suggest that such multicultural experiences are important for minority students as they “affirm” the students’ heritage and culture. They believe that “multiculturalism...is a reenvisioning of curriculum to embrace the lives and stories of children and families” (p. 105). Through our investigation of instructional practices using multicultural literature, we learned that:

1. teachers must believe in the value of multicultural literature and strive to fully integrate it into the curriculum.
2. teachers can use multicultural literature to teach students to think critically about the world, their beliefs, and the society in which they live.
3. students should participate in a variety of activities that promote critical thinking and stimulate discussion and interest in the themes and issues involved in the readings. Students should also read a variety of fiction and nonfiction literature.
4. instructional technology can be used to enhance students’ experiences with multicultural literature.
5. teachers should carefully prepare when integrating multicultural literature and be aware of issues that may arise from the integration of multicultural literature.

## **IMPLEMENTING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE**

### ***Commitment***

Successful integration of multicultural literature starts with the classroom teacher. The teacher must believe in the value of the literature. Ladson-Billings (1994) says teachers need to have “an interest and a desire” to teach minority students and make cultural studies a part of their

learning environment (p. 131). The teachers and researchers we studied expressed in one way or another the belief that multicultural literature could provide valuable learning experiences for students. For example, after unsuccessful attempts to engage students in reading activities that required personal reflection, social awareness, and critical thinking with “well-known” children’s books, Ballentine and Hill (2000) “turned to multicultural children’s literature, believing that, through such stories, truths like racism, depression, and abuse as well as acceptance, elation, and caring could become topics for our children’s meaningful discussions” (p. 11). Their instructional goals and their commitment to addressing their students’ lack of interest in reading led the two first-year teachers to develop a unit including multicultural novels that captured their students’ attention and aided in their development of higher order thinking skills.

Similarly, Robinson (2001) expresses similar aspirations when describing her Pennsylvania school district’s level of commitment in developing an entire course designed for the study of culture through multicultural literature. Although the school district served primarily white students, district leaders believed that multicultural literature would give students “a complete understanding of American literature and history, as well as of world literature and history” (p. 69), and Robinson reports that with local support and continued evaluation and change the school district has maintained a successful program for several years.

In addition to seeing the value of multicultural literature, educators must also have a goal and purpose for using the literature in the classroom. Sims-Bishop (1997) says, “How one defines the concept determines, in part, what kind of books one chooses and how one uses those books in a classroom setting” (p. 1). In their article, Ballentine and Hill (2000) state that because they hoped to teach students about racism and other social issues, they selected books that

addressed those important issues. Starting with a specific goal, teachers can determine the needs of their students and develop specific strategies for meeting their objective.

### ***Integration***

Since multicultural literature can be integrated into the language arts curriculum, it should be treated as an integral part of classroom activity—the goal should be to make multicultural literature a regular part of classroom instruction. Moore-Hart, Diamond, and Knapp (2003) explains that students do not fully benefit from multicultural literature if it is not treated as an essential part of the curriculum because students are not encouraged to reflect on the important issues presented in multicultural works. A curriculum that maximizes the use of multicultural literature promotes reading fiction and nonfiction on a regular basis and relates individual readings to a larger unit of study. Burroughs (1999) observed three high school teachers over the course of two years and found that the teachers who effectively used multicultural literature were those who created “conversation” relating the literature to themes and historical contexts so that the literature became necessary for understanding the development of individual nations and the world as a whole. The students in one American literature class began to view the multicultural literature written by American authors not as extra reading but as American literature. One student said, “It is very riveting to see how literature changes with society...” (p. 148).

Norton (1990) developed a five-phase program that makes multicultural literature a central figure in the language arts classroom. Like the teacher involved in the Burroughs study, Norton’s program requires that multicultural literature be used to establish connections between literature, culture, and history. The program is designed so that no single work is taught in

isolation. Each is linked to show the larger picture of how literature reflects people and their cultures and society.

Norton's (1990) Phase I involves the study of the oral traditions (fables, myths, and legends) from several regions. Students learn the qualities that make each region's literature unique while studying the "commonalities." In Phase II, the students are involved in an in-depth study of the oral traditions of one particular region, and they compare their new knowledge to the readings discussed in Phase I. Then in Phase III, the students broaden their study to include non-fiction literature such as biographies, autobiographies, and historical nonfiction. The objective here is for students to examine the relationship between the people's lives and cultural beliefs and their writings. Historical fiction is at the center of Phase IV. In this phase, students investigate historical periods and determine if the literature accurately depicts historical events. Finally, Phase V involves the study of modern fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Norton has designed this phase to encourage students to "analyze themes and look for threads across the literature" (p. 31). Phase V is a culmination of all learning because students use their prior knowledge to relate tradition to themes in current literature.

### ***Students as Active Learners***

As teachers begin to incorporate multicultural literature, they should develop classroom activities and projects that encourage students to be active learners. The teachers involved in the articles reviewed went beyond traditional instructional methods such as lecture and worksheets. The students in these classes were researchers and explorers and were provided multiple ways of demonstrating what they had learned in their classes. Their learning experiences also required that they use higher order thinking skills. Moore-Hart, Diamond, and Knapp (2003) recommend that students have opportunities to "acquire a knowledge base from which to look at culture

through genuine learning experiences” (p. 225). These learning experiences can include conducting interviews, visiting museums, and creating stories of people’s cultures. For example, in the Bean, Valerio, Senior, and White (1999) study, students read the novel *Heartbeat, Drumbeat* by Irene Beltran Hernandez. After reading the novel, students completed a research project investigating the question, “Is Irene Beltran Hernandez’s portrayal of Navajo ceremonies in the novel *Heartbeat, Drumbeat* accurate?” In conducting their research, students not only utilized traditional library resources, but also spent time studying materials located in the local Native American Center.

Similarly, Boyd’s (2003) students participated in a variety of activities. The students in this study created PowerPoint presentations illustrating maps and important symbols of the country represented in their novel. Their PowerPoint presentations provided details of the people and their culture, summaries of the story, and the students’ critiques of the novel. The students also produced a “body biography” of the story’s main character. For this assignment, students used their artistic abilities to create a drawing of the main character outlined with important quotes, symbols, and other representations of the character’s experiences and beliefs. The assignments used by this teacher were creative ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of key concepts.

McCarty and Dick (2003) worked with teachers in a Navajo community school to establish a bilingual and bicultural curriculum. This school’s curriculum focuses on teaching “reading and writing as integrated processes rather than products resulting from the application of decontextualized skills” (p. 110). To create reading materials that embody the culture of the local community, teachers at the school wrote books for class readings. The school also offers “authentic learning experiences” for students by inviting parents and other community members



to participate in classroom activities that often required students to research and study literature, art, math, and science within their community's culture and history. McCarty and Dick say that these learning experiences "create new opportunities for the development of Indigenous literacies and reaffirm the value of Navajo language and culture in their lives" (p. 114).

### ***Social Awareness***

Several teachers described in the articles used multicultural literature to aid in students' development of social consciousness. In other words, teachers and students gain a better understanding of people and social organizations by studying literature using "cultural criticism" (Ketter & Lewis, 2001). Ketter and Lewis (2001) explain that students read stories addressing issues like racism, discrimination, and social injustice that were written from the perspective of individuals who have experienced them. This literature exposes the institutions that play a role in the development and maintenance of such social problems, which can "challenge a reader's perception of self and other" (p. 176).

Lehr and Thompson (2000) suggest that through multicultural literature students "were able to confront their confusion, their own prejudices, their lack of understanding, and their questions about racial problems in the United States" (p. 482). They conducted a study of fifth grade students from both rural and urban populations. Students in these classes read the novels *Maniac McGee* by Jerry Spinelli and *The Friendship* by Mildred Taylor and participated in activities that included "silent reading, paired reading, spontaneous drama, journal writing, creating Venn diagrams, 'hot seating,' small-group discussions, large-group discussions, and art" (p. 482). Lehr and Thompson discovered that students applied many higher-order thinking strategies, moving from basic comprehension to making inferences and "abstract reasoning" and "synthesizing" in an attempt to understand the complex issues involved in the novels.

Ballentine and Hill (2000) and Boyd (2003) state similar experiences when using multicultural literature to address social issues. Ballentine and Hill created a unit for their second, third, and fourth grade students. The authors hoped that their students would “connect to literature and think critically about serious issues” (p. 13). Hill’s students read the novel, *Forged by Fire* by Sharon Draper, and Ballentine’s students read *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis. The teachers led their students in “read-aloud time” with much discussion and classroom “talk.” Students also responded to the readings through drama and art presentations. Students’ remarks showed that they could make connections between the characters’ experiences and real-world situations. One student said, “...it will tell you how to help a kid if he or she is being treated badly so you know what to do” (p. 19). Boyd (2003) and a ninth-grade English teacher designed a multicultural literature unit, which used novels dealing with similar issues. The teacher did not use one text in this unit but allowed students to choose the novels they wanted to read. Students were then placed in groups with other students that selected the same novel. Like Ballentine and Hill’s students, the students involved in Boyd’s study were active in classroom discussion, but they also participated in extensive journal writing. Boyd (2003) noted that after reading the novel, *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*, one student became angry when learning about the abuse of women in other countries and wrote that she desired to find ways to combat the problem.

### ***Using Technology***

Technological resources are able to enhance student learning in many ways. Allowing students to use various computer programs and telecommunication devices generally appeals to various age groups and different learning styles. Technology can then serve as a great tool for students to study and experience cultural diversity and promote critical thinking skills. Johnson

(2005) suggests that “WebQuests,” an inquiry-oriented technology activity developed by Bernie Dodge in 1995, is a practical approach that can be used to introduce students to multiculturalism. Using a WebQuest can be an effective method of integrating technology in studying various cultures. Students are engaged in using Internet resources to collect information and then use those resources to make informed decisions. This activity is designed to help students to develop their higher order thinking skills. Additionally, Dutton and Dutton (1990) suggest that using speech synthesizers and voice entry systems for student projects at all grade levels can help students reduce negative stereotyping when interacting with individuals who speak different languages or dialects. Using speech synthesizers and voice-entry systems can help students understand how a person’s cultural or geographic background influences his or her language.

Clemons (2006) discusses using computer aided design (CAD) to increase students’ sensitivity to multicultural issues and acceptance of others. Using the AutoCAD software, students manipulated cultural and symbolic images to design a multicultural area rug by researching four generations of their family histories and documenting cultural and symbolic influences within their family backgrounds. Capturing colors, visual images, symbols, arts and artifacts of personal and historical cultures, helped students develop their awareness of differences in cultural roots and views held by their peers. This process enhanced their appreciation for self and peers and also raised their awareness of social issues.

Additionally, Guenther, Kirk, Loguidice, and Nkemnji (2002) discuss a collaborative project, established between the University of Wisconsin-Platteville School of Education and two Milwaukee middle schools, which encouraged students to think about and broaden their cultural boundaries. This project emphasized multicultural literacy and the use of technology to help future teachers unlearn some of the prejudices and stereotypes that they brought to

classrooms. Most of the college students involved in this project were first generation college students and many of them did not know people of differing ethnicities or socioeconomic status. The goals of this project were to encourage these students to broaden their cultural boundaries and incorporate technology tools like PIC-TEL (picture telephone equipment, a video-conferencing system), Tech Pals, Virtual Classrooms, and chat rooms. The use of these tools made it possible for the students to observe urban classrooms, reflect on their experiences, and interact with peers through the chat rooms established through [www.nicenet.org](http://www.nicenet.org).

### ***Teacher Preparation***

Although there are numerous benefits to including multicultural literature in the language arts classroom, Sims-Bishop (1997) advises teachers to be aware of potential conflicts that could arise and encourages teachers to make wise decisions to avoid being placed in difficult situations. Preparation is very important when introducing any new material. Teachers must make sure that they have sufficient background knowledge to supplement the selected multicultural texts used in the classroom. Therefore, teachers must invest time in training, planning, and preparing lessons to ensure that they have knowledge of the cultures and perspectives to be studied in the literature. Lehr and Thompson (2000) suggest that the teacher can serve as a “cultural mediator” in the classroom. In this role, the teacher provides necessary background and historical information that may not be included in the reading. Lehr and Thompson argue that this is a “crucial” role for teachers. They argue, “If children are left to their own devices when reading and discussing multicultural books, there is the potential for a pooling of misinformation” (p. 484). To avoid this problem, Moore-Hart, Diamond, and Knapp (2003) held staff development sessions so that teachers would be properly trained in implementing the multicultural program. Teachers attended five workshops where they were able to ask questions

and receive lesson ideas and materials to use in the classroom. The researchers also “modeled” lessons for teachers, and during the course of the study, provided assistance to teachers whenever needed.

When using multicultural literature, it also is important that teachers select quality reading materials that students find interesting (Hansen-Krening & Mizokawa, 1997). Sims-Bishop (1997) advises teachers to be cautious in selecting reading materials. The books students read in class should provide accurate portrayals of people and their cultures. Any misrepresentation or misinformation can leave students with stereotypes or generalizations, which defeat the purpose of using multicultural literature. Teachers need to be aware not only of the content of the story but also the illustrations provided by the artists. If teachers are not careful when selecting class texts, they may encounter opposition from parents and community leaders. Hansen-Krening and Mizokawa (1997) assert that such conflicts can be avoided if teachers select works written by writers “considered to be an authority on the focal ethnic group” (p. 184). They also suggest that teachers find texts that are favored by members of the studied culture or ethnic group.

Multicultural texts should also provide students with valuable information about the culture of the characters portrayed in the story. Many stories contain characters who are minorities, but there are no depictions of characters engaged in cultural practices. In evaluating a story about African-American characters with no reference to culture or customs, Sims-Bishop (1997) asks, “What then, was the point of making the characters black?” (p. 8). The use of minority characters does not alone make a story multicultural. Individuals who read the story should leave the experience with some knowledge of the people and their values and beliefs.

In addition to opposition from parents and others in the community, teachers may find that their students are not open to the perspectives and views expressed by people of different cultures and religions. Beach (1997) suggests that students may express “resistance” to these new voices for several reasons, including pre-existing stereotypes and feelings of racial superiority. Teachers can influence student’s attitudes by selecting stories whose themes can relate to many different people. Hansen-Krening and Mizokawa (1997) say, “To understand and to connect with any story there must be something that we as readers recognize and that makes us care. A human theme, even with cultural variations, draws diverse peoples together in common understanding” (p. 185). Beach (1997) also says that role-play activities and careful, thought-provoking discussions can affect students’ perceptions and encourage them to view issues from the perspectives of other people.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Through our research, we have learned many ideas and strategies for making multicultural literature work in the curriculum. Although multicultural literature may require change and extra planning and training, the rewards are worth every single effort made on the part of educators. Many minority children and children of poverty need to have these experiences. They need to hear from people they can relate to. Other children need to learn about cultures and diversity so that they have a better understanding of the people they will encounter when they leave their communities of people who look and think just like they do. It is our hope that educators provide students with educational experiences that foster the appreciation and understanding of all people. We believe we can accomplish this goal by teaching students the stories of others so that they can begin to welcome difference as a way of learning, growing, and experiencing.

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