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Abstract

Multiculturalism literature includes the literary writing of groups of people from different races, colors, values, and cultures. It involves diversity and inclusion, but, more importantly, it also involves power structure and struggle. Multicultural literature for young adult readers includes and focuses on the cultures of people from non-mainstream cultural background. In addition, multicultural education is about the learners from various socio-cultural backgrounds. Authors and critics of multicultural literature are locked in an ongoing debate about who can accurately portray the realistic pictures of minority cultures in multicultural literature for young adults? Must it be written by a member of that particular ethnic group? Students therefore develop greater cognitive skills as they learn to engage with and critically evaluate the texts that they read. These themes are a major focus with a general capability strand dedicated to intercultural understanding, which is incorporated throughout each of the key learning areas. This concept paper tries to evaluate the concept of multiculturalism.

Keywords: *multiculturalism, young readers, English Language Learners*



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Multiculturalism literature includes the literary writing of groups of people from different races, colors, values, and cultures. It involves diversity and inclusion, but, more importantly, it also involves power structure and struggle. Multiculturalism has come to signify the inclusion of literature of underrepresented groups in classrooms “with a view to promoting appreciation and respect for diversity” (Sims Bishop, 2007, p. xiv) and an affirmation for children who may not have seen themselves in positive depictions in children books. “Its goal is not just to understand, accept, and appreciate cultural differences, but also to ultimately transform the existing social order, in order to provide greater voice and authority to the marginalized cultures and to achieve social equality and justice for all (Cai, 2007)”. Multicultural literature for young adult readers includes and focuses on the cultures of people

from non-mainstream cultural background. In addition, multicultural education is about the learners from various socio-cultural backgrounds. In its most authentic form, it is an area of literature that focuses on the realities of various cultures (Lindgren 1991; Rochman 1993).

Temple, Martinez, Yokota, and Naylor (2002) said, “Children's literature is the collection of books that are read to and by children ... from birth to about age fifteen” (p. 6). They also acknowledged that “it is surprisingly hard to define a children's book” (p. 5). Norton, Norton, and McClure (2003), rather than directly defining children's literature, simply talked about the qualities of good literature for children and the development of literature for children in recent times: “When students of children's literature look at the beautiful books published to meet children's needs, interests and reading levels, many are amazed to learn that not long ago books were not written specifically for children” (p. 42). They continued: “When childhood began to be viewed as a special part of the human life cycle, literature written specifically for children became very important” (p. 42).

In the selection of such literature, educators and researchers have focused on two main controversial issues—authority and authenticity—that the authors portray in writing (Nilsson 2005; Athanases 2006; Louie 2006; Wilfong 2007).

Educators believe that the authentic literature or books include only those written by a member of an ethnic group about that ethnic group, its cultural traditions, and its people, whereas authority refers to the role of authors who represent multicultural literacy or have control of the plot and characters in writing authentic literature (Aoki 1992; Mikkelsen 1998).

Difficulties in Integrating Multiculturalism in Children's Literature

Authors and critics of multicultural literature are locked in an ongoing debate about Who can accurately portray the realistic pictures of minority cultures in multicultural literature for young adults? Must it be written by a member of that particular ethnic group? Does it become something different if it is written by an outsider of the group? (Johnson and Smith 1993; Nilsson 2005), while others oppose this view (Fox 1991; Bishop 1992; Cai 2002; Hinton 2006). Some believe that authors of the particular ethnic or cultural group depict details of the ethnic group, its cultural traditions, and its people the most authentically and qualitatively in literature for young adults However, those who oppose this view qualify it by saying that if authors come from other social and cultural groups, they must have either sufficient knowledge or a wide range of research to create accurate portrayals of a cultural group. (Johnson and Smith 1993) found that stories told from an “insider's perspectives” (48) accurately reflect the lives of characters in the given social group. He opines characters, setting, and themes are more

authentically presented by authors of multicultural literature who have the cultural backgrounds of the characters.

Authority of Authors

The realities reflected in multicultural literature are culturally specific realities experienced by ethnic groups (Cai 2002). Ethnic literature represents unique cultural experiences of an ethnic group. For instance, Asian American literature is the literature that reflects the experiences of Asian American people; African American literature reflects the experience of African American people. Ethnic literature is, therefore, culturally specific. To create authenticity in multicultural literature for young adults, culture and cultural values of ethnic groups become the major criteria. "Departing from the reality of ethnic culture," as Cai (38) put it, "leads to nothing but misinterpretation or distortion of reality in multicultural literature." To be authentic, the writers need to reflect on the cultural perspectives of the people about whom they are writing, and make readers from inside that culture believe that they "know what's going on" (Bishop 1992, 38). Several books on ethnic literature have been banned, or highly censored, owing to their misrepresentations of a specific culture. Lack of understanding of another culture not only leads to misrepresentation of the culture but also creates difficult situations. It biases one group in society against another group, violates the integrity of a culture, and defeats the purpose of multicultural literature. If an author is an outsider, she or he should have studied and researched, and ideally lived in, the other culture before developing a fictional text. It is acceptable to provide authority to the authors from outside of the community to research and present an accurate portrayal of the culture (Louie 2006). In order to give authentic representation of an ethnic culture, an author must make the effort to enter the world of that culture, which cannot be entered simply on the wings of imagination, no matter how imaginative the author is. Insiders who want to write about their own ethnic cultures have great advantages over outsiders, but they also need to observe and learn. An ethnic group's perspective is not inherited through genes, but acquired through direct and indirect experiences. Any writer, whether within or without the group, requires sufficient knowledge of the subject matter through experience or genuine research of the other culture, his or her imagination, and superb artistic skills as a writer

Guidelines for Selecting Multicultural Children's Literature

The following guidelines for material selection were developed by adopting recommendations from various language arts and multicultural educators: Beilke (1986), Harada (1995), Harris (1991), and Pang, Colvin, Tran, & Yang (1992). These researchers recommend that multicultural literature must contain:

1. Positive portrayals of characters with authentic and realistic behaviors, to avoid stereotypes of a particular cultural group.
2. Authentic illustrations to enhance the quality of the text, since illustrations can have a strong impact on children.
3. Pluralistic themes to foster belief in cultural diversity as a national asset as well as to reflect the changing nature of this country's population.
4. Contemporary as well as historical fiction that captures changing trends in the roles played by minority groups in America.
5. High literary quality, including strong plots, well-developed characterization, authentic dialogues and relationships.
6. Cultural accuracy both of details and larger issues.
7. Reflections of the cultural values of the characters.
8. Inclusion of members of a minority group for a purpose.

The guidelines above are by no means an exhaustive list. They are meant to provide a starting point, from which teachers can explore the many aspects of multicultural children's literature. In addition, teachers may wish to consult with colleagues, parents, and the local ethnic community, drawing upon their specialized knowledge and unique perspectives.

Integrating Multiculturalism in the Classroom

The following figure discusses in details what a teacher could do to ensure to integrate multiculturalism in children's literature with mainstream education.

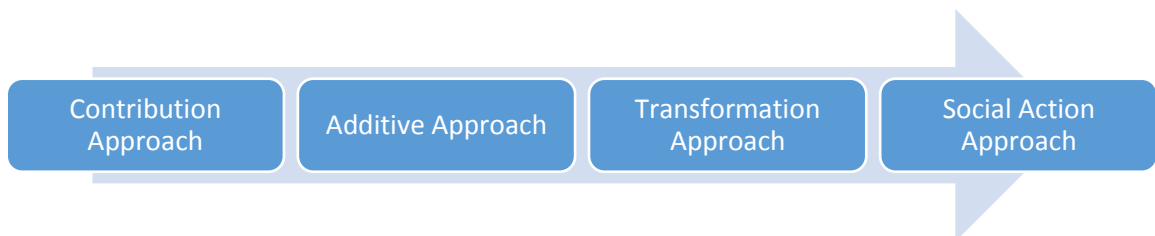


Figure1: Steps to integrate Multiculturalism in the Classroom

Level 1: In the first and lowest level of approaching curricular reform in multicultural education is the *contributions* approach (Banks, 1999). In terms of multicultural children's literature, it may also be called the *tourist approach* or a *food and festivals approach*, where books of different cultures are introduced on certain holidays and months, giving a sense of visiting different cultures and ethnicities. In this approach, one is least committed and a superficial effort is made to include literature about heroes, holidays, celebrations, and festivals representative of the culture depicted. The literature itself may not have been evaluated for authenticity and representation.

Level 2: The next level is the *additive* approach, where content is added without changing or evaluating the basic structure. In terms of multicultural children's literature, it may involve reading folktales from around the world that are representative of a class's demographic, bringing in guest speakers or authors representative of certain cultures, to talk about certain practices, and so on. Although slightly better than the former, no interaction as to questioning historical facts or critically engaging with literature may be possible as there are no structural changes that have been made.

Level 3: The third level or the *transformation* approach turns the fundamental curriculum around in that it helps “students view concepts, issues, events and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups” (Banks, 1999, p. 31). From a multicultural children's literature point of view, in such an approach, students are given literature that is “against the grain,” that gives a point of view of historical events not only from the mainstream perspective but also from the perspective of the affected parties. In such an approach, children are given the opportunity to see different perspectives of many parties involved toward an attempt at an Anti-Bias and equitable education. These give authentic and appropriate accounts from an insider's perspective, creating opportunities for rich discussions.

Level 4: The fourth and most desirable level of multiculturalism is the *social action* approach or an approach that involves students in not only the curriculum but also in social action, in speaking out against injustice, in engaging with power structures to take active action to modify and transform society toward a more equitable and just life. Although these seem like tall orders for young classrooms, this approach is more than ever before necessary at all levels of society if we as teachers want our students to become responsible and critically aware people of tomorrow.

In terms of multicultural children's literature, this may be accomplished by reading real accounts of famous historical events and applying the knowledge to current events by taking

action through the media, the Internet, and in the community, or to connect an everyday occurrence to issues in the real world.

IMPORTANCE OF MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Jenkins and Austin (1987) suggests that cultural understanding can be attained in many ways, such as by making friends with people from different cultures, and by traveling to other countries. They also emphasize the value of good literature, for it can reflect many aspects of a culture—its values, beliefs, ways of life, and patterns of thinking. A good book for children can transcend time, space, and language, and help its' readers to "learn about an individual or a group of people whose stories take place in a specific historical and physical setting" (p. 6). In addition, exposure to fine quality multicultural literature also helps children to appreciate the idiosyncracies of other ethnic groups, eliminate cultural ethnocentrism, and develop multiple perspectives. Dowd (1992) also argues that "...from reading, hearing, and using culturally diverse materials, young people learn that beneath surface differences of color, culture or ethnicity, all people experience universal feelings of love, sadness, self-worth, justice and kindness." (p. 220). Multicultural literature serves as a powerful tool in enabling students to gain a better understanding of both their own culture and the cultures of others. Through this deeper knowledge, relationships can be strengthened, bridging the gap between students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Hseu & Hetzel, 2000). As students of the 21st century are global participants, it is important that they possess cultural sensitivity. Through extensive research, Norton (2009) has discovered that when students can relate global events to the themes, conflicts and characterisations found in multicultural literature, it helps them to better understand current world issues. Students therefore develop greater cognitive skills as they learn to engage with and critically evaluate the texts that they read. These themes are a major focus with a general capability strand dedicated to intercultural understanding, which is incorporated throughout each of the key learning areas.

Promotes empathy and unity

Multicultural literature fosters positive self-esteem and prevents students from feeling isolated. It has the ability to nurture respect, empathy and acceptance among all students (Steiner et al, 2008). *The Smallest Girl In The Smallest Grade By Justin Roberts. Hardly anyone noticed young Sally McCabe. She was the smallest girl in the smallest grade. But Sally notices everything—from the twenty-seven keys on the janitor's ring to the bullying happening on the playground. One day, Sally has had enough and decides to make herself heard. And when she takes a chance and stands up to the bullies, she finds that one small girl can make a big*

difference.

Another text that focuses on commonalities is *Same, Same but Different*, written by Jenny Sue Kostecki-Shaw. The design of this book is unique, as two storylines sit side by side and are to be read simultaneously. This picture book is about the day in the life of two boys: one who lives in US, and the other in India. It eloquently reveals the external differences and inner similarities that define their lives. This book teaches children that they should not be fearful of those who may seem different to them, as their daily lives and routines may be very much the same.

Promotes cross-cultural friendship

Multicultural literature promotes the interaction of children across differing ethnic backgrounds (Steiner et al., 2008). Stories portraying cultural diversity can foster the belief that race is not a barrier, but rather a contribution to the beauty of our multicultural world. This ideal is portrayed in Kobald's *My Two Blankets* (2014). A young girl named Cartwheel relocates to a westernised country to escape the war that is occurring in her homeland. She feels lost and lonely until she meets a young girl in the park. Over time their friendship develops and the young girl helps Cartwheel to understand her new world.

This theme is mirrored in *Just One Wish*, a lovely story by Sally Rippin (2009) about overcoming diversity. Penny, a new arrival to Australia, initially struggles with the English language and feels alienated until she befriends her hearingimpaired art teacher, Mr Whitehorse.

Helps students look critically at the world

Multicultural literature can help students develop global awareness by introducing them to current cultural issues. When students vicariously experience the feelings and emotions of others through literature, they are encouraged to look critically at the world and gain a greater understanding of the global community (Monobe & Son, 2014).

Texts such as *Ziba Came on a Boat* (Lofthouse, 2007), *The Little Refugee* (Do & Do, 2011) and *Mahtab's Story* (Gleeson, 2008) are representative of actual events. The main character in each story is a refugee who immigrates to Australia with their family via an old, overcrowded fishing boat. These books reveal the hardships that refugees often experience when seeking a place of safety. They allow students to reflect upon and critically analyse the issue of asylum seekers and the idea of a fairer community.

John Marsden portrays the above issues in a unique and thought-provoking manner in his book *Home and Away* (2008). This compelling story is about a typical Australian family who

must flee their country when it is ravaged by war. This story presents a complete role reversal, as it is Australians who are being displaced. This text forces students to think critically and consider global issues from a different perspective.

Encourages identity formation

Multicultural literature can also assist students with their identity formation (Hseu & Hetzel, 2000). Identity formation is important in the social development of all children, as it gives them a sense of belonging and acceptance in society. Inclusion of multicultural literature in library collections confirm that the beliefs and experiences of minority students are valued (Steiner, 1998). When students see themselves reflected in the pages of literature, they are more likely to engage with a text. Smith's (1995) case study confirms this, revealing that prefer to read texts they can relate to culturally, increasing their interest in reading. Familiar concepts in multicultural literature help to build security, familiarity, and confidence, which can lead to an improvement in student learning (Agosto, 2007).

Finally, literature about a particular ethnic group benefits cultural and linguistic minority children as well. From reading multicultural books about their own culture, children achieve the opportunities to see how others go through experiences similar to theirs, develop strategies to cope with issues in their life, and identify themselves with their inherited culture. It is, therefore important that educators incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum and make it part of children's everyday life. The following sections will provide guidelines and resources for selecting multicultural literature in the elementary classroom.

Conclusion

Languages and content of stories have to accommodate the context of marginalised societies and this is important. Teacher educators must encourage their teacher candidates to read multicultural literature that reflects our diverse social system. The books reviewed in this article provide an avenue to stimulate reflective thinking in teachers. Beiger (1996, 311) eloquently noted: Each time we read a good piece of literature, we are reformed by the experience: we see the world in a new light. For these reasons, literature can be a powerful vehicle for understanding cultures and experiences different from our own. Through the use of multicultural literature, teacher educators who mentor and guide teacher candidates in all subject areas can have a positive impact on the lives of these future educators and the students they will teach. The push for multiculturalism is perhaps the most important need of the times, especially in a country such as the United States of America, where there are people from practically every part of the globe reside (Lester, 2004). As we become smaller in terms of

connectivity through the Internet, and we become bigger in terms of reach, our work as teachers becomes more complicated by the day.

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