

Using of Multicultural Literature in Schools

Carmine Guinta

Belleville Public Schools

Using Multicultural Literature in Schools

Multiculturalism and Educational Practice

Multiculturalism embraces a non-Eurocentric method of curriculum design, one in which the accomplishments of minority figures are discussed and debated just as equally as those of white males of European decent (Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell & Middleton, 1999). It allows students the opportunity to learn how knowledge is constructed or why we learn what we learn from elementary school through high school. Accomplishments, theories, ideas, and beliefs from all different races, religious groups, and socio-economic groups are debated, similarly to the way that many schools now operate using the equivalent of a Eurocentric curricular implementation (Olneck, 2000).

Multiculturalism also holds a place in our country as it directly aligns with our democratic values and ideals (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2013). The introduction of multicultural reading fosters bonds and understanding amongst all groups, not just a few (Tan, 2002). This could lead to a more accepting and tolerant society, which should be the end goal of any school that encourages the teaching of multicultural themes. If the end goal is to increase tolerance for all racial, religious, and socio-economic groups in our country, then discussion and cultural exchange is necessary (Olneck, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

Curriculums that include multicultural readings are based on a common sense approach. Students learn best when the curriculum is made relevant. For minority students, a curriculum that incorporates some of the major deeds and accomplishments of their ancestors can be quite rewarding and, at the same time, help them learn about their culture and their land of origin. This does not mean that everything currently taught in our school system would be altered. On the contrary, European races and figures are still studied alongside those of other races as equals.

This would ensure the exchange of ideas and a lively debate amongst the various cultures that comprise a school district (Galczynski, Tsagkaraki, & Ghosh, 2011).

Educational Relevancy and Meaningful Academic Growth

The book Holler if You Hear Me chronicles the experiences of a white, middle class teacher named Gregory Michie, who begins his career in an urban Chicago school with a high population of Mexican-American students. Michie, who had only dabbled in multiculturalism and multicultural reading in his college coursework, was at a loss on how to connect with some of his students. They were unable to relate or identify with what he taught in the classroom; it was not relevant to their past, present, or future. He had to make drastic changes to his training as a teacher. He adopted many real world multicultural strategies to create a positive rapport and the eventual, positive relationships with his students.

Nothing he did would be considered radical or out of the ordinary. Some texts removed stereotypes. For example, in history courses, Mexicans were presented as a proud people. Language arts texts, written by Mexican-American authors, were incorporated. As a result, students were able to identify proudly with explorers, adventurers and heroes in a social studies context, but they could also identify with the authors, the settings, the characters and their respective experiences in the poems, short stories and novels used. This type of reasonable thinking resulted in a change for his students; their academic studies had a purpose, and it resulted in scholastic engagement, self-realization and self-fulfillment. While some will argue that the entire educational system with regard to multicultural curriculum design needs to be torn down, common sense and simple to implement strategies such as these go a long way in helping students feel like part of a community and engaging them in the curriculum (Michie, 2009). Michie introduced multiculturalist-themed informational and literary text reading as a

vehicle for introducing other point of view, ideas, and cultural exchanges. It was a highly beneficial and successful strategy.

Profound Importance Beyond the Classroom

Michie's exploration and successful incorporation of multicultural informational and literary reading fostered academic engagement of his students. However, this successful practice provides many additional benefits for all students. Choosing appropriate titles and books for diverse groups of students can serve as both a mirror to children and as a window to the world around them, by showing people from diverse groups playing and working together, solving problems and overcoming obstacles. It helps learners to understand that despite our many differences, all people share common feelings and aspirations. Those feelings can include love, sadness, fear and the desire for fairness and justice (www.partnersagainsthate.org, 1, 2000). In a global economy where teamwork and competition become more prevalent as time passes, these skills are necessary, as our students may be working with and collaborating with workers from China to India in the coming years. They must learn how to be culturally respectful and more aware of the world around them (Wagner, 2008).

Conclusion

It is not necessary to completely overhaul the curriculum to make it more multi-culturally beneficial. The benefits of minimally incorporating multicultural reading into the curriculum are numerous for students of both the original populations and the newer, diverse, arriving populations. Recognizing the need to make education relevant for its students is a critical and integral responsibility for all local school districts. Upon using multicultural informational and literary readings to create a fuller understanding of diverse groups of people, the results for

students may be profound, promoting a decrease in bias and an increase in respect in the school, in the workplace and in their lives.

References

- Galczynski, M., Tsagkaraki, V., & Ghosh, R. (2011). Unpacking multiculturalism in the classroom: Using current events to explore the politics of difference. *Canadian Ethnic Studies, 23*, 145-164.
- Michie, G. (2009). *Holler if you hear me: The education of a teacher and his students* (2nd Ed.). New York City, NY: Teachers College.
- Olneck, M. (2000). Can multicultural education change what counts as cultural capital? *American Educational Research Journal, 37*, 317-348. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1163527>
- Tan, G. (2002). The need for multiculturalism in the classroom as perceived by Mexican American school children. *Multicultural Education, 9*, 21-24.
- Thijs, J., & Verkuyten, M. (2013). Multiculturalism in the classroom: Ethnic attitudes and classmates beliefs. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 37*, 176-187. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.04.012>
- Wagner, T. (2008). *The global achievement gap: Why even our best schools don't teach the new survival skills our children need-and what we can do about it*. New York, New York: Perseus.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose cultural has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 8, 69-91. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>

(2003). The importance of multicultural children's books. *PartnersAgainstHate*. Retrieved from www.partnersagainsthate.org/educators/books.html.