

MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW OF BEST PRACTICES

by Ellen S. Rempala



The value of using multicultural literature in the educational setting has gained much support in the last few decades. At the same time, the exact meaning of multicultural literature, while having been debated and discussed, has not reached “consensus” (Cai, 2002, p. 3). These two facts create an interesting dilemma: while many educators want to incorporate literature from diverse cultures into their curricula, they are unsure of how best to accomplish this integration. Perhaps, initially reluctant because of their unfamiliarity with the representative cultures (Dong, 2005), teachers’ hesitations are further fueled by the dynamic nature of the genre. This is all very understandable. And while I will not cover this continuing debate over definition, for the purposes of this article, my definition of multicultural literature will be borrowed from Glazier and Seo (2005) – that is, those writings “that represent voices typically omitted from the traditional canon” (p. 686). The terms “multicultural literature” and “culturally diverse literature” will also be used interchangeably.

WHY SHOULD TEACHERS INCORPORATE CULTURALLY DIVERSE LITERATURE INTO THE CURRICULUM?

It is true that some educators do not believe in using multicultural texts within their classrooms. For some, the task appears too complicated as various questions arise: Will focusing on the differences between groups and individuals really increase acceptance? How will we decide what authors to include? Does that mean certain “traditional” authors will be pushed to the side? As a white teacher, will I look “dumb” if I don’t know everything about the culture being studied? For others, it just doesn’t seem appropriate for the educational goals of their students. According to LaBelle and Ward (1994):

Underlying multiculturalism and education debates in many societies are questions such as: Which group(s) determines and defines what counts as knowledge? Which group(s) should determine what knowledge is to be transmitted through

educational institutions? Which group(s) controls access to formal education institutions and the certification they offer which is crucial to upward mobility in the job market? (p. 30)

One of my colleagues was very forthright when stating that she only focuses on canonical texts in her English classroom. The “dead white guys,” she explained, will be what her students need to know to pass tests and be successful in college programs. This was seven years ago, and I often wonder if her views have changed at all, even slightly.

Despite these viewpoints, I still strongly believe that multicultural literature should be included in the school curriculum. With advances in technology, a competitive yet interdependent global market, and continued immigration, our students will interact with individuals from various backgrounds, each bringing his or her diverse perspective and experience (whether racial, socio-economic, or cultural) to the table. Diversity is already the norm in many schools. Furthermore, many positive student outcomes have been associated with the reading of multicultural texts. The most popular argument is that the use of multicultural literature in the classroom “can help people cross cultural borders to achieve mutual understanding” (Cai, 2002, p. 117). This, of course, is no small task! But, when one breaks down this process and closely examines how culturally diverse literature is capable of affecting students’ constructs of themselves and others, a case for using multicultural literature begins to form.

WHAT DOES READING CULTURALLY DIVERSE LITERATURE DO FOR STUDENTS?

Author Walter Dean Myers (2005) attempts to reach “uninspired readers” by using the “language and context” he believes inner-city youth can relate to (p. 36). Laurence Yep (2005), in his writing, focuses on “the outsider,” a persona he believes appeals to many teenagers. Both authors promote the idea of culturally diverse literature being a mirror for those not normally represented in literary works. Glazier and Seo (2005) say it is “a way to encourage students who are most often voiceless in schools to find a voice” (p. 687).

While this works for the minority, what about the white majority? They, too, can benefit from culturally diverse literature. Multicultural texts can present a new world to these students, with new ideas and ways of looking at the world, i.e., “a means by which multiple cultural experiences can be explored” (Glazier and Seo, 2005, p. 687).

The key to gaining meaning and accomplishing true learning, however, lies in a constructivist approach that is often overlooked. When teaching multicultural literature, “the text must instead be interrogated from multiple perspectives and act as a comparison point for students’ own lives in order for it to be transformative, or life—and culture—affirming” (Glazier and Seo, 2005, p. 688). In other words, have each student reflect on what he or she knows about a topic or culture before reading a multicultural book or article. Journaling or writing is a great activity for this. After reading the piece, encourage class conversations about what students knew beforehand and what was learned by reading the text. Through listening to others and through their own reflections, students will be more likely to take something from the literature and add it to their repertoire of cultural knowledge.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALIST

In instances of collaboration, the media specialist is understandably restricted by what project the classroom teacher brings to the table. Hinton and Dickinson (2005), however, discuss the chance to “present options for studying elements of multiculturalism” during the task definition stage of the research process. They give World War II as a broad research topic, explaining that from there, the media specialist can “present opportunities for students to study the Japanese Internment, the Navajo codetalkers, and the Tuskegee airmen” (p. 17). The two believe that the media specialist, by providing a variety of information, is more likely to succeed in helping students find something to which they can personally connect (p. 17-19).

Hinton and Dickinson (2005) also praise the “culturally competent school library media center program” that has a diverse collection through all content areas and are headed by a media specialist who is: 1) knowledgeable about culturally diverse literature, 2) willing to assist classroom teachers in using that literature, and 3) capable of teaching teachers how to “evaluate multicultural literature” (p. 15). In these media centers, “cultural awareness and sensitivity are evident” (p. 15).

Creating this climate of respect was mentioned in numerous articles I read, and I have to agree. Minority students are very keen on perceived injustices and

inequality. One of my eighth grade students, after I had discussed a school-wide essay opportunity for Black History Month, commented, “Yeah. They give us the shortest month (February) of the year.” At the time I did not address his grievance, but I could appreciate his point of view. This is not to say that cultural awareness months should not be celebrated. On the contrary, they should be used as a time to highlight and celebrate the achievements of individuals from the representative culture. The point is to make sure that the promotion of culturally diverse literature is not just a “one month a year” deal within your school!

CONCLUSION

So, what can the school library media specialist do to promote an ongoing climate of respect and diversity? The following are some suggestions (these are general ideas gleaned from the research and ideas of my own):

- Maintain a collection representative of different people and cultures
- Give booktalks on multicultural literature
- Promote multicultural literature during cultural awareness months
- Promote multicultural literature in conjunction with other holidays and celebrations, throughout the year
- Invite authors to give talks
- Invite local writers or community members to talk about what a multicultural text means to them
- Ask students from different backgrounds what they would like to have offered by the media center program
- Contact the multicultural office/diversity office at your local college – many have student groups that celebrate cultural awareness months and bring authors, politicians, entertainers, etc. to speak or perform.
- Contact the multicultural office/diversity office at your local college to see if they have any student publications. Some of the best multicultural writing I have found has been from this type of publication.
- Offer opportunities to incorporate multicultural literature and topics during collaboration
- Provide professional development opportunities for teachers to learn more about multicultural literature – what is out there, how to find it, how to evaluate it, how to use it, etc.
- Continue to educate yourself about multicultural literature and best practices!

Whether you are already committed to promoting and using culturally diverse literature or are just

beginning to learn about the topic, when guided through the literature by an educator who is both knowledgeable about and respectful of multicultural literature and issues, all students can gain a better understanding of themselves and of others. By offering multicultural literature, we truly empower our students.

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