

Heightening Awareness about the Importance of Using Multicultural Literature

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INTRODUCTION

Using multicultural literature in the classroom has become a focus in recent years as classrooms have become more diverse. While offering teachers and students many opportunities to gain broader understandings about the world, the use of multicultural literature also presents challenges. The challenge is not only obtaining high quality multicultural texts, but the greater challenge may be creating an awareness among teachers of the important role multicultural literature plays in the lives of children.

Multicultural literature helps children identify with their own culture, exposes children to other cultures, and opens the dialogue on issues regarding diversity. As instructors who teach language arts methods courses, these challenges became evident through an assignment given to our preservice teachers in which students were prompted to examine their beliefs and practices regarding the use of multicultural literature in the classroom. It is not uncommon

for preservice teachers to have unexamined beliefs about cultural diversity and to have little understanding of the impact of their beliefs on classroom interaction, discussion and practices (Sleeter, 2001; Wiggans & Folio, 1999; Willis & Harris, 1997). This became apparent as our students shared their ideas after reading and reflecting upon “African American children’s literature that helps students find themselves: Selection guidelines for grades K-3” (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

In this article, Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) discuss the importance of children relating to characters and situations found in books reflective of their own culture. The absence of African American characters and culture in books found in many primary classrooms is discussed and its impact on children of color is highlighted. Students need to be able to make connections between literature and their everyday lives. Children need to receive affirmation of themselves and their culture through literature (Bieger, 1995/1996), and be able to connect text to self in order to promote greater meaning (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1978).

With this in mind, we set out to explore prospective teacher’s understandings of the use of multicultural literature in the classroom. Specifically, we examined changes in their beliefs and proposed practices based on new understandings regarding the importance of using literature in the classroom that portrays a variety of cultures, themes and views.

Our students were asked to respond to the Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd article using one or more of the following prompts (adapted from Reif, 1992): quote and discuss, ask questions, share experiences/memories, react, and/or connect. Upon reading these reflections, we were struck by the

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diversity of understandings these prospective teachers will bring to the classroom. Some of the reactions were not unexpected and inspired discussions about classroom diversity. Other reactions, which were not as evident in class discussion, surfaced in the written responses. After initially reading the student responses we realized that this issue needed to be further explored.

We began a more formal study examining our students' responses about using multicultural literature in the classroom. We collected student response papers from approximately 100 preservice teachers enrolled in elementary language arts methods courses. Data were analyzed based on a process outlined by Creswell (2002) for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. After a preliminary exploratory analysis was conducted of the qualitative data, data were analyzed based on emerging themes using the following four-phase process: coding the data; developing themes from the data; defining themes based on the findings; and connecting and interrelating themes (Creswell, 2002, p. 265). During the coding process, responses were read and notes were made in an attempt to gain a perspective on the attitudes and beliefs of preservice teachers and their understandings about using multicultural literature in the classroom.

During the development and defining of themes, categories were identified as they related to the understandings of our students that emerged from the data. During the connecting and interrelating phase, key understandings were synthesized and quotes were identified that supported these understandings. Upon analyses of the data, the following categories emerged: it opened my eyes, finding yourself, opening their minds, not just African-American, and it's my responsibility.

IT OPENED MY EYES

Beverly Daniel Tatum (O'Neil, 1998) states, "...many white students are oblivious to the power of racism and the way that it's operating in society" (p. 13). This quote accurately expressed our findings regarding the unexamined nature of perpetuating, albeit unconsciously, white culture in the classroom. Many of the comments made by students in their reader response papers focused on new beliefs and understandings they had gained about the use of multicultural literature in the classroom.

It was evident that many had not, until this point, considered the dilemma that children of color face in regards to having access to appropriate literature and an environment that acknowledges and celebrates diversity in the classroom. It was clear that the article proved to be a stimulus for analyzing biases.

One student mentioned, "I guess because I am European-American, I have never had to think about this

problem before." A second student stated, "I do not recall reading much literature geared toward African Americans... as a white child I never really thought about it because I already had books that I could relate to." A third student believed that young children would have the ability to not only identify a bias in curriculum materials but would also be able to articulate their concerns:

I felt like a light bulb had just gone off in my head... I didn't realize that there are children that feel like they had nothing to read and relate to... I have never really heard any of them complain about it or be vocal.

Upon realizing the effects of seeing only white people portrayed in books during their years in school, many students began to empathize with children from underrepresented cultures in children's literature.

One student revealed, "African American children need role models... As a Caucasian American I did not realize the importance of such connections..." Still, another mentioned, "I cannot fully understand what it must be like to have a dominant culture being portrayed everywhere I looked, however, I can only imagine the stifling effect it would impose on someone." This was confirmed by a third student, "It seems obvious that readers want to identify with characters, but I never considered how all-white characters would affect African American students."

Scholars discuss the lack of awareness that many white students, teachers and teacher educators have regarding their own "whiteness" and the privileges their skin color has granted them (Banks, 2001b; Cochran-Smith, 2000; Lawrence, 1997; Sleeter, 2001; Wiggans & Folio, 1999). The numerous comments articulated by our students confirmed this lack of awareness. Our students' comments served as a reminder of just how important it is, and will continue to be, to examine our own beliefs and assumptions.

FINDING YOURSELF

Many of our students commented on the ability to relate to characters and situations in books as a factor in book selection. One student wrote, "Growing up, I turned to a book for comfort and to get away from life. It never dawned on me to think about what my African American friends were reading."

The significance of the reader's relationship with the characters in books was well stated by one white student who wrote, "I started reading the Sweet Valley Twins books and I could relate to some of what the girls were going through... Over the years I felt like I grew up with them." The very personal nature of reading creates the need for teachers to examine the literature available to students.

Our students reflected on their required reading experiences in school and made some interesting discoveries.

One African American student wrote, “I don’t recall any (African American) books that were stories simply about romance or drama in everyday life rather than historical issues.” While recalling high school assigned reading a second student wrote:

...Everyone referred to these books (All Things Fall Apart and The Autobiography of Frederick Douglas) as books about black people. When we read books like Romeo and Juliet, The Doll House or Mac Beth no one thought of these as being white because it was normal to read about these types of Caucasian characters.

A third student expressed:

I know as an African-American child in the classroom, that you rarely ever see African-Americans or any other minority depicted as normal people...It was very hard to relate to the books that we had to read...Sometimes it would feel like I was out of place.

The absence of a broad and accurate representation of the African American culture in classrooms was discussed by one student:

As an African-American I don’t recall reading or learning about my culture in school. What I learned about my culture was taught to me at home by my parents or elderly relatives. When I did hear about my culture it always went back to the slave years or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Whatever happened to learning about the inventor of the stoplight, which is in use today? The point I am trying to make is that African Americans were more than just slaves. They were inventors and educators as well.

This student’s frustration at the small range of topics covered in most African American children’s literature was echoed by others, Occasionally, we might find books with characters that are African American. However, it is only the character and not the story that is African-American.”

Two handicapped students were empathetic. One student mentioned:

It makes sense on a very personal level for me that African American children struggle to establish their own identity as people who can and especially who are EXPECTED to succeed when so much of what they are exposed to suggests otherwise.

When children are not able to find themselves or their lives reflected in classroom literature, they are less engaged and interested in the reading process. Beyond that, the sub-

tle message is that school is for someone else, not people like you. A second student wrote:

I can definitely see how an African-American child would feel left out and confused if they only see white characters in the books they read. Growing up, I felt much the same way about the lack of disabled children in stories. I use to feel like I was made wrong because I rarely saw any characters in wheelchairs.

Students are often asked to make connections while reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). They are asked to connect to the world, other books, and their personal experiences. Unless books are carefully selected, we may be asking the impossible of some students. It is important that readers not only find characters to identify with, but that they can relate to situations found in the books they are asked to read.

Banks (2001a) states, “Citizens should be able to maintain attachments to their cultural communities as well as participate effectively in the shared national culture” (p. 3). Our classrooms need to offer children opportunities to celebrate who they are while learning about others. Perhaps one day each child can share the experience of one of our students, “I remember sitting a little higher in my desk when the teacher would read a passage that either reminded me of myself, or involved places or situations that were familiar to me.”

OPENING THEIR MINDS

Prospective teachers gained an awareness of the importance of using multicultural literature to stimulate understandings of diversity in the classroom. Students discussed how the use of multicultural literature could build an understanding of and respect for people from different cultures. One student wrote:

We should not just be reading books with black main characters, and books written by black authors just because black students are feeling left out, but because all students should be subjected to books by authors of every race and culture.

A second student advocated the use of multicultural literature as a means to examine racism, “I feel this is important because the key to abolishing racism is to first abolish ignorance that one has of others.” Statements such as these demonstrated how our students were beginning to think about multicultural literature in broader terms.

A third student shared, “Perceptions will not only change for the minority students, but also their majority classmates, and all of them will learn from the experience.” This theme was summarized by one student who offered

this insight, “Bringing culturally diverse literature in a classroom brings culturally diverse knowledge to all students. Since knowledge is power, we will be empowering our students with cultural diversity and tolerance.” These comments expressed the strong feelings that preservice teachers had about bringing cultural diversity in the classroom through the use of quality multicultural literature. We felt our students’ minds were beginning to open and that this would benefit the children they will teach.

NOT JUST AFRICAN AMERICAN

Students commented on the need to extend the article’s focus on African American children’s literature to include literature that portrays a variety of cultures, people and disabilities. This was a natural extension given the emphasis on multicultural education in our society, “Multicultural education is for everyone regardless of ethnicity, race, language, social class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other differences” (Neito, 2000, p. 4).

Integrating literature portraying a variety of characters and cultures, not just African American, was the focus of many comments. One student wrote:

Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd make a very good point when they state that it is important for children to be able to identify with characters in a book. However, that means all children, not only African Americans and whites, but also Chinese-Americans, Native Americans, and every other ethnicity.

A second student realized that although the authors focused on the portrayal of African Americans in children’s literature, the intent was to understand the larger implications, “I don’t agree that the literature needs to be just for the African American children. All children need to know and understand the history of not just their own race... Maybe that is what they are trying to say.” Lastly, one student summarized the enormity of the issue:

While this article doesn’t really talk about it, I have seen figures that suggest that by 2020, Hispanics will make up a larger part of the U.S. population than do African Americans... While good Hispanic literature would probably be even harder to find than good African American literature, the point is the same, find all that you can and make it available to your students.

While many students generalized their understanding of the lack of high quality African American literature to the lack of literature accurately portraying many ethnicities, others perceived the author’s sole focus on African

American literature with a more defensive stance. Some students commented about the over emphasis on African American literature in this article. A response by one student highlights this point, “I did not particularly like that the author emphasized only African American literature. There are many different races present in our schools.”

Another student wrote, “Today slavery is beat into these children’s heads so much that they think that no other race or people had it rough or were put down.” A third student pointed out, “I do feel that there is a need for more African American literature, but what about other heritages? There are many different types of people in the world and focusing on one heritage is very biased.”

These comments, while defensive in nature, provide insight into the initial resistance that many teacher education students may experience when learning about racism and their own racial privilege (Lawrence, 1997; Ukpokodu, 2002).

A few comments described prospective white teachers’ beliefs that good literature is good literature, regardless of the ethnicity of the characters. One student wrote:

I don’t think that books should be secularized by whether they are for black children or white children. Books should be books regardless of the color of the main character. We learn from everyone, everywhere no matter what their ethnicity is.

A second student revealed,

Hefflin writes that black children need literature that will relate to them through their culture and heritage. In this day and age we are all Americans and do we not share the same heritage? I do not believe things should be looked at in terms of whether this is a black book or this is a white book.

A third student expressed doubts, “I am still wondering just how right the author is, and how important it is for there to be literature of all the different backgrounds.” While these comments appeared to lack an understanding of the primary message of Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd’s article, for educators to realize the negative effects that using only literature portraying white culture can have on children, they also provide insight about confronting our own biases. Scholars in multicultural education report many white students and teachers tend to view all people through a color-blind lens (Banks, 2001b; Lawrence, 1997). Banks discusses this problem more extensively:

A statement such as “I don’t see color” reveals a privileged position that refuses to legitimize racial identifications that are very important to people of color and that are often used to justify inaction and perpetuation of the

status quo. If educators do not “see” color and the ways in which institutionalized racism privileges some groups and disadvantages other, they will be unable to take action to eliminate racial inequality in schools, (p. 12)

Overall, comments reflecting on the authors’ focus on African American children’s literature were quite varied. While many prospective teachers transferred this newly gained insight on the importance of including literature in the classroom that portrays a variety of cultures, others were defensive about the authors’ perspective. Further, a few students could not get beyond the idea that, “good literature is good literature, no matter what.” These diverse comments help us to understand the difficulty and complexity of changing beliefs regarding issues of diversity.

IT IS MY RESPONSIBILITY

Numerous responses indicated that prospective teachers found this article to be of value and mentioned how they would use this article as a resource when they begin teaching. Many students found the criteria for choosing quality literature and for choosing quality African American children’s literature in particular to be especially useful. In addition, they appreciated the recommended booklist.

One student had this to say, “So what can we do? I know that searching out appropriate literature is a great idea. This article helps that.” A second noted the usefulness of the guidelines:

The great thing about the guidelines found in this article is that they can be applied to all books. Whether you are looking for African American, Hispanic, or any other type of literature, use these guidelines to bring in as many good books as possible in order to facilitate reading across all ethnic groups within the classroom. Know your students and cater to their needs!

Still, another mentioned, “The criteria enable the teacher to discover good children’s literature on his or her own, outside of the booklist. This will be an article that I will refer back to for guidance.”

In addition, many students discussed their newly discovered commitment to using multicultural literature in the classroom. Comments were based on the understanding of how important it is to see yourself in the books you read with implications for classroom teachers:

I realized that when I read I do exactly what the article says, I envision myself in the story or as one of the characters, and that entertains me. The article made me re-think a lot of the literature I was thinking about using.

A second student wrote, “This article addresses all of the concerns I have in relation to African American literature. I want to make sure that my children can find themselves in the literature I provide and expose them to through out the year.” A third student commented on the need to learn more to be successful with this responsibility, “I am definitely interested in learning more about quality African American children’s literature. I hope to be teaching in a diverse classroom and would like to incorporate literature for all the children in my class.”

Many students reacted to the importance of this new responsibility. One student wrote, “It will be my responsibility as a teacher to give this opportunity to all of my students by providing quality literature depicting characters that they can relate to.” A second student had this to say, “A child can be turned off from reading at a very young age if they are not exposed to the right reading. It is our job as teachers to evaluate all books and integrate them accordingly into our classrooms.”

Lastly, a student reacted to the article, “This article stirred emotion in me because I’ve always felt all kids need to see them; selves in literature. Even now, I realize it’s in my hands to make it possible.” In contrast, one student realized the large responsibility that exists in truly integrating multicultural literature in the classroom and had this to say, “As a white teacher, I believe it would be hard to ‘remember’ to utilize books from other cultures because you teach what you know. This is a closedminded view, but it is human nature.”

After reading the article, it appeared that most students became aware of the difficult challenge that integrating multicultural literature successfully in the classroom will prove to be. Although this new awareness is only the beginning, it is a hopeful one.

Cochran-Smith (2000) advocates that part of our responsibility as teachers is to struggle along with others to “unlearn” racism. For teachers who have not given thought to exposing children to multicultural literature, reflecting on and changing some of our standard practices will require learning and “unlearning” simultaneously. Sonia Nieto (2000) makes this point clear:

The decisions we make, no matter how neutral they may seem, have an impact on the lives and experiences of our students. This is true of the curriculum, books, and other materials we provide for them... What is excluded is often as telling as what is included, (p. 316).

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Our students’ reactions remind us how important it is to integrate multicultural literature in the classroom as one method for creating learning communities that acknowledge

and celebrate diversity. Many prospective teachers realized, for the first time, the power of literature to perpetuate and dissolve stereotypes. As Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) state in their opening paragraph, "Literature is a powerful medium. Through it, children construct messages about their culture and roles in society" (p. 810).

Our students realized that not only would literature reflecting a diverse society motivate many students to read, but also, literature carefully selected to represent our diverse world can help students better understand the principles of tolerance, inclusiveness, diversity, and respect for all. Perhaps most importantly, our students realized how significant their role will be in using multicultural literature in the classroom for the benefit of all students.

In general, comments from these reaction papers indicated that teacher's awareness can be heightened, and effective practices can be explored regarding the use of high quality multicultural children's literature in the classroom. Teachers need to examine their materials and challenge their own cultural perspectives (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995). This is confirmed by Beverly Daniel Tatum (O'Neil, 1998) who states, "Educators and student themselves need to explore racial stereotypes, beliefs, and perspectives if classrooms are to become places where equity is valued" (p. 12).

Our students benefited from the examination of beliefs stimulated by the Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd article. Up to this point, many of our students had never considered how they would select and use literature that represents a diverse society. Their comments indicated that for the most part, teachers do see the importance of using multicultural literature in the classroom, but may need an outside stimulus to become aware of the issue. While this activity was just a beginning for our students in their journey to examine their personal beliefs and effectively use multicultural literature in the classroom, we believe it was an important one.

Our student's reactions remind us that we must have the courage to accept the challenge of helping all educators integrate multicultural literature in the classroom. Neito (2000) argues that unintentional discrimination is practiced by well-meaning teachers in schools where there is a lack of talk about differences, particularly about race.

As our preservice teachers join their colleagues in the field, we hope they will have opportunities to continue to reflect as individuals and as a member of an educational community. This will mean openly examining beliefs and practices, and, in many cases, creating new ones. Teachers will need to acquire skills to enable them to choose a wealth of high quality multicultural literature and, will need to learn how to use this literature for enjoyment and instructional purposes to better serve all children.

When teachers gain awareness that multicultural literature may be used as a stimulus for creating classrooms

where all students are valued, then children can celebrate their own cultures and explore the uniqueness of others. Dietrich and Ralph (1995) discuss the vital role of the teacher:

When multicultural literature becomes an integral part of the curriculum and teachers act as models and guides, classrooms can become arenas for open exchange. Literature and the ensuing discussion permit students to read, think, and become actively engaged with the texts. As a consequence, it should be easier for a student to cross cultural borders, (available on line: <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/miscpubs/jeilms/vollo/crossing.htm>)

The impact of a thoughtful teacher can be profound. As teachers become more aware of their own beliefs, attitudes and practices relating to diversity in the classroom, the children they teach will benefit. This may well be an important step towards reaching our goal of assisting children as they develop into productive citizens in a pluralistic society.

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