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Diversity in Literature: Preparing Literacy Teachers for a Multicultural World

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Abstract

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2023, 50 percent of the student population will be children with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Iwai, 2015). Furthermore, 10 percent of the school population in the U.S. is currently identified as having a disability that affects their ability to perform in the classroom (O'Leary, 2011). The reality is that teachers and literacy teachers in particular are faced with the difficult task of teaching a more diverse student population than ever before. The literature review analyzed and discussed in the present article examines studies that support the systematic use of multicultural literature in the classroom. Also, the author suggests strategies to create a curriculum that fosters awareness of diversity and multiculturalism through literature as a way to enrich literacy instruction in the classroom.

Keywords: Multicultural Literature; Literacy; Multicultural Curriculum

The world is becoming a complex network of cultures, languages, races and ethnicities. People are moving from their places of origin to new countries for better education and job opportunities (Clark, 2013). This phenomenon is bringing changes in the way teachers are designing curriculum to support students who are linguistically and culturally diverse. In many instances, teachers are using books or literacy material that does not accommodate the needs of students who do not belong to the mainstream culture (Clark, 2013). Literacy teachers, in particular, need to broaden their knowledge and understanding how to infuse quality literature in their curriculum to help students who are culturally and linguistically diverse to acquire effective literacy skills across the curriculum (Comber, 2011).

Research suggests that diversity in literacy supports students to better understand others and themselves (Comber, 2011). Students who are exposed to quality literature improve their literacy skills in the classroom and helps students to feel included in the lesson and the school. Teachers of literacy must provide the appropriate classroom environment for learning to occur. Multicultural literature can be the key to unlock the door for learning to read and write in a diverse world

by enhancing motivation in students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Shen, 2011).

Rosenblatt (1995) explained that literature as the power to help students to experience ideas and concepts in a more concrete mode. Rosenblatt (1995) maintained that literature helps students to critically analyze ideas in light of their background and culture as literate individuals. Rosenblatt (1995) also claimed that literature is crucial to lead students to delve into new experiences that open to a diverse understanding of reality and the world.

This paper reviewed and discussed studies that support the systematic use of multicultural literature in the classroom. Also, the author suggested strategies to create a curriculum that fosters awareness of diversity and multiculturalism through literature as a way to enrich literacy instruction in the classroom. Literacy curriculum in the 21st century must become culturally and linguistically sensitive to the needs of a growing diverse student population in U.S. schools. Therefore, literacy teachers need to acquire and develop the ability to teach literacy by using quality multicultural literature across the curriculum. It is not enough to teach our students the skills for reading but also and more importantly to teach students how to critically make sound choices on the literacy material they will access to prepare them for a complex reality in the 21st century (Gormley & McDermott, 2014).

The Need for Multicultural Literature

An extensive part of a student's education is placed on literacy, more specifically the necessary skills for reading and writing. It is

important that students acquire strategies and skills in order to become active readers and writers. Harvey and Goudvis (2007) defined active readers as individuals who interact with the text in an active, analytical and strategic way to extract meaning from the text. Multicultural literature can serve as a mirror for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, to allow them to see themselves in the text and make deeper connections with it. At the same time, multicultural literature can become a window for other students to experience new ways to look at the world as a rich and complex place.

Lopez (2011) maintained that students who are culturally and linguistically diverse lack access to diverse texts and quality literature in the classroom. Lopez (2011) argued that many students who do not belong to the white main stream culture lack motivation to read and acquire robust literacy skills that will prepare them to compete for jobs and careers in a complex society at the dawn of the 21st century. Lopez (2011) suggested incorporating multicultural literature in the classroom to provide students who are culturally and linguistically diverse equal opportunities to acquire a rich literacy curriculum via quality books and other print or non-print material.

Multicultural literature is a paramount conceptual and pedagogical tool when teaching students about diversity. It is a powerful way to challenge the status quo of society and have the potential to create a collaborative communal understanding (Nieto, 2013). Nieto (2013) pointed out opportunities for students to explore connections with people

from different cultural, social and economic situations may only be possible through the multicultural literature they experience in the classroom or school library. Therefore, it is very important for teachers to be aware of the texts they use in the classroom and how they use quality literature to teach about other cultures and diversity.

Maniatis (2010) claimed that children who engage in multicultural readings and critical analysis of texts develop a more systematic and profound awareness for diversity. Maniatis (2010) also claimed that teachers play an important role in this process. Teachers must make multicultural books interesting, exciting and relevant for their students by designing a multicultural curriculum that supports students' curiosity and critical inquiry for diversity around them. In turn, teachers must allow students to make connections with the self, the text and the other in a process of dynamic learning.

Suh and Samuel (2011) stated the importance of multicultural literature as an inclusive process in the classroom and the community where students live and interact. They called for a multicultural model that uses quality literature to help students become critical participants of a complex and a diverse society. O'Hara and Pritchard (2008) placed great significance on providing students ways in which they can interact with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The scholars argue that teachers must provide students with the opportunity to delve into the language of diversity and how language represents people from diverse cultures, ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Cozbar (2013) called for an in depth analysis of language in multicultural books.

This is due to the worldview that language is a rhetorical and narrative process. Cozbar (2103) contended that language is a core component of human experience. Symbols in language in the forms of words and image such as pictures or any kind of illustration create and define the symbolic meaning we find in books. Cozbar (2103) explained that language as a system of meaning making constructs and defines the reality we live in. Language is a container of meaning and experience. Cozbar (2013) concluded the analysis on the symbolic power of language by pointing out that it permeates the perception of diversity in students. Critical analysis of language and representation is paramount to support students' critical understanding of diversity.

Teachers Providing the Environment

Teachers can be just as important as parents when it comes to influencing their students. Teachers have the opportunity to help students become global citizens in the 21st century. Nieto (2013) wrote, "Sociocultural mediation is important because literacy is not just about learning to decode; rather, it is a social practice that cannot be separated from the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in which it takes place" (p.16). Teachers have the ethical and moral responsibility to support students' critical understanding of diversity from the complex perspective of politics, culture and language. If students are supported in making critical choices on the multicultural books to read, they become the main conduit of a sociocultural and sociopolitical mediation among

diversity in a complex society.

One crucial aspect of multicultural literature in the classroom is to help teachers be aware of their own prejudices and biases and to reduce them to teach critical understating of diversity to their students with ethics and professional demeanor. Lopez (2011) claimed, “Teachers who embrace the belief that schools are important in creating a socially just society must teach in culturally relevant ways that take into consideration how all students experience the curriculum” (p.75). Teachers need to know the classroom dynamics from a cultural, linguistic and ethnic/racial perspective and be able to navigate the curriculum around them. Teachers need to know what the students believe and their cultural and linguistic trajectories. Multicultural literature must help students take a step forward to see beyond their cultural and linguistic boundaries to become agents of change in a diverse and complex society.

One crucial aspect of multicultural literature and the curriculum is the preparation of teachers to teach for diversity. The vast majority of teachers in schools are white, middle class with a monoculture background (Jones, 2011). Teachers who come from a dominant white culture are not always aware of what it is like not to be white in school, and how that can affect one’s educational experience. According to Jones (2011), these teachers need to become aware and understand the challenges of being a person of color or a person that does not belong to the mainstream white culture. In a critical discussion of Sleeter’s analysis of white pre-service teachers, Jimenez (2014) pointed out that the teachers did not recognize the amount of racial inequality that existed in schools with a

high degree of diversity. As Jimenez (2014) explained, some white teachers have stereotypical views about low expectations for students of color in relation to their literacy achievement and reading engagement. In turn, they have a color blind approach to literacy education and multicultural literature in particular.

O’Hara and Pritchard (2008) discussed changes that can be made to reduce a colorblind approach to literacy education in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. O’Hara and Pritchard (2008) presented a model of e-portfolio that teachers must complete where artifacts, evidence, and reflections show grow in diversity and commitment to serve a diverse student population. The e-portfolio is a demonstration that teachers are aware of diversity and teach a culturally appropriate curriculum that meets students’ needs. According to O’Hara and Pritchard, this is just one of the different tools we can use to help teachers become aware of diversity in teaching across the curriculum to help students become literate in a complex society.

Multicultural literature is an important tool that must be used effectively by teachers. In order to do so, teachers need to be aware of their own shortcomings, especially when it comes to diversity and cultural knowledge (Szecsi et.al, 2010). Teachers need to be more willing to open their minds to the possibility that what they think and know about others might be wrong or not aligned with their philosophy of education and worldview. In a study carried out with teacher candidates, Szecsi et al. (2010) found that these preserv-

ice teachers had a limited knowledge of diverse cultures along with some stereotypes and misconceptions. The majority of preservice teachers in the study were not aware that their biases prevented them from looking at the curriculum from a more diverse and inclusive perspective.

Strategies for Teaching Multicultural Literature

Connecting with the text

Teachers who use multicultural literature in the classroom need to provide a balance between giving students background information about the text and gradually releasing responsibility to the students to critically analyze the text. Scaffolding in the form of providing support and modeling throughout the reading and analysis of the text provide students a fertile ground to connect with the text and to contextualize its content and meaning at a deeper level of learning (Colby & Lyon, 2004).

When students are not familiar with a culture and its complex web of meanings, the teacher must provide culture sensitive material to create a background for the story. Community resources, artifacts, and visual media are effective tools to scaffolding students in entering in a critical conversation with the text. Also, an interdisciplinary approach to multicultural literature is another effective way to supporting students' ability to see the other in literature (Colby & Lyon, 2004). Teachers can introduce the music, drama, and the folklore related to the text to socially, culturally and historically front the deeper meaning of the language that captures the multicultural experience embedded in the text.

Students in a classroom where literature

comes alive are encouraged to explore their own biases and go beyond their comfortable intellectual and cultural boundaries. Students are empowered to reach out and collaborate with others in their classroom and to see that different thoughts, beliefs, and viewpoints are part of the diverse landscape in the 21st century. As Rosenblatt (1995) contended, the literary work becomes the locus of shared experiences where students critically respond to the text. In this context, the teacher support students' analysis of the text by using thought provoking questions to enhance students' connections to the literature and to lay out the foundations of a culture sensitive curriculum in the classroom (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995).

Dismantling Prejudice

Multicultural literature helps students to confront their own prejudice by an in depth self-reflection on the language and content of the text read. Teachers should make sound choice to align the text to the curriculum and the content of instruction. Dietrich and Ralph (1995) strongly advocated for teachers to find the right text to begin the process to reflect back to what prejudice can do to us. They reminded us that an exclusionary culture in literacy can potentially lead us to obscure important contributions from non-mainstream authors. They also reminded us that important works of literature can become the blueprint of a systematic and critical discussion on what it means to be diverse in the US. The responsibility of the teacher is to provide guided instruction and activities that show students how to respond to text and reflect on their own beliefs and biases.

Multicultural literature is the locus

where students can see their own biases and prejudice via a vicarious experience (Rosenblatt, 1995). It is crucial that teachers help students see how prejudice is often deeply rooted in a sociocultural and sociohistorical process in a community. Teachers can unfold and critically analyze this condition by using multicultural literature to see the trajectories of prejudice and biases in the community where students live and interact. In turn, multicultural literature help students become aware and understand the complexity of issues related to cultures in society.

Conclusion

The world in which we live and interact as educators has become a complex place, a kaleidoscope of cultures and languages where diversity is not the exception but the norm. It is important that our schools recognize these changing cultural and linguistic landscapes to help teachers support students in the 21st century. Multicultural literature is one important avenue towards diversity. However, teachers need to recognize its importance and find ways to infuse the curriculum with diversity. As Rosenblatt (1995) put it,

In a turbulent age, our schools and colleges must prepare the student to meet unprecedented and unpredictable problems. He [She] needs to understand himself [herself]; he [she] needs to work harmonious relationships with other people. He [she] must achieve a philosophy, an inner center from which to view in perspective the shifting society about him [her]...Any knowledge about human kind and society that school can give him [her] should be assimilated into

the stream of his [her] actual life. (p. 3)

The focus of future research should be on how students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds feel about the literature and texts they are reading in U.S. schools. This line of research could give new insights to the way teachers think about their classroom and the way they choose quality literature for their students to meet the diversity needs of the 21st century K-12 schools in the U.S.

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