

Developing Cultural Competence through Problem Posing and Multicultural Children's Literature

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Abstract

Increasing diversity in Kansas elementary schools is challenging educators to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students effectively. Unfortunately, research shows teachers as lacking in necessary cultural competencies. This article shares a multicultural picture book action-research project and shows how pre-service teachers constructed pedagogy by selecting literature that drew upon their students' funds of knowledge. Implementation of the same project in practicing teachers' classrooms revealed their self-reflections of students' cultural connections frequently, but more often, the teachers' reflections focused on students' connections to the curriculum. This observation prompted an alternative problem-posing approach for utilizing multicultural literature to be presented for teachers.

Implementing multicultural children's literature...has helped me to see that my students grow up different than I did and come from different backgrounds and have different families than I do, and it is something I need to remember when planning for my students... [and] not try to get students to fit into the way I feel comfortable teaching... (Pre-service teacher's self-reflection after reading aloud a multicultural picture book in a practicum setting - March, 2012).

Transforming one's cultural landscape, as this pre-service teacher's reflection demonstrates, requires examining one's personal understandings and recognizing "vacancies" in previous experiences—holes that when recognized leave lasting impressions and prompt one to change the "status quo in education" (Szecsi, Spillman, Vázquez-Montilla, & Mayberry, 2010, p. 44). Teacher education programs have worked at bringing about changes in mainstream education and particularly the cultural competencies of their candidates for some time (Ming & Dukes, 2006). Incorporating multicultural educational training to facilitate candidates' awareness, knowledge, and skills to more successfully teach students from cultures other than their own is common (Pang, Stein, Gomez, Matas, & Shimogori, 2011). Unfortunately, research shows that while practicing teachers are aware and knowledgeable of diversity issues and support multicultural teaching, they fail to consistently and effectively implement cultural practices in their classrooms (Leighton & Harkins, 2010). Such evidence, coupled with the growing diversity in our Kansas elementary classrooms (Center for Public Education, 2009), urges us, as literacy teacher educators, to seek ways that better develop our pre-service and (ultimately) practicing teachers' cultural competencies.

As such, the intent of this article is to share our multicultural picture book action-research project (Author & Author, 2012) and show how pre-service teachers construct pedagogy by selecting literature that draws upon their students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). We also examine how such pedagogy alone does not result in culturally competent teachers with "behaviors that illustrate culturally sensitive interactions with diverse groups" (Leighton & Harkins, 2010) and offer an approach for how elementary teachers might utilize multicultural literature to further deepen their cultural teaching competencies.

Cultural Competence and Multicultural Literature

According to Ming & Dukes (2006), a teacher's cultural competence is measured by how successful he/she is at teaching students from cultures other than his/her own. It involves teachers' knowing how to "tap into the diverse cultures of their students to make learning meaningful and comprehensible" (Pang et al., 2011, p. 560). Teachers can design effective cultural pedagogy by bringing together students, instructional methods, and "materials that are imbued with cultural patterns of students' everyday lives" (Hefflin, 2002, pp. 232-33). Multicultural literature is such material because it reflects the values, facts, and attitudes or the deep structure of a culture, as well as its historical perspectives (Szecsi et al., 2006). Because "it is a safe place to display culture in an interactive and positive way (teacher candidate's self-reflection)," we developed an action-research multicultural picture book project for our teacher candidates. Each semester, we review the project data, modify and enhance the project, and consider how multicultural literature can impact both pre-service and practicing teachers' cultural competencies. Our reflections help us determine how we, as teacher educators, can facilitate candidates' transformation into culturally responsive educators.

Multicultural Picture Book Project

Our multicultural picture book project began with pre-service teachers' inquiry of quality, dual-language children's picture books—books that reflected the most prominent languages in their practicum settings. Each teacher candidate selected and researched one picture book to share orally with his/her class members. Their presentations included research, a selected oral reading, evaluation of the picture book in terms of its quality as a multicultural literacy tool, and classroom application ideas. As our candidates reflected upon this assignment, 98% of them reported that the use of these books had raised their awareness of such literature as effective tools for increasing cultural sensitivity.

To increase our candidates' inquiry and depth of investigation relative to multicultural literature, we added technological tools—Glogster (www.glogster.edu/) and VoiceThread™—to the picture book project. Through technology, our pre-service teachers probed for additional content and thus enhanced their knowledge of a book itself, the author, illustrator, and thematic implications by examining the literature from varying perspectives.

Our candidates' cultural knowledge has been most impacted by the requirement that they implement the book in a read-aloud within their practicum classroom that draws upon their students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Sixty-seven percent of their self-reflections following these read-aloud events showed how multicultural literature as a pedagogical tool helped them to see how such methodology framed their students' cultural references and responses instead of their own.

Beyond the Multicultural Picture Book Project

Recently, we extended the multicultural picture book project to practicing teachers—two kindergarten teachers in a diverse, urban elementary school. Using similar procedures and action-research methodology, we observed how multicultural literature impacted their pedagogical understandings, as they, too, read aloud selected picture books based upon their students' funds of knowledge. While the teachers often reflected upon the children's cultural connections to the books (32% of their self-reflections), they more often reflected (nearly 66%) upon how the children interacted with the literature relative to the reading curriculum (characters, inferences, vocabulary, etc.). Such observations suggest to us that pre-service and practicing teachers' implementation of multicultural literature read alouds is not enough. As Ming & Dukes (2006) noted, using these materials as "add-on[s]" (p. 46) within school routines will not transform the mainstream reading curriculum. Additional strategies are needed to help teachers design and consistently practice culturally relevant pedagogy. Thus, the use of literature within a problem-posing approach is offered.

Problem-posing with Multicultural Literature

Quintero (2004) maintains that "problem-posing teaching using children's literature supports meaningful learning" (p. 57). An example of problem-posing with multicultural literature is a recent group of Kansas elementary students inquiring, "How does need and access to clean water affect children all over the world?" These particular students were learning about the country of Ethiopia in preparation of their teacher's forthcoming educational visit. To do this, they participated in the reading of several children's books about Ethiopia: *The Perfect Orange*, *The Storyteller's Beads*, *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Only a Pigeon*. Additionally, they studied a book entitled *Our World of Water* by Beatrice Hollyer. While the first books provided a historical and cultural understanding of Ethiopia and her people, the book by Hollyer provided a means for students to connect personally to the children in Ethiopia via a common topic—the availability and use of water.

The students engaged in meaningful conversations based upon their knowledge about the uses of water, yet their understanding was limited by personal experiences. How was water used, accessed, and valued by others throughout the world? Through studying the literature, the students considered multiple perspectives in determining how access to clean water might affect the opportunity students have to attend school, remain healthy, and/or take care of family and animals. They took a field trip to a nearby river and wrote stories to share what they had learned. After illustrating the stories, and leaving

room on the page for translation into Amharic, a predominant language in Ethiopia, their teacher took the books to Ethiopia, so that Ethiopian students could learn about rivers in Kansas. Truly, with the help of children's literature, these Kansas students reflected on meaningful concepts in profound ways.

Our suggested approaches with multicultural literature can help Kansas teachers reconceptualize pedagogies relevant to CLD students, for such transformations may foster their cultural competencies and ultimately impact children.

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