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USING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE ACROSS CURRICULUM TO FOSTER
AN UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY

by
Nina Stubblebine

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
June 18, 2009

Approved by _____
Advisor

Date Approved June 22, 2009

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ABSTRACT

Nina Stubblebine

USING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE ACROSS CURRICULUM TO FOSTER AN UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY

2008/09

Dr. Susan Browne

Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this teacher research was to (a) use multicultural literature across curriculum to foster an understanding and acceptance of diversity and (b) examine more deeply how using multicultural literature in this manner might impact student learning, teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships and the overall environment of an elementary school classroom. In response to a cross-curricular multicultural literature unit, the four first grade self-contained participants of this study demonstrated progression from a recognition of physical differences to an acceptance of diversity. My methods for data collection were: keeping a teacher journal, conducting teacher interviews, informal student interviews, read-alouds, audio recordings of student discussion, daily observations and student response activities, such as role playing and drawings. Student responses are analyzed in terms of the impact of multicultural literature on student attitudes, behavior, and learning. The students were able to apply a newfound view of diversity to their daily classroom interactions with one another. Also discussed are the benefits and challenges of using multicultural literature within a special education setting.

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CHAPTER I

Foundations of the Study

Introduction

During the middle of Language Arts/Reading Centers I heard Giavanna's voice urgently calling me from the corner of the classroom, behind the bookshelf, where center 4 is located. Again, I heard, "Miss Nina, Miss Nina!" and as I rounded the corner of the bookshelf her wide-eyed open face stared up at me innocently. "Miss Nina, Maurice said the 'N-word,' but it's OK, because he said it at home." There was a naïve, questioning look in her face.

At first, I stood there for roughly thirty seconds, considering their age. I was unsure how I should address Giavanna's statement. I stared at Maurice as he sat there across from Giavanna at the small table, scowling at her. Then I quickly pulled myself together, trying to handle the situation as best I could – wasn't this one of those teachable moments my professors were always talking about? But how could I address what had just happened in a way that would help these students understand the severity and the implications behind saying the "N-word"? What was the most important issue here; was it a general understanding and acceptance of others or was there a bigger picture? Was there a possibility of counteracting notions of prejudice and racism before they took root and developed into something more? I felt an overwhelming responsibility to help Maurice and Giavanna – two students from such different backgrounds – understand and accept one another.

I knelt down to their level and began to address each of them individually. I faced Giovanna but spoke loudly enough for Maurice to hear, “That word Maurice used is a very strong, hurtful word, and just because he used it at home does not make it OK. That is not a word one should use, no matter where or to whom one may be speaking.” Then I turned to Maurice, whose eyes were now downcast, and spoke kindly but sternly to him. “I know you are a kind boy and that you don’t want to hurt anybody. Just because you may have heard someone older use that word does not mean it is an OK word. You need to understand that words are powerful things and that once you say them out loud you can never take them back or erase them. We are all different and that is not a bad thing, but rather a wonderful thing. We should never make fun of someone for being different, or use words that might hurt that person. Instead we should try to learn about people who aren’t like ourselves, and maybe they can learn about us too.” Then I stood up, “I want you both to remember that. Now please get back to your work and remember that you are supposed to be working individually. If you need help, please raise your hand and I or one of the other teachers will assist you.”

I was disturbed by what had just happened. Young as they are, how can I better understand my students? How can we as educators, counter ideas of racism and prejudice before they become ingrained in students? It should start at a young age, preschool or kindergarten even, because this is the period in their lives when children are most impressionable. During this significant point of their lives it is important to lay down a strong, well-rounded foundation of knowledge.

These thoughts led to the formation of my research question. Since first grade is such a critical point in a child’s education, where they learn to grasp or master many

preliminary skills and ideas, it is an important time to begin addressing the issues that surround race and diversity. If children are not exposed to these ideas, if they are not able to see both sides of the coin so to speak, then they will never have an opportunity to form their own views and opinions, or alter previous notions. Through multicultural education, educators can lace the preliminary years of school with content that introduces and explores diversity while also teaching the basics of reading, writing, math, science and social studies.

I began to think about all the college courses in which I had discussed the importance of multicultural education and the challenges and difficulties that arise when educators try to implement or utilize multicultural aspects across curriculum. These two particular students, Maurice and Giavanna, had made significant progress in the areas of reading and writing since September, which led me to analyze how literature could be juxtaposed across subject areas to promote an acceptance of diversity within the classroom. If this idea could be employed across curriculum, students could build their literacy skills while also obtaining a multicultural education. But how can one use multicultural literature with students who are still learning or struggling to read and write? Are there books for lower level readers that can address issues of race, culture, diversity, racism, and prejudice even as they are trying to read them independently? How can multicultural literature be incorporated across curriculum when there are barely enough minutes in the school day to teach what is absolutely necessary?

Purpose Statement

“Fictional literature, whether in the form of a novel or a story, a poem or play, represents a reflection of human life and thought” (Merriam, 1988, p. 62). Literature is a

powerful tool that can be used across curriculum, through which educators can motivate students and turn them onto learning. It can also be used to better explain or to reinforce information. I believe Merriam's words resound with truth when looking critically at any type of literature. Merriam (1988) highlights the possibilities of the positive effects of literature:

Given its powerful evocative potential, literature represents a promising vehicle for promoting increased sensitivity and understanding among people of different races and cultures. Fiction can serve as a window through which the reader can see the inner workings of another value system. (p. 62)

If students are able to understand value systems other than their own, it may be possible to create a stronger, more amicable learning community, one in which differences associated with race and culture are embraced and accepted because the complexities of diversity are better understood.

Books can be used to help children develop a sense of identity, an awareness of the ways in which they are different from others, knowledge about their own and other cultures, and skills to relate effectively with people of different cultural backgrounds. (Kim, Green & Klein, 2006, p. 226)

Research has found positive effects from the use of culture-specific literature in reducing problem behaviors among students and fostering positive peer relationships (Kim, Green & Klein, 2006). Using multicultural literature in the classroom can also improve teacher-student relationships (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2008).

Through my research study I set out to explore how educators can incorporate multicultural literature across subject areas. I hope to examine how using multicultural

literature in this manner might impact student learning, teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and the overall environment of an elementary school classroom. Effective and accurate implementation of multicultural education is very difficult to achieve, especially with all the subjects and skills educators are required to teach. By effective and accurate, I mean that the practice of multicultural education must go beyond the mere discussion of various holidays or cultural practices. Multicultural education must be much more complex to be effective and produce positive results. A presentation and explanation of diversity will not suffice; multicultural education is based on an inquiry and exploration of the implications of diversity on our personal lives, society, and the world at large. The purpose of this study is to raise awareness about the benefits of using multicultural literature within one's classroom and to expose some of the challenges in doing so, in the hopes that other educators might be able to better meet these challenges.

Statement of Research Problem and Question

As the population of the United States becomes increasingly more diverse, it is extremely important to create both classrooms and college level education programs that spread awareness and acceptance regarding the different races and ethnicities of this country. It is imperative to address diversity in order to best educate students because of the various different races and cultures present in student bodies. My research problem is based on the need for multicultural awareness and instruction in schools. My central question focuses on how multicultural literature can be used across curriculum to aid in more effective and powerful instruction. How will using multicultural literature in this manner effect student-teacher relationships, relationships among students, and academic

performance? Can it help to foster an understanding and acceptance of diversity within the classroom?

Story of the Question

As a graduate student in a regular and special education certification program, and as a practicum student and pre-service teacher, the implications of diversity on teaching and learning are especially important to me. One of the most valuable lessons I have taken away from my field work is that it is especially important to get to know as much as possible about one's students. I have learned that this means not only knowing their strengths and weaknesses academically, but also taking an interest in their culture and family background.

Diversity can affect a teacher's instruction, as well as both teacher and student learning. A teacher who has an open mind, who accepts diversity, is a teacher who creates a positive learning environment for students who will strive to attain higher skills and knowledge. I believe that forming a solid relationship with a student begins with learning about that student's background. Getting to know one's students is important if one wishes to be an understanding, empathetic and caring teacher, one who is able to form good relationships with students, whose students want to and are able to relate to them – no matter what racial or ethnic background the students might be. Establishing firm relationships with students is one of the first steps in helping them succeed in school, and allows an educator to impart information in a manner in which students can relate to and thus more easily comprehend. If educators are able to understand how a student's personal history and culture play into his or her learning, they can understand how to structure and present information in a way that is most suitable to that particular child. I

feel this knowledge provides the basis for creating effective and appropriate lessons, assessments, accommodations, and modifications – thus making information easier for students to grasp and comprehend.

The incident with Giavanna and Maurice, two first grade students in my Clinical I internship classroom, prompted me to arrive at my research question. There is no doubt in my mind that many improvements can be made to the current state of the school system in the United States. While finding better ways to educate our students and enable them to succeed should always be a top priority for educators, I also feel that in some cases it is important to look past academic factors and examine the social and emotional factors. This is where knowledge about students' personal lives and histories comes into play.

Yes, academics are extremely important. But while we must also look at the scope and sequence of education, it is important not to forget about the well being of the student. In the long run, and in some cases, it may be more important to give students those things that they might not receive in their home environment. By this I mean providing the support, care and guidance that a foster child, an orphan, or a child from a broken or unstable home, does not get when they go home each day. As teachers we have a profound influence on our students' futures. We have the power to assist them in reaching their full potential, and making them realize the capacity of their abilities. Sometimes going that extra mile, forming a real connection with a student and gaining an understanding of them personally, can make all the difference in the world. I feel that this can be achieved through the use of multicultural education.

I believe that multicultural education is a path not only to a better educated and more informed student body, but also to a better and more accepting society as well.

Fully and successfully practicing multicultural education is probably one of the biggest challenges educators face. But embracing this fact can lead to a national education system that breeds and promotes an understanding and acceptance of all individuals. While this may sound idealistic, failure to implement multicultural education universally could be a missed opportunity for a stronger, more efficient educational system, a better-educated society – and a more harmonious one as well.

Limitations and Influencing Factors

As with any research study, this thesis is sure to encounter limitations. However, in my situation there are several limitations, rather obstacles or difficulties, I have anticipated may arise. At this point, a huge factor, the context of my study is unknown. Demographics and grade level are going to have a large impact on the results of this study. It is my assumption that the primary grades, such as kindergarten, first, or second grade, will be ripe with challenges as I attempt to engage my students in critical and even abstract thinking, while introducing and probing ideas and issues associated with race and diversity. Where as older students, such as third, fourth or fifth grade, may provide me with more provocative responses and more concrete data.

In terms of diversity, I have speculated this study might generate more interesting results in a diverse setting. I believe in a diverse classroom students might be able to learn more from one another, from first hand interaction, than in a homogeneous classroom. Varying vs. static socio-economic factors will also undoubtedly weigh heavily on the outcomes of this study. Students in a largely upper class community will not have the same responses as those living in a mostly urban, or lower class community. However, no matter what the context or complications may be, it is important to

remember that the implications multicultural teaching possesses in regards to student learning are invaluable to both students and educators.

Lastly, I would like to note time as a large limitation of the study. As I will be conducting this research during my student teaching, which in and of itself is a huge undertaking with many requirements, I will not be given the full freedom to implement this study as I might if it were in my own classroom. I will be limited to my cooperating teacher's schedule and whatever time he or she allots me to implement my lessons and collect my data.

Taking a Deeper Look: Practicality vs. Reality

In order to better understand how an educator might use multicultural literature to create a stronger learning community within the classroom, the next five chapters will take a deeper look at the factors involved in the practice of multicultural education. Ideally, in a learning community that fosters an understanding and acceptance of diversity, teachers and students will have better relationships, students will have better relationships with one another, and overall a higher level of academic achievement can be reached. The next chapter will focus on reviewing existing literature and research that pertain to the topic. The third chapter will outline the context of the study and the research design. The fourth and fifth chapters will present the details and analysis of my research and findings based on the implementation of a multicultural literature unit.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

“America has always been a tale of peoples trying to be a People, a tale of diversity and plurality in search of unity. Cleavages among [diverse groups] ...have irked and divided Americans from the start, making unity a civic imperative as well as an elusive challenge.”

(Benjamin Barber, 1992, p. 41)

This chapter will present a review of literature that responds to the central question of how multicultural literature can be used across curriculum to strengthen student-teacher relationships, relationships among students, and students' academic performance, in addition to fostering an understanding and acceptance of diversity within a first grade classroom. The goal of this review is to provide the reader with the background knowledge necessary to understand both the importance and the potential impact multicultural literature can have on student academic performance. Studies conducted in 2004 and 2005 found 42% of public schools were made up of racial or ethnic minority groups, and 10.5 million school-age children spoke a language other than English in their homes (Saifer & Barton, 2007). As the population of the United States becomes increasingly more diverse it is extremely important to create both primary and secondary classrooms and college level education programs that spread awareness and acceptance regarding a plethora of different races and ethnicities in order to best educate

the youth of America. Research has indicated that poor school performance may be associated with an inconsistency that exists between the cultural norms of student's families or communities and those entrenched in public school policies, practices, and expectations (Saifer & Barton, 2007).

The first section of this review will focus on an explanation of why it is important to incorporate multicultural education into every classroom by defining the topic and examining existing research. The second section will discuss existing research regarding the affects of diversity upon teaching and learning, encompassing factors such as the value of teachers' self-reflection on their own racial views or prejudices and knowledge of students' backgrounds. The third section will identify the benefits of practicing culturally responsive teaching. The fourth section will analyze the effectiveness of multicultural literature and compare theory vs. practice of multicultural literature in the classroom and across curriculum. Lastly, the review will summarize why these factors are important and how they can contribute to furthering an understanding and acceptance of differences within the United States school system.

What is Multicultural Education and Why is it Important?

In her article "Genres of research in multicultural education" which appears in *Review of Educational Research*, scholar Christine Bennett (2001) writes:

I describe the field of multicultural education as a hopeful and idealistic response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s that developed into a Black Power movement and spread to include many other minority groups, including women. (p. 171)

She notes that while the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision sparked a rise in “expectations and aspirations for equal opportunity and social justice, especially in public education,” since then a great number of minority youths in the United States have been disproportionately placed in special education, or attend schools that only cater to the dominant Anglo-European perspective (Bennett, 2001, p. 171). The sphere of multicultural education is complex and interdisciplinary. It continues to evolve and is not as clear-cut as it may appear to be.

Bennett (2001) divides the genres of research in multicultural education into four clusters: curriculum reform, equity pedagogy, multicultural competence, and societal equity. Her conceptual framework is useful in understanding how multifaceted multicultural education is. Bennett (2001) has based the structure of this framework on four broad principles of multicultural education which she has identified through her research: cultural pluralism theory; ideals of social justice and the end of racism, sexism, and other types of prejudice or discrimination; affirmations of culture through teaching and learning; and the belief that educational equity and excellence can lead to higher learning for all students.

The first principle of her framework, the theory of cultural pluralism, was first developed in the early 20th century. It is an idealistic theory based on the democratic principles of equity and social justice (Bennett, 2001). It advocates a society in which every ethnic group is able to keep its own culture and heritage intact while still maintaining a national identity (Bennett, 2001). Bennett’s (2001) second principle, social justice and equity for minorities, is taken from this notion that as a society we should accept multiple diversities and eradicate structural inequalities related to race, ethnicity,

class, or gender. During the 1970s and 1980s, founding multicultural education scholars (e.g. Baker, 1983; J.A. Banks, 1970, 1973; Cortés, 1973; Forbes, 1973; Gay, 1973; Grant, 1978; Suzuki, 1979, 1984) were primarily focused on balancing out the racial inequalities of a society founded on and maintained by White privilege (Bennett, 2001). Their writing focused on uncovering and examining deeply rooted structural injustices and systematic patterns of dominance and suppression that kept African Americans from obtaining material and political equality (Bennett, 2001). It is important to note that the idea of righting social inequalities and eliminating racial discrimination and prejudice has been a part of multicultural education since the beginning.

The third principle rests on the influence of culture on both teaching and learning. This principle especially relates to the central question as it can weigh heavily upon student-teacher relationships, relationships among students, and overall academic success. Research increasingly indicates that multicultural education makes schooling more relevant and effective for minorities, enabling them to reach higher levels of academic achievement and performance (Gay, 2004). Using multicultural education and culturally relevant teaching can have a huge impact on academics because it allows educators to deliver information with relevance to students who might otherwise not respond to curriculum that is based on the dominant White Anglo-Saxon perspective. “Students perform more successfully on all levels when there is greater congruence between their cultural backgrounds and such school experiences as task interest, effort, academic achievement, and feelings of personal efficacy or social accountability” (Gay, 2004, p. 34).

While Nieto (2003) supports the idea that multicultural education can assist

students in improving their academics, she is also extremely concerned about the inequalities that are deeply rooted within the American school system and how to address this pressing problem. Nieto (2003) writes:

I define multicultural education as an anti-racist education that is firmly related to student learning and permeates all areas of schooling (Nieto, 1994). It is a hopeful way to confront the widespread and entrenched inequality in U.S. schools because its premise is that students of all backgrounds and circumstances can learn and achieve to high levels, and – even more essential – that they deserve to do so. Multicultural education needs to be accompanied by a deep commitment to social justice and equal access to resources. Multicultural education needs, in short, to be about much more than ethnic tidbits and cultural sensitivity. (p. 7)

These ideas relate to Bennett's (2001) fourth principle, the link between equity and education excellence, which is another primary idea behind the origin of multicultural education. Bennett (2001) emphasizes that equity in education, which means to provide equal opportunities for all students to reach their fullest potential, should not be confused with the notion that all students must reach identical levels of academic success. As Bennett (2001) points out, this distinction is important because it is the basis behind understanding different methods or styles of instruction that take into account the need to make modifications in the curriculum to accommodate a multiracial student body. Students of different ethnicities can bring distinct learning styles into the classroom environment and it is a teacher's responsibility to address those differences.

These four principles -- cultural pluralism, social equity for minorities, the impact of culture on teaching and learning, and equitable expectations for student learning -- are

the fundamentals of multicultural education (Bennett, 2001). Combined, they are used to create an ideology upon which Bennett (2001) has based the four genre clusters of multicultural education, under which multiple sub-genres exist. These sub-genres further explore the complexities and various categories of multicultural education.

Gay (2004) emphasizes that multicultural education both is an important step towards increasing the academic success of minorities and in preparing all youths for participation in a democratic, pluralistic society. “Students need to understand how multicultural issues shape the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of the United States as well as how such issues fundamentally influence their personal lives” (Gay, 2004, p. 30). For multicultural education to become pervasive it must critically analyze the social inequalities of our society (Crow, 2008). “Multicultural education is much more than a few lessons about ethnically diverse individuals and events or a component that operates on the periphery of the education enterprise” (Gay, 2004, p. 33). Multicultural education must extend beyond using culturally relevant pedagogy or possessing an awareness of cultural differences and understanding how they affect student learning. In the words of Nieto (2003), it also requires an examination of “the sociopolitical context of education, and school policies and practices” (p. 8).

It is also important to stress that multicultural education must be *for and about all students*, not just centered on African Americans or Hispanics, or other minorities (Crow, 2008). According to Nieto,

Everyone has been miseducated if we just have a monocultural education. The world is not monocultural, the U.S. is not monocultural. If we really want to prepare students

for the world as it is, we need to include all students through a multicultural perspective. (Crow, 2008, p. 56)

Gay (2004), suggests that in order to establish a multicultural perspective within a school it is important to thoroughly utilize and incorporate multicultural education across the curriculum:

Virtually all aspects of multicultural education are interdisciplinary. As such, they cannot be adequately understood through a single discipline. For example, teaching students about the causes, expressions and consequences of racism and how to combat racism requires the application of information and techniques from such disciplines as history, economics, sociology, psychology, mathematics, literature, science, art, politics, music, and health care. (p. 32)

However, all educators do not view multicultural education as a necessity of quality education. In practice, multicultural education has not yet become central to the development of curriculum (Gay, 2004). Some educators integrate it primarily with social studies, language arts, and the fine arts, and have generally targeted instruction for students of color, while others claim they do not have the time or the knowledge necessary to implement elements of multicultural education (Gay, 2004). This results in an inconsistent, sometimes sporadic and superficial implementation of multicultural education – if any implementation exists at all (Gay, 2004).

Implications of Diversity Within the Classroom

Gay (2004) stresses the profound effect the presence of diversity can have on developing instructional strategies and programs that are able to effectively, positively, and constructively address issues of diversity at all levels of education. While cultural

groups may live in close physical proximity, “coexistence does not mean that people create genuine communities in which they know, relate to, and care deeply about one another” (Gay, 2004, p. 30). This “lack of a genuine community of diversity is particularly evident in school curriculums that still do not regularly and systematically include important information and deep study about a wide range of diverse ethnic groups” (Gay, 2004, p. 30).

Nieto argues that effective public education must be based on a multicultural perspective (Crow, 2008). Nieto feels that the American school system has a responsibility to create what John Dewey referred to as the “beloved community,” to create schools that serve the public good, schools with teachers who are able to teach students from diverse backgrounds (Crow, 2008). In addition to developing classrooms and curriculum that serve the multitude of races and ethnicities that exist within this country, it is vital to establish strong teacher preparation and professional development programs that can effectively enable educators to teach to students of all backgrounds. According to Nieto, this means preparing teachers “for the students they’ll face everyday” not just with skills, but with joy and enthusiasm as well (Crow, 2008, p. 55). Nieto states, “Skills are important, but the attitudes teachers go in with are equally important” (Crow, 2008, p. 55). In order to engage in culturally responsive and effective teaching, “Teachers need to learn about the communities in which they’ll be teaching and who their students are” (Crow, 2008, p. 55). Nieto attests, “Curriculum is important, but relationships with students are even more important” (Crow, 2008, p. 56).

According to members of the Multicultural Education Consensus Panel of 2007, effective professional development programs should help educators to teach students

from diverse backgrounds based on five criteria (Banks et al., 2001). In order to effectively educate a diverse population, a teacher must first be able to uncover and identify their personal attitudes toward racial, ethnic, language and cultural groups (Banks et al., 2001). Second, they must acquire knowledge about the histories and cultures of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and language groups (Banks et al., 2001). Third, they should become acquainted with the diverse perspectives that exist within these different ethnic and cultural communities (Banks et al., 2001). Fourth, it is imperative to understand the ways in which institutionalized knowledge within schools, universities, and the popular culture can perpetuate stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups (Banks et al., 2001). Lastly, teachers should acquire the knowledge and skills needed to develop and implement teaching strategies that are based on equity (Banks et al., 2001).

This criteria should help teachers understand how the characteristics of different ethnic groups interact with factors such as social class, religion, urbanization, etc. to affect ethnic and cultural behavior. Understanding this connection helps better prepare them to instruct a diverse student population by making content relevant to all students (Banks et al., 2001).

Research indicates the importance of reflection and the journal-writing process in preparing preservice teachers to best educate a diverse population of learners (Sobel et al., 2002). Many researchers argue that the preconceived notions and set of beliefs of teachers who are just starting out change over time through reflection and experience (Sobel et al., 2002). As attested by Cabello and Burstein (1995),

If we conceive of culture as a dynamic process of interaction, communication, socialization and education, then becoming culturally sensitive must also be a dynamic, ongoing process that includes knowledge, action and reflection. (p. 292)

Dewey (1933) contended that reflection allows educators to teach with foresight and to plan and direct activities accordingly.

According to Kruse (1997), consistently pairing inquiry and reflection allows one to “move beyond representations of difficulty and on to resolution” (p. 2). Sobel et al. (2002) agree with prior research that shows reflective teaching allows educators to understand how teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions are interrelated with their knowledge, skills, and behaviors in the classroom. Sobel et al. (2002) also agree that utilizing reflective teaching practices is part of the solution to preparing teachers to adequately teach a diverse student body. Sobel et al. (2002) emphasize that reflective journaling is also “an effective way for teacher educators to encourage preservice teachers to address issues of diversity within their own belief system and classroom practices” (p. 10).

D’Angelo and Dixey (2001) suggest teachers should ask themselves these three important questions when assessing their personal views on race:

- 1.) Do I believe some races are more capable of learning and/or have greater intelligence than other races?
- 2.) Do I model respectful and positive attitudes in the classroom for all races and ethnic groups?
- 3.) Do I integrate race and ethnic issues in the curriculum exclusively through thematic units, holidays, and celebrations? (p. 84)

Self-reflection can be a daunting and difficult process, one that requires brutal honesty and self-awareness in order to deduce or evaluate personal feelings and attitudes about race (D'Angelo & Dixey, 2001).

Recognizing the value of familiarizing oneself with students' backgrounds, as well as the value of a teacher's ability to engage in self-reflection about their own racial prejudices, are two cornerstones of practicing multicultural education. It is believed that teachers' racial identity and attitudes can affect their behaviors towards their students, which can result in either a positive or a negative effect on student self-esteem, the ability to learn and academic achievement (Tettegah, 1996). "Educational researchers have shown that many of the problems that occur in classrooms with regard to student achievement and opportunity to learn are due to what is typically called the "cultural mismatch" between teachers and students, a mismatch that can be more accurately tied to racial/ethnic differences" (Tettegah, 1996, p. 152).

This is not to say that teachers' racial attitudes are always explicit or conscious. Many times this "cultural mismatch" is the result of how racial identity, attitudes, and consciousness can affect an individual's perception of others (Tettegah, 1996). "Since prejudice is an attitude or belief, it is not always evident in a person's behavior. Prejudice may manifest itself in subtle, covert ways" (Tettegah, 1996, p. 152). "Prejudice plays a role in developing children's self-concept or self-esteem, their socialization with peers, and ultimately their confidence to perform and succeed in the classroom" (Carter & Rice, 1997, p. 186). This data shows why the process of self-reflection is of the utmost importance and value to an educator. Through self-reflection a teacher can re-evaluate both personal views and pedagogical practices, taking a closer look at how these two

factors might influence one another, and learning how to effectively model appropriate behaviors and attitudes within the classroom.

In addition to self-reflection, collaboration is a wonderful and effective method for examining, discussing, and practicing appropriate ways of teaching to diverse learners, especially if an educator is grappling with diversity issues in the classroom. Nieto says, “Caring comes about through contact, through knowledge, and that’s why I always go back to collaborative professional development, where teachers grapple with these things, they puzzle them out together, so that they become honest” (Crow, 2008, p. 55). In addition to learning about their students’ backgrounds and reflecting on their own racial views and practices, it is in the best interest of all teachers to heed Nieto’s advice by discussing and exploring the implications of diversity within their classrooms and with one another, in order to view and understand their students’ learning through a multicultural lens.

Culturally Responsive Practice

According to Nieto (2003):

An outgrowth of multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy is founded on the notion that – rather than deficits – students’ backgrounds are assets that students can and should use in the service of their learning and that teachers of all backgrounds should develop the skills to teach diverse students effectively. (p. 7)

Jones (2007) refers to culturally responsive instruction as a teaching style that “validates and incorporates students’ cultural background, ethnic history and current societal interests into daily, standards-based instruction” (p. 15). The Multicultural Education Consensus Panel of 2007 stated that culturally responsive teaching should include using

“relevant cultural metaphors and multicultural representations” to help ease the discrepancies between what students already know and appreciate and what they are being taught (Banks et al., 2001, p. 198). These kinds of strategies help teachers to transform information about home and community into effective classroom practice (Banks et al., 2001).

In essence, culturally responsive teaching is based on all of these ideas, and is considered by most to fall under the umbrella of multicultural education. This kind of instruction empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In order to be culturally responsive, Banks et al. (2001) believe it is important for teachers to get to *know their students* in order to best translate content and boost student achievement:

Rather than rely on generalized notions of ethnic groups that can be misleading, effective teachers use knowledge of their students' culture and ethnicity as a framework for inquiry. They also use culturally responsive activities, resources, and strategies to organize and implement instruction. (p. 198)

When discussing culturally responsive teaching it is helpful to acknowledge the way The Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning (2007) has defined and differentiated culture from class and race. The center says culture is:

The way life is organized within an identifiable community or group. This includes the ways that communities use language, interact with one another, take turns to talk, relate to time and space and approach learning. There are group patterns that exist, which reflect the standards or norms used by community members to make sense of the world.

Jones (2007) outlines several main components to successful culturally responsive teaching, and each is equally important: caring, communication, curriculum, instruction, and content standards. According to Gay (2000) caring is essential when practicing culturally responsive pedagogy; it is reflected in teacher behaviors and attitudes and in expectations of students' intelligence and performance. Feelings of caring and acceptance enable students to feel safe and take risks in the classroom (Jones, 2007). The following is an excerpt from Jones (2007):

As one eighth-grade African American student said, "Knowing that the teacher cares about me is the difference between responding when I know the answer for sure and raising my hand when I think I know the answer. But I know for sure that if I answer wrong, Ms. Smith will still like me and think I am smart." (p. 15)

Frequent and informative communication between teachers, families, and students is another component of culturally responsive teaching. This type of effective communication means more than an occasional note or phone call home – it is based on how teachers relate to families and how they use this information to communicate instruction to students (Jones, 2007). The way an individual communicates is a reflection of one's culture and influences academic performance (Jones, 2007). The manner in which an educator chooses to view and accept a student's background can either adversely or positively affect his or her teaching style and ability to form healthy teacher-student relationships.

Understanding and valuing the differences in cultural communication styles is the difference between seeing a student who is engaged but speaking loudly and out of turn as unruly or defiant, and seeing that as a moment to explicitly teach the student,

in a culturally respectful fashion, about the "code-switching" that is necessary for success in academic environments. This type of skill can only be acquired and used in environments where a student's culture is understood and respected, and where trust is a foundation for a positive student/teacher relationship. (Jones, 2007, p. 15)

The content of lessons also plays an important role in student learning, which is why it is so important to make that content not only understandable, but also *relevant* to students of different ethnicities through the delivery of curriculum. The only way for an educator to know how to make content relevant is for that educator to understand the background of his or her students. This means acknowledging contributions and accomplishments people of various ethnic groups have made to society and the common bank of knowledge (Jones, 2007).

When students see visions of people who look and live like those of their culture (both currently and historically), it not only breeds interest but also provides motivation for students to believe they can achieve, and that their achievement is not only expected but valued. (Jones, 2007, p. 16)

In her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Gay (2000) states "deliberately incorporating specific aspects of the cultural systems of different ethnic groups into instructional processes has positive impacts on student achievement." She discusses how studies have shown school achievement is positively correlated with teaching practices that reflect an awareness of "mental schemata, participation styles, work habits, thinking styles and experimental frames of reference of diverse ethnic groups" (Gay, 2000).

In terms of instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy is based on the principle that educators must also become perpetual students; we as educators must learn which teaching strategies work and which are ineffective, as we respond to a culturally diverse student body and learn from assessment data (Jones, 2007). According to Jones (2007),

If a certain style or pedagogy is not effective, we as educators must be fluid enough to work collaboratively and strategically to adjust our instructional processes so that they fit the needs of our students, even if that means trying methods that are new and uncomfortable. (p. 16)

It is critical to remember that culturally relevant teaching must be instilled in all areas of standards-based instruction because without this infusion, by only focusing on culture, student achievement will not improve (Jones, 2007). Again, the importance of collaboration as a key component in culturally responsive practice should be noted.

The Importance of Story: Using Multicultural Literature to Engage Students

According to D'Angelo and Dixey (2001), prejudice awareness should be integrated into school curriculum throughout the entire year. This is synonymous with the idea that multicultural education must be pervasive and interdisciplinary if it is to be successful (Nieto, 1994). If activities that strive to be multicultural are only based on ethnic holidays such as Cinco de Mayo, Kwanzaa, Martin Luther King Day, Hanukkah, etc., they do not allow children to enhance their perspectives and understanding of different ethnic groups (D'Angelo and Dixey, 2001). Instead, they create the illusion that multicultural matters are only to be linked with certain days (D'Angelo and Dixey, 2001). "Teachers need to be proactive in their approach to decrease racial prejudice by providing opportunities for children to learn about the historical background of all ethnic groups,

their connections to American society, and the individuals within these cultures”

(D’Angelo and Dixey, 2001, p. 84).

Children’s literature is a versatile, powerful, and useful tool within the classroom. It can be used to tailor instruction so that all children can learn. Multicultural literature can be used by both teachers and students, along with many other culturally responsive resources, to encourage positive racial attitudes within the classroom (D’Angelo and Dixey, 2001). Multicultural children’s literature is important because it has so many benefits: building content knowledge, improving vocabulary, comprehension, and sequencing skills, teaching children to read for pleasure, and fostering a love of reading (D’Angelo and Dixey, 2001). Multicultural literature can also be used by teachers to practice culturally responsive teaching by supplementing the standard curriculum though incorporating real life experiences to which students of diverse backgrounds can relate (D’Angelo and Dixey, 2001).

According to Stern (1985), stories are an initial part of the early stages of speech, when children begin to develop the ability to verbalize experiences and form relationships. Through stories children narrate experiences and share personal interpretations. Both children and adults “use narrative to shape and reshape their lives,” and thus stories “have interrelated evaluative and social functions” (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 2). In other words, stories are used to form relationships with others and express both inner and overt feelings about people and surrounding environments (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). Stories also represent reflections of ones own sense of cultural membership, and can be used by teachers to share students’ diversity and build

relationships among teachers and students within school and classroom settings (Dyson & Genishi, 1994).

According to Cai and Bishop (1994), if multicultural literature is to serve the goals of multicultural education reform, forming a clear understanding of its characteristics is inherent. Cai and Bishop (1994) note that these characteristics are not clearly defined, “among the curricular components of multicultural education, the label “multicultural” seems to be reserved for literature and to a lesser extent the arts.

Professional educational journals do not generally contain references to “multicultural social studies” or “multicultural history” (p. 58). Cai and Bishop (1994) speculate,

This may be because literature and the arts reach beyond the intellect to appeal to the senses. Some time ago, Dorsey (1977) pointed out the importance of literature in a pluralistic society. The juxtaposition of diverse cultural groups, he argued, inevitably leads to interference in communication among groups, which can be overcome only if individuals can transcend their own cultural limitations. (p. 58-59)

This leads to the conclusion that multicultural literature is anticipated among educators and scholars as an important feature of implementing multicultural instruction (Cai & Bishop, Dyson & Genishi, 1994).

When discussing multicultural literature in terms of its function in relation to the school curriculum and setting, educators should utilize its pedagogical definition (Cai & Bishop, 1994). Cai and Bishop (1994) state, “Rather than suggesting unifying literary characteristics, the [pedagogical] term implies a goal: challenging the existing canon by expanding the curriculum to include literature from a wide variety of cultural groups” (p. 59). This existing canon represents the domination of the white majority and its literature

in school curriculum (Cai & Bishop, 1994). A statement by Nieto further supports the value of multicultural literature identified through the pedagogical perspective:

Teachers have to encourage their students to learn about and grapple with the complexity of multiple perspectives because reality is always messier than what is presented in the standard curriculum. Students need to learn by talking to different people and reading different sources. (Crow, 2008, p. 56)

Norton (1991) also affirms these ideas: “Multicultural literature is literature about various minority ethnic groups that are culturally and socially different from the white Anglo-Saxon majority in the United States” (p.530).

In the words of Bishop and Cai (1994), multicultural literature is an effective way to aid in meeting the goals of multicultural education, “to open students’ (and teachers’) minds and hearts so that they learn to understand and value both themselves and people, perspectives, and experiences different from their own. Building a just and equitable society requires no less” (p. 69). As mentioned earlier in the review, studies have illustrated the effectiveness in the use of literature to promote an understanding and acceptance of diversity. It is in every educator’s best interest to use literature to create a positive close-knit learning community that is accepting of diversity.

Conclusions

I would like to stress the responsibility educators have to make multicultural education an integral part of everyday instruction. Gay (2004) writes about the skepticism educators voice concerning the importance of multicultural education in building academic skills and forming a cohesive learning community,

A fallacy underlies these conceptions and the instructional behaviors that they generate: the perception of multicultural education as separate content that educators must append to existing curriculums as separate lessons, units, or courses. Quite the contrary is true. Multicultural education is more than content; it includes policy, learning climate, instructional delivery, leadership, and evaluation (see Banks, 1994; Bennett, 2003; Grant & Gomez, 2000). In its comprehensive form, it must be an integral part of everything that happens in the education enterprise, whether it is assessing the academic competencies of students or teaching math, reading, writing, science, social studies, or computer science. Making explicit connections between multicultural education and subject-and skill-based curriculum and instruction is imperative. (p. 31)

In conjunction with this idea, I emphasize the power of literature as a vehicle for implementing multicultural education across curriculum, and developing multicultural sensitivity in schools:

Books can be used to help children develop a sense of identity, an awareness of the ways in which they are different from others, knowledge about their own and other cultures, and skills to relate effectively with people of different cultural backgrounds. (Kim, Green, & Klein 2006, p. 225)

Multicultural literature provides a pathway for discussion and exposure concerning issues of race and diversity, “offering children choice and ownership over the material that they are reading” (Kim, Green, & Klein 2006, p. 227). In addition, Kim, Green, and Klein (2006) note that as children increase their knowledge and awareness of other cultures and they gain knowledge and pride towards concerning their own culture,

their levels of ethnocentrism may decrease. In short, multicultural literature possesses immense potential for creating both a national school system that better educates its students, and a society that accepts and embraces diversity.

CHAPTER III

Research Content and Design

Introduction

Due to the rising percentage of minority populations in American public schools it is becoming increasingly more important to understand how to best educate this multitude of ethnic learners. Through this study I hoped to uncover the benefits of using multicultural literature in creating a better learning environment and close knit learning community.

During this study I engaged in teacher research through the use of open-ended qualitative data collection. Teacher research aims to address a problem and a purpose, however, the purpose is never to prove something but to find what can be *learned*. It is about engaging in inquiry and attempting to examine a problem in a new light. This type of research was the most appropriate to use for my study as I am currently a teacher candidate. As a future teacher and current graduate student it is important that I familiarize myself with the difficulties of implementing multicultural education, as I will undoubtedly encounter similar challenges when I have my own classroom. Teacher research allows one to be a perpetual student. It allows one to constantly engage in inquiry and self-reflection, thus continually working towards becoming a better educator. My methods for data collection were: keeping a teacher journal, conducting teacher interviews, informal student interviews, read-alouds, audio recordings of student discussion, daily observations, and student response activities, such as role playing and

drawing. Through the implementation of a cross-curricular multicultural literature unit, I hoped to identify both existing and potentially effective methods for using multicultural literature in order to boost student achievement levels and guide students in reaching an understanding and acceptance of one another's differences.

Context

This five-week study was conducted at an elementary school in southern New Jersey, in a special education setting. The participants were four 6-year old boys in a first grade self-contained classroom: Andy, Dan, Larry, and Marcus. Two students were classified as learning disabled, one student was classified as communication impaired, and another was diagnosed as cognitively impaired. These students required a good deal of redirection, behavioral modification support, and one-to-one support. Three students were White and one was African American.

The elementary school is located in a middle to upper class community. The population of the community is not very diverse; 90.2% White, 4.9% African American, 0.1% American Indian, 3.3% Asian, 2.0% Hispanic or Latino, and 1.0% Biracial (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census; ePodunk, 2007).

Research Design/Methodology

During the initial stage of my research I planned to do what I personally believe all teachers should do at the beginning of each school year. I wanted to get to know each of my students. During this time I informally asked each student particular questions from a survey I compiled based on relating literature I have read. Through conducting informal surveys I hoped to collect some general data regarding my students' families, cultural backgrounds, attitudes toward reading or listening to literature, and any previous

exposure to multicultural literature. I used this information to create a list of appropriate and relevant books I planned to use in a cross-curricular multicultural literature unit. This data was analyzed again upon completion of the study in order to aid in identifying the benefits of using multicultural literature.

Prior to any further or formal collection of qualitative data, a letter of informed consent was sent home to the students' parents or guardians. This letter outlined the purpose, intentions, and scope and sequence of my research study. I also included some personal background about myself, including contact information, so as to make both the students and their parents comfortable with my presence and actions in the classroom. It was my hope that by including this information I might encourage parents to communicate suggestions, information, or comments regarding their children or my research study.

The next step in my preliminary data collection was to assess my cooperating teacher's attitude towards teaching and multicultural instruction by interviewing her. This interview was recorded and used to assist in planning the multicultural literature unit. Through the interview I hoped to gain an understanding of my cooperating teacher's expectations of her students, as well as her opinion regarding the importance of multicultural education and her abilities to incorporate it in daily instruction.

As a result of the academic, mental, and emotional capacities of the students who participated in this study, I determined to use read-alouds during the implementation of the unit rather than literature circles. Due to the students' limited abilities to read the texts on their own, my goal was to expose the students to multicultural literature and to frame class discussion through specific guiding questions.

These structured class discussions were used to collect data associated with the impact of a multicultural literature unit on student learning, student-teacher relationships, and peer-peer interactions in the classroom. One to three books were read each week. During read-alouds I would stop periodically to ask probing questions designed to guide student discussion and maintain student engagement. I also made sure to stop and directly teach unfamiliar terms or concepts. As the unit was based upon cross-curricular lessons relating to Language Arts, Social Studies and Science, students were guided to use prior knowledge and reading strategies such as text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections to help them explore, analyze, and learn the new material. Upon completion of a story I would facilitate a culminating discussion in which students were encouraged to provide feedback, retell details, and/or offer personal opinions regarding the literature. All discussions were audio recorded and transcribed each weekend.

In addition to these types of class discussions, each story was paired with a multi-sensory or hands-on activity to reinforce the concepts introduced or reviewed by the literature. These activities were also designed to aid the students with comprehension and to help them express responses to the stories or multicultural content. Examples of these kinds of activities are as follows: role-playing, painting, drawing, assisted writing, hands-on station teaching, and constructing 3-dimensional dioramas.

Midway through the research study, private and informal student conferences were held to discuss students' reactions and opinions about all the books read in class thus far. These conversations were audio recorded and analyzed, and student responses were compared. Upon completion of the multicultural literature unit, students were asked to share which story they most enjoyed, why, and what they learned from it. Throughout

the course of this study I kept a daily journal in which I recorded thoughts, feelings, facts, and reflections associated with my data and research. Upon conclusion of the study all of the qualitative data was organized, coded and categorized, and then analyzed.

CHAPTER IV

Research Study Results and Analysis: Making Sense of the Data

Introduction

Chapter four discusses the findings of the study. Student survey results, read-aloud responses and class discussions, hands-on and multi-sensory activities, student work, and teacher researcher observations, anecdotes and journal notes will be analyzed in order to form conclusions about the research question. More specifically, the data will be examined in terms of how it speaks to the use of multicultural literature and culturally responsive teaching in a learning disabled, self-contained elementary school classroom. I will begin with a description of each data source and how it was used, followed by an analysis of the data that was collected.

The Big Picture: Understanding the Study

Throughout the implementation of my cross-curricular multicultural literature unit, I strived to provide extensive exposure to diversity while fostering development of reading skills and appreciation of literature. This unit focused on exploring multicultural literature while teaching Language Arts and Social Studies content. My goal was to expand upon the existing curriculum, to encompass a variety of cultural perspectives, and to stay away from the norms that are most often presented by the standard curriculum. Cai and Bishop (1994) note the domination of the White majority in school literature and curriculum, and stress the need to challenge this existing canon through the use of a wide variety of multicultural literature.

Nieto (2008) and Norton (1991) also confirm the definition of multicultural literature as text about various different ethnic groups that are not typically represented within the classroom, and are both culturally and socially different from the white Anglo-Saxon majority. The seven stories that were read during the implementation of the literature unit centered on various races and their cultural lifestyles, ideas regarding similarities and differences, biracial identities, individuals with disabilities, family structures (nuclear family vs. single-parents, etc.), an introduction to cultural/social barriers, and an introduction to differences in quality of life (socioeconomics) across cultures and within the United States.

Examining such a variety of issues supports existing research that states multicultural education must be pervasive (Nieto, 1994). Exploring these issues through the use of a multicultural literature unit correlates with Bennett's (2001) conceptual framework for understanding multicultural education, and its value and importance in today's schools. The idea of righting social inequalities and eliminating racial discrimination and prejudice is deep-seeded in the framework of multicultural teaching and learning. On a basic level appropriate for a first grade self-contained classroom, I have strived to use culturally responsive teaching to aid in constructing an environment where students can learn to the best of their ability and explore the complex concepts related to multiculturalism and diversity.

Appropriating the Research Design

Due to the fact that all the participants were developing or emergent readers I decided to implement my multicultural unit thorough read-alouds. I felt read-alouds would be a good way for me to model fluent reading, in addition to allowing me to make

the best use of the time allotted to me for my thesis lessons. Reading in this manner would also allow me to pepper the stories with provocative guiding questions that might aid my students in making personal connections to the literature. I attempted to pick books that had vivid or interesting illustrations, and were not too text heavy, because I felt those were the kinds of books that would best captivate my readers.

Given the below average academic and mental capacities of these students, a general exposure was both developmentally appropriate and effective. The data yielded significant evidence of personal and social growth. Due to the time limitations of this study, few examples of academic growth, or increased academic performance were apparent. Using multicultural literature has exposed these students to multiple cultural perspectives and promoted a classroom environment that is accepting of diversity. While many modifications had to be made to the original research design, conducting this study has proven to be quite the learning experience.

So, What Did I Learn?

Through an analysis of my data I have found that a common theme emerged across the various sources of data I collected. By exposing the participants of my study to what diversity looks like in the real world they were able to obtain a better understanding of one another and function as a more close-knit learning community. The multicultural readings generated responses that can be identified by distinct themes.

Recognition of Difference

“I have light white skin and Marcus has brown skin.”

Understanding of Difference

“We are all white bones inside! But different colors on the outside”

Acceptance of Difference

“Hope felt happy because she knew she was from two races”

and

“Rainbow Joe couldn’t see but that’s ok cuz’ he could imagine in his head.”

These and other similar responses conveyed a sense of recognition, understanding and acceptance of differences. This knowledge was then transferred to situations and conversations that arose in daily classroom activity. The students were able to gain a deeper understanding of difference, which ultimately led to an ability to articulate a new found acceptance of differences both in the world and in their classroom. The four participants in this study varied in their physical, social, and academic capabilities. Each student struggled in a different area, or in more than one area. I spent eight weeks in the classroom with my participants, however the study was conducted during the five weeks near the end of my field placement. Over the course of those eight weeks I observed a shift in behavior, particularly in one student’s demeanor, among the students.

Marcus was classified as communication impaired and entered our classroom from his regular education setting only a week or so before I began my student teaching. His attitude towards his peers and his academics was one of frustration and stubbornness. It was apparent that he was embarrassed to be seen outside our classroom with his new “special” classmates. He would ignore his friends from his regular education classroom whenever they approached him on the playground or greeted him in the hallway. He did not play nicely with his new classmates and frequently tried to bully or upset them by provoking them, destroying Legos or projects constructed during break time, or taking toys away from them. Throughout this chapter I will discuss how Marcus and his

classmates' new understandings led to noticeable changes within the classroom environment and community as they were able to apply the knowledge gained from an exposure to diversity to their personal lives.

Preliminary Survey Results: Understanding the Participants of the Study

While collecting baseline data for my research I administered a preliminary survey individually with each of my four participants. The purpose of this preliminary survey was to help me gain an understanding of my students' attitudes towards reading, what types of literature they enjoyed, whether or not they had any previous exposure to cultural perspectives other than their own, and their attitudes towards their fellow classmates. I would like to note that due to the capabilities of these students, the information I obtained from these preliminary surveys may not be entirely factual. However, it is valid in the sense that the responses are the students' personal interpretations and answers to my inquiries. This data is important as it is a starting point to which I contrast my analysis and comparison of the students' responses near the conclusion of this study.

Preliminary Survey Data

Question	NO	YES	Other
Does anyone at home or outside school read to you?	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, and babysitter
Have you ever read a book in which you learned about another country, place, or group of people?	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	

Have you ever read a book either in school or at home in which you learned about people who were different than you in the way they looked or the things they did?	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	Yes, Black, White and Brown people
Do you think of all the other boys and girls in this classroom as your friends?		✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	
Do you like to read?	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	
Is reading easy for you?	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	
What is the name of your favorite book, or what is your favorite subject to read about?	Oswald, "Chicka-Chicka-Boom-Boom," magazines, cars, and "Me On The Map"		

Larry and Dan responded that they were frequently read to at home by their family members, while Marcus and Andy responded that they did not read outside of school. When asked if they had ever read a book either in school or at home, in which they learned about another country, place, or group of people, Larry and Dan responded yes. The other two boys responded that they had not. When asked whether they had ever read a book in which they learned about people who were different than themselves in the way they looked or the things they did, Larry and Andy responded yes. Andy added to his response, saying "Yes, black, white, and brown people." Larry and Dan, who responded

that they had read about different people and places received a good amount of support with academics at home, and it is safe to infer they may have had at least a minimal exposure to some diverse literature. I think it is also safe to assume that Marcus and Andy had received little to no exposure to multicultural literature. From this preliminary data I concluded that only half the class had any prior knowledge about multiculturalism and diversity.

All of the students responded yes when asked if they thought of each of the other students in the classroom as their friends. Here I would like to mention again that Marcus was a new addition to the classroom. Dan and Larry replied that they liked to read, while Marcus and Andy, the same two students who did not read at home, responded that they did not like to read. Only Larry replied that reading was easy for him, however, from my observations and discussion with my cooperating teacher I have learned that all the participants were still developing and emergent readers. Only Dan had mastered fluency, but still struggled with comprehension. When asked about their favorite book or subject to read, the responses were: Oswald, Chicka-chicka-boom-boom, cars, magazines, and a story that was read in school from the Harcourt reading program; “Me on the Map.” Marcus chose “Me on the Map” and I believe he probably picked this story because he does not engage with literature outside of school. Marcus did not like to read, which is important to note because I will discuss in my conclusions the significance of the multicultural literature unit for Marcus. For a student like Marcus, who struggles with academics, the effects of multicultural teaching are extremely important because it can help to motivate student achievement and make learning meaningful.

Read-Aloud Responses and Classroom Discussion

According to recent literature, the power of story can be very successful in helping children learn by enabling them to form personal connections and thus better relate to standard curriculum (D'Angelo and Dixey, 2001, Dyson & Genishi, 1994). For example, when reading about differences in quality of life in "Fly Away Home" by Eve Bunting, Marcus was able to form a connection with the main characters in each story. Marcus lives with a single parent who does not make a lot of money, just like the boy in "Fly Away Home." While we discussed the socioeconomics of the story we also talked about needs and wants, as outlined by the school's Social Studies curriculum. Marcus was able to identify with the feelings of the boy in the story and better understand the difference between things human beings might want versus things they need.

I often encouraged these kinds of personal connections by modeling for the students how to make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections as we read. Based on the demographics I also tried to pick stories that my students might be able to relate to based on their own cultural backgrounds. "Students perform more successfully on all levels when there is greater congruence between their cultural backgrounds and such school experiences as task interest, effort, academic achievement, and feelings of personal efficacy or social accountability" (Gay, 2004, p. 34).

I began to see the students make these kinds of connections more consistently as the implementation of the unit progressed. The participants often revealed their level of personal interest or engagement with each text through their verbal responses during our class discussions. Their verbal reactions to both the read-alouds and the corresponding hands-on or multi-sensory activities demonstrated their abilities to think critically at their

academic level while responding to the text by making personal connections. I will discuss the responses to the hands-on activities in the next section of this chapter. For example, the discussion that arose while reading “Let’s Talk About Race” By Julius Lester, led to a comparison of skin color among the students and teachers in the classroom. It led to the realization that despite physical differences commonalities can also exist.

Larry: That girl [in the story] looks Chinese.

Andy: I really like Chinese food!

Marcus: But you aren’t Chinese!

Andy: Yea, but I like Chinese food, so do Chinese people. We don’t look the same but we like the same food. It’s cool.

Marcus: I like Chinese food too.

Collectively, the students were able to recognize that the girl in the story was from a race other than their own. They assumed that this girl was Chinese, and not some other South Pacific/Eastern Asian population. However, this kind of generalization might be countered as the students grow older and gain more knowledge about the rest of the world, its history and its geography. The students did demonstrate a personal connection with the text. All the boys in the classroom, although from different backgrounds, shared a love for a food from a different ethnic culture. While making this connection, Andy highlighted for the other students that even though racial and physical differences existed, these were positive factors, and could be viewed in an appreciative manner.

Another example in which the students demonstrated their abilities to recognize and analyze diversity was the conversation that unfolded while discussing differences in

quality of life as I read to them, “A Country Far Away” by Nigel Gray. The questions I posed in conjunction with the layout of pictures comparing a young boy’s village life in Africa with a young suburban boy’s lifestyle led to an unexpected exchange among the students during our class discussion. I have inferred that as their exposure to diversity increased, this story being the 6th in the unit, their view of diversity developed further. The contrasting themes of difference and similarity were connected through an overall understanding and acceptance by the students that these two worlds can co-exist peacefully.

Marcus: I ride my bike like that. I ride to my friend Bubba’s house.

Andy: Me too. I ride to my friend’s. And to my cousin’s. But I don’t wear those kinds of clothes.

Larry: I go swim in Lake Candle like the boy in Africa swim in his pond.

Andy: Yea. I swim too, in the summer a lot.

Teacher: Why do you think the boy in Africa isn’t wearing a bathing suit like you boys do?

Andy: No one is wearing a bathing suit there. That’s there and we are here. But everybody swims when it’s hot cuz’ it’s fun.

Here we again see the recognition of difference and its existence in the world, paired with a general view of diversity in a positive light. The students did not laugh or poke fun at the boy in the story because he wears a cloth draped around his lower body instead of pants. They understand that the character’s way of life is different from their own. The students are internalizing the information by independently forming personal

connections with the text, comparing the character's lifestyle to their own, and making the content more meaningful.

Hands-On Multicultural Activities

After reading "Let's Talk About Race," the students worked on a painting project as a follow up activity. During the project, each student was given a large piece of white paper and paper plate on which they mixed different colored paints to create a color that matched their own skin tone. After placing a hand print in their paint mixture and stamping their own papers, the students moved around stamping their hands once on each of the other students' papers. Each student was helped to label the handprints with the corresponding student's name.

Even though this was the introductory story to the unit, when encouraged the students engaged in insightful conversation with one another. They made comparisons about how their skin tones varied. Andy piped up with an observation that summarized a main concept the students had learned from the read-aloud: "I have light white skin and Marcus is brown but we both have five fingers." Marcus affirmed this realization as he excitedly added, "And Dan has five fingers, Larry too!" The students were able to recognize that while physical differences existed in their classroom, there were also many similarities among the students and teachers in the classroom; appearances and personal traits or preferences that they shared. Again, difference was seen as a positive characteristic. Without these follow-up activities I don't think the students would have been able to think as critically as they did about the text. The hands-on activities allowed the participants to dig deeper, think a bit more abstractly and make meaning of the text.

Sometimes the follow-up activities did not pan out as I had planned. For example, after reading the story, “The Other Side,” by Jacqueline Woodson, I tried to assist the students in a role-play activity. After reviewing the story, which centered on society’s racial barriers and how parents can impart these views upon their children, I assigned each student a character in the book. I modeled with a fellow teacher, and then gave the students the freedom to reenact the story by themselves. The students did not know what to say. I tried to help them get started by joining in as one of the characters, however, I think these particular students rely too much on a structured routine and environment and found the task difficult. They wanted me to tell them what to say, which defeated the whole purpose of the activity. I decided to conclude the activity and move into a closing discussion of the story. This discussion proved that the students had understood the basic underlying theme of the story. Marcus told his classmates, “Everyone has different skin.” I probed the students further, “Is that a reason you shouldn’t like someone?” “Nooo!” was the resounding response from all four of the students. I felt reassured that the students had retained information from the story, but concluded they still needed structured guidance in communicating their responses.

Student Work: Responding Through Drawing and Writing

The participants of this study did not respond very well when given writing assignments, even though they were always given support. After reading “Hope” by Isabell Monk and Janice Lee Porter I worked individually with the students to discuss the story. “Hope” is about a young girl with a biracial identity. She pays a summer visit to her aunt during which she is labeled “mixed” by one of her aunt’s friends. Hope struggles

with the meaning of this title and its implications. In the end, Hope talks with her grandmother and is proud and happy about her unique identity.

I asked the students to draw a picture showing how Hope felt about herself at the end of the story. Although an array of crayons were provided, none of the students chose to depict Hope with a darker skin tone. She was part African American and part White, an aspect we discussed as a class prior to moving on to the follow-up activity. The illustrator chose a light brown skin tone for Hope, however the students all used a light peach.

I attempted to analyze my students' choices. What did the students' color choice say about the way they viewed racial identity? During the hand print activity they had been very observant of skin color. Perhaps their view of diversity was now more encompassing, perhaps they were no longer limited to seeing difference as only physical. When asked to write a sentence to complete their drawings the responses were as follows:

Andy: "Hope said being different was good."

Marcus: "Hope felt happy because she was from two races."

Larry: "Hope was proud because she was mixed."

Dan: "Hope felt happy because she had her aunt."

These students were not particularly adept in expressing themselves verbally and I feel it was even more challenging and perhaps even intimidating for them to be instructed to write down their thoughts and feelings. However, these responses demonstrate they were able to make the connection that people come from different races or backgrounds, and to be part of two races is something one should be proud of. Their word choices: "good, happy, from two races, proud because she was mixed" articulate their inclination towards

race as a definite characteristic of identity, one that any individual should be proud to share with the world.

Notes from a Teacher's Journal

Based on the daily notes I recorded in my teacher journal, I have determined that by learning to view race and diversity positively, my students have also learned to respect and better understand one another. An example recorded at the end of a Math lesson provided concrete evidence of a change in social interaction among the students, which led to an overall harmonious classroom environment.

As mentioned earlier Marcus was having some trouble with his behavior upon entering his new classroom. The majority of these behavioral issues were believed to be the result of Marcus's desire for attention, which he does not receive much in his home environment. Marcus does not possess a cognitive disability, he is learning disabled and as a result of his home life possesses behavioral problems. When I first began working with these students Marcus would become very upset and argumentative whenever his classmates received special attention in the form of individualized assistance such as one-to-one guidance, writing for a student who has fine motor difficulties, or other modifications or accommodations such as extended time during test taking. As our exploration of multicultural literature progressed, Marcus became less temperamental and was able to work and play with his peers without regular outbursts.

Thursday, April 16, 2009

This morning we read "Rainbow Joe" by Maria Diaz Storm, a story about a young girl and her blind neighbor. Afterwards we talked about the ways in which Rainbow Joe could use the senses he did have to enjoy and explore the world

around him. We also talked about the limitations. The students were blindfolded as they explored four “sense stations” using their other senses of touch, taste, smell, and hearing to identify various “mystery objects.” Afterwards we discussed the adjectives and descriptive words in the story that might help a blind person visualize the word. We talked about what the students learned and how it might feel to be blind. I was surprised at how much the students retained from the story and the maturity they showed as they worked their way through the stations. I feel their appreciation of people who are different from them, their understanding and acceptance of difference, is growing.

This afternoon Marcus did not whine during Math. I think today it all clicked for Marcus and he understood. When I announced it was time to begin the Mastering Math Facts timed test I expected Marcus to begin with his usual protests: “But, but, but why does he get help. I want help. Can you write mines? Nooo. I need help. I don’t know this.” After these kinds of outburst Marcus would sometimes shut down and refuse to complete the test, or purposely answer problems incorrectly. This was usually followed by an explanation from either myself or one of the other instructors in the room, “Marcus, remember how we talked about how each student in this room has different needs? You are an excellent Math student, you can do this all on your own, and you can do it well.”

But this afternoon was different. Instead Marcus picked up his pencil and did not speak as I began to pass out the papers. I directed Larry and his one-to-one aide to move into the hallway where Mrs. S would record Larry’s answers while he dictated. Still, not a peep. “Are you ready Marcus? Get ready with your

pencils boys.” Marcus nodded confidently and said, “I’m going to go up to the next level today!”

I strongly believe this is evidence my multicultural literature unit is having an impact! I will be watching Marcus and the other boys more closely now. I saw the way Marcus looked around at the other boys, then the way he looked at his own paper before beginning his test. Marcus may have been engaged in the process of reflection; the wheels were turning, and I think he was making a connection to our past two stories about individuals with disabilities.

This is just one example of how Marcus learned to accept his peers abilities and limitations. I think the exposure to the literature also helped Marcus accept his own abilities and limitations; in areas of academics he was able to recognize his strength in Math and his struggles with reading.

Conclusions About the Value of Literature

These notes, along with my other data sources, support the findings of Dyson and Genishi (1994). Both children and adults “use narrative to shape and reshape their lives,” and thus stories “have interrelated evaluative and social functions” (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 2). The literature we have read is helping my students to reshape preconceived notions, perhaps to even reshape their own identities. I have seen how they were able to carry over their new knowledge about diversity into their daily classroom activity, which in turn has created a more accepting, harmonious learning environment. For example, Marcus has been able to demonstrate his understanding that each student in his classroom has a different way and a different rate of learning.

These are the types of factors that are important in building a learning community that both understands and accepts diversity. A “beloved” learning community such as the one envisioned by John Dewey, one that can “know, relate to, and care deeply about one another” (Gay, 2004, p. 30). It is important to remember that for both teachers and students, becoming culturally sensitive is a “dynamic, ongoing process that includes knowledge, action and reflection” (Cabello & Burstein, 1995, p. 292).

Through their exposure to multicultural literature, the four participants of my study have shown a general recognition and understanding of diversity. This led to an acceptance of various types of differences, physical, mental, cultural, social and economic. Ultimately, my students were able to apply this acceptance of diversity, this new outlook, to daily classroom interactions. This resulted in a more harmonious, close-knit learning community whose members showed one another kindness and respect. Over the course of five weeks I was able to see the powerful and positive effects multicultural literature can have on the growth and development of a learning community. I have learned that culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education help all types of students learn to the best of their abilities. The powerful potential of multicultural literature is especially invaluable for a population with special needs. This study is important because it has shown me that special needs students can benefit from multicultural literature not only academically, but socially and emotionally as well. The following chapter will examine this more closely and summarize the significant data that supports my conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER V

Research Study Summary and Conclusions

Final Summary of Research Findings

This study has revealed that four students in a self-contained classroom have successfully been exposed to various forms of diversity. An analysis of the data reveals that the participants have come to understand diversity and its existence in our society. Responses to student surveys, read-alouds, writing and drawing exercises, and hands-on multi-sensory activities indicate that the students now have the means to view this diversity in a positive light. This chapter will provide a brief summary of the study and its results, ultimate conclusions, and implications for further questions regarding the use of multicultural literature across curriculum in order to promote an understanding and acceptance of diversity.

Prior to discussing the data and findings of this research I would like to identify some additional and unanticipated limitations of the study. Initially, I had planned to implement this research in a regular education setting. However, this was not feasible. Therefore the study was conducted in a diverse special education setting. While this setting was not racially diverse, it was diverse in the students' academic, emotional, social and physical capabilities. Please note that I personally feel all students are deserving of a multicultural education, regardless of the setting or grade level. While according to Nieto (1994) multicultural education should be based on more than "ethnic tidbits and cultural sensitivity," I believe it is important to at the very *least* expose all

children to real issues associated with race and diversity (p. 7).

Due to time constraints and the limited capabilities of these four special needs students I was not able to easily collect hard or concrete data for this study. The data was primarily based upon the verbal responses to the literature and the hands-on activities that were facilitated during the unit. The discussions that took place, along with minimal drawing and assisted writing, demonstrated how the participants were able to form connections and make meaning of the text. I would like to stress that the duration of the study was not long enough to obtain results showing academic improvement. However, during this five week study I was able to observe and note an improvement in the students' verbal responses during class discussion. I also noticed changes in the students' interactions with one another. An analysis of the data indicates that the students in this study gained a deeper understanding about the kind of people who live in the world around them, more specifically a deeper understanding of one another both as students and as individuals.

The participants received developmentally appropriate exposure to a range of diversity, to various forms of differences. The students demonstrated that they were able to identify differences in the form of physical appearances (i.e. race; skin color), people with disabilities, biracial identities, quality of life (socioeconomics), and family structures (nuclear family vs. single-parents, etc.).

Based on my field notes, teacher observations, hands-on projects, student work, and audiotapes of class discussions, I have concluded that as a result of the multicultural literature the participants have learned to view diversity as a positive thing. Their learning progressed from recognition of diversity to understanding of diversity, and ultimately to

acceptance. For example, they showed progression from recognizing the existence of physical differences such as skin tone, to accepting that a biracial identity is a unique and special characteristic one may be proud of. The students have learned not to chastise a peer because he or she may be “different.” An example of this is the change in Marcus’s perception of his peers in the self-contained classroom. Marcus demonstrated his ability to recognize and accept their different social and academic abilities. All the participants demonstrated they were able to carry over their new knowledge about diversity into their daily classroom activity and interaction. They were able to understand that each student in their classroom had a different manner and a different rate of learning. Thus, they learned to treat one another, the teachers, and the classroom assistants with kindness and respect, becoming a strong learning community.

Conclusions

Ultimately, this study was successful in promoting the use of multicultural literature and the positive effects it has on the establishment of a close-knit learning community that understands and accepts diversity. This study is unique and valuable to the field of education because it was implemented in a non-traditional setting. While the positive effects of a multicultural literature unit may have been harder to decipher due to the special needs of the participants and their struggles with expression and social interaction, they were present. This correlates with one of the pillars of multicultural education: That every child is entitled to a multicultural education because research has shown that student learning and achievement improve through culturally responsive teaching. Inconsistencies exist between the standard school curriculum and practices, and the cultural norms of the students and families that attend these schools. It is the

responsibility of the educator regardless of the setting, to meet the implications, or more often consequences, that these inconsistencies have upon student performance.

The conversations that arose during the implementation of my multicultural literature unit are perfect examples of how stories can allow students to examine their own sense of cultural membership and use that knowledge to think critically, or to make inferences and comparisons. According to Dyson and Genishi (1994), this kind of reflection allows educators to facilitate student sharing, providing a place to explore diversity and build relationships among teachers and students within the classroom or school setting. The stories that were read during the implementation of this research project provided a new environment, a new forum, for these students to ask each other questions, to identify both similarities and differences based on their perceptions of themselves and each other, and thus build upon their existing relationships with one another and their teachers.

Conducting this research has allowed me to see that multicultural literature is one of the most powerful and effective tools an educator can utilize. Literature works in wonderful ways to allow students to make learning personal, engaging and exciting. It can easily be paired or integrated with other subjects or activities to motivate student learning. Literature opens up a new world and new possibilities for students because it lends itself to making personal connections. Through read-alouds, teacher-led class discussion, hands-on and multi-sensory activities, writing, and drawing, I was able to facilitate student learning.

I have also experienced the many challenges that can arise while trying to implement a unit that is both multicultural and cross-curricular. While it is often difficult

to interrelate the two, using multicultural literature in conjunction with teaching social studies concepts such as families and basic needs, they can be combined very well at times. However, coupled with time management, it is often a delicate balance to maintain. I have realized that an important component of teaching about diversity is to be honest with my students about how diversity exists within our society. It is important to provide unbiased exposure to these issues.

Implications for Further Study

While these students were able to benefit from this multicultural literature unit by increasing their awareness of diversity and level of social acceptance and interaction, I would be interested to see the results if the study were extended for a longer duration of time. Perhaps an entire year would produce more of the same results or an entirely different outcome. I would also be interested to see the results if this study were conducted in an inclusive setting, to see how the special needs students' and the regular education students' interactions with one another might be effected. It would be interesting to compare two similar studies conducted in areas with vastly different demographics. Conducting two parallel studies such as these might allow for new, groundbreaking research regarding the benefits of multicultural education or multicultural literature for student learning.

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