USING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE FOR GLOBAL LEARNING
Caroline Maurer
Associate Professor of Education
Wilkes University
caroline.maurer@wilkes.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perspectives of American pre-service teachers who teach lessons using multicultural literature both in American schools and in an International school.

The use of quality multicultural literature is being used more and more in American classrooms as the schools become more diverse. The benefits are well noted, such as the need for students to see themselves in the literature as well as for children to see people different from them. It is through the study of how others live life that we begin to understand our own culture.

In today's teacher education programs, pre-service teachers have heard a lot about diversity, but until they experience it for themselves they struggle to grasp the importance of the multiple perspectives of the world that diversity opens up to them and the students they will teach.

In this action research study, pre-service teachers use multicultural books in American schools and then travel to Malaysia and share those same multicultural books in an International School. The question studied is how these teachers reflect on the use of multicultural literature in both domestic and international settings in order to understand the global impact of multicultural literature.

Field of Research: multicultural literature, global learning, pre-service teachers

Introduction

According to Aud, Fox, and KewilRamani (2010), between 1980 and 2008, the racial/ethnic composition of the United States has changed. During this time, the White population declined from 80 percent of the total population to 66 percent. This change in the population has caused an increase in the ethnic and racial diversity among students in American classrooms; yet, the ethnic and racial diversity of teachers remains somewhat consistent. In 1987, 86.9% of teachers in America identified themselves as White, non-Hispanic and in 2000, the number was only slightly lowered to 84.3%; yet, the number of students at the same time who claimed to be White, non-Hispanic declined significantly from 70.4% in 1987 to 61.2% in 2000 (Toppo, 2003). Moreover, the 2006 data by the National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey found that more 82 percent of the teacher workforce identified themselves as White or Caucasian.
Statement of the Problem

With increasing racial and ethnic diversity in our classrooms, pre-service teachers (students in training to be teachers) are presented with a significant challenge – to prepare for a culturally diverse classroom (Dilworth, M. E., 1992). Using multicultural literature is one way to support pre-service teachers in understanding diversity. Rochman (2003) states that “a good book can help to break down … barriers… (by) enthralling (us with) stories that make us imagine the lives of others” (p. 103). Once we learn to know people as individuals, rather than as stereotypes, we learn to connect with one another and are transformed in our understanding.

Multicultural literature has been called both a window and a mirror (Glazier & Seo, 2005; Kass, 2007). Through quality multicultural literature, children can see themselves reflected in books, thus establishing a sense of pride for both self and culture. Moreover, children also need to see those who are different from themselves. “Learning about different lives through a window onto the world opens us up to new ideas and greater understanding of others” (Kass, 2007, para 5). Multicultural literature allows us to reflect on who we are and meet those with different ideas, thoughts, and cultural practices.

In our ever-increasing diverse society, it is important for teachers to understand the needs of all the students. One way for this to happen is for pre-service teachers to interact and reflect on their own understanding of diversity. In today’s teacher education programs, pre-service teachers have heard a lot about diversity, but until they experience it for themselves they struggle to grasp the importance of experiencing multiple perspectives of the world that diversity provides to them and the students they will teach.

Research Question

In this research study, pre-service teachers will read and discuss multicultural books with children in American schools and then travel to Malaysia and share those same multicultural books in an International School. The research question is how these teachers reflect on the use of multicultural literature in both domestic and international settings in order to understand the global impact of multicultural literature.

The culminating event of a teacher education program at most universities is a 12-14 week student teaching experience. During this experience, the pre-service teachers observe, plan, and teach lessons. Ultimately, the student teacher will become the teacher in the classroom and the veteran teacher will observe and in many cases, leave the classroom allowing the student teacher to be completely responsible for the classroom. Upon successful completion of the student teaching experience, as well as other requirements, pre-service teachers can apply for certification to be teachers. The student teaching experience is vital to this process as it allows the pre-service teacher to put into practice the methods of teaching they have been taught, to reflect on their teaching pedagogy, and to hone their skills to become successful teachers.
Theoretical Framework

Banks (1999) posits that there are four approaches to how teachers use multicultural literature in the classroom. The first approach is labeled contributions and in this stage, multicultural books are chosen to celebrate holidays and special events. Multicultural books are not part of the curriculum, but are used to share about a hero or to celebrate a holiday in a different culture. The additive approach is similar to the contributions approach as the goal is not to change the curriculum; however, content, concepts, and various perspectives are shared through multicultural literature. In the third approach, transformative, changes to the curriculum are made to encourage the reader to consider concepts, issues, and problems from several perspectives. In the last approach, the social action approach, multicultural literature is not only used to understand and question issues, but to also take some kind of action to the issues raised. The four approaches to multicultural reform will be the framework on which the analysis of pre-service teachers thoughts and reactions to using multicultural literature in the classroom are based.

Methodology

This study looks at how reading multicultural literature to children impacts pre-service teachers understanding of the role of multicultural literature in understanding global learning. To conduct this investigation, the researcher will recruit student teachers who are completing a portion of their student teaching in the United States and a portion of their student teaching at an international school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Once the students are recruited, each will be given 1-3 multicultural books to read. The students will read the books and discuss them with the researcher prior to the reading of the books to children. In addition, the students will answer a short questionnaire on what role they believe multicultural literature should play in the classroom.

Once students know what is expected for this study, they will read the books to a class in the United States and then reflect on the responses of the children. A reflection prompts worksheet will be used and includes questions such as how did you prepare the children for the reading of this book? How engaged did the children seem while you were reading the book? And what kind of connections did the children make to this book – personal, life, other text? The student reflections will be collected by the researcher and coded for emerging themes.

In the second part of the study, the student teachers will read the same books to a class (of similar age and grade level) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Again, they will complete the reflection prompts worksheet and submit it to the researcher. These too will be coded for emerging themes. The two sets of data will be compared for overlapping themes and for thoughts and ideas to be discussed with the student teachers regarding their understanding on the use of multicultural literature.

The researcher will then conduct an on-line discussion with the student teachers to discuss the role of multicultural literature in the classroom. Building on Banks (1999) theory of Four Approaches to Multicultural Reform, the researcher will
look at the thoughts and reactions of the pre-service teaching after reading multicultural literature in the two classroom.

**Findings**

As our classrooms become more diverse, it is important that our new teachers are more aware of their own beliefs, attitudes and practices relating to diversity in the classroom (Colby & Lyon, 2004). This study is exploring pre-service teacher’s thoughts and approaches to using multicultural literature in a classroom in order to understand global diversity.

**References**


