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**“We need books that reflect all our students”: Preservice teachers transformation
in a multicultural children’s literature course**

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An education for our contemporary society must include critical interactions with themes of multiculturalism; children’s literature can serve as a first step. In a summer graduate-level course on multicultural children’s literature, master’s education students were asked to examine their own statements of subjectivity, drawing on their own philosophies of teaching and their experiences with people of different needs, ethnicities, and religions. The students revised and challenged these statements in some instances through individual and group experiences they had with multicultural children’s literature. This paper explores the themes of these subjectivity statements and the process of transformation that some students experienced because of their critical interactions with children’s literature.

Introduction

As our classrooms become more diverse, teachers must strive to educate students who come from backgrounds that may be very unfamiliar to them. Banks (1992) wrote that education within a pluralistic society such as the US should validate and educate students about their home and community cultures, while also freeing students from their cultural boundaries. Focusing on just what students enter the classroom with, the understandings they bring from home, is not enough for education within a democratic society. Educators need to prepare students “to participate in civic action to make society more equitable and just” (p. 32). The challenge is for educators, administrators, and policymakers to transform curriculum. Educators have argued that this transformation comes in the form of multicultural education, designed to reduce race, class, and gender divisions (Banks, 1992; Banks, 1998; Banks, 2003; Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, Irvine, Nieto, 2001; Copenhaver-Johnson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Nieto, 2003).

Instead of just learning about cultures within one limited month of the year, school programs need to be expanded to focus on cultures from the first day to the last. Banks (2008) outlined five dimensions of multicultural education to help educators begin and examine school programs that respond to student diversity:

1. Content integration (the extent to which teachers illuminate key points of instruction with content reflecting diversity);
2. Knowledge construction process (the extent to which teachers help students understand how perspectives of people within a discipline influence the conclusions reached within that discipline);
3. Prejudice reduction (efforts to help students develop positive attitudes about different groups);
4. Equitable pedagogy (ways to modify teaching so as to facilitate academic achievement from diverse groups); and
5. Empowering school culture and social structure (the extent to which a school’s culture and organization ensure educational equality and cultural empowerment for students from diverse groups).

Furthermore, the Multicultural Education Consensus Panel (Banks et. al, 2001) published twelve essential principles that describe ways to improve educational policies and practices related to diversity. These principles were further organized into five themes: teacher learning, student learning, intergroup relations, school governance, and assessment. All of these areas are important in order to address the needs of all learners and to promote a multicultural approach that affects all aspects of school.

A Taste of Multicultural Literature

As teacher educators in children's literacy, we are most concerned with the significance of curriculum content and materials on diverse student populations (Ladson-Billings, 1994). To help students see their worlds differently and to expand those views beyond their own backyards, educators must expose them to quality multicultural children's literature, that is rich and detailed while accurately portraying distinct cultural groups (Yokota, 1993). Doing this helps accomplish the goals of multicultural education explained previously. Several features of multicultural children's literature contribute to its purposes in the classroom. One is that by reading a book about a particular culture, the reader should come away with accurate knowledge of the beliefs, attitudes, and important characteristics of that culture (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Readers should be able to experience this through the work of an author who is from that particular culture or by an author who has carefully researched that culture (Short & Fox, 2004).

Another way to view multicultural children's literature is by the three metaphors often associated with experiencing literature: mirrors, windows, and doors (Bishop, 1990; Botelho & Rudman, 2009). First, literature needs to be a mirror, so that children can see themselves in books. This act helps to validate the experiences of a child: yes, there are others in the world like me and I am not the only person ever to go through this experience. On a broader note, children also need to see their families and their communities reflected in a book to achieve feelings of affirmation. Multicultural children's literature also serves the purpose of being a window for children. After affirming their experiences, children need to learn about others' experiences. The key here is for children to have familiarity with a variety of cultures. Multicultural literature can help make this happen especially when classrooms, schools, or communities are homogeneous. Students need exposure to multicultural children's literature to combat aesthetic restriction, which is the immediate, but unconscious rejection of a text (Rice, 2005).

While reading about their culture and then reading about other cultures are both important acts, they are not enough for multicultural education and the pedagogy of social justice. Children also need to use books as a door, where they can enter in and learn about others' experiences. This requires that teachers allow and encourage children to pose critical questions about what they read, and help them to examine important issues such as class, race, and gender. This is not always an easy task for educators. From looking at literature, educators and children can move to looking at situations in the real world. This expanded look can create a bridge of literary understanding. In the remainder of this paper, we explore discussions of multicultural literature books in a graduate literature class. Specifically, we wanted to examine the power of integrating multicultural children's literature in teacher education classes and its influences on preservice teachers. We share students' subjectivity statements as they grappled with the themes presented in books about diverse cultures, and the process of transformation that some students experienced because of their critical interactions with these books.

The Study

Using the framework of multicultural education, we sought to examine the responses of pre-service teachers in a graduate-level course on multicultural children's literature. Rosenblatt's (1938/1995, 1978) transactional theory of reader response provided us with a theoretical perspective. We believe that what the reader brings to reading a text is just as important as what the author writes. Furthermore, Probst (2002) explained that Rosenblatt's transactional

theory suggests that each reader comes to the text with a unique history, a unique set of circumstances and abilities and inclinations, and has to take that into account as s/he shapes an understanding of the text and his/her reading of it (p. 31).

When students and educators read a multicultural text aesthetically, they bring with them specific social, political, and cultural factors that then influence their interactions with the story. These personal interpretations are both valid and desirable (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The participants were thirteen pre-service teachers from a large, public university in the southeast. All were female and their teaching preferences ranged from early childhood to college-level. Most were part of the university's master's program which is a fifth year extension of the undergraduate degree program (aged 23-25), however there were four women who were completing the traditional master's degree program in reading and literacy (aged 30-50). Two women were international students from China, one was Native American, one was Southeast Asian, and one was Latina. The other women were of European descent.

The course took place during six weeks in the summer as a blended course. Face-to-face classes were scheduled for once a week and students participated in the on-line component of the course by uploading individual documents and engaging in conversations on various forums (e.g., literature circle discussions, weekly reading discussions). The use of a case study method is appropriate as it provides in-depth exploration and can provide a well-rounded account of the event under investigation (Yin, 2003). In this study, the event under investigation is our course.

Each week students were asked to select children's literature (both novels and picture books) that represented the cultures being studied. Although there was a date limit (find books published after 1990 to ascertain contemporary experiences), students could choose any books that they wanted to read. They employed such compilations as the Database for Award-Winning Children's Literature (<http://www.dawcl.com/introduction.html>) and the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (<http://www.childrenslit.com/>) to search for appropriate and engaging texts. A major limitation of this, however, was the availability of books at the local library. These texts were supplemented with professional articles that included

information about authors, topics, and/or literature that corresponded to the theme of the week. Again, students were allowed to choose one or two articles to read out of three or four.

At the first meeting, we distributed a questionnaire to help us understand who these students were and what experiences they had had with multicultural issues. These questions were developed by us as the instructors of the course (one instructor being a veteran researcher and tenured professor and the other instructor being a doctoral candidate with recency in the elementary classroom). Sample questions included:

1. How would you describe your current involvement in cross-cultural friendships/relationships?
2. What experiences have you had teaching in any capacity? Describe the students in these settings.
3. How do you choose books to share with students?
4. Why are you taking a multicultural children's literature course?
5. What do you hope to learn by the end of this course?

By asking these questions, we also hoped to move students to examine how their experiences may influence the responses they have to literature, especially texts that come from perspectives other than their own. In this way we wanted them to identify their own statements of subjectivity. Preissle (2008) wrote that the content of subjectivity statements varies, but often includes ascribed characteristics such as sex or gender, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age and achieved characteristics such as education and occupation. Our hope was that as the course progressed, our students' subjectivity statements would change over time as they accumulated new experiences and became transformed by their own inquiries.

Data were collected through weekly reflections that students submitted individually on-line. The guidelines for the reflections were originally vague, so as not to influence what the students focused on in their writings. However, after reading the first submission, we realized that we needed to provide some structure so that their responses would not be limited to summaries of the books that had been read. Jewett (2007) faced a similar dilemma in her experience of teaching a graduate-level children's literature course. Her experiences revealed that students were comfortable transacting with literature, but were hesitant to be critical in their reading. That is, they had no problem connecting children's literature to their personal lives, but they resisted discussing issues of social justice and equity. Through different strategies for discussion, Jewett encouraged her students, who were teachers, librarians, and other graduate students, to "redefine their personal responses to include critical responses, to read knee-deep" (p. 149). Specifically, she asked them to question what they read in terms of systems such as class, gender, and race.

We had to push our students to both transact with the literature (aesthetically and efferently) and to be critical when reading. Therefore, we created these guidelines from our personal experiences and current to help our students focus their reflections:

1. Give your personal reactions to what you have read-- it's okay to use "I" statements for these papers. How do the texts you choose affect you (as a reader and as a teacher)?
2. You don't have to write about each book or each article you read. Just focus on what was surprising/interesting/new. (This means, too, that you don't need to include summaries of the books you write about.)
3. Think about themes that intersect the texts you choose to use.
4. You can make connections to the articles you've read, but you don't have to use quotes. (Just include the name of the author/s.)

These guidelines did work to challenge our students to critically respond to the books and articles they read. For the rest of the course, students adhered to these guidelines in their weekly reflections and incorporated their thoughts into class discussions both face-to-face and on-line. As instructors, we were pleased with the steps our students took to “read knee-deep.”

We analyzed the data by using Glaser and Strauss's constant comparison method, as described by Guba and Lincoln (1994) to identify categories. To start, we created categories intuitively and continued as we coded the “I” statements within the reflections. Then, we continuously compared key words with others in the same category and other categories, which reflected any cultural insights and personal connections to the literature. The methodology of Maykut and Morehouse (1994) aided us in deriving themes and categories across the data. In qualitative data analysis and presentation, they write that,

The task of the researcher is to find patterns within those words and to present those patterns for others to inspect while at the same time staying as close to the construction of the world as the participants originally experienced it (p. 18).

From this analysis, we identified four major themes that captured how these pre-service teachers responded and in some cases, how the reader-response transactions that Rosenblatt lauded transformed them. These themes are also related to the five dimensions of multicultural education Banks (2008) outlined and mentioned previously. They include:

Holding on to prejudices;
Reading new ideas;
Wanting to know more; and
Critical reading.

The Findings

“Once again, I find myself wishing for more time to read. Maybe heaven is an enormous library. Wouldn't that be marvelous; no one needs to sleep in heaven.”

- (Angel, traditional master's student)

Holding on to Prejudices

Although students in this course overwhelmingly enjoyed the freedom to choose their own books to read, several students expressed in their reflections their reluctance to let go of prejudices they held about certain cultures. Banks (2008) outlined this as one of the dimensions for multicultural education that educators must face. The following student's comment clearly illustrated this:

Truth be told I'm not too interested in the Mexican culture, and most of the book is spent on these descriptions. There really wasn't much of which I could relate to, and that's my point, we can't assume that Mexican culture covers all of the Latin cultures.

While this student states that she knows that "all Latin cultures are not the same," she was not interested in reading about the particulars of the Mexican culture. The book she refers to, *The Tequila Worm* (Canales 2005), does center on the specific cultural aspects of a Mexican-American girl growing up in a Texas border town. Because the experiences of the main character were different from her own, also being raised in the Latino culture, but not Mexican, she rejected the story.

Her comments reflect the current trend that in Latino children's literature, some subcultures are being overrepresented while others have minimal exposure. For example, Naidoo (2008) found that almost half (49%) of the picture books that won the Americas and Pura Belpre honors and awards from 1993 to 2004 focused on the Mexican/Mexican American culture. Additionally, he found that 18% of the winners represented Caribbean cultures (Haitians, Jamaicans, Trinidadians, and Dominicans). The remaining subcultures were scarcely represented: Puerto Rican 4%; Central American (Costa Rican, El Salvadorian, Guatemalan, and Panamanian) 8.5%; Cuban 5.6%; and South American (Argentinean, Venezuelan, and Brazilian) 4% (p. 29). The student was close-minded in her response to the text; she expected a Latino book to represent her own lived experiences accurately. When the book failed to do so in her eyes, she would not open herself to an efferent experience of learning about a culture, possibly one to which her future students might belong.

This example highlights how as teacher educators we have to provide diverse experiences about diverse issues and how we have to probe students' beliefs to help understand the larger community around them. In the multicultural children's literature course, we gave students space to voice their initial beliefs but we also probe deeper to move them to this greater understanding. This student later came to appreciate that different subcultures need to be represented in the literature that she will share with her future students. We hope this belief, and her learning through this course, will eventually lead her to read more books with a critical and efferent lens.

Another student revealed in her reflection her own prejudice against books from the African American culture—specifically that previous experiences had focused more on these books. She voiced,

I enjoyed the literature choices for this week more than last week because I felt as though I learned more and felt more comfortable using these book choices in my classroom. I agree that African American culture still isn't represented the way it should be but I feel students will know more about African American than other minority subgroups, such as the Caribbean/Latino culture.

Like the previous student, she qualifies her response by writing that she understands that the African American culture still is not represented equally in children's books. The course readings also reflected this view. Horning, Lindgran, Rudiger, and Schliesman (2006) reported that in 2005 there were only 75 new children's books written or illustrated by African Americans reviewed by the Cooperative Children's Book Center. With 3,000 children's books published, this works out to be just 2.5% of the total, while African Americans make up 12.5% of the US's population. Yet, this student states that she would prefer using Caribbean/Latino cultures literature in her future classroom.

Reading New Ideas

Many of the students in the course had also completed their undergraduate degrees from the same university. As part of that degree, they were required to take an introductory course on children's literature. While the focus of that course is not necessarily multicultural children's literature, instructors and professors (us included) stress reading about different cultures. It was a bit interesting, therefore, to read in their reflections how much they learned in their readings. For example, several students wrote about what they learned reading about Native American cultures. One student shared,

I have never knowingly read a story about Native Americans that did not have to do with Thanksgiving so being able to delve into the culture and history of different tribes was a new learning experience for me.

This student acknowledges that her previous experiences reading about Native Americans are limited. Although much has been written about Native Americans, there have been few books written by members of this culture. Small publishers and the push for texts written by Native Americans in the classroom may help correct this situation in the future. Themes of Native American children's literature include oppression by the White population and appreciation, celebration, and protection of nature (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). Many books are traditional stories including myths, legends, and folktales, which are rooted in the oral storytelling traditions (Reese, 2007).

Because of the stereotypes children and adults hold about Native Americans and “the belief ... that Native Americans were a part of the past but were ‘wiped out’ and ceased to exist” (Eikstadt & Falk-Ross, 2008, p. 10), selecting quality Native American

children's literature is necessary. It is also important to include contemporary portrayals of Native Americans within the range of books used. Another student reflected on this issue:

Reading Native American literature for me is also a learning experience as I had little knowledge about it. I was amazed to learn that there are many different Native American tribes and that each tribe has their own culture, language, beliefs, and heritage. As we discussed in class, people all get used to "wipe out" Indians into modern and real life by only seeing their past. Therefore, as educators, we are responsible to not only teach history and traditions of the Native American but also open windows for knowing them as real human being by incorporating books that portray them as dynamic and present people.

Both students read books written by members of the Native American culture and learned so much. They confronted their own stereotypes and started to learn about the different tribes and about Native Americans in contemporary society. Two books by Sherman Alexi (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 2007 and *Ten Little Indians*, 2004), were mentioned in the class discussion as examples of works about contemporary Native Americans. Reading contemporary literature can promote the use of this literature (and more) in their future classrooms.

Wanting to Know More

While multicultural children's literature can often teach us new ideas, it also inspires us to learn more through other readings and research. A theme that was apparent in many different reflections by our students was that a particular book or article sparked their interest and motivated them to learn more about a culture. Several students shared, I was drawn to Julia Alvarez's novel *Before We Were Free* first because of the compelling story but secondly because of my own curiosity about the Dominican Republic in the 1960's, a period I know little about. I chose this novel because the summary captured my interest. In many ways these things made this novel even more appealing probably because I tend to see people in much the same way as I saw these characters. I want to know the person, and I want to know about each person's life. I chose to read Green's article because I have always been the skeptical inquirer: Can and how can I introduce religious literature in my classroom?

We felt that these reflections helped us to determine how we would present reading materials to future groups of students as they register for this and other literature courses we teach.

Within these reflections, we also see examples of the efferent type of reading that Rosenblatt described. Our personal and emotional connections to text are important, as is what we can learn from reading and how that enriches our understandings of the world

around us. Our students used the multicultural children's literature and professional articles available to read efferently.

Critical Reading

Critical reading, or critical literacy, goes beyond traditional notions of reading to include critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one's world (McDaniel, 2004). Shannon (1995) determined that a critical perspective pushes "the definition of literacy beyond traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text or society until it becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture" (p. 83). Shannon posited that this new understanding helps us to foster equal and just participations in making decision.

Many studies that use children's literature to foster students' critical literacy skills use what Cai (2008) called a transact-to-transform approach. He explained that this came from a combination of Rosenblatt's transactional approach to reading and Banks' transformational approach to integrating multicultural education (literature) into the curriculum. The goal of the transact-to-transform approach is for students to transact with multicultural children's literature in order to change their perspectives on cultural issues. Based on the reflections by some of our students, we believe that they transacted with the literature they read and that this transaction transformed their perspectives about themselves and the children they will ultimately teach. This was evident in several discussion forums as they commented about books and articles read for class. One student shared about her hopes for her future classroom,

It makes me wonder if in my future classroom, will I too have students that are living day to day in fear that they will be sent away? I think it's a subject that gets pushed to the backburner, but really needs to be dealt with because so many students are coming from other countries and need that support from their teachers.

Another student made a personal connection, "It makes me think about my own culture and reflect on myself in terms of individuality."

Still another student made a deeper connection to a book she felt authentically portrayed a cultural experience,

The book is written by an African American woman and is truly an authentic representation of African American literature. The story uses dialect, cultural problems, and social awareness all from a child's perspective that other children will be able to relate to. Furthermore, the story has a strain of hope that permeates its pages that every child will strive for. I would label this a "culturally conscious" book that has parts for many children to relate to, African American or not.

Conclusion

Children's literature is perhaps the most accessible way for young children to see themselves and diverse children's experiences presented. Books are present in homes, school, libraries, stores and other public media (Lowery, 2000). The images of "others" presented are not always positive thus it is important for teachers to understand how they can present positive images to their students and how they can help to alleviate stereotypes and prejudices by introducing children to multicultural literature in the classroom. Teachers need exposure to this literature, however, before they can introduce it to their students.

Our goal as teacher educators is to prepare teachers who are culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) and who will meet the needs of all students. Gay also determined that culturally responsive teachers know their students and focus on meeting them where they are. Culturally responsive teachers, then, seek to learn the cultural beliefs and mores of their students and seek to integrate learning materials that is representative of their students in everyday lessons. This was a lesson we wanted to teach in the multicultural literature class. We know that many of our preservice teachers do not read books about others unless it is required reading. If we want preservice teachers to share multicultural literature with their future students, we have to provide opportunities for them to experience this literature in a comfortable environment. As teacher educators, we also have to be willing to challenge their beliefs about others; help them to understand how they can learn about their diverse students, and use the lessons they learn to effect greater teacher-student community building in their classrooms.

The views expressed by the students in this course confirmed their move toward this new understanding of the role multicultural literature could play in their classrooms. We learned, also, that as we exposed preservice teachers to books about diverse student populations and provide them with opportunities to discuss their readings over time, they began to identify "good" and "questionable" book titles. They soon began to share titles with their peers and many were often willing to read and share their views about titles for which others wanted clarifications. Cherri, 23 years-old student summed up this transformative learning experience beautifully in her discussion forum response:

As far as the Asian literature I read this week, there is only one thing I want to mention. It is a comment by my peer, where she pointed out how so much of the Asian literature is set in the ancient past, and so little of it is actually contemporary literature. Although her comment did not suggest this was a problem, personally I think that it is something that should be corrected. Just as Muslims shouldn't always be depicted as victims, and African Americans shouldn't always be depicted as slaves, Asians too should also be depicted in more modern terms in books. We need books that teach history, but the most important idea that I have gathered of multicultural literature, is that we need books that reflect all our students as they are now.

Multicultural literature should freely express the experiences of all groups in contemporary settings and experiences. Children should see themselves and others presented in stories to which they can readily relate. Preservice teachers need positive exposure to multicultural children's literature so that they in turn will be better prepared to integrate this literature across their curriculum. In helping to transform these preservice teachers thinking about multicultural literature, we were also able to transform our thinking about how we presented the materials, what we included, and how we provide a forum for students to transact freely with multicultural books.

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