

8.7 Multicultural Literature Reflection

After reading many books, articles, text books, etc. over the past two weeks, I think that it is safe to say that I (and many other teachers I know) do not seem to have a good grasp on what is considered quality multicultural literature and how to go about teaching multicultural literature that can make a real impact on students. After reading this enlightening material, there are several ways for teachers to start rethinking their thoughts about multicultural literature and ways of teaching it.

The first thing teachers need to be educated in is what exactly is multicultural literature. There are a lot of debates about what groups of people should be included in multicultural literature. Should multicultural be based solely on people who come from various cultural backgrounds? Or should multicultural literature be based on all minority groups? These minority groups would be people with disabilities, gay and lesbians, etc. When thinking about multicultural literature, it would seem that most teachers would pick multicultural literature based on people who come from different cultures than we are accustomed to. Is this the way teachers should look at multicultural literature? Personally, when I choose to read to my students books that would be considered multicultural, I would pick stories about people who come from other cultures. Not to say that

reading stories with characters that have disabilities or come from different family structures are not important. However, I think that needs to be placed in a totally separate genre of literature that has yet to be named.

Once teachers define what they believe is multicultural literature, a teacher then needs to decide what they want their students to learn from reading about multicultural literature. I have always used multicultural books to teach students about another's culture. Working in a diverse classroom, I think it is important for students to learn about one another and how we are different. I always emphasized the different foods we eat, the different clothes we might wear, the different holidays we celebrate amongst other things. However, after reading various articles and literature about multicultural literature, I am realizing that is not what our main focus should be when we are reading multicultural literature. Obviously, it is important to educate students about how other cultures live. However, Mingshui Cai argues in her article called "Multiple Definitions of Multicultural Literature: Is the Debate Really Ivory Tower Bickering?" that "it is not just to understand, accept, and appreciate cultural differences, but also to ultimately transform the existing social order to ensure greater voice and authority to the marginalized cultures, and to achieve social equality and justice

among all cultures so that people of different cultural backgrounds can live happily together in a truly democratic world," (p. 313).

Cait makes an excellent point. We want multicultural literature to bring us all closer together. To learn that we are all equal in this world no matter the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the holidays we celebrate. Cait states, "To see the commonalities among cultures is important, but to study the differences is equally important or even more important." (p. 322). Joseph Bruchac in his stories about American Indians is trying to do just that. He is trying to educate people about the Native Americans, not to make us look at them differently because they may eat or look different from the "average American." He seems to want us to learn that Native Americans have gone through a lot of hardships and that they are a strong group of people who have come together to try to overcome these hardships. However, that does not make them lesser of people. Therefore, as educators while teaching stories by authors like Joseph Bruchac we need to emphasize how this culture is equal to every other culture and it is a great sadness that such harsh things have been done to them.

After deciding what teachers want their students to learn from reading about multicultural literature, teachers have to decide what books are considered quality multicultural literature. There is a lot of multicultural literature out there

that may be inaccurate. An example of this is the book by Beth Kannell called Darkness Under the Water. Beth Kannell used the Abenaki tribe to write a story about teenage angst during the Vermont Eugenics Survey between the times of 1925 to 1936. However, in her stories there was a lot of historical and cultural inaccuracies. For example, during that time period Abenaki girls would have to cut their hair to "blend in" more according to Doris Seale and Judy Dow in their essay about Darkness Under the Water. However, Kannell poorly executes the way she went about addressing this serious situation. Seale and Dow respond saying: "

In truth, our Abenaki mothers and grandmothers would cut our hair short, or put our hair up in pigtails, or brush our hair out. They might tell us this was necessary to keep us safe, or they might tell us a story, or they might not say anything. We understood this because we know our parents did it to protect us. But who would belittle a child, wound a child's spirit on purpose, by telling her that her braided hair is not pretty? Someone may have shared a story with the author about how painful it was to have had her hair—this important part of her being—cut or unbraided in order to avoid suspicion; but Kanell, once again, wittingly or unwittingly distorts the historical and cultural significance to the point that it was painful for us to read and it's painful for us to relive.

Therefore, as educators we need to take a serious look at the multicultural literature that we choose to present to our students. Books like Darkness Under the Water really hurt the people who were close to the Vermont Eugenics Survey during that time and as educators we may not know that until we did some research

to gain background knowledge about the book we are choosing for our students to read.

Another factor teachers need to consider when choosing multicultural books is who is writing or illustrating the story about that particular culture. Is it an author who is a part of that culture and is deeply embedded within the culture? Or is it an onlooker who has just observed the culture and has not actually been a part of it? In an article by Debbie Reese entitled "?????" she quoted the illustrator James Ransome when he was asked about why he had not illustrated any books about Native Americans and he replied "I haven't held their babies." What James Ransome meant was that he had never earned the trust and respect of the Native Americans to illustrate any stories about them. That is not to say that he could not earn their trust by living amongst them and learning about them. However, since Ransome had not done that before, he did not feel that he should be allowed to illustrate books about Native Americans. Denise Johnson in her book entitled The Joy of Children's Literature states, "Evaluating literature according to genre criteria without considering cultural and historical accuracy and authenticity can lead to missing important misconceptions or misinterpretations about a cultural or religious group," (p. 319). Therefore, as educators we need to learn about who wrote the multicultural books we are about to present to our students because it

may not be from somebody who was deeply embedded or very educated about that particular culture.

As a teacher we are taught to reflect upon our teachings and I find it difficult not to reflect upon the reasons I feel so unknowledgeable about the subject of multicultural literature. I think the root of the problem is from my lack of a multicultural background. I grew up in an all-white neighborhood and everyone around me all looked similar with similar cultural backgrounds. I was never exposed to multiculturalism at a young age and therefore did not have much prior background knowledge on the subject. Another factor that I think contributes to my lack of knowledge about multicultural literature and multiculturalism in general is the literature I was exposed to during my undergraduate career. I went to a very diverse university. However, I was never taught why our cultures were equal. Nor, was the subject about people being different ever really brought up. We all just coexisted without knowing much about each other. Lastly, I feel that my lack of knowledge stems from my teacher preparation courses. We discussed various multicultural literature that we could read in our classroom. However, we did not really go into specifics about why we should be teaching this genre. Nor, were we taught how to go about choosing quality multicultural literature. Denise Johnson sums up my point saying, "Lack of exposure to information about diverse cultures,

religions, and perspectives in elementary and secondary schools and in the teacher preparation programs as well as lack of personal experience may mean that teachers must construct a complex set of new knowledge," (p. 319).

As a result, I have started to now rethink how I will go about educating my students through multicultural literature. I need to move from multicultural lessons from just informing my students about other cultures to empowering them about other cultures. "Unless students empower themselves to deal with issues of social equity and justice, multicultural education will stop short of its ultimate goal," (Cai, p. 320). Inspiring students to do things about the cultural inequality we face every day should be my ultimate goal while educating students. However, before they can be inspired to do things about inequality they need to know background knowledge about the various cultures. Therefore, I will not be eliminating my teachings of various aspects of culture, however I will be also be empowering them. "Students will empower themselves when they develop the ability to identify, analyze, and take action on cultural/ethnic issues," (Cai, p. 320).

In conclusion, I (and many other teachers) have been at a disadvantage when teaching about multicultural literature because of the lack of background knowledge we have acquired throughout our life. However, we can change that by becoming more enlightened about the various cultures we are trying to expose our

children to. To do this we need to identify what our definition of multicultural literature is in our classroom. Once we have established that we need to decide what we want our students to learn from multicultural literature. Not only do we want students to learn the facts about various cultures, but we also want our students to feel empowered after reading the literature to drive them want more equality amongst various cultures. Once educators realize the dire need to expose our students to multicultural literature on an empowering level, we will instruct our students on a deeper level of equality amongst various cultures.

“Teachers can create learning experiences that encourage students to empower themselves.” P. 320

“Consider, for example, thematic units on food, housing, family., etc in which books about various cultures would be featured. But if the historically underrepresented groups are not included in the unit, the attempt to affirm diversity is not successful because it does not address the issue of equity.” P. 318