

The Need for Multicultural Literature in the Classroom

By Jonathon Wyman

My story: Making a push for multicultural literature is not a new thing nor is it a relatively new term. Since I became a teacher in 2010, I have heard about it and have seen it used as a buzzword in all kinds of contexts. I never questioned the idea behind using multicultural literature because it seems so obvious. I mean, even in a classroom of predominantly white students, shouldn't I make it a point to show them what it's like to live as a non white person? Of course I should. Shouldn't my students of diversity feel included? Of course they should. It's a curious paradox, however, that when things seem obvious we don't feel the need to learn about them. It's said that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing": in our classroom practice it leads to a half-hearted approach that defeats the very purpose of what we're trying to achieve. And so I've realized that I have failed to acknowledge why this need exists. I've also overlooked how profoundly students' understanding can be transformed through exposure to multicultural literature and concepts. This light-bulb moment inspired me to dig deeper at how to bring social issues and understandings of the power of culture to the forefront of students' minds. The following is a synthesis of my research into these matters translated into the core premise behind my creation of this website and materials.

When I think back to my childhood, I remember having a love for reading, specifically the Hardy Boys series. I also loved *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and several other sports books around basketball and hockey. Reflecting back on these readings, I realize that none of them have a broad spectrum of diverse characters. Basically, the characters are all white males. Growing up in an incredibly white suburb of the Twin Cities, Minnetonka, I was sheltered in my exposure to diverse cultures and so my selection of books also revolved around characters that looked like me. Would my world be different if I never saw myself in books? You bet!

In her *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (publication year), educational researcher Geneva Gay describes a study of literature completed in 1989 by Seamus Deane. Deane examined 300 popular children's books, focusing on how African Americans were portrayed by European American authors. Some popular titles included in his study were the series: *Nancy Drew*, *Hardy Boys*, *Bobbsey Twins*, *Woodland Gang*, *Sweet Valley Twins*, and others. Deane found that while explicitly derogatory portrayals of African Americans were absent, the presence of any African Americans dropped off almost altogether; of those that were included, almost none of them were portrayed with a true sense of who they were. Furthermore, African Americans included in these stories were given no characteristics of speech or culture that would differentiate them from

their white counterparts (118). Deane's findings portray a world of books that acknowledge the need to represent culturally diverse characters, but fail to do so, other than on a superficial level, by eliminating these characters' difference altogether. Writing in 2010, Gay states that there is no recent study comparable to Deane's, but expresses hope that literature published today may have made up for some of these mistakes. Sadly, this is not confirmed by the data collected by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In an effort to make up for the gap Gay has found regarding the representation of diverse culture, the CCBC has set out to compile annual lists of new and engaging multicultural titles for children and young adults. In addition, the CCBC completes yearly studies that dig into current publishing trends and attempt to dig into matters that Deane has studied. For example, in 2013 CCBC collected 3,200 books published throughout the year. Out of this total only 93 books had significant African or African American content, 34 had significant American Indian content, 61 had significant Asian/Pacific or Asian/Pacific/American content, and 57 had significant Latino content. In all, that comes out to 245 out of 3,200, suggesting that only 7.7 percent of books published that year contain significant culturally diverse content (Horning, Lindgren, and Schliesman). Looking at data from previous years, all the way until 1994 when CCBC tracking began, it is clear that the 2013 figure reflects publishing trends that have not changed much over the past two decades. By contrast, the US population of color in the same period has risen from 20% in 1990 to 28% percent in 2010 (Korean American Coalition).

Although one reason why we are not seeing more culturally diverse books in the classroom is that very few of them being published, this does not mean that we have no titles to choose from. Instead, we simply need to work harder to identify them and make a point of using quality multicultural literature in our classrooms. But what is multicultural literature, and how are we to know what multicultural books meet the quality criteria we expect to find in them?

In looking around for articles that provide titles and resources available to use, I came across several other articles providing checklists for selecting and using appropriate literature. Belinda Loui's, "'Guiding Principles for Teaching Multicultural Literature", stuck out because of a caveat she puts on using certain texts. Loui argues, "teachers need to first and foremost assess the story's perspective and determine whether feelings are celebrated or exploited" (438). Loui goes on to argue that if we are not careful with our selection, stereotypes tend to be fostered in the minds of students, especially when the reading audience is not a member of the cultural group presented (439). While I certainly understand the point Loui is trying to make, she walks a fine line in presenting the idea that we cannot use certain texts because they foster stereotypes.

I would argue this opens all the more doors to a conversation about how cultures are represented and if stereotypes are fostered, then let's talk about it. When we start putting caveats on how to select literature or make it seem like we can use this but not that, it limits our drive to use multicultural literature in the first place; furthermore, it only continues to foster the idea of using solely what we are comfortable with.

There is a lot of power in using multicultural literature in the classroom, and we need to embrace it. One essential aspect of doing this is in the promotion of respect through the exploration of similarities between the protagonist and the reader as opposed to the exploration of differences (Brand and Harper, 224). Brand and Harper agree that literature should provide both windows into other cultures, as well as mirrors reflecting back one's own. Too often though when we focus on the differences, we do nothing more than highlight how we are different from one another and we do not cultivate a sense of togetherness. Brand and Harper quote Hazel Rochman who states, "The best books break down borders, they surprise us and change our view of ourselves; they extend that phrase 'like me' to include what we thought was foreign and strange" (226). Creating a "like me" attitude is essential in teaching kids to understand one another and create a sense of appreciation for one another.

While pushing and advocating a "like me" attitude is easy to understand and desire, the implementation is something altogether different. In her article, "Opening Spaces of Possibility," Mary Ann Reilly suggests a teacher is a bricoleur. Her premise is based upon the idea that we work with what we have. Reilly follows a teacher, Murray Kranzmann, who was given a set curriculum to use. Kranzmann realized early on in the year, however, that the curriculum he was given was not going to work. In his words, "There was no room for the kids in the curriculum" (Reilly 382). Kranzmann threw the curriculum out and worked adapted on the fly using what he had. He used Sandra Cisneros', *The House on Mango Street*, as well as Walter Dean Myers', *145th Street*, to guide his teaching and include his students in the curriculum. He used reading, writing, social interactions, more reading, and more writing to create a process of social consciousness and constant reflection that allowed kids to connect with the text at multiple levels. Reilly points out that today, most teachers are not like Mr. Kranzman. Instead, she argues that the normalization of curriculum from the top down has negatively impacted the roles of teachers. Instead of becoming teachers like Mr. Kranzman, she argues "Teachers become tour guides, showing students what sites must be noticed...As a daily performance, teaching becomes a pointing ritual that seldom pierces underneath the skin of the everyday" (233). Reilly goes on to argue that the theory of creating windows and mirrors is not meant to encourage "wandering around in one's own house of mirrors, Narcissus-like, but remembering that the

language we speak now derives from what and whom we saw through our windows as infants, and children, and young adults” (383). If we want our students to grow up with an understanding of those around them, if we want students to break free from their “we’re all different” worlds to a “like me” state, then we, the teachers, need to be true bricoleurs and we need to find ways to “pierce underneath the skin of the everyday.”

References

- Brand, Susan Trostle, and Laurie J. Harper. "More Alike than Different: Promoting Respect through Multicultural Books and Literacy Strategies." *Childhood Education* 86 (2010): 224-233. *Educators Reference Complete*; Gale. Web.
- Gay, Gene. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 2010. Web.
- Horning, Kathleen, Mary Lindgren and Megan Schliesman. "A Few Observations in Publishing 2013." *Cooperative Children's Book Center*, 2013. Web. University of Wisconsin - Madison.
- Horning, Kathleen. "Children's Books By and About People of Color Published in the United States." Ed. *Cooperative Children's Book Center*, University of Wisconsin - Madison. 2014. Web. <<http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>>.
- Louie, Belinda Y. "Guiding Principles for Teaching Multicultural Literature: This Article Offers Specific Guidelines for Teaching Multicultural Literature that are Designed to Enhance Student Understanding and Response." *The Reading Teacher* 59 (2006): 438-48. *Educators Reference Complete*; Gale. Web.
- "Population Change by Race and Ethnicity." *Korean American Coalition*, California State University. 2003. Web. <http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/ckaks/census/7203_tables.pdf>
- Reilly, Mary Ann. "Opening Spaces of Possibility: The Teacher as Bricoleur." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52.5 (2009): 376-84. Web. 3 February 2015.