

The Power of Small Beginnings: Helping Pre-service Teachers Realize the Need for Cultural Awareness

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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

- Margaret Mead

In some parts of the United States, the face of education is changing due to the makeup of the student population. This change reflects the change in the general U.S. population, as minority groups continue to grow. According to the 1994 U.S. Census Bureau, minorities are expected to be 50% of the U.S. population by 2020. In some parts of the United States, however, the demographics remain constant. As an assistant professor teaching for a university where ethnic diversity is limited among its student body, I agree with Parameswaran (2007): “It is...important that college teacher education instructors who want to infuse their curriculum with themes that are diverse pay attention to...preconceived notions about diversity education and provide a setting where students can feel safe exploring...” (p. 51).

Guided by this belief, I strive to expose my pre-service teachers in their reading and language arts courses with a growing awareness of ethnicities through children’s literature. Through open discussion of multi-culture literature and references to the works of Lisa Delpit (1995) Victoria Purcell-Gates (1995), and Shirley Brice Heath (1983), students have an opportunity to explore how culture affects learning. They, too, have opportunities to examine how their own attitudes toward teaching students, whose perspective and backgrounds differ from our own, influence their pedagogy and teaching practices. Because I teach a literacy block for future elementary teachers and because “...all students need to recognize diversity that defines this society, learn to respect it, and see it in a positive light”, I choose to highlight issues of diversity through the curriculum and children’s literature (Harris, 1997, p. 3)

Noting a Need for Change

In becoming an advocate of teaching minorities well, I first had to develop insight and an understanding of the need. With experience in working with African-American children, as well as children from Japan, Mexico, and Appalachia, I read the works of Lisa Delpit (1995), reflected on the application of Louise Rosenblatt’s (1994, 1996) research, poured over Alfie

Kohn's (1999) recent book, and looked for children's literature that represented minorities both in their depictions and authorship. As I assigned class work for pre-service teachers in language arts classes, I integrated my insights and shared both my experiences and information regarding the teaching of all students. I borrowed Carl Tomlinson's (2004) phrase, differentiated instruction, and infused it within lesson assessment and planning to reflect the needs of all students. I also concluded that children of diversity need to see themselves in literature because if "...students...do not see any reflections of themselves or...see only distorted or comical ones [they will] come to understand that they have little value in society in general and in school in particular" (Harris, 1997, p. 4).

In spite of my convictions, however, one group of pre-service teachers appeared less than enthusiastic about using multicultural literature in developing lesson and unit plans. To counteract their response, I demonstrated using multicultural literature throughout the curriculum so that it would not be viewed as a separate entity, but a vital part of the curriculum.

During the course of the semester, I decided that while highlighting the needs of minorities was easy, getting my students to understand the need for change in meeting the needs of all students, especially minority students, was challenging and called for creativity. After much contemplation, I devised a new plan that I quickly put into play the following day. When the first student arrived, I asked her to be my "plant", meaning that she would call out all the answers using a cheat sheet hidden in her open book.

After class began, I introduced a set of flashcards that included the following: φαχκετ σνοω ζιππερ ωοολψ ωαρμ. While her peers look mystified, my plant correctly called out "jacket", "snow", "zipper", "wooly", and "warm". The class began laughing while a couple of students looked irritated. With tongue in check, I then admonished my students for not paying attention and not applying themselves. While few students smiled, I then introduced the big book, The Jacket I Wear in the Snow, with the same type of cards covering the corresponding words as previously introduced. After two or three minutes, students began to use their semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic clues to figure out the words. I then asked someone to explain the purpose of the lesson. As students shared their thoughts, they stated that introducing new words in isolation is useless. They, too, stated that we should teach students to use context and picture clues. "All true", I agreed. As they continued talking, everyone paused as one student stated that she now knew how an English Language Learner must feel. She shared, "I always thought that if people came here [the U.S.] they should learn the language, and if they don't, it's their problem. But I felt dumb, and I don't want my students to feel that way. So we've got to find a way to teach them without them feeling helpless or stupid."

After class, I reflected upon my student's new insight and thought about a quote from Billings (1994): "If teachers ...[do] not...see students' racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs" (p. 33). While I realized that my inroads during that lesson were small in regards to the magnitude of my endeavor, I recognized that this small step was reflective of how we, as teachers, are going to make a difference - one student and one insight at a time.

Second Experience

With some sense of success, I assigned my pre-service students in a children's literature class to analyze the following children's books: Brother Eagle, Sister Sky by Susan Jeffers (1993) and All in a Day's Work by Eve Bunting (1997). I, too, instructed my students to create T-charts and list both positive and negative aspects of the books. Invariably, the students groups agreed: They liked the books and only had positive comments. The students cited beautiful illustrations, sweet stories, and well-defined characters. I then asked students to read parts of the article, Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls (Mendoza, J. and Reese, 2001). Heated discussions arose. The authors of the articles brought to our attention that the books could, in some cases, promote negative stereotypes of minorities. For example, All in a Day's Work features Mexicans working in the fields and in no other jobs. In other words, this book used alone might mislead readers into viewing people of Mexico as being limited in their abilities to achieve monetary success. In the book Brother Eagle Sister Sky, the artwork, while masterful, depicts Native Americans only in the background, fading as if into the distance. Some readers may interpret this depiction as being representative of a now non-existent culture.

While some of my pre-service students were appalled at such opinions and defended the books and authors, others seemed confused and paused to express their concern that they had never considered these aspects before. Although I cannot say, with any confidence, that this changed my pre-service teachers' minds in their dedication to use books that represent diversity in appropriate ways, I did draw two significant conclusions. First, a deep conversation occurred among my students on the subject regarding diversity depicted in children's books. Second, for the first time, some students seemed uncomfortable when considering their responsibility in choosing quality literature to accurately represent cultures other than their own. In light of Frank Smith's (1998) proposal that discomfort or a disequilibrium in one's thinking must occur for true learning to take place, these students at least reached this milestone, and, for this reason alone, I considered the lesson a success.

Conclusion

No matter the makeup of our personal classrooms, diversity is an issue that must be addressed to meet the needs of our changing population. All students, including pre-service teachers, need opportunities to value diversity. By using multicultural literature in the classroom, we, as teachers, can model respecting and appreciating diversity for our students and know, in turn, that our students will be more likely to develop an appreciation and respect for cultures that differ from their own (Harris, 1997). While some may say that this is only a small start in addressing the issues of diversity, like Margaret Mead, I believe in the power of small beginnings.

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