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## “It takes more than brown paint to portray a realistic African American character”: Lessons Learned about Teaching Multicultural Literature

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“When I read, ‘It takes more than brown paint to portray a realistic African American character,’ it was very eye-opening for me. Through our readings and our discussions, I realized that there is so much more to consider such as the authenticity, issues of power, educational concerns, and literary/artistic concerns.” (reading reflection paper, fourth-grade teacher)

## Introduction

Ten elementary school teachers and one Spanish teacher enrolled in *Multicultural Children’s and Adolescent Literature* expecting to develop a long list of books for their classroom libraries that featured people with brown and black faces. Generally, coming into the course, their primary criterion for appropriate multicultural literature was that it included characters of color. These teachers, students in a graduate reading program, noted repeatedly in course reflection papers and online discussions that they never considered issues of power, privilege, and authenticity in the media in general and in literature in particular prior to their experience in the course. By the end of the course, however, these teachers understood the rationale for selecting multicultural literature from a more critical perspective and gained some strategies to begin to apply their new knowledge in their own classrooms.

## Theoretical Framework for Teaching Multicultural Literature

Grant and Sleeter (2006) identified five approaches to multicultural teacher education: 1. teaching the exceptional and culturally different, 2. human relations, 3. single-group studies, 4. multicultural education, and 5. multicultural and social justice education. These approaches ranged from assimilationist to social reconstructionist. The course that served as the site for this study embraced Grant and Sleeter’s fourth approach, *multicultural education*, which “calls on teachers to address power and privilege in the classroom – to subvert dominant hegemony, purposefully teach about injustice, and ensure educational equity for all students” (Gorski, p. 310-311, 2009). To accomplish the goals of this approach, the course was theoretically grounded in critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Recognizing that knowledge is not neutral, critical literacy provides a framework to examine the ways in which language is used to reproduce social inequities (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Further, critical literacy examines issues of power and privilege by paying attention to who benefits and who does not (Janks, 2010). Culturally relevant pedagogy offers a vehicle to look more closely at race critically and at how teaching can support the academic development of students by using their backgrounds, experiences, and frames of reference as assets in the learning experience (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Together, critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy provided a theoretical framework for the elementary school teachers enrolled in *Multicultural Children’s and Adolescent Literature* to gain new insights about teaching multicultural literature from a critical perspective.

## **Lessons Learned about Teaching Multicultural Literature**

At the beginning of the course, the teachers described their processes for selecting multicultural children's and adolescent literature. Generally, they noted they simply looked for texts that included a rainbow of faces and a universal storyline. As the instructor of the course, my goal was to add depth to the teachers' evaluation and selection processes by helping them to build their understanding of critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy. To accomplish this goal, I engaged teachers in a wide range of activities that included viewing videos of teachers integrating a multicultural education approach, reading texts centered on examining multicultural literature from a critical perspective, reading stories of teachers reflecting on challenges with teaching multicultural literature, and watching videos and visiting websites that brought attention to how different groups have been marginalized in our society. As a result of our journey through these resources, teachers articulated insights about and understanding of teaching multicultural literature critically that generally centered on five ideas:

### **Integrate multiple perspectives**

"Just because a person who is in a certain culture writes a book doesn't mean that it reflects the whole culture." (online discussion, second-grade teacher)

Upon entering the course, many teachers expressed surprise that members of a particular culture demonstrated divergent beliefs, thoughts, and ways of being. They also failed to scrutinize independently or with their students texts written about a culture by a member of the culture. Instead, they presented the material as if one viewpoint spoke for the entire culture. Through their examination of a variety of multicultural books, the teachers recognized the multiple perspectives exhibited within a culture. They also began to understand the diversity within groups they initially viewed as a single culture. One student, for example, came to the realization, "Africa is a large continent with many varying cultures and identities..." Previously, she selected a single book for her second-grade students which ignored the great diversity within the continent of Africa. Most of the teachers expressed concern about the amount of research necessary to integrate multiple perspectives, but most also understood the value in spending the time to do so.

### **Pay attention to representation**

"A [Native American] girl was in class and her teacher chose a book about Indians that made Indians look bad. Then when it was time to play, no one in her class would play with her because of what they learned in the book..." (reading reflection paper, kindergarten teacher)

In preparation for an online discussion, teachers visited a website devoted to Native American cultures ([www.oyate.com](http://www.oyate.com)). Among other things, the website discussed how some widely accepted and award-winning children's literature celebrated stereotypical and racist images of Native Americans. The website also shared testimonies from Native American children who experienced this kind of literature in their elementary school classrooms. For many of the teachers in the course, reading the experiences of children helped them to understand deeply the socioemotional damage caused by literature that failed to represent a culture accurately. At the beginning of the course, several teachers stated that they believed authors and illustrators maintained poetic license to represent a culture, but after hearing the voices of children, they changed their perspective. They not only saw the danger for children who were members of the culture, but also they saw the negative stereotypes developed by children who were

outside of the culture. Paying attention to representation requires work on the teacher's part, but teachers suggested, if it supported children's academic and socio-emotional development, then it was worth the effort.

### **Examine the use of foreign languages**

"I am going to be more critical of the language to determine if it is just thrown in or actually enhancing the authenticity of the text." (reading reflection paper, first-grade teacher)

In addition to selecting multicultural literature solely because it included non-white characters, teachers in the course noted they often selected multicultural literature because they saw words in a language other than English. They explained they rarely scrutinized how the language was used in the book as long as it appeared in it. After reading an article about the use of Spanish in children's literature, the teachers began to recognize the importance of examining how foreign languages were used in the literature they selected for their students. Often, in multicultural children's literature, authors immediately translate Spanish words into English which results in a redundant text for Spanish speakers and a disjointed story for non-Spanish speakers (Barrera & Quiroa, 2003). One teacher in the course stated, "Many of the books provided with the curriculum will do this 'double talk' and even my [four and five year old] kids are asking why it's saying the same thing twice." Barrera & Quiroa (2003) emphasized that 1. Spanish words and phrases should be used primarily in the first-person, 2. Spanish words and phrases should be defined by context clues, and 3. Spanish words and phrases should be deliberately selected. Once the teachers learned how to evaluate these kinds of books in their own classroom libraries, they quickly identified which to focus on in classroom instruction.

### **Avoid censorship**

"Sometimes, even in not picking a book, you have sent a clear message when in fact you didn't mean to send any message at all." (final course reflection paper, fifth-grade teacher)

Initially, teachers in the course demonstrated some apprehension toward examining literature critically, because such action could bring attention to their lack of knowledge of a particular culture.

Consequently, some teachers suggested they simply would not choose certain books in order to prevent discussions that required specific cultural knowledge. After reading a wide variety of criticism on multicultural literature and viewing interviews with scholars in the field, they realized all literature could inspire complex conversations. Censoring certain books, therefore, would not prevent the conversations and could send messages to their students about the teacher's beliefs about certain groups. Instead, the teachers acknowledged, to continue to improve their practice, they needed to be willing to educate themselves independently, through professional development opportunities, and through graduate courses to gain the background necessary to develop the knowledge necessary to teach the literature effectively. They also needed to ensure all of their selections demonstrated literary merit, curricular connections, and authentic representations of cultural groups (Bishop, 1997). Overlooking authentic representation by censoring certain books would undermine the goals of critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy.

### **Take risks to address issues of power and privilege**

"If it could help students rise up and feel powerful and want to change the problems in the world, how

could it not be worth it?" (reading reflection paper, third-grade teacher)

Throughout the course, teachers expressed concern about uncomfortable conversations, and they believed addressing issues of power and privilege could facilitate discussions they did not want. Their feelings were consistent with the research on talking about race among college students (i.e., Tatum, 1992). Critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy, however, demand we call attention to the powerful and the powerless in our society. It also requires teachers to explore with students the messages they receive about these issues in the literature they read. The goal, however, was not to encourage teachers and students to pity those who have been marginalized. Instead, the discussion centered on strategies teachers could integrate to inspire students to make change in the world around them. Once teachers understood the focus on developing among students the academic skills and personal dispositions to use the literature to understand society and to work for justice, they still felt apprehension, but they also demonstrated the willingness to work through their fears to empower their students.

Although the teachers completed the course with lingering questions, they clearly demonstrated growth as teachers and as individuals. One teacher, in fact, noted the experience in the course not only made her a better teacher, but also it made her a better. This sentiment was echoed by several teachers in the course. Notwithstanding this sentiment, the teachers also articulated concerns that one course was inadequate to prepare them to teach multicultural literature from a critical perspective. Several teachers stated they would ask the reading department to develop a more advanced version of the course in order to continue their exploration. Their interest in a second course spoke volumes about their commitment to integrating their lessons learned about teaching multicultural literature.

## **Conclusion**

"I know now that my choices are critical and integrating high quality, far reaching, and authentic multicultural literature is one of the single most important gifts I can give to my students and the future."  
(final course reflection, fourth-grade teacher)

Whether or not the teachers' philosophical beliefs initially aligned with critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy, they developed an understanding of the power of selecting authentic multicultural literature and teaching it in a way that empowers students. Embracing this perspective provided the teachers in the course with tools to accomplish several goals for multicultural education through the use of authentic multicultural literature: 1. to promote understanding of diversity, 2. to affirm students of all backgrounds and experiences, 3. to facilitate success among all students, and 4. to facilitate awareness of issues of power and privilege and the effects of these issues on the lives of people in our society (Grant & Sleeter, 2009, p. 178). Accomplishing these goals not only helps students to develop academic skills, such as critical thinking, but also it nurtures them into becoming productive citizens who appreciate diversity and understand issues of justice and equality.

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