

## **Multicultural Literacy Education as A Tool for Social Justice**

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### ***Introduction***

#### *What is Multicultural Literacy?*

Multicultural literacy is defined as skills that are involved when uncovering bias in regards to culture, as well as the ability to respect different perspectives and cultures. This paper discusses how multicultural literacy was used as a tool for social justice through a Multicultural Education Action Project (MAEP). Implications for educators are discussed.

#### *Multicultural Education Action Project (MAEP)*

MAEP was developed by two faculty members teaching an expressive art course to preservice teachers at a four-year liberal arts historically black college and university (HBCU) and a RO1 university in the South East. The project was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved course planning by the two faculty members a semester prior to the course being offered. This phase involved brainstorming on the project goals and objectives, meetings with department chairs at both universities and seeing permission to co-teach the course, meetings with the principal and kindergarten teachers at an elementary school in the metro area, preparing a course syllabus, and mapping out logistics to deliver and implement the course. Major planning topics were course delivery format, technology platforms, transportation and on campus parking, coordinating with kindergarten teachers for the date, venue and other logistics for final project presentations (Mohan and Jepkemboi, 2022, p. 240).

The second phase involved implementation of the project. This project was a key assessment for the expressive arts in the P-6 curriculum course that was jointly taught to preservice teachers at the two universities. The course was delivered using a blended format. Class sessions were held twice a week for a duration of one and half hours. Preservice teachers were introduced to the expressive arts course and the project during the first two weeks of face-to-face class sessions at their respective universities. Jointed class sessions of students in the two universities were held in the third week. Students were asked to form small groups with peers in the partner university. A total of six joint project teams of 5-6 students were formed. Project teams communicated with each other using Skype, Google Hangout, WhatsApp or facetime on their cell phones or computers. Team members were asked to choose one country for their project, allocate group member roles and plan their own group meeting times. Project teams chose to conduct their diversity research on the following countries: France, Italy, Spain, Mexico, India and Israel. During weeks four-ten, separate class sessions were held face-to-face on campus on Tuesdays and joint online class sessions on Thursdays. Students also travelled twice between the two universities times for joint face-to-face working-class sessions (Mohan and Jepkemboi, 2022, p. 240-241).

At the end of the semester projects teams presented their projects to kindergarten students at an elementary school in the metro area. The two faculty members facilitated the presentations along with kindergarten teachers. The projects were presented in the lunch room right before afterschool pick up time. Project teams showcased findings of their diversity projects using tri-fold posters, power point slide shows, artifacts, artwork, crafts, dances, and short skits. Kindergarten students participated in the cultural experiences and activities that were set up by project teams. At the end of the semester, project teams wrote a project report that was submitted for course evaluation (Mohan and Jepkemboi, 2022, p. 241).

MAEP can be integrated with other subject areas. For instance, it can be connected to language arts, where students can research the chosen culture and communicate their findings. In addition, students can write a reflection piece about the research and dance experience. In social studies, students can compare their chosen culture to the culture being studied in class (For example, Ancient Egyptians, pioneers, vikings etc). The purpose of this activity would be to allow students to take the perspective of different cultures. Students will gain a sense of why certain cultures have traditions that meet their needs and wants.

MAEP can even also be extended to health class, where students can research ethnic foods that pertain to their chosen culture. They can answer why these foods are so prominent in that culture (for example, in Mexico tortillas are made from corn flour because corn grows in Mexico). Students can also assess the nutrition value of their chosen ethnic dishes. Students gain a sense of why cultures eat the foods they do, and will build and appreciation for ethnic cuisines.

### Multicultural Literacy and Social Justice

*What is the importance of multicultural literacy in society?*

Multicultural education or literacy aims **to improve the learning and success of all students**, particularly students from cultural groups that have been historically underrepresented or that suffer from lower educational achievement and attainment (Great School Partnership, 2014).

*What is the role of multicultural education in promoting social justice?*

Social justice in education **demands equity for all students**, but it also yearns for growth that is provoked by student diversity. Multicultural Education or Literacy works when teachers are empowered to incorporate students' backgrounds and experiences as strengths rather view them as hurdles to overcome (Great School Partnership, 2014).

The 21st century brings a new and diverse group of learners into the public schools. Soon, 50% of the students in our schools will comprise of student from minorities populations (Webb, Mehta, and Jordan, 2000) and 85% of our nation's teachers will be white females, who differ from their students racially, culturally, and in social status (Banks, 1991a). Because schools have become much more culturally and linguistically diverse, educators should strive to provide experiences in the classroom that closely mirror the cultural and linguistic environments of their students. Teale and Yokota (2000) contend that "children need to see themselves and others in our diverse society reflected in the selections read by the teacher" (p. 15). Multicultural literacy is one method of providing diversity for both students and teachers. Beiger (1996) believes a good piece of literature, can alter and enhance one's view of the world. Multicultural literacy, offers rich opportunities for reflection and learning about different cultures (Fisher & Searns, 1998).

*What is multicultural literacy?*

There are various definitions for multicultural literature. Broadly defined, multicultural literacy includes literature about people who are considered outside of the mainstream of society and have been in some manner marginalized. This definition would include people from diverse cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. In addition, it encompasses issues on gender, sexual orientation and disabilities (Yokoto, 2001). A narrower definition of multicultural literacy focuses on literature people of color from diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious groups (Yokoto, 2001).

*What criteria can we follow for selecting multicultural literature as a tool for social justice?*

In recent years there has been an increase in children's books written about culturally and linguistically diverse groups. This influx of new multicultural children's books has made finding culturally diverse books to use in the classroom much easier. However, there is always the danger that books may contain literary characters or situations that perpetuate negative stereotypical images of culturally and linguistically diverse populations (Reddish, 2000).

Banks (1991a) provides a model for integrating multicultural content into the curriculum. His model identifies four levels of integration, including *the contributions approach*, *the additive approach*, *the transformational approach*, and *the social action approach*. This paper on multicultural literacy education as a tool for social justice covers the last two approaches-*the transformational approach* and *social action approach*.

The third level, *the transformational approach* is when you are able to change the structure of the curriculum to provide students with the opportunity to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from perspectives of different cultural groups (Banks, 1991a). Using this approach, children for Social Studies might read and compare *The Matchlock Gun* (Edmond 1941) to Hickman's (1979) *The Valley of the Shadow*. The first book contains stereotypical unprovoked savagery and attacks on white settlers, whereas the second book portrays the true account of the massacre of peaceful Indians at the hands of white settlers. Thus, the goal of the transformational approach is to help students develop a critical awareness of, understanding of, and respect for multicultural concepts, events and people (Coonrod & Hughes, 1994).

The fourth and highest level of Bank's hierarchy of integrating multicultural content is the *social action approach*. Here, students identify social problems and concerns, make decisions, and take actions to help resolve the problems they have identified. Students begin to feel empowered to participate in social change because they have the knowledge and perspective to do so (Banks, 1991a). After reading for English Class or Social Studies "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry" (Taylor, 1976), students might sponsor a "Freedom Day" to celebrate how far the nation has come and to accentuate how much remains to be done in terms of true freedom and equality for all.

#### Implications for Practice

Using multicultural literacy education as a tool for social justice has several implications for educators. When we try and make multicultural literacy an integral part of the curriculum and teachers act as models and guides, classrooms can become areas of cultural development and learning. Teachers must make a concerted effort to incorporate multicultural literacy into the instructional day (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995).

Teachers must help students examine and identify with their own cultural backgrounds (Banks, 1991b). Some students are knowledgeable about their ethnic or cultural heritage, whereas others may identify so strongly with the mainstream culture that they neglect learning or discovering more about their own culture and often find themselves feeling as if they do not belong to either the mainstream or their own cultural group (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995).

Let us each rise today to make our classrooms examples of effectively promoting multicultural literacy. We can start with the youngest age group, Kindergarten and Talk about MEAP.

#### Conclusion

Freire and Macedo (1987) assert that students need "first to need to read their world and then to read the word." "In a world that is becoming so culturally and linguistically diverse, how does one create such learning experiences without exposure to racial and ethnic minority reading materials and a most importantly a teacher who can sensitively guide students in their discussion? This is an agenda important for educators to consider.

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