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Multicultural Competence in Pre-Service Teachers: Questioning Assumptions through Juvenile Literature

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Zanin-Yost, Alessia, "Multicultural Competence in Pre-Service Teachers: Questioning Assumptions through Juvenile Literature" (2018). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 2157.

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Multicultural Competence in Pre-Service Teachers: Questioning Assumptions through Juvenile Literature

Abstract

The article highlights how librarians and faculty can collaborate to prepare pre-service teaching students to select culturally appropriate juvenile books. Results show how the students' misconceptions or poor knowledge about multiculturalism impact their decision in the selection of material. Changes in the content and delivery of information demonstrate how to improve the knowledge and application of cultural literacy skills by the students. This case study approaches the importance of the connection between textual and visual content in juvenile books, and how a collaborative approach between a faculty member and an academic librarian can improve the acquisition of lifelong learning skills.

Keywords: Information Literacy, Juvenile Literature, Librarians, Multiculturalism, Pre-service Teachers, Visual Communication.

Introduction

At many four-year-degree institutions, the preparation of pre-service teachers, who are college students enrolled in a PK-12 education degree program, includes extensive academic and field preparation on subjects and issues relevant to education, teaching methods, and assessment. One aspect of this preparation focuses on teaching pre-service students how to select appropriate materials for their students. The ability to make these curriculum selections comes with experience, something that pre-service teachers still need to acquire. While pre-service teachers gain some preparation for these curriculum decisions in their degree training, researchers have pointed out a lack of direction regarding choosing multicultural curriculum selections. As noted

in the literature, pre-service teachers do not acquire adequate knowledge about diversity, a culturally diverse curriculum, and cultural competence (Able, Ghulamani, Mallous, & Glazier, 2014; Siwatu, 2007). Furthermore, because of their lack of expertise, they tend to have low self-efficacy in these areas (Kyles, & Olafson, 2008; Mills, & Ballantyne, 2010) and retain certain biases and stereotypes they learned as children (Clark, & Zygmunt, 2014; Mdunge & Le Roux, 2012).

To address this challenge, this article reports findings from a case study on how undergraduate pre-service students training to teach prekindergarten to second grades were taught to select multicultural juvenile books through the collaborative efforts of the faculty member and the liaison librarian. In prekindergarten to second grades, juvenile books are often used in the classroom because they provide both textual and visual information enabling all children to participate. Furthermore, juvenile literature does not merely tell a story, but it also provides educators with a venue to teach a multitude of academic skills, such as consolidating language skills, building vocabulary, enhancing comprehension, and learning social skills. It is through this continuous engagement that children construct and reconstruct their personal knowledge, and, under the guidance of the teacher, are able to gain new skills and form their ideas about our society. Keeping this goal in mind, the initial one-shot library session planned for the course developed into a year-and-a-half collaboration which made it possible to understand how college students form their perceptions and assumptions about what multiculturalism is. The article begins with an introduction of the concepts of juvenile literature and multiculturalism before moving into the case study, which shows how and why changes were made over the course of several semesters. The article adds to the growing literature on teaching and learning

multiculturalism in PK-12 education and to the limited amount of research that covers the same topic in higher education.

Juvenile Literature and Multiculturalism

At all levels of education, books are not a passive form of learning, but rather “they construct us by presenting to us an image of ourselves. They mold us into who we think we are” (Fox, 1993, p. 656). Learning is about growing, and schools “are essentials to laying the foundation for the transformation of society” (Gorski, 2010, para. 6). Images in books are essential for young children to better understand the meaning of the text and to facilitate their self-identification with the characters of the story. According to Paivio’s (1986) dual-coding theory, pictures are learned better and faster than spoken and written words. Furthermore, images are better for memory recall and allow for a deeper recording of details that stimulate connections to the senses and emotions (Sadoski, Paivio, & Goetz, 1991).

Within juvenile literature, there are two forms of illustrated books. Picture books, which are geared to children up to first grade, refer to books where images are more important than text—the image dominates the narrative of the story. Because in picture books the images form the information of the story, these books must have a unified narrative. Illustrated books are those where “illustrations are an extension of the text and may add to the interpretation of the story but are not necessary for understanding it” (Stewing, 1995, p.7). The adult reading to the child functions as a link between fantasy and the real, thus creating meaning of the spoken and visual information. As the child progresses, images give way to more text, leaving the construction of the images to the individual imagination.

In 1965, Nancy Larrick published the article, “The all-white world of children’s books,” in which she questioned the lack of multiculturalism in juvenile literature and noted that when

children are not exposed to diversity, they are not able to understand other points of views. According to Norton and Norton (2003), “multicultural literature [is] about racial or ethnic groups that are culturally and socially different from the White Anglo-Saxon majority in the United States, whose largely middle-class values and customs are most represented in American Literature” (p. 457).

Over the next thirty years, multiculturalism in juvenile literature expanded and diversified, yet many stereotypes and biases were continued. In 2016, Yu reported that 20% of children’s books presenting Chinese culture, traditions, and religions contained stereotypical features; for example, *Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China* (1989), a book which won many awards, stereotypically depicted one of the three sisters in the story with slightly exaggerated slanted eyes. These unrealistic depictions and stories continued to support “the dominating group’s political, economic, and cultural interests” (Lewis, 1988, p. 135). Providing children with culturally accurate stories and exposing them to a variety of content, from science to folk stories, helps them develop critical thinking skills about others.

Today our primary classrooms have a diverse student body, therefore, it is important to provide and use literature that is representative and inclusive for all of the students (Nilsson, 2005). Social cognitive theory posits that children as young as two years old understand societal norms and begin to develop prejudice and bias toward others by observation (Bandura, 1989). By reading about other cultures, different points of views are formed and children can be taught that we are not all alike, but yet we share many emotions and ideas, and therefore we need to be accepted for who we are. This information is shared with children in the primary grades through written and spoken words as well as through images. A culturally responsive pedagogy is not a

need today, but a necessity, and teachers must learn how to include it in their curriculum (Gay, 2002).

The literature, case studies, and research on the topic of multiculturalism in early childhood education have been growing in multidirectional ways (Alenuma-Nimoh, 2016; Kim, Wee, & Lee, 2016; Prieto, 2018). Several studies shows that pre-service teachers are recognizing a lack of preparation in course work and through field experience (Premier & Miller, 2010; Vincent, Kirby, Deeds, & Faulkner, 2014), and research on the inclusion of multicultural education demonstrates a positive change in attitude, behaviors and skills in pre-service teachers (Coffey, 2010; Miller & Mikulec, 2014; Sassi, Lajimodiene, Bertolini, & Ketterling, 2012). What is lacking are case studies that show how information literacy instruction geared to pre-service teacher can increase knowledge about multiculturalism in juvenile literature. The author became personally aware of this gap while collaborating on an information literacy lesson for pre-service students. The project highlighted follows the steps taken in remedy the gap and points learned along the way.

The Project

The institution where this case study took place is a four-year, public, multicampus university in central Pennsylvania. At this specific location, the education program offers a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary and Early Childhood Education, focusing on grades PK-4. Undergraduates in the program are predominantly from the area, with the majority being females and first-generation college students. This section chronicles how the multi semester collaboration between the faculty and the librarian came about and what was done to promote and support students' learning about multiculturalism over time.

Semester One

After giving a presentation about information literacy to the education faculty, the librarian was contacted by interested faculty members, one of whom was the instructor for the course “Introduction to Teaching English Language Learners.” This course focuses on developing disposition, skills, and knowledge to assist English-language learners in school, and it is required for education majors, although some students in other majors also take it to fulfill their general education requirements. The faculty member, who had many years of teaching experience but was new at teaching this particular course, and the librarian made decisions about what the library session should include, and a one-hour library session was taught. The session included how to conduct a catalog research specifically to find juvenile books using a variety of limiters as well as requesting materials not at the library’s campus. A short tour of the juvenile library collection allowed the students to see where the resources were located and how to read the call numbers. During the library session the students were engaged and asked questions and from the point of view of both librarian and faculty, the session was a success. Or at least it seemed.

Two weeks later, the faculty member called the librarian with an unexpected problem. When asked to bring to class a multicultural book and to explain how they would use it for lesson planning, the students brought books like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*; *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What do You See?*; and *The Kissing Hand*, none of which are multicultural. When the students were asked why they selected these books, answers included: “I do not know much about kid’s books,” “My mom read it to me,” and “I do not know what multicultural books are.” To better understand the issues related to this misinterpretation or lack of knowledge about multiculturalism, both faculty and librarian decided to take notes during the semester on comments and questions the students asked. Through the information collected, it became

evident that several of the students thought that multiculturalism in juvenile literature meant speaking another language celebrating the various cultural holidays, or simply could not contextualize what it meant. In light of this, the faculty decided to make the broader objectives of the class more focused using the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards (2008), specifically:

- In area of diversity, teachers “connect lessons, instruction, or services to students’ experiences and cultures” (p. 34).
- Teachers need to “show respect for individual differences of ethnicity, race, languages, culture, gender, and ability” (p. 56).
- Teachers should use “a variety of approaches for teaching students how to construct meaning from media and nonprint texts” (p. 56).

Initially, both librarian and faculty decided to align these goals with those of the Information Literacy Standards in Higher Education but, after much conversation, it was decided that the Information Literacy Standards for Teacher Education (Education and Behavioral Science Section, 2011) were better suited because they are specific for K-12 students. Using these standards as a foundation, the following outcomes for the library session were chosen:

- Select appropriate juvenile books using the library catalog, the Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database (CLCD), and free available online resources such as *Scholastic* and the *Association for Library Service to Children* web page that lists the various book awards.
- Determine how to find similar books by using the subject headings and synonyms for the keyword search.
- Know how to find the juvenile books in the library.

- Understand how to cite in APA format.

The librarian and the faculty ended their summer with a plan for the fall course, which included moving away from the traditional book report to a discovery of information focused on the question, “Why do we need to teach about multiculturalism in primary grades?” In addition, instead of using one book for their lesson plan, future students would be required to use a variety of books from many different areas, for example, history, science, and art. Gaining information from different subjects would help the students to deepen their ideas and concepts about that culture. Expectations between the librarian and faculty were also discussed to clarify their roles. For example, since the faculty was in charge of grading the students, comments about content would only come from her; and the implications of time if the project could become a multi-year research.

Semester Two

For the fall semester, the library session was redesigned to meet the objectives decided during the summer. The online library guide prepared for the course allowed the students to link to different sources and enhance their discovery of information. As the semester moved along, the students presented what they learned. Both librarian and faculty noticed that these student presentations demonstrated minimal understanding of the culture/region represented in the chosen books. Recurring information provided by the students included accounts about culture derived from media instead of research. For example, a student presented how she would use *On Top of Spaghetti* by Paul Brett Johnson in a lesson plan and noted, “In all of the [Italian] homes and restaurants you can find the red and white tablecloths.” The librarian asked the student where this information came from, and the student responded, “They [tablecloths] are in all of the movies and in many Italian restaurants where I went.” It was clear that in order to reduce their

cultural assumptions, students needed basic information about the whole culture, not just information conveyed through the juvenile books or personal experiences.

Semester Three

The spring semester saw few additions to the content of the course as well as the library session. Students were now required to conduct research about the region (educational system, social and political environment, traditions and arts, and current issues such as natural cataclysm or war), author, and illustrator of the culture represented in their books. In addition to the existing resources listed on the library guide, the following were added:

- A link to the *CIA World Factbook* and *Goodreads*.
- A link to the following books through the library's catalog: *World Education Encyclopedia*, *100 Most Popular Children's Authors*.
- A link to the database, *Literature Criticism Online*.

In class, the faculty used a variety of books to demonstrate how culture can be misinterpreted, for example in the story *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, Japanese attire is represented but the story is set in China. During the library session, students were encouraged to discuss the importance of finding books that visually communicate the same message about a culture and, if there is any discrepancy, they should question why.

One issue that emerged during the semester was the students' frustrations with finding appropriate juvenile books. For their lesson plan assignment, the students had to use books that focused on a specific culture, but also books that were an appropriate reading level for the lesson they wanted to create. The library catalog did not note a suggested age group or reading level, thus the students spent considerable time to first find the book in the catalog, and then research whether the book met the reading level criteria through other online sources. The librarian and

faculty discussed this obstacle and decided to help the students with the selection of the books housed in the library. The librarian brainstormed about potential solutions and, in consultation with the library director and staff, decided to use a simple color-coding system.

Throughout the summer, the librarian and staff placed a strip of colored tape on the top of the spine of the books in the juvenile collection. Large format picture books were assigned pink, PK-2 grade level books were assigned yellow, 3-5 grade level books were assigned orange, 6-8 grade level books were assigned blue, and finally 9-12 grade level books were assigned red. A chart was placed at the end of the bookshelves explaining how the color-coding system worked to identify suggested reading levels. The same information was also added to the online library guide. Ultimately, it was the responsibility of the students to ascertain whether the books selected were right for their purpose. In the fall, the new students were greeted by a rainbow in the juvenile book section.

Semester Four

The process of finding information for the assignment became multi-steps. First, the students selected a region and researched its culture, history, and socioeconomics. Then they tracked down and analyzed juvenile books about that region. Finally, they wrote a paper and presented a lesson plan based on their research. Through this process, the studentse changes made the previous semester, both the librarian and the faculty noticed a higher level of quality in the students' work.

The color coding of the books was a success as it resulted in higher circulation of juvenile materials, less frustration from the students, and better use of time toward learning about multiculturalism. The projects presented by the students were captivating, both in terms of lesson plans, but also about what the students learned from their research about using books in PK-4

grades and about biased information in the form of text and visuals. Some of the comments from the students resonated their confidence and self-efficacy in finding the information they needed. For example, one student noted, “I learned about the struggle my English Language Learners have faced in their home country.” Another student commented, “I didn’t know there were so many books about the world to read to my students!” Another student observed during the presentation that “I can now teach a classroom that will be culturally sensitive.”

The faculty and librarian were impressed by the amount of work and the high quality of the final products, and they wanted to give students the opportunity to share their projects with an outside audience. It was decided that a webpage would be the best way to achieve this. This resource was called *Global School Library* (Dangler, 2015). The web site provides reviews of multicultural books, activities, and teaching strategies to enhance understanding of both content and culture. The books, on the webpage, are divided by region and specific topics, such as weather and dealing with family challenges. Although the faculty teaching this course retired after two more semesters and the assignment changed, the web site is still active, and more information is being added in the hope that this information continues to support other pre-service teachers, as well as teachers already teaching in the classroom.

Lesson Learned

Teaching cultural competence to college students can be a challenge because educators assume that students understand the concepts of diversity, multiculturalism, bias and stereotypes. Collaborating in this project opened the eyes of both faculty and librarian, as well as the students. Through a series of open communication, trials, and practice the two years project ended with some critical changes in both the curriculum and the library session. The lesson learned during this process are as follow:

- Instead of jumping into the topic of cultural competence, multiculturalism and diversity, a brief pre-test or discussion with the students should be given to gauge their understanding of these concepts, as well as how they fit into a juvenile literature course.
- Students need ample examples to form their ideas about multiculturalism. Discussion of several books in class was instrumental to make them understand where to look for biases.
- Taking the students to physically explore the juvenile collection was essential to show them first how it was organized and second to discover resources.
- Students want to find what they need fast, and if the collection is not friendly to use, they will give up. In our case a color-coding system worked well. If changes to the physical books are not possible, having the students do a scavenger hunt could help them understand how to find what they need.
- Establish an environment of respect, where all ideas and opinions are accepted is essential to engage the students to discuss.
- It is important to ask the students to base their research on solid sources, not assumptions or personal knowledge.
- Connect what the students do to the benefits of a greater audience. Our website give the students an opportunity to participate and share outside the classroom.

Conclusion

In this case study, the initial on-shot library instruction session, meant to give students the skills to find what they needed, evolved into a multi-semester collaboration between the librarian, the faculty, and students. Initially, the researchers focused on an inadequate collection

of materials. As they investigated further, the researchers realized the problem was larger than a lack of appropriate materials. The desire to improve the course outcomes as well as to broaden the understanding of the importance of multiculturalism in teaching grade level PK-4 students pushed both librarian and faculty to have open communication that involved experimenting and engaging the students. The librarian and faculty developed a course of action that provided flexibility but assured rigorousness in the delivery of a lesson plan, which was well thought out from the point of view of textual and visual communication and content that was providing reliable information about other cultures. The skills the students gained in the course will allow them to better select, explain, and integrate juvenile literature in their own classes as children's books can communicate positive but also negative messages affecting self-efficacy in those children.

Collaboration between the faculty and librarian resulted in a course that allowed students to explore and understand multiculturalism in juvenile literature as well as two additional ongoing benefits. First, the development of an easy color-coding system led to an increase in the circulation of the collection. Second, the creation of a webpage that made available the students' projects became a resource for other students and educators.

Juvenile books were the basis of the project and turned out to be a good choice as they provided multiple aspects of a culture from different perspectives, such as art, science and literature. The current literature about using juvenile books focuses on merely listing resources on multiculturalism. Articles and web site created by teachers and librarians listing books and audiovisual materials abound. While these lists of materials serve as a helpful starting point, more research needs to be done on strategies for incorporating these materials into curriculum and preparing pre-service teachers to teach the delicate topic of multiculturalism. In this way,

these teachers can be prepared to educate children to think critically about information that may continue to misrepresent people from a culture different from ours.

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