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## **Integrating Cultural Pluralism through Reading**

[Guang-Lea Lee](#)

### **Abstract**

The paper provides practical suggestions for teachers to integrate cultural pluralism in three reading strategies (1) reading workshops, (2) writing workshops, and (3) language experience approaches which make a valuable contribution to students of all cultural backgrounds.

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### **Introduction**

America is a culturally pluralistic society in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, and cultural groups coexist within one nation. Most Americans believe people should have the right to retain their cultural identity as a positive expression of American pluralistic societal ideals (Blau, 1998; King, Chipman, & Cruz-Janzen, 1996).

Teachers have a critical role in play to encouraging and maintaining a culturally pluralistic society. They have an opportunity to incorporate [multicultural activities](#) about diverse cultures as they organize their classroom activities. The activities they use should reflect our nation's increasing diversity and allow students to share their similarities, develop a positive cultural identity, and appreciate the unique contributions of all cultures. The best way to incorporate multicultural literature, depicting [African-American](#), [Asian](#), [Arabic](#), [Native American](#), and [Hispanic](#) heritage, is to integrate it into the established reading program rather than as a separate or distinct area of study. This paper suggests that teachers [integrate cultural pluralism](#) into three reading activities that are in widespread use--(1) reading workshops, (2) writing workshops, and (3) language experience approaches.

### **Reading Workshops**

In [reading workshops](#), students select from a variety of reading materials such as books, reports, biographies, encyclopedias, and magazines. Students share their responses to the literature by writing or talking with teachers and classmates (Atwell, 1987). One of the benefits of reading workshops is that it allows students to take ownership of their reading by choosing their own reading material. To allow students to select from varied materials, teachers need to have a large supply of multicultural literature to choose from that is sensitive to and reflective of students' diverse cultural backgrounds. When reading these materials, students can learn that most people have similar emotions, needs and dreams (Bishop, 1997; Wardle, 2000). During reading workshops, students usually engage in five activities--reading, responding, sharing, mini-lessons, and reading aloud.

### **Reading**

In a reading activity, students usually spend 30 to 60 minutes independently reading books and other written materials that include diverse cultures. Since these materials play an important role in bringing cultural pluralism into reading instruction, classrooms should have a variety of instructional materials representing diverse cultures such as information about African-American, Asian, Arabic, Native American, and Hispanic students (Hicks, 1999). For example, when students select and read "Journey to Topaz (1971)" from the collections of Asian literature, they not only learn about Japanese culture but also gain non-mainstream perspectives about Japanese-American internment camp during World War II. [Multicultural literature](#), carefully integrated into the reading workshops, enable students to maintain their

own ethnic and cultural identity among different groups, and to accept and affirm cultural pluralism (Bishop, 1997).

### **Responding**

After students select and independently read a multicultural storybook, teachers should direct them to make inferences and reflect on the meaning of the story in their own lives. This encourages students to make personal connections to stories and predict different outcomes. In this process, students interpret meanings and draw inferences based upon their own cultural perspectives and experiences.

Students usually keep [journals or reading logs](#) in which they write their initial responses to the materials they are reading. They may also talk with the teacher about their books. Teachers play an important role in helping students expand and enrich their responses to literature (Hancock, 1993). They help students move beyond simply writing summaries and toward reflecting and making connections between literature and their own lives (Barone, 1990; Kelly, 1990; Yokota, 1995).

### **Sharing**

Sharing racial, cultural, and ethnic differences of diverse families heightens a child's sensitivity to issues involving prejudice, racism, and intolerance toward students of different cultures. According to Becker (1979) and Banks (1994), literature helps students develop cross-cultural competency in cultures beyond their national boundaries and helps them gain the insights needed to understand the interconnectedness of all people. Exposing students to culturally diverse literature provides them with a means to become global citizens who can perform more effectively in a culturally diverse society.

### **Mini-Lessons**

Mini-lessons provide a teacher with a brief period of time, usually 10 to 20 minutes, to present vital reading skills and strategies based on students' needs. To advance cultural pluralism, a teacher can prepare a short lesson on particular authors who write about people with diverse cultural backgrounds. A teacher also can teach a mini-lesson on noticing ethnic language and creating images in their mind as they read multicultural literature. When students are unfamiliar with foreign settings, characters, or events in a story, a teacher can teach them a lesson on how to make connection to their own lives and previously read stories.

### **Reading Aloud**

Teachers [read aloud](#) when they wish to present literature that students might not be able to read themselves, such as [award-winning books](#) that they feel every student should be exposed. After the teachers read to them, students should participate in a class discussion about the book and share the reading experience. This activity is important because it allows students to respond to the story together as a community of learners, not as individuals (Tompkins, 2002).

### **Writing Workshops**

The [writing workshop](#) is an organized activity for teachers to use for facilitating writing development. During a writing workshop, it is important for teachers to encourage students to write a story depicting the lives of persons around the world as they imagine a setting and characters with foreign names (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000; Zahorik & Novak, 1996). For example, a teacher introduces a [fairy tale from other countries](#) before asking children to write a creative story. Pedro is a main character in a Spanish version of the Cinderella story created by a child who is seven years old: He wrote, "A long, long time ago in Spain, there lived a child. His name was Pedro. One day, Pedro wanted to fly but he couldn't. He put the magic wings on he found and they worked. Then, he went to Cantabria, Spain and met a girl, who had magic wings too. So, they got married and lived happily in their little palace on a hill."

In a writing workshop, students can make a book box containing cultural items of a country or several countries such as ornaments, clothing, pictures, or music tapes associated with the story line they create. Another way of integrating multicultural activities in writing workshop is to involve students in a multicultural [pen-pal project](#). Students can send letters about their lives to students in a school in a foreign country using Internet based email systems. Students can compose group letters to partner classes in other nations about their school, their lives, or a favorite part of the books they have read about the partner's country. Copies of these books and thank you notes from partner classes can be displayed in the school by posting them on bulletin boards. From this activity, students learn that there are interesting books to read from different countries and nice kids to share ideas with all around the world. As students engage in these writing activities, they expand their views about other cultures by sharing language, beliefs, religion, heritage, and their school and home life.

Another writing workshop method involves having students write an autobiography containing a description and history of their family, including pictures of the family or the country's flag. These should be displayed around the classroom. As a project following the writing, students can make a story quilt illustrating the theme of the autobiography. These activities, which connect the reading and writing with art projects, provide aesthetic experiences and develop insights and awareness for different cultures and values.

Teachers can also utilize guest speakers available in their local area by contacting a minority [community center](#). Speakers might be a director of an international program at a local university, a minister, and a person from the community with knowledge of a different culture. It is useful for the students to prepare questions in advance. The K-W-L (What I know - What I Want to Learn - What have I Learned) approach can be used to make students responsible for interviewing and searching for answers about the speaker's country of origin. Students can also write the invitation and follow-up letter of appreciation to the speaker.

Other creative ways for teachers to integrate cultural pluralism in writing workshops include:

- Ask students write a short stories about the ethnic origins, meanings, and backgrounds of their names or nicknames. Have students write a poem, "my best friend is from....." to introduce their friends' families, interests, customs, memorable events, and hobbies.
- Have children express their ideas and exciting experiences in writing after attending a cultural festival.
- Ask students to choose a favorite culture and write about its people, tradition, clothes, music, food, games, etc.
- After reading aloud a multicultural book, such as "Angel Child, Dragon Child (Surat 1983)," aloud to students, ask students to write about the illustrations, characters, and plot, especially describing the cultural differences they found inspiring.

Finally, students can conduct independent or collaborative research to learn more about different cultures. Students can use customary sources of data such as encyclopedia and other reference books, but visits to foreign countries' embassies or consulates, as well as the Internet, are also possible sources.

### **Language Experience Approaches**

To integrate cultural pluralism in the [Language Experience Approach](#) (LEA), students participate in reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities using personal experiences and stories written by them based on cultural events in their own lives. The LEA literacy learning activity is useful because it allows students to communicate their values, beliefs, cultures, and most of all their own identity with others who are not familiar with it. This activity is also beneficial for teachers who can use the information gained to better understand their students' cultures.

The starting point of the LEA approach is to help students identify diverse cultural experiences they wish to explore and write about. Some of the idea-stimulating experiences teachers may provide for students to be involved include:

- Take students to various cultural centers and ethnic festivals on field trips.
- Have students read and discuss fiction and nonfiction about various cultural groups.
- Encourage students to participate at local cultural events or excursions with their families and bring the stories of individuals they saw to the class.
- Assist students in using the Internet to explore various cultural groups.
- Invite guest speakers with diverse cultural backgrounds to talk with the students.
- Plan for a special lesson for [making and eating foods](#) from various countries.
- Have a brunch or tea party while discussing various types of beverages from around the world.

Integrating multicultural activities through the student centered LEA approach is effective, since students suggest the activity or topic and provide relevant experiences for their meaningful reading and writing activities (Tompkins, 2002). For example, around a holiday season, students work in pairs to discuss, write, and share with classmates about important holidays that their family celebrates, thus allowing the students to learn about the diversity of holidays around the world. These holidays might include [Hanukkah](#) (Jewish), [Kwanzaa](#) (African), [Chinese New Year](#) (East Asian), [Ramadan](#) (Moslem), [Diwali](#) (Indian), and [Chusok](#) (Korean). During such student-centered activities, students will treasure and possess pride in their own heritage.

Another way of incorporating LEA is writing and sharing a personal journal based on a student's daily cultural experiences at home. For example, a six-year-old student whose parents are Korean wrote and illustrated an "All about Me" journal, introducing himself and his mother: "I am Matthew, a six year old boy. My mom is from Korea. I like to attend a Karate class." The student drew his self-portrait in the center of the paper as part of the journal. These cultural journals can be shared in the classroom on a daily basis. When students enjoy writing and sharing about their diverse home cultures with classmates, they will learn that people of all cultural groups are different, but have similar interest, needs, and life.

## Conclusion

This paper reviewed how cultural pluralism is integrated in three reading activities--reading workshops, writing workshops, and language experience approaches. Teachers who integrate cultural pluralism using diverse cultural literature and activities can make a valuable contribution to students as they seek to establish positive perceptions about cultural pluralism, to understand people from other cultures, and to learn to cherish different cultures. Cultural pluralism should be an integral part of the curriculum that contributes to students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening development. It offers teachers and their students a wonderful opportunity to assist and advance humanity by understanding and respecting all persons on earth.

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## References