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# Teaching Language Arts Multiculturally: Implications for K-12 Teachers

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One day, my daughter, who was in second grade, brought home a book about Christopher Columbus as part of her accelerated reader collection.

Of all the books she had been reading at school, that was one of the very few that captured her attention and interest. She was fascinated specifically by the statement: "And Columbus had an Arabic interpreter on the ship." She didn't know why. "The teacher never told us," she explained. Then we started discussing the book in the context of Arabic being the lingua franca spoken in many parts of the world, including on the Indian subcontinent at the time. An analogy of how English today is the international language of trade, politics, and communication helped in explaining an implicit aspect of historical literacy.

The impact one word has had on my daughter's interaction with the book is worth noting. She saw part of her cultural and linguistic identity in the book that made her motivated to learn. Her heritage was depicted in some way that was intriguing; she eventually became part of the literacy experience. In other words, like most of her peers who see themselves in the curriculum and instruction on daily basis, my daughter discovered for the first time what it means to give credence to her culture in school. I know my daughter is not alone.

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in the U.S. public schools requires teachers to be more sensitive to how students develop literacy skills in diverse settings. Anderson &

Barnitz (1998) state that diverse students "bring to the reading task the diversity and richness of many languages and cultures" (p. 95). Thus, the role of sociocultural factors that shape the insights and perspectives of diverse students in the process of interacting with school input cannot be ignored especially in reading/language arts programs.

This paper explores these issues and draws pedagogical implications for multiplying literacy learning opportunities for all students in the U.S. pluralistic schools.

## Underlying Assumptions

Language and literacy experiences children bring to school are deeply rooted in their home cultural and linguistic upbringing (Piper, 1998; Odlin, 1993; Brislin, 1993; Borden, 1991). They are also linked to unique personal and social experiences that can be easily overlooked when children enter school. According to Suleiman (1996), some of the assumptions that underlie the discussion of language arts instruction schools are:

- (1) Students come to the class with informal information about the world around them.
- (2) Students have preferred ways of interacting with the new linguistic knowledge.
- (3) Classroom settings hardly represent students' prior linguistic and cultural experiences.
- (4) Students tend to creatively use and apply what they already know to new learning experiences including their first language patterns.

- (5) Knowledge in the native language is significant in learning and teaching the new language.
- (6) The transfer of first language behavior may hinder or enhance the communication process in second language settings.

These assumptions should be the foundation for any language arts and literacy program in today's schools. Students' prior cultural schemata and background experiences have a profound impact on literacy acquisition in diverse schools. Making any prior assumptions that are biased against the cultures or languages represented in classrooms can be counterproductive. Thus language arts frameworks must be based on a comprehensive approach that values students' diversity.

### Teaching Language Arts: A Multicultural Framework

One of the major components of multiculturalism is to promote sensitivity to students' communication patterns in culturally diverse settings. This is especially important in reading/ language arts classrooms given the intricate link between cultural identity and literacy engagement (Neuman, 1999; Seelye, 1993; Ferdman, 1990). The multicultural approach to language arts and literacy instruction values multiple ways of communicating in various learning environments, thus matching the academic, social, and linguistic needs of all students (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995; Garcia, 1991, 1994; Suleiman, 1996; Suleiman, 1997). These needs may vary widely due to differences in race, sex, ethnicity, or sociolinguistic backgrounds of the students and educators.

Through the process of integrating multicultural education in all avenues of language arts, students can develop self-esteem, and respect those who are different from them in their sociolinguistic behavior. Such an approach will also foster students' and educators' ability to analyze critically and make intelligent decisions about real-life problems and issues through a comprehensive process of literacy development (Ovando & Collier, 1998; Stice, Bertrad, & Bertrand, 1995; Cummins, 1989).

In addition to understanding learners and their needs, multicultural education has focused on building cultural and linguistic links among participants in schools. Suleiman (1997) maintains that educators in diverse language arts classrooms should celebrate and value individuals through:

- (1) awareness and appreciation of different experiences relevant to all minorities and other ethnic groups in the American society;
- (2) an understanding of the nature of the pluralistic society and its implications for the communicative process in schools;
- (3) creating optimal opportunities for learning by acquiring multicultural literacy;
- (4) an understanding of students' attitudes, values, and other motivational forces that significantly affect the communicative process;
- (5) acquiring multicultural knowledge to augment the democratic spirit in classrooms so that mutual communication can take place meaningfully;
- (6) learning effective communication and mediation styles that are conducive to students of diverse sociocultural backgrounds;
- (7) utilizing multicultural competence in terms of the unique contextual demands of various literacy events.

To achieve these goals, Banks (2001) suggests a four-level approach for education in diverse settings. His approach has direct implications for language instruction and literacy development. This multi-level conceptualization includes the social action approach, the transformation approach, the additive approach, and the contributions approach. At the highest level is the *social action approach* in which students and teachers think about a *here-and-now* issue and engage in literacy activities to thoughtfully analyze, dialogue about, reflect on, and take action to resolve problems. For instance, students may select a newspaper article, a story, or a film depicting a given group in a negative way. Then, the teacher facilitates discussions, dialogues and relevant arguments to resolve

problems associated with racial and cultural differences. By so doing, students engage in intellectual discourse and cognitive reasoning that can lead to shared decisions rejecting ignorance and accepting tolerance. Further reading, writing, and literary engagement opportunities about the issues can enhance the development of students' civic literacy in which they become "thinking and caring people who can be moved to act on values and beliefs that are developed through thoughtful analysis" (Rasinski & Padak, 1998, p.200).

The next two levels in Banks's hierarchy, *the transformation and additive approaches*, encourage students and teachers to view social realities from multiple perspectives and frames of reference. Teachers may strategically introduce themes and concepts that have cultural relevance and value to all students. Social and historical themes are added without entirely changing or transforming the curriculum. Teachers, for example, may integrate themes to promote peace education in the context of World War II as they read stories about survivors of the nuclear attack on Japan. A teacher may also introduce the theme of discovering America and have students explore it through reading, writing, and speech from Native American, African American, Hispanic, or Anglo perspectives. Occasional introduction of socio-historical content can enrich students' ability to understand themselves through the understanding of others. In the process of curriculum transformation, students are encouraged to critically view the world from a broader perspective and enrich their cultural schemata (Anderson & Barnitz, 1998).

On the lowest end of Banks's continuum is the *contributions approach* in which heroes and heroines, holidays and celebrations, food and traditions are highlighted. Despite its limitations, teachers can help students build cultural content by acknowledging various

contributions of various cultures to the American civilization. For example, a teacher may read Martin Luther King's biography to pinpoint the contributions of African Americans to humanity. Also, a teacher may highlight the contributions of the Arab and Muslim civilizations reflected in the Arabic numbers used in English and other languages. Seeking to develop visual literacy, the teacher may need to explain to students that Arabic numbers are deeply rooted in geometrical shapes (0: zero, a circle with no angles, 1 one angle, 2 two angles, 3 three angles ... etc.) given that Arabs were among the first pioneers in math and science (Suleiman, 2001).

### **Pedagogical Implications and Classroom Applications**

Since all students come to schools reflecting diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, these differences "often result in cultural discontinuity or lack of cultural synchronization between the students and the

school" (Irvine & York, 1995, p. 489). In other words, student diversity and social expectations can challenge teachers in planning their lessons and implementing instructional practices if they do not take into account the cultural make-up of their

students. Thus, it is critical that cross-cultural discourse in literacy classrooms is cultivated to maximize educational opportunities for all learners. Culturally responsive literacy curricula and instructional activities can establish continuity between the home and school cultures (Neuman, 1999); it can also affirm the cultural identity of students through their engagement in relevant literacy tasks (Nieto, 2001; Peregoy & Boyle, 1997; Ramirez, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ferdman, 1990).

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(2000, 1999, 1997) suggests the following guidelines provide language arts teachers with implications relevant to students' literacy needs in multicultural settings:

- (1) Understanding the linguistically and culturally diverse learners along with the sociocultural context of learning and teaching.
- (2) Being flexible in terms of the contextual demands of learning and teaching situations.
- (3) Building on learners' cultural schemata through active participation of all learners and self-disclosure activities.
- (4) Building on students' intelligences through considering various modes of instruction that appeal to their emotional, psychomotor, cognitive, cultural, and social skills.
- (5) Assessing students' preferred ways of communicating and learning by using formal and informal techniques.
- (6) Encouraging cooperative learning and sharing of experiences so that students are exposed to the communication and learning styles of their peers in the class.
- (7) Empathizing with the learners by communicating efficiently with students in terms of their cultural orientations.
- (8) Encouraging acculturation of students while maintaining pride in their linguistic, cultural identity and self-concept.
- (9) Creating an anxiety-free and culture-friendly environment through considering the physical and affective domains that value and celebrate diversity.
- (10) Deliberate delivering of content in a variety of ways to make it more comprehensible and meaningful to all students.
- (11) Working with parents and maintaining a cultural and educational continuity between home and school.
- (12) Using linguistic and non-linguistic cues to facilitate the communicative process in language arts classrooms.
- (13) Using rich multicultural literature that affirms the physical, cultural, and intellectual being of all learners in the diverse classroom.

For daily lessons, "inducing students to approach text with a conscious expectation for culturally different meanings may be a feasible plan" (LeSourd, 1998, p.116). The following are some examples that illustrate how teachers can cultivate diversity in daily literacy classrooms:

- Assessing prior knowledge and experiences of students using both formal and informal techniques. This includes such strategies as formal and informal reading inventories, surveys, kidwatching, home visits and parental involvement. Successful cross-cultural schemata assessment largely depends on control for cultural differences in test materials and stories. Thus, teachers must carefully and cautiously interpret students' test results; they also should assess their observations of students' literacy behaviors in terms of cultural congruity.
- Incorporating literacy approaches that are culturally sensitive to the readers' schemata. For example, teachers can easily use the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to help diverse learners expand their linguistic and cultural experiences. Likewise, teachers can help students in processing content through Directed Reading Thinking Activity based on prereading, reading, and postreading stages.
- Using graphic organizers such as KWL, Venn diagrams, semantic maps, and concept webs can help activate students' prior knowledge. Also using cultural portraits, peer interviews, and field trips can help activate and build the learners' cultural schemata. For instance, comparing and contrasting various versions of Cinderella tales can help learners acknowledge differences and recognize commonalities among cultures. In addition, semantic feature maps can help learners appreciate various layers of language at the word level as they compare and contrast syntactic, semantic, and cultural denotations and connotations of cognates. Visual cues can also help learners develop new vocabulary.

- Integrating literacy tasks that tap into learners' multiple intelligences. Such activities include using centers, art, music, pictures, role-play, reading, writing, speaking, and other literacy opportunities to engage all learners.
- Encouraging oral traditions to affirm the intellectual and cultural being of diverse learners. Since speech is a major pathway to literacy development in all children, reading out loud must be encouraged on daily basis. In addition, reading with, to, and by children is a major principle of literacy scaffolding experiences. Such support can be enhanced by reading in the language of the child. For example, reading stories in Navajo, Spanish, or any other language can be rewarding to all students.
- Using Question Answer Relations (QARs) all the time can promote students' critical thinking and comprehension skills. In addition to assessing comprehension, questioning techniques can help students' understanding of the content a meaningful context. For example, in reading a story about Christopher Columbus's journey to America, teachers can ask: Why did Columbus decide to take the journey? Who did Columbus travel with? Why did Columbus have an Arabic interpreter on the ship? How long did it take Columbus to sail across the Atlantic? How did Columbus greet the natives? What destination did Columbus think he would reach? Why? How long would it take Columbus to cross the Atlantic by a plane? Why is Columbus Day offensive to Native Americans? Asking and answering these questions and others can engage students in developing historical, ethnic, scientific, cultural, political, and other forms of literacy embedded in the text. They also contextualize what is being taught and learned.

## Conclusion

To achieve their role as cultural mediators and effective communicators, language arts teachers should possess several competencies to cultivate cultural diversity. Diamond & Moore (1995) argue that attaining a high level of multicultural literacy is needed to match language and academic activities with social realities and cultural expectations. At the same time, Banks (2001) delineates several multicultural traits for teachers in the pluralistic society. According to Banks (2001), teachers must have democratic attitudes and values, a clarified pluralistic ideology that constitutes a vision and belief in all learners, a process conceptualization of ethnic studies, the ability to view society from diverse ethnic perspectives and points of view, knowledge of the emerging stages of ethnicity, and knowledge of the complex nature of ethnicity in Western societies. Having these characteristics can empower teachers and their students to function and communicate effectively in pluralistic environments (Suleiman, 2000; Suleiman et al., 2000). Consequently, teachers having these traits will "reach a state of *additive multiculturalism* ... also may enjoy advantages over monoculturals, including a broader view of reality ... and multicultural flexibility" (Nieto, 2000, p.347).

Finally, assessing the communicative process in terms of multiculturalism and linguistic diversity provides teachers with key elements for the success of all students. It also provides new directions and foundations in the augmentation of progress in student learning and self-esteem.

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