

Chapter 6

Multicultural and Global Children's Literature as Agents of Change

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ABSTRACT

Literature is the primary method used in elementary schools across the disciplines to teach children. Forms of media technology (computers and iPads) used in elementary schools at present are primarily supplementary. This chapter focuses on literature as an agent for change within two education approaches, multicultural and global education. The purposes of multicultural and global education and why literature is used as an approach to teaching are explained. Multicultural teacher education is discussed, but global teacher education is not, since not enough research could be found by this author at this time. Discussions of the uses, authenticity, and diversity issues of literature are included.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the use of multicultural and global print media (herein referred to as “literature”) as agents of change through multicultural and global education at the elementary level in the United States only. Inclusion of researched perspectives on this topic from cultures outside the United States and an in-depth analysis of the benefits of technology versus print media is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, highlights from research on the use of technology versus print at the elementary level is included, because a major concern of researchers and teachers is how technology use might affect the development of executive functions in children. The development of executive functions and learning to decode and comprehend texts in all subject areas is the primary work of elementary school children; how well executive functions develop in students is key to the comprehension of concepts and the critical thinking involved in empowering children to be agents of change.

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EXECUTIVE FUNCTION DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNOLOGY USE

The use of technology at the elementary level in schools where I work is paired with traditional texts in an attempt to achieve a balance between the two. Some forms and uses of technology help children to learn and others do not (Bavelier, Green & Dye, 2010). An issue for teachers develops when children have unsupervised access to all forms of technology outside of school. Some habits can interfere with learning and contribute to students' inability to focus for long periods of time. Digital distraction is an example of a habit that steady users of technology acquire and is a major concern for teachers when using technology in the classroom ((Cho, 2016). "Knowing how to select, organize, and use information in order to solve problems, handle new situations, and continue learning are key issues in the teaching and learning scenario in contemporary society" (Sales & Pinto, 2008, p. 53). Children need to develop these skills at the elementary level to become agents of change. Developing and refining executive functions is necessary. Goal setting, reasoning, planning, organizing, initiating, and strategic thinking are the foundation of cognitive ability.

Using children's literature helps students learn vocabulary and aids in developing visual intelligence. Walton (2017, p. 1) notes, "Because picture books are short, all messages, knowledge, ideas expressed in a picture book must be boiled down to their essence," and, "If you want to express a powerful message, a picture book is one of the most powerful media for doing so." Multicultural and global literature as agents of change meet those requirements for promoting student growth.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND LITERATURE

The Civil Rights Movement gave birth to the idea of multicultural education. The goal was to change school curriculum to be more inclusive of marginalized groups in the United States. Multicultural education is meant to include the sociocultural needs and experiences of those who fall outside the mainstream. Multicultural literature is about "...persons or groups that differ in some way (for example, racially, linguistically, ethnically, culturally) from the dominate white American cultural group" (Cai & Bishop, 1994, pp. 57-58). It includes categories of race, gender, sexual orientation and disability. Multicultural literature, as a component of multicultural education, is meant to serve the goals of that movement.

Multicultural literature equips students with an understanding of issues that drive our society and how to be effective agents of change. It is not about holidays and heroes. The way teachers use multicultural literature can help children see value in both differences and similarities between and among people. More importantly, it can open the door to helping children understand social justice issues, become acquainted with multiple perspectives, and gain insight into their own cultures. "Multicultural literature helps children identify with their own culture, exposes children to other cultures, and opens the dialogue on issues regarding diversity" (Colby & Lyon, p. 24).

According to Banks (2014), "The United States is currently experiencing its largest influx of immigrants since the early 1900s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012)" (p. ix). Teachers, now more than ever, need to be able to deal with the changing demographics in the United States. Educators can use multicultural literature to increase their own understanding of social justice issues. They can learn more about the various perspectives of the cultural groups represented in any literature used for lessons. With understanding

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