

Multicultural Literacy in Education: Meeting the Objectives of the Florida Sunshine State Standards

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to show how incorporating multicultural literacy in education can meet the Florida Sunshine State Standards to promote a more equitable approach to classroom discourse and a qualitative teacher-facilitated learning environment for students who reflect a multicultural and global community.

Multicultural inclusion is specifically addressed in Florida's *Sunshine State Standards* (Florida Department of Education, 1996) in response to our ever-changing national demographics as well as the need for a global perspective in our educational system. Multicultural education refers to "an idea or concept, an educational reform movement, and a process. It incorporates the idea that all students, regardless of their gender, social class, ethnicity, or race, would have equal opportunities to learn in school" (Parla, 1994, p. 2). Historically, the teaching of literature and social studies has focused on the literary canon, which incorporates the viewpoints and stories of a Eurocentric society. Furthermore, many of these viewpoints and stories have been biased with language that not only has, according to Knapp and Woolverton (1995), *linguistic gaps* (or what one might refer to as monolingual preferences), but the language has also been derogatory and disempowering when it has made mention of minority groups. The American ideology of schools as the great equalizer are not yet our realities, as can be attested to by the difficulty of students to transcend class boundaries and teachers' perceptions of student capability based on class (Knapp & Woolverton, 1995). Clearly, our educational approaches have yet to be inclusive of all groups. Historically, children of immigrants have had to assimilate and adopt the language and culture of the host country. The last few decades have reflected a resolute effort of various minority groups to bring about a more participatory democracy, one in which all groups might have a voice and have their views, language, history and artistic expressions reflected in the curriculum in public education.

In promoting multicultural inclusion, as identified by Powell (2001), who refers to the *monocultural* education that American students have historically received, Florida's *Sunshine State Standards* (Florida Department of Education, 1996) have incorporated several objectives to achieve a more equitable and multicultural approach for educators. Specifically, the focus will be on the standards required for the English language arts; however, some attention will focus on the Social Studies criteria for the *Sunshine State Standards*. Standards provide a foundation from which educators can build an edifice of equitable and participatory transaction for both teachers and students. Also, the purpose of standards is also to implement an accountability system (Cummins, 2001, p. 649). If the standards are properly implemented, there should be positive outcomes for both student and teacher performances and students will be prepared to take their roles as more knowledgeable participants in a global community.

Review of Literature

Since the late 1960s, there has been a more concerted focus by educators and politicians regarding the problems of inequitable approaches to race, class and gender. Gorski and Covert (1996; 2000) state that multicultural education is in a constant state of evolution through the

process of refocusing, transforming, and being reconceptualized. Still, there remains a broad gap between what has actually been achieved and what needs to be achieved in the way of an egalitarian approach. The problem with educational reform is that the pace is slow, inadequate, and met with multiple barriers, which include special interest groups, the lack of state and federal interventions, lack of representation among minorities, and disproportionate funding.

Christenbury (1994) has acknowledged that the increasing Hispanic (Latino) and Asian populations in the United States are rapidly increasing and changing the demographics of our nation. Bruder's (1992) research stated that one-third of the youth in the United States will be residing in California, Texas, New York and Florida by the year 2010. The non-White proportions of this population will be 57% within California and Texas and 53% within Florida and New York; it is expected that the descendants of these populations will represent 40% of the overall population by the year 2050 (Bruder, 1992). In order for all groups to have equal access, their voices must be heard and represented at an early onset in education, where students can learn to value their worth and build their self-awareness. A multicultural approach, which is inclusive of all groups, would help to bridge the gap between the educational approach that America's schools claim to have as the *great equalizer* (Knapp & Woolverton, 1995) to that which actually exists, which is still a separation of ethnic groups and stratification among social classes with limited access to the poor. Historically, attempts have been made to implement reforms that would affirm various ethnic groups; however, educators need to look around and assess the cultural composition in their classrooms and judiciously reflect the same in their curriculum choices and methods of instruction. Clearly, the "mobility process" accounts for the reasons African Americans and other minority and underprivileged groups relate to "academic engagement in predictable ways," which are their perceptions of educational opportunity and disdain for the educational system as it accommodates the White and upper classes, and leaves minorities out of the loop (O'Connor, 1999, p. 137). This gap is widened when the literature, history and culture reflect only one element of society. Students feel powerless and do not want to engage in literary transaction of the canon, because their voices are not reflected there (Rosenblatt, 1995). The attempt is not to throw the literary canon out of academia and public education, but to engage students in critical analyses of these selections, address the inaccuracies and biased perceptions and invite alternate viewpoints and multicultural literary expressions.

Naidoo (1993) places critical importance on diverse resources and confronting difficult issues within the historical context, which would address the multiple ethnicities reflected in our classrooms. It is necessary to confront painful issues like slavery from different perspectives. The failure of truthful confrontation and multicultural expressionism are evident in O'Connor's (1999) research: "Ethnographic research on working-class, minority, and female youths' resistance to schooling accounted for how students recognized class- and gender-related constraints in addition to race-related barriers" (p. 138). The failure of educators to provide literature that mirrors minority struggles, viewpoints and aspirations is indicative of these groups failing in academic settings. They are resistant to an immersion of literature, which fails to address their realities. Educators need to affirm every child's identity, struggles, and self-worth.

Implications and Implementing the Standards

Minority groups desire to have their voices heard and reflected in the educational arena from the early stages of learning. Naidoo (1993) explains that "all young children seem to have a strong sense of what is 'fair' as well as an expectation of just treatment, unless they have been emotionally scarred at an early age" (p. 266). Children want reaffirming and historically

accurate stories about themselves, which are valued. "Empowerment is not an inherent birthright or a capacity acquired automatically as individuals move through life. Rather, it results from teaching and learning" (Gay & Hanley, 1999, p. 364). A more balanced paradigm in literacy can be realized when educators reflect the cultural perspectives and voices of other groups in the curricula, through literature, history, social studies and interdisciplinary studies. Historically, control has been through language, behavioral expectations and differential treatment, which have reinforced the social political status quo; however, through social and political activism, minorities are beginning to resist oppression and take an active, aggressive participation in the construction of their own reality (Knapp & Woolverton, 1995). Teachers, students and parents must move toward an inclusive, tolerant and affirming classroom environment.

One of the greatest challenges of the teacher of literature is to understand how readers think about and discuss literary works. This involves understanding student perceptions and how they process information. It is clear that the processes involved in reading literature are both intellectual and social, which can be observed in two ways: a) an informative process, and b) reading for literary understanding (Langer, 1997). Consequently, the information that the students receive must reflect historical accuracy, multicultural inclusion, and invite student perceptions and participation. The second challenge is to bring in other resources to allow critical thinking opportunities when discussing literature, history and social studies. The Sunshine State Standards (1996) encourage educators to incorporate an accurate and multicultural perspective in teaching. Specifically, the objectives for the social studies curriculum, according to the *Sunshine State Standards* (1996), require that the student understands different historical periods and outcomes, such as the Age of Discovery and the consequences of European colonization in the Americas and in India (S.S.A.3.2.4). History should be taught according to cause and effect, for example, the causes of the Civil War and the effects of Reconstruction (S.S.A.3.2.6). Understanding the significance of important documents like the *Declaration of Independence*, the *United States Constitution*, and the *Bill of Rights* enables students to understand governmental processes for political change and personal empowerment (S.S.A.4.2.4). A historically accurate approach to immigration and how immigrants enhanced our nation as well as the stumbling blocks that they faced will enable the student to empathize with the struggle of building a new nation (S.S.A.5.2.1). The student will understand "the perspectives of diverse cultural, ethnic, and economic groups" in Florida's history" (S.S.A.6.2.4). When major events like World War II are presented, the student understands the "economic, political and social transformations" that affected our nation as a result of these events (S.S.A.5.2.7). Students, previously lacking a global understanding, will be able to identify the different geographic and political regions of the world and how people relate differently (S.S.B.1.2.3; S.S.B.1.2.5). Students should understand governmental branches and processes (executive, legislative, and judicial), the protection of rights, and the importance of community involvement (S.S.C.2.2.1; S.S.C.1.2.2). Finally, students should be able to critically address whether historical documents effectively achieved their fundamental precepts.

After reviewing the *Harcourt Brace Social Studies* (Florida Edition, 2002) for Fifth grade, in Unit Seven, *War Divides the Nation* (pp. 407-475), the authors have attempted to apply significant African American inclusion. The topics addressed are the multiple complexities of the slave economy; slave codes and lifestyles, overseers, resistance, abolitionists, the Underground Railroad, the free and slave states, confederacy, emancipation, and other multiple-related topics and historical encounters. However, the horrific treatment and incarceration of slaves preceding, during and after the *Middle Passage* are not adequately addressed. There

seems to be an apologetic explanation regarding the practices of slavery prior to European and American slave trade in the Kingdom of Benin on the Ivory Coast. It states that slave trade was a practice in Benin well before the slave trade in the Americas; however, the text goes on to state that "enslaved people were treated almost the same in Europe as in Africa. They often worked as house servants. Few owners thought of making slaves do hard work on farms or in mines" (p. 144). This reference does not effectively address the abuses of power, economic pursuits, and the deeply imbedded social impacts of the slavery experience. Therefore, the teacher, as a facilitator, should bring in additional information that would critically address the social and moral implications, hardships, economic factors, separation of families, and the physical and emotional abuses suffered by slaves. The teacher can show how the practice of slavery deprived African Americans of their cultural heritage and basic human rights. Furthermore, the teacher should include sensitive but necessary excerpts from writers and slave journals that adequately addressed the injustices. Teachers need to include supplemental material and encourage meaningful student discourse. Finally, teachers can relate this unit to other oppressed groups.

The *Sunshine State Standards* (1996) for Language Arts addresses the need for students to understand that there are a wide-range of authors from diverse backgrounds with multiple viewpoints and styles of writing that help shape the reader's perceptions; furthermore, these writers bring in their personal arguments and understandings into their writings and students must learn to think critically about these selections and should be free to incorporate their understandings in their responses. The Standards for grades 3-5 state that the student understands that words can shape perceptions and beliefs, recognizes that there are different writing styles and audiences, and different purposes for writing that can shape reactions (Standard 2: L.A.D.2.2.1; L.A.D.1.2.2; & L.A.B.2.2.3). Standard 2 for grades 6-8 emphasizes that the student must use critical thinking to understand the text, construct meaning, differentiate fact from fiction, and understand the construction of ideas, personal views and arguments (L.A.A.2.3.8). The student understands the power of language and literature, how culture is transmitted, and how to identify diverse voices in the multiple literary genres (L.A.D.1.3.2). The student must understand the historical and social implications of literature and how individuals respond to literary pieces in a personal way (L.A.E.2.3.5), as indicative of Rosenblatt's (1995) paradigm of the reader-response approach in *Literature as Exploration*. Consequently, students will be able to understand the historical and social contexts of these literary pieces and how writer and student perceptions bring about what Christenbury (1994) refers to as a community of meaning.

The *Sunshine State Standards* criteria for language arts, grades 9-12, involve a higher level of critical thinking. Some of the objectives that are clearly defined involve the student being able to construct meaning from a wide range of texts, synthesize information, and draw conclusions (L.A.A.2.4.8). The student must be able to identify bias, prejudice, or propaganda in oral messages (L.A.AC.1.4.4); recognize the shifts in language from informal to formal, social and academic; and to refrain from gender and cultural biases when expressing language (L.A.D.1.4.2). The student needs to understand that differences exist in dialects in the English language (L.A.D.1.4.3) and that language is a powerful tool in shaping the "reactions, perceptions, and beliefs of the local, national, and global communities" (L.A.D.2.4.1). The students must be able to understand multiple literary forms prevalent in the literature of all cultures (L.A.E.1.4.3) and recognize different styles, themes, and structures of literary forms within a cultural and historical context (L.A.E.1.4.5). Students need to think about and respond critically to various texts and forms of literature, knowing that individuals respond differently to

based on "their background knowledge, purpose, and point of view" (L.A.E.2.4.8). Clearly, the objectives are implicitly formatted for educators to include multicultural practices in the classroom. However, educator biases, lack of knowledge and failure to implement these practices remain significant problems. According to Parla (1994), the failure to implement cultural inclusion indicates in-service teachers and pre-service teachers need to develop teaching strategies that reflect cultural sensitivity and linguistic diversity. Naidoo (1993), in stressing the need for affirming images regarding diverse populations, had significant questions to pose to educators and administrators: (a) How can teachers enable children to be excited about life beyond their corner of the world? How many challenge racism? (b) How many institutions have a program of inviting in people from ethnically, culturally diverse communities, for example writers, artists, dancers? (c) Have they developed a policy? (d) Does the school/college subscribe to a journal like *Multicultural Teaching*, and do staff read and discuss issues? (p. 262). Educators cannot expect students to have positive social interactions and engage in higher cognitive levels of thinking if they fail to reflect the language, literature and history of all groups.

Conclusion

Although there have been significant strides made by minority groups to have their voices heard, research indicates that the structure and policies of the educational system still fail to mirror and reflect, in a positive way, these populations. Additionally, class stratifies minority and low socio-economic populations of all races. Cartledge's (1996) research illustrates how "... teachers structured more creative and critical thinking activities for learners of middle-income families, and more meaningless activities were more common with low-income students" (p. 142). These elements of stratification, social, political and cultural, all have economic roots (Knapp & Woolverton, 1995). Administrators and educators need to rally for public policy that would appropriate and guarantee equal distribution of funds to enhance the educational experience of all children. Meanwhile, the implementation of the *Sunshine State Standards* can help to ensure that educators will provide a more equitable learning base for their students.

Educators need to be aware of their own preconceived biases, attitudes, knowledge-construction paradigms, and differential treatment of students who come from lower socio-economic classes and diverse ethnicities. They must adjust their preconceptions and come to a higher level of cognitive thinking, just as they should want their students to do—all students, not just those that they perceive to be intellectually capable. According to Spears-Bunton (1990), culturally conscious literature can lead to improvements in students' attitudes toward the reading of literature and to new ways of thinking about one's own ethnic group and the relationship among ethnic groups in the United States. Educators need to reflect and provide an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural approach to teaching, which will enhance the educational experience for all children. Curriculum development should envisage an atmosphere and "understanding of a multicultural nation and an interdependent world" (Parla, 1994, p. 2). Equal access, equal funding and inclusion will help to advance the American educational system and help to realize her claim as the great equalizer, while emerging with a more balanced paradigm for all students. Finally, Burke (1999) advocates teaching with a balanced approach by the inclusion of different literary genres, both classic and contemporary, including authors from all groups, male and female, white and those of color, and those of different cultures and perspectives. The literary pool of possibilities has enumerable choices to bring into the classroom; teachers should make choices from this pool that mirrors the particular ethnic makeup of their classrooms. Clearly, as depicted in the Florida Sunshine State Standards, educators must

be advocates for all diverse populations and create an affirming and equitable atmosphere in the classroom.

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