

Creating Multicultural Understanding in a Monocultural Setting

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Keywords

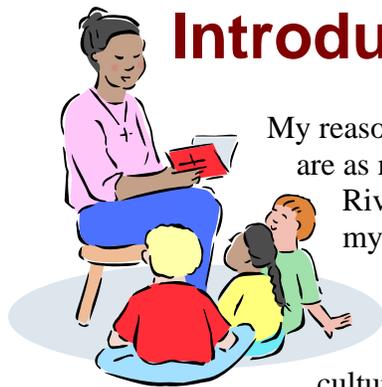
Migrant, multicultural literature, multiculturalism, The Circuit, Inspiration, concept maps

Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to ascertain whether reading and discussing multicultural literature would help my students understand the lives of people from another culture and modify their stereotypical views specifically of migrant workers. Students developed their own concept maps which I used to measure growth as they read a class novel and worked with nonfiction resources. My middle school students increased their factual knowledge and reduced the number of stereotypes they held by the end of the unit.

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Introduction

My reasons for wanting to create respect for diversity in my classroom are as much personal as they are professional. I grew up in Rocky River, Ohio, a middle/upper middle class suburb in Cleveland. In my class of 250 students there were three Asians and 243 white students. Clearly, diversity did not exist in the school system or in the community where I lived. Growing up, there was very little talk of diverse populations or units of study about other cultures. The teachers, like the students, were mostly white.

Multicultural education was not a focus for my teachers, district or community. Even the American history curriculum was very one-sided and failed to include controversial issues such as Japanese internment, treatment of Chinese railroad workers or the United States' failure to offer protection to the Jewish citizens of Europe during World War II.

After high school, I continued my education at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Again the educational experience was outstanding but there was very little diversity. I remember sitting in my freshman English class and listening to a student who was talking about "rushing a fraternity." He mentioned that every fraternity he visited emphasized the importance of diversity when choosing members. I distinctly remember wondering what he meant by diversity. So not only did I not grow up in a diverse environment, but I did not even know how the term was used until I was an adult.

I graduated from Miami with a degree in accounting and got a job working at a bank in central Ohio. Throughout my five years in the business world, I felt handicapped by my inexperience with people from backgrounds different from mine. I said and did things that others found offensive not because I was narrow-minded but just because I was ignorant of other peoples' beliefs. I lacked the background knowledge to filter out offensive remarks and preconceived ideas about race and background. I had to work hard to overcome this deficiency in my education. I was particularly concerned because I was planning to leave the business world and enter the field of education. To become a quality educator I knew I had to understand the needs and learning styles of all children, not just children whose backgrounds matched mine.

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Ever since I was a little girl I wanted to be a teacher, but a tough teaching market and a father who always wanted me to be an accountant influenced me to pursue a career in the business sector. After I had my second child, I quit my job and enrolled at Otterbein College to complete the coursework required to obtain a teaching certificate. After completing my program, I found myself teaching language arts, reading and social studies to seventh grade students in Upper Arlington, Ohio.

School Background

Upper Arlington is a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. According to the 2000 Census, (<http://www.census.gov>) the population is 94.7% white with 2.4% of the population at or below the poverty level. Upper Arlington has a median sales price of a home at \$214,000.00 and a median household income of \$72,116.00.

Upper Arlington is designated as “Excellent” by the Ohio Department of Education (<http://www.state.ode.oh.us>) because the district has met all 23 indicators established on the State Report Card. I teach at Hastings Middle School which also is designated as “Excellent”. All sections of state mandated tests were passed with percentages ranging from 83.8-97.2%. The 651 students in grades six through eight are taught by a staff of 59 teachers.

Introducing Multiculturalism in My Classroom

I immediately saw the connection between my new work environment and the community where I grew up. I knew that Upper Arlington and Rocky River are both homogeneous and affluent. I think Upper Arlington, like my hometown, is a great community, but from my own experiences, I knew what the negative side effects could be once students left Upper Arlington and were “out in the real world.” My parents and teachers in my home town often viewed the homogeneous environment as a reason why multicultural education was not important. Because we had very little ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic variation, there was no reason for learning about other cultures. According to Hochschild and Scovronic (2003), “In their study of American history, literature, and government, students should see people who are like, and unlike, themselves; well-off whites who live in racially and economically isolated suburbs probably need diversity training the most” (p. 175).



I knew at the very least I wanted to begin to create an appreciation for diversity in my classroom. The response of my students would dictate the next step. Clearly, I could not create a multicultural environment but could I create an appreciation for one?

Searching the Professional Literature

Because I am an English teacher, literature seemed the logical avenue to pursue to try and create the environment I envisioned. I felt it was imperative to learn more about multicultural literature before trying to use it in my classroom.

My most memorable classes at Otterbein were literature classes. I am a firm believer that literature is the key to understanding others. From my personal experience, middle school students find it difficult to look at anyone's perspective other than their own. I think literature helps them to do so. Most of my children come from very privileged backgrounds, and my intention was to have students learn to appreciate the strengths of diverse populations. I was interested in providing students with the background knowledge they needed to appreciate and understand the diverse world around them, and the people in it. I found it is essential to discuss preconceived ideas about diverse populations in order to address and dispel stereotypes.

Defining Multicultural Literature

There are many definitions of multicultural literature presented in the professional literature. Hillard (1995) explores different definitions from a variety of researchers to determine the most inclusive definition. Kruse's definition (as cited in Hillard, 1995, p. 728) is narrowly stated as "books by and about people of color." Hillard believes this constricted definition fails to account for cultural, religious, or geographical differences and focuses entirely on skin color. She chose to utilize Martinez's definition (as cited in Hillard, 1995) that identifies multicultural literature as that which "emphasizes respect for the different historical perspectives and cultures in human society" (p. 728).

I was interested in creating a multicultural environment for my students, but I was not sure if I could do that without actual diversity in the classroom. I struggled with how to get students to develop an appreciation of the world they would come to know.

I am a white teacher in a white district. I was concerned that my background and upbringing might create an obstacle for integrating multiculturalism into my classroom. White educators are affected by their whiteness and need to understand this when choosing multicultural literature. Also, white teachers sometimes resist using multicultural literature because it conflicts with their ideals (Ketter & Lewis, 2001). I was worried that my lack of experience outside of my own cultural group, one that is shared with the students, would prohibit me from providing them with an appreciation of other cultures.

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When searching for a definition for multiculturalism, I looked at Wong (1993). He took a philosophical approach when he borrowed the following phrase from a colleague: “Teaching a multicultural curriculum is the closest approximation to the truth and the reality of our American society” (p. 25). Although he did not state this as a definition it can be construed as one. This study will utilize Wong’s implied philosophical definition of multicultural education as well as Martinez’s more concrete all-encompassing definition of multiculturalism.

Finding Quality Literature

I wanted to decrease stereotypical views of my students and chose to use literature to do this. I knew I needed to understand how to find a piece of quality literature to accomplish this goal. While exploring different types of multicultural literature I found Bishop’s (2003) category scheme helpful. She divides multicultural literature into two categories:

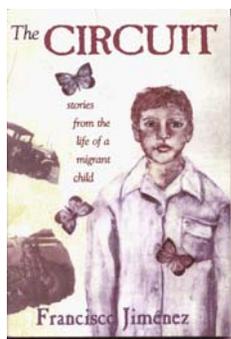
Culturally neutral books – People of different cultural groups are included, but no specific social issue or concern is addressed.

Culturally specific books – People of different cultural groups are predominant, and the theme and characters reflect their cultural context

Both types are important and should be included in a classroom collection. As a teacher I needed to be cognizant of the difference and include both types when planning lessons and units of study. For this project, I chose to focus on a culturally specific book but was not interested in using material that was historical in nature. I wanted my students to be able to identify with the characters in the novel, and a book with a modern setting would help them to do so.

Unit Overview

Choosing a Novel



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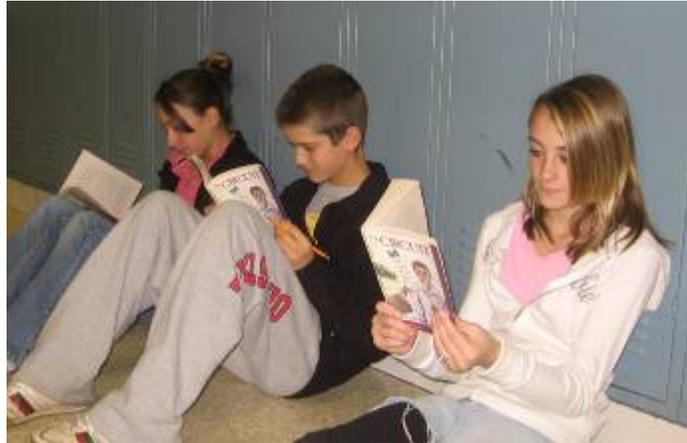
I wanted to address migrant culture within the United States. None of my students had a migrant background, so I knew there was little background knowledge. I had used *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*, by Francisco Jimenez as a part of a literature circle in the 2004-2005 school year. Of the nine books I had available for students to choose from, this novel provided me with the most positive feedback from my students. This novel follows the life of Francisco from a little town in Mexico to the migrant crop picking circuit in the United States. Although the book is sequential, each chapter is written in a self-contained short story format.

According to the author, (<http://www.scu.edu/fjimenez>) this book is a fictionalized autobiographical account of Jimenez himself who resides in the United States.

Would reading and discussing *The Circuit* help my students to understand the lives of people from another culture and to modify their stereotypical views of migrant workers? I focused on my two reading classes to see if I could answer this question.

My Reading Classes

Reading classes at my school are viewed by parents and other students as intervention classes. Students have the choice of either taking reading or a foreign language class. Placements in reading classes are generally based on recommendations from sixth grade teachers. Some students actually elect the class because they want an easier course load or simply enjoy reading.



I teach two reading classes with a total of 18 students. The first class contains eight students, but only seven students were present during the unit. Of those seven students, four students have Individualized Education Plans, two are strong readers and one is a struggling reader. The other class consists of ten students and is team-taught with an intervention specialist. In this class ten students were present for the duration of the unit. Of these ten students seven have Individualized Education Plans, one student receives daily English language tutoring, one is a struggling reader and one is a strong reader.

Data Collection

I started the unit with pre-reading activities. I had my students work in small groups to discuss what they already knew about migrant workers and their lifestyles prior to reading the novel. They were asked to record answers to specific questions about working conditions, hours, pay, insurance and vacation time. In addition, I included lifestyle questions concerning socioeconomic status, schooling, religion, ethnicity, and family size. I taped these conversations in case I needed to refer back to them at a later date.

The unit consisted of daily discussion along with in-class reading. Students then constructed concept maps to organize information using Inspiration software. I had done a mini-unit earlier in the year to familiarize students with the software. Again they worked in small groups to complete this task. Students saved their maps on the school's server so they could update them throughout the unit. They were directed to add information about lifestyle and working condition categories but were also allowed to

come up with their own categories. Material from their charts was added to their files twice during the unit. Students in the first period class kept individual concept maps. Due to the large number of special education students in the second class, I chose to make the maps a group assignment and assigned a strong reader to each group to help facilitate the discussion.

While I thought my novel was a great source of information for my students to gain knowledge about the migrant culture, I still felt I needed to do something more. We spent two days working with nonfiction texts so that we could add information to our web (See Book List).

Book List

Ancona, G. (2001). *Harvest*. New York: Marshall Cavendish.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, D. (1996). *Migrant worker: A boy from the Rio Grande Valley*. New York: Holiday House.

Jimenez, F. (1997). *The Circuit: Stories from the life of a migrant child*. Albuquerque: New Mexico Press.

Kent, D. (2005). *Migrant farmworkers hoping for a better life*. Chanhassen, MN: The Child's World.

Martinez, E.C. (1995). *Coming to America: The Mexican-American experience*. Brookfield: Millbrook Press.

I was surprised at how difficult it was to find books that accurately depicted the lives of migrants and were age appropriate for middle school students. One day was spent generating questions about Francisco's family. Students picked several from their list, and we attempted to answer them based on our research and knowledge gained from the chapters.

- Why do they have so many kids?
- How do they sneak into the country?
- Why do they seek out low paying jobs?
- Why is it harder for Mexicans to cross our border, but it is not hard to cross theirs?
- Why do they choose to be migrant workers?

Data Analysis

I was most interested in whether or not stereotypes decreased, but I also wanted to be sure that my students had increased knowledge of the migrant culture. Some inaccurate

statements were just that, inaccurate; they were not stereotypical. For example, students included the following statements about migrant workers on their maps:

- Farm land and live in Central America
- Earn \$1.00 for every fruit or vegetable they pick
- They have small families
- Could choose their own schedules

Upon examining the data I became a little concerned. I noticed stereotypes that we discussed in class were still present in the final web. I wondered if students just added to their webs and didn't remove inaccurate information. In March I asked the students to revisit their webs and delete information they learned to be untrue, so I could be sure my information was accurate.

My data were very dramatic, and I was pleased with the results of my research. My students clearly had a better understanding of migrant culture. Before beginning our unit students averaged just over five accurate facts about migrant workers on their concept maps. By the end of the unit students averaged over twenty accurate facts on their concept maps. There was a large increase in the amount of correct information my students were able to place on their concept maps (see Table 1). All students had acquired new facts from the unit.

Table 1
Number of Facts in Concept Maps

Student Number or Group	Before the Unit	After the Unit	Modified Concept Map 12 weeks After Completion of Unit
1	5	22	22
2	5	15	17
3	5	10	16
4	5	17	21
5	5	27	34
6	5	18	15
7	5	16	16
Group 1	6	28	28
Group 2	9	29	29

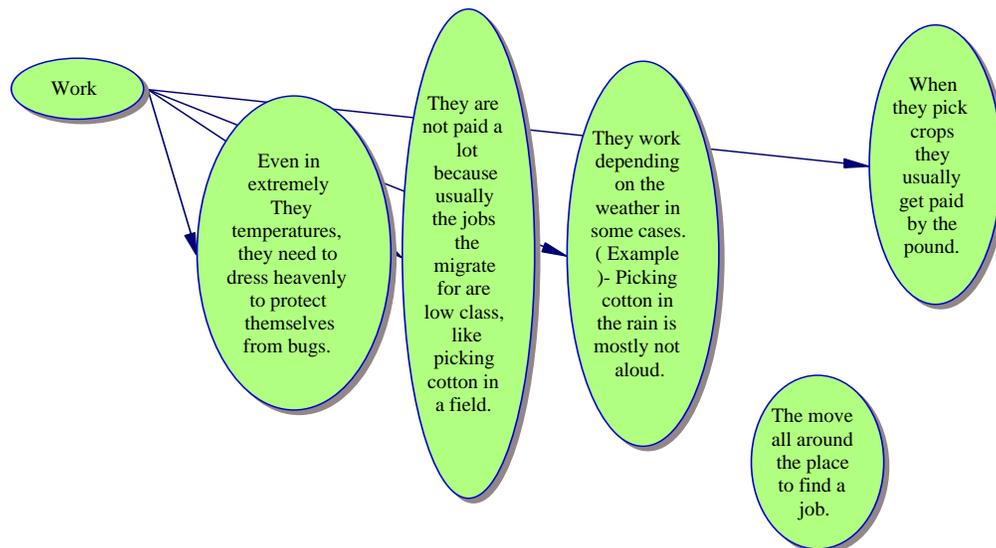
My students averaged 4.4 pieces of inaccurate information before the unit, 3.7 after the unit, and 2.9 on the delayed post-assessment (see Table 2).

Table 2
Misconceptions in Concept Maps

Student Number or Group	Before the Unit	After the Unit	Modified Concept Map 12 Weeks After Completion of Unit
1	1	0	0
2	1	5	3
3	1	3	2
4	7	4	6
5	7	6	3
6	7	6	6
7	7	5	4
Group 1	6	3	1
Group 2	3	1	1

I realized that the more we discussed the novel, the more accurate their maps became. I was also pleased to see that stereotypical views of migrant culture were disappearing. I analyzed the classes separately because results varied by class (see Student Sample).

Student Sample



Four stereotypes were present in my first class (see Table 3). I was pleased to see a reduction after the unit was completed. The large number of students that still noted that

migrant workers were either African-American or Mexican prompted me to return to the maps. I asked students if they had deleted information they knew to be inaccurate at the end of the unit and suggested we go back and modify our final maps.

Table 3
Stereotypes: Class 1

Stereotype in concept maps	Number of Times Mentioned Before Unit	Number of Times Mentioned After Unit	Number of Times Mentioned 12 Weeks After Unit
Dirty	4	2	2
No Religion	3	2	2
Only Mexican or African-American	7	5	1
No schooling	3	2	1

The second class held far fewer stereotypes originally and these disappeared by the end of the unit. I wondered why this class had better results. I felt as though the strong peer role models that were placed in each of the groups affected the results. I have struggled with whether or not this was a good decision. I wondered if the students had “taken over the group” or if they served as teachers for the other students. While students were working on their final product I monitored one group and the intervention specialist monitored the other. I observed productive dialogue from all students but more from my stronger students. I am not sure I can say for certain that all the students in these groups really eliminated stereotypes from their thinking or just conformed and accepted the opinions of a capable peer.

Table 4
Stereotypes: Class 2

Stereotype in concept maps	Number of Times Mentioned Before Unit	Number of Times Mentioned After Unit	Number of Times Mentioned 12 Weeks After Unit
Dirty	2	0	0
Dirty homes	2	0	0
Not well educated	2	0	0

Reflection

My students learned a great deal about migrant culture and developed an appreciation for *The Circuit*. They expressed how much they enjoyed the book. What is particularly compelling about this book is that it does not make readers feel badly about what they do have but does invoke both sympathy and admiration for the characters. My students recognized the strength in the characters and how hard they worked to stay alive.

Francisco found pleasure watching a goldfish in a bowl, walking home, going to school, and going to mass. I wondered what it was about *The Circuit* that allowed children to empathize with the family. I felt it was important for me to know why this book is consistently a favorite of my students, so I can apply the same criteria in future literature selections for my classroom. Responses included exploring other cultures, exciting text and a cliff hanger leading to a sequel.

Cultural competence is an important part of working and living with people from different backgrounds. According to Taxel (1998), there is a need “for students and teachers to develop competence in the language and/or culture of groups outside of their own cultural heritage” (p. 420). In order for my students not to feel handicapped in their chosen professions, they need to be aware of beliefs that differ from their own. Gay (2003) further elaborates by stating, “These unfamiliar groups, cultures, traditions, and languages can produce anxieties, hostilities, prejudices, and racist behaviors among those who do not understand the newcomers or who perceive them as threats to safety and security” (p. 30). It is imperative that our students receive instruction that is multicultural in nature.

This is just the beginning for multiculturalism in my classroom. Although I am happy with the results of my research, I do not think an isolated unit is enough. I do not want multiculturalism in my classroom to be limited to a unit of study. I want it embedded in all of my units and in the classroom climate. For my students, I feel as though it is a good start...a foundation to build on. Marshall (2005) states, “An aim of making curricula multicultural should be to provide varying perspectives on a given topic” (p. 58). I am interested in building a culturally rich environment and promoting acceptance in my classroom and think Marshall’s work can help me to design my lessons with these ideas in mind. My own experiences as a student inspired me to help my students develop a multicultural perspective.

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