

Multicultural Literature as Defined in College Texts

Gina M. Almerico, PhD
The University of Tampa

Elizabeth L. Barron, MLS
The University of Tampa

Helene Silverman, PhD
The University of Tampa

Abstract

The authors of this study conducted a content analysis of children's literature college textbooks to determine how the term multiculturalism was interpreted within the context of children's literature. They determined how the concept was defined, the extent to which subcultures in the United States were represented, the amount of text devoted to each represented cultural group, and the number of recommended trade books for each group.

Introduction

In the latter half of the 20th century, a trend known as multiculturalism gained prominence in American education. Hanley (2003) suggested that multicultural education emerged "to address the educational needs of a society that continues to struggle with the realization that it is not monocultural, but is an amalgamation of many cultures". (p.)

Gay (1994) in an extensive study of the most frequently used definitions of multicultural education identified 13 specific descriptions of the concept and noted that several points were common in all the definitions in that they all agree that the content of multicultural programs should include:

1. ethnic identifies, cultural pluralism, unequal distribution of resources and
2. opportunities and other sociopolitical problems stemming from long histories of oppression....
3. multicultural education as a philosophy, a methodology for education reform, and a set of specific content areas within instructional programs. (p. 3)

In her book, *Affirming Diversity*, Nieto (2000) stated:

Multicultural education....challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. (p. 305)

A review of the numerous definitions finds them inclusive and broad in nature offering educators a term which may vary greatly in its interpretation.

For many students preparing to be elementary school teachers, their introduction to multicultural education occurs during their study of multicultural literature, a component of a required children's literature course. Bishop (1993), a pioneer in this field, presented readers with this classic definition of multicultural literature: literature about people who are members of groups considered to be outside the socio-political

mainstream of the United States. The term described books about what Bishop referred to as people of color - African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics. Bishop maintained that part of the reason such books are considered multicultural is to avoid the use of the term minority, which connotes both a “low status and inferiority” to the mainstream culture. (p. 39) Multicultural literature, according to Bishop, could also include books about people of color outside the United States as well as folktales, fiction set in other countries, and information books about the countries, cultures, and beliefs of people of color. The authors of this study questioned how the term multiculturalism is interpreted in the children’s literature college textbooks read by preservice teachers. What “groups” (cultural, religious, etc.) did the texts’ authors include in their works? How is the concept of multicultural education defined? To what extent is multiculturalism presented as an inclusive notion or does it, in fact, become exclusive and remain so on a consistent basis?

To answer these questions, the authors examined the multicultural entries found in eight children’s literature textbooks in use in undergraduate elementary education programs. Textbooks selected were those that had a second or greater edition of publishing history. Multiple editions indicate continued use in college and university classrooms nationwide.

The researchers noted:

1. The definition of the term multiculturalism.
2. How the term is interpreted as it is related to children’s literature.
3. What specific groups (ethnic, religious, etc.) were identified?
4. What specific groups’ literature was represented?

It is during this literature course students read about multicultural literature and begin to form a conceptual understanding of what is meant by multiculturalism. If the text being used has a limited definition of multicultural literature, the preservice teacher may develop a narrow perspective of the meaning of the concept of multiculturalism.

Although there seems to be a consensus that multicultural literature is about people who are not in the nation’s mainstream, there is a lack of agreement as to what constitutes populations outside of the mainstream (Temple, et al, 2002). While some may contend that multicultural literature is by or about people of color in the United States, others may include religious minorities or diverse life styles, such as families with same-sex parents. For these reasons, the authors chose to examine how multiculturalism was being presented to future elementary teachers, what groups were being highlighted, and which were being excluded or mentioned peripherally.

Tatum (1999) suggested that children’s earliest experiences tend to take place among people of their same race, ethnicity, or culture. Gay (1994) concurred and warned that the absence of significant relations across ethnic, social, and cultural lines may reinforce stereotypes and cause people to be suspicious and distrustful, even fearful of those who are different. Because this separation of cultures is prevalent in our society, people often count on second-hand sources such as books for developing ideas about people from other races and ethnic and religious backgrounds (Temple, et al, 2002). One way educators can teach youngsters about culturally different groups is by providing quality multicultural books as a component of a multicultural curriculum. What today’s children learn about themselves and others in our classrooms will make a difference in the world of tomorrow (Beatty, 1997).

Colby and Lyon (2004) found that preservice teachers tend to have unexamined beliefs about cultural diversity and have little understanding of the impact of their personal views on classroom interactions, discussion, and practices. Teacher educators cannot easily ascertain the knowledge base teacher candidates possess of cultural groups in our society. Because of this unknown variable, it is imperative that teacher educators realize how multiculturalism is defined and interpreted in children's literature texts. The way authors present multiculturalism often provides the basis upon which preservice teachers develop cultural concepts. If an exclusionary approach is taken where some cultural groups are discussed while others are omitted, the preservice teachers may assume the predominate groups mentioned are the only ones that need to be addressed in the classroom. If the concept is narrowly defined, it will impact not only teachers in training but their future students. Additionally, if the children being taught are members of an excluded group, then, at worst, they might internalize the idea that they are unimportant in the eyes of their teacher and/or the world.

Multiculturalism Defined in College Texts

Russell (2005) used the term culturally diverse literature in *Literature for Children*, which he defined as stories about people in the United States outside the Anglo-American ethnic group. The culturally diverse groups he identified include African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and "the myriad of other ethnic groups that contribute to the splendid array of peoples in the United States." (p. 76) He incorporated a section on worldwide cultures in which he emphasized the importance of exposing children to a rich variety of cultures through literature which may enable them to live and thrive in diversity. Guidelines for evaluating literary works for their attention to cultural consciousness and recommended readings were offered. Additionally, he presented a bibliography for children which included titles that highlighted the following groups: African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish people.

In Stood-Hill and Amspaugh-Corson's (2005) *Children's Literature: Discovery for a Lifetime*, their chapter on multicultural literature defined the term as including books that incorporated the experiences of white ethnic and cultural groups as well as diversities of race and religion in the United States. The specific cultures noted were: Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Jewish people. They also mentioned books about the Amish and Appalachian cultures.

Norton, Norton, and McClure (2003) dedicated a chapter in *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature*, to the study of multicultural literature. Multicultural literature, in this work, was defined as literature about racial or ethnic minority groups that are culturally and socially different from the white Anglo-Saxon majority in the United States, whose middle-class values and customs are most represented in American literature. In-depth discussions were presented in the chapter for the following types of literature: African American, Native American, Latino, and Asian American. The endpapers of the text listed milestones in multicultural children's literature for the following cultures: African American, Native American, Latino, Asian, Jewish, and Middle Eastern. Although Jewish and Middle Eastern literature milestones were listed in the endpapers, information about these groups was not found in the body of the chapter.

In *Children's Literature: An Invitation to the World*, Mitchell (2003) defined multicultural literature as literature that calls attention to peoples and voices not traditionally written about or included in the body of literature most frequently taught. In the U.S., this group, according to the author, consisted of African Americans, Mexican Americans and Latinos, Asian Americans, and American Indians. Mitchell emphasized the importance of using books that respect the cultures they represent. She urged teachers to avoid the "tourist approach" to literature, where a culture is oversimplified by looking only at food, fashion, folklore, and festivals. Such an approach tends to perpetuate stereotypes and undermines the intent and values of sharing multicultural materials with children which are used to expand their understanding and appreciation of themselves and others. The endpapers included the titles of books about American Indians, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and international characters.

Galda and Cullinan's (2002) *Literature and the Child*, included a chapter on culturally diverse literature in which they focused on books from North American parallel cultures, or groups formerly called minorities including: African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American peoples.

Anderson's (2006) *Elementary Children's Literature*, presented a discussion of multicultural literature however, did not contain a definition in the body of the chapter. The book contained a glossary which included a definition of multicultural literature as cross-cultural literature that includes books about and by peoples of all cultures. The literature described in her text represented the following groups: Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. She included a list of four books representing each of the following religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson's (1999) *Essentials of Children's Literature*, contained a chapter entitled, Multicultural and International Literature which defined multicultural literature as any trade book, regardless of genre that has as a main character "who is a member of a racial, religious or language micro culture other than the Euro-American one." (p. 188) The groups highlighted included: African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, Jewish American, and Native American.

Temple, Martinez, Yokota, and Naylor's (2002) *Children's Books in Children's Hands*, addressed multicultural literature in a chapter in their text, entitled, Literature Representing Diverse Perspectives. Multicultural literature in this work was defined as literature that reflects the multitude of cultural groups within the United States and focuses on works that depict ethnic and regional groups whose cultures historically have been less represented than European cultures. The groups noted were: African Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and Native Americans. Other cultural groups recognized and mentioned by the authors included Jewish Americans, Appalachian Americans, and European Americans such as Swedish Americans and Italian Americans.

The eight textbooks reviewed each contained a chapter dealing with the topic of multicultural literature. All of the texts included the following four major cultural groups in their discussions of multicultural children's literature: African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. Three of the textbooks included Jewish Americans as a cultural category and two mentioned Appalachian Americans as a cultural group. The major cultural groups, African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans received the largest share of in-depth

coverage. The number of pages devoted to each cultural group by text and the number of recommended trade books for each group is shown in Table 1. This information indicates the quantity of text coverage and the number of recommended titles per group.

The nature of the modern world requires that all educators become more aware of and sensitive to the diverse cultures found, not just in our country, but in the world at large (Russell, 2005). Teacher educators must be aware of the strengths and limitations found in the textbooks our students use. While most of the textbooks reviewed acknowledged the cultural diversity of the world in general, the majority focused on children's books representing four major subcultures of the United States: African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American. This finding left the authors questioning why these texts were offering such a narrow definition of multiculturalism in children's literature. A limited definition of multiculturalism as it relates to children's literature could create a cultural void in the knowledge base of our future teachers and subsequently, their students. Children's books are now available that include an array of cultures in the United States. Carefully selected literature that represents the cultural diversity of our nation can help students understand the principles of tolerance, inclusiveness, diversity, and respect for all.

One purpose for exposing preservice teachers to an assortment of quality multicultural literature is that it enables them to make educated choices regarding the types of books they have available to share with their future students. We can better prepare preservice teachers by asking them to move beyond the pages of their textbooks; by engaging them in questioning why authors are defining subgroups from a narrow ethnocentric perspective. We need to question the generic, homogeneous labels assigned to the major cultures represented in these textbooks. For instance, the designation of African American as a racial group does not apply to people of color from the Caribbean and locales other than Africa. Each of the dominate groups were assigned broad labels, such as Hispanic Americans, which basically uses the Spanish language to establish commonality. In addition, preservice teachers need to examine why some cultures are not mentioned and discuss the implications of omitting such groups, especially when we consider the conditions of our world today. The definitions of multiculturalism as it relates to children's literature were limited within the texts examined to ethnic groups that exist in the United States. Cultures that exist outside of the U.S., if they were mentioned were not examined. It therefore behooves teacher educators to expand upon the textbooks being used in college and university classrooms. We are charged with the task of assisting preservice teachers in finding quality children's literature representing diversity within the four major cultures and of obtaining a larger sampling of books about cultures outside of the major subcultures of our nation.

Bibliography

Beatty, J.J. (1997). *Building bridges with multicultural picture books for children 3-5*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Bishop, R.S. (1993). Multicultural literature for children: Making informed choices. In V.J. Harris (Ed.), *Teaching multicultural literature in grades K-8*. (pp.37-52). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.

Galda & Cullinan (2002). *Literature and the child*.

Gay, G. (1994). *At the essence of learning: Multicultural education*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.

Hanley Lynch-Brown, C. & Tomlinson, C.M. (1999). *Essentials of children's literature (third ed.)*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Mitchell, D. (2003). *Children's literature: An invitation to the world*.

Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education (3rd ed.)*. New York: Longman.

Norton, Norton, & McClure (2003). *Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature*.

Russell, D. (2005). *Literature for Children (Fifth edition)*. Boston: Pearson.

Stood-Hill & Amspaugh (2005). *Children's literature: Discovery for a lifetime*.

Tatum, B. (1999). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York: St. Martins Press.

Temple, C., Martinez, M., Yokota, J. & Naylor, A. (2002). *Children's books in children's hands: An introduction to their literature (2nd. Ed.)*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Table 1

The Representation of Cultural Groups in Children's Literature Textbooks

Author(s)	Cultural Groups	Pages per Group	Number of Recommended Books per Group	Total Number of Pages per Chapter
Anderson				
Galda & Cullinan				
Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson	African American	1 page	91	36
	Asian American	½ page	36	
	Hispanic American	½ page	41	
	Jewish American	½ page	38	
	Native American	½ page	58	
Mitchell				
Norton, Norton, & McClure				
Russell	African American	1 ¼ page	97	20
	Asian American	1 page	38	
	Hispanic American	7/8 page	40	
	Jewish People	¼ page	21	
	Native American	1 ½ pages	54	
Stood-Hill & Amspaugh				