

The Implementation of Culturally Relevant Teaching Through Co-Constructing Multicultural Picture Books with Preschoolers

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Abstract: This study reports on the research undertaken with preschoolers and teachers in implementing culturally relevant teaching at an early childhood facility located in Ohio, USA. The study explains how the project was established through narratives shared by the two researchers. It describes an attempt from two researchers in creating a culturally relevant classroom by integrating literacy and the arts, aiming to employ the arts as a medium of expression and communication for children with limited vocabulary and emergent language learners. The 8 week project entails five weekly readings of five multicultural picture books followed by five art activities, utilizing the first 3 weeks to familiarize the children with the project. The first step in the process involved reading multicultural picture books to the children, followed by having a conversation with the children about topics featured in the book. The children's conversations continued as informal one on one conversation with researchers while the children engaged an art project. Next, the artwork and their narrative were compiled into a draft picture book which was read to the children for any necessary amendments or additions. Then, a title was co-constructed finalizing the book. The children's actions, conversations, responses and narrations during the book reading sessions and art activities were audio and video recorded. These recordings were transcribed and relevant remarks were added in the book draft, making their voices visible. This project resulted with four successfully co-constructed multicultural picture books. The valuable process of co-constructing the title with the children, how it makes visible the children's awareness of the goal of the project and how it provides evidence that the arts is more than just scribbling, drawing and painting for young emergent language learners are presented in this study. Art is a unique language, a method of communication and a way for people to develop a sense of personal and cultural identity.

Key words: Culturally relevant teaching, picture books, visual arts, literacy, action

INTRODUCTION

It is a challenge today for educators in the United States in planning culturally responsive lessons. Teachers also need to be culturally competent by having the ability to understand and question their own cultural backgrounds. They also need to have a better understanding and being more aware and sensitive of the cultures around them, especially of their students (Nieto, 1992). Previous methods include being "colorblind". Nieto (1992) describe "colorblind" as the teacher's belief about students. Being colorblind involves ignoring the differences that exist within the classroom. Teachers will "close their eyes" by seeing the students simply as students amidst their cultural differences.

At first glance, it seems "fair and impartial, when it comes to judging people based on their race". However, various research have proven otherwise (Safrina, 2013;

Souto, 2009; Gay, 2010). Realizing this, the purpose of this study is to provide an account of an attempt from a teacher and a researcher to promote a culturally relevant classroom by integrating literacy and the arts in an early childhood classroom activities. This study can also serve in providing strategies and ideas for early childhood educators for building culturally relevant early childhood classrooms.

Genesis of the project

Theresa's story: "We're all friends and we're all white!" stated Marissa, a student of mine back in 1999 my first year of teaching. Marissa and one of the two other students she was playing with are African American and the third student is Caucasian. I overheard this comment and looked to my co-teacher and we laughed a little while shaking our heads. It was an uncomfortable laugh for both of us and we never spoke of that comment

again. The uncomfortable feeling I had felt was because I had no idea what to do with a comment such as Marissa's. I had been taught to be colorblind and to only see the student, not his or her culture, therefore I was to ignore the comment but I knew being colorblind was not the answer. I had wanted to discuss her comment and explore her thoughts.

Last year a student had stated "Daddy said no Christmas, no Christmas tree, no Santa!" Jaaswitha was clearly upset she was not allowed to celebrate Christmas at home. I began to search for multicultural picture books which represented culture but also picture books where the characters were also struggling with some of the issues my students were struggling with as well. I had found a picture book, *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* by Helen Recorvits where a Korean girl who had moved to America had struggled with the fact all of her friends were celebrating Christmas and she was forbidden to do so at home, because she was Korean. However, her father had always insisted since they now lived in America, they must be and act like Americans. Just as Jaaswitha was torn, not wanting to upset her father's wishes about celebrating Christmas in their home but also wanting to fit in at school where Christmas was celebrated, so was the character Yoon in the picture book. This picture book and many others helped to encourage dialogue with my students about issues they were facing which were linked to their culture.

Last semester I had found an study describing about how diversity "is seen, not heard". The researcher had discussed "a distinct lack of connection between the physical classroom environment which represented multiculturalism through various media and the relative silence around the topic of racial and ethnic diversity in planned lessons and spontaneous classroom discussions" Park (2011). As I looked around my classroom I saw all the multicultural dolls, photos, books, crayons, markers, paint and so on, I continued to question, like in the study Park (2011) "what the mere presence of difference in the perceptual realm, unaccompanied by explanation and dialogue, was teaching students about the politics or meaning of difference in the larger society". Even though my students and I were already engaged in dialogue about diversity which was usually initiated through reading a picture book, I was even more committed to what most would consider taboo conversations to have with preschool children.

At the beginning of this school year, I fully intended to engage in taboo conversations with my pre-schoolers, I realized these conversations were not going to happen in the traditional sense of spoken discussions but

rather we were going to engage in nonverbal dialogue through our creativity, especially through the use of visual arts, specifically drawing and painting.

Fatin's story: Coming from Malaysia, a multiracial and multi-religious country, I am always aware of the ethnic/racial differences of the people in my country. We are able to live harmoniously with each other although there are instances of minor racial friction sometimes. In order to avoid major racial friction, most Malaysians tried to avoid discussing the issues of cultural differences openly. In short, color blind seems to be the way to go for most people in my country. When asked, most Malaysians would answer that we are afraid that discussing the issue of culture will offend other people. Culture, race and religion is considered a taboo and sensitive issue to most Malaysians. So, what do we actually know about each other's culture?.

Although, we learned in schools about the differences and similarities of each races, the topics being discussed are always on religious festivals, food, traditional clothes and different names that we have. Having being exposed to the readings on culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, I realized that when discussion is only limited to the topics mentioned, we are not able to have a dialogue about the uniqueness of our cultural identity or celebrate the differences and similarities that we have.

Since, the Malaysian education system is very exam oriented, any form of art activities is always being less valued. My perception on the importance of arts especially to young children has wobbled and shifted after being exposed to the Reggio Emilia Approach. Now, I see arts as essential to young children in expressing themselves. Children with limited vocabulary and emergent language learners use arts as a medium of expression. This is where they make their voice visible.

The arts contribute to three things "They provide opportunities to think and learn in new ways; they allow us to communicate when other forms of language fail and they enrich the spaces in which we live (Eisner, 2002). Applying these benefits in our teaching can contribute in including our student's diverse backgrounds, learning styles, intelligences and senses. Arts is more than just scribbling, drawing and painting for young children who are emergent language learners. It is a unique language, a method of communication and ways for people in developing a sense of personal and cultural identity (Ladson, 1995; Purnell *et al.*, 2007).

Effective early childhood teachers often try to find ways in enhancing children's development of literacy skills through children's natural interest in arts such as in

painting, coloring, drawing, acting and storytelling. Various studies have also shown that arts rich programs contribute in the development of leadership skills, self-esteem and cooperation especially among children (Moll *et al.*, 1992).

My initial idea was to have this art project in a different setting. But, since approval was not granted, I decided to approach Theresa on the possibility of me working together with the children in her classroom. We then came up with the idea to co-construct multicultural picture books with the-in her classroom. Theresa focuses more on the literacy aspect while I do visual arts projects that promote culturally responsive concept.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The spiralling process: The first step in the process of co-constructing picture books involved Theresa reading the multicultural books to the children. This followed by having a conversation with the children on the topic featured in the book while reading the book or after the book reading session. This picture book reading was then followed by an art project where the conversation will also continue. Then, the researchers conducted an informal one to one conversation with the children. Next, the artwork and their narrative were compiled into a draft picture book. The draft picture book will then be read to the children for any amendments or addition to the book. After the children were satisfied with the content of the book, the title will then be co-constructed and the book will then be finalized. This is a spiralling process with the daily on going conversation between Fatin and Theresa through email, phone calls and meetings. It is also a spiralling process between the two researchers with the children in Theresa's classroom.

Literacy and visual arts: A total of five books and five visual arts activities were used in this project. Books for this project are selected based on the Criteria for Book Selection checklist developed by Neugebauer (1992). All the visual arts activities were adapted from York (2003) book, roots and wings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The process of co-constructing picture books with the children has been a trial and error process for both of us. This project is a form of a pilot project that surely will need to be improved in future implementations. We managed to create four picture books from the six activities conducted.

Doing research with children involves constant improvisation since things do not usually go as planned. For example, in one visual art activity, the plan was to produce a handprint rainbow so that the children can see the differences on hand sizes and handprints. However, the children had a different idea where they went wild putting their handprints all over the paper. Still, the objective of discussing the different sizes and prints were achieved because these differences were visible.

The children were also very involved in the process of co-constructing the picture books. The following vignette illustrates their excitement and awareness of the process and the aim of the whole project.

- R₁: That's the first book that we constructed
- H₁: Yeay!!
- R₁: And you also drew the picture and talked about yourselves
- R₂: Yeah, you drew
- R₁: Okay we know that books,... we know that authors and illustrators are who?
- H₁: All of us
- R₁: All of you and also who else? Pointing to herself and R₂
- H₁: Teachers
- R₁: R₁ and R₂. Yes. and, you know what, we have all the authors and illustrators, so we need a title for this book. Raise your hands if you can think of a title for this book. A1 what title would you like to call this book?
- H₂: raises his hand
- R₁: H₂ what do you want to call this book?
- H₂: Every color we have. H₁ is calling for R₁ attention
- H₁: All the faces that we color
- R₁: Every color that we have and all the faces that we color?

Through this process of co-constructing the title, it is visible that the children are aware of what is the goal of the project. It is evident that arts is more than just scribbling, drawing and painting for young children who are emergent language learners. It is a unique language, a method of communication and ways for people in developing a sense of personal and cultural identity (Goldberg, 2006; Isenberg and Jalongo, 2006). This can also relate to Kinloch and Pedro (2014) "the idea of researchers moving beyond doing work for a purpose or for people to researchers doing work with and alongside others. I tell her that working with is the type of work more people should be engaging in."

Working with others, co-constructing knowledge, developing a sense of personal and cultural identity could not have been done without building sustaining relationships for all of those involved. Throughout this

project, we realized the most key factor was the dialogic spiral. The dialogic spiral as described by Kinloch and San Pedro is “the construction of a conversation between two or more people whereby the dialogic process of listening and speaking co-creates an area of trust between speakers-the space between” (Kinloch and Pedro, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Without the dialogic spiral, even though our conversations with each other and the children were not always verbal, sustaining relationships could not have been formed.

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