This paper addresses the issue of diversity and tolerance in the classroom by using multicultural children’s literature with a thematic approach. With a review of the related studies on the topic, it points out that the understanding, respect and appreciation of various cultures are imperative for us to live peacefully as global citizens, and the importance of addressing tolerance and differences in our schools. Since literature is a great resource for us to study our various cultures, the article shows classroom teachers how one specific model, the thematic approach, can be used to enhance children’s awareness of diversity and allow them to see there are more similarities than differences among cultures.

Multicultural Globe and Literature

Many Americans believe racial disparities are a major problem in the nation (Whyy, 2000). Since our society is made up with various cultures, religions, and ethnic groups, it is bound to be diverse and multicultural. As globalization has sped up by the fast growing technology, the understanding, tolerance, respect and appreciation of each other’s culture become an imperative for us to live peacefully as global citizens.

Everyone has a culture and cultures are learned, shared and adapted. Culture is a way of perceiving, believing, evaluating and behaving (Goodnough, 1987). Culture is so much part of us that we do not realize that not everyone shares our culture, its attributes, or its manifestations. Thus, learning about other cultures with their beliefs, values, behaviors, customs and traditions becomes one important step for us to take towards peace and harmony in the world.

From the current terrorist activities, racial conflicts and gender differences to schoolyard bullies, most of them arise because of misunderstandings and intolerance of differences and diversities among people. Thus, our global community in general and educators in particular are faced with the task of preparing the youngsters to live in today’s diverse global community with each other harmoniously, successfully and productively. Our classroom teachers, administrators of schools, professional development staff and teacher training institutions are faced with the overwhelming challenges of working with students from extremely diverse...
cultural backgrounds. In multicultural countries such as the United States, both students and faculty populations in schools are getting more and more diverse. Thus, it is even more important for us to understand, accept and appreciate each other in school settings as well as in society.

To face and meet the challenge and demand of enhancing teachers’ and students’ awareness of diversity, we need to develop programs with multicultural components. Literature is the essence of communication. Through it, we share our opinions, values, experiences, and what makes us happy and sad. We share the most personal aspects of our culture and the ways in which we identify with a particular ethnicity, geographical region, religion, or other cultural groups. Thus, literature becomes a great resource for us to study our various cultures. The study of literature allows us to see that people of different cultures are more similar than different from each other.

Also the Advisory Board (Whyy, 2000) for “The President’s Initiative on Race” developed a list of actions to take that could increase the momentum toward making “One America.” The first action suggested by the Advisory Board includes the use of literature, “Make a commitment to become informed about people from other races and cultures. Read a book, see a movie, watch a play, or attend a cultural event that will inform you and your family about the history and current lives of a group different than your own” (Whyy, 2000).

**Related Studies**

Perini (2002) stresses multicultural children’s books have the potential to support diversity in the curriculum and raise consciousness on cultural issues that are ignored in schools (Harris, 1991; Reese, 1996; Tatum, 1997). Sharing children’s books with students can provide opportunities to make explicit and call into question the traditional, prevailing beliefs and views people hold of themselves and of others.

In 1998, Abound proposed, after conducting a study, that the attitudes of children towards diversity tend to remain the same unless they are somehow altered through life-changing events. Wham, Barnhart, and Cook (1996) reaffirmed Aboud’s (1998) findings and in addition found that children in kindergarten, second and fourth grades, who were exposed to multicultural storybook reading in addition to school and home reading programs, seemed to develop the most positive attitudes towards differences.

Cai and Sims-Bishop (1994) explained that the term multicultural literature implies a goal to challenge the existing canon by expanding the curriculum to include literature by and about members of a wide variety of cultural groups. This could combat intolerance and foster a sense of inclusion, possibly changing education and classroom instruction. In these ways, children’s books potentially serve what Takaki (1999) saw as the intentions of multicultural scholars to engender a pluralistic society in which all people aim to understand and respect one another’s cultures while recognizing the shared histories and experiences that unite us. What makes a book “multicultural” depends largely on how it is used with children and perceived by children – two conditions that teachers...
are in a position to influence.

Mathis (2001) presented a study which discussed the important roles of teachers of multicultural literature, the purpose of a literature discussion group and ways for teachers to encourage critical thinking and reading of multicultural literature in the classroom. Educators' insights and understandings of different ethnic groups have been greatly enhanced by exploring the richly authentic multicultural literature for children.

The reviewed studies show that reading multicultural storybooks to children does significantly improve their tolerance for differences and development of positive attitudes towards our diverse culture. Multicultural literature tends to foster more positive self-perception and more positive view of schools, which allow better education and more employment opportunities for children. These studies also emphasize the responsibility placed on educators to make multicultural education an essential ingredient of every classroom and also point out the importance of professional development for teachers on how to address diversity issues with children's literature. The current study will provide teachers with ideas on a thematic approach of using children's storybooks to teach multicultural education in the classroom.

**The Thematic Approach**

Over the years, the author has been using multicultural storybooks to teach children about diverse cultures and help them understand the differences and similarities among cultures. Multicultural storybooks are used to enhance children's self-esteem, and to help them understand why and how each culture behaves, believes or does certain things. We hope children will realize that differences among people are only skin deep and we are more similar than different from each other.

The model suggested here involves using children's storybooks with common themes to address differences and similarities among people and cultures. Books from different cultures, which represent the same themes, can be used together to teach diversity to children. The considerations about using thematic approach may include the selection of themes, selection of reading materials and procedures of teaching.

**Selection of Themes:**

Themes relevant to all human being experiences, no matter what cultures, such as family traditions, major holiday celebrations, religious ceremonies, nursery rhymes, folktales, emotions that people share and ways of life, will work well for the purpose. Teachers may select a theme first, and then collect books from several different cultures that deal with the same topic to analyze, compare and contrast.

-- Books about family traditions and beliefs such as wedding ceremony, birthdays, welcome of new babies (baby shower), family gatherings, work ethics and respect of elderly, etc. can be used to teach about cultural specific practices on these occasions and subjects.

-- Books depicting major holiday celebrations such as Chinese New Year, Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving for Americans, National Days, Hanukkah with candle lighting for Jewish, Deepavali, or Festival of Light for Hindu Indians, and
Hari Raya Puasa for Muslim Malays are all good resources to study traditions, customs, and cultures.

-- Books about emotions or ways of life such as loss of loved ones or pets, school life, children’s responsibilities at home, friendship, and growing up, etc. are good choices for thematic approach.
-- Nursery rhymes from different cultures that share similar themes such as lullabies, skipping songs, and tongue twisters are all good choices for cultural studies.
-- Folklore lends itself best to the study of cultures because it has its roots in, originates from, and depicts culture. There are many folktales that share common themes. For example, Little Red Riding Hood has many cultural variations, Snow-white has more than 100 different versions, and Cinderella is the same.

• Criteria for Book Selection:
Once the theme is selected, it is time to collect books. To ensure desired results of study, the criteria listed below should be born in mind when selecting reading materials for children.
-- First, books chosen should have literary merit--a poorly written novel with stereotyped characters and simplistic answers to complex questions is probably worse than not reading anything at all and can even leave children or young people with a negative view of literature.
-- Reading materials should be age-appropriate, and up-to-date in information.
-- Books should create a lot of possibilities for class or group discussions.
-- Books should contain enough cultural elements to enable students to vicariously or directly obtain new cultural knowledge and increase understanding.
-- The materials should allow students to learn to appreciate and accept cultures other than their own. The descriptions of cultures should be positive, non-stereotypical, and authentic.
-- The illustrations in the books should reflect authentic portrayals of physical features of people and depict details of cultures.
-- The materials should also provide possibilities for students to do hands-on activities or projects, such as building models, cooking food, making costumes, drawing or painting, dramatization, creative writing, character analysis, etc.

• Guideline for Thematic Approach:
After careful selections of themes and materials, it is time to start teaching and reading.
-- First, teachers need to motivate students with introductory activities. If learning cultures from holiday celebrations, you may start by inviting students to share experiences of family celebrations, traditions, foods, etc. You may also ask students to bring from home dresses they wear for their major holidays to class to share.
-- After the introductory activity, provide ample time for reading. Reading can be done as a class, in small groups, or as individuals.
-- Allow incubation time. Provide materials, strategies that help with reading comprehension to students to work on while reading. Strategies such as Storymaps, or Venn Diagram can be used for comparing and contrasting the ways of
dealing with the same theme by different cultures. For examples of Story-map and Venn Diagram, please see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

--- Provide follow-up discussion time. Ask questions that will lead students from literal recall of information to interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information. Compare how different cultures deal with the same situations. Talk about the similarities and differences.

--- Follow up with extended activities, such as further research on the theme to find out more about it, or write a poem about the theme or conduct culture study.

**Demonstration of Using Thematic Approach**

The example presented here shows how the thematic approach can be used in teaching diversity and tolerance in the classroom. The theme chosen is Cinderella from different cultures. The rationale for using Cinderella is that there is a Cinderella tale or story in almost every culture. As a matter of fact, it is believed that there are 347 known versions of this popular story (Polette, 1997). Learning about cultures and customs of nations throughout the world can be exciting when using Cinderella tales selected from various countries as a starting point.

* **Theme:** Cinderella Stories
* **Reading Material Selection:** Eight Cinderella stories are recommended and listed here with short summaries. Among them are versions of African, Native American, Chinese, English, Japanese, Korean, Hawaii and Vietnamese.

*Cinderella* by John Patience. Landoll 1993.

It is a familiar version. Cinderella is helped by a fairy godmother and wins the heart of the prince.


This is a Vietnamese legend.


In Korea, Pear Blossom, with the help of three magical animals, accomplishes three tasks that no human could possibly do alone and attends the festival and becomes a nobleman’s wife.


This is a Japanese Cinderella story. Lily’s grandmother placed a lacquered bowl on her head before her death and made Lily promise never to remove it. True love from her groom releases the bowl from Lily’s head and reveals the beauty and riches.


This is an African story. Mufaro and his two beautiful daughters live in a small African village. Nyasha is caring and agreeable while Manyara is disagreeable, selfish and demanding. When the king wants to choose
a wife, the girls go to see him.

This is an Algonquin Indian folklore. To marry the powerful Invisible Being, women have to be able to see him and describe him. Rough-Face Girl proves to be able to see him and describe his bow and arrows.

Yeh-Shen lives in southern China. Her only friend is a fish, whose spirit dresses her for the festival with golden slippers.

Mango boy lives on the islands of Hawaii with his parents and two big brothers, and dreams of becoming a sumo (Japanese sport) champion. While his brothers go off to sumo practice, he has to pick, peel, and slice mangoes. He proves himself eventually with the help of a manapua (Hawaii snack) man, his fairy godfather. This is a Cinderella story with a Hawaii twist.

• Procedures of the Approach:
  1. Introductory activity: Teacher may show a video depicting the cultures or countries under study; or show some pictures or postcards of the people or cultures; or take students on an internet virtual tour to these countries. Ask students if they know anything about the cultures.

  Teacher read aloud Cinderella by John Patience to students. Pass out copies of story-map to students to work on while read the story the second time. For an example of Story-map for Yeh-Shen, a Cinderella Story from China, please see Appendix 1.

  To work on the Story-map, encourage students to think about:
  • CHARACTERS: What are their names? How old are they? Who are girls and who are boys? Who are the main characters and who are the supporting characters?
  • SETTING: Where does the story take place? Which year? What time of the year? What season? What time of day? What else can you tell about the where and when of the story?
  • PROBLEM: What events or problems happen in the story to make it interesting to readers?
  • RESOLUTION: How are the events or problems solved in the story? Does the story end “Happily Ever After”? If it does, how does that happen?
  • LESSONS: What is the message to the listener about life? Does the story end “Happily Ever After”? If it does, how and why does that happen?
  Is there a Good versus Bad lesson? What is it?
  2. Ask students to break into small groups and each group works on one of the Cinderella variations: The Golden Slipper, retold by Darrell Lum, The Korean Cinderella, by Shirley Climo, Lily and...
3. Ask each group of students to prepare a book talk or a reader's theatre script on their story and share it with the rest of the class. Here is an example of a book talk.

The Rough-Face Girl: In a wigwam by the shores of Lake Ontario lived a rich, powerful Invisible Being. All of the young women wanted to marry him because he was supposedly very powerful and handsome. But to marry the Invisible Being the women had to prove to his sister that they had seen him by describing how he looked like. Everyone failed to see that his bow and arrows formed a rainbow and his sled runners made up the Milky Way.

Until one day the ugly Rough-Face Girl with scars and burns, and charred hair from working by the fire appeared. Could she succeed where her beautiful, cruel sisters had failed? They had costly clothes while she could adorn herself only in broken shells, tree bark and cracked moccasins.

The Rough-Face Girl, a Native American Cinderella story told by several tribes of the Northeast, is one of the most haunting and powerful versions of the Cinderella tale ever told.

4. Students remain in small groups. Pass out posters of Venn Diagram to students. Ask them to compare and contrast the first Cinderella story they heard with the second one they read in small groups. Take notes and fill in the Venn Diagrams with the differences and similarities of the two Cinderella stories. Pay special attention to:

- The setting, the place, the time, the homes, the traditions, and the customs,
- The main Cinder character, clothes, appearance, and personality.
- The Cinder character's job in the story (the role in the family or village),
- Who are the other characters in the story?
  - How is the Cinder character treated by other people, other animals, or outsiders?
  - Is magic involved? Who helps the Cinder character?
  - How does the story end?

Complete and hang the Venn Diagrams (Appendix 2) up in the classroom for everyone to see.

5. Class discussion on cultural elements they notice from the variations of Cinderella stories. Ask questions such as:

- What cultural specific information do you get from the story?
- What do you learn about Chinese/Japanese/Korean/Vietnamese/Native American/African cultures from the stories?
- In what ways is your story like Cinderella by John Patience?
- In what ways is your story different from Cinderella by John Patience?
- Think about "Are various cultures
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more different or more similar as human beings?"

• Anything else about the culture in your story that interests you and you still want to know?

E.g. Cultural Elements Found in Korean Cinderella by Climo:

-- Food important for the culture: rice growing, dried fish, and pickled cabbage.

-- Common magical creatures – animals such as frog, sparrows and ox.

-- Dress: father wears a horsehair hat, a symbol of Korean gentleman. Women wear Hanbok, a traditional women’s dress with 2 pieces. A skirt tied high underarms by long ribbons and a short jacket. No buttons or hooks are used in dress.

-- Straw sandals for poor girls and silk slippers for the rich.

-- Wedding ducks are symbols of fidelity.

-- Nobleman sits in palanquin as vehicle. It is a wooden chair with bars carried by 4 men.

-- White ribbon attached to performers’ hats. In traditional farmer dance, when men toss their heads, ribbons will flow in patterns.

-- Illustration: with patterns and designs inspired by “Tanchong” which symbolizes good luck, protection and cycle of reincarnation. It is often painted on eaves of Korean temples.

6. Extension activities: country and culture study activity.

Ask students to work as small groups to conduct country research, the setting of their stories. They may use the library, the Internet and any books as references. Write a short report and share with the class. The report may include information on:

• A brief description of the country – area, population, capital, crops and major products and industries.

• Traditions, costumes and major holidays celebrated.

• Interesting facts about the culture, people and country (e.g. Japanese in Hawaii and World War II).

• A typical day for a child living in the country or a day in the life of a real princess.

• Famous places, buildings, constructions in the country (e.g. Great Wall, Buckingham Palace, famous castle in England).

• Things people enjoy doing in the country or region (e.g. traditional musical instruments, and sumo).

• A typical meal for the people (e.g. Korean meal or Japanese meal).

• Animals found in the land (e.g. giant panda, dolphins, and sea turtles).

• Living in the country (e.g. the Algonquin Indian village / African village).

• How something cultural specific and interesting (e.g. Moccasins, bamboo reads furniture, or pickled mangoes) is made?

Examples of descriptions of countries:

Korea

Korea is a peninsula that juts out into the Sea of Japan. Since the Korean War of 1953, the peninsula is now two countries, North Korea and South Korea. Many Koreans still live as their ancestors lived
hundreds of years ago. They live in small houses with thatched roofs and farm the land with crude tools. Four out of five Koreans are farmers. They grow rice as their main crop.

China
China is the largest country in eastern Asia. More than one fifth of all the people in the world live in China. China has 56 ethnic groups with Han as the majority. Beijing, the capital of China, is the financial and political center of the nation with a population of 9.3 million people. The Chinese grow many crops including cotton, rice, tea and wheat. They produce many items including cotton cloth, silk and porcelain. One of the nature’s gifts to the Chinese people is the bamboo plant, which grows wild in China. The Chinese eat bamboo sprouts and use bamboo reads to make furniture, to build houses and boats, to weave sandals and hats. Water buffalo are common in China and are used to plow rice paddies. Giant panda live in China. China has one of the two buildings that can be seen from the moon, the Great Wall. In ancient times the Chinese invented printing, gunpowder, paper and compass.

Students may present their research to the class using any visual aids they prefer, e.g. costumes of the culture under study, bring food of their culture, bring music, photos and videos, etc. Teachers may invite parents and students from other classes to come and celebrate children’s work.

7. The class makes a Cinderella World Map. First, look at a Map of the World. Then, draw one simplified World Map. Mark the map with the titles of the Cinderella stories at the locations of the countries of origin. Also, add the names of the country and the main characters. Hang the map up in the classroom when finished.

8. Ask students to think about why there are so many variations of Cinderella in the world; what are the origins of folktales with similar themes. Discuss oral storytelling and ask which of the theories they identify with better:

- Travelers and storytellers may have taken the stories they heard in other lands back to their homes, and then changed them a little to fit their own culture.
- Folktales of similar themes have resulted from similar human life experience, emotions and feelings with variations of cultural differences.

Conclusion:
The above model provides teachers with some guidelines in addressing multicultural issues with children’s literature in the classroom. Many teachers have attended educational preparation programs that value literature as a significant curriculum component for reading. Others completed their preparation to teach before the present body of multicultural literature existed. Since it is not the literature alone but the experiences created in response to the literature that determine the power of the stories, teachers’ participation in a literature discussion group can intensify their reading experiences (Hill, Johnson, Noe, 1998; Short, 1999). Teachers not only need to be familiar with literature that provides
cultural insights in the classroom, but also need to be able to present texts in meaningful, insightful ways. Such engagement goes beyond using a book as a reading assignment, when followed by comprehension questions and answers or construction of predesigned multicultural activities. Framing the social-political contexts of a story by drawing on readers’ prior knowledge, responding through one’s own experiences, and providing information about the author’s background and purpose are but three important strategies to enhance sharing multicultural literature. It also helps when teachers experience personal connections themselves to realize the empowering nature of such literature.

Reference:


Appendix 1: Story-map

- Main Characters
- Setting
- Supporting Characters
- Author/Illustrator
- Problem
- Solution
- Lessons for Life
Example of Story-Map for Yeh-Shen: a Cinderella Story from China

Main Characters:
Yeh-shen
The King

Setting:
Southern China

Supporting Characters:
Stepmother, Stepsister
An old sage
A fish with golden eyes

Author/Illustrator:
Ai-Ling Louie
Ed Young

Solution:
When Yeh-Shen returns home from the festival, the bones are silent. She does not realize that at that very moment, the King is searching for the owner of the slipper. He has vowed that he will not rest until he makes her his wife. Lives happily ever after.

Problem:
Yeh-Shen’s stepmother kills and eats her only friend, a fish with golden eyes. Yeh-Shen learns that the bones of her friend contain a powerful spirit. Yeh-Shen wishes for a beautiful garment and golden slippers to wear to the festival. The bones warn her not to lose the slippers, but in her haste to hide from her stepmother, she loses one of them.

Lesson for Life
Be kind to others.
God rewards and punishes.
Appendix 2: Venn Diagram

Read and compare the cultural variations of Cinderella story with the traditional version using the diagram.
Example of Venn Diagram Comparison

*Korean Cinderella* by Shirley Climo and *Cinderella* by John Patience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Korean Cinderella</th>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Tradit'1 Cinderella</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father married stepmom.</td>
<td>-Dressed in rags;</td>
<td>-Helped by fairy God Mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omoni tries to get rid of her;</td>
<td>-Beautiful, kind and dependent on magic.</td>
<td>-Scrub floor, make bed, dinner, and dress steps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boil water and cook noodles, dried fish and pickled cabbages, weed rice paddies and pick rice.</td>
<td>-Mistreated by steps.</td>
<td>-Go to Ball in horse drawn carriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped by magical frog, sparrows and ox.</td>
<td>-Lose one shoe and married by someone</td>
<td>-Wear ballroom gown and glass slippers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressed in Hobbok &amp; straw sandals.</td>
<td></td>
<td>-12 o'clock leave Ball &amp; Prince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk to village festival</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Married by Prince in Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet nobleman in Palanquin on the way.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>