Multicultural understanding through literature

Children read more literature than textbooks and enjoy literature more than expository text (O'Brien and Stoner 1987). One reason is that imaginative prose and poetry offer affective and aesthetic views of others' lives and the joys and sorrows people know (Norton 1990; Wagner 1981). Because of its vivid setting and dramatic events, literature is also an excellent means of traveling to the heart of social issues like freedom, justice, liberty, and human and civil rights, as well as the underside of society, represented by social problems and decay.

Avid readers believe that literature enriches them. Compelling recent research has suggested that multicultural literature fosters cultural and personal pride within students and promotes cultural awareness, tolerance, mutual respect, and understanding among students from diverse backgrounds (Olson 1996). A wide range of literature that offers ideas and stories can promote interest in and greater sensitivity toward problems that have an impact on people's lives.

Good literature nudges readers to wonder, survey, invent, and alter relationships they perceive between their readings. Literature can fuel the imagination to show us possibilities instead of boundaries, reflecting nature's law that growing things defy boundaries (Brooks 1992). To respond to literature is to envision alternatives. Literature that evokes sensitivity to social issues, like the multicultural literature discussed here, can greatly enhance social studies learning by helping students develop the ability to think for themselves.

Effective social studies teaching through literature requires the guidance of students through different stages of involvement. First, student interest in appropriate literature must be fostered, which requires giving students sufficient choices to allow them to define their own interests. Subsequently, student interest becomes the basis of a spirit of inquiry, as students ask questions that enable them to appreciate the objectives and context of the literature. Third, students should be guided toward mature reflection, in which they come to terms with ambiguity, tension, and incompatible perspectives. Throughout these stages, students should be encouraged to respond to literature in writing, which will encourage clearer thinking and communications skills.

**Interest**

Teachers can use a variety of strategies to help children enjoy literature. These include the careful selection of good stories and poems likely to hold personal meaning for readers; the provision of a wide array of literature to appeal to individual tastes and allow for a range of personal choice; and the presentation of an interesting introduction to and rationale for studying a unit and its major issues, players, and factions that will encourage students to develop an interest in the literature.

Teachers who are aware of the abundance of multicultural literature available can carefully plan library visits so that they are occasions of pleasure, wonder, and excitement that will help students locate literature that is meaningful to them. Students offered a range of literature choices will probably pick works that stir personal thoughts about topics under study. Student motivation and student selection are integrally related (Greene in Koeller 1992). Students who select literature that interests them are motivated to read more. What they select themselves is also what they exchange with others (Hill and Hale 1991; Nielsen 1991a).

One example of the powerful impact of literary interest is provided by Louie (1993). Until she read *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow, she felt that no one in print understood her. Books could not help her relate her slowly emerging Asian American sense of identity to the classmates and teachers with whom she spent her waking hours. She craved a connection with sympathetic and likable characters. What she sought was not information, but rather an experience achieved through literature. She wanted full literacy, a reader's ability to relate self to others (Shannon 1982). *Fifth Chinese Daughter* enabled her to identify with someone else's experience.

Interest is also about hearing the writer's perspective, which even young children do well. Heard (1989) quotes a discussion among second graders who read Langston Hughes's poem *I, Too, Sing America*. Second graders did not grasp Hughes's meaning immediately, but soon saw why one's context is one's truth. Hughes starts with exclusion, something he feels deeply; sent to eat in the kitchen when company comes, he, the darker brother, sings America, grows strong, and knows that tomorrow no one will dare exclude him from the table when company comes because they will see his beauty and be ashamed. This poem, like all poems that Heard (1989) shares with second graders who read Langston Hughes's poem *I, Too, Sing America*, enabled her to identify with someone else's experience.

Heard's suggestions to promote interest include the following: Don't explain. Let students hear poetry and experience moments of discovery. Reading aloud trains one's ears and is critical preparation for writing. Heard advises teachers to read slowly and respect white spaces because these mean silence. Overly dramatic readers feature themselves rather than the books, so Heard's advice is to read naturally, as in speaking to a friend, and to read with mood in mind. Heard's helpful questions, which challenge students to focus their interest, include the following: Does this piece remind you of anything? Anything you don't understand? Something you noticed? General comments? Why is this story or poem considered to be literature?

After their initial interest and engagement, readers go where imagination takes them (Brooks 1992). Their mind moves toward inquiry and deeper understanding. This process helps them realize that literature can hold insights not immediately grasped.

**Inquiry**

Research suggests that teachers increase the spirit of inquiry when they share an abundance of culturally diverse literature with their students (Olson 1996). Teachers in Olson's studies shared multicultural works with diverse classrooms of students and concluded that the comments of the students and teachers in our studies convince us that increased efforts must be made to infuse multicultural literature into our classrooms, whether those classrooms be language minority or language majority, whether those classrooms be ethnically diverse or ethnically homogeneous. (1996, 657)
The sign of maturity, according to Wagner, is the ability to project into distant time and place and back again to acknowledge our own abstract, generalize, and organize a concept's attributes and values (Ruddell 1993). Maturity results from this conceptual growth.

Books like *El Chino* can be read to develop a spirit of inquiry as readers travel in search of what writers care about, and how they interpret life. This spirit of inquiry requires that readers consider different characters' viewpoints; infer their thoughts, feeling, and motives; and anticipate the consequences of their words and interactions (Moss and Oden 1983). It requires that readers study stereotypes and inequities in order to open dialogue and avoid silence, the kind of speechlessness that occurs when accentuated, "substandard" English or another language is somehow considered "unacceptable" to others (Delpit 1988; Greene 1993). For purposes of effective social studies and the development of democratic values, a great benefit of this spirit of inquiry is that it helps students develop sensitivity about societal reality (Norton 1990).

"You be nothing but Jeffrey in here. But ... out there, I don't know," says Mrs. Beale, a kind mother whose black family nurtures Maniac Magee, an orphaned white child (Spinelli 1990, 53). Spinelli's *Maniac Magee* is a story that invites inquiry. In search of shelter, Maniac innocently enters a black neighborhood, but he can't understand the color business, and doesn't figure he's white any more than other East Enders are black. He studies himself hard to find seven different skin shades, none really white (except his eyeballs, which aren't any whiter than East End eyeballs). He believes he isn't pure white, which is good because white to him is a boring color. What he overlooks is dislike accumulating around him—not from everybody, to be sure, but still in evidence. Maniac Magee's story extends readers' knowledge about social attitudes (e.g., tolerance, bigotry, charity, greed) and psychological theories (e.g., growth, development, assimilation, alienation) within historical, geographical, sociological, psychological, and economical contexts.

Contradictions between myth and reality abound, and inquiry seeks to understand them. Consider Rosa Parks, who didn't move in the bus as law required, but asked, "Why do you all push us around?" and the policeman who answered, "I don't know, but the law is the law and you're under arrest" (Parks 1992, 1). In her autobiography, Parks says:

For half of my life there were laws and customs in the South that kept African Americans segregated from Caucasians and allowed white people to treat black people without any respect. I never thought this was fair, and from the time I was a child, I tried to protest against disrespectful treatment. But it was very hard to do anything about segregation and racism when white people had the power of the law behind them ... I had no idea when I refused to give up my seat on that Montgomery bus that my small action would help put an end to the segregation laws in the South. I only knew I was a regular person, just as good as anybody else. There had been a few times in my life when I had been treated by white people like a regular person, so I knew what that felt like. It was time other white people started treating me that way. (1992, 2)

Autobiographies like that of Rosa Parks can further the spirit of inquiry when readers explore human issues like fairness, independence, self-determination, friendship, and the need to destroy villains (Babbitt 1990; Wagner 1981). Inquiring questions in breaking villainous rules is fine when good comes of it, and why it may be good when generous people break rules and bad when greedy people do (Babbitt 1990).

The spirit of inquiry probes why and how heroes like those who created this nation defied unjust authority and got away with it to create a stronger democracy (Babbitt 1990). Through inquiry, students discover what they notice in literature, what they recall, what they don't understand, and what they want to mention (Heard 1989). Through inquiry, students question how they feel and think. Yep writes in his memoir:

At a time when so many children are now proud of their ethnic heritages, I'm ashamed to say that when I was a child, I didn't want to be Chinese. It took me years to realize that I was Chinese whether I wanted to be or not. And it was something I had to learn to accept: to know its strengths and understand its weaknesses. It's something that is a part of me from the deepest levels of my soul to my most common, everyday actions. For one thing, my wife, Joanne, tells me that my family and I speak to one another in a different rhythm than what we use outside the home, our voices rising and falling though we are speaking English. (1991, 43)

Students engaged in Yep's story find an opportunity to connect to the experience of struggling with personal identity. They are granted the chance to reflect on their own struggle as they learn to sympathize with someone else's.

Maturity

The questions students pose in the process of inquiry demand a period of reflection, in order to allow students to come to terms with ambiguity, tension, and perhaps a lack of resolution in literature. Reflection is an opportunity for conceptual growth, an essential social studies goal. Personal experience is augmented by the information provided in literature, which enables the student to discriminate, abstract, generalize, and organize a concept's attributes and values (Ruddell 1993). Maturity results from this conceptual growth. The sign of maturity, according to Wagner, is the ability to project into distant time and place and back again to acknowledge our own

Social studies/literature/writing connections can inspire written student critique, argument, tolerance for ambiguity, suspended judgment, write deliberately to dissect and transform information across the different realms of psychology, philosophy, pedagogy, and genre. Koveller's careful research suggests that teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools enrich their students by offering them a wide array of ideas about who they are to what they are reading. Both prose and poetry are ways of reacting to reading by writing. Some suggestions for encouraging students to write about literature would include the following: Linked Writings. These exercises can be a means of capturing feelings, personal images, and little ideas that come to mind. They are dashed off, uncensored, authentic, without concern for sense or form (Heard 1989). Students describe how they perceive things to be, their feelings and thoughts, the way these connect them to the text, and how literature relates to their store of memories. Students write candidly in their own words about themselves and the text, and the relationship between the two (Greene 1993).

Carrick (in Heard 1989) maintains that the discipline of putting words down helps him think and crystallize ideas. Many writers admit that, to write well, they inevitably write badly first. Teachers should caution students against the writer's despair that precedes discovering what you really want to say. Poetry. Heard (1989) writes poetry for all ages, even five year-olds. She also reads aloud published poems that deal with a short time period or an intense perception, feeling, or experience. She urges students to probe thoughts to see if a poem reminds them of anything or to note what they don't understand. Then, she asks students to write about what worries, excites, interests, or confuses them. She says the important thing is to write regularly, because most writers must survive writing badly first. Heard asks children to read their writing to a partner for advice. Good writers are committed to a process of improving their writing (Berthoff in Koeller 1992).

Olson's research suggests that teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools enrich their students by offering them a wide array of culturally diverse literature, and having them think about what they read and write about what they think (Olson 1996). She demonstrates effective ways in which teachers encourage students to write personal responses to text and probe for universal themes that connect us all. She presents teachers' lessons to promote students' writing about multicultural drama, novels, poetry, short stories, and non-fiction. She also reports indicators of growth: an increased amount of writing; more control of and ease with language; greater use of supporting evidence from texts, including use of quotations; evidence of planning and organization; a stronger sense of personal voice of the writer; and growth in students' reading and thinking ability.

Reading and writing are reciprocal (Cairney 1990; Moss 1991). Literature often inspires readers to write. Writing about reading can further maturity, conceptual knowledge, and the ability to be confidently articulate (White 1993). According to White, it can help to induce intellectualism, which students avoid when they rely on another's words and don't develop their own ideas or heed their own voice in responsible writing.

Writing requires continual inquiry and invention (Covino 1991). Covino suggests that mature writing is always in motion. He defines honest writers as those who pursue maximally open discourse, demonstrate thinking that plays multiple themes on one another, and write deliberately to dissect and transform information across the different realms of psychology, philosophy, pedagogy, and genre. Social studies/literature/writing connections can inspire written student critique, argument, tolerance for ambiguity, suspended judgment, and disclosure of incompatible perspectives when students ask, What good is it? rather than, Is it true? (Covino 1991).
Social studies investigates what it means to be human. Literature assists these investigations. Literature can inspire students to think critically about the human problems it exposes. Its writers use their unique contextual angles to suggest historical and contemporary tensions within their personal stories. The role of literature in social studies programs is not to hurry learners or to advance "minimal competency and skills," but to offer interest and inform perspective (Wagner 1981). It illuminates context, deepens conceptual probing, and shows why information without affect is incomplete. In social studies classes, literature is a work of art enabling the study of character issues and relationships between persons sharing contexts or ideas. Literature must be read whole, not in bits and parts like textbooks (Wagner 1981), because students become disengaged from literature when it is treated like textbooks, with dull accompanying workbooks, tedious analyses of literary elements, inflexible reader groups, and "correct" answers to interpretative questions (Hill 1985; Sloan 1980; Wagner 1981). What is so personally important about social studies learning that students will want to remember it always? (Wittrock 1987). Proper social studies requires more than answering someone else's questions, achieving someone else's purposes, and taking someone else's perspectives (Shuy 1982). Social studies/literature/writing connections can help students recognize their own interest, honor their self-reliance, and understand why readers and writers play a crucial role in democracies.

References


Olson, Carol Booth, ed. Reading, Thinking, and Writing About Multicultural Literature. Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1996.


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educators and policy makers. Review of Current Definitions Even though Ogbu (1992) had suggested that multicultural education has yet to be defined by the scholars, there has been a sufficient number of definitions to justify an action. The literature of modern Britain reflects the multicultural society of these isles, and challenges the notion of a fixed and singular British identity. We look at some of the stand out authors writing in Britain today. This diversity is increasingly becoming essential to an understanding of contemporary English literature, especially in its incorporation of postcolonial themes and experiences. Postcolonial literature is a response to the inherent ideal of an exclusive and singular “British” identity and the widely varying issues that have arisen from colonisation.