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Inviting Empathy into the Classroom

All school systems across the country need to implement multicultural education into the daily classroom experience. There are students in schools who feel as if they are invisible because there is no diversity included in the curriculum. Students are missing out on the opportunity to learn about an experience that is different from their own. Marginalized students are being forgotten, and students who fall in the majority lack skills of understanding and empathy. Case-studies at the secondary level demonstrate the success of multicultural literature in fostering empathy in the classroom. Multicultural education promotes empathy and understanding and has the power to transform thinking, as it gives students the opportunity to adopt a new perspective. In order to create a positive learning environment for all students, it is time all educators start implementing multiculturalism into the daily curriculum.

Over the course of this paper I will provide a detailed analysis on the effects that multicultural literature has in a classroom environment. I will utilize work from educators and researchers who explore the relationship between multicultural curriculum and the development of empathy. I am going to pair research on multicultural education with case-study results to show how multicultural literature fosters empathy in the classroom. Through the process of unpacking and analyzing these scholarly articles, I will introduce the impact of multicultural education and how it can create a positive, supportive learning environment. Once I have utilized

the scholarly articles to explore the importance of multiculturalism, I will analyze how actual case-studies advance this research by putting it into practice. The analysis I will provide of these case-studies will demonstrate how students cultivate empathy and understanding as a result of the implementation of multicultural literature in the curriculum.

Introduction to Multicultural Education

In order to create a supportive learning environment for all students, teachers must invite empathy into the classroom. While educators have found ways in which to formulate lesson plans that foster understanding and empathy, multiculturalism is not extremely prevalent in classrooms today. Barbara Hardy Beierl explores how literature gives readers a chance to develop an empathic understanding of others in her article, “The Sympathetic Imagination and the Human-Animal Bond: Fostering Empathy through Reading Imaginative Literature.” Beierl explains how through the process of reading a novel, students have the opportunity to step into diverse worlds. This article explores how stories give the reader the opportunity to “interpret ethical principles by giving them emotional texture and vicarious experience” (Beierl 216). In this line, Beierl explains that readers have the opportunity to have a vicarious experience as they witness a character in a unique environment and learn from that character’s thoughts and emotions. As they experience the character’s thoughts and emotions, readers adopt an attitude of empathy, as they began to wonder how they, themselves, would react in such if they were in the same situation as the characters. Christina Tchida takes this idea one step further, as she explains the ways in which literature transcends basic human experience. In the article “Building on Windows and Mirrors: Encouraging the Disruption of Single Stories Through Children’s Literature,” Tchida (2014) describes how literature can act as a window or a mirror for students.

She explains how books can serve as a mirror, as the plotline of a story encompasses a part of their identity or experience that helps them to see themselves in the text. When a reader sees themselves in a text they feel a sense of validation because they can see a shared experience and, in turn, will not feel so strange or different. Additionally, when a book acts as a window, students can transcend their understanding of life to learn about experiences different from their own. For example, if a male caucasian student reads a book about the life of a African-American boy, then he will gain a better understanding of what African-American students experience on a day to day basis. If the literature acts as a window, then students are able to step into the experience of another culture and gain a sense of understanding and empathy. Regardless of whether the book acts as a window or a mirror, the use of literature that encompasses diverse cultural backgrounds allows all students to find success in the classroom.

Ideas into Practice

Through the implementation of multiculturalism into everyday curriculum, educators can help students cultivate understanding and empathy. Jake Startman explores the idea of using literature to foster empathy in the classroom during the Freshmen Summer Reading Program at John Brown University. In the article “Toward a Pedagogy of Hospitality: Empathy, Literature, and Community Engagement,” Jake Startman helps his students understand character responses to difficult situations in Alan Paton’s novel, Cry, the Beloved Country. Startman explains the main purpose of this lesson, as he details, “One way that I hope to invite empathy in the classroom is by listening to others' stories—there is no better place, in my mind, to do this than a literature course” (Startman 29). Throughout the semester, Startman explains how he continuously asks the students to “listen to the characters to make room for a different

perspective” (29) in order to stimulate empathic understanding. Startman explains how he relies on creative writing assignments to gauge student understanding of the novel. One student in particular that stands out as demonstrating an emotional reaction to the story, as this student writes, “When I started going back through the book and noticing things that I hadn't before and allowing myself to feel what the characters were feeling is when I was really affected by it” (30). This student response demonstrates the development of empathy for the characters in the book. The student admits that upon first reading, they did not connect to the character or plot. With further reading and through thoughtful discussion, the student felt notably affected by the characters' experiences. During the course of the semester, Startman acknowledges the growth in student responses, as he recognizes a tone of understanding in the way in which the students discuss the novel and the main characters. He concludes his analysis of the semester by explaining that just reading alone will not foster empathy, as it must be paired with meaningful class discussions, thought-provoking writing assignments, and background knowledge of the cultural context behind the book. Overall, Startman reinforces the idea that teachers should utilize literature in order to develop empathic responses in their students and formulate understanding in the classroom. This analysis of the impacts of multiculturalism serves as an introductory explanation of how to utilize literature to foster empathy in the classroom.

Case-Study #1

In order to demonstrate how educators put theories on the impact of multicultural education into practice, it is essential to examine the results of actual case-studies. Continuing this exploration of the use of literature and benefits of multicultural education, Christine R. Junker and Stephen J. Jacquemin discuss the results of a case-study completed in a high school

English class. Junker and Jacquemin illustrate the significance of using literature to stimulate empathy in the classroom in the article “How Does Literature Affect Empathy in Students?” This case-study consists of two college sophomore-level English courses, completed in order to explore the relationship between reading, writing and empathy. This study looks to answer the following questions: Is there a relationship between empathy and text? Does the type of writing assignment that students complete in response to a text coincide with their level of empathy? Is empathy related to writing ability? Does empathy increase over time in a classroom setting? In order to answer these questions, the researchers observe two different classrooms as each engage in a lesson plan that involves reading, discussing a text and answering a creative writing prompt. The offered texts include: Bonnie Jo Campbell’s American Salvage; Toni Morrison’s Beloved; Ben Fountain’s Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk; Anthony Marra’s A Constellation of Vital Phenomena; Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time; Jeanette Walls’ The Glass Castle; Rebecca Skloot’s The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks; Sherman Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian; Octavia Butler’s Kindred; Elizabeth Strout’s Olive Kitteridge; Toni Morrison’s Paradise; and Barbara Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible. The two classes use different texts but both classes have identical course structures. For the analytical writing, every prompt is “designed to build students’ skills at discerning and analyzing multiple perspectives” (Junker, Jacquemin 81), specifically, exploring the “cultural frameworks that affected characters’ behaviors” (81). In addition to analytical writing assignments, students are also asked to complete a creative writing prompt where the students have to pick a scene from one of the novels and rewrite it from a different narrative perspective. The students are allowed to choose from any of the six texts and select the scene they want rewrite. This exercise

is designed to give the students a deeper understanding of the importance of perspective and recognize how it affects the story.

To assess these assignments, Junker and Jacquemin evaluate student worked based upon a four point scale:

Openness, student's ability to read about diverse cultural experiences and people without leaping to premature judgments; cultural frameworks, student's ability to identify and understand the complexity and implications of a character's cultural background and frameworks; multiple perspectives, the student's imaginative ability to view a situation from a multiplicity of viewpoints; and effective, the student's identification of emotional nuance and expression of shared emotional experiences or traits. (81)

After full evaluation, Junker and Jacquemin report that they have found a connection between reading, writing and empathy. In this analysis, Junker and Jacquemin explain that in order to have a substantial effect, educators must pair reading and writing together to foster empathy in the classroom. In order to utilize literature to stimulate empathy, students must engage in active reading and complete both analytical and creative writing prompts that help them to understand diverse experiences. Overall, the results of this case-study reveal the significance of multicultural literature, emphasizing the importance of engaging students in mindful discussion in order to aid in the development of understanding and empathy.

Case-Study #2

In the advancement of the examination of how educators put theory into practice, another case-study demonstrates how multicultural literature supports student acquisition of empathy. Belinda Louie's case-study further reveals the effectiveness of multicultural literature in the

classroom in the article, “Development of Empathetic Responses with Multicultural Literature.” In this case-study, Louie spends six weeks in a high school English class. This case-study takes place at Greenville High School, which has a population of 92% White, 0.8% African American, 2.6% Asian American, 2.4% Hispanic and 2% Native American students. Louie explains that this school has never had an emphasis on multiculturalism in the school’s district curriculum and *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the only multicultural literature title ever used in the classroom. This lack of diversity in the curriculum reveals the very significance of engaging in multicultural curriculum, as the students need to have a classroom experience that teaches them the importance of empathy and understanding. Louie uses this experience to study the student’s empathetic responses to *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom* (Feng, 1995). Prior to reading this novella about a struggling artist during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the students explore the cultural, political and historical behind for the book. Students then participate in eleven sessions, meeting twice a week, focusing on communist China through the exploration of world issues in order to gain insight on the setting of the novel. Louie explains how in the first three weeks, the teacher helps the students to understand the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the context surrounding it “through simulation activities, interactive lectures, film and analysis of Chinese communist propaganda posters from the internet” (Louie 570). In the second half of the course, the students work with a partner to make a concept map and “write short essays to demonstrate their understanding of the historical, cultural, and social context of communist China” (570). The students use their newly acquired contextual understanding to interpret the text and, in turn, cultivate emotional empathy as they step into the lives of the characters. Students cultivate emotional empathy by reading about the experience of the main character and understanding the

character's emotional journey. Once the students understand the cultural context, they are able to gain a deeper understanding of how the environment affects the main character. During the actual reading of the text, students engage in group discussions, complete journal responses, and create a timeline of the main character's emotional journey throughout the novella. This process helps the students to develop an empathetic view of the protagonist, giving them the perspective necessary to step into the main character's world and understand his life and emotional turmoil.

In order to understand the process the students go through, it is important to understand the basis of the novel. This story is told by Hua Xiayu, a Chinese artist during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Hua Xiayu explains his story to a stranger he meets on a train, going into detail about how he was victimized during the Cultural Revolution of 1966. Hua Xiayu describes how he was top of his class at the Beijing Academy of Fine Arts but was forced to work at a remote porcelain factory. Even though he does not like his job, he finds some joy in the process and in his interactions with the other workers. Soon, the other workers accuse him of being counter-revolutionary and he gets brutally beaten by the Red Army before he is forced into hard labor at a quarry where the only joy he finds is in his observations of the local artistry. Overall, the story serves as a window into the Chinese Revolution and how it affected the Chinese people.

In order to measure the students' learned empathy, Louie analyzes student responses and categorizes the different types of empathy they display. By analyzing the way in which students discuss the plot, Louie demonstrates how this text fosters empathy within the classroom. Beginning with Student Response 1, where the student answers: "aborting the child might be easier for the wife than seeing the child being abused by others all through life" (571), Louie identifies the presence of Cognitive Empathy. In this response, Louie defines Cognitive Empathy

as the ability “to articulate others perspectives by understanding others circumstances,” (571), as seen in the students articulation of the difficulty of the characters’ situation discussing abortion. Moving to Student Response two, where the student answers: “I understand why the artist did not protest when he was sent down to a little country porcelain factory. At that time, all the jobs were assigned by the communist government and people had no say about where they wanted to work” (571), Louie identifies the presence of Historical Empathy. Louie defines Historical Empathy as the ability “to reconstruct the attitudes, feelings, and actions of an individual who lived during a historical period,” (571), as seen in the student’s ability to describe the cultural context of communist China. In Student Response 3, where the student answers: “I cannot say I understand what he is going through. I don’t know how I might act if I were the artist. I might be silent and grit my teeth in anger” (571), Louie identifies the presence of Parallel Emotional Empathy. Louie defines Parallel Emotional Empathy as the ability to express emotional responses similar to those the other person is experiencing,” (571), as seen in the student’s ability to put his or herself in the same situation and speculate how he or she would react. Next, in Student Response 4, where the student answers: “It sucks to have your dog run over by the truck of your enemy” (571), Louie identifies the presence of Reactive Emotional Empathy. Louie identifies Reactive Emotional Empathy as the ability “to react to the emotional response of others,” (571), as seen in the student’s articulation of how he or she felt when the character’s dog is run over. Lastly, in Student Response 5, where the student answers: “They live for what they believe in. Although we cannot understand how the Chinese people could follow a leader so devotedly, or the Chinese people who were used to the concept of an emperor ruling over the whole country, Mao was just another great emperor to follow” (571), Louie identifies the

presence of Cross-Cultural Empathy. Louie defines Cross-Cultural Empathy as the ability “to step away from one’s self-centered approach of interpretation and work with others’ beliefs and values to explain what others think and do,” (571), represented in the student’s articulation of his or her opinion of the actions of a character in the novel. Through this process of observing and recording student responses, Louie recognizes the presence of empathy as a result of the students’ understanding of cultural context and close reading of a multicultural text.

Upon completion of the case-study, Louie analyzes student responses and assignments to find that all together, the exploration of cultural context, discussion, writing and multicultural literature stimulate empathy in the classroom. Louie explains that she would not have been as successful in recognizing learned empathy in the students if the lesson plan did not include cultural context, discussion, writing and multicultural literature. In the six week unit, the students first acquire knowledge about a different culture and then have the opportunity to step into the life of someone in that culture, giving the students a new perspective. After this journey, Louie then conducts a series of post-unit interviews and comes to the conclusion that “Empathy development is a process of approximation during which students shorten the distances between the characters and themselves” (575). This multicultural exploration through the use of the text, *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom* by Feng Jicai, has significant effects on the high school students at Greenville High School, an environment which lacks diversity, as the students acquire life long skills of exploring and understanding. Not only do the students develop the ability to analyze the characters’ lives, but they also create personal connections to the characters that elicit an emotional response and stimulate understanding. Overall, this pairing of

multicultural literature with extensive cultural exploration strongly demonstrates the importance of implementing multiculturalism into every classroom.

The Importance of Implementing Multicultural Education

In working to understand the significance of multicultural literature it is essential to explore the implications and benefits of implementing multiculturalism in schools. In order to empower and support each student, every school needs to implement a multicultural curriculum. Gorski and Swalwell (2015) reveal the importance of multiculturalism in the classroom in the article “Equity Literacy For All.” Gorski and Swalwell write about a high school student that expresses that she feels invisible in her own school. She explains that her teacher only allows students to explore their cultural identity once or twice a year with a food or music festival. Other than that, the teacher fails to implement any forms of diversity in the classroom or lesson plan. In response to this lack of support students feel within the classroom, Gorski and Swalwell identify that “at the heart of a curriculum that is meaningfully multicultural lie principles of equity and social justice” (Gorski and Swalwell 36). In order to implement curriculum that not only supports all students but teaches understanding and empathy, Gorski and Swalwell turn to a framework entitled “Equity Literacy” (36). In this model, Gorski and Swalwell emphasize the need to cultivate four abilities, these abilities include: Recognizing all forms of bias and inequity; Responding to bias, discrimination and inequity in a thoughtful manner; Redressing bias, discrimination and inequality; Cultivating and sustain bias-free and discrimination-free communities (37). Gorski and Swalwell explain that in order to implement this framework and help students to develop these abilities, educators must work to cultivate these abilities as well. In order to effectively implement this framework into curriculum, educators must take part in

professional development opportunities that center on multiculturalism, cultural competence and diversity awareness. Educators can implement this framework into the classroom but not only just identifying students that feel alienated and forgotten, but taking it one step further and looking to change the practices that cause that student to feel that way. Gorski and Swalwell insist on the implementation of this framework in order to create a classroom that supports all types of students. In order to create a positive learning environment, it is essential that all educators adopt this classroom model and work to support the needs of all students. There are children who feel invisible in their schools as there is little to no conversation about their identities and unique backgrounds. Not only are teachers failing to help their students to develop empathy and understanding for people who are different than them, they are failing to identify and empower each and every student.

Multicultural Education as Culturally Relevant Teaching

In order to effectively support and empower every student, teachers should work to understand each student as an individual. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) continues this discussion on the implications of implementing multiculturalism in the classroom.

Ladson-Billings highlights the importance of integrating multiculturalism into the classroom in her article, “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.” Throughout her life, Ladson-Billings has spent a great deal of her career studying the academic performance of African American students, specifically looking towards the surrounding school environment. In all her research, she has found that the most successful teachers link together schooling and culture. She explains her findings, stating, “one of the reasons Indian children experience difficulty in schools is that educators traditionally have attempted to insert culture

into education, instead of inserting education into the culture” (Ladson-Billings 159). Instead of simply researching different cultures, Landson-Billings insists teachers need to adopt a culturally-relevant teaching style where they utilize the students’ culture as a vehicle for learning. In this type of classroom, the teacher helps the students to understand their cultural background and use their unique skills to demonstrate their knowledge. For example, Landson-Billings describes a classroom where the teacher allows the students to use their home language in order to articulate their ideas, instead of forcing them to use standard English. Once they are able to get their ideas out, the teacher then has them translate their work into standard English. By allowing them to use a language they are comfortable with, they are able to really demonstrate their intelligence. Through the practice of culturally-relevant teaching, educators build off the students’ unique strengths and skills to help them find success, further highlighting the benefits of implementing multiculturalism into the curriculum.

Multicultural Education as Social Justice

In addition to supporting student success and instilling confidence in the classroom, multicultural education also promotes social justice. Furthering this discussion on the benefits of implementing multiculturalism, Nieto and Bode discuss multicultural education as social justice, in the textbook, *Affirming Diversity*. Nieto and Bode explain how multicultural education not only creates empathy in classrooms but begins to tackle societal issues. In this textbook, Nieto and Bode discuss how multicultural education is essential in school reform and stretches far beyond the exploration of ethnic holidays or food festivals. Nieto and Bode affirm that multicultural curriculum can lead to increased empathy and understanding, creating real change both in the classroom and out, as explained:

[Multicultural education] permits educators to explore alternatives to a system that promotes failure for too many students. Such an exploration can lead to the creation of a richer and more productive school climate and a deeper awareness of the role of culture, language and power in learning. (Nieto, Bode 41-42)

Looking deeper into the framework of multicultural education, Nieto and Bode emphasize that lesson plans that extensively explore culture alongside curriculum will create more widespread educational success. Nieto and Bode affirm, “Although White students may be uncomfortable with discussions about race, broaching this discussion can actually be a positive pedagogical approach to help students think about their position in society and their responsibilities to combat racism and other biases” (45). By creating the opportunity for students to engage in uncomfortable conversation about racism or discrimination, the teacher promotes self-assertion, understanding, communication and empathy. It is essential that schools give students the opportunity to engage in these conversations, emphasizing the importance of multicultural education. When implemented correctly, multicultural education enriches the school environment and the lives of all students by giving them support and confidence to advocate for themselves.

Multicultural Education in Action

Moving to understand how the previous research fits into the curriculum, educators unpack the implementation of multicultural teaching through a lesson on a popular young adult novel. An effective lesson plan that implements multiculturalism centers around the teaching of Sandra Cisneros’ novel, The House on Mango Street. In her novel, Cisneros provides a detailed story of the struggles of an adolescent Chicano who battles with her identity in an urban Chicago

neighborhood. The novel is written from the point of view of a struggling teenager living in Chicago and explores her identity, discussing issues of racial discrimination, sexual abuse and the difficulty of adolescence. In the article "Teaching The House on Mango Street: Engaging Race, Class, and Gender in a White Classroom," Kathleen Ryan explores how to effectively utilize the novel in a classroom setting. Ryan reveals that the reading, writing and discussion of the novel as a whole in the classroom creates opportunities for the exploration of class and cultural privilege. In analyzing the significance of the novel, Ryan explains "strategies of engaged pedagogy to discuss ways in which white, privileged teachers can encourage white, privileged students to recognize themselves as raced, classed and gendered so that they can begin to think more fully about the whys of their cultural dominance" (Ryan 1). These strategies include prompting students to introspectively reflect on their own lives and backgrounds. Ryan explains this strategy, as she writes, "By carefully reading *Mango Street* students become self-reflexive of their own entrance into a textual neighborhood that asks them to become more familiar with its characters" (259). Once the students become familiar with the characters, they then can compare how their experience differs and begin to understand the importance of perspective. Ryan continues to explain that she finds that "this story encourages students to think about the larger structures (political and cultural) that either confine or shape identities" (259). Once the students understand the daily life of the characters in the book, Ryan then has her students engage in meaningful discussion where she prompts them to articulate how the characters are affected by political and cultural events. These strategies take understanding one step farther as this discussion helps the students to recognize how the political and cultural environment affects the experiences of the characters in the novel. By giving the students the

opportunity to step into the protagonist's world and engaging in meaningful discussion, students will be able to identify their own cultural privilege, further revealing the importance of multicultural literature.

In addition to creating discussion about cultural privilege, Cisneros' novel also helps students to gain knowledge about political and cultural structures. In chapter twenty-six of Luis Aldama's book Latino/a Literature in the Classroom: Twenty-First-Century Approaches to Teaching, educator Brant Torres discusses his approach to teaching Cisneros' The House on Mango Street. In his analysis on the importance of teaching this text to his class, Torres explains the various activities and strategies he uses to unpack the main messages of the stories. He explains that this novel not only helps students to listen and empathize with a Chicana voice, but also helps them to find a voice of their own. Torres reiterates the importance of the novel, as he states, "I find that this story encourages students to think about the larger structures (political and cultural) that either confine or shape identities" (Torres 262). In unpacking the importance of the text, Torres goes into detail about what a typical unit on this novel would look like. When he first introduces the novel, he allows the class to reflect with ten minutes of free writing. In this time, he encourages students to revisit vivid childhood memories, helping them to identify their narrative voice. He then has the students split into small groups to allow them to feel comfortable talking about their personal experiences before having them all come together as a class to talk about how their personal writing relates to Cisneros' novel. These beginning steps frame the whole unit as they help students to recognize the power of their voice and make space for authentic reaction and connection. Students can empathize with the protagonist, even if they have a different cultural background, as they recall defining moments of their childhood. This

novel artfully interlaces issues of gender, race, class, cultural and adolescence into one powerful story, acting as a wonderful example of how to use literature to bring multiculturalism into the classroom. This exploration of how a popular young adult novel fits into the curriculum reveals the effectiveness of implementing multicultural education into the curriculum.

Conclusion

Multicultural education has numerous benefits as it supports all students, gives them the confidence to succeed, and helps them to cultivate understanding. Over the course of this paper, I have examined how the use of multicultural literature fosters empathy within the classroom. I began by introducing multicultural education, utilizing the work of educators and researchers to reveal the importance of multicultural curriculum. Once I introduced multicultural education, I then brought in case-studies that demonstrate the importance of implementing multicultural literature in the curriculum. Through the exploration of scholarly articles and a handful of case-studies, I have provided evidence of the benefits of multicultural literature. As shown in the research and the results of the case-studies, multicultural literature is an effective way to give students the opportunity to experience different cultures and expand their knowledge, in turn creating a sense of learned empathy. By utilizing diverse literature in the classroom, students can either adopt a new perspective and grow as individuals, or find themselves in the text and feel empowered in their identity. Multicultural education is not just something that could help students but critical pedagogy.

It is essential that classrooms implement multiculturalism into daily curriculum. Teachers must use their platform as educators to help students feel empowered in their identity and understand the world around them. Further implications of this research would be to explore

how fostering empathy in the classroom can stimulate social change. There are serious issues within today's society and multicultural education can help to create a more understanding, empathetic society. The current political and social climate further reveals the importance of implementing multicultural education into all schools. We live in a society that lacks empathy and understanding. Every news cycle shows the prevalence of hatred in society, whether it be mass shootings, acts of racism or instances of senseless violence. Through the process of implementing multicultural education into daily curriculum, we will help the youth of America cultivate empathy. Children in schools today are the future of our society. By helping students to gain a deeper understanding of culture and the importance of valuing and recognizing differences, we lay the groundwork to create a better society with less conflict. The benefits of multicultural education stretch far beyond the four walls of the classroom and it is imperative that we implement it into all schools.

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