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How to Create a Multicultural Environment: A Practical Guide for You and I

Introduction

Many librarians have (or want) a very diverse collection of materials and resources that not only have books that represent all of the cultures in their school, but many more cultures beyond. Librarians may get discouraged because there are so many positive and negative examples of multicultural texts out there. It is hard to choose which is positive and which is negative. Also, librarians want to help teachers in their schools create safe environments that are multicultural and invite safe discussions. We do not want to just sit there with our great collection of multicultural resources by ourselves. We want our collection and our knowledge to spread around the school, creating a multicultural environment! As a librarian, I asked "How do I do this and where do I start?" You do this by getting ready, setting up your multicultural collection (not just books), and collaborating with educators. Take this journey with me as I take the steps to create a multicultural collection in my library and collaborate with teachers to create multicultural, inviting classrooms! **READY! SET! GO!**

Get READY...

First, I will select my criteria for choosing a variety of multicultural text. This is an important task because when students are only exposed to literature that includes their own race, they view their race and traditions as the norm and exclude other cultures. This includes a majority minority school. For example, if I have a school of majority African-Americans and only share African-American stories with them, they will not encounter any other culture through literature. Therefore, my most important criteria with my diverse collection will be to make sure every person in the school is represented, but not limiting my texts to only those peoples and cultures.

As a librarian, I know it is unrealistic to think that I will have the time to read every book I want/need to order. However, we cannot order blindly either.

To choose texts, I will either read the text or read reviews of the work. It would be great to do both if time allows. I will choose different lengths and genres of works, such as traditional texts, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. I will do this because students all respond to different genres of print differently. Some students rather the true accounts of nonfiction, some prefer the form and flow of poetry, and some desire the elements of fiction. I want them to expand their knowledge of people and cultures and I have no preference to what form that comes in. Also, the different genres show different viewpoints and different aspects of cultures. My inclusion of different texts from the same peoples and cultures is because no one text can represent a diverse people and culture.

In choosing texts, I cannot solely rely on my opinion of the work because I have the duty of impacting children with this piece of work. I need to be sure that the text is as accurate as possible if I portray it as a positive picture of a people or culture. Therefore, I will have to read critical analysis and talk to colleagues about my text choices. I have had many instances where I felt one way about a book until I read a review or talked to someone in that culture and then felt differently about the text by the end of the entire experience. As librarians, we may not be able to help what is already in our libraries when we step in them, but we can affect what comes in them while we are there.

SET Up Your Multicultural Collection

Great Authors

Some authors shine bright and are known as the best at what they do. These authors are some of the best of the best (according to my opinion and critics) and hopefully your collection will include more than one book from each of them. These authors include Joseph Bruchac, Julius Lester, Mildred D. Taylor, Laurence Yep, Sandra Cisneros, Lois Lowry, Suzanne Staples, Ashley Bryan, Gary Soto, Paul Goble, and

more. All of these authors have exemplary works in various cultures. They all have excellent critiques of their work and produce good, quality work. Their works are thought provoking and delves into different aspects of cultures. Their works also vary in genre, length, and style. Having works by these authors will be a good starting point in creating your multicultural collection.

Book Lists

Anthologies that discuss multiculturalism are good resources for many reasons. These books give criteria of how to choose multicultural literature and provide listings of texts that are recommended and listings of texts that are not. They also provide explanations of discrimination against cultures and describe traits of the culture. This information is usually written in the emic view with an understanding of the culture that is immeasurable. Examples of different types of these texts are Violet Harris's *Using Multiethnic Literature in the K-8 Classroom* (Harris 1997), Hiley Ward's *My Friends Beliefs: A Young Reader's Guide to World Religions* (Ward 1998), and Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale's *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children* (Slapin and Seale 1998). These are great starter resources for your multicultural collection.

The Forgotten Groups

I would have Esther Sanderson's picture book *Two Pair of Shoes* (Sanderson 1990) in my collection. You may be asking why a high school librarian would have a picture book in his/her collection. Even though it is a picture book, it is a book that can start a good discussion no matter what level of school library you have. It is a simple story that is extremely relevant to the discussion of the separation and merging of macro- and micro-cultures. Maggie, a Native American girl, gets a pair of patent leather shoes, as well as a pair of moccasins as gifts. She loves both pairs of her shoes and does not shun away from either pair (or either culture). This book can open the discussion of being part of two different cultures and how that is dealt with. Think of the discussion the librarian can start by using this simple picture book! This is the type of genuine discussion

students are not getting in our test driven schools. Sometimes it is up to us, as librarians, to start the conversation!

If you would like to, you could then move to a discussion of the Native American people and culture. Native Americans are still so blatantly stereotyped and discriminated against in America that people often do not realize they are being prejudice against them (Have you ever "played Indian" or dressed like an "Indian" for Halloween? Think about it!). Students can view how rich a culture they have and how their lives are affected by such treatment. Once we discuss Native Americans, students will become more aware and use the knowledge that we already discussed in practical ways. Joseph Bruchac would be a star author during this discussion. Bruchac's *Eagle Song* (Bruchac 1997) deals with discrimination and racism in Brooklyn and the main character Daniel rising above it all by learning more about his culture and himself. I think students will respond greatly to this book and it will not take long to finish. Because of its length, it could be a great classroom read-aloud.

Another group of people that are not discussed very often is the homeless in America. The homeless encompass every race and many of our students, whether we are aware of it or not. Judith Berck's nonfiction *No Place To Be: Voices of Homeless Children* (Berck 1992) and Eve Bunting's short story picture book *Fly Away Home* (Bunting 1993) are both texts from homeless children's point of view and I think my students would relate to some of the children. Some other cultures that are underrepresented in our school library collections are adopted children, LGBTQ children, special needs children and interracial children. Research should be done to find great titles that represent these cultures.

GO Forth and Collaborate

Storytelling

Now that I have my criteria for how to select my books and I have ordered materials for my library, it is time to start thinking outside of books (a collection is more than books). What are some things as

a librarian can I do to start discussion in my library and in the classrooms? How can I start collaborating? One thing I can do is invite storytellers to come to my library to share stories from different cultures. If this is not possible because of lack of resources, funding or time, I can purchase videotapes of storytellers sharing stories from different cultures. These can be purchased for the library's collection so I can use it in the library and the resource can be within reach for teachers to include in their everyday lessons. Many teachers may think that storytelling does not fit into the curriculum, but as Margaret MacDonald, renowned storyteller and author of *The Story-teller's Start-up Book: Finding, Learning Performing and Using Folktales*, states that "storytelling teaches listening. It models fine use of oral language. It models plot, sequencing, characterization, the many literary devices you wish to convey. There is no better educational tool to teach language-arts skills" (MacDonald 1993, 43). Also, MacDonald says, "Sharing story broadens our awareness of other cultures and gives us a deeper understanding of our own" (MacDonald 1993, 101). Storytelling can begin discussion. Students can tell stories from their culture, their family history, or from their lives. They can do this in the library or as an extension activity in the classroom. The teacher can also have students choose a culture and tell a story from that culture (using books and resources from your library, of course). I agree with MacDonald that "it is pretty hard to hate someone whose story you know" (MacDonald 1993, 104).

"Cinderella Around the World" Collaborative Lesson

Another collaborative lesson is Cinderella Around the World. It includes Cinderella tales from a variety of different peoples and cultures. This fairytale is represented differently by so many cultures; it really is a fascinating journey around the world. After discussing what the Cinderella tale tells us about the values of that culture, the librarian can collaborate with a teacher to go on a journey through that culture. The students can find different traditional literature, poetry, nonfiction, fiction, videos, and any other resources from and about that culture. The students can present

what they find and tell if it is a positive or negative example of that culture. A listing of the various Cinderella tales can be found in many book ordering catalogs, such as Shen's Books' *Sharing a World of Stories* (Shen Books 2003). Besides individual books, I will use Katharine F. Goodwin's *In Search of Cinderella: A Curriculum for the 21st Century* because it is an anthology of 12 different Cinderella story summaries with lessons (Goodwin 2000). This is a great way to discuss other cultures in an everyday lesson that uses the library's resources extensively.

What are the Walls Telling Your Students?

Look around your library! Walk through classrooms! Look at how and if different cultures are represented on the walls and in all the decorations. A multicultural environment is the first message sent to children that they are accepted in the school. Before anyone in the library or at your school actually speaks to a student, they see the walls, the decorations, and the surroundings. However, just as in texts, decorations need to be chosen carefully. Make sure different cultures are represented in a respectful way. For example, is a Native American referred to as red, Indian, or grossly surrounded with symbols? Does the "I" in the alphabet stand for "Indian"? Is the skin color, hair texture, or facial features of the African-American children over exaggerated? Are the Spanish American children seen working in stereotypical jobs? These things need to be analyzed because having a multicultural environment sets a tone without words.

Conclusion

The importance of creating a multicultural collection in your school library is crucial. You can be the person at your school who provides the resources for students and teachers to open the discussions that lead to learning. Our multicultural collection could serve two purposes: for our students to gain the knowledge and have the experience necessary to form intelligent opinions about society and for educators to do the same and actively use and spread that knowledge in their classrooms and lives. Hopefully we can motivate and influence our teachers to go beyond the superficial when discussing other cul-

tures (food, clothing) and use multicultural materials during ordinary lessons. Reading and using multicultural books during every day lessons is an effective way to incorporate “other” cultures and make them part of the “norm.” It demystifies cultures as “the other” and makes them a valued and relatable part of everyday life. We can also help teachers learn and use the tools of choosing multicultural materials that represent cultures accurately and with respect. I am expecting our multicultural collection and knowledge to have a long lasting impact that will continue to touch people’s lives long after us all.

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