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TEACHING DIVERSITY: ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' OPINIONS AND EXPERIENCES ON THE USE OF MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S BOOKS

FARKLILIKLARIN ÖĞRETİMİ: İLKOKUL ÖĞRETMENLERİNİN ÇOKKÜLTÜRLÜ ÇOCUK KİTAPLARI KULLANIMI HAKKINDA DÜŞÜNCELERİ VE DENEYİMLERİ

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ABSTRACT

Diversity in the US is rapidly growing and as such, teachers are being faced with increasingly diverse classrooms. Culturally relevant teaching focuses on the representation of different cultures in schools and provides information about the cultures (Jeffy&, Cooper, 2011). Within this framework, using multicultural literature and the books related to diverse issues become more important than ever. The purpose of the study was to determine teachers' opinions and experiences on the use of multicultural children's literature for supporting multiculturalism. For this study, I interviewed four elementary teachers, referred to by the pseudonym within the study, who are currently working in elementary classrooms in public schools in the United States. For this study, the data were collected from the interviews with semi-structured and open-ended questions. According to the findings, teaching religious, linguistic and cultural differences are the main objects that the teachers plan on teaching multiculturalism. Another finding says that positive representation of others' cultures is a necessary part of their diverse classrooms.

Keywords: Multicultural books, multicultural education, elementary school teachers, teachers' perceptions, children's literature, diversity in the classroom.

ÖZ

ABD'de çeşitlilik hızla artmakta ve bu nedenle öğretmenler giderek öğrenci çeşitliliğinin daha fazla olduğu sınıflarla karşı karşıya kalmaktadır. Kültürel değerlere duyarlı öğretim, farklı kültürlerin okullarda temsil edilmesine odaklanır ve kültürler hakkında bilgi sağlamaktadır(Jeffy ve Cooper, 2011). Bu çerçevede, çokkültürlü edebiyatın ve farklılıklarla ilgili konularla yazılmış kitapların sınıflarda kullanılması her zamankinden daha önemli hale geliyor. Bu çalışmanın amacı, öğretmenlerin çokkültürlülüğü desteklemek için çokkültürlü çocuk edebiyatını kullanma fikirlerini ve deneyimlerini belirlemektir. Bu çalışma için şu anda ABD'deki devlet okullarında ilköğretim sınıflarında çalışan dört ilkökul öğretmeni ile görüşme yapılmıştır. Bu çalışma için veriler, yarı yapılandırılmış ve açık uçlu sorularla yapılan görüşmelerden toplanmıştır. Bulgulara göre, dini, dilsel ve kültürel farklılıkları öğretmek öğretmenlerin çokkültürlülükle alakalı kavramları öğretirken üzerinde durdukları ana konular olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Diğer bir bulguda ise farklılıklara ait kültürlerin olumlu resmedilmesi, çeşitliliğin çok olduğu sınıfların bir parçası olduğunu söylemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çokkültürlü kitaplar, Çokkültürlü eğitim, İlkokul Öğretmenleri, Öğretmen görüşleri, çocuk edebiyatı, sınıf içi farklılık.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching diversity and multicultural issues in the education system helps provide positive opportunities from elementary to higher education to see the diversity surrounding our life (Barta &, Grindler, 1996). According to Banks (1993), multicultural education has two most important goals. First, multicultural education provides opportunities to the students who come from diverse background to experience the

same instructive quality in the classroom. Second, multicultural education provides similar opportunities to both gender in order to succeed. Based on the other researchers, multicultural education is always known as teaching different cultures, for instance, teaching different religions or beliefs, different languages and all kinds of differences to improve people's awareness to the importance of supporting pluralism (Bieger 1996).

Many researchers believe that children literature is an essential way of teaching differences alongside the benefits of multiculturalism and multicultural education. For instance, Bieger (1996) believed that using children's literature can support the understanding of multiculturalism. Additionally, Ching (2005) stated that multicultural children's literature has the same purpose with multicultural education and they both purposed to teach being respectful to the all differences.

On the other side, many studies have explained the power of children's literature and how it supports multiculturalism. For instance, according to Barta and Grindler (1996), children can easily express themselves by reading and listening children's books, and they see differences between the people and cultures. In the same study, the researchers expressed that "multicultural literature focuses on people of color, regional cultures, and religious minorities, the disabled, or aged or describes female perspectives or issues" (p.269). This idea that is related to multicultural children's books has been supported by many researchers in the field. For instance, Levin (2007) stated that multicultural children's literature is a useful tool to represent the world to children. According to Hinton and Berry (2004), multicultural literature is an important component of current classrooms and can support children in their creation of their critical perspectives. Mathis (2001) indicated that providing multicultural literature in the class is a good way for children to learn new cultures, gain an experience with different cultural patterns, and have discussions about different culture. In classrooms, teachers provide books based on the children's needs and cultural backgrounds. For example, Alseth's (2010) study showed that teachers provided books about Latino and African-American cultures for their students, because a higher percent of their students came from these groups.

"Quality" is also another component of selecting the right multicultural literature for a classroom. For example, Garcia (2001) study participants were elementary school teachers, and each teacher mentioned that the multicultural literature that they use needs to have higher quality in order to support multiculturalism and diversity.

1.1. Culturally Relevant Teaching

Diversity in the US is rapidly growing and as such, teachers are being faced with increasingly diverse classrooms. Culturally relevant teaching focuses on the representation of different cultures in schools and provides information about the cultures (Jeffy&, Cooper, 2011). According to the same scholars, culturally relevant teaching is a teaching method used to integrate a child's home environment with the school, and show the similarities and differences between his own culture and the community's culture. Integration of a child's family life with the school's culture is one method by which to bring them together. One way to help a child accept his culture in regard to the school's culture is through multicultural children's literature.

According to Lopez (2011), when teachers develop culturally relevant teaching in their classrooms, they provide a safe environment in to which the students feel comfortable bringing their own cultures. Such support improves the students' academic skills and understanding in the class. One of the best ways to bring the students' cultures into the classroom is find books that properly represent their cultures. Many teachers defined culturally relevant teaching as bringing all the components of the students' lives such as their cultures and languages, into the class (Paris, 2012). It is my belief that teachers who use this method are successful in regard to teaching their studies about diversity.

Culturally relevant teaching can be applicable for all subjects and classrooms. For example, Martell (2013) examined "culturally relevant teaching in the U.S history classroom"(p.65) and found that around the 90% of the students had positive ideas about culturally relevant teaching activities and believed that these activities were helpful to them in regard to learning about US history. As mentioned above, all classes can use culturally relevant teaching to teach their subjects. For example, teachers can use culturally relevant activities with multicultural children's literature to increase their students' reading skills.

Irvine (2010) discovered several myths; (1) only teachers who come from diverse backgrounds can design culturally relevant teaching, (2) culturally relevant teaching is only for culturally diverse students. However, Irvine believed that culturally relevant teaching all enhances students' success by designing a

classroom environment consistent with their diverse backgrounds. I believe that, even if teachers are anxious about bringing students' cultural differences into the classroom, they can provide a beneficial environment for their students using this method.

1.2. Research Questions

Based on teachers' perceptions, this research tries to find answers to the following questions;

1. How do teachers define multiculturalism?
2. How do teachers can support multiculturalism by using children's literature?

2. METHODOLOGY

1.1. Participants

For this study, I interviewed with four elementary school teachers, who are currently working in elementary classrooms. For my study, four female elementary school teachers accepted doing an interview with them, but I am not allowed to use their real name. I will use pseudonym instead of telling their real name. Those names are; Mary, Christina, Megan and Heidi.

The interview questions used were semi-structured and open-ended in order to encourage the teachers to think deeply about multiculturalism and see their classroom instruction through the view point of multicultural children's literature. After completing the interviews, I transcribed them and coded to determine the major categories discussed. Once I started analyzing participants' responses, I was able to divide the questions into two themes: definition of multicultural education, experience with multicultural literature, distinction between children's literature and multicultural children's literature, connection between multicultural teaching, diversity and children's literature. From these themes, I picked up the related ones to the research questions.

In order to project the identities of my participants, I kept all of the data on my locked, personal computer and used pseudonyms instead of participants' actual names.

1.2. Coding and Analysis

In the tables below, I provide the themes under which I coded the data. For example, Mary stated that her experience with multicultural literature is not much like other peers. She could then learn all about the local cultures. I coded her story as "not much multicultural literature in action".

Table 1. Emerging categories from the interviews

Categories	Themes that emerged from the participants' responses			
	Mary (pseudonym)	Christina (pseudonym)	Megan (pseudonym)	Heidi (pseudonym)
<i>Definitions of multicultural education</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally Relevant teaching, Cultural awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embrace what every child's family practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching different cultures, • Different life experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposing authentic material, • Introducing new things
<i>Experience with multicultural literature</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not much multicultural literature in action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation of folktales 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning together, • Different religious celebrations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using age appropriate books
<i>Distinction between children's literature and multicultural children's literature</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal Meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not every person is the same 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are intertwined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No distinction, showing differences as a normal thing
<i>Connection between multicultural teaching, diversity and children's literature</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation of diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt daily teaching based on differences, • Know backgrounds and meet the diverse needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They helped each other to teach differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences become a part of daily life with literature.

2. FINDINGS

Many researchers have defined multicultural education in their own way. For my study, I asked teachers their personal definition of multiculturalism and multicultural education. When asked this question, Mary talked about the importance of materials. She stated that multicultural education means using texts, visuals, and other materials that accurately represent many different cultures and ethnicities. She mentioned that teachers also need to teach about different people all over the world in order to expand the cultural awareness of their students. In our interview, I noticed that her experiences influenced her opinions strongly. Currently, she is teaching in Chicago and living far away from her family. When I asked her to describe her life as if it were a story in a book, she said

I am teaching in a very culturally diverse school. I am a white English speaker from Indiana, so I have a lot of new people, places, and events to experience and enjoy. The story could be about a new girl who moves to town and is in the minority and gets to learn all about the local cultures (Mary, interview, #15-16).

According to Mary, multicultural literature would be a useful resource for teaching social studies and language arts lessons. In these lessons, she believes that multicultural literature can expose her students to different people and places all around the world. Mary stated that she felt it was inappropriate to make a distinction between children's literature and multicultural children's literature. She argued that "all children's literature should be considered multicultural because all people and therefore all characters in books have culture" (Mary, interview, #76-77). According to her, multicultural teaching means teaching about diversity and using materials that represent a diverse array of people when teaching all subjects. One integral aspect of multicultural teaching is using high quality children's literature that features main characters and settings that represent different cultures.

Christina believed that multicultural education needs to embrace all of the cultures that teachers have in their classrooms. She stated "I would not put up a Christmas trees and make that one student uncomfortable...but I think it's important to embrace what every child's family practices"(Christina, interview, #64-66). Christina mentioned that she grew up in a small town and that all the people around her defined themselves as 100% American. She also mentioned that she went to a religious school that was only attended American students. She said that she never met with someone from a different country or culture. She also mentioned that she has very little knowledge of multiculturalism and cultures and ethnicities different from hers. However, when she begins teaching at an elementary school, she expects to have students from different cultures, religions and ethnic backgrounds. As such, she is aware of the importance of designing her classroom based on these differences.

Christina mentioned that students like to read famous stories such as Cinderella, Peter Pan and Snow White. As such, she provided them with different versions of these famous books that represent different cultures through the same story. She believed that the children became more interested in these famous stories and when they were given opportunities to see the stories represented in different cultures.

Unlike Mary, Christina believed that differentiation between children's literature and multicultural children's literature as important as multiculturalism teaches us that "not every person is the same". In order to create a strong learning environment, Christina argued that classroom management is an essential part of the classroom. She stated that if the teacher has a strong background in classroom management, then the learning activities will be more effective.

Megan stated that multicultural education should be centered on teaching diversity. According to her, multicultural education should teach children about other cultures and how children all over the world live and experiences their day-to-day activities. It should explain how these activities and experiences are similar to and different from what the children in her classroom experience. Megan grew up in a Christian minded family and, as such, she is very interested in learning about and comparing different religious practices and beliefs. In her classroom, she tried to represent different religions and their practices as much as possible through children's literature. She believed that teaching different religious practices would create empathy and tolerance between the children.

In addition, she designed a multicultural lesson plan aimed at teaching the children about religions from the world. Not only would this lesson plan benefit the children, but it also allowed her to leave new things about other cultures. She has taught an entire unit about holidays that other cultures celebrate within which she used several books to help explain Dawali and Ramadan to her students. "I myself was not aware of

what these holidays were so I was able to learn from them as well” (Megan, interview, #35-36). Before this lesson plan, Megan stated that she knew very little about non-Christian holidays. Megan also stated that an ideal classroom would be one in which exists a community of learners where the students learn from and about each other. She is planning to have a classroom library filled with all types of books and plans to let her students know that her classroom is an open forum where they can be themselves. She wants her students to sit in groups so that they can collaborate together and share ideas with one another.

Heidi stated that “authenticity” is an important component of multicultural education and she believed that multicultural education needs to expose students to as much authentic material about other cultures as possible. Heidi said that supporting awareness of and accepting different faith is really important for children. As such, she believed that a positive representation of different belief systems would support relationships and friendships between children at early ages. Heidi also mentioned that teaching religious diversity through children’s literature is important. She argued that teachers need to take into consideration the students in their class when planning any type of lesson. When planning a lesson or unit, she said that she thinks about the diversity in her classroom. She comes up with different topics that fit within that diversity, such as related to family life, beliefs, customs, and food. Then, she used that information to compare and contrast different cultures; so that her students can understand how they are different, but still the same.

According to Heidi, using age appropriate books is important. For example, she mentioned that a couple of years ago, she was helping out in a kindergarten class and use some non-fiction books to teach the similarities and differences between families and cultures. She said that the books were too hard for the children to understand and she would have had better success with the lesson had she used children’s literature instead.

According to Heidi, children’s literature and multicultural children’s literature are the same thing.

I think we shouldn’t make a distinction because that is supporting segregation and showing that it is different and out of the ordinary. If we don’t point out a difference then the students will get used to seeing other cultures mixed in as a normal thing(Heidi, interview, #31-34).

When Heidi defined her ideal classroom, her main goal was having a very low student-to teacher ratio. In addition, she would like to have an ample supply of books and support from her colleagues. She also stated that it is important her students to have their parents involved in their schooling.

3. CONCLUSION

Based on my interview with these four teachers, I discovered that they each aim to teach multiculturalism in their own way. Teaching religious, linguistic and cultural differences are the main ways that they plan on teaching multiculturalism. Positive representation of others cultures is necessary part of their diverse classrooms. This might highly be possible by selecting right children’s books to teach diversity and diverse issues in the classroom. In addition, their backgrounds really influenced their understanding of multiculturalism and, as such, they have tried to adapt new ways to teach multiculturalism. Additionally, each participant believed that children’s literature is a good method by which to teaching multiculturalism and diversity. They stated that high quality children’s literature would be the most beneficial to their students.

At foundation of this study is a critique about analyzing teachers’ thoughts through literature-based instruction and uses of multicultural children’s literature. The people who wish to learn what teachers think about children’s literature would benefit the most from this study. In addition, university professors and lecturers may find the results interesting as they will help them understand the perspectives of teachers, which will enable them to better teach them in the future.

For the future studies, after learning teachers' perspectives towards using multicultural children's books, it might be more beneficial to do in class research about how to use that kinds of books to support understanding of diversity, diverse issues and differences in the class or society.

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