

Unpacking Cultural Barriers in the Secondary Classroom Using Multicultural Literature

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Abstract

The establishment of self-identity within the learning community is at the core of participation; as educators, it is critical that we consider the cultural makeup of our classroom participants, and address those cultures through instructional decision making, teaching opportunities, and development of the classroom community. This article discusses the need for cultural self-awareness from teachers and students. It also provides teachers with a cultural identification activity and multicultural book jigsaw to support the integration of diverse texts into the classroom.

Keywords: *Cultural Relevance, Cultural Competence, Secondary Literacy, Multicultural Texts, Diversity*

Growth Mindset and Cultural Competence

One of the current concerns plaguing the nation's schools is how to find teachers who are capable of teaching successfully in diverse classrooms. Although teacher education programs throughout the nation purport to offer preparation for meeting the needs of racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse students, scholars have documented the fact that these efforts are uneven and unproved (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Culturally responsive pedagogy, as defined by Gay (2002), requires us to use the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. Therefore, to teach in a way that adequately attends to the characteristics of our learners, and certainly to promote the idea in our classes of all of these characteristics as things to be embraced, we must understand what our definition encompasses, how we are using that lens in our

instructional choices, and how we can remove limitations from "culture" as something so simplistic and obvious to the naked eye.

Ladson-Billings delves into the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy in her research surrounding the intersectionality of culture and teaching, which reflects an idea that for students to be successful, we must help them accept and affirm who they are culturally (1994). One major tenet associated with culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings argues, is that of cultural competence. Cultural competence suggests that teachers understand they are cultural beings, as are their students. It is crucial, then, that our conversation about relevant pedagogy begins with an educator's self-reflection on culture, our cultural lens and identities. In "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix," Ladson-Billings further explores the idea that culture is something that will continue to evolve; in developing our ideas

about how to evolve and sustain practice through appropriate cultural pedagogies, we must be willing to admit that the practice cannot be static, but continually able to grow and change with the students we serve (2014). The need for teachers to have open minds, self-awareness, and growth mindset, with the goal of breaking down cultural barriers and promoting a sense of pride and identity alongside one's academic achievements is of mounting importance (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Cultural Bias and Classroom Instruction

Children need to have a classroom space where they feel safe to discover and express themselves, a place to explore their own culture while learning more about the diverse backgrounds of their peers. According to Kaiser & Rasminsky (2019), "culture shapes not only our values and beliefs, but also our gender roles, family structures, languages, dress, food, etiquette, approaches to disabilities, child-reading practices, and even our expectations for children's behavior. In this way, culture creates diversity" (p. 20). Culture in today's classrooms has a broad definition to include anything that makes individuals unique (Webster, 2020). Educators play a vital role in creating the type of space that values diversity – a cultural safe haven.

To value diversity in the classroom, educators must be equipped with the proper tools to ensure a safe and optimistic learning environment. One of the most effective ways to create this type of learning environment is through teachers implementing Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Social Awareness is one of the five core competencies of SEL that specifically focuses on perspective-taking, diversity, respecting others, and empathy. Teachers and students together can learn to appreciate diversity within each classroom when teachers provide lessons that elicit and reinforce empathy (Core SEL Competencies, 2020). A classroom as a safe haven can marry SEL with academics to maximize student achievement.

Another valuable component for creating a cultural safe haven is ensuring teachers identify their own cultural bias (Berry and Candis, 2013). What educators think about students impacts how they teach. Children at an early age begin to develop their cultural identity by how they are treated by others. This can lead to students feeling invisible, devalued, disrespected, and even ashamed of who they were. On the contrary, students who feel valued and free to explore their cultural identity are more likely to take academic risks (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Classroom communities that are cultural safe havens include teachers who explore students' differences by utilizing instructional strategies that reflect diversity. Teachers must be able to draw upon all of their students' strengths to foster resilient student identities of achievement (Gist, 2014).

Cultural Identification: Activity #1

Merriam Webster defines culture as the "customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group, as well as the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time" (Webster, 2020). Based on this definition, the term culture could also be used to describe anything that makes us unique – the type of music we like, our household makeup, hobbies, shared experiences (like travel, first generation graduate, campus resident), struggles (i.e. SES, trauma, illness), as well as heritage and traditions we are proud to call our own. We argue that the term culture is not generally referred to in such a broad sense in the classroom, and is instead used to primarily refer to skin color or language proficiency. In order for students to adequately develop their cultural identity, they must first understand all that the term "culture" encompasses. One activity that can be used within the classroom to help expand our definition of culture is as follows:

Activity 1

1. As an icebreaker, give students a few examples of cultures they may be a part of (i.e. single mother household, first

generation potential college graduate, language spoken, region of state where they reside, etc.). Here, it is important not to give them “all the answers,” but to have them explore their own definition of culture as part of the activity.

2. Give students 5 minutes to write down as many cultures as they can come up with (those with which they self-identify).
3. For those who appear stumped, continue sharing ideas that may help them understand what you mean by “culture.” This can be anything that makes them unique or represents who they are as an individual. For example, have they considered their favorite type of music as a culture they belong to? Their favorite foods? Whether they have siblings? Extracurricular activities they belong to? What makes them different from the person sitting next to them?
4. After the five minutes is up, see how many cultures they were able to come up with, and have them share some that they think are unique to them. Don’t be surprised if they are able to come up with more than 20 or 30 cultures!
5. Use this as an opportunity for them to learn more about their classmates, and also as a springboard for discussions of culture found in their texts and less-than-obvious ways they may be able to relate to characters.
6. Discuss which of these cultures they would know about each other just by looking at them. Which require building relationships or sharing themselves in some way?

This is great for students during the first week of school, as it can be a means of building classroom community, enhancing relevance of lessons, accessing biographical data that will help you differentiate your teaching, and/or to

help students think more deeply about cultures, both explicit and implicit, in texts. The ability to make connections to readings will be enhanced as a result.

When examining our definition of the word “culture,” educators and pre-service candidates can also find their view limited to the more obvious gender, race, or ethnicity. As the type of cultures represented in society, and therefore in the classroom, continue to broaden, including more representation from multiethnic backgrounds, gender or sexual preference, it is important that educators ask themselves what their personal definition of culture includes, how it can be expanded, and how a more contemporary look at the term can promote opportunities for self-expression and advancement of skill development through their teaching.

Multicultural Book Jigsaw: Activity 2

This jigsaw activity is a cooperative learning technique (The Jigsaw Classroom, 2020) that can be used to 1) vote on a book for class reads, 2) choose books for literature circle groupings, and 3) to introduce new authors to learners for individual/silent reading time.

Activity 2

1. Choose at least four multicultural books for this activity, which is in the format of a jigsaw (book number depends on number of classroom students and jigsaw groups).
2. Divide students into a) home group, and b) jigsaw group
3. Have students disperse into jigsaw groups.
4. Provide each group with a copy of one of the books chosen (if available), a summary of text, an author handout, and an excerpt of the sample text provided.
5. As a group, have them spend time
 - a. Reviewing the summary of the text
 - b. Learning about the author
 - c. Reading the excerpt of the sample text provided

6. Then, have each group answer the following questions:
 - a. Are you familiar with this author? If yes, what has your experience been with them?
 - b. What are your first impressions of this text?
 - c. What cultures might be represented in this text?
 - d. What connections could be drawn from what you have read to the students in your class and the cultures they represent?
 - e. How might this text be a challenge for you to read?

7. Have students share out in “home group” so they learn about each of the four book choices.

As you are making book choices for this activity, you should also consider: How do these texts align, or deviate, from the types of texts you already integrate in your classroom? What types of pre-reading or during-reading strategies might enhance students’ connections to this text or their ability to engage in its content? Gather feedback from learners regarding their interests and analysis of the excerpts they have received. Use this to initiate pre-reading strategies like an anticipation guide or carousel brainstorm as needed for the book(s) you decide to proceed with. Figure 1 provides resources for identifying diverse classroom texts.

- 22 Diverse Book Choices for Students of all Grade Levels: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/22-diverse-book-choices-all-grade-levels>
- Multicultural 2019 ALA Youth Media Award Winning Books: <https://coloursofus.com/multicultural-2019-ala-youth-media-award-winning-books/>
- 21 Books That Every High School Needs to Teach Their Students: <https://www.bustle.com/p/21-books-that-every-high-school-needs-to-teach-their-students-3073255>
- Recommended Reading: Celebrating Diversity: <https://libguides.ala.org/c.php?g=488238&p=3530814>
- Diverse Books for Teens and Tweens Written by Own Voices Authors: <https://www.readbrightly.com/diverse-books-tweens-teens-written-voices-authors/>
- The Nerdy Book Club: <https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/category/2019-nerdies/>
- 10 LGBTQ Books for Teens: <https://www.readbrightly.com/new-lgbtq-books-for-teens/>
- YA Books about Immigration: <https://bookriot.com/2018/06/28/ya-books-about-immigration/>
- Books for Kids with Characters on the Autism Spectrum <https://imaginationsoup.net/books-kids-characters-autism-spectrum/>
- Young Adult Books Featuring Teens in Foster Homes/Adoption: <https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Teen-Young-Adult-Orphans-Foster-Homes-Fiction/zgbs/books/10368562011>

Figure 1. Texts to Consider: Integrating Varied Cultures into Curriculum

Conclusion

Schools that recognize and celebrate all definitions of culture will promote student success. Teachers who recognize their own cultural bias, understand the myriad of cultures their students represent, and incorporate

discussions of empathy and connection alongside culturally diverse texts, will help students to embrace their identities and embrace one another. Expanding the definition of culture and promoting diverse authors that reflect those cultures are great starting points for both.

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