

2013

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Recommended Citation

Gunn, A. A., Bennett, S.V., & Morton, M. L. (2012/2013). Culturally responsive literacy pedagogy: Using children's literature to discuss topics of religious diversity. *Florida Reading Journal*, 49(1), 17-24.

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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LITERACY PEDAGOGY: USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TO FACILITATE DISCUSSION ABOUT RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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Abstract: As the US demographics continue to become more diverse, schools will need to continue to adopt pedagogies and practices that support their students from diverse cultural backgrounds. While a large body of research supports teachers adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy and supporting diverse students, there is limited research on supporting students from diverse religious backgrounds (Subedi, 2006). This article urges teachers to discuss topics of religious diversity using children's literature. The authors argue that using multicultural literature is one component of adopting a culturally responsive literacy pedagogy that can dismantle stereotypes and helps students develop their cultural competence (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008). The authors offer suggestions on evaluating children's literature and offer a small sample of recommended books that can be used to facilitate topics of religious diversity.

As our nation continues to become more culturally diverse, it is imperative that teachers address the changing diversity in their classrooms. The US Census Bureau (1999) projects that by 2050, 47% of the US population will be non-white, and this trend is expected to continue. Many scholars have called for classroom teachers and teacher educators to embrace a culturally responsive pedagogy due to this influx of students from diverse backgrounds in the United States (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Phuntsog, 2001). However, in US schools, the topic of religious diversity is often avoided and considered uncomfortable or too controversial.

The majority of research about cultural diversity issues neglects to separate the different elements of culture, such as religion. Culture comprises a person's identification with their nationality, language, sexual orientation, religion, gender, socioeconomic class, and race (Banks, 2006). Douglass (2002) states that religious beliefs, practices, and communities influence how people live. In essence, religion plays a significant role in many people's lives. Subedi (2006) asserts that

because our schools are rooted in American and Christian epistemologies, students whom embrace or come from religions other than mainstream Christianity "face difficulties in negotiating everyday school practices" (p. 227). As our country continues to become more diverse, it is imperative that teachers renegotiate how to talk about religion in their classrooms.

In our recent research (see Bennett, Gunn, & Morton, 2012), we interviewed four in-service and preservice teachers from diverse religious backgrounds: (a) Lara, a recently-graduated preservice teacher, who identified as a Latter Day Saint; (b) Lynn, a preservice teacher in an alternative certification graduate program, who identified as Sikhi; (c) Fatim, an in-service teacher in an Islamic school, who identified as Muslim; and (d) Dana, an in-service teacher in a public school, who identified as Jewish. Four themes emerged from this study:

- *Separation of church and state:* Participants' beliefs of whether church and state should be separate.

- *Social justice*: Teaching as a way to make a difference, not just an academic curriculum.
- *Respect for religious diversity*: Respect of students' rights, making a student comfortable in the classroom, knowing your students, and not objecting to others religious/spirituality within different contexts.
- *Personal beliefs*: Connects issues that conflicted or made some impact, such as discomfort, on the participants' personal beliefs.

These themes interconnect significantly as a call to teach for social justice and to make a difference in students' lives. All four teachers believed the classrooms should create a safe environment that illustrates respect for individual students' culture, beliefs, and religious diversity. Each participant experienced discomfort due to mainstream Christian privilege (Blumenfeld, 2006; Schlosser, 2003). Lynn and Fatim witnessed prayer at school and work-related functions where they were expected to participate, Dana felt isolated due to Christmas discussions in school, Lara dialogued with an instructor about course content not being sensitive to her beliefs, and Fatim endured uneasiness with classmates' conversations of alcohol and sexual relations. These conflicts with their personal religious beliefs within public schools and in Colleges of Education strengthened their dedication and commitment to "giving back to the community." From our findings, we recognized the need for teachers to not only have strategies to teach all students, but the necessity for them to develop their understandings about diverse religious cultures and to become aware of the literature that offers an approach to discuss religious diversity in a student friendly manner. Because multicultural education is multi-faceted and complex, we chose to focus on one "culturally responsive literacy practice" (Gunn, 2011) to discuss religious culture through meaningful,

high-quality, effective children's multicultural literature (Livingston & Kurkjian, 2005).

Why Talk About Religion?

"The discourse of religion in schools contains power dynamics since it influences how critical topics, such as knowledge, culture, and identity are interpreted in everyday settings" (Subedi, 2006, p. 236). Many teachers are uncomfortable talking about religion in their classrooms, yet many schools continued to celebrate the traditional Christian holidays, such as Easter and Christmas, which further marginalizes non-Christian students. Holidays and celebrations are important topics in schools because they offer interesting and relevant opportunities for students to learn about cultures different than their own and to develop awareness of how religion influences cultures. However, the exploration of holidays should occur throughout the school year and not be limited to December, a month in our society devoted to a mainstream Christian holiday. Evans and Gunn (2011) discuss that many times we take a taco and egg roll approach to culture, where instead we need to take a deeper look at the contributions and achievements different cultural group. These authors asserted:

Indeed, recognition and celebration of cultural diversity is important; cultural awareness begins with knowledge of cultural diversity, respect for that diversity, and the general recognition that ethnic groups have different values. However, in order to impact achievement, educators must move beyond the perspective of celebratory multiculturalism- (p.7).

Noddings (2008) proposed that informed people have a greater understanding of themselves and others; and hopefully, this understanding leads to acceptance versus intolerance for people who practice different religions. Green and Oldendorf (2005) further explain that when teachers and children engage in learning about religious diversity they can further develop empathy and global understandings beyond their own experiences. Without knowledge of diverse religions,

misconceptions about minority religions and possible silencing of non-Christian individuals can prevail.

What to Talk About?

Researchers suggested students learn about diverse religions with respect for all students' beliefs in the classroom (Dever, Whitaker, & Byrnes, 2001; Noddings, 2008). Instruction should "neither promote nor denigrate the ideals of faith" (Douglass, 2002, p. 33). Ayers and Reid (2005) offered some ideas for teaching about religion including: (a) teaching religion as a subject, not as a practice, (b) teaching without students attempting to agree or disagree with aspects of different religions, and (c) teaching about a wide variety of religions, but not describing any as better or worse than others.

For young children, sharing their stories can be a vehicle to open conversations about religion and diversity. Tisdell (2006) suggest that classroom teachers should welcome students' spirituality into the classroom through the sharing of cultural histories, creative projects, different types of literature, and any experiences that stimulate cross-cultural understandings. Tisdell also purports these ideas might provide support for transformative educational experiences in which students from all backgrounds learn and develop a sense of community and acceptance. Teachers should consider how religious beliefs can affect all aspects of culture, and navigate these conversations as steps in an education journey, not as a spiritual pursuit.

Books that Contain Religious Topics

We would like to suggest multicultural children's literature as a culturally responsive literacy practice for raising children's awareness of the many religions and religious traditions in our world (see Table 1). Crisp (2012) defined multicultural literature as consisting of "those books by and about populations that have traditionally been under-represented..." (p. 27). Reading and discussing

multicultural literature fosters opportunities for students to not only learn about world religions, but to explore commonalities and differences amongst people from a variety of places and religious practices (Dever, Whitaker, & Byrnes, 2001). Au (2011) stated:

...many teachers and publishers seem to believe that the reason for introducing children to multicultural literature is to 'teach them that people are more alike than different.' They do not seem to understand that celebrating and maintaining differences may be equally, if not more important to students of diverse backgrounds (p. 17).

The books, images, posters, awards, bulletin board items, and the holiday celebrations that are used in the classroom comprise the hidden curriculum, which teaches students what and whom is valued in school (Gay, 2002; Rychly & Graves, 2012). Therefore, we argue that every book we choose to read with and to our students needs to be a piece of multicultural literature that affords students the opportunity to learn about each other. Green and Oldendorf (2005) stated exploration of children's literature can help children and teachers learn about religious diversity and that, "children can strengthen their understanding of their own belief systems as well as their understanding of others' beliefs by hearing stories about people from a variety of religions" (p. 211). Our classrooms need a plethora of powerful pieces of multicultural literature with rich illustrations that enable teachers to "bring the wonders of the world into the classroom" (Livingston & Kurkjian, 2005).

Multicultural children's literature offers teachers and students a space to explore diverse characters and themes represented in the stories. The discussion can then focus on the culture of a particular story or character and not a student or teacher's personal belief. Teachers can navigate the conversation of religion through the events, settings, themes, and characters presented in the piece of multicultural children's literature. This list can

assist teachers as they navigate the flow of conversation and make the topic more comfortable and less driven by fear and anxiety.

Award lists and research articles offer teachers an excellent way to select children's literature for their classroom. However, many times educators will select their own books. Based on the research of several authors (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008; Livingston & Kurkjian, 2005; Morgan, 2008/2009), we offer a series of questions for teachers to consider when evaluating a multicultural book:

1. Do the components (theme, plot, setting, characters) of the book exhibit the characteristics of a well written piece of children's literature?
2. Does the theme of the book have the potential, through a teacher lead discussion, to advance the reader's understanding of the religion portrayed in the book?
3. Does the book include accurate information or facts embedded within the story about the religion portrayed in the story?
4. Does the book avoid bias and stereotypes?
5. Does the book have components that are relevant to the reader's own life and have the power to positively shape his or her cultural consciousness?

Conclusion

We no longer can ignore perplexing and cumbersome topics about religion because of fear or anxiety. Exclusion of religion can negatively impact students from diverse backgrounds by allowing stereotypes to persist and increase alienation. We believe teachers need to talk with their students about how religious and spiritual beliefs are not only

diverse around the world but within the school's community, which includes the principal, other teachers, staff, parents, and other students.

We have recommended a small sample of powerful pieces of children's multicultural literature that we believe fosters understanding and respect for diverse religious and cultural groups. These books can be used as a vehicle for raising children's awareness of the many religions and religious traditions in our world. Reading multicultural literature can create opportunities for students and teachers to learn about world religions and provide a space to explore commonalities and differences among people from a variety of places and religious practices (Dever, Whitaker, & Byrnes, 2001).



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Table 1: *Recommended Children's Literature for Teaching Religious Diversity*

	Title	Authors	Subject Matter	
<i>Non-Fiction</i>	Coming to America: A Muslim Family Story	Bernard World	Immigration	
	Faith	Maya Ajmera, Magda Nakassis & Cynthia Pon	Religious and cultural diversity	
	Kids Books of World Religion	Jennifer Glossop & John Mantha	Religious and cultural diversity	
	One World Many Religions	Mary Pope Osborne	Religious and cultural diversity	
	Diwali: Hindu Festival of Lights	Dianne M. MacMillian	Diwali	
	My First Ramadan	Karen Katz	Ramadan	
	The Butterfly	Patrica Polacco	World War II	
	Day of Amed's Secret	Florence Parry Heide & Judith Heide Gilliland	Family in Egypt	
	<i>Fiction</i>	Tree of Cranes	Allen Say	Eastern and Western Culture
		The Night of the Moon	Hena Khan	Muslim Holiday Story
Seven Candles for Kwanzaa		Andrea Davis Pinkney	Kwanzaa	
Going Home		Eve Bunting	Mexican Family's Christmas	
Lighting a Lamp: A Diwali Story		Jonny Zucker	Diwali	
The Dancing Dragon		Marcia K. Vaughn	Chinese New Year	
New Year At the Pier		April Halprin & Stephane Jorisch	Rosh Hashanah	
The Trees of the Dancing Goats		Patricia Polacco	Hanukkah and Christmas	
	Mrs. Katz and Tush	Patricia Polacco	Passover	

Note. These tables provide a small sample of recommended books that contain themes, characters, historical events, and holidays and that features religion as a culture element.

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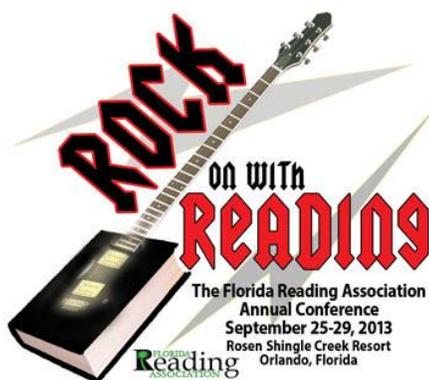
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