

The Use of Multicultural Literature in Elementary Classrooms:
Teaching Acceptance and Understanding of Different
Races, Ethnicities, and Cultures

by

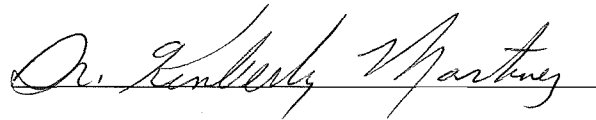
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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dr. Kimberly Martinez". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

The elementary classroom today in the United States is much more diverse than in previous years. The diverse dynamics of the society are continuing to increase and are evident in the student population. It is imperative that students learn acceptance and understanding of different races, ethnicities, and cultures. Knowledge of the diverse world around the students leads to communication, understanding and acceptance of differences, and assists in finding ones identity.

Multicultural literature can be used to begin an acceptance and understanding of different races, ethnicities, and cultures. For children from mainstream culture, multicultural books assist in teaching acceptance and understanding which leads to cultural sensitivity. For children who are culturally diverse, the use of multicultural books assists in building a positive self-concept and a feeling of comfort and acceptance in the classroom environment. Multicultural literature can be used across the curriculum if so desired by the educator.

The implementation of multicultural literature into the curriculum can occur in several stages. It is important that the educator feel comfortable with the level of implementation they choose. This paper will discuss the importance of teaching acceptance and understanding of different races, ethnicities, and cultures through the use of multicultural children's literature; how to select appropriate multicultural literature; and how to use multicultural literature across curriculum.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Snyder, 2011), in 2008, minority students made up 45.2% of the student population. This percentage increases every year. Salas, Lucido, and Canales (2001) contended that “because schools are becoming much more culturally and linguistically diverse, educators need to learn more about the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all students” (p. 141). Educators should prepare themselves for the diversity in their classrooms to ensure the children feel welcome and have their differences embraced and celebrated. Multicultural literature is an option to help explore, embrace, and identify the uniqueness of students found in the classroom.

The use of multicultural literature can assist in exposing children to the makeup of the society found in the United States and globally. Using multicultural literature gives children the opportunity "to develop their understanding of others, while affirming children of diverse backgrounds" (Mendoza & Reese, 2000, p. 1). Multicultural literature has the ability to accurately portray “the conflict that many groups were forced to endure, and... celebrate the rich diversity that can be found in America today” (Ambrogi, Shoemake, & Watson, 1996, p. 1).

Using multicultural literature is one step in helping students accept each other and find their own self-identity. Multicultural literature can teach cultural awareness and acceptance of diverse cultures. For students who may not be a part of a diverse setting, learning through multicultural literature allows students to see diversity and relate information back into their own lives. Making connections within their own lives helps them make connections and begin to not only look at differences, but similarities as well.

Statement of the Problem

The United States represents a variety of ethnicities, races, and cultural groups. The diverse atmosphere has given this country a rich history, full of tribulations and successes. It is important to teach children about all aspects of the past and present United States. Ideally, children in classrooms across the country would represent the diversity in the United States.

Unfortunately, not all classrooms are as diverse as the outside world. This lack of diversity can cause children to misunderstand others who are diverse or accept them as part of this society. Multicultural children who are in limitedly diverse schools can become uncomfortable in the schools and lack self-confidence and self-identity when they are unable to relate the education they receive to their lives in the home and in the community. This may also lead them to think their educators and peers do not understand them or wish to include them into the school community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this critical review of literature is to determine how multicultural literature can help culturally sensitive students learn cultural awareness, acceptance of others, and self-identity in elementary classrooms across the United States of America. This critical review of literature will also include guidelines for choosing authentic multicultural literature and integrating multicultural literature into the curriculum.

Rationale

In many schools across the United States, the curriculum is focused on mainstream Americans. Mainstream Americans are considered to be people belonging to the cultural group of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Banks and Banks (2007, p. 229) explained that “a curriculum that focuses on the experiences of mainstream Americans and largely ignores the experiences,

cultures, and histories of other ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious groups has negative consequences for both mainstream American students and students of color.” In less diverse areas, multicultural literature allows them be aware of a community larger than what they are accustomed to within their own small community.

The population of the United States has changed over the years and curriculum needs to change to compliment the diverse population seen today. Multicultural literature is a door to opening up discussions on diversity on a level the students can understand and relate to. Mendoza and Reese stated (2000, p. 4), “good multicultural literature can benefit all children.” With appropriate multicultural literature available, students can embrace their surroundings or prepare them for the world outside of what they see every day.

In 1932, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) focused on the bias of curriculum and misrepresented information (Pinar, 2004). Six years later, the NAACP published their recommendations for changes and fought for revisions within the existing curriculum. Curriculum was an important topic of discussion for civil rights activists. Activists continued to work towards a more integrated curriculum to include textbooks that have an accurate portrayal of multicultural students. The recognition of the importance of including multicultural perspectives and literature in education is still a relevant discussion today.

Research Questions

The following questions will be answered within this research paper.

1. How can the use of multicultural literature affect the self-concepts of culturally diverse students?
2. How can multicultural literature impact cultural sensitivity in limitedly diverse communities?

3. How can educators find appropriate multicultural literature for the elementary classroom?
4. How can educators use multicultural literature across the curriculum?

Definition of Terms

Diverse - differing from one another (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Multicultural literature - “literature that portrays racial or ethnic groups aside from the ‘White Anglo-Saxon majority’ that currently reside in the United States today.” (Dera, 2007, p. 1); aliases include multicultural children’s books, multicultural children’s literature, culturally diverse literature

Mainstream American culture - that held in common by the majority of Americans; often referred to as “Anglo-Saxon” Culture (Doran & Littrell, 2009)

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

The researcher assumes the information gathered in this review of literature on multicultural literature is accurate. There is a limitation on information available on how effective the use of multicultural education is on teaching cultural awareness, acceptance, morals, values, and self-identity. There have not been studies that the researcher has found to measure effectiveness and change in personal views on diversity.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter includes information on the use of multicultural literature to teach cultural awareness, acceptance, morals, values, and self-identity. This chapter also includes information for educators on how to authenticate multicultural literature and implement it into the curriculum.

Teaching Cultural Awareness and Acceptance

In the United States, there is an abundance of cultures coexisting. The educational system is meant to provide equal education for all children. As Ray stated (2003, p. 135), “At the heart of the contradiction lies a challenge to American preschool and elementary educators to respond effectively and fairly to cultural, racial, gender, sexual preference, ethnic, and ability diversity.” Educators need to be aware their own cultural sensitivity and move beyond what they may be familiar with to serve the needs of their diverse student population.

Teaching cultural awareness and acceptance is of great importance. Ramsey (2008, p. 24) contended that “Contrary to popular beliefs (and possibly hopes), children are *not* ‘colorblind’.” From preschool age, students notice differences between themselves and their peers. Though students do not make choices based on race and ethnicity at this age, they are still aware of the diversity. It isn’t until they begin to enter the primary grades when children begin to include race and ethnicity in their choices.

Educators play an important role in teaching cultural awareness and acceptance. There are two dimensions in how to address teaching cultural awareness and acceptance: planned curriculum and spontaneous conversation (Ramsey, 2008). Planned curriculum with when educators purposefully plan to address cultural awareness and acceptance. Spontaneous

conversation is when educators take the opportunity to discuss cultural awareness and acceptance at teachable moments, when student conversations arise concerning diversity.

Educators impact the interactions among students. As Stone (2008) suggested “attitudes and expressions of respect start with grownup and then trickle down” (p. 41). When educators model cultural awareness and acceptance, students from the mainstream culture learn how to respect cultural differences and become aware of the diversity around them. To teach cultural acceptance and awareness, educators will have to evaluate their own biases, make changes, and plan curriculum and use teachable moments to address cultural awareness and acceptance of diverse populations.

Teaching Self-concept

Teaching self-concept is important for educators. When students are able to make connections about who they are and their history is given an accurate portrayal, students gain confidence and self-esteem. Mendoza and Reese (2000, p. 1) believe that multicultural literature “allow(s) young children opportunities to develop their understanding of others, while affirming children of diverse backgrounds.” Multicultural literature can assist students in finding who they are by examining their own actions, beliefs, and emotions.

It is important for students from diverse backgrounds to feel that they are accepted as the individuals they are in the classroom and school. Ramsey (2008, p. 25) contended that “children develop their racial identity during preschool and elementary schools years.” For children, “personal cultural, ethnic, and racial identities can be complex” (Ray, 2003, p. 139). With the guidance of educators, students can develop a positive self-concept.

When addressing diversity, Ray (2003) suggested two characteristics to make schools successful: curriculum that is culturally sensitive and instruction which includes the cultures of

the students. When schools incorporate culturally sensitive curriculum and culturally inclusive instruction, students begin to develop a positive self-concept. Gay stated (1999, p. 195) that “Genuine acceptance of one’s ethnicity is positively related to psychological well-being, interpersonal relations, social consciousness, and personal efficacy.” Positive self-concept can lead to more successful school experience.

Everyone’s culture is important to them; it is a part of who they are. “Our ethnicity is one of the most basic elements of our being. It reveals itself in the custom, rituals, values, attitudes, and personality types of individuals” (McAdoo, 1993, p. ix). Educators have a critical role to guide students in creating a positive self-concept. Gay (1999) suggested that “Feelings of historical connectedness, how they see themselves, and how they live their lives in relation to their cultural socialization are of more importance in determining...ethnic identity” (p. 199). Self-concept influences interactions and behaviors in the schools, home, and community. Using multicultural literature across the curriculum can aid in teaching mainstream culture students cultural awareness, acceptance of diverse students, and it can assist in developing a positive self-concept for students from diverse backgrounds

Use of Multicultural Literature across the Curriculum

Since the early 1900s, educators have been trying to create a curriculum that is culturally sensitive. For many years, especially in the 1960s, the argument of what and who should be included in textbooks was a main focus. According to Zimmerman (2002), “any reference to racial violence, hostility, or prejudice often spelled the removal of a textbook” (p. 116). Texts which included pictures and information of people who were minorities were often denied for use in schools. For students, this would leave them disconnected and wondering how they fit into society. Classes were developed to teach specific information on races to students within that

race (Zimmerman, 2002). This course of action segregated students and did not assist in cultural awareness and acceptance of diverse people. Today, the use of multicultural education across the curriculum assists teaching cultural awareness and acceptance of diverse populations to students from the mainstream culture and self-concept for students of diverse backgrounds.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NCES, 2009), 68% of fourth grade students read at a basic or below basic level. This number has been steady for three years. There could be many reasons for this: lack of resources, lack of interest in resources available, or no home support. One idea to assist in literacy is to offer books that are relevant to the students and their lives.

Multicultural literature can assist in teaching literacy and assist students in learning more about diverse people and themselves. For younger students, preschoolers and kindergarteners, reading is emergent. Emergent literacy is “what young children know about reading, writing, and print before they begin formal schooling” (Mendoza & Reese, 2000, p. 3). Since children come from diverse backgrounds, their knowledge could vary greatly.

Picture books are an ideal way to get young students familiar with literacy concepts. Temple et al. identified three types of picture books: 1) wordless books, which rely solely on illustrations to tell a story; 2) picture story books, in which illustrations and text work together to tell a story; and 3) illustrated books, in which the text supplies most of the information, where the illustrations augment what is said or serve as decoration (as cited in Mendoza & Reese, 2000). When selecting picture books, it is important to look for pictures of diverse people. The content does not necessarily need to be about other cultures, but should have multicultural representative pictures of people from diverse races and ethnicities.

For primary students, first grade to third grade, multicultural literature develops into stories for students to read. It is important to use books that allow students to see how other people think. Students coming from diverse backgrounds bring morals and values that are similar, but different. Books can help students see another viewpoint other than their own. It opens students up to acceptance and self-identity. Students who read books that relate to their own identity will have their identity reconfirmed.

For even older students, fourth and fifth grade, multicultural literature can be used to learn about the history of diverse groups of people. Curriculum begins to look at histories of people, and having books available for students to explore history is beneficial. Some students even begin to be curious about their own history. Since there is a vast amount of information taught on mainstream American history, educators should also include history of diverse people that is relevant to the same era to give a more complete look at history.

Banks and Banks (2007) identified four levels of using multicultural literature across the curriculum: 1) the contributions approach, 2) the additive approach, 3) the transformation approach, and 4) the social action approach. Many educators use the first level of integration, the contributions approach. This is when educators only acknowledge ethnic people who have made major contributions to the mainstream history. People, such as Harriet Tubman, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez, are only identified and recognized for their contributions glorifying them as heroes/heroines. Holidays that are commonly related to diverse groups of people are also showcased and not always taught with understanding of the significance of the holiday. Banks and Banks contended that “an important characteristic of the contribution approach is that the mainstream curriculum remains unchanged in its basic structure, goals, and salient characteristics” (2007, p. 232). The first level of integration is easiest and is usually

included in the curriculum. The disadvantage is that students do not get a clear picture of the history from a realistic, personal, first person viewpoint. Many of the stories read are authored by mainstream Americans.

Level two, the additive approach, is similar to the first level. Books and mini-units are added into curriculum by educators based on their own choice. Curriculum itself doesn't actually change at all; information covered is based on the educator's preferences to teach additional information or not. "Its most important shortcoming is that it usually results in the viewing of ethnic content from the perspectives of mainstream historians, writers, artists, and scientists..." (Banks & Banks, 2007, p. 235). This level includes more opportunities to use multicultural literature. Educators should try to use books that are written by authors of the same ethnicity to get a viewpoint that might not agree with a mainstream author.

The third level is the transformative approach. At this level, curriculum changes; goals are created to include other perspectives beyond the mainstream American perspective. The goal at this level is to "enable students to view concepts and issues from more than one perspective and from the point of view of the cultural, ethnic, and racial groups that were the most active participants in, or were most cogently influenced by, the event, issue, or concept being studied" (Banks & Banks, 2007, p. 237). Multicultural literature would be used at this level to assist in giving another perspective of historical events taught in the curriculum. Educators at this level integrate multicultural perspectives instead of showcasing them when they apply. Students can better understand what they learn when they can see all sides of an event, issue, or concept that is important to more than one ethnic group.

The fourth level, the social action approach, includes all components of the third level. The fourth level goes above and beyond the third level by requiring "students to make decisions

and take action related to the concept, issue, or problem studied in the unit” (Banks & Banks, 2007, p. 239). This level takes knowledge gained on a concept, issue, or problem that relates to a diverse group of people and has students take their ideas and become proactive. Students find the relevance in the information they learn and come up with an idea on how they can do something currently to inform others or participate in social change.

Multicultural literature can be used across the curriculum in several ways.

It can be used to teach literacy skills. From infancy through elementary school, multicultural literature assists in developing children’s sense of cultural awareness and appreciation of the diverse populations in the United States. It can also be used to teach about the history of diverse groups. Four levels of using multicultural literature across the curriculum were identified.

It is important that educators feel comfortable in whichever strategy they choose to use when including multicultural literature in their curriculum.

Authenticity of Multicultural Literature

Authenticity is very important when exposing students to multicultural literature.

Authenticity is strongly debatable in multicultural literature. According to Fox and Short (2003, p. 3), “authors, illustrators, editors, publishers, educators, librarians, and scholars all have different points of view about authenticity...” Authenticity refers to how books depict “accurate representations of the cultural attitudes, feelings, and perspectives, both visually and literally” (Steiner, 2001, p. xx). It is important that ethnic groups are represented in an appropriate manner.

It is not necessary for an author to be part of the same ethnic group that he/she writes about. Bishop (2003, p. 28) describes authenticity as having “to do with the success with which a writer is able to reflect the cultural perspectives of the people about whom he or she is writing, and make readers from inside the group believe that the writer ‘knows what’s going on’.”

Educators need to be aware of the author's background if they question the authenticity of the book. When educators are seeking multicultural literature for their students, they need to act as investigators to make sure that the literature is an appropriate reflection of a diverse group of people. Authenticity goes beyond the author as well.

In Fox and Short's book (2003), authors from various ethnic groups addressed the issue of authenticity of literature related to specific ethnic groups. The authors in this book discuss how to look for authenticity in stories and illustrations. The authors discuss multicultural literature as it relates to their race or ethnicity and their experiences with writing and illustrating multicultural literature. Fox and Short (2003) bring together a great collection of authors to inform readers about cultural authenticity, political correctness, and creating connections to multicultural literature in the classroom. Fox and Short stated that (2003), "because children's literature has the potential to play such a central role in an education that is multicultural... all young readers should have access to culturally authentic literature" (p. 22). It is critical that students get the best literature to make unbiased decisions on people who are addressed in the stories.

There are many books available to help assist educators in finding appropriate books for students. One such book is *Multicultural Voices in Contemporary Literature: A Resource for Teachers* by Frances Ann Day. This book has information on how to look for bias in multicultural literature. Day (1999) identified a list of eleven characteristics to look for in books that may be biased. The eleven characteristics include the following: 1) omission of a group of people, 2) illustrations that represent stereotypes and tokenism, 3) check the story line, 4) check authenticity of story, 5) consider the relationships between people in the story, 6) check for bias in heroines/heroes, 7) consider the effects on a child's self-image, 8) research the author's or

illustrator's background, 9) consider the author's or illustrator's perspective, 10) check language for stereotyping or offensive terms, and 11) check the copyright date. Day also offers questions to think about when looking at multicultural literature. In her book, educators will find authors, their ethnicity, book titles, and age levels. This is the type of resource educators should use to assist them in adding to their collection of multicultural literature.

Another publication that is useful is *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults*. This resource groups books by type; there are titles for books for babies to young adults. Educators teaching at any age level can find books that are available for their students. Each book referenced in this publication has a summary about the book. It is important to remember that even though these books are recommended, educators should still screen them for bias before allowing students to read them. There are many more resources that teachers can find that can help with finding authentic and bias-free multicultural literature.

In Steiner's *Promoting a Global Community through Multicultural Children's Literature* (2001), educators will find useful information on literature that is organized by themes. In each section, Steiner summarizes the theme and then goes on to list and summarize literature that falls under the theme. As Steiner contended (2001, p. xv), "Bringing quality multicultural literature into schools and libraries requires leadership, activism, commitment, and continuity." It is important for educators to research the multicultural literature chosen for the classroom.

Authenticity is very important when considering which multicultural children's books should be included in a classroom. Educators have many resources available to help when researching multicultural literature. The key factors when choosing multicultural literature are knowing the author's or illustrator's background and to look for bias in representation, language, character interactions, and omission of relevant information. Educators should choose

multicultural literature to use across the curriculum. Multicultural literature has the potential to make connections between the students, the classroom, and the community.

Chapter III: Summary, Critical Analysis, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will include a summary of the previous two chapters, a critical analysis of the reviewed literature, and recommendations regarding the use of multicultural literature in elementary classrooms.

Summary

Minority students make up a little over 45% of the population of students in schools in the United States. This percentage increases every year. As the population of students becomes more diverse, it is important to create an environment where they feel welcomed and included. The use of multicultural literature can assist in creating bonds among students and teachers. Students will become aware of differences and similarities among classmates. Multicultural literature in the classroom can help in understanding differences and in creating a positive self-concept.

Over the years, education has been changing to include more culturally diverse literature. In the 1960s, there was a movement to create a more equal educational system. This equality included the revision of textbooks and curriculum. Previously, if books included prejudice or racial violence, they were removed from the schools. Texts with information and pictures of minorities were also overlooked. Currently, curriculum includes some multicultural literature. Educators should still seek out additional stories that relate to the students in their classrooms. It is important to create a curriculum that is equal to all students. As of right now, the majority of the curriculum is aimed towards mainstream Americans. Minority students are often left to wonder how they fit in to this society and lack positive validation of who they are. Mainstream

American students often do not understand their minority peers due to lack of information on cultural diversity.

There is a plethora of multicultural literature available for educators to support teaching cultural awareness, acceptance, and positive self-concept. Authors of multicultural children's books do not have to be of the same culture, but their background should reflect knowledge of the culture in which they write about. Choosing multicultural books needs to be purposeful and carefully reviewed for bias. It is important for the educator to be aware of bias in literature. Educators who choose appropriate multicultural books can influence the students into more aware beings who development a positive self-concept and are accepting of each other for their differences and similarities.

Critical Analysis

The researcher gained a better understanding of how to use multicultural literature in the elementary classroom and how to integrate it into the curriculum. Minority students should feel that education includes information that is relatable to them. Multicultural literature gives all students the opportunity to learn more about themselves and people around them. Connections can be made between the multicultural books and the students' own lives.

There are several questioned addressed in the study. The following is a critical analysis of the original questions posed in the study.

1. How can the use of multicultural literature affect the self-concepts of culturally diverse students?

Multicultural literature can affect self-concept both positively and negatively. Providing multicultural books allows the students to examine their own actions, beliefs, and emotions by relating to the story. As Marshall (2003) suggested, "It has become clear that what many of us

have taken for evidence of self-esteem is influenced by our cultural perceptions. It is important, therefore, to revisit some of the issues related to self-concept development in light of a more sophisticated understanding of cultural influence” (p. 168). If educators are not careful in their choices of multicultural books, they provide a biased view on cultural differences. When educators are conscious of the multicultural books they bring into the classroom, they will offer books that are relevant and speak to a positive view on cultural diversity which will assist children in building a positive self-concept.

2. How can multicultural literature impact sensitivity in limitedly diverse communities?

Teaching cultural awareness and acceptance is a critical role for educators. In limitedly diverse areas it is especially important. As Ray (2003) stated, “Early childhood educators particularly need to address the issues of cultural, racial, and ethics diversity because the demographics of American society are changing” (p. 136). Students from mainstream culture learn how to respect cultural differences and become aware of the diversity around them when educators model cultural awareness and acceptance.

3. How can educators find appropriate multicultural literature for the elementary classroom?

There are many resources available to educators when searching for anti-bias multicultural literature. Educators need to search for books that portray the following: a realistic view of the culture; realistic illustrations of people, places, and things; and an author who is knowledgeable about the culture in which they write about. Educators have access to books that review multicultural literature. Fox and Short (2003) contend that “We must ensure that young people have regular, meaningful engagements with high-quality children’s books that are culturally authentic and accurate” (p. 22). Even with the assistance of books that were discussed

in this study, it is up to the educator to choose high-quality multicultural books for use in their classroom.

4. How can educators use multicultural literature across the curriculum?

Multicultural literature can be used across the curriculum and use is dependent on the educator's comfort with the materials. Educators should always have a plan on how they will incorporate multicultural books in to their curriculum. First, they need to know why it is important to include multicultural literature. The following are twenty reasons why multicultural literature is needed as identified by Steiner:

- It provides an opportunity for all children to see themselves in the literature.
- It fosters development and positive self-esteem.
- It strengthens the significance of personal heritage.
- It helps raise personal aspirations.
- It provides a means for everyone to learn about people all over the world.
- It recognizes and values the contributions of all people.
- It broadens understanding of history and geography.
- It cultivates respect, empathy, and acceptance of all people.
- It helps build a global community.
- It prevents people from feeling isolated.
- It allows differences and promotes harmony.
- It provides a multitude of opportunities to discuss similarities and differences.
- It promotes social consciousness of people afflicted with social problems.
- It helps overcome denial and fear of differences.
- It provides daily opportunities to talk about diversity and current events.

- It promotes positive actions to rectify unjust behaviors and events.
- It blends easily into themes of study found in schools.
- It provides the needed balance of literature representative of many cultures.
- It offers a good option for locating well-written literature.
- It prepares us for the future. (Steiner, 2001, p. xix)

When the educators understand the importance of using multicultural literature, then they need to decide how to use it. In this study, there were four levels of use identified. The levels are as follows: 1) the contributions approach- acknowledging major contributors and events; 2) the additive approach – use of books and mini-units in the curriculum; 3) the transformation approach- curriculum includes goals to include various perspectives beyond the mainstream perspective; and 4) the social action approach- students become proactive about knowledge gained on a problem or issue relating to a diverse group of people (Banks & Banks, 2007). The main importance for an educator to consider when using multicultural literature across the curriculum is that the educator is comfortable in the strategies they use in the classroom.

Recommendations

This study has highlighted the benefits for students when using multicultural literature across the curriculum in the elementary classroom. The following recommendations are made as a result of the literature review:

1. It is recommended that educators understand the importance of using multicultural literature when addressing cultural awareness, acceptance of diverse cultures, and self-concept.
2. It is recommended that a study be done to determine how effective the use of multicultural literature is on students' views and if the impact has a lasting effect.

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