

Teaching diversity through multicultural literature¹

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Abstract

In times where there seems to be a growing primacy of emotion and opinion over fact and evidence, citizenship, identity and diversity take on added importance. The purpose of this paper is to showcase the importance of children's and adolescents' literature on diversity and on the daily teaching in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. Many researchers have stressed the role of books and literature on teaching, in general (Livingston, 1993; Yokota, 2009). The study of literature on diversity and the "foreign" makes students more open to the different, the "other", as Martinez & Rodriguez have suggested (2013). By studying diversity in its various forms (as they appear in literary texts), teachers help their students to critically understand the text and to form their own opinions and attitudes towards the other, the foreign. Several studies have investigated such an approach to diversity via literature (cf., Belisle, 2008; Bonissome, 1998; Davis, 2005; Gibson, 2012; Ogletree, 2014; Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016; Ruggs & Hebl, 2012; Short, 2009; Szu-Yin Chu, 2016). However, the question still remains: how ready are teachers to approach diversity and what types of teaching methods do they employ in times where fact and evidence appear to take a back seat to emotion and opinion? In this paper, we attempt to offer some preliminary answers to these questions based on the pilot phase responses of a larger project on the subject. The greater aim of this project is to investigate and to suggest methods for an enhanced introduction to diversity via literary texts (Greenfield, 2013).

Introduction

Greece has been transformed into a largely multicultural society. Among other things, this means that schools should be staffed with teachers who, besides being knowledgeable about who and what they teach, are trained to cope with the challenges posed by their multicultural classes (Columnia, 2010; Greenfield,

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2006). Moreover, there have been several studies which have shown the positive impact of specific good practices when working with a culturally diverse group of students (cf., Biseth, 2011; Ippolito, 2010; Pittinsky, 2011).

Specifically, Biseth (2011) reported a study employing samples of students and teachers from Scandinavian countries. The study showed that cultivating a climate of democracy could help create conditions necessary for accepting the other, the different. Similarly, Pittinsky (2011) suggested a programme of acceptance and positive attitudes consisting of five characteristics (forms) and directed towards the other, the stranger: (i) love, (ii) comfort, (iii) affinity, (iv) creation of bonds, and (v) enthusiasm. In a separate study Ippolito (2010) mentioned five (5) key factors (Ippolito used the word *phenomena* when referring to these five factors) that may affect a successful and smooth integration of a student from a different linguistic and cultural environment into a modern multicultural class (Ippolito, 2010). It is worth noting that teachers in an intercultural classroom should be trained in the proper teaching techniques in order to provide the best learning experience to their students. In addition to the aforementioned factors or characteristics that focus on what a class should be (e.g., democracy, love, acceptance of the other), the present article offers a contribution to a different method of teaching based on multicultural literature.

In several studies the idea of multicultural understanding through literature is proposed: (Amer, 2003; Belisle, 2008; Boles, 2006; Bonissome, 1998; Davis, 2005; Gibson, 2012; Ogletree, 2014; Peterson, 2016; Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016; Ruggs & Hebl, 2012; Short, 2009; Szu-Yin Chu, 2016). Multicultural literature may be the key to solving many kind of problems about diversity (Amer, 2003; Gibson, 2012; Kramsch, 2012; Lee, 2012). And really what is the meaning of the word 'diversity'? Diversity is, in itself, a term with a lot of meanings and perspectives. Diversity may refer to foreign and migrant students, students from different cultural environments or students with disabilities, handicapped and other conditions which make them (the students) different than the main student body of a classroom. In today's classrooms, teachers are often called to deal with such situations. Knowledge of a subject matter (e.g., reading, mathematics, social sciences and so on) may not be enough. Teachers should be flexible and able to understand and work with diverse students using all available educational means.

With a story, with a book we can say and learn everything

Modern Greek literature for children involves many questions of diversity and it may be a valuable resource for teachers who wish to achieve a better and smoother integration of their “other” students into their classrooms. Examples of such authors include Manos Kontoleon or Lotti Petrovits-Androutsopoulou

(Kanatsouli, 2002). This is not a novel approach, as several studies mentioned earlier have already investigated such an approach to diversity via multicultural literature (cf., Bonissome, 1998; Gibson, 2012; Ogletree, 2014; Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016; Ruggs & Hebl, 2012; Short, 2009; Szu-Yin Chu, 2016). Many researchers have stressed the role of books and literature on teaching, in general (Livingston, 1993; Yokota, 2009). The study of literature on diversity and the foreign makes students more open to the different, the “other” as Martinez & Rodriguez have suggested (2013). The practice in classroom shows that through a story and a book we can say and learn everything. That phrase was our motto when working with all the themes we tried our hands on in our class. Especially when we read the book of Manos Kontoleon *A History of Fjodor* (2004). The book tells the story of Lioumba, a foreign-born student who comes to a small Greek village and details the difficulties she encounters as she tries to blend in and attend the local school. My students' reaction was that they learned so many more things by reading the book than by trying to find information about the culture of the foreign student of the story.

By studying diversity in its various forms (as they appear in literary texts), teachers help their students to critically understand the text and to form their own opinions and attitudes towards the other, the foreign. However, the question remains: How ready are teachers to approach diversity and what types of teaching methods do they employ in times where fact and evidence appear to take a back seat to emotion and opinion? To answer these questions, a large project was designed in order to investigate the attitudes, opinions and techniques used by active-duty Greek elementary school teachers. The greater aim of the project is to investigate and to suggest methods for an enhanced introduction to diversity via literary texts as suggested earlier by other researchers (Greenfield, 2013). Following is a brief presentation of such an attempt in a regular inner city elementary school classroom from a large urban area in Western Greece.

An everyday example from a Greek elementary school

In today's classrooms teachers attempt to create small groups of students coming from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There are several difficulties in this endeavour; teachers should be aware of how to deal with different students and the particularities of their backgrounds. In my classroom, diversity was the subject and multicultural literature was the key to our situation. More specifically, we talk diversity and then we try to locate diversity in the stories we read. Some of the stories were not so obvious. The different character hides in his/her symbolism. Students had to think about identifying diversity. This is a most important point. Students are asked to actively engage with the text; they are not passive listeners.

They learn to critically stand up to the text and to probe its concepts and implied messages.

An umbrella activity which is included in the official curriculum is *Philanagnosia*. The term literally means *the love of reading* in general. Within the context of philanagnosia, students learn to read literary texts; in our cases our texts have a focus on diversity in its various forms. Then the students report what they learned from the books in the class. A productive discussion on books, diversity ensues.

We also have profited from a separate project titled “Books On Wheels”. This is an original programme implemented and directed by Books-on-Wheels, a non-governmental organisation operating in Greece. The aim of the project is to loan books to schools so that students can read more and expand their literary horizons. The books arrive in a suitcase by mail. Students think of it as a gift coming into the classroom specifically for them. There are 30 book titles in the suitcase, including some books with fewer pages for students who may have difficulty in reading longer texts. The theme we chose was diversity. There are books on the environment, family, and so on. Many activities took place during these 30 days that we had the books in our classrooms. The books had given us ideas for drawing and decorating our classrooms as well. A separate idea sprang from the same Books-on-Wheels project. We found a cooking recipe in a book and a recipe from another country. Hence, a side project on learning other cultures through smells, flavours and foods was initiated.

In addition to these activities, reading more literary texts gave us the incentive to participate in two different literature competitions by two major Greek publishing houses. The goal was to bring new books to our school library. I am happy to report that we were among the winners and we were able to bring more literary books to our school library. Finally, a contemporary Greek author of children's literature, Dionysios Leimonis, came to our school. He presented his work and his new book which is about a diverse group of children exploring the famous Antikythera shipwreck (where the world known Antikythera mechanism was found--A visit to the Archaeological Museum in Athens and the Antikythera exhibit is planned for later). The classroom students were active participants in the presentation of his books last April during World Children's Book Day.

Conclusions

Although, this paper did not present any quantitative (or even qualitative) data on teachers' use of multicultural literature to deal with diversity, it did offer a glimpse into its daily use in a classroom where a large portion of students come from diverse backgrounds, literally a classroom full of others. The use of literature, the constant quest for meaning in books not only enhanced the reading

skills of all students (and most importantly, the struggling ones), but it set the conditions for students to know more about themselves and their diverse peers.

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