

# MULTIPLE CULTURES, MULTIPLE LITERACIES

**N**ations!" exclaimed JJ, when I asked my multicultural fifth-grade class what culture meant to them. "Culture is something of nations; different cultures are like different nations."

"I think culture is closer to religion," said Diana who, interestingly, doesn't affiliate with any particular religion. "Isn't culture what people believe?"

"Mummies are part of culture, part of old Egyptian culture," said Donovan, who, like many other students in my class, became interested in mummies after a Mexican student selected the topic for his research presentation.

"Culture is what we experience," said Nichole. "If a seven-year-old came here from Africa, it would be difficult, because he would know what people did in Africa. He would have to learn a new culture. But his experience would be different if he always lived here."

## Culture as Lived Experience

These students not only represented four different cultural heritages (Mexican, Russian, American Indian, and European), but also had cited four distinct components of the complex concept of culture. When I had asked the students to define culture, I was thinking about culture as behavior, with the tools and constructions of a given group constituting the artifacts of culture. These students, however, were connecting the abstract to the concrete by finding examples from their immediate environment. As I continued to explore the meaning of culture with my fifth-grade students, they touched on other dimensions of culture: the

political, the architectural, even the philosophical. Although I already thought of cultures as fluid, rather than static or distinct, the insights of my multicultural class made me realize how experiential and subjective the notion of culture is.

In my classroom of 34 fifth-graders, 13 were born in another country and 16 speak a language other than English. The other students represent other spectra of diversity. Cultural surprises are a welcome part of our class. Questions about languages, nationalities, and traditions are commonly asked. As a result, I have learned that opportunities to transcend language by using other sign systems allow multiculturalism to flourish.

## Music: The Universal Language

Sari's first musical performance for the class showed how music spurred the students' appreciation of cultural differences. During our first story cycle, Sari, a newly-arrived immigrant from Lebanon, was barely able to speak a sentence in English, and no other Arabic speakers were available to translate in school. With some translation help from his uncle, however, the first draft of his personal narrative about his passion for singing was eventually crafted into a fuller tale about his first musical performance as a preschooler. His parents, having recognized Sari's ability to sing along with the radio, had hired professional musicians to accompany him for a family birthday party. The party had been a great pleasure for his family and a personal triumph for Sari.

During a read-around of the class anthology of the personal narratives, the class

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listened as Sari's heavily-accented voice detailed the expectancy and subsequent success of Sari's singing debut. Immediately, they wanted to hear the song. After some initial hesitation, Sari delivered an a cappella rendition of a highly emotional love song.

Knowing Sari's personality, we had expected to be entertained. We had not, however, expected to witness such a serious presentation of longing and heartbreak. At first, Sari's dramatic hand gestures, his wailing, bent notes, and his direct eye contact startled us. A few nervous laughs were silenced by dirty looks from other audience members. This song was different from more familiar songs, the looks communicated, but must be respected.

The cultural components of Sari's song were celebrated by applause and then scrutinized by questions. Although Sari's limited English prevented him from thoroughly explaining or translating the lyrics, the audience comments revealed that he had communicated many messages in his performance. Later in the week, I learned that two assistant teachers had snickered during a command performance during a pull-out ESL class the next day, and had been abruptly reprimanded by several of the students for not taking the song seriously.

An important precedent had been established in the class: the unfamiliar, the foreign, the exotic, merited respect and should not be the object of ridicule. Knowing full well that challenging those who are different, accusing others of being "weird," and brandishing insults are tools of power among young people, I was particularly pleased that the students had taken their first steps on the path of cultural inclusion.

### **From Painting to Problem Solving: Cultural Bridges**

I can think of many other celebrations of cultural differences in which temporary

language barriers did not obstruct communication in the class. Maria, unable to read and write in English despite some fluency in listening and speaking, was championed for her exquisite watercolors early on in the year. Maria's celebrity as an artist helped her become confident enough to ask her peers for help. Eventually, peer tutors were instrumental in spurring her literacy development. Wilmer arrived from Guatemala shortly after the school year began, but was reluctant to ask questions for months, even in Spanish. When Wilmer at last volunteered to improvise a pantomime during our weekly drama class, the class was ecstatic that he had, metaphorically at least, broken the silence by overcoming his shyness to participate. His humorous take on pantomiming a problem with a machine resulted in later requests that he volunteer for drama roles. Playing with the class pets was a medium of communication for a Turkish student, who was able to implement her creative ideas for getting the hamsters to perform a variety of tasks and tricks. A graphic representation of a math problem allowed Melodie, a French-Iranian student, to suddenly become a math consultant for some of her classmates.

I began to see that nonlinguistic avenues of expression were transcending language differences in many ways. A common misperception of non-English speakers as incapable was eroding. As students were called upon to draw, play piano, play basketball, or solve math problems, strengths were being highlighted. Furthermore, the social interactions spurred by these paralinguistic capabilities helped the limited English speakers to acquire English.

The interactions also helped monolingual English speakers to learn about other languages. One student became so interested in the diverse languages in our classroom that she chose "languages" as the topic of her first research cycle. As part of her research, she made a chart that showed

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common vocabulary in Spanish, Turkish, Russian, Arabic, and the other languages represented by the students. Every single student was beginning to see bilingualism as an advantage worthy of appreciation.

## Multiculturalism as Personal Experience

My previous class had not been as universally accepting of students of other linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Although they constituted a minority view, a handful of students had vocally asserted their dislike and distrust of foreigners. On several occasions throughout the year, I felt compelled to call a class meeting to address questions such as, “Why can’t they just speak English?” or “She doesn’t know anything; she doesn’t even speak English.” Knowing the prejudices of some of the students, I took extra pains to ensure that all voices were heard as often as possible. I often translated Spanish contributions to class conversations, and I tried to introduce controversial topics that would highlight issues of cultural pluralism and the need to respect differences.

The issues I introduced sometimes led to heated debates. When I brought in a newspaper article about migrant workers in rural Oregon, such a debate began. The article revealed that loosely interpreted laws and poor enforcement had resulted in many Mexican children, some as young as eight years old, working on Oregon farms in lieu of attending school. I was taken aback by the article, but the students’ reactions ran the gamut from those who were indignant to those who thought that the migrant workers’ situation was just tough luck. One student who had actually been a migrant worker expressed the idea that everyone should have the right to go to school. Steve summarily dismissed this idea.

“They can go to school in their own country,” said Steve, after I translated the

Mexican student’s comment. “And why should we care about *them*? If they need the money, let them work in the strawberry fields instead of going to school.”

Steve’s comments were characteristically acerbic. In September, Steve would shore up his sense of superiority by putting down his immigrant classmates. One of the few students in the school who weren’t on free or reduced lunch, Steve often seemed surprised when his position of privilege was pointed out. He took his summer vacations, his computer, and his dinnertime conversations with his parents for granted, and thought it only fair that he should have more advantages than most of his other classmates.

Within the first week or two of the school year, Steve was particularly condescending around Ricardo, who, after attending first grade in Mexico, had not attended school until the last month of fourth grade. As Steve realized that Ricardo was a first-rate soccer player, however, he began to respect him. By January, Steve had picked up a number of Spanish words and phrases, and fortunately, not all of them were derogatory.

In January, Steve’s resistance to other languages and cultures showed signs of further erosion. For his literature study, he chose to read *The Clay Marble*, a novel about a family of refugees in Cambodia. After reading the first few chapters, Steve dominated the discussion, frequently demonstrating excitement about the war theme. He kept emphasizing that war was “cool,” and that he would love the chance to use guns. He was not sympathetic to the characters’ plight as they fled from one place to another in search of a safe stopping place. He volunteered to produce an illustration of a scene from the book, and his drawing showed exploding shrapnel.

Ilene, a Cambodian student, was the only student who did not contribute much to the discussions. At first, I thought that her connection to the characters and situa-

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tions in the novel were inhibiting her, but as the literature circles began to explore the book's historical context, we learned that Ilene knew little about Cambodia in the 1970s and was making few personal connections. Ilene had left Southeast Asia as a small child, and she never spoke with her parents about her country of origin despite the fact that she spoke only Cambodian at home.

After persistent urging, initially from me but later from her classmates, Ilene eventually interviewed her parents about their lives in Cambodia during the era depicted in the book. On the day of her report, she had tears in her eyes. Her voice was even softer than usual as she spoke.

"My grandfather was one of Pol Pot's slaves," she told us. "My parents always talked about my grandfather, but I never knew that he was killed. My parents never told me about the war in Cambodia. But last night they told me everything. They were crying and crying."

The silence was tangible; never before had I witnessed a literature circle come to a complete standstill like this. Steve was visibly moved.

"What about your parents?" he asked. "Did they have to work for Pol Pot, too?"

As Ilene continued to recount her parents' story, her personal connections unleashed a flurry of questions about her heritage and her family's plight during the Pol Pot era. Ilene suddenly became an indispensable member of our literature study. The book came alive for us in a new way. Again, Steve's resistance to linguistic and cultural differences began to wane, and he listened intently to Ilene's stories and opinions during the remainder of the literature cycle. Soon thereafter, he chose to study the Vietnam War for his history research. To do this, he teamed up with Thanh, a Vietnamese student whose father had fought in the Vietnam War. Steve and Thanh remain friends to this day.

When my class published its first poetry anthology in May, I realized just how far Steve had come in understanding and appreciating diversity. Marija, a Macedonian who rarely wrote in her first language, had decided to write her poem in Macedonian. After reading the Macedonian version and then an English translation, Steve blurted out a loud comment.

"It sounds so much more beautiful in Macedonian!" Steve's comment was followed by several exclamations of agreement, and one student asked her to read it again.

This was an unforgettable event for me. Steve's hardened resistance to multiculturalism was not so impermeable after all. But it had not happened overnight, and the linguistic and cultural assets of Ilene, Thanh, and Marija had contributed to his softening. So had class meetings about playground conflicts and heated debates about ethnic slurs and immigration issues. Furthermore, the various talents of his classmates had been revealed in music, drama, sports, and other sign systems. I argue that these conduits of expression, along with the experience of living with peers of diverse cultural backgrounds, transformed Steve's views.

## **Celebrating Cultures in Various Sign Systems**

Around the same time that Steve complimented Marija, our school celebrated its first Multicultural Day. This all-day extravaganza of workshops showed us that the transformation I had seen in Steve was also occurring in our school. As our school population has become more multicultural, the staff has worked on helping students to accept differences. Over the years, student incidents of ethnic slurs, group exclusion, and related discipline problems have greatly decreased. The

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staff's excitement about Multicultural Day and the students' overwhelmingly positive response to it seemed symbolic of the continued improvement in school climate.

Multicultural Day started out with an all-school assembly. About 550 students sat in the gym as the school choir started the assembly. First the choir sang a song in different languages, having the audience sing along at designated intervals. The choir's second song communicated the importance of teaching others about peace. Then Anita Silvey, our Title I teacher, told a moving story about her father's immigration to the U.S. from the Philippines, as the audience listened intently. Then she read a big book version of the folktale, *The Most Beautiful Thing in the World*. In the story, a father sends his three sons out into the world to find the most beautiful thing in the world, promising his throne in return. The first brother returns with an exquisite painting, the second with a rare pearl. The third returns empty-handed, apologetically explaining that he ended up giving away the money to needy people he met along the way. The father immediately relinquishes his throne, saying that his third son had indeed found the most beautiful thing in the world: a caring heart. The students, after barely a moment's pause, burst into exuberant applause.

The feeling of unity engendered by the students' reaction pervaded the day. After the assembly, there was a buzz of excitement as the students checked the hallway sign-ups for their four workshop choices. The principal, the staff, and visiting folk artists had planned a total of 42 workshops, each offered twice. All students had confirmation slips to match their slots on the 40'-long sign-up display, and teachers of younger children had walked them through the school to help them identify the locations of their workshop choices. During the sign-ups, older students had helped the younger students read the 42 descriptions and make their selections, and

they continued to mentor the younger children throughout the day.

Luckily, some of the workshops represented the presenters' own cultural heritage. A Japanese American teacher taught an origami class, while an assistant teacher of Russian heritage gave a presentation on Matroyska dolls. A teacher from Dominica presented on Dominican culture and foods, and a Latina parent collaborated with two teachers to conduct a Latin American dance workshop featuring salsa. A Mexican staff member told Mexican legends, and Anita introduced Filipino fashions. The visiting folk artists offered workshops related to their own cultural heritages.

Other teachers gave workshops related to their own experiences in or knowledge about other cultures. My student teacher told stories and showed artifacts he'd gathered in India, and a teacher who lived in Polynesia taught Hawaiian dances. I held a workshop on African music, using instruments I'd gathered in Cameroon and elsewhere. I loved watching the fifth graders showing the first graders how to play the congas and the mbiras, and I laughed out loud while observing the students' joyful free-form dancing to traditional Malinké music.

The final event of the day was a concert of Latin American music, performed by musicians who live in the area and teach music to some of our students. Students who had taken the salsa class were able to demonstrate what they'd learned at the end of the program. Students were also allowed to view some of the visual arts that had been created, from origami constructions to dream catchers. Then everyone returned to their home rooms for a final reflection of the day.

My initial concerns that the day might have been too superficial, a smattering of culture as mere arts and crafts, were allayed by the students' verbal and written responses to the day. Many said it was the "funnest" school day they'd ever had, and

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more than a few mentioned what they'd learned. Best of all, though, were the questions: questions about the people, places, ideas, and arts to which they'd been exposed. I realized that the multicultural exposure our students experience on a daily basis had enhanced their appreciation of the entire day, and that appreciation had enhanced the success of Multicultural Day.

Subsequent events confirmed that the positive effects of Multicultural Day had lingered. I learned that Multicultural Day had been the first day in the school year during which no significant behavior problems occurred. It even appeared that the incidence of ethnic slurs on the way to and from school were diminishing in the weeks following the event. I also saw evidence that the day had had an impact when students made classroom connections to the day, wanting to know more about Japanese art or asking about the location of Nigeria. The hands-on, multiple sign system entries into other cultures during Multicultural Day had planted many seeds of inquiry.

## **Balancing Critique and Celebration**

As I recognized the importance of interaction with those of other ethnic backgrounds, I also realized that mere exposure is not enough to make multiculturalism more than a theory. Students need to accept differences on a daily basis, and this does not happen automatically. Indeed, there have been times in the school's recent history when diversity has been seen as a problem. There have been faculty concerns about bilingual criteria for jobs, student use of ethnic slurs, and harsh criticism of non-English-speaking families at PTO meetings. Yet there seems to be a predominant air of change, of transcendence. Much of this change, however, was forged in fire. Teachers had to openly share their apprehension about growing bilingual concerns, students had to demonstrate a collaborative commit-

ment to eliminating name-calling at school, and parents and teachers who attended PTO meetings had to challenge unfair assumptions about immigrant families.

Multiculturalism is more than a concept. It is a way of knowing based on experience and a multitude of *intersecting* concepts and experiences. There are cultural elements of socioeconomic, gender, age, and other identifying characteristics. These identity markers intersect with other components of our lives as they direct our thoughts and actions. Culture is big and abstract, encompassing both conflicting and complementary identities. Yet at the same time, culture manifests itself in the small everyday interactions of people.

In a multilinguistic setting, it is especially crucial that students use multiple sign systems such as sports, art, music, and drama, to communicate effectively. Students construct culture through these sign systems and are at the same time enriched by them. Many teachers in our school have actively attempted to incorporate alternate sign systems into the curriculum. The more these alternate sign systems become part of the classroom, the broader the available range of multicultural expression.

But the opportunity to critically examine assumptions and biases is just as important as diverse avenues of expression. Students transcend limited points of view by hammering out arguments about what is fair and what isn't. These discussions might occur within the context of a first-grade discussion of a folktale, or during a fifth-grade discussion about a photograph of a concentration camp. As students debate the right and wrong of different views, their questions and disagreements will illuminate cultural differences. Some of these disparities can be reconciled while others can't, and sometimes shouldn't, be compromised. Members of the class, for example, could not agree about the propriety of South Carolina's display of the confederate flag, yet our agreement to disagree

helped facilitate the reconciliation of other important disagreements.

If questions and disagreements are balanced by opportunities for students to express themselves in multiple sign systems, classroom communities can foster cross-cultural understanding. When students demonstrated openness to Arabic music, when Steve expressed appreciation of the Macedonian language, and when the

entire student body applauded charity over materialism, the intersections of multiple sign systems and multiculturalism became apparent. The emotion of song, the lyricism of poetry, and the power of picture books nurtured cross-cultural acceptance and caring. When these and other avenues of expression are encouraged, cultural concepts and understanding are easily expanded.

## Growing Your Knowledge Base

**Text Sets:** When readers read two or more texts that are related in some way, they are encouraged to share and extend their comprehension of each text differently than if only one text had been read and discussed. Text sets highlight the strategy of searching for connections as we read. As readers make connections between texts, they begin to see the reading event as an experience in itself. A reader can read one text to prepare for reading and understanding a second text. The focus is not on what readers have to do to get ready to read, but on what happens when readers read one text to facilitate their understanding of other, related texts. In addition, reading related texts encourages discussion among a group of students. Because they have read different texts, they have a real reason for sharing their books with one another. I have shared two sample lists below.

(This idea comes from Harste, J. C., Short, K., & Burke, C. (1988). *Creating Classrooms for Authors*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.)

### **Text set: A focus on culture**

Christiansen, Candace. *Calico and Tin Horns*. New York: Dial.

Gibbons, Kaye. *Mountain Wedding*. New York: William and Morrow.

Hendershot, Judith. *In Coal Country*. New York: Alfred A. Knoff.

Miller, Jay. *American Indian Festivals*. New York: Grolier.

Polacco, Patricia. *The Keeping Quilt*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Reeder, Carolyn. *Shades of Gray*. New York: Avon.

Sheldon, Dylan. *The Whales' Song*. New York: Dial.

### **Text Set: A focus on social issues**

Burleigh, R. (1997). *Hoops*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Burns Knight, Margy. (1995). *Talking Walls*. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House.

Burns Knight, Margy. (1996). *Who Belongs Here?: An American Story*. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House.

Cha, D. (1996). *Dia's Story Cloth*. New York: Lee & Low.

Cisneros, S. (1990). *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage.

Coleman, Evelyn (1996). *White Socks Only*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.

Feeling, T. (1995). *The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo*. New York: Dial.

Lester, Julius. (2000). *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. New York: Puffin.

Lorbiecki, Marybeth. (1998) *Sister Anne's Hands*. Illus. K. Wendy Popp. New York: Dial.

Martinez, Victor. (1996). *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*. New York: HarperCollins.

Miller, William. (1998). *The Bus Ride*. New York: Lee & Low.

Soto, Gary. (1992). *Living up the Street*. New York: Laurel Leaf.