Zygmunt-Fillwalk, E. and Clark, P. (2007). “Becoming multicultural: Raising awareness and supporting change in teacher education”. *Childhood Education*, 83:5, 288-293.

Heather Barton

Kennesaw State University

Abstract

Multiculturalism is an often-buzzed work in academia. Teachers are encouraged to include multicultural texts within the classroom. However, Zygmunt-Fillwalk and Clark argue that the term multicultural does not just mean text rather that the term multicultural is a euphemism for a more evolved, connected, compassionate being. The way to become a multicultural being is through encounters with culture.

In classrooms all across America, teachers enter from pre-service education filled with ideas of the need to incorporate multicultural literature within the classroom. With the amount of students from all cultures increasing in the average classroom, the biggest challenge that these teachers face is that they are not from a minority and thus do not represent a culture that upwards of 40% of students represent. The mono-cultural experience that many teachers have leads to a misunderstanding of how to begin to add multicultural literature studies into the classroom in an authentic manner.

However, the lack of knowledge and experience should not be a deterrent. The process of becoming a multicultural person is to explore the nuances of one’s own culture first. In some instances this will allow those students who see themselves as not having a culture to explore the differences that are uniquely their own. The exploration of self-culture can be done through poetry circles where all members of the classroom (teacher and students alike) share their stories and background.

After examination and acceptance of one’s own culture, the next step is to explore other cultures. The best way to explore is through immersion within a culture. The use of high-quality texts within a classroom that represents these cultures is an effective means to immerse a student into an unknown culture. Yet this lacks the ability for the pre-service teacher to actually see and experience the culture first hand. Study abroad programs also allow students to immerse themselves within a culture and to experience the culture as an outsider, a guest who must conform to cultural norms. The drawback to study abroad programs is that not all can participate. Finally, Zygmunt-Fillwalk suggests that where immersion into another culture is not possible for a pre-service teacher, that simulations of cultures within a classroom can help the pre-service teacher understand a culture.

Once the encounters have been completed, the student must reflect on the experience. Challenging students to look through new lens at cultures and their experiences will allow for the growth of multicultural teachers who will lead their own classes into becoming multicultural beings in their own right.

Application

I employ many of the strategies suggested within this article. I begin each year with a feather circle in which students share their constructed “Where I’m From” poems. During the creation of these poems, I offer examples from past students, teachers, and colleagues. This allows students who believe that they lack a unique culture to explore and push their beliefs. The sharing of the crafted writing allows all members of the circle to embrace the uniqueness of the cultures that make up the fabric of our classroom.

Through Zygmunt-Fillwalk’s words, I feel challenged as a teacher to look at my own beliefs of culture. What beliefs and traditions do I believe in? What myths and mysteries of other cultures do I need to explore? While I like the idea of immersion, I realize that this is not a possible step for many of us teachers. I would love to see multicultural workshops offered within university for teachers already in the field to come and explore in a structured immersion the nuances of a culture.

* What steps do I need to improve of my own understanding of culture, and how can I explore opportunities to immerse myself within a culture to further enhance my understanding of the culture?