Page, M. L. (2004). “Going beyond the book: A multicultural educator in the english language arts classroom”. *Voices From the Middle*, ProQuest, 12:1.

Lindsay Kovel

Kennesaw State University

Abstract

Multicultural literature in the classroom , to many educators, is primarily reading short stories, poetry, or novels from other cultures and utilized similarly to canonical literature by simply reading and discussing the plot in its context and avoiding discussing how students’ own backgrounds can help aid in meaningful discussion. Often teachers avoid having the difficult discussions and fail to discuss the impact the literature used has on understanding or even attempting to delve into students’ own experiences.

Choosing the right piece of work to discuss and examine and analyze is only half the battle. Page (2004) argues that “merely the presence of multicultural literature in the classroom does not guarantee student learning, motivation, or transformation.” This magical transformation from nonreaders and nonthinkers to strong readers with critical thinking and application skills simply does not occur unless there is a real connection to both the environment for learning and the literature.

Page presents a myriad of strong activities to create that safe, comfortable, and most importantly, culturally responsive environment. These activities that create the safe environment often get overlooked and could have the largest impact on participation and caring or are used in the first week of school and never returned to again. Some activities Page mentions include writing “I am” and “I am from” poems, creating surveys, partner reading, inviting guests from the community to speak to classrooms, and conducting interviews of students and other members of the school.

Page also alludes that particular behaviors for establishing trust help to mould that strong working environment. Providing constructive feedback enhances student understanding of expectations and also assists in creating that connection between student and teacher.

Having students take up action or a personal cause helps them connect even more to literature that yearns for advocacy, particularly of a group of people. When students take on these causes, they develop interest as well as a global connection to the issue. Social justice and multicultural literature tend to go hand in hand, and with this knowledge, students feel connected and expert on an issue. Page’s most important lesson she wants readers to glean is that students can easily read a multicultural text, but it is the personal connection to the literature in a meaningful environment that helps them succeed, step back, and reflect upon the important messages or issues in the texts.

Application

Page’s article really resonated with me as a World Literature teacher because I tend to teach the course through a social justice lens. I have students create social justice “blogs for a cause,” and they examine this cause throughout the semester in relation to the texts we read. By examining that lens that they chose, they take on so much more authority in discussion and they care about what they read because it has impact. I am a passionate advocate for student voices, and I think it is foolish to not tap into that. World Literature and Multicultural literature are two courses that can often be taught using this social justice lens, and I found the article meaningful. I know that I have students do far more of those “get to know you” activities at the beginning of the semester, and then I get bogged down by other standards-based activities and lose sight of them. It’s important to remember to tap back in every once in a while to have mini-checkups of change/growth.

Community building was a central focus of this article, and although meaningful, I would have liked to have seen more text selection and what kinds of questions come up from that discussion in schools.

Question: How can educators deal with other teachers in their departments who are not on board with multicultural focuses in the classroom or a lack of budget allocation to new materials that are necessary to teach course titles like Multicultural Literature or World Literature?