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Teacher Experiences and Perceptions: Multicultural Literature

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Master’s Research Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to observe and assess the perceptions of teachers, both in-service and pre-service, with regards to the use of multicultural literature in classrooms. Two separate questionnaires were prepared, one for the pre-service English teachers and one for the English teachers in-service in middle and high schools. Both groups were asked to define multicultural literature and comment on their interaction with students from diverse ethnic groups. The in-service teachers were asked about books they use in their classrooms; while pre-service teachers were asked to recall the multicultural books they had read when they were in school. Based upon the results of the questionnaires a conclusion was formed about how multicultural literature is perceived by teachers.

Keywords: teachers, perceptions, multicultural literature
This Research Project is dedicated to

my husband, Khurrum
&
children, Affan, Ayat and Rayyan.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Teacher Experiences and Perceptions: Multicultural Literature

Background

United States is a land of immigrants. People of many races, color, language, culture and heritage call this pluralistic nation home. According to Howard (2006) more than a million immigrants enter United States each year. Most of these immigrants come from South America, Mexico and Asia. After the 2000 census it was estimated by the US Census Bureau that about 28% of the nation’s population comprised of people of color. It is predicted that by 2050 one in every five Americans would be a person of color or an immigrant. In 2002, 40% of the student population comprised of students from non-White households, but more than 90% of the teachers are White (National Center for Educational statistics, 2003; Howard, 2006). “As a result of a majority White teacher force our curriculum remain Euro centric and mono cultural” (Howard, 2006, p.4). Majority of our teachers advocate and preach the lesson of “melting pot” whereas majority of the researchers and educators agree that students learn better if they can see themselves in the curriculum taught in schools. Advocates of multicultural literature believe that multicultural literature should be part of our curriculum because it enables us to grasp the reality of our pluralistic society.

History of racial discrimination in United States

United States has a history of conquest and slavery. Europeans created an aura of intellect and intelligence for themselves and categorized the indigenous people and the people of color as savages and infidels who were uncultured and needed saving. Whites, as a dominant group ascertained for themselves a place at the top of the cultural
hierarchy. They considered their culture, history, language and literature to be superior to those of the ethnic groups or people of color. In order to be accepted as Americans, the immigrants were expected to, “melt away their distinctive difference and emerge in the image of Anglo-conformity” (Howard, 2006, p.54).

Our White teachers of today, unaware themselves, bring this idea of White superiority in classrooms, when they decide that the only literature, art or music exceptional enough to be categorized as classical is European or in other words White and it is the teacher perception that drives and moves our educational system. Some teachers pride themselves on being color blind and perceive themselves as non-racists because “they don’t see color”(Howard, 2006, p.63). Color blindness is an offshoot of melting pot and “similar to the melting pot idea, the declaration of colorblindness assumes that we can erase our racial categories, ignore differences, and thereby achieve an illusory state of sameness or equality. This colorblind perspective treats race as an “irrelevant, invisible and a taboo topic” (Rist, 1974; Schofield, 2000; Howard, 2006).

This colorblind perspective of the teachers lead them to believe that if they teach writers like Dickens, Shakespeare, or Poe then they are doing a favor to the students. The rationale is that teaching classics allows education to continue at a neutral level without any discussion of racial or ethnic history or controversy.

After the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s multicultural revolution was born, but unfortunately, even today, in mainstream education it means putting excerpts of Dr. King’s “I have a dream speech” on the walls and celebrating a Black history month and a multicultural week with food and clothes from around the world. It is the baggage, knowledge and perception that a teacher brings in a classroom that either colors the world
of students and make them appreciative and emphatic towards cultures different from their own or turn them into adults who view the world with feelings of dominance, ignorance, bias and confusion.

**Research Question**

This research project strives to answer the following research question:

- How is multicultural literature perceived by in-service and pre-service teachers?

Teachers have a tendency to teach what they know and how they were taught. One quote by Malcolm X describing the teachers’ attitude states, “we can’t teach what we don’t know, and we can’t lead where we can’t go.” This quote effectively describes the need for a positive teacher attitude towards the teaching of literature from diverse cultures and ethnicities. This research was conducted to observe teachers’ opinions and perceptions of multicultural literature. As universities today, emphasize the use and importance of the multicultural literature genre, a separate questionnaire was prepared for pre-service teachers to observe and assess if their views and perceptions of multicultural literature modified after their exposure to this genre during their college years.

**Significance of the Research**

“Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another’s skin, another’s voice, another’s soul” (Oates, 1996, p.16). Teachers’ perceptions and believes affect their students. Plethora of research suggests that “using multicultural literature is the first step toward eliminating stereotyping and prejudice and helping students develop a cultural identity” (Hazza & Bucher, 2008). Explaining how multicultural literature can help all the children, Steiner (2008) writes, “It provides an opportunity for all children to see themselves in literature. It fosters development of
positive self-esteem. It prevents people from feeling isolated and cultivates respect, empathy, and acceptance of all people” (p.88).

Multicultural literature provides children with an understanding that even though people from diverse cultural backgrounds might have a different history but they are the same as far as one’s family dynamics, dilemmas of friendship, love and growing up are concerned. Multicultural literature enables children to make connections and also to view the world from the perspective of others.

Many teachers have a tendency to generalize and in many cases teachers, because they themselves are unaware about particular cultural or ethnic group stereotype students based on their own preconceived prejudices. As the world becomes, in the words of Friedman, “flat” (2006) then the ever shrinking borders require that we learn about the diverse cultures of the world.

This research was conducted with the purpose of asking both pre-service and in-service teachers their views and opinions about using multicultural literature in the classroom. It was also hoped that discussion about multicultural literature might augment teachers desire to use multicultural literature in their classrooms.

**Definitions of Significant Terms**

- Multicultural Education is defined as “education appropriate for all Americans, regardless of ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, or other distinct heritage” (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005, p.5).

- Multicultural Literature is defined as books, “that reflect the diverse cultural experiences, traditions, histories, values, world views, and perspectives of the diverse cultural groups that make up a society” (Mestre & Scott, 1997, p.185).
Israel Zangwill coined the term Melting Pot in his play “The Melting Pot” in 1909 to describe United States of America as, “America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming” (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005, p.8).

Salad Bowl is a metaphor used to describe the United States of today where, “a variety of different ethnic groups symbolize the ingredients which reserve their own flavor and texture while contributing to the aggregate salad” (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005, p.10).

Organization of the study
Chapter one provides an introduction to this research study. It provides the background and history of multicultural movement in the United States. It also describes the research question and significance of the study along with the definitions of the important terminology; chapter two provides a brief review of the extensive literature citing the importance of using multicultural literature in classrooms. Chapter three describes the method of research; it provides information about the participants and research sites. Any limitations that might have been a factor in this research are also stated in chapter three; chapter four discusses the results and the implications of the study and presents several strategies for incorporating multicultural literature in classrooms and chapter five concludes the study with a brief summary of the study.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Teacher Perceptions

The literature stressing the use and importance of multicultural literature in classrooms is immense and vast. Multicultural literature generally refers to literature that portrays characters, ideas, and perspectives from all around the world. Literature from around the world helps everyone curb stereotyping and generalizations. Researchers and educators agree that multicultural literature should be part of our curriculum because it enables us to grasp the reality of our pluralistic society. “Multicultural literature can serve as a mirror of students’ own cultures and a lens through which they can view the cultures of others” (Stallworth, 2006, p.479).

It is teacher’s perceptions and understanding that make the use of multicultural literature a success. Though there are many researchers and educators who advocate the use of multicultural literature, some educators believe that finding differences would divide instead of bringing people together. There is an unwritten, hidden assumption amongst the educators of our youth “that White represents the norm in thoughts and behavior” (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005, p.11).

Multicultural theorists and researchers also face a great deal of resistance from teachers who believe that if differences were made more visible then the concept of “America as one” would be lost. Furthermore some teachers worry that multicultural literature might not be effective because it has not passed the test of time. Many teachers are reluctant because they themselves are not familiar with literature from other parts of the world. They also argue that to teach literature from diverse cultures, they need not
only to be experts in history and cultures of the world; they also need time, which is not readily available because they have to cover the provided required curriculum.

Even if a teacher decides to incorporate multicultural literature some parents and administrators would argue that using multicultural literature would not prepare the students for further advanced studies in colleges and universities. As in higher institutions of learning there is an emphasis on learning works from only European and American authors like Shakespeare, Dickens, Hardy, James Joyce, Steinbeck, Conrad and the likes, reading and learning multicultural literature will not benefit students.

Stallworth (2006) interviewed teachers to research their perceptions about multicultural literature and one of the teacher commenting on censorship concerns stated, “I don’t use any works other than the classics because they just seem to have less objectionable subject matter as far as parents are concerned” (p.484). Howard also mentions a similar response by a teacher in his book (2006) who in response to the lack of using multicultural literature replied, “as a white teacher I feel insecure, and I don’t know if it is my place to bring these issues up with my students” (p.8). In 2007, commenting on the curriculum of North American texts, Lee Gunderson wrote, “North American educators appear to view education within a mainstream viewpoint; One that focuses on European values and beliefs, even though their school populations grows increasingly multicultural” (p.11).

United States has always being diverse with “distinct racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural groups” (Tiedl & Tiedl, 2005, p.11). Although the history and story of United States is the story of all the people who call United States home, in our schools we learn about the history of “few” (Tiedl & Tiedl, 2005, p.11). Even today, in
our schools we use textbooks that portray stereotypes of many races and this stereotypical attitude is transferred from teachers and textbooks to the students. “Native Americans in many social studies textbooks are still portrayed as a bellicose, war-like people, African Americans as incompetent and violent, Asian Americans as passive and duplicitous and Puerto Rican Americans as violence-prone and dangerous” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997 p.171). If we want our students to understand and accept the concept of diversity and pluralism in all its entity, we need teachers to develop a penchant for multicultural literature.

**Importance of multicultural literature**

Stories can generate an attitude that does not see race as a barrier but as a natural identity contributing to the beauty of our world. Exposure to multicultural literature can encourage students to seek changes that do not discriminate against any individual (Johnson & Smith, 1993, p.6).

There is extensive research that cites the importance of using multicultural literature in classrooms. Researchers like Banks (2009); Billings (1994); and Nieto (2004), contend that using multicultural literature in classrooms creates awareness and empathy for others and when minorities see themselves depicted in literature and curriculum it raises their self-esteem.

Banks in his article, Human Rights, Diversity, and Citizenship Education (2009) argues that, “students must experience democratic classrooms and schools that reflect their cultural and identities to internalize human rights, values, ideals and behaviors” (p.100). Discussing the cultural assimilation of the early 1800 and 1900s, Banks mentions that students from ethnic groups were taught to be ashamed of their culture, heritage and
language. Every effort was made to assimilate them into the mainstream America. Banks effectively presents the dilemma of the modern man, who because of globalization is not just part of one culture or community but is part of two or more cultures. Banks argues that students should be taught citizenship education in a manner that enables them to see themselves in relation to others. A similar sentiment is echoed by Billings (1994) where she writes, “students who feel part of the school culture are less likely to fail in school settings” (p.11).

Steven Wolk (2009) commented on the importance of making English relevant to our world. He interviewed high school boys and asked them what reading and English was about, and the answer he got was that it was not about anything. This was because in today’s classroom the job of the English teacher is to teach student comprehension, answer their questions and teach to the test without any concern about the students’ world or identity. In fact, a reading teacher is in a position to shape, mold and create inquisitive, questioning minds. If teachers use books that encourage students to see not only themselves but also their less visible peers, a teacher can, through enthusiasm and positive perception encourages these students to become emphatic, aware and responsible global citizens of tomorrow. Reading classes can also be a venue for teaching themes of caring, empathy, morality, justice and social responsibility.

Kristi (2005) serves as a good example to curb the responses of the teachers who mention they do not have time to prepare and teach a unit based on multicultural literature. Any kind of literature can be used to engage students into a discussion about racism, prejudice and the importance of diversity. A teacher using 16th and 17th century British literature, for example, can ask students to visualize the European society at that
time and ask if they believed any ethnic groups were part of the high society at that time. This can lead to a lesson into history that can serve as a basis for a discussion of the importance of learning and understanding the cultures of people who do not look and sound like us.

Majority of the times multicultural education is associated with ethnic food and music festivals which do not provide an accurate picture of the ethnic group depicted because these food and multicultural weeks tend to portray people from other cultures as “foreign and exotic” (Glasgow & Rice, 2007, p.5). Thus it often leads to the misunderstanding and stereotyping of cultures and ethnicities. According to Slater (2009), teachers often frame multicultural education in terms of merely teaching about cultural differences but it is only when multicultural literature is taught with regards to the contextual knowledge that leads to real learning and understanding. This was demonstrated by Louie (2005) when she used Feng Jaci’s Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom (1995) to teach about the Chinese Cultural Revolution. When the students are provided social, political, historical and cultural context then students gain cross cultural empathy and awareness. “I discovered that students are inherently interested in the limitless diversity of the world, if only we introduce it to them” (Wilson, 2004 p.24). In order to create well informed citizen of tomorrow we, the teachers, have to employ multicultural literature to teach not only about how others live but also to enable our students to understand the world around them.

Landt (2007) suggests that teachers using multicultural literature should be careful so as not portray these books as “cute or exotic” (p.19). These books should be treated as any other books and they should not be taught as a representation of that culture.
Choosing appropriate and authentic representative literature is not only the first step but it is also the most important step towards creating and teaching a multicultural unit because if the material selected is not authentic then it distorts the impression and views formed by the students. Recently, the researcher came across a young adult literature book called, The Homeless Bird (2000) written by Gloria Whelan. This book is set in India; and is about a teenage girl who is married off by her parents but soon after is widowed. The novel then describes her struggles for survival and how in the end she finds love. Though this novel has an underlined theme of the importance of education but being from that part of the world the researcher could not find anything in this book that was an authentic depiction of mainstream India. Whelan in her interview on PBS acknowledged that she had never been to India and her novel was based on her research. After reading this book the question that comes to my mind is what if this was the only book about India that the students read. What would their impression be about that country? Pondering the same question Stewart (2008) writes,

> Readers can easily come away from the text believing that, with the exception of a few enlightened people, India is an “inferior” country with “strange” traditions. Under these conditions, India and Indians become the ultimate ‘other’, a place and group of people to be gazed upon with some degree of condensation if not contempt (p.100).

It is crucial that teachers be aware of the impression the chosen book would create on the students and should chose literature that authentically represents the chosen ethnic group or culture. One book can never portray an authentic picture of any culture and Landt (2007) suggests that a teacher should either treat multicultural books simply as
books or should at least take two books that portray that particular culture from parallel viewpoint.

Teacher perspectives play a vital role in the selection and use of materials for their classrooms. National Educational Association reported in 2003 that more that 90% of our teachers are White. Racism and prejudice, unconsciously becomes part of the curriculum, when teachers make comments about being colorblind. Making comments about being colorblind do not make these teachers ineffective or bad but it raises the question of the teachers being “uncomfortable about accepting diversity” (Billings, 1994; Howard, 2006).

Ketter and Lewis (2001) interviewed several teachers to understand the significance of the role teacher beliefs and perspectives play in the selection and use of multicultural literature. One teacher mentioned she did not use books like Journey to Topaz (Uchida, 1971); a story about the Japanese internment camps during Second World War because learning about “these kinds of injustices would make students doubt the foundation of this country” (Ketter & Lewis, 2001, p.178). White teachers have a tendency to resist the underlined political or racial discrimination message that multicultural literature provides. This was apparent from the teacher interviews by Ketter and Lewis (2001) when several teachers mentioned that though slavery is mentioned in the textbooks but it is not a topic that is acknowledged out aloud because it would create feelings of shame and hatred and might even encourage racism, so teachers focused on “universal commonalities” (p.178). There is no doubt that it is important to teach about universal commonalities but what about the differences? If we do not teach our students our “actual history” then how can we expect them to grow to be responsible, aware
adults? We, as teachers would then in part be responsible for creating an ignorant generation.

In 1996, endorsing the use of multicultural literature, International Reading Organization (IRA) and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) stated that students should read works that, “reflect the diversity of the United States’ population in terms of gender, age, social class religion, and ethnicity” (p.28). These standards also state that reading multicultural literature, “builds an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience” (p.29). Though this endorsement points to the importance of teaching multicultural literature in classrooms majority of the teachers perceive the use of multicultural literature in classrooms as “problematic” (Stallworth, 2006, p.483). Teachers reason that using White classical literature is a way to keep learning neutral. Majority of the times teachers are presented with a curriculum that they are expected to teach and thus have no input in the selection. Researchers and theorists like Banks, 2009; Billings, 1994; Howard, 2006; Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Neito, 2004; Stallworth, 2006; argue that using multicultural literature creates not only awareness of “others” but it also boosts the self-esteem of students with diverse cultures and religious backgrounds.

Though the literature stressing the significance of using multicultural literature in classrooms is vast, the researcher was not able to locate any studies that compared the multicultural perspectives of in-service teachers to the multicultural perspectives and understanding of the pre-service teachers to assess if the use of multicultural literature and diversity classes in universities have broadened the horizons of pre-service teachers. The aim of this research project is to analyze the perspectives of pre-service and in-
service teachers towards multicultural literature and then present several strategies for incorporating multicultural literature in classrooms.
Chapter Three: Research Design

This research project was designed to learn about the perceptions of in-service and pre-service teachers towards multicultural literature. For the purpose of this research two questionnaires were prepared; one for the in-service teachers and other for the pre-service teachers. The in-service questionnaire comprised of seven questions whereas the pre-service questionnaire was designed to ask ten questions. Both the questionnaires asked about the interactions the respondents have had with people from other cultures and their views about multicultural literature. In-service questionnaire asked the teachers to name some of the books they used in their classes. Pre-service teachers, on the other hand were asked to recall books they had read while in high school. Both pre-service and in-service teachers were asked to define multicultural literature and ponder about the problems they associate with teaching multicultural literature. Both these groups were also asked to explain how they perceived the society in The United States; as a melting pot or as a salad bowl. In-service teachers were asked to describe some of the strategies they use in their classroom to teach about other cultures and pre-service teachers were asked to describe some strategies they would adapt to teach their students about diversity.

Participants

The basis of this research project is the response to the questionnaires by the in-service and pre-service teachers. For the purpose of this research thirty-five questionnaires were sent out to the English teachers in middle and high schools located in rural Appalachia. Out of these thirty-five questionnaires, eighteen questionnaires were completed and returned. Undergraduate pre-service teachers candidates enrolled in a Methods course in a university in the same region were invited to complete the pre-
service questionnaire. This methods class comprised of thirty-five students and twenty-two pre-service questionnaires were received back; but seven out of the twenty-two provided no answers other than the monosyllabic yes or no. These seven questionnaires were thus not included in the research analysis and only the fifteen completed pre-service questionnaires were used for the purpose of analysis and discussion.

**Procedure**

In order to learn about the teacher perceptions towards multicultural literature a collective case study was conducted and the responses to both in-service and pre-service questionnaires were then qualitatively analyzed. Undergraduate teacher candidates in an English methods class at a university in rural Appalachia were invited to complete the pre-service questionnaire. These students were provided the background information about the research project. They were informed that their responses would remain anonymous therefore they should provide honest answers. They were asked to think back towards their high school years and answer about the interactions they have had with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. They were also asked to recall if they had read any book during their high school years that depicted culture other than the dominant culture. They were not informed that their responses would be compared to the responses of the in-service teachers because the researcher was wary that this might lead the teacher candidates to be cautious about providing honest answers and they might be deceptive and provide answers that they viewed were appropriate but not necessarily candid and forthright.

Pre-service teachers were then provided with the in-service questionnaire with a request to have their co-operating teachers complete these questionnaires. No contact
was initiated with the in-service teachers because the researcher was cautious that her ethnicity might influence the teacher responses. After the completed questionnaires were received, the answers were qualitatively compared to form a conclusion about the types of books taught and read in middle and high school English classrooms. The researcher also compared and analyzed the responses to ascertain how teachers defined multicultural literature and the difficulties that they associated with using this literary genre in classrooms. The responses provided by the pre-service teacher candidates to the importance of multicultural literature were compared with the response to the same question as provided by the in-service teachers. The rationale for this comparison was to observe the difference of approach between the two groups. As teacher preparation programs of today emphasize the importance of understanding and respect for diverse cultures and groups, the researcher with this research project desired to investigate if the teachers of the future, after learning about multicultural books in college will use them in their classrooms or as suggested by Banks (1996), Neito (2004) and Howard (2006) would teach books they themselves read in middle and high schools.

**Limitations**

Participants were asked to complete the survey authentically and anonymously. There were no interviews or any follow-up questions due to the constraint of time. This is considered a limitation because if the participants had any questions they could not ask for clarification and the researcher could also not ask for elaborations, explanations or clarifications.

Pre-service questionnaire was completed by undergraduate students in a teacher education program at a university in rural Appalachia. The respondents of the pre-service
questionnaire were the researcher’s peers. This is considered a limitation, because familiarity with the researcher’s ethnic background might have influenced their answers to some degree, even though they were requested to honestly respond to the questions.
Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

In-Service Questionnaire

The in-service questionnaire comprised of seven questions (appendix A) and was prepared with the intention of learning about the teachers’ perceptions towards multicultural literature. In-service questionnaire was completed by fifteen high school teachers as well as three middle school teachers teaching in rural Appalachian schools. Their representative comments were quoted in italics below for clarity with the researcher’s comments and analysis.

1. What kinds of interaction have you had with students from diverse ethnic groups?

All the teachers surveyed except two said that they have not had any interaction with students from diverse ethnic groups. One of the teachers mentioned,

My high school doesn’t have much diversity as a whole in any respect. It is unfortunate and it poses many problems with stereotypes. I often have students say offensive things simply because they are unaware and have never felt the need to censor their words.

One other teacher answering this question wrote,

Very little, my school’s population is mostly white; we have a very small population of African-Americans and our Hispanic and Asian population is non-existent unless we have visiting foreign exchange students.

This comment reflects the concern of cultural theorists and educators (Banks, 1993; Howard, 2006; Nieto, 2003; Steinberg, 1997; Sleeter, 2003; Tiedt, 2005) who are concerned that lack of diversity in schools leads to stereotypical portrayal of ethnic
groups. Teachers who do not use multicultural literature in their classrooms with appropriate contextual materials and references make their students’ minds fertile ground for the cultivation of stereotypes. One other teacher mentioned,

I always have a few international students from Asia, Middle East and Europe every year and a few Jewish, African-American or Muslim American students every year. One year I tried teaching World literature to create awareness but it created uproar in the community.

This response echoed the concerns of many researchers (Gilton, 2007; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1993 & Stallworth, 2006) that mentioned teachers did not use multicultural literature in classroom because they were apprehensive about the community and administrative response.

2. Name some of the books you use in your classes.

The rationale for this question was to obtain a curriculum design that would hint at the categories of books that are part of the middle and high school English classrooms. William Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” was mentioned as a book taught in every high school surveyed. Only three high school teachers mentioned using books in their classrooms that depicted the culture and history of the minority groups. The books mentioned by the teachers were, To Kill a Mocking Bird (Lee, 1960), Night (Wiesel, 1955), Angela’s Ashes (Mc Court, 1996) and All Things fall Apart (Achebe, 1958). All the other teachers surveyed mentioned using books like Treasure Island (Stevenson, 1919), Pride and Prejudice (Austen, 1813), Rebecca (Maurier, 1938), Fahrenheit 451 (Bradbury, 1953) and The Catcher on the Rye (Salinger, 1951).
Teacher responses to this question were reminiscent of the teacher responses mentioned by Stallworth (2006) where the teachers interviewed by him mentioned that they use books that have stood the test of time. With the exception of Angela’s Ashes (Mc Court, 1996) all the books mentioned by the teachers surveyed were published more than fifty years ago. Using books that do not echo our pluralistic society reiterates the concerns by Banks (1993; 2003 & 2009) that schools are not preparing the citizens of tomorrow for the global world of the future.

3. How would you define multicultural literature?

All the teachers surveyed were aware of the multicultural genre and were able to provide a working definition for multicultural literature. One teacher defined multicultural literature as, “literature by authors from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities with characters who reflect author’s diverse experience and values.” In response to this question another teacher replied, “Literature from various places in the world and various cultures. It encompasses authors who represent various perspectives and voices: men; women places outside of the United States and different socioeconomic statuses.”

It was interesting to notice that although all the teachers surveyed were aware of the multicultural literature but only three teachers out of the eighteen respondents mentioned using books that reflects the cultures of diverse minority groups.

4. What are some of the problems you associate with teaching multicultural literature?

Out of the eighteen teachers surveyed two middle school and one high school teacher mentioned not having any problems with multicultural literature because they only used books that “are appropriate for all my students.” All the teachers surveyed
mentioned that there were many problems associated with teaching multicultural literature. This was the only question where teachers let go of their inhibitions and vented their frustrations. They mentioned curriculum constraints, administrative restrictions and parental and community uproar as some of the problems associated with multicultural literature. One teacher commented, “The classes we are assigned have stipulated pieces that must be taught, leaving very little room or tie for multicultural literature.” One other teacher vented the frustrations by writing, “We don’t own books/multicultural literature is few and far between in text.” Another interesting observation was presented by a teacher, who wrote,

I think the title of the genre is problematic. If we’re teaching literature from all the areas of the world, including the U.S, then it fits. However, if the goal is to teach the unheard voices of the colonized people/oppressed people, then the title/focus should change.

Many teachers commented that they face resistance from parents and students, as one teacher wrote,

Parents complain about non-main stream literature and do not want to deviate from Whitman, Dickens Poe and Shakespeare. There is resistance from the students. Some students do not have an open mind when reading the material and consider this literature controversial.

This comment was reminiscent of the research conducted by Ketter and Lewis (2001); Louie (2005) and Stallworth (2006). All these researchers mentioned that many teachers did not use multicultural literature because they did not want resistance from their students. Teaching is a work of passion and majority of the people who enter the
teaching profession do so with the desire of making a difference but instead of support when they find criticism and resistance from administrators, parents, community or students then many times they succumb to their demands and teach within the restraints and confines of the established curriculum. The response to this question provides information of the teacher perspectives toward multicultural literature. The teachers surveyed mentioned their desire for using multicultural literature in their classrooms but they find themselves bound by the constraints of the administration, curriculum and community.

5. How do you view United States: as a “melting pot” or a “salad bowl”.

Elaborate.

Out of the eighteen respondents twelve teachers mentioned that they viewed United States as a combination of salad bowl and melting pot, four considered it to be a melting pot and two viewed United States as a salad bowl. One of the teachers in response to this question wrote,” The U.S is a’ melting pot’ particular in reference to immigrant groups of the past. However, there are ‘salad bowls’ within the ‘melting pot’. It depends on what part of the U.S you are in.” Another teacher wrote, “I grew up with the melting pot analogy and as our U.S population becomes increasing more bi-racial, I think the term is appropriate.” One other teacher continuing in the same stream of thought wrote,

I think it is more of a melting pot. I acknowledge that there are many different cultures and different values and ways of living in this country, but more or less, I think we all sort of take the pieces and parts that make us happy and melt them together.
These comments reiterate Howard’s (2006) research where he mentioned that teachers teach how they were taught. The teachers who believe that we all “melt together” to make one culture, are the teachers who believe that authors like Whitman, Poe, Austen, and Shakespeare are representative of our entire population.

A teacher in response to this question wrote, “I guess both. Some groups work hard at assimilating and others work hard to preserve their native culture.” Banks (2009) and Howard (2006) are of the opinion that schools should act as a democracy where the views of all the groups and ethnicities are valued and respected but when teachers believe that the group itself is responsible for the preservation of its culture they bring to class their assumptions that in school students are treated equally when they only have to learn about mainstream time tested White literature. Although the teachers answering the previous questions about multicultural literature vented their frustrations that they cannot use multicultural literature because of the restrictions placed by the curriculum, administration and the community, the teachers through their response to this question hinted about their own perceptions of the multicultural literature. If a teacher believes that we are all the same and can melt away our differences to become one then it is apparent that they find no need for using a curriculum that celebrates diversity.

6. Do you think students should be taught about other ethnic groups even if your class or schools have no students from any diverse groups? Please explain.

All the eighteen teachers who completed the questionnaire said multicultural literature should be part of a school curriculum because, “they (students) will inevitably be around people from other walks of life in the future and need not to be ignorant.” Another teacher commenting wrote, “They need to understand ‘White privilege’ and how
it affects this nation and its people.” One other interesting comment mentioned the reason, “It can help discourage hatred, discrimination and violence. It also exposes students to similarities and differences between their cultures and others, thus extending students’ knowledge.”

One other teacher wrote,

Absolutely! Democracy demands that we live and play well with others.

Achieving this does not come naturally. Part of my goal is to help students participate and thrive in a democracy. To do this they must be able to interact and listen in a civil manner and decent manner. I always tell them that to assume an alternative viewpoint is one indicator of being an intellectual.

Not a single teacher thought that multicultural literature should not be part of a class or school curriculum. They all suggested that democracy demands, “We live and play well with others” but they felt their hands were bound by the “higher powers” who do not want to deviate from the ways of their fathers and fore-fathers. The teacher responses suggest that given opportunity they would most likely incorporate multicultural literature in their classrooms. They perceive it as a crucial part of creating a global society but they are bound by the rules of curriculum as dictated by the administration and community.

**Pre-service Questionnaire**

The university attended by the pre-service teachers who completed the questionnaire emphasizes diversity and professors incorporate multicultural books in their teaching. As pre-service teachers of today are the in-service teachers of tomorrow thus a questionnaire was prepared to understand the feelings and perceptions of the pre-
service teachers towards multicultural literature (appendix B). The rationale of this questionnaire was to observe the feelings of pre-service teachers towards diverse ethnic groups and multicultural literature. Undergraduate pre-service teachers in the English methods classes were invited to complete the questionnaire to the best of their abilities. Out of the thirty-five questionnaires that were provided only twenty-two were completed and returned but of these twenty-two returned questionnaires, seven questionnaires were answered in yes or no format, without any explanation; so those seven questionnaires were not considered for this research project. Only the fifteen questionnaires that were completed accurately with descriptions are reported below. Major themes that emerged for each question were reported below and supported by research. Pre-service teacher responses are presented in italics for clarity.

1. Did your school have students from diverse ethnic groups? Yes/ No

2. If you answered yes to the above question please elaborate your interaction with them.

The first question required respondents to answer in a yes or no format if the high school they attended represented diversity of color and race. Eleven out of the fifteen pre-service teachers who completed the questionnaire answered “No” for question one. One responded, “mostly White and very few African Americans”. Elaborating the interaction with students from minority ethnic groups one pre-service teacher wrote,

We were predominately Caucasian but towards my junior and senior years we had a large influx of Somalian students. I had no issue with them but felt separated from them because many were in the ESL program and were in different classes than me.
One of the respondents further elaborated, “I interacted with diverse students as much as I could but everyone mainly stuck to their own groups.” One other commented, “There were many diverse students in my school and although the cafeteria seems split at times the hallways were equal.” The demographics of the United States is changing and it is projected by the U.S Census Bureau that by the year 2050 one in every five American would be an immigrant or a person of color as a result our school population gets, “increasingly diverse but most of the nation’s teachers remain White” (Banks, 2001, p.5).

The purpose of asking pre-service teachers about their high school diversity was to record if the teachers of tomorrow had any interaction with students from diverse cultural groups. Pre-service teachers will enter classrooms that are racially and culturally diverse but,

Many pre-service teachers have never attended schools themselves with individuals from diverse backgrounds, or lived in racially diverse neighborhoods.

In light of this lack of exposure to diverse population… pre-service teachers rely on stereotypical conceptions of diverse students to inform their future work as teachers (Milner, Flowers & Moore, 2003, p.64).

As lack of interaction can lead to misunderstanding and stereotyping therefore it is of vital importance that teacher education programs include several diversity courses to expose their pre-service teachers to not only to multicultural literature but also the historical and cultural backgrounds of numerous minority groups like the Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, Muslim Americans and Asian Americans.
3. When you were in school did you read books that depicted ethnic groups? Name some of them.

Out of the fifteen pre-service teachers who completed the questionnaire, eleven responded that they had not read any book in school that depicted minority ethnic groups. One replied, “In class we read mostly classics like To Kill a Mockingbird. We did not read any books that tackled any kinds of issues within the ethnic groups and To Kill a Mockingbird isn’t current and we’d learned about African American struggles for equality ever since middle school.” Another pre-service teacher wrote, “Yes, I read The Kite Runner in school but I am afraid that the way these books were taught depicted stereotypes.”

The rationale for this question was to make pre-service teachers reminisce about their high school years and recall the books they had read during those years. As revisiting an old memory many times provides a fresh perspective therefore it is hoped that these pre-service teacher will think about their lack of exposure to diverse cultural and make an effort to incorporate multicultural literature in their teaching in the future.

4. Do you believe United States is a “melting pot” or do you believe in the idea of a “salad bowl”? Elaborate

As the purpose of the pre-service questionnaire was to assess if college had provided the teachers of the future with a new perspective towards diversity and multicultural literature they were how they perceived United States as a salad bowl or as a melting pot. out of the fifteen pre-service teachers who completed the questionnaire, six considered United States as a salad bowl, eight considered it to be a melting pot and one mentioned that it is a combination of both. One responded, “More of a salad bowl. We
don’t all melt together and become one homogenous substance. People have differences and we hope these differences are appreciated or at least tolerated in providing variety for the ‘salad’.” One other pre-service teacher commented, “I think it’s more of a salad bowl. Regardless of our racial backgrounds, we’re all very different from those around us”. One other responded, “I think it is more of a melting pot. I acknowledge that there are many different cultures and different values and ways of living in this country, but more or less, I think we all sort of take the pieces and parts that make us happy and melt them together”. One of the thought provoking responses was,

I’d like to say ‘melting pot’ but it’s a little optimistic. I grew up learning to appreciate diversity and I do so now. But being in college and close to entering the real world, I’ve started to see how separate our culture still is. In the past few years I’ve seen a lot of racial issues with/within politics, media and everyday life. I feel salad bowl is more appropriate, but I wish it were more of a ‘melting pot’.

The above mentioned responses about the melting pot seems to hint that the meanings of salad bowl and melting pot were vague to some of pre-serve teachers and they associated melting pot with the concept of unity and salad bowl with differences. No matter how we look at it the fact remains that if we feel differences of opinion, culture or race should merge to create one mind and thought, then we cannot appreciate and embrace the colors of diversity.

One of the most interesting responses for this question stated,

I believe that U.S is more of a ‘melting pot’ than a ‘salad bowl’. My main reason for this is that people gradually grow away from their original cultures and more like those around them as the generations pass. Though the original immigrants
were very culture specific, the children become less and less reserved and want more to fit in with those around them. The longer people are around each other, the more alike they become.

This interesting comment expressed the perspective that we are all alike and the idea that we are so similar that even if we teach just White literature everyone can relate to it. This comment reiterates the research conducted by Stallworth (2006) where he concluded, “Many teachers teach what they consider familiar and safe—what they themselves were taught. They do not know how or where to begin literature beyond the Eurocentric perspective” (p.484). Teachers who believe that we can all fit in together and are satisfied with celebrating diversity through a multicultural week once a year with food and dance and consider classrooms to place where differences melt together to unite us. These are the teachers about whom Banks (2009) and Nieto (2004) are wary because when diversity is not appreciate and accepted by the teacher then their students have no hope of becoming the global, understanding and emphatic citizens of tomorrow.

5. How would you define multicultural literature?

The views mentioned by the pre-service teachers related to multicultural literature were similar to the views and opinions expressed by the in-service teachers. All the fifteen respondents answered along the lines that it is literature that focuses in a culture other than the dominant culture. One pre-service teacher wrote, “It is literature that incorporates information from cultures other than predominant culture to which the material is being taught. (so in U.S, anything not being written by an old ‘White guy’ from Western Europe).”

6. You associate multicultural literature with …
All the fifteen respondents replied that multicultural literature was associated with progress, tolerance, acceptance and learning about new places, people and societies. The pre-service teacher response to this question was different to the response provided by the in-service teachers, who defined multicultural literature and then left this question either blank or simply wrote “see above.” One pre-service teacher wrote, “College! In high school and my younger years, I mainly studied Shakespeare, Homer and other such writers.” This comment resonates the research conducted by Miller, Moore and Flowers (2003) when after interviewing pre-service teachers they concluded, “School students are not exposed to diversity but attention has been given to the issues of multiculturalism and diversity in teacher preparation programs”(p.64).

The pre-service teachers, because of the teacher education program that emphasized diversity and the importance of using multicultural literature, were more aware of the significance of multicultural literature than the in-service teachers who were most probably less exposed to the education of the significance of diversity during their pre-service years.

7. What are some of the problems you associate with teaching multicultural literature?

The answer to this question was reminiscent of the frustrations of the multicultural educators and theorists like Banks (1993; 2001&2009), Neito (2004) and Billings (1994) who are of the opinion that resistance towards incorporating multicultural curriculum and literature comes from administrators and community members. Other concerns mentioned by researchers like Keeter and Lewis (2001) and Stallworth (2006) include teachers’ reluctance because of inadequate exposure in diverse cultures and
resistance from students who do not want to learn about people representing groups and cultures different than their own. One pre-serve teacher commented on his/her reluctance to the use of multicultural literature in classroom, “I am only from one culture. I can’t truly explain everything about other cultures because I haven’t been there so any lesson I give will only be mediocre when it comes to truly explaining that culture.” Commenting upon other problems associated with teaching multicultural literature another pre-service teacher commented, “Overcoming stereotypes and prejudices my students might already have. Also, I believe it would be challenging to teach literature about a culture I am not fully familiar with.” One other responded, “Students may be resistant to literature/cultures unlike their own. I also believe parents would become involved if they feel their culture isn’t being represented properly.” One of the detailed responses summarized the entire issue was, “correct language used to not offend others; censorship, parents and administration. Judgment that students may not see the relevance in others’ cultures, customs, values or ideas; or they may not make a connection to their own lives.”

All the in-service teachers in their response to the question about the problems associated with the use of multicultural literature lamented that parents, administrators, society and many times students themselves act as road blocks and refuse encourage the use of multicultural literature in classrooms. They expressed their reluctance citing the need to complete the mandated neutral curriculum and not one of the eighteen in-service teachers who completed the survey responded the desire to stand up in the face of resistance. But one pre-service teacher, as a hope to the future wrote, “There will be an initial resistance. People don’t like change or things that are different. Afterwards, though it improves understanding, decrease bigotry and helps people to be nicer to each other”.
This comment signifies the importance of cultural diversity courses in a teacher education program because it is only through awareness and understanding multicultural literature will gradually become part of the main stream curriculum through the efforts of teachers who realize its importance.

8. When you become a teacher would you like your students to learn about other cultures? Do you have a strategy?

As the purpose of pre-service questionnaire was to gauge and assess the attitudes, opinions and perceptions of pre-service teachers towards the use of multicultural literature in classrooms; the questionnaire also asked the pre-service teachers to provide their own strategy for tackling and incorporating multicultural literature in their future classrooms. Twelve out of the fifteen pre-service teachers who completed the survey replied that they would like to teach their students about other cultures and had a strategy but three pre-service teachers replied that they were not sure if teaching about other cultures would be beneficial to their students as they believed media provided adequate exposure.

One pre-service teacher commented on the importance of using multicultural literature in the classroom, “Yes, I think it is more important than ever as the world shrinks and our global community grows. I like the strategies I’ve learned from Rice/Glasgow text.” Mentioning the strategies one responded, “I would like to try to have speakers who have lived in or are from the culture that we will be reading about and studying”. One pre-service teacher emphasizing the importance of multicultural literature wrote,
Yes. Books are a good starting place as they hold the power to highlight how cultures are similar and how they are different. Multicultural texts can challenge students to criticize, analyze and fight stereotypes. However I believe there needs to be additional resources like film, travel, speakers and so on.

The strategies mentioned by the pre-service teachers were similar to the strategies mentioned by Qureshi (2006), Rice (2006) and Glasgow (2007) regarding the importance of inviting guest speakers and providing contextual knowledge.

The responses of both the questionnaires indicate that teachers both pre and in-service perceive multicultural literature as a means of teaching their students appreciation and awareness of the many diverse ethnic groups that call United States their home. They were aware of the resistance from the administrators, students and the community, their own unfamiliarity with other cultures and lack of materials and resources. Many in-service teachers have tried and lost the battle of broadening the horizons of their students due to parent interference or resistance from students themselves. The pre-service teachers were aware of the many challenges they will face in future if they want to incorporate multicultural literature into their teaching curriculum but were hopeful that they, with their many strategies would succeed in creating classrooms where diversity will be celebrated and accepted in all its entity.

**Strategies**

The study revealed various concerns of teachers and pre-service teachers on teaching multicultural literature in the classrooms, like reluctance due to lack of knowledge, lack of resources, problems finding authentic representative literature and
lack of support from parents and community. The following strategies will help with alleviating some of the concerns and frustrations.

Race theorists and educators like Banks (1993; 2003 & 2009), Gray (2006), Neito (2004) agree that using multicultural literature in classroom is crucial for creating aware and emphatic citizens of tomorrow. But the fact of the matter is that if multicultural literature is not used appropriately, then instead of creating appreciation and understanding for diversity, it “can promote a more divisive society” (Gitton, 2007, p.20) because if taken out of context then the students will not be able to understand it. In order for the literature to be effective a teacher should first and foremost find authentic multicultural literature that accurately mirrors the culture and ethnic group under study because, “empathy begins with seeing others in their own light rather than through our projections of them in our light”(Howard, 2006, p.79). Temple, Martinez and Naylor (2002) state while selecting multicultural literature a teacher should consider the following questions:

- Do the author and illustrator present insider perspectives?
- Is the culture portrayed multidimensionally?
- Are cultural details naturally integrated?
- Are details accurate and interpretation current?
- Is language used authentically?
- Is the collection balanced?


To address concern of lack of personal exposure in diverse culture, a teacher can either bring in a guest speaker from that group; or allow students to ask questions. If any
student from that particular ethnic group is present at the school, this student can also be asked to share his/her own experiences. The teacher should not be afraid of the voices from the other side of the desk. If a minority student wants to share his/her own insights that do not match the ideology of the teacher, the teacher needs to learn to accept and respect opinions from others.

Another strategy that may work well is the use of KWL charts. It is a very common practice to use these charts with any literary unit but the charts for multicultural literature can have some thought provoking questions like:

- What is familiar and unfamiliar to you about the book?
- Without reading the book what is your opinion about this group?
- How did you form this opinion?
- Does the name of the author or country influence your opinion?
- Did your opinion change after reading the book?
- If you met someone from this ethnic group how would you react?

(Adapted from Qureshi, 2006)

To curb student resistance a teacher can involve students in an active discussion of the text by conducting a Socratic Seminar (Rice, 2006, Glasgow, 2007& 2010). In a Socratic Seminar a teacher, “takes the stance of Socrates as s/he is not there to deliver answers, rather to encourage and prompt deeper, reflective thinking” (Glasgow, manuscript under review). “Simulations and role play can be used as active learning strategies by the teacher to help students come closer to significant issues and themes in historical(and other) literature”(Rice, 2006, p.13). In addition to these above-mentioned
strategies a teacher can use media or technology to create awareness and make the students aware of their prejudices and stereotypical generalizations.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

We, human beings have a tendency to view the world through the lens of our own perception and understanding. Teachers also enter the classrooms with their own preconceived notion of history and tend to see the world from their own side and as majority of our teachers are White, this means understanding only the White perspective. Teachers’ perceptive towards multicultural literature requires them to be honest and, “acknowledge the limitations of our culturally conditioned perceptions of truth” (Howard, 2006, p.73). Extensive literature emphasizes the importance of multicultural literature in classrooms as the first step towards creating accurate pluralistic society. As Rochman (1993) writes:

A good book can help to break down [barriers]. Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community: Not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others. A good story lets you know people as individuals in all their particularity and conflict; and once you see someone as a person - flawed, complex, striving - then you've reached beyond stereotype. Stories, writing them, telling them, sharing them, transforming them, enrich us and connect us and help us know each other (p.19).

The responses to the survey by both the pre-service and in-service teachers suggested they understood the importance of using multicultural literature in their classrooms and were aware that if utilized accurately, this literature has the power to create students who are emphatic and appreciative of people from diverse backgrounds. All the teachers who responded to the questionnaire agreed that there are problems and
hurdles with the use of multicultural literature in classrooms like lack of resources and lack of support from parents and community, but the vote was unanimous that authentic use of multicultural literature is one of the most effective ways to encourage global awareness, empathy and understanding of others. Current college education made pre-service teachers more aware and conscious of the diversity around us. They were mindful and more aware of the importance of using multicultural literature in classrooms. The pre-service teacher responses to the survey also provided a hint that even though these future teachers were not exposed to diverse literature in schools, they perceive teaching multicultural literature crucial to prepare their students to become contentious global citizens of tomorrow.
References

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Appendix A: In-Service Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions honestly and to the best of your capability.

What kinds of interaction have you had with students from diverse ethnic groups?

Name some of the books you use in your classes

How would you define multicultural literature?

In your view multicultural literature encompasses …

What are some of the problems you associate with teaching multicultural literature?

How do you view United States: as a “melting pot” or a “salad bowl.” Elaborate

What are some of the strategies you use in your classes to teach about other cultures?
Appendix B: Pre-Service Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions honestly and to the best of your capability.

Did your school have students from diverse ethnic groups?

If you answered yes to the above question then please elaborate your interaction and feelings towards them.

When you were in school did you read books that depicted ethnic groups? Name some of them.

If answered yes did it enhance your knowledge and understanding about that group?

During the past year have you read a book that depicted culture other than your own?

Please explain

Do you believe United States is a “melting pot” or do you believe in the idea of a “salad bowl”? Elaborate

How would you define multicultural literature?

You associate multicultural literature with…

What are some of the problems you associate with teaching multicultural literature?

When you become a teacher would you like your students to learn about other cultures?

Do you have a strategy?