

MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN LITERACY AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: INSTILLING YOUNG LEARNERS INTO LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

Being literate through engaging with literature in literacy and multicultural education will open students' horizon. In the globalization era there are ample of cultures young learners can learn in addition to their own which guide them to build a good relationship for better worldly networking in their future. Through the wide range of multicultural materials, students of the majority culture like those from Indonesia learn to respect other peoples' insights and contributions and develop an understanding of technological and social change in this era. This paper highlights how multicultures found in multicultural literature need to be considered by teachers in literacy education (LE) and multicultural education (ME) for young learners to instill complex layers of personal, national, and world identities into individual students.

Keywords: Layers of identity; literature; literacy education; multicultural education

INTRODUCTION

What is multicultural literature in literacy education (LE) and multicultural education (ME)? How can it be defined and instilled into young learners with complex layers of identity in their literacy development nowadays? Is anything they read and enjoy a part of their literature? There are no absolute definitions and there are also differences of opinion among scholars. Authors like Sutherland and Arbuthnot (1986) believe that literature for young learners consists of books or images which are not only read and enjoyed, but also that have been written for them and met high literary standards. Today in this global era some students especially those *avid* readers, actually are able to read and even share such young

adult or adult delights as *Cinderella* and *Harry potter* although these books are not purposively designed for them.

Actually, there are two kinds of books read by young learners. One is useful didactic books, such as those about how to do things and how to behave in good manners and morals. The other is the books they read for pleasure, particularly if the books are on a subject in which they have a special interest, or if such books are currently popular or sort of best sellers and much discussed in the society due to the exposure through media.

Exposing and discussing multicultural literature concerning morals and how to do things in literacy education are very important for the students to cope with globalization. As modern instruction is changing, more and more teachers require their students to read and respond to more multicultural authentic or real literature which is important in developing students' abilities to construct meaning and think critically. Cooper (1993) says that "real literature" helps students appreciate and understand how people from any culture and social setting live and work together (p. 21).

Many of the goals for ME can be expanded through multicultural literature. For example, according to Lewis and Doorlag (1987) cultural rights can be restored by focusing on cultural equality and regard, the self-esteem of students can be enhanced, and a feeling of appreciation for various cultures can be established while teaching basic skills. These goals go hand in hand with the principles of multicultural literature for all children. "Through multicultural literature, students who are members of racial or ethnic minority groups realize that they have a cultural heritage of which they can be proud and that their culture has made important contribution ... to the world" (Norton, 1991, p. 531). Thus, exposure of important righteous deed for young learners who live in the era of the 21st century is critical and teachers are responsible to expose good multicultural materials to them as early as possible.

LITERATURE VS. MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION (ME) AND LITERACY EDUCATION (LE)

Literature for Young Learners in the 21st Century

In the past few decades, vast changes have taken place in society including that of Indonesia and those changes have influenced children's literature or books due to the variety of students today who have a greater awareness of the current situation and condition. The students who have always been with adults—parents, teachers, and librarians and who have not found their counterparts in books, in this global

era, fortunately, could do more than those who used to live decades ago, by using the new medium (Haeffner, 2016) which is on the tip of their finger.

There is also an infinite variety among young learners of this era. Some of them are bright, average, and slow. Some are rural, urban, suburban, migrant, and villagers. They come from happy families and broken homes. They are Javanese, Sumatranese, Sundanese, Chinese, Arabs, and Indians to mention a few. They are loved and cherished or unloved and neglected. They may be bookworms and non-readers. They are boys and girls whose interests need identification, development, and acceptance in the community. Many of them are also studied by researchers and or served by caregivers either privately or through the daycare center.

Based on those various backgrounds, as a body of writing either in prose or verse, imaginative or creative writing, literature sometimes cannot avoid reflection concerning life-styles, moral standards, and or even conflicts that have been established in the society. Children who like to watch TV by the hour, for example, are familiar with what is going on in the rest of the world as well as with those in their own country. Therefore, it can be concluded that young learners' literature is unlimited and is of importance to be exposed to students as soon as they enter kindergarten and elementary schools, especially in relation to not only for the purpose of literacy education (LE) but also multicultural education (ME) in the 21st century. In relation to education in Indonesia, Suherdi (2012) argued that teachers need to be competent to instill local identity as well as the global one into their students.

Literature Reading in Literacy Education (LE)

Literacy education is an idea that every student develops a relationship with as he or she moves through the education system that engages with prints, images, and various kinds of knowledge and skills (Wadham et al., 2007) and reading literacy is of essential in literacy education and must be grown and become part of every learner's activities in this century.

For example, at home, many children in this era read an advertisement on thinly sliced bread, a bottle of jam, a box of Ultra milk or juice as they have breakfast and or they stop to ask their Mom or Dad to change the children's TV channel of their interest especially during COVID-19. During the normal situation, at school, usually, they read the signs at the bulletin board or on the door of their classroom, and in-class they read their textbooks. In the grocery stores, they may go looking for the sections for buying vegetables or dairy products together with their parents during weekends or holidays and also looking for the name of the bookstore among any other department stores to buy the book they like to read with their siblings or grand(parents) once they get home.

Then, is every sign or book that young learners read a part of their literature? It is not always easy to say due to children's different ages and the curriculum lessons and activities they have at schools (Schiller & Phipps, 2011). The books themselves may have been published as distinctly labeled or shelved in separate parts of a school, a bookstore, or a public library. Therefore, to have a clear idea where literature is placed in literacy education, good literature must be most appreciated. If literature is approached in a recreational mood of curiosity, it makes its best contribution to young learners because the primary aim of young learners' literature is to nurture an abandonedly joyous feeling of pleasure in reading worthwhile materials to exert their experiences, to rouse their thinking powers and to lift their spirit of interest. Thus, one of the first needs is that the children's early acquaintances with literature should be very pleasurable. To this end, while kindergarteners should be told interesting stories and provided with charming picture books, the primary graders should be given frequent exposures to good literature through role-plays, storytelling, presentation, and ample recreational reading times.

Multicultural Education (ME) in the Global Era?

Multicultural education (ME) is education which regularly appraises variety and people's perspectives (Santrock, 2001). The goal of ME is to prepare students with chances to have educational experiences that will help them recognize and respect those from different backgrounds. It is believed that ME could make preservice teachers knowledgeable and skillful to apply it in their future classrooms with diverse students. Therefore, the major goal of ME is to bring about democratic standards that value fairness, equity, and individual rights within schools and society at large.

Globalization has truly had a big impact on schools around the world. Hence students from kindergarten to grade six needs professional teachers who apprehend and treat difference in more dynamic ways. The changes in student demographics throughout the world have also brought forth diverse students' needs across curriculums. In other words, preservice teachers must be provided with thorough and balanced courses (Alismail, 2016; Sharp & Coneway, 2018) in order to make them aware and well prepared with knowledge and skills needed for all students before they are ready to teach.

How much Does Available Literature Relate to Multicultural Education?

While many teachers in almost every subject have made up their curriculum to address the needs of their diverse students in relation to multicultural literature, there has not much research conducted to assess those needs and arrive at a method to tact them. It seems that the collection of the library, especially those related to literature consisting of children's books or fictions is still scarce in Indonesia, especially in South Sumatra. There is only one information found in the society which relates to the supporting resources about young learners' literature. Based on Dinas Perpustakaan Provinsi Sumatera Selatan (2020), the public library of South Sumatera Province only has 7,217 titles (0.027%) of children and young adult books out of 261,074 titles of the whole collection (South Sumatera Library Office, 2020). In the last three years, not many books added or acquired by the Public Library of South Sumatera Province. This fact has proved that it was not even one book purchased a day by the library (see Table 1).

This fact has confirmed parts of the results of the study done by Diem (2012) that the students were somewhat reluctant to visit the library due to its scarce acquisition related to students' needs.

Table 1

Number of Children and Young Adults' Books Added to the Collection of the Library of South Sumatra Province in the Last Three Years

No.	Years	Titles	Copies
1	2017	58	290
2	2018	823	3,575
3	2019	195	583
Total		1,076	4,448
Mean/Year		358	1,482

Source: South Sumatera Library Office, 28 May 2020

Challenges in Multicultural Education Practices

Globalization has influenced the demographics of the world including Indonesia. Thus, the ethnics makeup of schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods have increased. The global era has changed both the students' population and their psychological conduct of an interpersonal relationship in the classroom. Due to this change, expert such as Kymlicka (1995) proposed multicultural education (ME) which may open the teachers' horizons about students' various identities, such as religion, socioeconomic status, gender, language, and cultural practice as a formal declaration. This multiculturalism perspective must be promoted in the school

curriculum for the successful and fair teaching and learning process. Establishing enough resources covering multiple cultures in multicultural classrooms, teachers could avoid the perspectives that are only significant for certain societies.

However, changing any curriculum towards multiculturalism is not easy in a multicultural country like Indonesia where students bring different faiths with them. Singh (1994) says that the process of transmitting cultural values and coping with cultural differences requires ever-essential cultural literacy. This means that the teachers must have multicultural competence which requires them to be multicultural themselves not only in terms of having enough multicultural knowledge but also of having the skills related to being supporters in helping students to be confident and to acquire equity and in multicultural classrooms. In this regard, Jencks et al. (2001) strongly believe that multicultural competence could be obtained through awareness, knowledge, and skills which are actually based on the theoretical frameworks of ME in teacher education. For example, the first framework is that those minority students must assimilate themselves with mainstream students from the dominant culture although this is not easy. Another framework is the recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity and pluralism with its primary goal to allow equal opportunity among students. However, this framework neglects the difference that the students themselves could actually promote inequality. Thus, the third framework would argue that even though natural equality does exist among groups of students, equal opportunity, unfortunately, could never exist in society. In other words, natural equality does not develop. By having knowledge of these frameworks, teachers are required to minimize the possible conflict available among students from diverse backgrounds by trying to adapt the three frameworks wisely as a challenge in living in the global era. It is encouraged that teachers avoid focusing on only the majority culture instead of teaching the value of multiple identities and perspectives of their students.

Therefore, Ukpokodu (2003) suggests that teaching practice in ME considers such a paradigm in which teachers and students consciously engage in the construction of knowledge and skills to avoid the various forms of inequities and injustices which may occur in the educational system and to empower those who are culturally responsible. In other words, teacher educators in ME are challenged to prepare preservice teachers to encounter today's diverse student population.

All three theoretical frameworks of ME above could be realized in the classrooms through the availability and exposure of multicultural literature since in Indonesia there is the motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" (Unity in Diversity) and it has become the doctrine in Indonesian society. However, it is argued that it is a far-fetched dream on many occasions and the ideals of multiculturalism in which there is still a discriminatory treatment and representation of multicultural "others" in

society. Babaii's (2018) doctrine "one world, many peoples" is still in line with the Indonesian motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*". Therefore, to arrive at tolerable communities, the promotion of successful teaching and learning process through multicultural literature in the ME and LE must be encouraged. Future teachers must have a solid understanding and points of view concerning social, philosophical, and cultural "norms" found in society. By using literature, they could as well develop a good mindset to work with young learners who come from different backgrounds. The following information would remind teachers of why literature in whatever form it is could help young learners survive in the multicultural culture in this era.

Literature in ME and LE in a Changing World

Nowadays we are facing a dramatic change both technologically and socially. New technologies, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and email have altered every aspect of life in society, including education. According to Kellner (as cited in Wadham et al., 2007), education today needs to bring up a variety of new kinds of literacies in order to enable students and to make education an urgent requirement of present and future. Through literature promoted for literacy learning in multicultural education, teachers could help learners understand the world, identify universal human struggles that people have experienced, and also use new technologies to retrieve information for pleasure. Indeed, due to the process of globalization, the world has become more unified, entangled, and in essence smaller (Keenan et al., 2016).

How to Promote Multiculturalism in Primary Schools

Indonesia is very culturally rich. There are a lot of cultures in Indonesia and every culture has its own literature, such as traditional stories, poems, dramas from its islands, such as Sumatra, Java, Bali, Kalimantan, etc. Any type of literature may be used for literacy experiences among children. In this way, every student will be aware of other cultures either from certain areas in Indonesia or any other areas in the world which they probably have never heard before.

Therefore, fostering multiculturalism in the classrooms becomes a must. While Diem and Abdullah (2020) focus on the teachers themselves to have cultural awareness and cultural knowledge when they deal with children, Favat (1977) in his review of research studies concentrated more on the materials. He found that more students of various ages like literature in the form of folktales and realistic stories. This likeness on folktales according to Norton (1991) and Sutherland and Arbuthnot (1986) usually stays until children are in the fifth grade and they often

follow their interest at their prereading ages and slowly rises to the point of greatest development, value, or intensity between the approximate ages of six and eight. This condition will gradually decline and emerge in reading realistic stories. Actually, young children believe that inanimate objects and animals in folktales have a critical awareness of their own identity much like that of humans. In folktales, animals act like people and the actions are consistent with children's beliefs that the good girl is rewarded by marrying the prince, and the dishonest maid is punished severely.

Realistic stories on the other hand according to Sutherland and Arbuthnot (1986, p. 74) "... are more sentimental in tone, moral in intent, and realistic in approach." Realistic stories for children are primarily about outstandingly respectable characters. When Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, he carried realism further. In this book Huck Finn and his untrustworthy father were probably the child's first literary confronts with real people who were not considered appropriate but who were likable anyway. In this book, Mark Twain not only gave us realism with humor which is in itself a new development in literature for children but also showed warm tolerance in his presentation of people then thought socially unacceptable.

How Can We Relate Culture with Literacy?

Literacy and literacy learning are related (Cambourne, 1988; Cooper, 1993; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Wells, 1990). They cannot be separated into the learning of the world culture either, as culture is being a part of literacy elements. Formerly, Teale and Sulzby (1986) say that literacy consists of only reading and writing skills. Then, Cooper (1993) adds that, "In the broader sense, literacy involves all of the language arts ... [and] thinking" (p. 6). Thus, when teachers want to help young learners to be involved in literacy learning, they must not teach reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking as a separate subject. Cambourne (1988) confirms that literacy grows as students come upon worthy and original literacy experiences in which they are accustomed to completing the assignments of literacy. Therefore, in this global era, it can be said that literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using materials associated with various contexts. In other words, it is the ability to critically appreciate various forms of communication either spoken, printed, or digitalized. Then to be literate means to be able to know and employ information in daily activities—at home, at school, and in the community—to achieve goals, to develop knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society. Wells (1990) confirms that engaging appropriately with different types of multicultural materials could empower people including young learners to feel, to do, and to think in their

literacy activities in the society. Therefore, in multicultural and literacy education, young learners are exposed to literacy by experiencing real listening, reading, speaking, writing, and thinking rather than just doing mechanical exercises. Hill (2012) in her book *Developing early literacy*, thus strengthens that in addition to the four skills of language, literacy involves the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in activities needed for effective functioning in the community. Therefore, recently, the term '*multiliteracies*' in literacy education is used to cover what students have to cope with in this global era and to give young learners a worthwhile and meaningful literacy experiences, there must be a framework which interconnects such elements like teachers' presence, online devices, learning materials in this case including multicultural materials, and collaborative efforts while fulfilling the syllabus requirement (Ali et al., 2017).

As a set of ideas, multiliteracies have a rich circulation among educators, governments and people commenting upon national development and prosperity. This means that all students should be engaged with various texts, images, and different types of knowledge and skills throughout their school lives as they move through the education system. In relation to the rich currency of the students' significant others above, Wadham et al. (2007) suggest that "... the ability to read culture, to acknowledge and manage cultural difference, to handle the challenges of developing information technologies, and to consider global development in the context of environmental conservation, are crucial contemporary skills, and they are all connected to literacy" (p. 248). Thus, it is reasonable if the extended term *linguistics literacy* is considered as a form of currency for success. Now what is the relationship between linguistics literacy and multicultural education?

All human beings belong to a culture and use symbols as the sign of being literate and act to show who they are and what they believe in. Of course, there must be differences in beliefs, activities, and ways of life. Teachers need to understand the cultural dimension of human beings that through education people learn to live and contribute to their own culture as well as to other cultures. Education and culture just cannot be separated. Therefore, it is really not exaggerating if every student is encouraged to understand what culture is and how it is connected to multicultural literature in the cultural literacy program in the education system.

How Can Literature and Cultural Literacy be Implemented in the Multiliteracy Program?

There are some ways of defining *literature* for implementing it in the multiliteracy program. Based on a group of teachers from all over the world whom Lazar (1993) asked to write down a definition of literature, here are some of the answers.

“Literature is ‘feelings’ and ‘thoughts’ in black and white.” Literature is the use of language to evoke a personal response in the reader or listener.” “Literature is a world of fantasy, horror, feelings, visions ... put into words.” Literature means ... to meet a lot of people, to know other different points of view, ideas, thoughts, minds ... to know ourselves better” (p.1). All of these definitions or descriptions are of importance in the teaching of multicultural and literacy education. However, the most important thing to focus on here is the implications of using literature in the multiliteracy program.

In Indonesia, as is known by most of the school children, usually there are two broad categories of literature—fiction and nonfiction. Fiction is the type of material that comes from the imagination of its writer and within this category, there is also a reality which is often called realistic fiction, which is about people or events that could exist. For non-fiction usually this includes kinds of students’ books for certain subjects, such as social studies and math. Therefore, the literature selected for the program must also include materials that are both culturally and socially authentic (Greenberg et al., 2014).

It is recognized that the world is changing due to the existence of multiliteracies. However, we do not necessarily know why or how it is changing. Wadham et al. (2007) say that curriculum must evolve to manage the change because the term *multiliteracies* include teaching all kinds of technological literacies which nowadays have changed people’s lives and become necessary parts of today’s world. Therefore, multiliteracies do not only draw attention to the different types of literacies, but also to the very different cultural contexts called *cultural literacies* in which human beings are raised.

Cultural literacies describe literacy as a social practice. All students today are shaped in profound ways by the societies and cultures in which they are born and where they eventually live. In other words, this shaping locates people socially and culturally. Young learners with no exception develop their identities based upon the worlds in which they have grown. Since cultural literacies include functional literacies, they must be built by people in the society including teachers and students who live in this era because literacy ability has an important role to build up human capital to survive in the global era.

Actually, cultural literacy has been stated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Pambudianto, 2019). There are some basic aspects of literacy that teachers of literacy education (LE) should set up in their minds one of which is cultural literacy. Why cultural literacy development is important for Indonesian children? It is because Indonesian children have not been widely introduced to sequenced literacy so they have not been able to interpret discourses or materials that they read. Meanwhile, having gradual literacy skills from an early age will enable children to absorb and share information with friends, teachers, and

parents more easily in accordance with the capacity levels that they have. Therefore, instilling a positive cultural attitude of literacy from an early age is very important for Indonesian children to grow. This attitude is confirmed by Akc and Sakar (2020), Bozkus, (2019), and also by Swan et al. (2010) who say that the culture of literacy throughout the world enables youths to become information processors and self-determined participants in a global society. In line with this, Gorski (2009) also suggests that teachers be prepared to apply the key principles in multicultural education (ME), such as being aware of, knowledgeable, skilled, and committed to educational equity. In addition, well tiered ME with thorough and balanced courses for preservice teachers will make them professionally ready to help all students from various cultural backgrounds.

In Indonesia Julianto and Subroto (2018) did a study in elementary schools concerning multicultural education based on local wisdom. The results of their study reflected that the initial step of the teachers preparing themselves as educators is that transforming themselves to become multicultural persons who would appreciate diversity. They conclude that the process of ME must include planning, implementing, and using local wisdom-based multicultural education strategies through literature appreciation.

In summary, developing an appreciation for literature is not a function of chronological age, grade placement, or occasional contact. According to Heilman et al. (1981), appreciation evolves as a result of numerous exposures in which teachers of any grade level should assume responsibility for introducing their students to good literature. It is believed that the purpose of teaching is to provide experiences that facilitate personal growth. Therefore, the ability to appreciate good literature assures young learners of a lifetime source of pleasure.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A work of literature must be introduced, read, and responded to, and finally extended in some way or another in the classroom. It can promote student's interest in books and any other forms of learning resources that eventually fulfill 21st-century literacy demands. Reading and understanding literature will inevitably lead to insights about young learners themselves (personal identity) and the world around them (world identity). Helping them develop appreciation comes only from actual participation in literacy activities, especially reading because, in essence, reading is a dialogue between reader and writer and appreciation is personal which cannot be standardized. In modern societies, a person's identity either as an individual or a citizen of a nation will be evaluated mostly based on his/her educational qualifications, including literacy and multicultural education.

Therefore, teachers in this era must be aware of diverse aspects regarding cultural norms covering socioeconomic, racial, gender, and language of today's students in order to instill in their mind that literature can make a difference.

To enhance the meaningful curriculum of multicultural and literacy educations in this era, the school must promote theme-based learning activities. With a centralized theme to build daily activities around, students can make connections to the world they live in (personal identity or national identity), and to the world, they want to develop their multicultural identity (the world identity). By integrating multicultural materials throughout the curriculum, teachers could establish a framework to empower young learners and inspire the whole values of their intellectual capacities to obtain the intended outcome.

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