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Supporting intercultural engagement in literacy education

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Multilingual Learning and Literacy: Second Language Education
Becoming a Teacher of Language and Literacy

Australia has, for several decades, espoused multiculturalism, although this rhetoric has now been shaken by the controversies that surround refugees. Even so it remains the case that educational policy and practice in Australia have variously acknowledged the diverse cultures and languages of students in schools.

Recently there has been a pronounced shift away from deficit constructions of students from language backgrounds other than English to teachers recognising and drawing on the rich cultural and linguistic resources, often called 'funds of knowledge', attributed to the work of Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff and Norma Gonzalez (Moll & Amanti et al. 1992). As a literacy educator, you will typically find yourself in classrooms that reflect a diversity of cultures and languages. Within such settings, issues associated with multiculturalism and the flow of people around the world are not simply topics for debate, but matters that you and your students negotiate each day. This is often a richly rewarding experience, but it can involve challenges that cause you to interrogate your own values and beliefs, in much the same way that teachers like Rachel and Bella (see Chapter 2) were prompted to think about the way their lives have shaped their work as literacy educators.

In this chapter we introduce you to three teachers in very different school contexts, who share an agenda for incorporating intercultural understanding into their literacy teaching. The teachers’ school settings are quite different and so their starting points and actions also differ.

This chapter arises out of a research project in which we had conversations with a range of teachers who were investigating the importance of intercultural understanding in Australian schools. In the Australian Curriculum, the general capability of intercultural understanding is described as follows:

Students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. The capability involves students in learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect.

Gunilla Holm and Harriet Zilliacus (2009) suggest intercultural understanding has an emphasis on 'interaction and dialogue's between individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse cultures. Learning about other cultures is not seen as sufficient; rather intercultural understanding is nurtured through experience, communication and engagement across cultures (Liddicoat et al. 2003).

Claudia is a Year 3/4 teacher in her second year of teaching at an inner-city school with students from diverse backgrounds. Angelina is a graduate Year 5 teacher at an independent school with a diverse student cohort in an affluent suburb of a large city. Patrick is a Grade 6 teacher at a middle-class suburban school with a narrow mix o
students from a few distinct groups. Each of them has engaged in significant professional learning in their efforts to develop practices that are more sensitive to cultural diversity. This has had both an intensely personal character for them, sending them back to think about their own values and beliefs, as well as an inter-personal character, in that it is learning that they have shared with others at their schools in an effort to bring about whole school change.

We have organised this chapter around their stories, which we have written on the basis of conversations with each of them. The chapter connects intercultural understanding with teaching and learning in literacy classrooms.

Reflection and discussion

As you read the narratives you might like to think about the examples they provide of teachers working with linguistic and cultural diversity and reflect on your own context and experiences. Are the decisions and actions they take ones that you would take if you were in their situations? How feasible would it be to follow their examples in other school settings?

Claudia moves beyond ‘Harmony Day’ using cultural resources and texts

After spending time travelling through Asia and Europe, Claudia began working at a co-educational government school that has a population of about 400 students with 40 per cent coming from language backgrounds other than English. Two per cent of students are Indigenous and there are many students whose grandparents migrated from Greece and Italy after the Second World War. Saudi and Indian full-fee-paying students are represented, as are students from Chilean, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Somali, Sudanese and Vietnamese backgrounds. The staff includes a Somali multicultural teacher aide who speaks multiple African languages and acts as a bridge to the community. As Claudia describes it:

We’ve got everyone here: some families living in the flats are refugees, or children of refugees, mostly from Africa; others are here from overseas to work in high flying corporate jobs; others are inner-city gentry, Queen’s Counsellors and so on.

Now in her second year of teaching, Claudia teaches a Year 3/4 class. She knew from her previous experience that incidents sometimes occurred, particularly in the playground, which permeated her students’ intercultural relationships. The Year 3/4 boys play soccer with great passion, both in and out of school. Sometimes during their play, students have engaged in behaviour that has had racist overtones. Or at least this is what some of them
have reported, because the details of the incidents have been hard to confirm, beyond someone relating that ‘he looked at me bad’. Similarly, boys and girls occasionally seek teacher intervention when others have made comments about their diet, or their activities during play time, or their clothing; all things that reflect cultural and religious differences. When asked how she responded to such incidents, Claudia responded, ‘I reinforce the school values that it’s not respectful to comment on others’ behaviours, appearance and beliefs ... or to touch someone else or their belongings’.

In addition to teaching her Year 3/4 class, Claudia has joined a newly formed curriculum team, which has representatives from each teaching team, including the specialist teachers. Her recent extensive travel has heightened her awareness of the challenges and rewards in communicating across cultures. Growing up in Australia as the child of immigrant non-English-speaking parents, she is aware of how the children of immigrants often need to negotiate a pathway between the dominant culture and their own beliefs and values. As part of the intercultural understanding team she has the responsibility for students to make connections between their own worlds and the world of others and to negotiate difference in a respectful way across the whole school. Claudia had hoped that by joining this team, she would be able to develop her confidence in teaching in a more culturally sensitive way. At their first meeting the school coordinator led a discussion differentiating between intercultural understanding and multicultural education.

A key point of discussion at the initial meeting of this team was the difference between ‘multiculturalism’, a word that everyone knew, and ‘interculturalism’.

An intercultural perspective puts emphasis on interaction and dialogue between individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse cultures, rather than simply tolerance of diversity (UNESCO 2006). It is not enough just to learn about other cultures (as in multiculturalism), but attention should be given to nurturing cultural sensitivity and understanding through engaging with each other and negotiating the similarities and differences between us. This resonated with Claudia, both at a personal level and with respect to the kind of social relationships that she wanted to encourage in her classroom.

Knowing what people I associate with and my family say - it’s a problem. And my family comes from overseas as well, but still see other cultures ... well they don’t understand them because they don’t have the same beliefs or cultural values and they don’t talk to people from other cultures. You assume these kids have a lot more understanding because they are growing up together and its just part of who they know, who their classmates are. But I wonder how deep the understandings are ... it can be scary to talk about as you don’t know where the discussion is going to go.
The school traditionally celebrates Harmony Day in March each year, usually through an across the school theme. The curriculum team decided to make Harmony Day one of its first responsibilities. The previous year the school had invited the school community in to work with teachers to conduct a series of one-off workshops highlighting aspects of culture. Claudia reflected that the focus was on difference between students and their families (for example wearing different clothing, eating different food) and overlooked the opportunity to explore similarities. In Claudia’s words:

That was a real ‘ah-ha’ moment for me. Unless we are careful, this approach can actually reinforce the dominant group as the norm and other students as different and perhaps exotic, for example ‘Aussies’ wearing ‘bootsy jumpers’ as opposed to our African students in colourful national costumes. We have to be careful not to promote stereotypes or we can be giving false impressions and failing to get to real engagement. It has to be about communication.

Rather than a ‘one-off’ experience, the committee decided that they wanted the work that students engaged in around Harmony Day to be ongoing, and a way for the children in each class to get to know one another at this early stage in the year. They settled on the theme of ‘Many people, one Australia’ and each year level undertook an integrated literacy/art project that was themed around the students’ unique identities. It was a broad approach allowing teachers of each year level to interpret and implement it in their own way. Claudia actively supported this initiative.

We really need to start thinking of ways that intercultural understanding can be embedded into all that we do rather than confined to a special day. At the moment we are all about ‘the big event’ – the five Fs of ‘food, festivals, flags, folktales and fashion’. Literacy seems a natural place to start embedding intercultural understanding because we’re all teachers of literacy, and literacy permeates all learning.

It might be valuable to pause here to reflect on what Claudia has told us about her school.

**Reflection and discussion**

Think about Claudia’s ‘ah-ha’ moment. What are your thoughts about her ‘ideas about difference’? What approaches have you observed in schools towards promoting cultural sensitivity and respect for difference? How would you describe the difference, if any, between multiculturalism and interculturalism? What role do you think you should play as a literacy educator in school change directed towards enhancing intercultural understanding?
Claudia and her Year 3/4 colleagues actively looked for opportunities to develop intercultural understanding in their current curriculum offerings. In Art lessons, their students had been working with an artist-in-residence developing memory boxes. These involve students selecting images and artefacts that represent aspects of their cultural memories and placing them within a box or tin to present a narrative. Rather than develop a separate activity they decided to enrich and expand the development of memory boxes to include oral and written reflections on memories through the use of memory journals and filmed oral presentations on their tablet devices.

To begin the memory journal students wrote and drew about themselves, responding to the prompt, 'Who am I?'. Three of the students' responses are reproduced below:

**Table 5.1: Student responses to the prompt 'Who am I?'**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXTRACT FROM IDA'S MEMORY JOURNAL</th>
<th>EXTRACT FROM YIN'S MEMORY JOURNAL</th>
<th>EXTRACT FROM OMAR'S MEMORY JOURNAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Nanna and Nonno came from Italy.</td>
<td>I am here from Vietnam because my father is working for Vietnam Airlines. I love Carlton Football Club and sausages and mash. When I lived in Japan I did origami and Sudoku. In Vietnam we have a dragon festival.</td>
<td>My mum is Egyptian. My dad is Lebanese. I am all of these and Aussie too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My dad was born in Australia. My grandpa, great grandpa and grandma came from England.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My mum is Aboriginal and I am Aboriginal and I have Aboriginal grandparents and Aboriginal cousins.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to Mt Martha with my Italian cousins. On the holidays I am going to Echuca with my Aboriginal cousins. I go to meetings with my Aboriginal cousins. At these meetings we talk about the history of Aboriginals in Australia.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such texts prompted Claudia to think about students' unique backgrounds and experiences in their out-of-school lives and the depth of knowledge that students bring to their curriculum experiences. She became aware that many of her students had multiple backgrounds that were far more complex than she had assumed.

The texts were really powerful. I realised the students had disclosed a lot about themselves in these narratives: things about their families, their lives. There were also things students spoke to me about that didn't make it into the written texts because of their sensitivity, like students who had family living overseas — deep, close, personal things. In an ongoing way I wanted to honour their work through sharing it but I felt a responsibility to create a safe environment to do this, one that would support them to continue to disclose things about themselves. Respect and boundaries are important.
Claudia remembered her own experience of speaking a version of English at home that was very different from the English she was taught at school. She remembered learning to adjust her language for classroom learning. Sometimes she would adjust not only her speech, but the way she presented her thoughts and experiences in order to make them more like those she associated with the ‘dominant culture’.

See Michæl Clune (2005) and Alex Kostogriz (2005) for discussion about the ways in which teaching and learning are mediated by socio-cultural understandings.

She was now determined that in her own teaching practice she would provide her students with opportunities to engage in genuine exchanges about their cultures and experiences. This was what she was trying to do with the memory boxes.

Claudia and her colleagues worked to address both the creation of an environment for respectful intercultural engagement and for the honouring of student work. They asked students to adopt and extend on the sentence stem: In our class we think that everyone should have the right to... Following discussion, students wrote their suggested ‘right’ in ‘speech bubbles’, and photographs were taken of each individual. A display of the sentence stem and student responses in speech bubbles with photographs of students was prepared and hung in a prominent position visible to students and classroom visitors. Students’ examples of completion of the sentence stem included:

- In our class we think that everyone should have the right to
  - be treated fairly
  - laugh, to love and to be free
  - stand up for yourself
  - have a family and friends
  - have a culture
  - be healthy and safe.

Claudia then read the text *We Are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures* (Amnesty International 2008). The students compared their responses to the rights agreed on by the United Nations after the Second World War. Following the comparison, additional rights were suggested by students and added to the display. This display then served as a constant reference point for Claudia and her class, framing conversations and providing a point of appeal when rights were seen to be violated.
Becoming a Teacher of Language and Literacy

Claudia thought about the potential of the students’ texts to stimulate intercultural understanding to the wider school community. Many of students’ completed texts remained in their portfolios, seen by an audience limited to herself, and perhaps a few other students and parents. To honour their work, and to encourage student pride in the development of authentic texts that would promote intercultural engagement, Claudia and her colleagues decided to display the memory boxes, journals and oral narratives as an art exhibition and to invite the school community to an evening launch of the display. Claudia invited her students to write and make audiovisual representations of their oral narratives on their tablet devices. They rehearsed this work with a peer for review, gaining and giving critical feedback. This prepared them for discussing their texts with the broader community audience.

The launch of the exhibit was a real event, with students’ discussing their texts with their peers, teachers and parents. The Art room was transformed into a gallery with presentations on tablet devices displayed with each student’s memory box and journal.

Reflection and discussion

What experiences have you had in engaging with other languages and cultures – in and out of schools? What initiatives have you experienced that draw on students’ languages and cultures as resources for learning? What might you do as a literacy educator to provide opportunities for creation and critique of texts that might enhance a sense of the value of diversity and difference? What challenges do you envisage to implementing an intercultural policy of the kind that Claudia’s school implemented?

While Claudia draws on family background, personal experiences of travel and school-based experiences to inform her work around literacy education and intercultural understanding, Patrick brings very different experiences to his teaching and understanding of interculturalism.

Patrick develops intercultural understanding and skills

Patrick is a Year 6 teacher at a middle-class suburban school. The school has a mixed population, with large groups of recently migrated Asian students from Taiwan and Hong Kong and large groups of Caucasian students whose ancestry is from post-Second World War Europe and earlier English and Irish migrations. There are small numbers of students from other backgrounds.

Patrick has worked at the school for five years and is an enthusiastic participant in the school’s intercultural understanding focus. Before working at the school, he
had not really grappled with issues of race or difference in his life and had little knowledge of other countries, beyond the basic geography he had learned in school.

When I first came to the school, I didn’t really even know anyone who wasn’t white or, you know, from a different background. I didn’t have any friends who weren’t white. I know that sounds bad, but really it was just that I hadn’t met anyone. Everyone was really well, basically the same as me when I grew up, and even at uni, in my teaching course ... I think most of the people were white.

Although he grew up in a large city, Patrick lived mainly in a largely English-speaking, white, middle-class suburb. He had never been out of Australia, and did not think about issues such as how people from diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds fit into Australian society and how Australia was positioned in the world. When he first came to the school, he did not really think that the school would need to do any kind of work on race or intercultural understanding, as he did not think that there were any problems of this kind in his city. He had a kind of colour blindness; for him such tensions simply did not exist. As a young person, Australian English was so normalised to him that he did not even consider that he had an ‘accent’. He acknowledges that if someone had asked him previously what intercultural understanding in primary schools meant, he would have said that it was the festivities like Multicultural Day and ‘raising money for other countries when they faced natural disasters’. Now he realises that intercultural understanding is much more than that, and he has since developed strong intercultural understanding through the experiences and opportunities given to him at the school.

When Patrick joined the school teaching team he did not realise that he was also joining them on a journey of intercultural understanding. But the work that Patrick has subsequently done on the school’s intercultural understanding focus has proved to be the area of professional learning where he feels the most satisfaction and growth. The staff and leadership team at the school are very enthusiastic and committed to the development of intercultural understanding. When Patrick started at the school, it was already embarking on a program of studies of Asia and had Mandarin as its study of languages other than English. The principal was committed to furthering the studies of Asia, in line with the changing population at the school. She saw this as central to both enabling the school to reach its population, and embracing the changing nature of Australia and Australia’s physical location and place in the world. The school curriculum is now embedded with studies of other cultures. It has a strong Mandarin language program, a sister school in mainland China, studies of other cultures through the texts studied in language and literacy, the artworks produced in Art classes. The teaching team at the school has invested considerable energy in embedding both the values and content of intercultural understanding into the school curriculum.
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After five years of working at the school during this time of change, Patrick is now at a point where he feels very confident with intercultural understanding.

I feel really confident with the intercultural understanding part of the curriculum. It is pretty amazing really, especially seeing that I had no experience in this area. We have such a great team here at the school though, and every one has really supported me to get on board with the program. I think the trip to China was really important. I made some great friendships with teachers from the other schools, and we stay in contact. It is great. We come from the other side of the world, but at the end of the day, we’re teachers, and have similar issues and problems. It’s just all about the kids really.

Patrick recognises his personal growth through his encounter with this aspect of the curriculum. He has been on a school trip to the sister school in China, has had professional conversations with teachers at the sister school and has worked on programs with them. This travel and getting to know teachers from another culture has made him feel like he belongs to an international network of teachers, all of whom are working in their students’ best interests. He is enthusiastic about this work, and keen to really make a difference to the way that students in his school work together. He finds that the students generally are very inclusive and accepting of each other, but every now and then he faces a race-based issue, and he always tries to successfully resolve it. He is used to discussing different cultural issues with his students, and he feels confident when working with students from different cultures. Patrick recognises now how race and culture play out for many of his students. They encounter small sneers of racism everyday as a regular part of their lives.

Patrick has noticed that some of the issues at the school are around using language to exclude others. This can be tricky to deal with because the school does not want to make a rule where students may never use their mother tongue or home language. Patrick describes how a group of girls came to see him because they felt that they were being excluded by other girls because they spoke Mandarin. When he delved into the issue, he found that the bilingual girls always spoke Mandarin on the playground and that non-Mandarin-speaking girls felt as though they were being excluded from their play. It got to a point where the non-Mandarin-speaking girls were retaliating by not including anyone who spoke Mandarin in their games. Patrick organised an open forum with the girls and they all talked through the issues about how the use of language can be a way of excluding others. The girls decided that it was up to all of them to work together on this, that it was very important for everyone to use their home language to communicate with their friends, but that everyone needed to be aware of how language had the potential, to include some and exclude others. Patrick felt that this was quite a tricky issue to deal with, but through handling this incident successfully, he was more determined than ever to develop a more structured and critical approach to teaching multicultural values in his literacy classroom.
Chapter 5 Supporting intercultural engagement

Patrick has experienced a shift from thinking about intercultural understanding as being the content of the curriculum to thinking about it as signifying a deeper set of inclusive values and empathy for others. This has also occurred as he has become more aware of his own views, of his own position as it has shifted in relation to intercultural issues. While he would never have thought of himself as being ‘racist’, with his growth in professional knowledge, he realises that he once held stereotypical beliefs and attitudes that were racist and narrowly monocultural in nature.

It is weird really. When I first came here, I would have said that there is no racism in Australia, but really I just meant there was no racism on my street. Now I can see it everywhere, and I am kind of super vigilant. I almost overreact, like someone who has given up smoking does when other people smoke. You know, and they can’t stand the smell of smoke at all. I just want to solve every situation that has even a sniff of racism.

Patrick examines his own actions and thoughts, as well as trying to develop intercultural understanding where he can. He is always looking for examples from the media, because issues presented in the media are at a remove from schoolyard incidents as children experience them, when a lot of heated emotion comes into play. From not even thinking about race as an issue, Patrick now sees racism around him everywhere. He sometimes witnesses racism in small everyday moments that he would not have thought remarkable previously, like noticing a shopkeeper raising his or her voice to a customer who does not speak fluent English. Now he notes it and tries to act to help the situation.

Reflection and discussion

What place should mother tongue or home language have in school? Do you feel that Patrick handled the situation of the Mandarin-speaking girls appropriately?

How confident are you in dealing with issues like this? How can racism be tackled in schools? What might you do as a teacher of language and literacy?

You have seen that Patrick became quite experienced in identifying and addressing issues in relation to cultural difference and building understanding within the school context. We will now turn to Angelina, and her experience of introducing a literature focus and laying emphasis upon the value of personal stories to sensitise people to cultural difference and the need for cross-cultural dialogue. This was once again in line with a whole school commitment to promoting intercultural understanding. As you read the following narrative, you might like to consider the value of using ‘stories’ to encourage the building of intercultural understanding in her classroom.
Angelina taps into students’ ‘funds of knowledge’

Angelina was born in Australia, as were her parents, but her mother’s family originally migrated from Macedonia. English is the only language in which Angelina is fluent and she considers herself to have been brought up in what she calls ‘the Australian way of life’, with lots of sport, social gatherings and a love of the beach and bush. Angelina is a graduate teacher whose first appointment is as a classroom teacher for children in Year 5. She works in a large school of nearly 600 students in an affluent south-eastern suburb. The students come from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds from more than twenty different countries, but the most common backgrounds are Indian, Sri Lankan and Sudanese. The school community is quite transient, as people tend to rent in this well-established suburb for a while, prior to purchasing a home in one of the surrounding new housing developments.

Angelina’s school decided that intercultural understanding needed to permeate all areas of the curriculum. Staff spent time discussing the meaning of ‘culture’ and then reflecting upon their own cultural identities. This was because they believed that you firstly need to understand your own cultural identity before you can truly understand the identities of others and engage in meaningful intercultural exchanges.

Angelina commented that a key realisation for her was the fact that everyone has a distinct cultural background, regardless of whether they have lived in Australia for a long time or they’ve just arrived:

We all came from somewhere and it’s important to recognise and value that and then try to understand one another’s backgrounds and how we can work together from there. I never thought I was very Macedonian, but reflecting upon the values that I uphold and understanding how they differ to the views of others has led me to question this. My gran would be thrilled.

The school has a growing number of students who were born overseas and migrated to Australia with their families. Some have arrived as refugees and many others have come to Australia for their parents to engage in further study and upgrade their qualifications. Prior to working in this school Angelina assumed that low socio-economic status in families was directly associated with low levels of parental education, but a recent experience changed her views on this. While preparing for a class excursion to visit Scienceworks, Angelina approached a family who had not yet returned the permission slip and payment for the excursion and found out that the family couldn’t afford it. After engaging in discussion with the child’s mother, Angelina learned that she was highly proficient in English and that she was a medical doctor from Sri Lanka, here to upgrade her qualifications to an international standard. Her husband was working in a factory and studying a Masters degree in engineering part time. Angelina shared this story with staff and together they discussed the importance
of genuinely getting to know their students and their families at a deeper level in order to better understand their needs and open up avenues for communication. For Angelina, this story showed that teachers need to be constantly sensitive to their own preconceptions and embrace opportunities to think and see differently.

Angelina belongs to a teaching team comprised of four Year 5/6 teachers, all of whom have many more years teaching experience than her. The team decided to use literature as a focus to develop students’ literacy and intercultural understanding. They felt that doing so would provide a seamless introduction to discussing valuable issues that could firstly be explored in the meaningful context of shared stories and then branch out into talk about the children’s own lived experiences.

Angelina’s school committed to creating classroom blogs. Each teacher shared interesting teaching activities, reported about events and celebrated students’ achievements in their online space for the entire school community to access. Angelina’s classroom blog was well designed, and other staff approached her for assistance. In addition, her team leader asked her to develop an intercultural understanding literacy blog in which the team and later the entire school staff could share their teaching ideas and experiences and the rich array of literature that they had used and found valuable. She compiled a list of the teams’ resources and had staff add critical reflections about the activities. Angelina worked collaboratively with the school librarian who alerted her to related websites, newly released titles and books purchased. Here is an entry that a Year 4 teacher at Angelina’s school contributed to her Intercultural Understanding blog about his plan to use a book called The Little Refugee (Do & Do 2011) with his class.

A blog entry by Andrew T.

Grade 4 teacher

The Little Refugee is an award winning picture storybook written by Anh and Suzanne Do. It’s an inspiring story describing Anh’s story of arrival in Australia. Fleeing a life of poverty in war-torn Vietnam, his family and friends boarded a fishing vessel and set sail. The many challenges that they faced on their treacherous journey are introduced, including hunger, thirst, fear and pirates. The story then describes the challenge of settling into a new way of life in a new country. This story is characterised by a sense of hope and is a testament to the power of love and resilience.

If you go to this website you’ll find a pdf with teaching suggestions


I’ve selected some activities from here and I’ll let you know how they go in next week’s update.

As well as the dissemination of information about resources, the Intercultural Understanding blog was also used to share thoughts about how the children were responding to the curriculum. Below is a blog entry written by Angelina for other staff to read about a recent classroom episode and how a focus on literacy and intercultural understanding was embedded into classroom activities.
Building intercultural understanding: Year 5P's ongoing journey

By Angelina P, 20th June

Last week one of the children reported on a news item in which someone of an Indian background in Sydney had been robbed by a group of teenagers from the Pacific Islands. They described a version of the incident in detail and the children were clearly intrigued, 'oohing' and 'aahing' in response as the story was told. Observing the children's responses, I decided that the issue was worthy of discussion as I wanted to ensure that the children were not left feeling distraught about what they had heard. I also wanted them to think about the text being discussed. We searched the Internet and found a brief article about the incident and discussed the following points:

- Whose perspective was being portrayed and for what purpose? (authorship, audience/readership)
- What difference would it make if the reporter had not provided information about the people's cultural backgrounds?
- What could have been the motivation behind the incident?
- What kind of solutions could be considered?
- How would changing the headline title of the article change the impact of the story?

I was very proud to find that, on the whole, the students engaged in responsible discussion about the story. They started to realise the importance of critically analysing a text considering its source, purpose and the effect of the words used.

But following this discussion I noticed that Afa, a Samoan student, became unusually quiet and withdrawn, and I was concerned that this may have been because Pacific Islanders were portrayed in a negative manner. I tried to speak with him about his feelings but he reassured me that he was fine. There are only a few Pacific Islander children at our school and Afa, in my class, is one of them. As a child, I remember that I never met anyone else at school who were Australian and part Macedonian and so I would state that I was Australian, a full Australian. I had felt disconnected from Macedonian culture and wanted to build a sense of belonging among my peers. It was easier to be Australian, as the other children had no idea where Macedonia was. I decided to make a conscious attempt to introduce the class to an opportunity to learn more about Pacific Island cultures through literature, I wanted Afa to have the opportunity that I missed out on: the opportunity to feel that your cultural background is truly valued.

Over the past month my class has spent Tuesday afternoons reading short traditional stories that originate from a range of cultures. We began with stories from Australia and have also worked on stories from China and India. Following the reading, we engaged in rich discussion about the meaning of the story and the values and beliefs that are advocated. I also provided time for the children to reflect upon their own beliefs and they had to create a response of some sort i.e. a written piece, a visual response (digital poster, slideshow), a podcast. This week I selected a Samoan story called ‘Sina and the Eel’ (Goodchild & Potter 2005). I was hoping that focusing on this story might help Afa bounce back and be his happy self again. You can read the two following diary entries (one by Ryan and one by Afa) and decide for yourself if you think I achieved this.

**Two diary entries from Year 5P “Sina and the Eel: a Samoan story”**

1. Our class read this book and learned about the Samoan legend of how coconut trees came about. After we talked and answered questions about it we did an art activity, which was about the eel. We had to create symmetrical patterns and match them to make a design. My friend Afa comes from Samoa and he did these really nice tribal patterns and it looked excellent! By Ryan
2. I was so surprised that we read a Samoan story in my classroom. That’s never happened before! When our teacher started reading I was excited and nervous at the same time because I wasn’t sure what the other kids would think.

Everyone ended up being really interested. They liked how it had a scary twist and then a happy ending. After the story they asked me all about Samoa and my family’s lifestyle and beliefs. It was like I was the expert and they all wanted to know more. We all talked about our lives and found out that the way I live in Australia has lots of things in common with the other kids... and some big differences. There aren’t many other Islanders at my school and I felt really proud when the class loved my artwork. It was an awesome day! By Afa.

Angelina stated that she was determined to ensure that Afa’s renewed engagement in class would last beyond that one ‘awesome day’.

When Angelina’s class read the Samoan literature it became the stimulus for interesting conversations among the students. Initially focusing upon Samoa and Afa’s life, it then became the springboard for each student to share and reflect upon their lives as well. Angelina realised that tapping into her students’ existing funds of knowledge and genuinely valuing them in the classroom was empowering and served to engage them in their learning. She also found that through purposeful planning teachers could use stories and literature from a range of genres in the classroom as the basis for children to further explore their own cultural identities and to better understand and relate to those around them. Angelina’s school found the use of literature to be instrumental in supporting staff in introducing the concept of intercultural understanding to their students and to nurture their ongoing knowledge and skill development in this area. The use of well-selected literature was powerful in enabling children to learn through vicarious experiences by putting themselves into someone else’s shoes. They seemed to be developing empathy and respect for cultural difference and were beginning to understand their own biographies as important and ongoing.

Reflection and discussion

What lessons can you draw from Angelina’s story with respect to your professional practice as a literacy educator? How do you feel about the way she handled the situation with Afa? Can you think of moments when what you have learnt about the languages and cultural backgrounds of your students has caused you to critically revisit some of your assumptions as a literacy educator?

Conclusion

The stories in this chapter have all been about teachers who have reflected critically on the different cultural experiences they bring to their teaching of literacy and intercultural understanding. This includes Patrick, who recognises that while his culture might be dominant, it is still only one culture among many, shaping his view of the world. Through their engagement with particular students and their backgrounds...
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and needs, these teachers have all developed a deeper awareness of the cultural resources of students and their worlds of experience. This has enabled them to draw on those worlds of experience as a resource for learning.

The school communities in which each of the teachers work are fostering their understanding about difference and about how to work together more effectively. The school contexts differ, but each can be thought of as a site for teacher inquiry into cultural diversity. Collaboration with colleagues, engagement with the broader school community and a preparedness to tackle difficult issues are leading to deeper understandings of literacy and difference on the part of both teachers and students.

References


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