Learning About Everyone: How Primary/Junior Teachers

Promote Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Through Multicultural

Children’s Literature

By

Stephen Feltracco

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Abstract

This qualitative study is focused on investigating how elementary teachers utilize multicultural children’s literature in order to teach students about different cultural identities. Through a detailed literature review, as well as face-to-face interviews with three teachers from the Toronto and Peel District School Boards, six prevalent themes arose: Understanding Multicultural Education, Familiarity with Multicultural Literature, Methodology for Selection, Learning Goals and Instructional Strategies, Evaluating Impact on Students, and Obstacles and Support to Implementation. From these themes, several findings emerged. It became clear that these teachers understood multicultural education as a powerful tool for the classroom that can assist teachers in building appreciation and acceptance among students within all curricular subjects. Despite limited exposure in their pre-service education, these teachers were able to integrate multicultural children’s literature as a specific tool for implementing multicultural education, with a primary focus on fictional books that provide authentic textual and visual representations of other cultures. These books are used in the classroom in order to promote student understanding of multiple cultures in terms of similarities and differences in order to develop acceptance and appreciation among students through whole-class discussion in which students are expected to engage with different cultures through their own lived experiences. Based on these findings, this project outlines how both pre-service and current teachers can work towards integrating multicultural education through children’s literature in order to achieve these goals, as well as how these findings have influenced the researchers own pedagogy and praxis.

Key Words: Multicultural Children’s Literature, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Culture, Literature, Identity
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Research Study

By 2002, it was documented by Statistics Canada that almost one-quarter of the nation’s population was born outside of Canada, with forty-six percent being of non-European background (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007). In 2006, 13.4 percent of Canada’s population classified themselves as “visible minorities”, a grouping that is expected to increase to twenty percent by the year 2016/2017 (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007/Statistics Canada, 2006). This growth has significant implications for the demographic of Canada as one in five Canadians will be classified as visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2006). With over two-hundred ethnicities and cultures present within its boundaries, Canada has become a leading example of a multicultural society and this is reflected in the student body (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007). Therefore, it is important that elementary students in Canada be exposed to literature that educates them about the different cultural identities within the nation.

Multiculturalism has become “a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society” (Bokhorst-Heng, p.643). In fact, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act recognizes that the concept of multiculturalism “reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society” and the understanding of different communities should be promoted (Government of Canada, 1985). If the importance of cultural diversity and identity plays a minor role in the education of students, how can we expect students to understand and be accepting of the multiple cultures within Canadian society (Pantaleo, 2000)? Students not only require literature that reflects their own cultures, but also educates them about other cultures unknown to them. Therefore, multicultural literature, in terms of my study, is defined as any textual work that places a focus on various
ethnic and cultural groups, spanning various geographic regions and racial classifications. My definition contrasts with that of certain researchers on multicultural literature, such as Cai and Dong, who define multicultural literature as “literature written about or by ethnic minorities” (Cai, 1998/ Dong, 2005). I believe that multicultural literature must be written about all ethnicities, both minority and majority groups, if students are to better understand and relate to various cultural identities.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to learn how a sample of teachers are implementing multicultural children’s literature in order to teach students about different cultural identities. Specifically, this research project will investigate the methods teachers use to select literature, the educational purposes for using the literature, and how they evaluate and recognize cultural understanding among their students. It is no longer adequate to simply teach students to “appreciate the nature and value of a diverse, multicultural society” (Ministry of Education, p.4). Classroom educators can no longer promote the “we-are-all-the-same-after-all” discourse which can often be the natural direction taken by education in the classroom. This disproportionate focus on harmony and similarity has proven to be an obstacle preventing the education of students in terms of critically understanding cultures in relation to their own cultural identities (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). Bearisto and Carrigan (2004) argue that by trying to treat all students equally and, by denying differences, some teachers in Canada are denying student needs and identities.

In her research, Dana Colarusso (2010) found that teachers in the twenty-first century face increasing demands to satisfy the diversity of learners and that teachers are increasing
efforts to redefine the texts they utilize to better reflect this student diversity. This has led Colarusso to inquire “whether the English curriculum should mirror the learners or open a window on what is foreign or new to their experiences?” (Colarusso, p.437) I believe that all curriculums, English or otherwise, should not only reflect the learner’s cultural identity but also provide a looking glass into cultures foreign to their own. Teachers are integral to the education of children and have a professional responsibility to expand the scope of student literature beyond the white identity that has dominated the field for so long and, instead, include characters and subject matter reflective of other diverse populations (Sleeter, p.vii). This white privilege in literature is the result of the socio-political structures and status quo that has dominated Canada in the past. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, Canada’s population was predominantly white with immigrating groups being comprised of primarily white, western European and American backgrounds. This led to an inordinate focus on white, western European and American/Canadian cultural representation in children’s literature while other cultures and races were misrepresented or underrepresented. The increase in global immigration in the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century has led to an increased focus on races beyond White. Subsequently, the cultures inherent within these non-white races, as well as those cultures within the White population that had been given less attention in the past, such as Eastern European populations, were given greater representation in literature. With this change in population diversity, educators have been expected to adjust the literature they use to better represent our multicultural society and the cultural experiences of all students. By moving beyond this limited perspective, teachers can help students prevent the development of bias or racism towards cultures different from their own (Sleeter, 2011). Failing to provide a diverse collection of
literature will only alienate those students who do not see themselves reflected in what they are reading (Colarusso, 2010).

**Research Questions**

Having discussed the issue currently facing teachers, the primary question my MTRP will investigate is: “How are a sample of elementary teachers integrating multicultural children’s literature to teach multicultural understanding in ways that address themes of similarity and difference by inviting students to engage the texts through their own cultural identities?”

My research will require that several questions be asked of the teachers interviewed. In order to understand how teachers integrate children’s literature in the classroom for multicultural understanding, the questions must address their understanding of the term “multicultural education”, their methodology for selection and implementation, how they evaluate student understanding and, lastly, what obstacles are encountered as well as what support they receive. For the purpose of my study, sub-questions have been categorized into four sections that will also serve as an organizational framework for the interview questions:

**Understanding**

How do these teachers conceptualize “multicultural education” in theory and practice?

**Methodology**

What multicultural children’s literature do a sample of teachers utilize and what is their criteria for this selection? What are these teachers’ learning goals and key instructional strategies when integrating multicultural children’s literature?
Evaluation

What impact, if any, do these teachers observe in regards to students connecting with the cultures described in the literature and what verbal/oral cues signify understanding?

Obstacles/Support

What factors and resources support these teachers’ integration of multicultural children’s literature?

What range of challenges do these teachers experience when integrating multicultural children’s literature to foster multicultural understanding?

Background of the Researcher

Having outlined these questions, it is important I note that my interest in this topic extends from my own experiences in elementary school. Upon reflection of my educational background, it is clear that the majority of authors prevalent in my elementary classroom environments were Western-born, white males such as Dr. Seuss and Robert Munsch. This critique is not meant to diminish the work of these authors and the benefits of each, but rather to emphasize my point that children’s literature for myself was primarily representative of white men raised in the western world and, therefore, I was privileged because curriculum content was representative of my own cultural identity. Many of the literary characters introduced to me by my teachers were of white background and I believe this western dominance within children’s literature still occurs in elementary classrooms. This is not to say that the Canadian education system, especially in Ontario, has not made strides to introduce representation of various cultures. Many of us can remember being expected to research and present our family heritage and culture, often taking
the form of a family tree assignment. However, this provides a small window into other cultures because my teachers rarely used these activities to teach similarities and differences between various cultures.

Being a White student of European background I realize that I have seen my experiences reflected in most of the literature during my elementary schooling. Therefore, I realize I have been privileged in the sense that children’s literature in my classroom environments has reflected my cultural experiences, thereby assisting in engaging my interest in the material and schooling process in general. Being aware of this privilege, I believe I have a better understanding of the benefits that arise when a student sees themselves reflected in the literature. Therefore, a significant component of my rationale for studying this topic is the hope that the findings may support more teachers in their efforts to meaningfully integrate multicultural children’s literature into their classroom teaching. The goal of such integration is that more students in our diverse classrooms can see themselves reflected in texts so that all students can engage in learning about cultural identity – their own as well as others.

**Overview**

Before beginning to elaborate on this subject, it is important that the structure of this research project be outlined. Chapter one has outlined the study in regards to its purpose and why it is important for the field of education. Chapter two provides a literature review in which current academic texts from leading researchers are compared for the purpose of understanding common themes surrounding the subject. Chapter three describes the methodology for the study, including the criteria for the selection of participants and how the interviews will be conducted. Chapter four will report and discuss the research findings and contextualize them in terms of the findings.
from the literature review. Chapter five will summarize the findings and will outline their implications for further research and classroom practice. I conclude chapter five by articulating a range of recommendations, as well as how these findings impact my own pedagogy and praxis.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

When discussing the use of children’s literature by elementary educators, especially in terms of multicultural education, there are several facets that must be understood. It is a shared belief among academic texts that promoting an understanding of multiple cultures in the classroom is necessary in our current society. The question, however, is what kinds of literature should be utilized for multicultural education, what learning outcomes should they produce and for what purpose.

Reasons for Using Multicultural Children’s Literature

The Concepts of the Mirror and Window

Academically, there are two factors supporting the popular argument for the necessity of multicultural children’s literature in the classroom. As noted by Bishop and Colarusso (2010), these two factors are the literary “mirror” and “window” (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). These terms reflect the duality of multicultural children’s literature. Students should see their cultural identities portrayed within literature, known as a mirror, while being provided the opportunity to examine other cultures separate from their own, known as the window. Most children included in the white, Western European and North American population have had an abundance of literary mirrors in which they can see their cultural identities reflected within children’s literature. This abundance is the direct result of the white, western European and North American culture being the social status quo in Canada up until the mid-twentieth century (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). Subsequently, this means that minority cultural groups that have entered Canada in the following periods have had many literary windows with which to examine, engage and understand the white, Western European and North American cultural identity (Mendoza and Reese, 2001).
However, this also means that these minority cultural groups have had limited access to textual resources that represent their own cultural identities. With fewer literary *mirrors* in children’s literature with which children from minority cultural groups can “see” themselves, they will struggle to create a “positive self-image” (Hurley, p.221). This also means that those students from the white, Western European and North American population have had few *windows* into the identities of these minority cultures. With the abundance of multicultural texts being produced in the last four decades, it has become increasingly possible to integrate more *mirrors* for those cultural groups previously marginalized as well as *windows* for those cultures classified under the white, Western European and North American population.

**Discrimination Prevention**

Children are often aware when their background is not being reflected in the classroom literature. For example, Sleeter (2011) discerned that students who find their culture or background absent in classroom texts often become increasingly disconnected from school in comparison to those students who see themselves represented. Subsequently, if students lack exposure to multiple cultures they will become increasingly susceptible to the stereotypes and prejudices prevalent in society (Duren, 2000). As Beach (1995) discusses in her research, when students are not provided information on other cultural models, they can often be led to believe that they have the only cultural model present within society. Beach noticed this trend among many of the white, middle-class suburban schools she studied where they had not been exposed to different cultural perspectives (Beach, 1995). In support of Beach’s argument, Pantaleo (2000) conducted a study with a class of grade three students comprised primarily of white students (with the exception of two children). Pantaleo found that the class failed to recognize different cultures, or a lack thereof, within eleven picture books when asked how the books
depicted Canadian society (Pantaleo, 2000). This study supports Beach’s argument that there is a singular cultural model mindset that tends to develop among children not exposed to “alternative cultural perspectives” either through personal interactions or literature in the classroom (Beach, 1995).

Subsequently, if students simply learn to respect the unfamiliar, it will remain exactly that: unfamiliar. My viewpoint is supported by academics such as Duren (2000) who, in her research, argues that teachers must stop absolving themselves from helping their students by focusing on “recognition and appreciation” and instead assist students in “conceptualizing [their] world...in context of the experiences of others” (p.16-17). With a teacher’s guidance and focus on understanding a variety of global cultures represented in literature, Robinson argues that students are capable of “forming personal connections with...different cultures by relating to their experiences” (Robinson, 2013). This transition from respect to understanding has proved successful in studies by academics such as Iwai (2013). When introduced to multicultural children’s literature, pre-service teachers in Iwai’s study found that students were able to “understand...other cultures and traditions and broaden [their] views of diverse people” (Iwai, p.193).

*Types of Literature*

**Picture Books**

Although the benefits of utilizing more diverse children’s literature in the elementary classroom is generally agreed upon, scholarly literature tends to contain the most debate when discussing what types of literature should be utilized. It is generally agreed upon by academics such as Morgan, Mendoza and Reese that picture books are the most reliable resource for the
promotion of multicultural understanding among elementary students. The reason for this being that students need to see visual representations of other cultures in order to better comprehend them (Morgan, 2009/ Mendoza and Reese, 2001). These scholars, among others, believe that to teach a complex topic such as multicultural understanding requires that text play a supplementary role to illustrations that capture the attention of young children and stimulates them into focusing on the experiences of the characters (Morgan, 2009/ Mendoza and Reese, 2001). Utilizing books with visual representations of diverse cultures provides a didactic outcome for the students, even if that was not the books’ primary purpose (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). By creating opportunities for students to engage with visual representations of their own culture as well as others, they become increasingly acclimatized to the idea of multiple cultures beyond their own (Duren, 2000).

**Literary Content/ Fiction vs. Non-Fiction**

Although several scholars agree that picture books are primarily the best method of delivery for students, there is a division among academics regarding the proper content of these books. The debate focuses on the accuracy of the material being presented. Certain researchers, such as Mendoza and Reese (2001), believe fiction is an acceptable format as long as it is accurate regarding the cultures being presented. Specifically, this accuracy should be the equivalent of an informational textbook (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). This idea of the cultural authenticity of the literature is supported by Sleeter who argues that simply “infusing representation” of diverse cultures, through either visuals or reference, provides only a minimal impact on student understanding (p.viii). She argues the books need to be authentic in their content, with examples including issues of racism and bias (Sleeter, 2011).
However, other researchers, such as Morgan (2009), refute the use of fiction when selecting multicultural children’s literature. Instead, she believes that teachers should only provide non-fiction in the form of picture book biographies (Morgan, 2009). Morgan discards the “contributions approach” to multicultural literature, as accepted by Mendoza and Reese (2001), which utilizes protagonists of different cultures within a realm of fiction (Morgan, p.220). Instead, Morgan promotes the “transformative approach” in which the book actively attempts to describe cultural perspectives common within those groups (Morgan, p.220). Morgan believes that, in using fictitious scenarios, the content of the book becomes overwhelmed with popular culture, thereby undermining student development of multicultural understanding (Morgan, 2009). While there is merit in having characters properly represent cultural groups, I believe that biographies often give a limited view regarding the aspects of a culture. Oftentimes, picture book biographies, especially for children, focus on famous individuals and their achievements over their cultural experiences. If students are expected to draw connections between their own cultures and those of the characters, I argue that characters must be relatable and diverse. The stories must include every day, relatable experiences, a factor that will most likely be absent in the biography genre. As mentioned previously, children need literary mirrors. I struggle to believe that famous individuals represented in biographies will provide a literary mirror for students to see reflections of themselves. Examples of proper biographical picture books, as provided in Morgan’s (2009) argument include “My Name is Celia: The Life of Celia Cruz” by Monica Brown and “Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote” by Tanya Lee Stone. Although both books address important topics of multiculturalism and human rights, they do not provide perspectives that I believe would be understood by young children. A student could more easily connect with the experiences of a fellow child because they will see
much of themselves reflected in the experiences of that kind of multicultural character. Most importantly, the contributions approach also taps into a student’s imagination. This will serve to capture the attention of students. As primary school educators understand, the average elementary student has a short attention span. Therefore, literature must draw the student’s attention from the beginning, and engaging their imagination is a good method towards achieving this student focus. There is no reason why a book cannot contain both a contributions and transformative approach in that the story contain fictitious elements while communicating aspects of a culture rooted in the real world that students can identify with in their own lives. I believe that, by refuting fictitious literature, academics such as Morgan hinder themselves in their goal of multicultural understanding among students.

*Lack of Implementation*

**Fear of Implementation**

While the debate over the kinds of children’s literature to utilize for promoting multicultural understanding continues, finding the answer to this question will only be beneficial if teachers are willing to implement it into their classroom curriculum. Current research and studies find that many educators feel hesitant or unable to use multicultural children’s literature in the classroom (Lowery and Sabis-Burns, 2007/ Hammet and Bainbridge, 2009). In Lowery and Sabis-Burns’ (2007) study of pre-service teachers in a children’s literature class at the University of Florida, they found that the participating elementary-level teacher candidates were uncomfortable discussing race or ethnicity. Their discomfort stemmed from fear and uncertainty regarding the proper methods for handling sensitive subject matter, such as racism and cultural representation (Lowery & Sabis-Burns, 2007). An important point made by Lowery and Sabis-
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Burns (2007) concerning their subjects was that, for many, this was their first exposure to children’s literature dealing with multicultural topics and experiences. The feelings of fear among these University of Florida pre-service teachers reflect the types of anxiety present among teacher candidates in Canada. Hammett and Bainbridge (2009), in their study of six Faculties of Education across Canada, found similar feelings of fear. Inquiries about teaching practices involving multicultural children’s literature found that pre-service teachers in Canada also displayed feelings of fear in implementing multicultural material because of the controversy that might arise in response (Hammett & Bainbridge, 2009). Although this research concerns pre-service teachers, I believe this does not diminish the findings. If teacher candidates are fearful in implementing multicultural children’s literature, this anxiety may likely continue when they attain full-time teaching positions. As described in Ge’rin-Lajoie’s research (2012), Canadian teachers are concerned that, by recognizing different cultures in their curriculum, this will emphasize the need for accommodation which can lead to feelings of segregation.

Hammett and Bainbridge (2009) agree with Lajoie (2012) when describing a common fear of community segregation in response to multicultural literature and education. Hammett and Bainbridge (2009) also found pre-service teachers’ feared focusing on implementing multicultural material because they believed it would make cultural groups feel like they required accommodation. They were also concerned that, by pointing out differences between cultures through multicultural children’s literature, members of those communities may interpret that as a form of cultural alienation (Hammett & Bainbridge, 2009). Teachers also feel uncertain regarding the types of books that should be selected for multicultural educational purposes. As Mendoza and Reese (2001) discovered during a reading of A Day’s Work to a children’s literature class, a book that appears to advocate the positive promotion of a cultural group can
easily be interpreted negatively. Although *A Day’s Work* was meant to educate students on the struggles faced by Mexican-American immigrant families, a student of Latino background felt the book promoted the stereotype that Mexican immigrants serve only as physical labour in the workforce (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). This negative reaction by the university student exemplifies the response teacher’s fear from the community when deciding whether to implement more multicultural literature into their curriculum. For new teachers who have not established themselves within a community, this fear can prove discouraging. Teachers are expected to use multicultural children’s literature to assist students in understanding different cultures, however, if they do not feel comfortable in selecting which books will assist them in this endeavour, fear will continue to hold them back. Although Mendoza and Reese (2001) argue that making mistakes is expected of the position, this is not always the mindset of recently hired teachers. Therefore, it is important that this study interviews teachers currently implementing multicultural children’s literature in their classroom. Through their insight it will be possible for elaboration on this fear in the hopes of understanding how they overcame any discomfort and how these methods can support future educators in their implementation of multicultural children’s literature in the classroom for the purpose of reflexive thinking and understanding regarding cultural identities.

**Focus on Difference-Blindness**

By trying to avoid discussing race or ethnicity in the classroom, teachers in Canada have been implementing multicultural education in a disadvantageous manner. As a result of their fear of controversy, as discussed in the previous section, many teachers are avoiding the inclusion of opportunities in the classroom for students to critically reflect on global cultures in favour of promoting a *difference-blindness* approach. *Difference-blindness* involves teachers refusing to
see race or cultural difference between students, also known by researchers such as Ghosh (2008) as the “tolerance of others” approach (p.28). This approach is used in order to “treat all students equally” (Bearisto and Carrigan, p.5). This desire to provide equal treatment to all students is understandable in relation to the Canadian education system which, as Gerin-Lajoie (2012) states, expects all students to “attain common performance standards…regardless of the student’s background…and social reality” (p.209). By attempting to provide students with common expectations for success, we as educators eliminate from the classroom the idea that difference, such as culture, exist and therefore needs accommodation and representation.

Lajoie (2012) argues that this difference-blindness approach was developed in the 1960s and has remained prevalent in the Canadian education system. The prevalence of difference-blindness in twenty-first century Canadian classrooms is evidenced in Lajoie’s (2012) extensive study of 500 teachers and principals across Canada’s most diverse regions, primarily in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Many of her participants stated in interviews that they did “not to differentiate among their students” in terms of culture and race, choosing rather to “treat everyone equally” by not “address[ing]… diversity at all” (Lajoie, p.214). Lajoie (2012) concluded that educators in the study typically viewed their students as being the same regardless of racial and ethnic origins.

I agree with the findings of Lajoie, Bearisto, Carrigan and several other academics in regards to the danger of this mindset. I believe this difference-blind view deters teachers from wanting to use literature to promote cultural analysis and understanding. By utilizing a “curriculum of sameness”, it ignores culture and the important dialogues that teachers can have with students, such as racial and cultural privilege, racism and bias (Carson and Johnston, 2000). Although these subjects can seem intimidating and controversial to teachers, they are necessary
for building cultural understanding and respect among students (Harper and Brand, 2010). As Harper and Brand argue, multicultural education, especially through multicultural literature, can “break down barriers” and “dispel prejudice” through in-depth discussion that “create awareness and appreciation” for students regarding other cultural identities (p.224). As mentioned by Atwater (2008), there appears to be a blending among schools across North America regarding the idea that race should not matter and race does not matter. I believe this applies to culture as well since, by trying to give students equal academic footing (race/culture should not matter), I often see teachers applying this logic to mean that race and culture do not matter at all. By trying to follow the democratic ideal of anti-discrimination, I agree with Atwater (2008) that teachers are undervaluing the individual in favour of a supposed collective benefit. This, in turn, is leading many educators in Canada to underutilize multicultural children’s literature, if at all, to promote cultural understanding in terms of the similarities and differences.

**Lack of Exposure**

In a study of elementary and middle school teacher candidates, Iwai (2013) discovered that many of the participants displayed a lack of exposure to multicultural children’s literature in their own education and, as a result, lacked foundational knowledge of the genre for use in the classroom. Since the genre is fairly new, having developed significantly in the past few decades in terms of volume, many of the current teachers in the field will have had limited exposure. The only teachers that I believe will be exceptions to this rule are those who have attained exposure to the genre as a result of independent research or those young teachers who have had firsthand experience with such texts during their own childhood. This lack of exposure provides an interesting focal point for this research project. Given the fact that multicultural children’s
literature, as a genre, has been developing since the late twentieth century, how did teachers currently implementing such texts become familiar with the literature?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Procedure/Instruments of Data Collection

The type of research conducted for this project was qualitative, consisting primarily of informal interviews with three teachers which served to confirm, expand and challenge the information ascertained from the literature review. As stated by Shank and Villella (2004), qualitative research acts as a lantern with which to illuminate dark areas so that we can see things that were previously obscured. The interview questions were formatted according to four categories: Understanding, Methodology, Evaluation and Obstacles/Support and were “open-ended, general and focused on” my main question (Creswell, p.163). The interview questions attempted to understand how teachers perceived multicultural education. By understanding their definition of the term, the interview questions then attempted to understand how teachers selected multicultural children’s literature and how they integrated it into their lesson plans in order to promote understanding of cultural identity. Once the techniques for selection and utilization were established, the interview questions focused on their methods of evaluating student understanding in terms of visual and verbal cues. Lastly, the data being collected in the interview phase attempted to understand what obstacles, if any, teachers faced in implementing multicultural children’s literature and education, as well as any factors of support.

Data Collection and Analysis

Once the interviews had been completed the information collected was transcribed verbatim. After transcribing the initial interview, the transcript was reviewed several times in order to familiarize the coder (myself) with the information provided by the participant (Agar, 1980).
The transcript was then coded using the framework of the grounded theory approach, as outlined by Creswell (2013). The coding process began by formulating codes *in vivo*. As the *in vivo* codes were developed, the codes with increased frequency were noted. Following the creation of the *in vivo* codes, the transcript was read again, this time developing codes based on the coder’s interpretation of the data. During this second reading, focus was placed on areas where the high frequency *in vivo* codes appeared in the transcript, a method supported by Huberman and Miles (1994). Once the tentative codes were developed, they were compressed and compiled into new codes. This new list of codes underwent the axial coding process in which they were compiled into larger groupings based on similar subject matter.

Throughout the coding process, several themes emerged:

1. Understanding Multicultural Education
2. Familiarity with Multicultural Literature
3. Methodology for Selection
4. Learning Goals and Instructional Strategies
5. Evaluating Impact on Students
6. Obstacles and Support to Implementation

The final list of coding groups were organized under these six themes, thereby serving as the sub-themes discussed in chapter four. These themes and sub-themes served to provide answers and insights regarding the research question and sub-questions addressed in this project.

**Participants**

My selection process for choosing participants was formulated on the basis of inclusionary and exclusionary criteria that allowed me to select teachers that could appropriately
answer my questions and elaborate on my topic (Creswell, 2013). The most important criteria was that these participants were teachers trained and experienced in elementary or middle school classrooms. It was also required that these teachers be familiar with or actively integrating multicultural children’s literature so that the most relevant information and insight regarding the topic could be ascertained. Although my literature review makes mention of pre-service teachers, I have withheld interviewing these individuals because it was important that my findings be from full-time, experienced teachers in actual classrooms.

The reason that not all participants are required to be actively using and promoting multicultural children’s literature is because obstacles to implementation is a focus of this research project. By interviewing teachers who are using multicultural children’s literature occasionally, or are just familiar with the genre, may allow for more revealing information regarding hesitations about using this literature.

The first participant, JK, is a full-time teacher librarian with a Master’s Degree in Child Studies from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She has been serving in the Toronto District School Board for 12 years, teaching grades 6, 7, and 8.

The second participant interviewed, KM, is a full-time teacher-librarian at the Peel District School Board. She received her teaching degree from Queens with an Intermediate/Senior designation, but has attained additional teaching qualifications which has allowed her the opportunity to teach grades 1 to 13, including kindergarten. Although she has been a full-time teacher for 27 years, she has only been a teacher-librarian for three. Along with teaching in standard classrooms, she has also worked in special education settings where she has assisted E.L.L students.
My third and final participant, SM, has been teaching within the Toronto District School Board for 13 years where she has taught grades ranging from kindergarten to grade 5. Specifically, she has worked with special education classes for grades 3 to 5 and in standard classrooms with students from junior kindergarten to grade 3. She received her undergraduate degree in Child Studies and Education at Brock University and received her Masters from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Limitations

There are several limitations that must be addressed within this research project. Firstly, there is the limitation of the small group. Being a two year program where interviews are only able to proceed in the second year, at which time a supervisor has been provided and approved the topic, there is limited time for interviews to be held and I have therefore been limited to only three participants. Subsequently, with the time it takes to transcribe the data collected from interviews, it is difficult for multiple sessions to be held with these participants. Once the organization of information from these interviews had been completed, I reassessed whether I needed to ask follow-up questions of my participants in order to elaborate on the information collected, which did not occur. The small number of participants also means that the findings may generalize teachers in Canada. Although the findings and insights might be reflected among most teachers, there is the risk that some of what is determined in these interviews will be specific to residents of Ontario. My final limitation concerns the fact that there is no opposing stance on multicultural children’s literature and its effects in the classroom. Therefore, this MTRP will appear biased in its promotion of this type of literature and its benefit for students. I am studying this topic because I believe that it is important that more teachers meaningfully integrate multicultural children’s literature to promote multicultural understanding. However,
this limitation is not significantly detrimental since this MTRP is primarily attempting to understand how this literature is understood by teachers and can be utilized rather than whether or not it is beneficial. To protect against bias, I ensured that the teachers selected for interviews were not pro-multicultural children’s literature with an agenda to spread regarding its benefits. Lastly, this MTRP does not allow for the observation of students, which is considered an important tool for collecting data, especially for a topic such as this which seeks to understand student responses to literature (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, my MTRP must rely on descriptions of student responses to the literature from teachers which might be biased since participants will most likely want to emphasize the effectiveness of their strategies and classroom instruction.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

The ethical review procedures followed those approved by the Master of Teaching program. This entailed that consent forms, explaining the purpose of the study, were provided to every individual interviewed. Prior to signing, all participants were required to read the contents of the form and ask any questions that arose concerning the interviews and study in general. All participants were allowed to leave the study at any time without consequence, an aspect that was outlined in the consent forms. Since this study asks that participants discuss possible obstacles faced from their community in implementing multicultural children’s literature and education, this posed the possibility of a limited risk to their relationship with that community once the study is published. Therefore, all participants were assured of the option of anonymity at any point in the study, prior to publication. The framework of this anonymity included the use of pseudonyms in all transcripts, as well as in the final published work. Lastly, all interviews were held in locations agreed upon and selected by the participant, to ensure that professionalism is maintained and ensuring that all information provided is private, especially if the participant has
requested anonymity. These private locations also ensured, as outlined by John W. Creswell, that the interviews remained “free from distractions” (Creswell, 165).
Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter I will outline the findings from my one-on-one interviews with the three participants selected for my study. These participants consisted of two teachers within the Toronto District School Board: JK, a full-time teacher librarian and SM, a full-time primary school teacher. The third participant, KM, is a full-time teacher-librarian from the Peel District School Board. The interviews conducted with these participants sought to understand how they perceive multicultural education, how multicultural literature was selected, for what purposes the literature was utilized, and how they recognize student impact from engagement with the literature. From these three individuals, six prevalent themes arose: Understanding Multicultural Education, Familiarity with Multicultural Literature, Methodology for Selection, Learning Goals and Instructional Strategies, Evaluating Impact on Students, and Obstacles and Support to Implementation. Each of these themes encapsulates several smaller sub-themes in order to better organize and understand the data that has been collected.

Understanding Multicultural Education

Defining Multicultural Education In Theory

Before understanding how multicultural children’s literature is selected and implemented by my participants, it is important to outline their theory and understanding of multicultural education and why they include it within their pedagogical practice. In terms of my participants’ conceptualization of multicultural education, the general definition was that it is the pedagogy of incorporating multiple cultures into the lessons and activities of the classroom with the goal of providing students the opportunity to understand and appreciate the different backgrounds that reflect Canada’s “pluralistic society”. This pedagogy ensures that students feel welcomed,
represented and understood in the classroom. As JK states, the use of multicultural education closely aligns with the official stance of Canada:

*Well multiculturalism has been an official policy of Canada since the Trudeau years and it became an explicit policy of our educational establishment.*

**Defining Multicultural Education In Practice**

In terms of how multicultural education should be integrated into the classroom to achieve this goal of inclusion and representation, all participants agreed that multiculturalism could be, and should be, included within all subject matter. The participants agreed that there are opportunities within all curriculum strands for multicultural education to be inserted organically. As JK states:

*So really in every subject it should be integrated. There should be an awareness that you’re speaking to the students and using references that will be familiar to a wide variety of students. And using resources that reflect their community and asking questions that are relevant to the needs of different people around the world.*

Although it was agreed upon that multicultural education has a place within all curriculum areas, the participants made it clear that certain subjects were better suited. In particular, social studies and language arts. Through the language arts curriculum, multicultural education is integrated primarily through books, a topic that will be explored in the subsequent themes within this chapter.

Along with language arts, SM stated the *Ontario Social Studies Curriculum* offers several opportunities for teaching students about different cultures:

...it [Heritage and Identity strand] honors the different kinds of celebrations across different cultures versus...I think generally in our school system in Toronto, even in Toronto, even though it’s so multicultural, I think we focus on Christmas and Easter and Halloween and those kind of things, and so ...through social studies you can incorporate all those other celebrations...
JK agreed with this assertion and mentioned how the social studies’ focus on historical narratives provides further opportunities to implement cultural representation and education about diverse communities within her classrooms:

You’re not just studying, you know, the western explorers but you are doing, at least in some stages during the year, you’re reflecting the different communities that have formed our country.

In terms of other subject areas where multicultural education can be infused, specific emphasis was also placed on mathematics. Particularly, that multicultural representation could be reflected through the names and examples used to explain concepts. As SM stated:

...if you look at word problems it’s about, you know, often times it’s about Mary had, you know, five Christmas trees.

Using an abundance of white, western names and cultural objects in classroom examples provides a limited cultural perspective of the world and can prove inaccessible to students whose cultural backgrounds are not being reflected. Therefore, SM discussed how you can infuse a multicultural lens into mathematic examples, along with other subjects, to solve this issue:

...it’s all connected and I think the more you can look at those little things...even when you’re making tests, trying to use names from different cultures and experiences from different cultures and not to assume that kids all know about Christmas, or about whatever it may be that you are talking about. Certain kinds of foods even if you are doing word problems or writing...and things like that.

This practice of using a variety of multicultural names and examples within all subjects was strongly supported by the other participants, such as KM, who stated that this practice was important because it meant that the examples provided a “fair representation of the children that would be accessing the text”.

Familiarity with Multicultural Literature

Background Education on Multicultural Children’s Literature

Upon inquiring into how my participants familiarized themselves with the genre of multicultural children’s literature, I was surprised to learn that almost all were unable to recall receiving exposure to these texts in their pre-service education. Only SM was able to recall having received any training:

*I had a fair bit in pre-service only because I took a course on that. I believe it was multiculturalism and children’s literature. Or it could have been…it was gender, as well and multiculturalism.*

Although SM had enrolled in this course which broadened her understanding, it was not required by her faculty of education. It is also important to note that SM proceeded to state that, despite taking the course, she still desired more knowledge regarding the genre:

*I would like…I would like to have more access to them [multicultural books]. I’d like to have more knowledge of them, for sure.*

With all of the participants having discussed receiving little, if any, exposure to multicultural children’s literature in their pre-service education, I proceeded to inquire about the sources of their understanding and familiarity with the genre. When asked how they became familiar with the genre, each participant discussed having pursued multicultural literature and education through both personal interest and research or through workplace exposure provided to them through their individual school boards. In terms of gaining experience and understanding through their individual school boards, the participants firstly credited the school community, as expressed by JK:

*Well, keeping my ear to the ground in the librarian…teacher librarian community. There was a leader in that community who was extremely alert to and sensitive to*
these issues. So she really promoted multicultural books. She’s no longer in that role but that was an exposure I had in my post-service training as I became a librarian and then met with other people in that role.

And KM:

On this staff we are very fortunate because we have teachers…it’s a very multicultural staff and so I’ve learned a lot by speaking to them and I’ve also had them assist me with the purchase of some resources.

Beyond the school community, participants also credited board-run workshops and conferences for developing their understanding of multicultural literature and its role in the classroom. Nonetheless, all of the participants seemed to place the greatest focus on their own research as the primary method for understanding this form of literature. As KM noted:

...there’s sort of an onus on an educator to educate yourself around that.

The individual responsibility expressed by KM was shared among the other participants who discussed the importance of outside research and investigation in understanding what to look for in multicultural literature. Two participants cited locally owned bookstores as providing assistance in their research into selecting multicultural books. These local experts supported them in finding texts that would provide their students with strong, educational representations of different cultures. KM also noted the importance of attending literary conferences, such as Reading for the Love of It, along with any other workshops on the subject of multiculturalism and literature provided outside of the school boards.

SM credited much of her own knowledge about the genre to internet research. Through her investigations into online literary resources, she has come across a variety of websites and programs which she shared during her interview:

The internet. The internet for sure. I mean, Book Flicks...there’s a program called Book Flicks through Scholastic and I use it a lot with the class. There’s another one called
Tumble Books. When you go on there they do endeavor to be multicultural. There’s things on there about Diwali, and there’s things on there about all different kinds of cultures.

Methodology for Selecting Multicultural Children’s Literature

Reflecting the Backgrounds of Students

With their understanding of multicultural education established and their familiarity with the genre discussed, it is important to comprehend the methodology used by these participants for selecting multicultural literature for their students. It was evident in chapter two’s literature review that the texts used by teachers should reflect the students in the classroom and two of my participants supported this finding, as evidenced in their criteria for selecting books. SM stated:

*I would look for representations of the children in my class, specifically. So, I would want characters that look like them. Maybe characters that speak their language.*

She further elaborated by stating:

*So I do try to, if I have particular, you know, if I have a really high group...I mean I’ve had classes where half the group is Somali kids before. So that was kind of a focus those years, you really want to make sure you’re including books, literature that includes Somali characters and includes Somali experiences.*

Along with reflecting the cultures of the classroom, SM also stated that it was important to expose students to other cultures that comprise their local community:

*You want to read about, you know, this is our local community, it’s made up of this, you know, we have Chinatown, we have little Italy, we have all these places within our city, right?*

This view of reflecting the cultures of the classroom and those in the community when selecting literature was supported by KM:

*I network very carefully with the Peel Library services, and they even have a committee that’s looking into making sure they are buying, you know, books for children that are representative of the various cultures in Peel.*
Although KM and SM both agreed that, when selecting literature, the cultural background of students was an important factor, my third participant disagreed. Rather, JK stated that when selecting books for her students, their backgrounds were not a concern unless culture and race was the subject under discussion:

So, for example, we are going to be doing case studies based on exceptionalities. In this case, the composition that I’m trying to reflect is that I have such a high proportion of learning disabled children is these different abilities. So my fiction is about different abilities. Now if my theme was, you know, being an outsider and a newcomer, then I would try to make sure the story is relevant to their ethnicity... to the extent that it’s possible. There are not that many. And I have done themes about...novel sets about newcomers and I would try and make sure they were reflective, if I could find the books.

JK only utilized a multicultural lens to ensure that the books being selected did not offend students:

I would certainly be alert to whether the heroes and bad guys are culturally stereotyped. I’d definitely be alert to that.

JK’s criteria for selecting books was based on the general criteria that they include realistic portrayals of people:

I don’t think I look at a book and think “does this represent the way they look? Or the way they speak? Or the way they celebrate? I think the question is “does this seem like a realistic portrayal of a character?” in which the cultural component isn’t being hammered down my throat. It’s just part of the story. So I’m not sure...I think all those things are part of making a real character. I don’t think you can write about a real character unless...or depict someone that is real, unless you do a pretty thorough job of reflecting all of their culture.

Instead, JK stated:

I look to see that the stories are good, strong stories. That the language is vivid. That the, the characters seem real and make sense. So yeah, so I don’t apply different standards to multicultural, choosing multicultural literature than to anything else. I just make sure, as I’m book shopping...I look at my cart and think, have I got anything in here...am I making
sure I’m reflecting more than just a dominant cultural perspective. And I…and I do that from a gender point of view as well, a sexual orientation point of view as well as a, sort of, multicultural perspective.

When discussing how students could be reflected in the material, both KM and SM discussed the importance of pictures. SM mentioned:

*I think pictures are great, especially when they...like if they represent a particular place, or dress, or food, ...and I think it’s important to use that kind of literature always.*

KM further discussed the use of pictures:

*I always try to make sure that they see different faces on the front covers of books so they can identify with themselves.*

Although these statements support the importance of picture books as espoused by academics such as Morgan, Mendoza and Reese, neither KM nor SM state that pictures should take prominence over textual content. Rather, they stated that pictures are better suited for junior kindergarten to grade six. As KM noted

*I think they’re both [illustrations and textual content] really valid and, you know, I guess it’s almost on a student by student basis*

**Content of the Selected Literature**

Among all the participants, there was a general agreement that they selected only good, authentic stories. However, upon hearing this criteria, I knew it was necessary that I investigate what these participants understood as “good” and “authentic”? As SM states:

*So stories that are not just, like the book was not written just to be multicultural. Likes it’s an actual good story and good literature as well. Interest. I want it to be interesting and engaging.*

SM proceeded to describe an example of this kind of literature:

*There’s another one called Fan and the Lucky Money and its...it’s also about a specific topic. It’s about Chinese New Year but it’s a great story. It shows Chinatown in Toronto, and it shows the Dragon Parade, and it shows him, but it’s a great story itself. It’s not*
just being multicultural for the sake of being multicultural, you know, its…there’s a lot of those kinds of books.

KM supported this view on celebrations as authentic subject matter along with folklore when she stated:

So, in terms of celebration and folklore, that’s a really great place to start to show children, again a lot of similarities between us. That it might be called something different in your country, it is the same story that I grew up with up north where I grew up.

In support of KM’s view, SM agreed with the importance of folklore and described her own use of fairy tales for assisting student understanding of different cultures through comparison and analysis:

Well I’ve done a lot of comparing and contrasting with the fairy tales. So we’ve compared the traditional Cinderella story, or what we consider to be the traditional one, to some of the others ones and looked at things like “what is similar?” So in all the fairy tales…all the Cinderella stories there is generally the number 3, there’s generally step-sisters or some mean sister involved but then it changes…like the magic changes

...so just comparing...the similarities and differences within the story and then finding out how culture kind of plays a role there.

This focus on folklore and fairy tales by my participants does not imply that fiction is the only subject matter utilized by my participants. Rather, most of the participants expressed benefits to using both fiction and nonfiction, as well as the fact that children show interest in both types of books. However, all participants placed greater emphasis upon fiction for reasons summed up best by JK:

It’s probably more likely to hit home with the kids. Non-fiction can be useful. Its...if they are going to access it generally, some kids do, but generally they don’t access it unless they are doing research. As where they will access fiction for their own purposes. Even beyond any demands of the school they will just choose to read it.
They sometimes want to read about historical figures. But if you are talking about the volume of what a child will do in a middle school career, they are, you know, going to read 70 percent books that are relevant to them and therefore have protagonists they relate to and 30 percent books that they are required to read about historical figures. And they are interested about them too, once they get to them, but they wouldn’t necessarily pick them. Some do, but it’s fewer, I’d say, than the norm.

**Importance of the Author’s Cultural Background**

In terms of the importance of an author’s background in selecting good, authentic multicultural literature, most participants did not place much emphasis on this as a factor. Some did not place any emphasis on this factor at all, as evidenced by JK and SM. In the case of KM, the author’s background was not an important criteria for selecting authentic literature, but she did express the importance of choosing authors who have engaged in extensive research on the cultures they are writing about:

*Debra Ellis really fascinates me so I heard her speak because she, you probably know a lot about her, actually lived in a refugee camp and so, you know, her series on Parvana’s Journey, etc., I just thought, you know, it gave a lot of credence to what she was doing. She’s not just talking about refugee camps but she’s actually lived amongst people that are in…and she actually lived there herself and gives credence from her books back to trying to support education for girls particular in that part of the world.*

**Learning Goals and Instructional Strategies**

**Addressing Cultural Similarities and Differences**

With the criteria for selection established, I proceeded to inquire as to the goals and strategies being undertaken by my participants when using multicultural literature. It quickly became clear that one important goal shared amongst the participants was that everyone is similar and different in various ways and it is important that this understanding be developed among students. JK discussed the reason for why instilling this understanding in students is so important:
...so if I am a little kid and I’m looking at someone across the room and they look different from me and I’m trying to understand that and I get to read a book about someone who looks like them and it explains a little bit about what their family’s life might be now or might have been somewhere else in the world, I think it helps me gain empathy about them.

SM supported this understanding that children seek explanation as to why people are different, stating that stories are a comfortable format for addressing differences with students. In terms of KM’s stance, she actively works towards developing a mindset among students that they are more similar than different. She described her use of books, such as *The Golden Rule*, for achieving this understanding amongst her students and how this focus on being more similar than different has been met with success in many of her classes:

...he [a student] went on to further to say, you know, “my parents think that we are very different from our neighbours but we’re actually not”.

**Recognition of Cultures**

By promoting an understanding among students that everyone has similarities and differences, my participants work towards developing a mindset of acceptance for all cultures. As SM states, one of her primary learning goals for her students when using multicultural literature is:

> To feel, first of all, acceptance for themselves and who they are and who their family is. To understand that their story is really important and that their story is different from everyone else’s. And just to understand that this is a country made up of people from all over and they are still coming from all over and long ago and that they came from all over and I think just getting them to understand that we all fit and how we all fit together.

KM supported this goal of acceptance and discussed how it was a feeling that several of the children in her school desired, especially those who had recently immigrated to Canada:

> A lot of children say they just want a place. They want...their family’s gone through tremendous struggles to get here and they want to be a part of things. They don’t want to
be alienated. They don’t want to be, you know, sort of, prevented from doing things. They want to be part of things. But they also want to keep some of these very rich traditions they have brought with them.

The participants realize that children desire acceptance from their peers and that, in order to foster this acceptance, teachers need to address different cultures through literature so that all students “feel they have a voice and they feel they’re being listened to and that they are part of something that is pretty wonderful”.

Is Difference-Blindness the Goal?

By using literature to address the differences between cultures and, therefore, between students, SM and KM actively oppose the policy of difference blindness as discussed by Ghosh, Bearisto, Carrigan and Gerin-Lajoie. Although KM stated that she tries to develop a mindset among her students that “we are more similar than different” she does not shy away from discussing differences in terms of food, celebrations and lifestyles.

SM gave her thoughts regarding difference blindness as a current trend in teaching:

I think that used to be kind of the way. Like, I remember growing up that was very much the way that I felt that it was. Like everyone was the same and we didn’t… if there was difference we kind of pretended that they weren’t there and didn’t talk about it. I don’t think so. I think because we are growing up in Toronto, these kids are growing up in Toronto, and growing up in a public school, I think that they are…they always have friends of different cultures and from very young they get to meet kids of different cultures and hopefully the teachers honour their cultures and talk about differences.

The stances of the participants in this study supported the argument outlined in the research by Atwater (2008) who stated that race, which in this case will also be applied to culture, in schools should not matter, rather than does not matter. JK supports this goal in her statement:

Ultimately, I would like my class to be, you know, have its 4 or 5 pinks kids, and some blue kids and some orange kids and I don’t see them by their colour and think “there’s a
pink kid, there’s a purple kid, and an orange person”. I think “look at this pack of kids I have to teach today” and I don’t notice it.

Each participant realized that differences exist and should be appreciated in the classroom environment and learning process.

**Evaluating Impact on Students**

**Student Inquiry**

Although the participants have their learning goals and expectations for students when using multicultural literature, it is important to understand how they evaluate and recognize this impact and learning. For SM and KM, one of the primary methods for recognizing the impact of multicultural literature on their students is through the inquiry it stimulates. As SM states:

*So I think any book that kind of brings up discussion and questioning has made an impact on kids. If they just listen passively to the story that you’re reading then they probably didn’t get anything out of it, right?*

Students always have questions and it is important that the literature selected by teachers for multicultural education stimulates discussion where students can feel comfortable inquiring about their environment and the cultures within. As SM discussed:

*...the kids were very curious about that and they asked questions and, you know, I think they’re...they’re very interested in differences. They don’t see it as a negative, yet.*

This assertion was supported by KM:

*...our job is to question and wonder and so I think it’s really important that we [the class] talk about it and tell kids as well...*

If students are given the opportunity to ask questions about different cultures and satiate their curiosity through discussion about multicultural literature, SM and KM believe this can help deter the development of stereotypes and bias which, as supported by Sleeter (2011), can develop when students are provided with a limited perspective of the world around them.
Developing Understanding and Respect

By creating discussion and inquiry among their students, my participants believe that this develops a better understanding among students regarding different cultures, along with a greater respect towards them. According to SM:

*I think the more they see characters of different cultures, the more they feel that that culture is just a normal part of life.*

Along with respect for other cultures, SM discusses that multicultural literature can impact students in terms of not only respecting other cultures, but also feeling respected within the classroom:

*I think, you know, when you do read a story like, for example my Chinese kids, my Korean kids, when you read them a story that’s about their culture or with kids that are Asian, they love it and they will often say “Oh, I eat with chopsticks” or “I do this” and “I do that”. So they, I think they always need to see that and they just relate and...and they just feel validated, right? When you include them and their culture and the way they look in your daily routines and your stories and you value it, then they feel valued.*

KM further emphasized this impact of understanding and respect on students through her account of a class she had previously taught:

*...a couple of kids brought in books that they really like about their culture and they shared, and from that we came, sort of, to the conclusion that in every group there’s people that do a lot of positive and there are some people who make some poor choices. But it’s not one particularly ethnic group that’s responsible for all good things or all bad things.*

JK also emphasized how important seeing student appreciation and respect for other cultures was for assessing the positive impact of multicultural literature:

*So I would say when they read it, depending on the child, they tend to obviously be pretty appreciative and, again, more appreciative of the situations of people around the world.*
The reason that developing understanding and respect is important to these participants is because of the negative impact that can occur when multicultural literature is not integrated into the classroom. As KM noted:

So, you know, I think if those children...they talked about that particular person not feeling that they ever felt a part of the school system in Canada. That they felt alienated. And if we don’t make the children feel that their voices are important and that their literature is important, that their story is important, I think it is going to have a lot of fallout from, you know, a lot of negativity in a lot of ways, in terms of behavior.

In terms of this behavioural response, KM further elaborated:

Sure, again, when I taught grade 8, if those children become marginalized. And so that’s when any sort of depression or anxiety, or any of those sort of mental health issues creep in, performance declines.

...well then there’s only one avenue and that can be behavioural, that can be acting out, you know, depression.

Obstacles and Support to Implementation

Family/Community

Having outlined how my participants select, utilize and assess multicultural literature and impact in their classroom, it is important to note any obstacles and support they have encountered when teaching multicultural education. As any teacher knows, the school community plays an important and influential role in the classroom and that a positive relationship with this community can make the teaching process increasingly more enjoyable and stress-free. In terms of the school community, none of the participants cited experiencing any forms of resistance from the families of students. As KM stated:

I think I get a lot of support from the community.

So I would say no, I have just received a lot of encouragement and support from particularly, I would say, the community here.
KM discussed how the families in her community, many of which are newly immigrated to Canada, have come to support the use of multicultural literature and education because they view it as a means for future socio-economic success for their children:

...most families are very anxious, I think...they are becoming more aware that for their children to be successful in Canada, they have to be open minded, they have to be sensitive to the...you know, a lot of companies are providing cultural training and sensitivity because there has been a lot of trouble in the workplace.

JK supports KM’s statement that families are often quite eager to have multicultural literature present in the classroom. JK cited several encounters with parents asking her to include more literature that represents different cultures:

But I’ve had parents...I had a Japanese-Canadian woman, come in and say “you know, you could use more literature about the internment of Japanese children and families during the war” and make some suggestions and that’s helpful and I’ll pick them up. If I can get them.

Although families have proven supportive of the use of multicultural literature, JK did note that interest groups within the community can prove oppositional to certain texts:

Similarly, I will tell you what we did run into: Canadian-Jewish Congress, I think it was called, didn’t want some of Debrah Ellis’ books about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the library. The book was famously called Three Wishes and was selected as a Red Maple novel which...Red Maple goes from grades 6, 7, 8. Those are the books I used to buy. So I had my copies of it and then they tried to get it banned or pulled.

Administration/Staff

In terms of how the school staff and administration have responded to the use of multicultural literature and education, none of the participants discussed these groups being oppositional. Rather, all participants cited nothing but support from their peers and school administrations in their promotion of multiculturalism. As JK and SM mentioned respectively:

The board, obviously, tries to promote a very even-handed, very multicultural lens.
I’ve never had anyone say anything negative about using multicultural literature or anything like that.

This popular support by the school administration was discussed in detail by KM:

Where in the last, particularly five years, almost everything that you participate in...I was at a workshop last night, I was at a workshop today, the multicultural lens was brought up. How are we going to support what literature we are going to use, what websites are we going to...so those discussions are now on the table. Every time you get together for any sort of planning, curriculum, implementation.

Summary

In terms of understanding multicultural education, it is clear that my participants viewed the pedagogical idea as a positive and necessary method for incorporating multiple cultures into aspects of the classroom. Many found children’s literature to be a primary tool in the teaching of appreciation and understanding of cultures among their students. This educational tool was singled out by most despite a general admittance among all participants of lacking pre-service experience and knowledge of the genre. It is also clear from these interviews that despite their focus on using literature, this does not mean multicultural education is limited to teaching Language Arts. Rather, participants agreed that it could be naturally implemented into the subject matter of every curricular area.

On the topic of criteria for selecting multicultural children’s literature, the participants provided two answers. For two, it was important that they focus on utilizing books that were reflective of their students both visually and textually, while the third argued that reflecting students was only necessary if the topic under discussion was culture and race. In terms of the content, participants focused on celebrations and folklore, supporting fiction over non-fiction as a more accessible means of understanding cultures among elementary grades. Regardless, every participant agreed that multicultural literature and education were worth implementing because
they stimulated student inquiry into cultures and promoted appreciation of the experiences and lifestyles of others.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how a sample of teachers implement multicultural children’s literature in order to educate students about different cultural identities. Having outlined my research and findings on this topic, this chapter will discuss the implications of these findings for the pedagogical understanding of all teachers while outlining possible directions for future research on the subject.

Implications and Recommendations

Understanding Multicultural Education

In terms of participant perceptions of multicultural education, it is clear they understand that it is a powerful tool for the classroom that can assist teachers in building appreciation and acceptance among students for all curricular subjects. This reasoning supports the multicultural initiatives outlined in both federal legislation and by local school boards. This reflection of national and local values is evident by the fact that my participants experienced little resistance implementing multicultural literature.

Familiarity with Multicultural Literature

In terms of familiarity with multicultural literature it was evident that my participants did not experience much exposure to the genre during their teacher training, which supports the findings of researchers such as Iwai (2013). Instead, the participants assumed the responsibility for exploring the genre after being certified and determined for themselves which books would be useful in educating students about diversity within their society. Despite having experienced a greater focus on the genre of multicultural children’s literature in my own pre-service teacher
training compared to my participants, it is still important that this project stress the necessity of addressing this literature within all faculties of education. We live in a global world where connection and communication across cultures has never been greater and training colleges need to ensure they are preparing teachers to educate students to appreciate and understand these diverse cultures. Nonetheless, the onus should not fall entirely upon faculties of education. Therefore, I would recommend that all teacher candidates engage in their own research of the genre and immerse themselves in the literature before entering the classroom. There are a variety of outlets for exposure such as the public library, local workshops and conferences, and local bookstores which were all utilized effectively by my participants. Although board-run workshops and resources were cited by one of my participants, I believe it is useful for pre-service teachers to have exposure prior to receiving their own classroom. However, this can create additional burdens and responsibilities that can make undertaking such outside research increasingly difficult.

Methodology for Selection

In terms of selecting the literature, the consensus was that texts should properly reflect a number of diverse cultures, both visually and in terms of subject matter. Whether they should specifically reflect cultures present within the classroom was a topic that produced differing responses among my participants. Two participants believed it was a necessary aspect to focus on when selecting books, while one participant believed it was only necessary if multiculturalism was the focus of study by the class. Nonetheless, it was clear that each participant sought books that positively and authentically reflected the practices and beliefs of the cultures being discussed within the texts. This focus on authentic cultural perspectives aligns with the “transformative approach” discussed by Morgan. Meanwhile, the participants also agreed that picture books were
a good way of introducing different cultures to primary and junior level students. This aligns with the research from the literature review which discussed the benefits of visuals for younger students (Morgan, 2009, Mendoza and Reese, 2001). Therefore, the findings of this project recommend that teachers, within the primary and junior grades, seek out books that include both visual and textual representations of different cultures. In terms of the aspects of culture covered in the literature, most of the participants expressed an affinity for festivals and folklore, stating these were effective in introducing and addressing similarities and differences among cultures. All rejected non-fiction as a primary type of literature, stating that students in younger grades are more likely to enjoy fiction. This supports the “contributions approach” discussed in Chapter 2, which are texts that use culturally diverse protagonists within a fictional story. From these findings it would appear to be beneficial for teachers to begin with texts that cover the topics of celebration and folklore, since those will be relatable and understood by most children. From that point the teacher can integrate more abstract books that discuss everyday experiences of children from different cultures. However, this does not imply that non-fiction should not be available. As KM stated, if students are interested they should be provided access to non-fiction multicultural books. However, it is probably not the type of book a teacher should use with younger children since it most likely will not hold their attention or be relatable to their own lived experiences since non-fiction prominently deals with adult historical figures.

**Learning Goals and Instructional Strategies**

In terms of the goals of my participants when engaging with multicultural children’s literature, the consensus was that they want students to develop acceptance of other students based on the understanding that people have different cultures and that there are commonalities and differences among them. Their focus on addressing differences made it apparent that my
participants had moved beyond the difference-blindness approach in the classroom. However, the reason for this detachment from difference-blindness was also attributable to how the participants perceived the term. In terms of this study, difference-blindness was addressed as the process of refusing to acknowledge differences between students in favour of perceiving them as more similar than different (Ghosh, 2008). For some, difference-blindness was not the goal because only promoting similarities between everyone was not representative of the diverse society in which students live. While, for one participant, it was because they perceived difference-blindness differently. Rather than the term representing the view that all students are more similar than different, they perceived difference-blindness as a level of multicultural appreciation where children within the classroom assumed the identity of a student first. In the eyes of the teacher, culture was a part of the student identity, but not the primary identifier. This raises the point regarding how much emphasis teachers place on cultural background when identifying their students. Although all participants use literature that reflects multiple cultures, the question arises for all teachers, “How much of a cultural lens should we use in our everyday engagements with students in the classroom?”

Evaluating Impact on Students

Nonetheless, simply reading multicultural literature is not enough to develop positive responses from students. As my participants expressed, student understanding of cultures can only occur when they engage in discussion. This thinking aligned with the argument of Harper and Brand (2010) who also promoted in-depth discussion among students as a method for promoting awareness and understanding of multiple cultures within the classroom. When students engage with the material and discuss the cultures addressed, in terms of the similarities and differences to their own cultures and experiences, it promotes the development of empathy
and understanding. These qualities, as my participants attest, assist in the development of acceptance and appreciation. This is one of the most important recommendations I can give to any teacher who is considering using children’s literature for the promotion of multicultural education. If you introduce the book, stimulate conversation by asking questions of the students that require them to answer by addressing their own experiences. If a teacher can get their students to discuss culture and experiences, it will allow for the introduction of more in-depth subject matter, such as racism and other negative attitudes.

**Obstacles and Support to Implementation**

My final recommendation, based on my findings, would be for teachers implementing multicultural children’s literature to ensure they believe in the reasons for using it. Despite the few obstacles that may oppose your use of the literature, if you truly believe in the messages conveyed in the text and the benefits it provides your students, do not be deterred. The participants interviewed made it clear that, although few in number, certain people will have complaints or grievances about the multicultural books being used. However, many of my participants made sure their teaching was as transparent as possible, which is a good recommendation for any educator. Ensure families and the administration know how and why you are using certain texts or addressing certain topics. If the purpose is acceptance and understanding, few external forces will be able to stop you.

The lack of obstacles also proves that teachers have little to fear in terms of disapproval from the school community when implementing multicultural children’s literature. If teachers are firm in their stance and focused on using literature that is both reflective of all cultures within the classroom, then fears of segregating certain communities, as mentioned in chapter 2, should not
arise. Feelings of alienation and segregation can only arise if certain cultures are singled out. Therefore, I would implore all teachers to provide discussion and exploration into a plethora of cultures so that no student feels excluded or focused upon too heavily. A balanced program will promote the fullest experience for students regarding multiple cultures.

Limitations

While this study does provide insight into the benefits of using multicultural literature in the classroom, it is important to note that only being able to utilize teachers as participants means student insights into the effects of multicultural literature in the classroom are not present. However, this does not discredit the positive results perceived by the teachers interviewed. It only means that we need to be careful regarding the extent to which multicultural literature has a positive effect on all students. The small sample of teachers interviewed also means there is much more on the topic yet to be investigated. There were differing points of view and ideas among the participants and even among my colleagues in the field. This means there are several aspects of this topic yet to be explored.

Further Research

With several aspects of the topic left to be explored, it is important that further research investigates certain areas of the subject in order to expand on what has been discussed in this study. Firstly, the scope of the investigation needs to be expanded. Researchers should interview a larger number of educators currently using multicultural literature to better understand the books being used, the themes being discussed, the lessons being developed and the purposes for which they are being used, as well as how they perceive student understanding. Secondly, researchers must work with more students to understand how exposure to multicultural literature
changes their views and attitudes towards other cultures. Thirdly, I would recommend further research into how teachers can teach more in-depth subject matter on the topic of multiculturalism, such as racism and bias. This is a difficult subject and most of my participants did not discuss the topic in their answers. Lastly, discussing folklore and festivals is important. However, some may argue that is not enough to deter negative attitudes such as racism. Therefore, research must seek to understand methods for addressing topics such as racism and bias with young students so that they can deter influences that perpetuate this behavior beyond the classroom environment.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, through the research outlined within this project, it has become clear that teachers perceive benefits in using multicultural children’s literature. For this literature to be effective it should be balanced in terms of using a combination of both visuals and authentic textual content to convey to students that cultures are similar and different. Despite facing the occasional obstacle, either through a lack of experience or from outside forces, all teachers have found that the benefits multicultural books bring far outweighs the potential negative issues. If teachers can engage students in discussions on culture through the integration of multicultural literature, it will assist in the development of a learning environment that promotes acceptance and understanding of diversity where students feel respected and reflected. These positive feelings will encourage greater engagement in the learning process while also supporting the pluralistic society promoted within our nation and reflected in the values of a global society.

Having reached the conclusion of this study it is also important that I, as the researcher, look internally and reflect on how these findings can affect my own role as an educator. I am fortunate to have received exposure and education on multicultural children’s literature in my
pre-service education and this study has affirmed my belief in the benefits of using it in the classroom. However, a colleague once asked me what implications this study had for me in terms of my future direction as an educator and advocate of culturally responsive pedagogy? This is an important question and, having looked at the findings of this study, the only answer I can conceive for my colleague’s inquiry is that I now have the means to contribute to the growing field of multicultural education and literature. Now when I speak of contributing, it is beyond sharing my findings among fellow educators within professional learning communities, although this is important. What I mean when I say “contribute” is through the production of my own multicultural children’s literature. The power of the written word is a monumental thing and what I have learned in the last two years has not only served to confirm this truth but to provide me with the knowledge to use it. I now have a more thorough understanding of the subject matter, goals and influence of multicultural children’s literature. Primarily, I intend to use this knowledge to expand the subject matter currently being promoted within the genre. Although festivities and folklore are important and the benefits of using them as avenues for discussing different cultures has been proven to promote multicultural understanding and acceptance, I want to expand the genre to include more personal, everyday experiences of children. Individual identity, in terms of culture, is so much more than that and if I can influence students to engage in self-reflection through more experiential avenues, there is no reason to believe their future success in our global community will not be assured.
Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying Children’s Literature and Multicultural Understanding for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr._________________. My research supervisor is ___________________. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of an initial 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. Subsequent interviews, or email correspondence, may be necessary if further information is required following the transcribing and data analysis portion of the research project. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, or another private and professional location that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. If requested, this study will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in any written work, oral presentations, or publications. Regardless, this information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw, even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will delete the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. Since this interview will discuss obstacles both private and public, these interviews may provide a limited risk to your relationship with the school community. For this reason, anonymity will be provided to you in regards to your identification within this research project, upon your request.
Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: _________________________________

Phone number, email: ______________________________

Instructor’s Name: ____________________________________________
Phone number: _________________ Email: _______________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: ___________________________________
Phone #: __________________ Email: _______________________

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Stephen Feltracco and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: ____________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

**Introduction**

Tell me a bit about yourself? Educational background?

How many years have you been teaching? Grade levels (past and current)?

How would you describe the cultural composition of your classes over the years (past and current)?

**Understanding**

How would you define “multiculturalism/ multicultural education”?

Where does multicultural understanding fit into the curriculum for you?

How much experience with multicultural children’s literature have you had in your pre-service education and professional teaching career?

How familiar are you with the range of multicultural literature available for young people? How did you become familiar with the genre of multicultural children’s literature?

How do you think children’s literature helps address similarities and differences? If not through children’s literature, how might you address cultural representation in your classroom?

**Methodology**

What criteria would you use when selecting multicultural children’s literature (MCL)?

How does the cultural composition of your classes impact which texts you select?

What aspect of cultural identity do you focus on?

What are some strong examples of multicultural literature you have used? Provide an example(s) of lessons you’ve implemented with a multicultural book?

**Evaluation**

How do you know when a student demonstrates multicultural understanding from engagement with a book? Discussion? Written response?
What impact do you recognize among your students when they engage with the subject of cultural identity through multicultural literature?

   How do these students respond to literary characters of different cultures? How does it affect their attitudes towards other cultures?

   How do you find students respond to literary characters of their own culture?

**Obstacles/Support**

Have you ever faced obstacles or support in implementing multicultural children’s literature and education?

Have you noticed, in your professional career, instances of difference blindness in the classroom? If so, what effects have you noticed on students in these classrooms?
References


