

## Tracing the World's Culture in the US Elementary School Students' Literature

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### **Abstract**

Multicultural education was once a new concept in education. Arguments on the content of multicultural education were evolving throughout the history of education. As many countries in the world, the United States experienced challenges in integrating culture into the curriculum. Pros and cons have created different views on providing multicultural education. There were concerns about losing the country identity when considering the diverse cultures into the curriculum. In fact, culturally responsive classroom builds a connection between students and the world. It develops students' skills to adapt and survive in the diverse and changing world. As we understand the importance of multicultural education, this paper will trace the world's culture in the US elementary school students' literature through literature research of several references. The questions raised were: 'How was the history of multicultural education in the US? How did the history of multicultural education in the US affect the elementary school curriculum? How does the multicultural education affect the elementary school literature? Does elementary school literature contain and reflect the knowledge and values of various world's cultures? How is the implementation of multicultural education in the elementary school?' The results of the discussion were based on the combined references used in this research.

**Keywords:** elementary school, the US curriculum, world culture.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Integrating culture into the curriculum has become a struggle to every country since years ago, including the US. Many considerations were involved. Different cultures of the world in the multicultural education was once a new concept in education. Sleeter and Grant (1987) defined multicultural education as "a way to help students of different backgrounds communicate, get along better with each other, and feel good about themselves" (p. 426). There was a time when many specialists in multicultural education debated its' content and goal (Banks, 1993). Some specialists argued that educational institution should provide multicultural education to promote students with diversity in race, ethnic, and social groups. Others argued that it should cover content about equality between men and women. Other specialists mentioned that multicultural education should provide knowledge of different races, classes, and genders. Various arguments were evolving. The experts' differences on the content of multicultural education must have been affected by the different situations and historical settings when they lived.

Culture is an identity of a country (Yitah & Komasi, 2010). Integrating multicultural education by introducing world's cultures in the curriculum could encounter pros and cons. The pros favor world's culture as the way to understanding and respect others' point of view. The contras regard world's culture as a possible risk in eliminating or changing the identity of a country.

Although pros and contras occur among the emergence of multicultural education, culture becomes an essential value, especially in children's education. Students' identity is built since their childhood. Elementary school is a crucial period for developing children's identity as a citizen and as a human. Thus,

teachers are also responsible. Many moral values develop during this time. Understanding different cultures become the assets for the students to survive in the real world that full of differences. In fact, the need to survive is changing over time, adapting to the differences. Understanding students' different backgrounds is a start for the teachers to promote diversity in the classroom. Bringing different cultures of the students will provide cultural knowledge to the school environment. The connections are created as the teachers build upon the implementation of culturally-responsive classroom activities (Roberts et al., 1997).

The US curriculum has developed throughout the history. The different nations that build the US had brought literature from different world's views. Understanding how vital is multicultural education, this paper will trace the world's culture in the US elementary school students' literature. The questions raised were: 'How was the history of multicultural education in the US? How did the history of multicultural education in the US affect the elementary school curriculum? How does the multicultural education affect the elementary school literature? Does elementary school literature contain and reflect the knowledge and values of various world's cultures? How is the implementation of multicultural education in the elementary school?' The discussion is provided through the literature research from several references. The results of the discussion may only be generalized regarding the combined references used in this research.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The History of Multicultural Education in the United States**

To track the time when the multicultural education began, we will trace throughout the history of the educational system in the United States. The foundation of the US civilization was laid by Greece, Rome, and Christianity (Cubberly, 1947). Greece brought the influence of art, literature, and philosophy as well as personal and political freedom and initiative to the US. Romans gave influence on the law, government, and practical arts. Christianity helped the US to organize and establish civilizations after the fall of the Roman Empire. Thus, it is crucial to discuss the US education by involving discussion on its history. However, the references used in this discussion might not always explicitly and specifically mention or differentiate the elementary school education system. It is because, in the history of education, the educational system was not differentiated based on the particular pattern as today.

America's first schools were the influence of Protestant Revolts in Europe that used Gospel reading as the core of education (Cubberly, 1947). The religious basis of European background became the influence at the beginning of American education. Some people came to America to enjoy religious freedom like the ones who settled in Carolina, New Jersey, New Amsterdam, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Delaware in the southern colonies. Anglicans settled in Virginia and southern colonies. Only Maryland was the only Catholic colony in what is now the United States.

From all refugees who came to America, it was Puritans who contributed to the taxation system for the support for the schools and compulsory education of all children, backed by the town. They set up settlement called New England where they practice a religious and civil form of government. Elementary school started in 1647 when there was a policy that required the towns to build public elementary schools (ISM, 2016). In fact, educational opportunity for all American children only began with Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. Thus, while discussing the history of the educational system in the US, the researcher will try to trace the existence of multicultural education in the US elementary school through the history.

#### **B.C.**

The concept of education has been around for thousands of years. This session will not straightly discuss the US education. It will discuss the very beginning of education to give a better picture of how education evolves, and how western thought finally triggered by the conflict happened between philosophers.

In the beginning, prehistoric human used primitive language using gesture to communicate and educate in hunting, agriculture, courage, and bravery (Daley, 1966). The oldest records by Sumerian taught basics reading, writing, arithmetic, patriotism, and piety. In 4000 B.C., education in Egypt influenced Roman, Greek, and Persian to prepare young men as scribes, government officials, or priests. The Grammar School was initiated so-called *Grammaticus* to learn language and literature (Shepherd, 1817). Grammar arranged sets of rules to direct specific purpose on the use of the words consisted of orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody (Shepherd, 1815). Roman contributed to the western civilization for organization and

administration of the institution. Concrete law system was developed from the influence of Roman education.

In early Greek education, philosophers like Socrates, Aristocles (Plato), and Aristotle played some roles. The aim of education by Socrates was 'man is the measure of all things.' Plato argued that education was the chief function to control the phenomena elicited by the five senses, not merely by political and educational ideas without involving the state of being. Aristotle explained that human was made up of body and soul that both should balance with moral education. Greek had a significant contribution to western civilization with the art, philosophy, science, and literature (Duggan, 1936).

Jewish education in 1500 B.C. focused on the education of religion and family life. Thus, Jew contributed to the religious idea of the western civilization (Duggan, 1936). In India, around 500 B.C. instruction was focusing on theology, ethics, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, and physics. Around the same year, China had Confucius as the curriculum.

There was no apparent trace of multicultural education in the history of education during B.C. era. However, there is something extraordinary in Jewish history and education that we can interpret as likely to be it. Jewish history and education gave the lesson "that not any national peculiarity but strict adherence to an educational system having a peculiarly high moral ideal has preserved the unity of the race. The salvation of a people is dependent upon its education" (Duggan, 1936, p. 13).

#### **A.D.**

In the A.D. era, multicultural education was still not part of the concept of education. Early A.D. era was when Christian education emerged (Daley, 1966). The purpose of education was to guide humanity to live a holy life towards the absolute truth. It began in Egypt with School of Alexandria and School of Antioch. Mohammedan education started at about 610 A.D. appeared in Arabia that triggered conflicts between Islamic and Christian philosophers. This moment stimulated western thought (Daley, 1966).

#### **Middle Ages**

The middle ages education took part as history in the US education. Thus, this session will describe how education started during the middle ages. In the period between Roman Empire came to an end and year 1500, Germanic tribes moved into the empire with the culture of Rome and Greece. Moslems conquest the East. The Roman church could only influence Western Europe (Daley, 1966).

In the East, the individual was suppressed that external force controlled by their destiny. The method of learning was merely memorizing because memory was the power to subordinate the present and the past. In the Western, the individual was investigative. The individual was responsible for contributing to science and civilization (Duggan, 1936).

Monastic schools were dominant at this time. Schools were the place to train clergy with subjects of grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Monks vowed to poverty, chastity, and obedience. Participation in social and political activities was limited (Duggan, 1936).

In the later middle ages schools, the concept of university emerged in the thirteenth century. Students were coming from all place in Europe to have *studium generale* to listen to a distinguished speaker. After the speaker, they gathered based on nations to discuss the *studium generale*.

As Constantinople fell to the Moslems, Byzantine scholars came to Italy and brought the influence of Renaissance education to learn Greek and Latin literature, moral, humanism, and liberal arts. Besides, there were women education as a successful wife. It was also the era when elementary education (reading, writing, arithmetic, and drawing) and secondary education (rhetoric, composition) was introduced (Daley, 1966). Printing was invented. Up to this point, however, there was no sign of multicultural education in this era.

During Reformation era when Martin Luther in 1517 had motion in the religious revolution, Europe was divided into Protestant and Catholic Christians. Catholic reacted by finding teaching congregations like Jesuit Order, Ratio Studiorum, and Jesuit College. The heavy emphasis on education became Latin grammar, humanities, and rhetoric. The education was very organized. Trained teachers were delivering oral instruction, memorizing, reviews, and discipline in the education. However, the culture was still not part of the education. In fact, although Catholic schools nowadays are still open towards various religions, the core religious Catholic education value remains (Horning, 2013)

#### **The 1600s**

In this era, the beginnings of American education started. We need to understand more details to be able to trace the inclusion of multicultural education. When we revisit the discussion on the Puritans, the educational system in New England was dominated by the ideas of early Puritans. In 1936, John Harvard

found an English type college in the Massachusetts Colony (Cubberly, 1947). As an addition, Connecticut Assembly provided Yale college in 1701. Latin Schools were established to prepare the students to enter Harvard and Yale. As for insufficient teaching for reading, there was Massachusetts Law of 1642. It was a fundamental law that affected the future of the US. In the Law of 1642, the state ordered that all children should be taught to read. Law of 1642 was completed by Massachusetts Law of 1947 that ordered the establishment of an elementary school for all children in all towns and secondary for the youths in larger towns.

There was an attempt by George Thorpe (Library of Congress, 2017) to plan the school for Native Americans in the 1600s. However, the plan stopped when he was killed in 1622. Thus, we can understand that during this era, multicultural education might have been initiated by the plan of building Native Americans school. However, as the plan ended, the discourse of having schools on different cultures never started.

### **The 1700s**

One type of school brought by the early colonist in the seventeenth century was called The School of 3-Rs (Ridin, Ritin, and Rithmetic) as the influence of elementary school later (Cubberly, 1947). The church communities and societies supported by the schooling system.

Another type of school brought by the early colonist was Latin Grammar School. The school was for beginners in Latin, taught by excellent teachers of religion and learning. It was the continuation school after boys graduated from the same school in their seventh or eight-year-old. The preparation in Latin Grammar School was made so that by the age of fifteen years old, they were ready to go to college (Cubberly, 1947).

Sisters of the Order Saint Ursula found a Catholic Ursuline Academy in New Orleans in 1727 as the first free boarding school and retreat center for young women from any race and class. The graduate students became pharmacists and first women writers. Although the curriculum might not explicitly teach about multicultural education, the system of the Catholic Ursuline Academy had explicitly promoted multicultural values. It was different from Latin Grammar School.

### **The 1800s**

Introduced by early colonists to New England, The Petty or Dame School was popular in America during the eighteenth century. It was a home instruction to the neighborhood children, done by women who accept basic education in their youth (Cubberly, 1947). American educators like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard traveled to Europe in this century to learn ways for improving the US education. Normal school for teachers was imported from Europe. It was established in 1839 in Lexington, Massachusetts. National Educational Association was created on Barnard's publication in need of a federal agency to coordinate educational progress (Cubberly, 1919). At Chicago, John Dewey initiated Laboratory School for educating future teacher after he moved to the University of Chicago in 1894. He mentioned that school should cover subject matters about facts that are observed, remembered, read, discussed, and suggested to solve the problems. Thus, students needed to have interest and motivation. There were major philosophers during 1800s. However, they still did not include multicultural education as their suggestions.

Although significant philosophers emerged during the 1800s did not contain multicultural education, activists tried to move on by developing curriculum frameworks that promote norms, teaching approaches, tests, and practices with the multicultural concept (Gorski, 1999). After refusing to accept African American to enroll in the public schools, the Black community initiated to build their schools (Anderson, 1988). Finally, in 1818, African American school got funding from the city. However, the quality of the facility was worse than White schools. Also, White community controlled the content of the learning. African American teachers and administrator could work in the African American schools with a lower salary than the White schools. However, White community controlled the board, curricula, and textbooks.

### **The 1900s**

The era of the 1900s was an essential time for multicultural education to nourish in the US. There was a civil rights movement against the discrimination in the public institutions to African American and color people in 1960s (Banks, 1993). Part of the movement was Martin Luther King Jr. who was assassinated after he Racial discrimination happened mostly in the educational institutions. Thus, many activists demanded to change the current curriculum and become a curriculum that respected diversity. As the act to support the movement, Woodson and Wesley were teachers who created school and college curriculum with including African Americans. Williams and DuBois were scholars who prepared and created sources about African

Americans for school and college curriculum (Banks, 1993).

Woman movement in the early 1970s also supported reformation in education (Banks, 2007). They demanded equality in employment. The number of female workers of color in the education field was low. Activists also urged to include histories and cultures from groups of colors in the curricula. The number of women of color students was also small. Thus, they asked for equal opportunity in education. At the same moment, there was a demand for disabled people to get the same social and human rights in education.

War on Poverty passed by President Lyndon Johnson had included Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 (Lessow-Hurley, 2013). It brought American children the right to have an equal and fair education with a high standard of quality. Schools received funding to help students from a low-income family, immigrant, and students who are at risk. Early Amendments to 1965 Law created New Titles like Title VII in 1968 on Bilingual Education Program that provide service to students of Spanish speakers. Also, some instructors support students of Native Indian, Hawaiian, and Alaskan. Students had the opportunity to understand and get involved in the learning process, without losing their background identity and culture. The 1968 Bilingual Education Act had evolved in promoting concrete regulation and curriculum programs in accommodating immigrants. The researcher could not find the result of the implementation. However, although critiques on the funding realization occurred during the implementation of the program (Thomas & Brady, 2005), Title VII policy had described the implementation of elementary school multicultural education during this time (Stewner-Manzanares, 1988).

### **The 2000s**

The notion of multicultural education in the twentieth century has developed. Elementary schools are encouraged to integrate multicultural values in the school system. Although elementary schools might or might not be able to explicitly connect the Common Core Standard with the multicultural values (Sleeter, 2017), educators are encouraged to blend the literature, guidelines, activities, and class ethics based on the multicultural value.

In 2010, National Council for the Social Studies or NCSS published National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (NCSS, 2017). Although it was founded in 1921, NCSS still has a significant role in advocating social studies. NCSS believes that effective social studies should include ten experiences that provide for the study. One of them is culture. In understanding the culture, there are four key topics that students should be competent. The first topic is 'human beings create, learn, share, and adapt to the culture.' In this topic, students are expected to learn others' culture and then try to understand and respect the similarities and differences with their culture. The second topic is 'cultures are dynamic and change over time. The students need to understand the meaning and characteristics of culture and then identify the factors that influence the culture. The third topic is related to the experience, observation, and reflection. The students identify the elements of culture and its similarities and differences among cultural groups across time and place (NCSS, 2017). Students will understand the complexion of the various cultural system. The themes typically appear in units and courses related to geography, history, sociology, and anthropology, as well as multicultural topics across the curriculum (NCSS, 2017). Through the topics, the students will be able to apply the cultural values in the school subjects.

### **The Implementation of Multicultural Education in The Elementary Education**

Implementing Multicultural education has faced challenges in integrating to the school system (Banks, 1993). The dimensions are broad and debatable that it is challenging to get a useful concept in integrating its value. Efforts are needed to empower the elementary school in implementing the multicultural value.

Williams and Bauer (2006) suggested using children's books to help to enforce multicultural value in the elementary school. Elementary school students have the right to get the access to literature with multicultural content. It is crucial to involve multicultural literature because it develops teachers' and students' affective accountability in respecting the value of diversity. Students also need to get involved in planning, choosing, or suggesting the literature. Motivation and enjoyment on the various children's literature will add to the encouragement in understanding and promote the cultures of the world. "When our students read more, the world is open to them as an endless source of learning and inspiration" (Miller, 2013, p. 27). Science literacy on diversity will grow as multicultural education is implemented in the classroom

(The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Having science literacy means that students will understand practices on how communities and society make the value of the knowledge on diversity. It is based on the ability to adapt to the environment that individual science literacy will expand to the understanding of applying the knowledge of different cultures.

Singer and Smith (2003) also argued for the importance of elementary school children's literature for reassuring multicultural education. Students need to understand themselves and others to understand the social context in their life. Literature helps students to look the world through the views of others. Drowning their thoughts through the others' eyes will promote another point of views in valuing life. Thus, developing the elementary classroom activities using children's literature in different cultures provide support, appreciation, and deeper understanding of the essential moral of the diversity. Elementary schools need to pay particular attention to the implementation of multicultural education. It has benefits on the development of students' respect for different race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or religion so that negative cases like bullying, for example, never happen among the students (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016).

In the classroom, diversity might be considered as a taboo topic of discussion especially in a racially mixed classroom (Afolabi, 2011). Although students have been aware of the value of respecting others, discussing race is essential for the students to get the positive values of being diverse. Thus, multicultural education is vital in elementary school. As we understand the importance of multicultural education, educational system should prepare the teacher to be able to integrate it into everyday classroom activities (Sampson, 2007). To avoid misinterpretation of students' behavior, teachers should understand and familiar with the background cultural differences of the students. Guessing without precisely knowing is not suggested when the teacher wants to decide that involving cultural value in the options of solutions. Understanding the students' culture is also about giving no prejudice on their literate behavior and cognitive ability. Home literacy practices should be part of the consideration before assessing the appropriate intervention. Choice of literature in the classroom activities should provide an opportunity to apply methods of culturally-responsive approach. Students will be able to communicate, analyze, and synthesize the multicultural value beyond the literature content. By having culturally responsive literature, teachers need to make sure that the classroom atmosphere is safe for the students to self-generate knowledge based on their different cultural backgrounds (Afolabi, 2011). Clear guidelines should be established to empower students as the ambassador of their culture. Children literature for the classroom activities should be wisely chosen. In fact, by selecting books that support children's positive emotion and intellectual, "a teacher may play a small role in the growth of a peaceful society" (Patterson, 1993, p. 59).

## CONCLUSION

Elementary school curriculum nowadays is integrated with the multicultural education. The school system has given its support in implementing the multicultural value. We had witnessed the history when the US education involved knowledge from other continents and countries. History showed multicultural knowledge could be thought as well as embedded in the school system. Multicultural education was not necessarily implemented by teaching it as one of the subjects at school. It could be carried out by having it as part of the ethics and morality of the school system. The world's culture in education might have been introduced since the curriculum reform movement happened in 1960's and 1970's. However, the idea of multiculturalism had even started a very long time before like the lesson of Jewish, Native American school plan, Catholic Ursuline Academy, and African American schools. The movement in the 1960s against discrimination towards African American, women, colored groups, and disabled people had brought to the initial formulation of multicultural education in the elementary school. Although nowadays multicultural education has been claimed to be implemented, the real practice might still be questioned (Banks, 1993). It is not only about teaching the cultures of the world to the students. The implementation of multicultural education needs dedication of the elementary school to change the curriculum, materials, learning styles, attitudes, norms, and perceptions of the teachers, students, staffs, and school management. In fact, it is not an easy thing to do. Many would complain about being not prepared and competent because of having a limited understanding of multicultural concept and knowledge. The media might have exposed knowledge of the diverse cultural groups but might not promote the essential moral value and essences of the diversity

itself (Banks, 1993). There was no apparent description and conceptualization of how it should be implemented and integrated into the educational system. The multicultural education should empower the culture of the elementary school and the society in implementing the understanding, tolerance, and respect for the diversity of race, gender, ethnic group, religion, country, and social class. The curriculum should have the content of multicultural understanding. The knowledge should be constructed within the elementary school system to build school behavior and attitude towards the multiculturalism. Achieving these will empower the elementary school culture towards the multicultural environment.

Recognition of the role of cultural diversity in children's literature seemed to be one of the critical factors in empowering elementary school multicultural education. Yitah and Komasi (2010) added to the findings on the role of children's literature to promote real appreciation to the cultural education. Books would promote students' culture as well as the experiences of the others' cultures. Having several kinds of literature on cultures will build students' creative potential as a unique entity to make language products like writing. Cultures help children to construct their childhood in social and historical context as the asset for their future.

The critical role of multicultural education needs to be understood as an ongoing process that cannot stop. Banks (1993) provided four phases for the educational actors to understand the process of integrating multicultural education into practice. The first phase that elementary school educators should recognize is when they have an interest in the different cultures try not to ignore it. Try to understand deeper by finding the information, concepts, and theories that might involve in the initiative of integrating the cultures into the elementary school curricula. The second phase is when the elementary school educators realize that integrating cultures into the classroom is vital in facilitating students from different cultures but might not sufficient to effect on the school reform. A plan is needed to bring impact to the elementary school system. The third phase happens when every stakeholder in the elementary school is aware of their needs to get the same rights as others though different in race, class, or gender. The last phase is when there is an effort to develop theory, research, and practice to value differences. All phases of the integration of multicultural value need every individual to be aware and willing to move from one to another phase to integrate it into the elementary school system. "Culture can never be wholly conscious-there is always more to it than we are conscious of, and it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background of all our planning" (Eliot, 1948, p. 170).

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