
Cultural and Multicultural Literacy and the Curriculum

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This brief article is intended to initiate discussion - it is very much a point of view contribution. It is, however, based on my firm belief that both cultural and multicultural literacy can be greatly fostered through the appropriate use of well-chosen story books.

I define cultural literacy as a specified level of competence in shared knowledge, understanding and values of one's culture that would enable members (of a particular cultural group) to know their cultural roots and to effectively communicate with one another.

Knowing one's cultural roots is essential for the development of one's identity and a positive self-esteem, aspects which I regard as significant in a world in which Pacific island cultures are increasingly under threat from outside influences.

While such literacy is a given in the western world, where children's schooling involves the transmission of essential cultural knowledge and values, this is not so in the Pacific. This is because in our region, schooling has until now been western-based, and has largely involved cultural transformation rather than transmission. It is argued, therefore, that vital cultural knowledge must be carefully and consciously incorporated into Pacific primary school curricula, so that our schooling also involves cultural transmission, as it does in the western world.

Story books can play a major role in promoting such cultural literacy. Indeed, they may well become one of the few sources our children will have of essential cultural knowledge. This knowledge is rapidly being lost, especially in urban areas of our region. As the older generation passes on, vital cultural data is being lost with them. It is sad to say, too, that modern (western) schooling has not until very recently valued such knowledge. Furthermore, the western economic model which our countries have

embraced with very little adaptation or questioning, serves to further denigrate traditional knowledge and values. The media, too, whose tendrils are reaching further and further into rural or outer island Pacific, further undermines our rich cultural heritage, replacing it with a 'get rich quick' and self-centered ideology.

In my own country, Tonga, for example, very few urban and probably many rural children as well, could name many of the plants, shrubs and trees growing all round them. If they do not know names of the flora, it is also certain that they are unaware of the vital cultural importance of these plants! Furthermore, if you do not know the cultural values and importance of a particular tree, you are more likely to cut it down. It is my hope, however, that such knowledge could be captured in simple books, both fiction and non-fiction, and incorporated into the primary and secondary school curricula.

I would put emphasis on *primary* for two important reasons: firstly, because young children show an amazing ability to memorise. This is witnessed for example by their verbatim repetition of what I regard as meaningless and useless advertising jingles they hear in most TV advertisements. Secondly, the increasing use of story book material and integrated approaches in primary curricula in our region makes this level an ideal one to target.

Moving now to what I would like to term 'multicultural literacy', there is again great potential for bringing about improved knowledge and attitudes among people in multicultural communities through story book curriculum development.

familiarised with each others' cultures through the medium of story books. Such books can be written with the dual aims of entertaining and of filling gaps in children's knowledge of

other cultures. This is particularly relevant in a multicultural country such as Fiji. Such cultural knowledge, transmitted during children's formative years, could go a long way to promoting inter-cultural understanding.

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