

Using Multicultural Resources to Support Language Learners and Enhance Diversity in the Classroom

Many educators successfully use multicultural resources to teach their students about other cultures and to make their classrooms more welcoming for a diverse student body. Other teachers, however, feel overwhelmed at the prospect of adding “multicultural education” to their expanding list of things to do. They often are already dealing with new testing requirements, changing core standards, and other demands. They struggle with ways to make their classrooms more multicultural while meeting all of their other teaching objectives.

Incorporating multicultural education into the curriculum should not be considered an “additional” task; rather, with the right tools and resources, educators can integrate a multicultural element into existing lesson plans.

Using multicultural and multilingual resources in the classroom can enhance and support core standards, and can have the following benefits:

It makes the classroom more welcoming for students from different countries because they see their own culture and language reflected in the lessons.

It builds self-esteem and instills in multi-ethnic students a sense of pride about their heritage.

It provides all students a chance to learn about other cultures and languages, which can help them succeed globally and in our diverse communities.

It offers an opportunity to involve parents from diverse cultures in the classroom.

If students are allowed to bring multilingual materials home, it promotes literacy at home and enhances parental involvement, both of which improve school success.

Below are just a few suggestions on how to incorporate a multicultural element into already-established lessons. I hope this will give you some new ideas or thoughts on the topic.

1) Holidays / Festivals:

Teaching about holidays and festivals is an excellent way to introduce diverse cultures to your students. While studying different holidays, children can cover important concepts such as “comparing and contrasting,” and the learning can bridge over to art, math, and other subjects.

For example, when studying Thanksgiving, consider reading Samira's Eid and comparing and contrasting our celebration of thanks with the Islamic celebrations of Eid and Ramadan. During the winter holidays, a book such as Marek and Alice's Christmas shows how Christmas is celebrated in Poland. In learning about how other cultures celebrate familiar holidays, children begin to understand traditions from other parts of the world. Children can draw Venn diagrams to share what they have learned.

Other important holidays can be discussed as they occur throughout the year. You can use Deepak's Diwali to teach about the major Hindu holiday Diwali (the Indian Festival of Lights). When teaching about Diwali, speak to the art teacher about having the children design their own Rangoli patterns. Students also could review the Rangoli patterns in math class when they are learning about symmetry.

Students can learn about Chinese New Year in the book Li's Chinese New Year. In art class during this time, they can make masks with a sign of the zodiac (instructions about how to make the mask are included in the book). Older children can work in teams to do additional research on international holidays and festivals and then come together to present their work.

2) Dental Health and Hygiene:

Many schools periodically have a dentist come to discuss dental hygiene. Including a reading of *The Wiggly Wobbly Tooth* is a great way to add a multicultural element to such a lesson. This story depicts a child of Asian heritage trying to figure out what to do with a tooth that just came out. In it, he talks to friends from all different cultures to find out what they do when a tooth falls out. This opens up an opportunity for you to ask your students from other countries to share their family's traditions.

The dental health lesson could also include a bilingual version of *Sahir Goes to the Dentist*, ideally choosing a language edition spoken by kids in the class. Not only will students read about a child's visit to the dentist, they will see a language/text that is represented in their class or community.

3) Community, Cooperation and Teamwork:

In the bilingual book *The Giant Turnip*, school children work together to plant a garden and then have to figure out how to remove a giant turnip that grows there. In the end, they are successful only after they have brainstormed ideas and have all worked cooperatively.

This is, of course, a great book to use when doing units about planting and growing a garden. But it is also an excellent tool for discussing themes of

community, cooperation and teamwork. For example, it can be used as an introduction to the concept of “community” (what is a community, why is it important, similarities and differences within a community, how differences in a community can help it operate better).

Students can discuss the diverse makeup of their own communities and even how their classroom community can be more united. Older students can research different communities around the world, comparing and contrasting similarities and differences. The book can also be used to reinforce concepts of cooperation and teamwork: how people need to work together to achieve a common goal.

4) Folktales and Fables:

When teaching a unit on folktales, include bilingual folktales from around the world in the lesson. You can introduce the concepts of “good versus evil,” the importance of cooperation, and the rewards of courage and ingenuity, while simultaneously introducing other cultures and languages. Some great stories to consider are: Yeh-Hsien (A Chinese Cinderella); the Bengali folktale Buri and the Marrow; the beautiful Chinese story The Dragon's Tears; and the Tibetan Fable “The Hare’s Revenge” (part of Lion Fables).

5) Counting:

For younger children who are learning to count, consider reading a book such as Handa’s Hen, in which young Handa is looking for her chicken and encounters many other animals and insects along the way. Set in Africa, children will see settings and animals that may be new to them (e.g., five beautiful sunbirds, eight spoonbills). By pointing out different languages in the bilingual books, children also can see the different language scripts, thus expanding their view of the world. In addition, using multilingual number cards when learning numbers will allow children from non-English speaking homes to see their languages represented in class.

6) The Five Senses:

Welcome to the World Baby is a wonderful multicultural book to share with children who are learning about the five senses. It is especially exciting to use in class when a student has a new baby sibling. In the story, Tariq has a new baby brother and the children in his multicultural classroom share how they welcome new babies in their families. Each example relates to one of the five senses (e.g., they can touch An-Mei’s red painted egg, which stands for birth, life and growth, and is the color of good luck; they can taste Elima’s bitter aloe leaf and sweet honey, which represents that life can be bitter and sweet). Again, this offers a chance for children from multicultural households to share their own traditions.

These are just a few of many examples of how multicultural and multilingual stories can be used to bring a global perspective to existing lessons and make multi-ethnic children feel better represented in the classroom. For more details and additional lessons that incorporate multicultural stories, please see the Multicultural Lesson Plans on our website. In addition, please consider sharing your own multicultural teaching ideas on our blog at <http://blog.languagelizard.com>!