As a teacher in a middle-class neighborhood where most people are of the same religion and ethnicity, I often ask myself: “What is the role of diversity at our school?” At first, I concluded that students should read stories that reflect their own communities, stories that provide them with a mirror in which they can see themselves and can connect with a character. However, after thinking more about the needs of my students in this homogeneous setting, I realized it was perhaps even more important to provide them not with mirrors, but with windows to other worlds. I wanted my students to gain insights into other cultures and to be filled with a sense of wonder and respect for the diverse peoples in America and in the world.

Accordingly, I looked at my language arts curricula and developed an Around the World Unit, a thematic study in which students read stories, poems, plays, biographies, emails, letters, and articles from over 30 nations. As my students participated in activities designed to simulate different countries, they kept a “travel journal” in which they logged their feelings and connections to each story and place. By the end of the unit, many students’ journals were more than 60 pages, filled with color, maps, cartoons, narrative writing, and lists of facts. A few of my students went to the library of their own accord to do further research.

Before we began the unit, students filled out passports that asked them which countries they would like to visit and why. I planned my lessons accordingly, requiring students to present on the country of their choice before we read a text from that region. I was thrilled when students shared food and artifacts from all over the world with their classmates. The presentations varied from Irish dancing to Maori poi twirling while students wore outfits from Indian saris to Egyptian headdresses, all providing solid background knowledge about each place before we read its literature.

After studying countries ranging from Samoa to Thailand, we concluded the thematic unit by exploring diversity in America. Working with a partner, students selected American authors from diverse backgrounds, read a biographical article about him or her, and prepared a brief, informal presentation on the author’s contributions to American literature.

To complement these presentations, I brought a variety of ingredients to be used in making either trail mix or a flour paste. I also supplied two large bowls, one labeled “Melting Pot” and the other “Trail Mix” (see Figure 1). Just before the presentation, each partnership selected a different ingredient to take to their desks. I then told them that each ingredient represented their author’s unique contribution to American literature. Furthermore, the bowls represented America. As students shared their author’s contribution to America with the class, they either poured their ingredient into the Melting Pot or Trail Mix Bowl. Through this activity, everyone experienced first-hand how a wide assortment of people contributed unique characteristics to form America.
Afterwards, as students looked into the respective bowls, we discussed the characteristics of each. We came to a general consensus: a Melting Pot America is not as applicable as a Trail Mix America. Students noticed that in the melting pot, each ingredient lost its own individual characteristics and became a part of the larger blend, while in the trail mix, people could still discern the original shape of each ingredient. This visual sparked many interpretations, including that immigrants should be able to keep their culture, as in the trail mix, instead of conforming, as in the melting pot.

The “Metaphors of America” activity was an effective springboard to different reading and writing assignments. Students learned the historical context of the melting pot, beginning in 1782 when J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote: “What, then, is the American, this new man? […] He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones [and is] melted into a new race of men” (1998/1782, pp. 856–857). Students also read speeches from the 1960s and ’70s, introducing them to the “trail mix” concept of multiculturalism. They classified and discussed various quotes and speeches according to the two schools of thought.

Afterwards, my classes created extended metaphors that described their own communities and increased their awareness of the diversity in their neighborhoods. For example, one student wrote that her community was a bowl of brownie mix: most of the people shared the same religion and culture, representing the bulk of the brownie mix, but there were a few outsiders who were the “nuts.” This student concluded that, even though some people try to pick out the nuts because they are different, the rare people of other religions still added flavor to the brownie mix. As she reflected on the sameness of her community, she decided that she did not want to live without those who added flavor.

Meanwhile, the students’ enthusiasm for diversity was reinforced as our entire school held an official month-long celebration of diversity. Students and faculty alike dressed as people from other lands. In foreign language classes, students made posters stating the benefits of learning another language; these posters lined the halls of our school. Students who spoke foreign languages were encouraged to speak to all of their content-area teachers in those languages, and teachers signed a chart to verify their efforts. Families brought artifacts from all over the world to label and hang in our numerous display cases. Students were encouraged to publish their writings on diversity in the local newspaper, and our choirs performed songs from other countries. One teacher began Oquirrh Hills’ first Diversity Club, currently the largest club in our school, whose membership skyrocketed from 25 to 50 people after the first meeting. The Diversity Club’s message was simple: kindness to all, regardless of people’s social status, sexual orientation, gender, beliefs, or race. Students in our community were becoming excited about diversity.

Although I planned my unit to coincide with this diversity month, the days stretched into weeks as my students read more world literature. At the end of their travel journals, many students reported that this unit was their favorite because they learned of places and peoples they had not known before. After doing the “Metaphors of America” activity, one student said, “This lesson plan was my favorite one we’ve done so far.” I discovered that students are inherently interested in the limitless diversity of the world, if only we introduce them to it.
As we read about different cultures and beliefs, the students and I both learned valuable lessons. Although people in my classes appeared the same on the surface, I learned that they are not as homogeneous as I had previously thought: reading their travel journals and watching their presentations revealed a wide variety of talents, interests, interpretations, and opinions. My students also learned an important lesson as they glimpsed through windows into other worlds—they saw mirrored reflections of themselves. Some of them connected with characters from Israel or Jamaica in ways that they had not connected with characters from middle-class America. In so doing, they learned perhaps the greatest lesson about diversity—that in spite of the differences in lifestyle and appearance, there is a deeper thread of humanity that binds us together.

Reference

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NCTE Reading Initiative Study Groups Share Successes & Challenges at Annual Convention

The NCTE Reading Initiative, a study-group-based professional development program founded on the best of what we know about learning, is successfully increasing the knowledge of teachers and the achievement of students. Come to the NCTE Annual Convention in Indianapolis, November 18–23, to hear how this program could enhance your K–12 teachers’ classroom practice! Look for the familiar logo in the convention program, or visit our Web site (www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/readinit) for full information. Sessions include:

- The RI Forum, Thursday, November 18, 3:30–4:30 p.m. The get-together is open to all.
- Literacy as Social Practice and New Visions for Linking Literature and Mathematics
- When Teachers Work Together: Solving the Reading Problem in Middle and High School Classrooms
- Living through the Harlem Renaissance: Creating Curriculum from a Multimodal Perspective
- Creating Curriculum of Significance: Teacher Transformation through the South Carolina Reading Initiative
- Looking Back from the Future: The Significance of Teacher Learning Six Years Later
- Professional Growth: Teachers in Schools Who Are Making a Difference
- Organizing Curriculum to Support Focused and Flexible Inquiry
- Shaping Classroom Curriculum: Children as Significant Partners
- Secondary Literacy Coaching: What, Why, and How
- Solving the Reading Problem: High School Teachers Explain What Works
- Reading Initiative Fall Institute