

Literature as a Tool in Multicultural Education: Perceptions of Finnish Student Teachers on Reading Multicultural Literature in Finland

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural education presents many challenges. In Finland, one of the largest challenges is the fact that the distribution of the immigrant population is highly imbalanced: almost 90 percent of immigrants live in metropolitan areas while in other areas of Finland there are few or none at all. For this reason, schools' and teachers' experiences with immigrant students vary widely and even the teacher training schools may have difficulties producing teaching graduates with experience working with immigrant students. In teacher education, reading fiction can be used as a tool for gaining understanding of different aspects of society and offer a chance to understand those in different situations. However, fiction has been an under-used method to support student teachers' professional growth. In this article we describe an experiment in which student teachers read and discussed multicultural literature in literature circles as part of their studies in multicultural education. Reading multicultural literature gives young teachers a chance to understand the diversity of multicultural issues beyond the monocultural or touristic perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Fiction is being increasingly used as a component of various university courses^[1,2]. Reading fiction enables us to learn about different situations, circumstances, and people not otherwise familiar to us. In addition while helping students to perhaps be more empathetic; fiction can give them factual information about various things^[3,4]. This can be an important factor when using fiction as a part of studies concerning different aspects of multiculturalism. Using fiction as a source of information and as a means for ethical-moral growth can be demanding for the teacher. It is important to find meaningful literature and it may be necessary to change the students' whole attitude toward reading fiction. It might also be difficult for the readers to change the discussion from sharing opinions about fiction to learning about a certain subject or theme^[5,6].

An important method in literature education is the classroom discussion after or during the completion of a reading. These discussions are usually very teacher-led and the teacher uses the discussion as an opportunity to control the students' understanding of the text^[6]. Many previous studies have shown that these kinds of discussions are often ineffective and uninteresting for the participants^[6-8]. The best literature discussions resemble the conversations of everyday life: they have no leader, the questions have no correct answers, and the participants are equals^[8-10]. When working in literature circles, students work by themselves without the teacher controlling their discussions. The teacher can offer the students topics for discussion and they can report their results to teacher, but the students are in charge of the conversations. The number of students attending a literature circle is usually small, which enables everybody to participate. The goal of a literature circle is dependent on the aim of the conversation and whether the literature circle involves reading the text together or reading it independently and discussing in circles afterwards^[11].

In teacher education, reading fiction in literature circles can serve several purposes. Fiction can help students become familiar with a certain subject matter and better understand children's worldviews, lives, and thinking. In addition, reading fiction improves the reader's literacy skills and reading children's literature in particular gives the students information on literature itself and models on the methods capable of using as a part of their future work^[12].

This article presents an experiment in which student teachers read multicultural literature in literature circles as a part of their multicultural studies. The aim of the article is to evaluate the student teachers' perceptions of activities such as reading fiction in literature circles as a part of their professional studies. Using new methods of multicultural education is especially important for Finland as a nation because the country is becoming increasingly multicultural while most teachers still have only monocultural experiences. It also seems that there are not enough methods of multicultural education or some methods are going unused ^[13,14].

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: MULTICULTURAL EDUCATIONS CONNECTIONS TO LITERATURE EDUCATION ETHICAL-MORAL EDUCATION

Ethical-moral education means adopting the basic idea of ethics according to which we should always strive for a better life by reducing selfishness and short-sightedness. Ethical-moral education should aim at increased understanding of values and moral issues instead of providing children related to loose recommendations and rules ^[15]. One of the problems with ethical moral education is the fact that even young children know how to act empathetically and morally but may choose to do otherwise ^[16]. The ability to feel empathy and understand fiction are closely related because both require empathizing with someone else's feelings, situations, and actions. Sometimes it is almost impossible to say whether the reader needs fiction to feel empathy or advanced literacy skills. That is one of the reasons why literature is frequently used as a tool for ethical-moral education ^[1,17].

Stories are commonly used in ethical-moral education to help children to approach the ethical-moral theme in question ^[18,19] and it is easier to evaluate ethical-moral questions without having to rely solely on one's own experiences. Fiction's capacity to engender empathy is considered important for ethical-moral growth. It is easier for many to deal with difficult topics, such as bullying or tolerance, when viewing them from the position of a fictional character ^[20]. To use fiction successfully as a tool for ethical moral growth, the fiction selected must have credible characters and situations with which the reader can empathize ^[21,22]. Literature, including drama, can be an effective way to learn empathy and increase the desire to help others through role-playing and identification ^[18]. The structure of narratives and the happy endings of fiction are relevant to personal growth. They may guide readers to have more positive attitudes and confidence toward the life problems they encounter, since they can help to understand that problems and difficulties can be resolved ^[23].

Literature must be selected carefully, because young readers prefer empathizing with characters whose opinions resemble their own and who have desirable traits. It is also notable that in children's literature, many characters with negative attributes are described as being more adult and bolder than others. This may inspire young readers to empathize with these characters ^[5]. According to Brozo ^[24], many young people have a negative and violent worldview, which may include their stage of development. One of the reasons for this may be their relatively low levels of reading and high levels of movie viewing: in literature, the hero's character is the opposite of evil and is built on self-discipline and high morals, but in the movies the corresponding role is often dominated by a violent outlook.

Literature education

Literature education means using fiction to support the reader's personal growth, with emphasis on the development of reasoning skills, values, and identity as well as the general understanding of human and social reality ^[25,26]. Contemporary literature education emphasizes that literature should see greater use to support the readers maturation process and provide information about different aspects of life. Reading fiction can provide material and ideas for solving problems that will be encountered later in life ^[27,28].

Each of us has our own experiences of the world and of life, but reading fiction gives us the opportunity to see and understand things that are not present in our lives ^[3]. Understanding fiction is an individual process influenced by various personal, cultural, and social factors of age, gender, personality, and literacy skills, as well as social and cultural background. This means that nobody interprets the same piece of literature exactly the same way. According to Rosenblatt ^[29], even the author cannot predict how a text will be interpreted. The less experience the readers have of life, the themes of the story, or reading itself, the more their interpretations will differ from each other ^[5,6]. Understanding fiction is more complex than understanding facts, because in addition to information processing and reasoning skills, fiction readers need to use imagination and feelings. The reader's imagination and feelings are needed to imagine and empathize with situations, people, and events described in the text ^[3]. Fiction offers readers opportunities to experience and clarify feelings related to different situations which they might be facing in reality. In order to be able to take advantage of literature, the reader must be able to relate to its themes imaginatively ^[3,4].

Learning through fiction can be more efficient than learning through facts because the reader is more involved in the process of making sense of the text. The dual effect of learning means participating in the process of learning through conscious and subconscious understanding and thereby enhancing the learning to make it more effective ^[30]. Literature education can be connected to experiential learning and drama ^[31]. Close to the concept of the dual effect is that of abstract conceptualization which means new internal perspectives and understanding of the issues generated during empathetic learning process are developed. At the moment of abstract conceptualization learners are consciously in contact with their inner worlds and identify with the subject in new ways and on new levels ^[31].

At present, there is a lack of research-based knowledge on literature education and pedagogical approaches on connecting

literature and ethical-moral education ^[32]. One of the problems with using literature education in ethical-moral education is that the interpretation of fiction is affected by so many factors. In education, the teacher should not control how the students interpret the literature or their attitudes to it ^[32,33]. Prejudices toward literature education may also arise because some readers find it difficult to develop empathy through reading literature ^[2]. It is sometimes difficult to say if the feelings aroused by fiction are empathy and caused by the reading or just feelings related to certain words and situations with experiences of grief or joy ^[32]. In addition, it seems that the age of the reader affects the feelings and attitudes toward conflicts described in literature; for example, many older students take defensive attitudes toward acts of racism not directed at their own cultures ^[34].

Multicultural literature

Multicultural literature has many positive effects on people with different backgrounds, including increasing cultural awareness, developing self-awareness, and promoting intercultural understanding. Fiction that reflects minority groups' own cultures in a positive way may have a positive impact on the self-esteem of people from minority groups and help them feel a sense of unity with the majority. Readers from majority groups, in turn, can increase their understanding of diversity and different cultures and learn that despite differences, people also have many similarities ^[21,35]. It is important in school settings to pay attention to the fact that students should read literature that reflects the students' different cultural backgrounds and nationalities ^[36].

Multicultural literature is defined in many ways. In the context of education, multicultural literature refers to texts by minority authors that are read to enhance respect for diversity and acceptance ^[37]. This type of literature affects everyone regardless of race, class, or gender and essentially describes the struggles and difficulties common to all humanity ^[38]. In some definitions of multicultural children's literature, the author's authentic relationship with the culture described is emphasized ^[38]. Sims ^[39] has compared books written by African American and non-African American authors describing Africans. He found that the non-African Americans' books often had a false emphasis and were also often inaccurate. Short ^[40] emphasizes the national perspective: literature must have themes in common with the reader's life. According to Short ^[40], multicultural books that reflect children's own lives are essential to building multicultural understanding. When children identify themselves with the characters in the books, they can find a position from which to develop deeper understandings of both their own culture and other, nearby cultures. Only after that it is possible for the educators introduce multicultural literature to children from a broader and more international perspective. Higgins ^[41] has developed an instrument for educators to evaluate and choose multicultural literature, and asserts that the concept of multicultural children's literature has previously been used only for books in which the minority groups are described in a positive tone, whereas the current goal is to provide a realistic picture of different cultures. Higgins' criteria include stereotypes and negative images of different cultures, as well as the literary quality of a text ^[41]. Multicultural literature should authentically represent the oral traditions of minority groups, and the minority characters should be of equal status with the majority-group characters and depicted as directing their own lives. In addition, one of the quality criteria of multicultural literature is the publication year. According to Higgins ^[41], nearly all books describing minorities that appeared up to the end of the 1960s in the United States were written by representatives of the majority and reflected the white middle-class worldview.

Similar instructions for the assessment of multicultural literature books have been developed by many specialists. Shiohita's ^[36] criteria are based on statistics made by Newling and contain a list of nicknames that can be experienced as offensive. In addition, he stresses the importance of selecting the books based on the interests of the readers. In addition, Iglesia ^[35] emphasizes that reading multicultural literature should be a positive experience, and children should enjoy reading the books even without thinking about multicultural values. She places the responsibility for the assessment of the suitability of multicultural literature for the teacher, not their students. Assessing the suitability of multicultural literature based on different criteria and guidelines can be regarded as censorship, but more important than the question of censorship is the teacher's responsibility to protect their students from abusive texts ^[36].

Gopalakrishnan ^[38] has classified the use of multicultural books in education on the basis of Sims Bishop's ^[39] definitions of multicultural literature. "Melting pot" books describe cultural diversity and experiences of cultural diversity. Their purpose is to establish that all people are basically the same and people should not be discriminated against on the basis of race or ethnicity. Books that enhance social awareness introduce the reader to a culture and a unique experience associated with it. They strive to raise the awareness of a certain cultural minority and to awaken the attention to multicultural issues, but from an external point of view. They do not attempt to solve the problems described in the story. Books that enhance cultural awareness depict the cultural traditions and language and ethnicity-related experiences in an authentic voice. They depict real cultural conflicts and force readers to discuss critically, for example, existing power relations. According to Gopalakrishnan ^[38], these books are the most multicultural, as they concentrate on certain minority groups and give others the opportunity to understand their world. In education, however, melting pot books are most commonly used because they are suitable for all groups and do not require any advance preparation by the teacher ^[38].

The selecting of literature and pedagogical approaches when using literature for multicultural education must be undertaken with particular care in order to enhance their educational value.

Despite the growing range of multicultural literature, many teachers are not familiar with it or are unsure of its suitability and usefulness. Merely reading literature and being captivated by the details of stories is not enough. If attention is paid only to the

differences with one's own culture or to the details of a particular culture described, the use of literature can be unproductive or, at worst, even increase intolerance ^[6,40]. Lehman ^[42] emphasizes the responsibility of teachers when reading multicultural literature. It is particularly challenging when the literature is beyond the teachers' own experience. All kinds of books can be read, but it must be ensured that children are directed to critical reading and that false or biased perceptions are avoided.

Multicultural literature in multicultural education

Multicultural children's literature can be used in all traditional forms of multicultural education. Banks and McGee Banks ^[43] defined different levels of multicultural education. The lowest level of multicultural education is described as a tourist, food, or party perspective. This means using multicultural literature only to enliven certain holiday events at school, and that literature is only used to gain a passing familiarity with a certain foreign culture and is not assessed on the basis of its authenticity or content. The next level of using multicultural literature in multicultural education is adding the literature and its content to education without evaluation. This might mean reading folk tales from different countries and bringing the representatives of different cultures to classes to tell about their habits. Literature is used as background material before the visits. At the next level, the aim of multicultural education is to encourage students to examine topics, concepts, and literature on ethnicity and culture. Students are offered literature that does not correspond to the views of the majority. Literature gives them an opportunity to read about the same events from different perspectives and to empathize with the feelings of a person from a different culture. Additionally, it creates opportunities for discussion about diversity. On the highest level, the aim is to get the students to act actively toward a more just and equitable society. From the perspective of fiction this could mean reading literature about historical events and comparing them with current events. The goal is to connect the events described in literature to a concrete reality ^[38]. Boyles ^[21] gives as an example students' practical actions based on multicultural literature: letters written to policymakers.

It is, however, obvious that the mere placement of multicultural literature in the classroom or the use of multicultural literature as part of the free-choice readings is not enough. Studies show that when multicultural literature is combined with an activating pedagogical approach, reading levels improve along with students' attitudes toward different cultures ^[44,45]. Häggblom ^[46] has examined the use of multicultural literature in Swedish-speaking immersion classes in Finland. According to this study, multicultural literature may increase the awareness of the importance of culture and diversity and help readers feel more empathetic toward diversity and the representatives of another culture. However, the same study also shows that reading literature is not enough as it is essential to discuss what has been read. This requires good reading skills, a wide knowledge of multicultural children's books, information about the different cultures and immigration, and an open-minded attitude toward differences ^[19].

There are several literature-based, systematic pedagogical approaches to multicultural education, with Norton's ^[45] five-step approach being one of the most systematic. In addition, Short ^[40] and Leming ^[47] have tested the use of picture books as tools for ethical and multicultural education and Louie ^[44] has developed a method through which, by comparing different versions of the same story, the understanding of the meaning and impact of literature to culture and individual lives can be evaluated. Dong ^[48] has tested the use of literature circles in multicultural education. In his study, teachers read and discussed, in circles, a number of different multicultural-themed texts. At the end of the reading circle sessions, the teachers implemented different kinds of multicultural literature and pedagogical approaches in their classrooms. Their teaching experiments show that even young pupils are able to discuss racism, culture, and social justice issues. A particularly good method to learn and understand the cultures described in literature was the use of students as insider experts. This was beneficial for the teachers as well: They had an opportunity to learn about the cultures of their students. Furthermore, the students valued the opportunity to talk to their classmates about their own cultures. One of the positive effects was changes in literature discussions: They started to resemble casual conversations on multiculturalism.

METHODOLOGY: EXPLORING STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE THROUGH MEMOS OF READING CIRCLES

In Finland, it is important to find ways to enhance students' understanding of diversity because of the increasing number of immigrants and because the immigrant population is very unevenly situated geographically. For instance, in the city of Rauma where the authors' Teacher Education unit is situated, it is nearly impossible to find immigrant students in university courses.

This study represents a teaching experiment in which student teachers became familiar with diversity by reading multicultural literature. The aim was to test the usefulness and effectiveness of reading circles as a part of teacher education from the perspective of Finnish student teachers with little or no experiences on multiculturalism. The research questions of this study are: How do student teachers evaluate multicultural children's literature in Finland? And how do student teachers feel about using multicultural children's books as a part of multicultural education in primary schools?

Participants and the context of data collection

The data were collected during the years 2013 and 2014 from student teachers during the course, "Multilingual and Multicultural education in pre- and primary education". The aim of the course is to help the students be more capable of dealing with multiculturalism and managing the main concepts of multiculturalism and the multicultural pedagogy, as well as bilingual education in primary schools.

The teacher trainees were in the fourth or fifth year of the master's degree course required to qualify as a primary teacher in Finland. They had no prior literature studies or studies on multiculturalism. Nor did they have any experience on reading circles. The total number of participants was 51, of whom 35 were female and 16 male. During reading circles they worked in 15 groups of 3 to 5 students each.

DATA AND COLLECTING THE DATA

The data is one of the independent works of the course "Multilingual and Multicultural education in pre- and primary education." The task started with instructions on working in reading circles and by dividing the students into 15 groups of reading circles. The data consists of memos of these reading circles. The memos were numbered.

Since the aim was to concentrate in the reading circles to discussions about the books and multiculturalism, the student teachers were asked to read individually a Finnish children's book with multicultural themes. During the reading they were guided to make a reading diary. After reading the book they joined reading circles and presented their reading experiences and discussed multiculturalism. The discussions were organized in students' free time. They were advised the circles should discuss the books for about 90 minutes.

To help them find appropriate books, they were given lists of suitable books. The list comprised 40 contemporary Finnish multicultural children's books. The books have been published, mainly after the late 1990s, but because the multicultural books in Finland are so few some of the books were older.

The reading circles began with presentations of the individual books and diaries. The students were guided to introduce the main features of the books while concentrating on their multicultural characteristics and to evaluate the books from the perspective of a teacher and its usefulness in teaching. After the individual presentations the participants were guided to discuss their thoughts on multiculturalism and multicultural books. Within the circles, the students also discussed the meaning of multicultural books for teachers and considered the value of multicultural books for children. One participant in each circle acted as a clerk and documented the discussions.

THE ANALYSIS OF DATA

The research in this study represents qualitative research. The qualitative analysis was conducted through a content analysis and supported with quantitative data. Qualitative content analysis is an empirical, methodological controlled analysis of various kinds of communication, followed by the rules of content analysis and step by step models. Qualitative content analysis does not require exact quantification^[49]. In this study, the objects of the content analysis are the memos of the reading circles.

This study represents inductive content analysis. Both inductive and deductive content analyses have three main phases: preparation, organizing, and reporting. The preparation phase starts with selecting the unit of analysis^[50,51]. In the inductive content analysis, the next step is to organize the qualitative data. This process includes open coding, creating categories, and abstraction^[50,52]. The organizing of the data started by reading the memos through several times and labeling them in accordance to the theoretical framework and research questions. After several readings, it was possible to set categories and group them into broader categories and name them.

The data provided three main categories/perspectives (the usefulness of multicultural books in education, the relevance of reading multicultural books for personal and professional growth, and the assessment of the quality of multicultural books). To verify the results, they are presented along with the support of authentic citations from memos of the reading circles.

The credibility and transferability of this study

Successful content analysis requires that the researchers can analyze and simplify the data and form categories that reflect the subject of study in a reliable manner. Credibility in terms of research findings also deals with how well the categories cover the data^[53]. To increase the trustworthiness of the study, it is necessary to demonstrate a link between the results and the data^[54], and that link is here strengthened by describing the analysis, the collection of the data, and the data itself in detail and using authentic citations. The citations were translated from Finnish to English by the first author and back translated from English to Finnish by a colleague. This proved that the translations were accurate.

Findings: The Perceptions on Multicultural Children's Literature

It appears that the Finnish student teachers in this study had three main perspectives on reading multicultural literature as a part of their professional studies. The three perspectives were the relevance of reading multicultural books for personal and professional growth, the usefulness of multicultural books in education, and the assessment of the quality of multicultural books. The majority of the 51 students had a positive attitude to reading multicultural literature to support their multicultural growth.

The relevance of reading multicultural books for personal and professional growth

All the students considered the relevance of reading multicultural books positively. All the comments concerning the usefulness of multicultural books for their personal and professional growth were positive. It seems that an important factor on valuing the

reading experience so positively was the possibility to discuss the books in reading circles. Some of the students even suggested making the reading of multicultural children's literature in reading circles a practice for all primary teachers:

Reading multicultural fiction helps the teachers to address children with immigrant backgrounds. This would be especially important for young teachers with little or no experience of immigrant students. Fiction offers information and fosters understanding of immigration and these books should be widely read amongst teachers (Reading circle 3).

Comments on the subject of personal growth were either concrete details or abstract ideas of what the readers had learned while reading and discussing the multicultural books:

It was a surprise to me that some immigrants have to adapt to everyday experiences of injustice (Reading circle 3).

I learned that the meaning of the family is deeper than in Finnish society. It is important to get to know different cultures in schools and that is one of the teacher's tasks (Reading circle 10).

It seems that reading multicultural children's books helped the student teachers to empathize with the lives of immigrants and understand them better. Many of the readers even said that they had never thought of a certain aspect of immigration before reading these books. The most common comments were expressions of how they had tended to think of immigrants as a group, not individuals: I realized that we tend to think that all foreign-looking persons are immigrants and we also treat all immigrants in the same way, basing our thoughts on stereotypes (Reading circle 15). In addition, there were many comments on the fact that just by reading these multicultural stories the readers had come to realize that life is not easy for immigrants: It is not easy being an immigrant; they have to rediscover their place in society and sometimes even to create their whole identity again. (Reading circle 8). One theme that came up several times was the status of women: We were shocked and surprised about the status of women in some cultures (Reading circle 2).

Reading multicultural fiction and discussing it in reading circles raised many practical issues. They were presented either from the perspective of the teacher or from the perspective of class practices. The comments concerned the role of the teacher in the immigrant students' adaptation to the school environment. The students also emphasized that the teacher should take time to become familiar with the situation of each immigrant student on a personal level. It is important to treat immigrant students as individuals and with discretion. The teacher has an important role to play in the adaptation of an immigrant child (Reading circle 5). Some of the comments also showed a certain helplessness and even fear about how a teacher would be able to cope with immigrant students. The refugee children would be particularly challenging issue for the teachers.

Reading multicultural literature made us realize how different immigrant families are. The books also made us feel that the teacher has to help the immigrant child in all areas of life. We were also a bit worried that it might sometimes be dangerous for the teachers to interfere in the problems of immigrant children" (Reading circle 1).

The usefulness of multicultural books in education

The student teachers were skeptical of using Finnish multicultural children's books as a pedagogical approach in children's multicultural education and felt that the use of literature is difficult or impossible in their future work as primary school teachers.

The positive comments on using multicultural children's books emphasized two perspectives: Multicultural children's books might help children to empathize more with immigrant students and to approach diversity with acceptance and reduce racist ideas. Through multicultural literature children and adults can get familiar with different aspects of immigration; refugees, bullying, the meaning of language (Reading circle 10). Multicultural books might also give teachers and children accurate information on different cultures and countries. It is easier to approach multicultural issues through fiction than just giving facts, because children know so little about immigration and have difficulties in understanding its issues (Reading circle 11). Furthermore, the student teachers seemed a bit confused and uncertain about their abilities to conduct multicultural education: they were skeptical about the children's books but according to them they were the only tools they have been offered during teacher education to multicultural education. In our hometowns there are so few immigrants that we have no personal knowledge of multiculturalism. If we don't use fiction we have no material to convey to children the feelings of 'real' people (Reading circle 8). Interestingly, only one comment valued the usefulness of multicultural books to immigrant students themselves: Reading fiction could help immigrant students to raise their self-esteem and reduce intolerance amongst all (Reading circle 9).

Most of the skeptical or negative comments concerned their ability to choose suitable books. The students felt that they lacked knowledge of multicultural children's literature and immigration. Many teachers and student teachers know too little of multiculturalism to be able to read and discuss multicultural issues with children. It may only cause more harm" (Reading circle 7). They also thought that books should be written from the perspective of the immigrant to make it easier for children to empathize with immigrants. The best multicultural books are written from the perspective of the immigrant child. This might help Finnish children to empathize with diversity (Reading circle 9). However, in Finland there is only very few books with immigrants as main characters. They considered being particularly difficult to select books if there were immigrant children in the class. Multicultural literature seems useful, but we are very uncertain how to use these books if there are immigrant students in the class. They might be offended (Reading circle 12). Some of the student teachers also thought that it would be better to read autobiographical texts on

real people, because they have more facts and they prevent over-identification with a character: We might prefer fact from fiction on teaching multiculturalism because it helps children to approach multicultural issues. Children might empathize with the characters of different cultures too much and feel anxiety if we used fiction (Reading circle 9).

The student teachers produced many ideas about how to use the multicultural books in classrooms. The most often mentioned requirement for using multicultural books was that the reading should always be connected to different kinds of teacher-led discussions to help the children approach the multicultural issue and to ensure that the books would increase tolerance, not the reverse. Choosing books for multicultural education must be done carefully because we are afraid that some books might increase the intolerance, not reduce it. Most books are not suitable for individual reading but they need discussions and activities led by the teacher (Reading circle 6). Almost as frequently mentioned was that using multicultural books means extra work for teachers, because the books must be carefully read in advance. Using multicultural literature with children at schools means extra work for the teacher because the books must be chosen and read in advance (Reading circle 12).

There were also a couple of concrete suggestions on the use of multicultural literature in the classroom. They thought that the best and easiest way to use the books would be to read excerpts.

This way the teacher can be sure that the message of the reading is understood correctly. Some considered that multicultural books may be thematically too remote to children and it would be wiser to read instead, or alongside, books on a more familiar, yet similar, theme. The children could empathize with these kinds of more familiar situations more easily. How are Finnish children able to empathize with diversity through books that handle issues strange to them? Would it be more useful to read books that affect them? Like on some Finnish child moving abroad? (Reading circle 9)

The assessment of the quality of multicultural books

The quality of the Finnish multicultural books, especially the multicultural children's books aimed at school aged children, may prevent using them in education. Almost all the student teachers valued the books negatively, and even suggested not using them. How to find suitable books? All the children's books we read were uninteresting, old and too difficult or violent for many children (Reading circle 10).

In Finland there is not enough of high quality and attractive multicultural children's books. The book must be interesting and enjoyable for children and the illustrations should be engaging. The illustration highlighted the differences between Finnish and immigrant people (Reading circle 12).

The student teachers were surprised how old-fashioned many of the Finnish multicultural children's books were. They did not like most of the books and doubted if children would either. The books were so old-fashioned and boring that they would have no positive impact on anyone or anything (Reading circle 3). Some of them also mentioned that many multicultural children's books seemed to be aimed more at girls than boys.

The student teachers in Finland doubted their ability to choose the right kind of book. They actually suggested that there should be experts to evaluate multicultural children's books for teachers. They mentioned in particular books with crude and unpleasant events. It was difficult to set up age limits for books including events like this. Someone even wondered why there were no multicultural children's books with happy events in Finland. We don't have enough knowledge on multiculturalism or literature to find suitable books for different age groups and needs. We are afraid that reading multicultural literature that is chosen by us would cause more harm than good (Reading circle 8).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS: MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IS PERCEIVED AS A NECESSARY SUPPLEMENT FOR TEACHING

The results of this study indicate that fiction and literature circles could be effective and useful tools for teacher educators and teachers. The becoming teachers in this study felt that reading fiction could be beneficial for them from the perspective of ethic-moral as well as personal and professional growth. The literature circles offer possibilities to share the experiences of reading and they bring social elements to reading. At best these might help the readers to enhance their literacy and to learn to evaluate and choose appropriate and useful literature to different purposes ^[55,56]. In order to increase and diversify the reading of fiction in primary education new approaches must be taken to heighten the use of fiction in teacher education as well. In the United States, student teachers are already trained to select, analyze, evaluate, and use multicultural literature effectively ^[45]. There are also a variety of webpages in the United States to help the teachers in primary schools to use multicultural literature in education. In Finland, these practices are not yet utilized ^[57].

There are many research-based pedagogical approaches and knowledge of using multicultural literature in primary education more diversely and effectively, but it seems that teachers are not familiar with these assets. It also seems that the problem areas concerning multicultural children literature as a part of multicultural education are the same regardless of how multicultural the surrounding society is and how established the tradition of multicultural literature and multiculturalism in the surrounding society is. This is highlighted by the fact that the results of this Finnish study resemble to prior studies of multicultural literature in education in the United States ^[45]. This is a complex issue of how we value the power of fiction and the pedagogical possibilities of fiction ^[26].

There is a lot of work to be done if we aim at more extensive use of multicultural literature in education. This study shows in accordance to prior studies that the becoming teachers feel that reading multicultural literature could be beneficial for multicultural education, but they are unsure of its application in primary education and therefore are not likely to use it in future work. There are many reasons for this uncertainty: limited knowledge of multicultural literature and methods for using literature as a part of multicultural education; the somewhat poor quality of multicultural literature; the prejudices and fear of the influences on reading multicultural literature for children of natives and immigrants; and the unwillingness of teachers to read books in their free time. In addition, the reading of multicultural literature in order to find appropriate literature is too burdensome in relation to the benefits achieved.

This study highlighted the problems with multicultural children's literature in Finland, and in other parts of the world. The issue of defining a children's book as multicultural sparked a considerable amount of discussion ^[38,41,45,58]. In order to use a book as a tool for multicultural education, it should have various multicultural elements and, preferably, an immigrant as the main character. If the book is poorly written and has inaccurate details it may increase intolerance instead of reducing it. In Finland there is no immigrant or minority authors and most of the multicultural books are old and contain a lot of negative stereo types of minorities in Finland. It is also characterized for the multicultural children's books in Finland, which the books tend to highlight differences, which may increase intolerance. This means that reading multicultural literature does not necessarily always have positive outcomes. In the United States it is possible for a minority child to read literature about events similar to his own life. This is not the case in Finland.

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