

Developing Cultural Competence through Children's Literature in Training Educational and Psycho-Social Professionals

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Abstract

Present day educational and psycho-social services deal with broad cultural diversity. Educators and psycho-social professionals need to become culturally competent to be able to work with people from different cultural backgrounds including race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, etc. To be able to do so, it is important to cultivate cultural competence among these workers, the prerequisites to which are the awareness and acceptance of differences between people as well as reflection upon their own attitudes and feelings. To create a profound and long-lasting effect of the training, creative and experiential teaching methods are often applied. This paper describes the use of children's books in academic training for cultural and context awareness and presents two training modules. The application of this methodology is demonstrated with university students in social work and with students in an Arabic-speaking teachers' college in Israel.

Keywords

Cultural Competence Training, Children's Books, Education, Psychosocial Services

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that effective educational and psycho-social services to peoples from diverse cultural, ethnic, or religious groups need to be attuned to the recipients' cultural background, culturally based ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting (Murakami et al., 2019; NASW, 2001). Cultural competence is

the term that commonly denotes this approach. It implies the ability of professionals to function successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds including race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental ability, age, and national origin (NASW, 2001). Three components of cultural competence are consensual: cultural awareness, culture specific knowledge and culture-attuned skills (Sue, 2001). Cultural competence begins with the awareness of one's own cultural beliefs and practices, and the recognition that others believe in different truths than one's own (Kohli et al., 2010). This involves awareness of one's own biases and prejudices and is rooted in respect, validation, and openness toward differences among people (NASW, 2001).

An invaluable asset to add to cultural competence is context awareness: people experience and construct their different realities within their contexts (Askeland & Døhlie, 2015). Professional development involves reflectivity through becoming aware of our own assumptions as well as alternative meanings. An understanding of context refers both to our own contexts as people and as professionals, and the contexts influencing the people we work with. A social context is created by people, and people are formed by their social contexts. A person never exists in a void, but always in a context. Contexts are complex, because they change constantly over time, as do human beings. Context means a set of circumstances or facts that surround and contribute to the full meaning of an event or situation (Askeland & Døhlie, 2015).

Knowledge about diverse cultures is important for cultural competence, and often forms the basis for cultural competence training (Bussema & Nemec, 2006). Typically, such programs emphasize cognitive learning and teach working with multicultural concepts including definitions of culture, race, ethnicity; acculturation theory; understandings of the influence of worldviews; racial/ethnic identity development etc. (Williams, 2005). Teaching methods include formal lectures, assigned readings, journal clubs, clinical case presentations, group discussions etc. (Jernigan et al., 2016).

However, there is a growing understanding that cultural competence training must focus on exploring and changing attitudes, and increasing awareness of the personal biases that each person inevitably holds while examining the surrounding world (Bussema & Nemec, 2006). Given the need to focus on attitudes and personal exploration, the techniques employed in cultural competence training must go far beyond a lecture or panel presentation and include more and more interactive games, simulations, encounter with patients from varied cultures, personal and group reflections etc. (Jernigan et al., 2016).

Cultural competence training needs to focus on issues such as personal and group identity, a sense of belonging, the meaning of "home" and social and political topics relating to prejudices and stereotypes especially in relation to minorities, immigrants, and refugees. This inevitably involves discussing students' personal perspectives and emotional reactions. It is not surprising therefore that experiential and artistic techniques have become a vital component in training for cultural competence and context awareness (Lijtmaer, 2001). One such tech-

nique is the use of children's literature.

This paper describes two academic teaching modules using children's literature to foster inter-cultural understanding, cultural competence, and context awareness. This methodology was used at the School of Social Work, Hebrew University and at Sakhnin Academic College, an Arabic-speaking teacher education college. Starting with a review of the use of children's literature in education, we will present the social context in which the modules were developed and implemented, demonstrate the teaching modules themselves and discuss this methodology.

2. Children's Literature in Education

Children's literature has been long known as a potent educational instrument that can promote empathy and the understanding of diversity. Typically, it is used with children in pre-schools and elementary schools. Multicultural children's books address manifold aspects of cultural diversity and multiculturalism and are often used to teach about similarities and differences between cultures, develop intercultural awareness as well as cultivate, understanding and acceptance of differences between people (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1998). Such books also deal with immigration, exile and experiences that accompany them and can be used in teaching about these issues (Braden, 2019; Mendoza, 2019; Layfield, 2021; Sciarba et al., 2021). They may also address universal human issues such as human rights and can be used to introduce a discussion on these topics (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016; Todres, 2018).

In the past decade, the application of children's books in adult education has increased. They are widely used to train teachers and educators to become aware of diversity and multiculturalism in society at large and in their classrooms and to convey this understanding to their pupils (Hayik, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2019; Landa & Stephens, 2017; Meacham & Meacham, 2016). One of the teaching modules, presented in this paper, introduces for the first time ever the topic of migration and displacement into the curriculum of an Arabic-speaking teacher education college.

The use of children's books in training professionals outside the educational system is only at its start. Based on the understanding that the learners' personal and emotional world needs to be addressed for effective training, narrative techniques have been long incorporated in training for cultural competence in psycho-social professions (Mirsky, 2008, 2011). Such techniques are especially suited for the exploration of the experiences of immigrants, refugees, and members of minority populations. They are flexible and narrator-oriented and therefore can contain unique cultural as well as personal materials (Lijtmaer, 2001). However, the use of children's literature in training social workers for cultural competence, as described in one of the teaching modules in this paper, is a pioneer endeavor.

3. The Social Context of Israel

The Israeli society is greatly multicultural, comprising both Jews who immigrated to the country from over one hundred countries around the world, bringing with them the cultural baggage of their countries of descent, and the Arab Palestinians who are about twenty percent of Israel's population. Added to this are thousands of legal and illegal migrant workers and asylum seekers who also reside in the country. However, multicultural social composition is not necessarily reflected in pluralistic social attitudes nor in the understanding that cultural diversity must be studied and integrated in the training of professionals in educational and psycho-social services.

To promote pluralism, social tolerance and cultural sensitivity in the Israeli society, a project for the Development of Innovative Curricula on Immigrants' Lives (DEMO) was funded by the European Commission, Erasmus+ program. The aim of the project was to develop, implement and disseminate in Israeli Higher Education Institutions courses about the lives of migrants and displaced persons with the aim of improving the skills of professionals in educational as well as psycho-social services (teachers, counsellors, social workers, psychologists, etc.) to better meet the needs of these populations. The courses also involved immigrants and displaced persons and initiated encounters between them and the students in the hope of including their voices in the general social discourse in Israeli society. By applying advanced teaching methodologies, DEMO courses encouraged a personal and meaningful learning process that enabled the students to connect to their own and their families' migration and displacement histories¹. One of such methodologies was the use of children's literature on migration and displacement. The two teaching modules that applied this methodology were designed to deal with two adverse social phenomena in Israeli society: manifestations of prejudice and racism towards immigrants from Ethiopia and the suppression of memories and testimonies of displacement in the Arab-Palestinian community in Israel.

3.1. Immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel

Immigrants from Ethiopia are a prominent social group in Israel. It is not because they are numerous: altogether about 120,000 immigrants came to Israel from Ethiopia over the past decades, a small community compared for example with 1,300,000 immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Nevertheless, in a society composed mostly of Jews of Caucasian and North African origins, the dark skin of immigrants from Ethiopia is very conspicuous and manifestations of racism are directed towards them (Ministry of Justice, 2016). Indeed, prejudice and racism has gained increasing recognition in Israel as a problem that needs to be addressed both on the level of social policy and at the level of the practice of social services (Shenhav & Yona, 2008). These attitudes add to the stresses of immigration and negatively affect

¹Link to DEMO website: <https://www.demo.erasmus-il.org/>.

the wellbeing of Ethiopian immigrants, especially of children (Shmuel, 2023).

The Code of Ethics of Social Work (NASW, 2021) requires social workers to provide adequate assistance and to fight for the rights of individuals and groups who suffer discrimination. In various countries (e.g., United States and United Kingdom), the problem of racism is seen as an essential challenge that is addressed in the training and practice of social work. In Israel however, social services seem to lack the awareness of such a need. To ensure the provision of proper services to Ethiopian immigrants, the training of professionals in social services needs to address this population and the issue of prejudices and racism.

Dei et al. (2000) propose a critical integrative approach to inclusive education, a model for change based on an anti-racist approach. One of the objectives of the model is integrating multiple foci of knowledge into the curriculum at all levels to enrich the learning experiences of all students. The model refers to sources of knowledge that have been marginalized and particularly to indigenous knowledge, which refers to knowledge that people acquire and use in their everyday lives, based on social and cultural interpretations of their environment (Dei et al., 2000). In the spirit of this approach, a workshop was developed and implemented in the School of Social Work at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the oldest and biggest Higher Education Institution in the country. In this workshop, children's literature on immigrants from Ethiopia was used to introduce culture specific knowledge about this community and counteract stereotypes, prejudice, and racism. The workshop was subsequently implemented in other academic and training settings.

3.2. Arab-Palestinian Citizens in Israel

Unlike most Jews, who had immigrated to Israel in the past century, Arab-Palestinians lived in the land prior to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. They are the Indigenous peoples of the land but during the 1948 war, many were displaced within the country and outside (Masalha, 2005). The elderly still carry the memory of their displacement, but the documentation and transmission of these memories to the younger generations has been complicated. On the one hand, due to political pressures from the outside (Israeli Military Rule) and inside (the Palestinian National movement), these memories became infused with political agendas (Masalha, 2005; Sela & Kadish, 2016). On the other hand, many of these memories had been silenced and suppressed. Very rarely was the history of Arab-Palestinians subject to academic research and the issue of displacement was absent from the curricula of Arabic-speaking schools and higher academic institutions. The suppression of a narrative may be detrimental to individuals and to communities: *“Personal narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience. Self is broadly understood as unfolding reflective experience of being-in-the world, including a sense of one's past and future. We come to know ourselves as we use narratives to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others”* (Ochs & Capps,

1996: p. 21).

In the past decade, the Arab-Palestinian narrative of the 1948 war has been gaining renewed scholarly attention (Masalha, 2012). Oral history projects are being launched, recollections are being documented, memoirs are being written and researched (Sela & Kadish, 2016). For example, Sorek (2015) investigates the development of collective memory and national commemoration among the Palestinian citizens of Israel. He explores a range of commemorative sites, including memorial rallies, monuments, poetry, the education system, political summer camps, and individual historical remembrance. An impressive example of a project using advanced technology is the iNakba mobile application. This is a trilingual “electronic monument” (Arabic, English and Hebrew) whose goal is to influence public discourse regarding the Nakba. Designed by an Israeli NGO, the app provides coordinates, maps and narratives on Palestinian localities that were demolished in the 1948 war or remained standing but were depopulated and their residents expelled. The app provides access to virtually unlimited amounts of data (sound, picture, moving image, and written word) and the users are invited to share their memories and narratives (Schejter & Tirosh, 2016).

In this spirit, a course based on children’s books that related to the phenomena of migration and displacement was developed and implemented at Sakhnin Academic College for Teacher Education. This institution trains Arabic-speaking educators, teachers and kindergarten teachers and grants them a B.Ed., M. Teach and M.Ed. degrees in Education and/or a teaching certificate.

4. The Teaching Modules

4.1. A Workshop with Children’s Books for Social Work Students

The workshop with children’s books presented here is one way of introducing the issue of cultural diversity to students in academic courses, professionals in training programs for cultural awareness and migrant groups. The objectives of the workshop may differ from group to group and these objectives determine the actual format of the activity as well as the books chosen and the questions for discussion. The workshop encourages self-awareness of personal outlooks and overt bias and offers an opportunity to meet alternative narratives, values, cultural perspectives, and experiences from other cultural groups. It provides the opportunity to discuss openly the issue of color as a significant factor in the transition of immigrants and refugees and their experiences in the host societies. Increasingly it becomes apparent that this issue is relevant and important to understand for the second generation as well (Shmuel, 2020). The children’s books provide a unique and enjoyable means of talking about these complex and volatile subjects. Through discussion, students may compare perspectives and gain insight into the experiences of other people. The books also offer the opportunity to discuss cultural diversity in the classroom and in professional practice. Understanding cultural logic and context can neutralize the initial gut-reaction and internalized stereotypes, enabling professionals to find creative solutions to

complex problems that arise in the field.

Working with children's books in class

Each group of 3-5 students receives an illustrated children's book with several questions to discuss. They are given 20-30 minutes to read the texts and discuss the questions, after which all students assemble in a plenary session and each group presents their conclusions. The facilitator encourages a group discussion on the issues raised and adds insights. Here are two examples of books used in the workshop:

"Brown Daniel" (Shmuel, 1991) *"My name is Daniel. I am four years old. I have brown eyes and my skin is brown. Do you know why I am brown? Because my father is brown [...] My father told me "Don't be angry, they don't understand, explain to them where we came from", says Daniel, and proceeds to tell his kindergarten friends about his father's childhood in a small village in Ethiopia, about how he grew up believing Israel to be his real home and about his long and difficult journey to get there.*

Through this story, students may gain culture-specific knowledge about immigrants from Ethiopia and discuss the issue of color and how it affects the experiences of immigrants and the second generation in their struggle to adjust and belong.

Questions for discussion:

*How did you feel when you read the story?

*To what extent do you think Daniel's experience is representative of what dark-skinned children experience in pre-school/school?

*How do you think educators and parents can encourage a positive attitude towards diversity?

*What in your own personal experience relates to this book?

"What is My Name and Who Am I?" (Shmuel, 2012)

This book describes how a Jewish Ethiopian baby is given many different names by all the members of her extended family. The child grows up with several different names and as time goes by, it becomes evident what is the name that suits her best. Upon arrival to Israel, the names of many immigrants from Ethiopia, which were unfamiliar & difficult to pronounce, were changed with the intention to make it easier for them to be integrated in Israeli society. The immigrants, however resented the change of their name as they did not choose the new name and did not identify with it. Eventually, most returned to their original names.

The discussion of the book may center on the meaning of names and the way they reflect personal and familial histories and identities. Through this story, students can gain awareness about unique characteristics of name-giving in Ethiopian Jewish culture. They can become more sensitive to the meanings and significance of names and the complexity of identities in the classroom as well as in their professional practice. Multiple names often reflect the experience of transition, their recognition gives legitimacy to mul-

tiple or hybrid identities.

Questions for discussion:

Are your own names representative of a certain time or place?

How do you feel about your name?

Does it represent you?

In your opinion, what is the connection between a person's name and their identity or sense of belonging?

4.2. Migration and Minorities in Children's Literature

This course connects children's literature and academic readings on migration, displacement, and marginalization with students' life challenges as members of a minority group in Israel. Students are invited to respond to the children's books and readings with the help of reader-response-strategies that combine arts and connections to self and community. Additionally, they engage in project-based learning through PhotoVoice (Hayik, 2018) projects and making films of displacement that create possibilities for reflection on their challenging reality. Such engagements provide a safe space for students to reflect on issues of displacement, marginalization, identity, privilege, memory, and aspirations for a better future. For example, here are two books used in the course:

"Azzi In Between" (Garland, 2015)². Lesson title: "Center vs. Periphery: Feeling In Between"

This story describes the difficulties faced by an immigrant child adjusting to the culture of a host country. Azzi and her parents had to leave their home and escape to another country on a frightening journey by car and boat. In the new country they had to learn a new language, find a new home, and Azzi had to start a new school. With a kind helper at her school, Azzi began to learn English. She made a new friend, and with courage and resourcefulness, started to adapt to her new life. Planting some special beans that were brought from her home country in the school garden helped her show the planting skills she had learned from her grandmother and connect with her classmates.

Activity:

People with a history of migration/marginalization often live in two different worlds. They face the challenge of finding their way around in the dominant culture while at the same time maintaining their own cultural values and traditions. They therefore often feel in between. This book helps students connect emotionally to the experience of migration and their own or their families' similar experiences. They are encouraged to reflect on inner and social conflicts and emotional challenges, the components that make up their identities as well as difficulties they face as members of a minority group belonging to diverse subgroups.

²Link to the read-aloud story \Accessed 12 April 2023 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AqZM-EXnrA&t=2s>.

The *Identity puzzle* is one activity that can follow reading of the book. The students are presented with a pre-prepared drawing of a human figure in the form of a puzzle. In each piece inside the drawing, the students are invited to write in words that define who they are. On puzzle pieces outside the figure students can write down identity components that they wish to have but do not yet possess. After students finish writing, they sit in a circle and share. A follow-up discussion can be conducted on what makes up one's identity. When do people feel they belong or are disconnected or in-between? And what can they do to manage such feelings?

“Steppingstones: A Refugee Family’s Journey” (Ruurs, 2016)³

This picture book was inspired by the stone artwork of the Syrian artist Nizar Ali Badr. The author was captivated by the strong narrative quality of Mr. Badr's work, and, using many of Mr. Badr's already-created pieces, she set out to create a story about the Syrian refugee crisis. *Steppingstones* tells the story of Rama and her family, who are forced to flee their once-peaceful village to escape the ravages of the civil war raging ever closer to their home. With only what they could carry on their backs, Rama and her mother, father, grandfather and brother, Sami, set out to walk to freedom in Europe. Nizar Ali Badr's stunning pebble images illustrate the story. The story is bilingual: English and Arabic.

Activity I: Writing down hardships on pebbles.

Connecting with the story and the hardships faced by the fleeing family, students can reflect on hardships their families faced and the ones they personally face as members of a minority group. They write down their thoughts on pebbles and in a small group share their reflections.

Activity II: Graffiti Wall. This activity uses the “graffiti wall” technique: Each student first draws a sketch that can include drawings, words, ideas, symbols, shapes, and colors to represent the story and its relevance to him/her. Then all the sketches are assembled and displayed on the wall, a graffiti wall, and the students are encouraged to explore each other's sketches and talk about them.

5. Discussion

Participants in workshops with children's literature are often surprised when asked to read books written for young children, but the resulting discussions are very deep and meaningful, leading to profound insights. These discussions begin by talking about the books and the characters within them, but very quickly switch to the participants themselves and their own experiences. What makes children's books work in training?

Donald Winnicott's concept of “transitional space” may help understand this phenomenon. Originating in the realm of pediatrics and psychoanalysis, the term transitional space describes an intermediate space of experiencing, between

³Link to the read-aloud story/Accessed 12 April 2023 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-RhmR367i0&t=3s>.

the inner and outer worlds, and contributed to by both. It is the bridge between the subjective experience and objective reality, between the inner reality which contains the child's illusion of creation and control of others and the external environment which includes the "not me" concept and the external objective reality (Winnicott, 1953, 1958, 1971a). A related concept that may be also helpful here is Winnicott's concept of "play", which he identified as an important criterion of mental health in both children and adults (Winnicott, 1971b). An authentic encounter in a transitional space is an overlap of areas of playing of the participants. The area of playing is a transitional space in that it is not the inner psychic reality, it is outside the individual, but fragmented from the external reality. In this space no dichotomy of internal-external needs exists and can be temporarily suspended. Into this play area children and adults gather objects or phenomena from external reality and use these in the service of inner or personal reality. There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences (Winnicott, 1971b).

Relying on Winnicott's concepts, we suggest that children's books may create a transitional space where participants can contribute from their inner world, where playing areas of the author and of the participants can interact in, "shared playing", while the external reality does not need to be fully imposed.

Many children's books are based on real events, as are the books mentioned above. They provide a clear emotive message about human existence and are easy to relate to. However, the work with these books does not necessitate a reality-testing or finding out whether they indeed present facts and real occurrences, or whether the historical sequences they describe are accurate. Rather, the work is centered on the participants making a connection between the book and their internal experiences, "playing" with it, and making it their own.

This temporary suspension of reality testing in a transitional space, makes it easier to connect to phenomena and experiences that may otherwise be overwhelming and evoke anxiety or resistance, phenomena such as prejudice or racism. Being less threatened, participants may more easily connect with their personal experiences of marginalization and family history of displacement or discrimination. The "shared play" area provides a venue to discover, voice and share emotions and reflections in a safe environment where subjectivity is not scrutinized. Thus, it becomes possible to voice often-muted experiences and gain feelings of relief and empowerment. Such process can also promote increased sensitivity to the needs of others and willingness to be active advocates for the community. This is extremely significant for people who work in the educational and social service fields. In their practice they are bound to encounter an ever-changing multicultural environment and to be effective and helpful, they need to be aware and at peace with emotions and experiences such encounters evoke in them.

6. Conclusion

One of the critical challenges presently facing educational and psycho-social ser-

vices worldwide is the prevention of inequities in service provision to people from different cultural backgrounds including race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, etc. Cultural competence, the ability to work with people from different groups and be attuned to their needs, has been long recognized as essential in these fields and efforts have been invested by various professional associations, educational institutions, and services into training to improve cultural competence of their workers. Regrettably, the results of these efforts are modest. Disparities in health, educational and social services provision to different cultural groups are repeatedly documented in many countries (Ortega-Reig et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023). Less documented, but prejudice, discrimination, and outright racist attitudes towards minorities and to anyone perceived as “the other” are also pervasive. Such attitudes are widespread not only in the general population, but also among professionals (Pedersen et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2021). In the present paper, we suggest that cultural competence training directed solely at the cognitive level providing knowledge and understanding, is not sufficient. Attitudes change may be achieved only if the training involves the exploration of personal, emotional, and often unconscious levels. To reach these levels, creative and expressive techniques need to be implemented in training. The specific technique that we presented in the paper is the use of children’s books. But other creative approaches may be also effective, and we encourage the readers to explore them and experiment with them.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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