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# Seeing in Color: Three Reading Teachers Explore the Importance of Multicultural Children's Literature

BY ROSE CROWLEY, MONICA FOUNTAIN, & RACHELLE TORRES

**T**his is a review of multicultural literature research studies through the lens of three personal narratives. As we analyzed the studies, we narrowed our search to frame the review around three guiding questions: *Why does multicultural literature matter? What is available in multicultural children's literature? How can teachers implement it effectively in their classrooms?* What follows is the analysis of 15 different research studies on the subject of multicultural children's literature, seen through the eyes of a Hispanic American second-grade teacher, an African American first-grade teacher, and a Caucasian American middle school teacher.

## Why does multicultural literature matter?

The U.S. Census recently reported that the increase in the Hispanic population accounted for over half of the growth in the United States population from 2000 to 2010. The Hispanic population grew by 43 percent; it is currently at about 50.5 million people. The Asian population grew faster than any other ethnic group between 2000 and 2010. The Black population had the third-largest increase of 4.3 million. (U.S. Census, 2010). These trends demonstrate an increasingly diverse population, evident in our classrooms. Therefore, the literature needs to represent the same diversity. In this first section, we explore the implications of the imbalance that exists when children's literature does not equitably represent the diverse children who will read it.

### Teacher 1

*Entering kindergarten as a child of Hispanic heritage with very limited English was challenging.*

*Even now I recall the lack of interest I had in books, not only because the words did not make sense, but because the pictures did not resemble anything from my world. I was curious to learn more about these families, but at the same time I longed to find families in the stories that were like my own.*

### Identity Formation

On the surface level, it seems obvious that children's literature is wonderful for aesthetic enjoyment and also for literacy instruction. There are other effects not as easily apparent. Children's books have tremendous potential as tools of identity formation (Bishop, 2007, 1997; van Belle, 2010). Erik Erikson's (1963) fourth stage of psychosocial development, industry vs. inferiority, focuses on the crisis of identity that every child must successfully resolve in order to feel competent as an individual. Erikson understood that the African American child's identity could be negatively affected by racism in ways that led to the child internalizing an inferior sense of self.

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## Teacher 2

*At times it is so frustrating to try to explain to someone your belief in why there is a learning gap between the achievement levels of African American and White students. I believe that the learning gap originates from slavery and how slaves were not allowed to be educated, let alone taught how to read. Below is an excerpt of Ratner's (2008) presentation to the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Issue Forum, which gives a more in-depth explanation of why there is an African American achievement gap in education:*

The starting point, I believe, is the period of slavery before the Civil War. Because the law deemed slaves to be the property of their masters, slaves had no right to education—whether they were to be educated was in the owners' discretion. After about 1835, and the culmination of a movement of slave insurrections, most white Southerners agreed that it was too dangerous to educate slaves because education could encourage them to rebel against slavery. (Indeed, at times, Southern laws made it a crime to teach slaves to read and write.) Thus, slaves were widely denied even rudimentary education. By contrast, white Southerners were free to be educated; they emphasized college education for plantation owners' children. Today's African American achievement gap was seeded in slavery.

For children of color, identity development can be even more challenging. They must define themselves in terms of their cultural heritage as well as their national heritage—African American as well as American, Hispanic American as well as American (Roethler, 1998). Racial identity development theory posits that children do not develop their identity within a vacuum; rather children develop their racial and ethnic identity within their family, community, and society at large (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991; van Belle, 2010). Roethler (1998) in a study of African American children's identity formation, states "one of the ways in which Black children in America create their schemata is through the illustrations they encounter in the literature to which they are exposed as children" (p.96).

Multicultural children's literature can affirm cultural and social identities. Hefflin (2003) considers power in the positive sense, exploring how culturally conscious literature opens up new ways for children to speak about themselves. In an exploratory case study analyzing the power of African American literature in children's lives, Hefflin randomly selected African American children from a third-grade class in a school located in a large urban area in the eastern United States. The researcher read aloud to the students, one book per week for 6 weeks, with discussion immediately following the reading using open-ended questions. Students were asked to respond to the literature in personal ways, identifying what was powerful for them in the literature. Hefflin found that making connections to cultural practices is one of the factors involved in developing one's racial identity. Cultural practices were identified as realistic features in the books the children read. One specific practice, naming, was highlighted in the research. Naming is a form of empowerment in African American culture. Hefflin summarizes one of the children's discussions:

For these beginning and ending moments of the discussion, it was as if the naming that happened in the story "opened up" and enabled a way to define themselves, each other, and the story, in terms that were congruent with values, norms, and beliefs they wished to invoke. (179)

### *Healing the effects of racism*

African American children can use the power of naming to experience healing from the effects of racism and discrimination. Considering an aspect of literature that has received little research, students in Hefflin's study expressed the joy they felt while reading literature featuring African American characters. After reading *Aunt Flossie's Hats* (Howard, 1991) one student, Judy, described how she felt, "Books like this (African American ones) make me feel joyful." Commenting after *Cornrows*, she added,

*Like I didn't know that cornrows came from Africa. I was just sooo [sic] happy when we read that book. I was telling everybody. I was like, "Did I tell you that cornrows came from Africa?" I told my mom and my friends and they told me, "You told me a hundred times already!" (177)*

Another student, named Tia, addresses the importance of African American literature being written by and primarily about African Americans. When asked whether a White author can create an African American character, Tia responded, “No... ‘cause they don’t have any color to put in the character” (Hefflin, 177).

Hefflin identifies passing important cultural stories on as a “power” that African American children’s literature makes possible. The reasons for passing stories on had to do with defining who you are; the means of achieving this ranged from reading and writing books to oral storytelling with relatives. The language used in these stories needs to be historically, socially, and culturally congruent with the African American experience. Grice and Vaughn (1992) conducted a similar study in which third graders responded to literature for and about African Americans. The researchers focused on the question of whether the audience for whom this was intended (African American children) had the contextual knowledge and/or background to identify with the books’ characters and themes. Thirteen children were chosen from a third-grade class to respond to the content of 24 books. The children’s teacher read each book to the entire class over a 6-week period and then questioned three randomly selected students for each book.

Each student was easily able to comprehend the story line of each book. When asked “Could you be in the story?” students were not as easily able to respond. None of the students questioned could identify themselves with books reflecting their African heritage. Referencing some children’s fears of traveling to Africa “...it would seem that the news media and also textbooks have created a negative perception of Africa to the cultural heritage of the U.S. Such misconceptions prevented children from appreciating these traditions” (p. 158). Coming from African American heritage or living in urban settings was clearly not enough in itself to build necessary background knowledge. Explicit discussions related to the children’s cultural heritage were key components for students’ appreciation and comprehension of the literature.

### ***Connecting with Literature***

Why is it important to use multicultural children’s literature in today’s classroom? Reader response theorists offer important insight into this question.

Louise Rosenblatt (1994) argued that each act of reading literature involves a transaction between the reader and the text. Each transaction is a unique experience for the particular individual because each reader brings individual background knowledge, beliefs, and context into the reading act. Because this literature allows children from diverse ethnicities to see themselves depicted in the books’ characters and storyline, it can significantly contribute to their identity development.

#### **Teacher 1**

*Zoe, a second grader, is interested in Christmas books. She loves them and week after week during library time she chooses books about Christmas. Zoe is Jewish and celebrates Hanukah. I asked Zoe once why she was so interested in Christmas. She replied, “It’s cool to see how other people do things.”*

Two different studies can offer insight into Zoe’s interest in books about Christmas. Holmes study (2007) of third graders found that racial congruency is often **not** a factor in book selection for young children. The surprising results suggest that while children are in the constant process of identifying themselves, they are also, as importantly developing the identities of others. Towell and Demetrulisa’s, study (1997) of 110 students from grades K-3 found that reader interest rather than ethnicity or skin color plays a more important role in how readers connect to books. Both studies suggest that children in primary grades are learning to make sense of their world, which includes the roles of people from other cultures. Therefore, literature that portrays certain ethnicities in particular roles, such as a character’s profession, economic status, intelligence, or motivation, can influence the way children feel about those people (Cobb, 1995). Multicultural literature can shape the way children think and interact toward people of other cultures.

#### **Teacher 3**

*As a Caucasian middle school teacher in a culturally diverse school, my experience was different than Teacher 1’s. My African American students preferred reading stories with characters that they could relate to. We had so few books in our book room that I resorted to purchasing some on my own. Terry was a very reluctant reader. Terry’s teachers knew she had the capability, but she chose not to read. One day during a book talk on “The Skin I’m In” (1998) by Sharon Flake, I read the first few pages aloud and*

*then placed it on the book shelf. Terry scooped it up, finished the 176 pages in one evening, and came back the next day asking for more. "Do you have any other books like that?" she inquired.*

Multicultural literature is important not only for young children. Authentic multicultural literature holds recurring themes that can accommodate all ages and backgrounds. Brooks (2006) conducted a study analyzing how middle school readers from a similar ethnicity responded to African American textual features. One of those textual features is recurring themes. The theme of forging family and friend relationships is a universal theme that all children can relate to. The theme of surviving city life speaks to issues prevalent in many different cultures. African American literature, as representative of other multicultural literature, contains various "entry points" for students of other ethnicities. All people of color, regardless of race, class, or sexual orientation, could appreciate the recurring theme of confronting and overcoming racism.

Culturally identifiable linguistic patterns are another textual feature to which Brooks draws attention. Brooks cites Sims Bishop (1990) "the most readily recognizable element of African American culture to appear in books is the accurate representation of many...structures that identify a speaker as a member of the African American community" (p.560). Characters speak with a variety of language variations, such as Standard American English (SAE), African American English (AAE), and rural dialects. Brooks found students responded in depth only to AAE.

Common cultural practices, including family activities, community events, and religious ceremonies, are another category that is particular to one's culture. This is significant because knowledge of these practices creates a common base when interpreting literature. The accurate depiction or portrayal of these practices becomes a way to evaluate whether literature is authentic or not. One ethnic group practice that is considered more traditional evoked great interest among the students in Brooks study. Virginia Hamilton's *The House of Dies Drear* (1968) is a ghost mystery. Although the book explains the reason the White occupants continue to live in the house (the father is a historian; the home had been part of the

Underground Railroad), this rationale does not sway the readers from seeing the decision as unrealistic. As one student claimed, "Only White people would stay in a haunted house" (p.387). Culturally influenced textual features have the potential to be effective teaching tools. These features (recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and ethnic group practices) can be used in a heuristic way to evaluate the authenticity of multicultural literature.

## What is available in multicultural children's literature?

In Nancy Larrick's classic study of children's literature, she discovered that only 6.7% of the 5,206 books published by the Children's Book Council (1962-1964), included a person of color in both text and illustration. With trends to embrace and celebrate multiculturalism and diversity today, one would think that things have changed. Cobb's (1995) replicated studies of Larrick (1965) and Chall, Raowin, French, and Hall (1979), reported less representation of people of color in children's literature. Between 1989 and 1991, less than 1% of children's fiction books featured African American or Hispanic American characters.

According to the U.S. Census of 2010, the total number of Hispanic Americans constitutes 16.3% of the U.S. population, African Americans 12.6%, and Asian Americans 4.8%. Based on these demographics, one would think that the publishing companies would want to increase the number of multicultural books. Although there is no doubt that there has been a rise in ethnic population, the quantity of children's multicultural literature in our classrooms does not reflect this increase. Cobb posits that what *is* available in children's multicultural literature represents minority populations in positive ways, with a variety of occupations for adult characters, though several might be considered stereotypical occupations.

### Teacher 2

*When children enter elementary school classrooms, we as teachers are prepared to engage them in learning experiences that will increase their knowledge base in all content areas. We are given curriculum materials, provided by our school districts, to ensure that our children are learning to their full potential, based on state standards and*

*benchmarks in state policy. Yet if we are required to teach according to these standards and benchmarks, then why aren't we provided the necessary multicultural children's literature to assist us in helping our children understand different cultures, values, traditions, as well as life experiences, as seen through the eyes of people of color? When we read a good piece of multicultural literature (or any good piece of literature) to our children, I believe reader and listener should be changed by the experience. It is through these experiences that our children gain a better understanding of new information about the world in which they live.*

Research maintains that youth literature is not reflecting the faces of our children (Barkley, 2009). According to School Data Direct (2008) the demographics of U.S. students as of 2006 is almost 56% white, 17% African American, 21% Hispanic, and 5% Asian or Pacific Islander students. In a study conducted by Agosto, Huges-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough (2003), however, only one-sixth of their sample of books for middle-grade readers contained people of color as either main or major secondary characters (Barkley, 2009).

### ***Supporting multicultural literature***

Research supports the idea that culturally diverse authors should be recognized as a valuable resource for literacy and self-development. Barkley (2009) posits that by requesting materials written by these authors, not only are we supporting our children's literacy development but we are also validating examples of successful people of color, both academically and professionally. The following are two notable examples of how the American Library Association promotes multicultural literature written by people of color. Designed to commemorate the life and works of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and to honor Mrs. Coretta Scott King for her courage and determination to continue the work for peace, the annual Coretta Scott King Book Awards encourages the artistic expression of the Black experience through literature and the graphic arts in biographical, social, and historical treatments by African American authors and illustrators (ALA, 2011).

The Pura Belpré Award, established in 1996, is named after the first Latina librarian at the New York Public Library. The award is presented annually to a Latino writer and illustrator whose

work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth. It is co-sponsored by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), and REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking, an ALA affiliate (ALA, 2011).

Purposeful purchasing of children's multicultural literature by school districts, librarians, and even parents will assist our children in becoming aware of the many different features of people of color at all reading levels. Through a conscious decision to purchase these books, consumers can demand materials from major publishers, forcing them to respond by increasing the number of books that feature characters of color. School districts should also purchase from smaller, independent, and specialized publishers, supporting those publishers who already recognize the need for quality children's multicultural literature (Barkley, 2009). Listed below are some websites of publishing companies that provide children's multicultural literature:

Albert Whitman and Company  
[www.albertwhitman.com](http://www.albertwhitman.com)

American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL) blog  
[www.americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com](http://www.americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com)

de Grummund Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi  
[www.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/html/aboutus-welcome.shtml](http://www.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/html/aboutus-welcome.shtml)

¡Imaginense Libros! Blog on Hispanic children's literature  
[www.imaginenselibros.blogspot.com](http://www.imaginenselibros.blogspot.com)

International Children's Digital Library  
<http://en.childrenslibrary.org>

Jump at the Sun Publishing  
[www.leibowstudios.com/webdevelop/hyperion/jump](http://www.leibowstudios.com/webdevelop/hyperion/jump)

Lee & Low Books  
[www.leeandlow.com/p/about\\_us.mhtml](http://www.leeandlow.com/p/about_us.mhtml)

The vast amounts of information that the digital world can offer our school districts, teachers, parents, and young readers is right at our fingertips, but publishing companies must also be held responsible for providing our children with the necessary literature that will help to increase

learning about people of color. Jaime Adoff (2011), in his closing remarks at the Virginia Hamilton Conference on Multicultural Literature for Youth stated, "People are very much ready for diversity. It isn't the people of this country who hold back diversity, it's the gatekeepers."

## How can teachers implement multicultural literature effectively in their classrooms?

After reviewing the research, we are convinced that multicultural literature is essential in today's classroom. Furthermore, we find that a gap exists between current populations of ethnic groups and resources available in children's multicultural literature. However, we still need to address the question of how multicultural literature actually gets "to the child" so the child can reap its powerful benefits. There is a myriad of ways to bring this literature to the child. As educators, we are most intrigued by the concept of how teachers can make this happen in their own classrooms.

### *Teacher perceptions*

Many educators come from backgrounds completely different from their students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2007-08, 76 percent of public school teachers in the U.S are female and over 70% identified themselves as White (NCES, 2009). These statistics show that teachers are far more likely to be White than the general student population; therefore, teachers need to examine their own beliefs and be transparent enough to identify their own possible biases. How can we, as educators, make meaningful connections with our students if we are not willing to enter their world?

To put our beliefs on hold is to see ourselves in another's gaze so that we can learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness (Delpit, 1988).

Although it is possible for teachers whose ethnic backgrounds differ from those of their students to be effective, that doesn't minimize the need for teachers to be aware of their own subjectivities. It is not uncommon for pre-service teachers to have unexamined beliefs about cultural diversity and

to have little understanding of the impact of their beliefs on classroom interaction, discussion, and practices (Sleeter, 2001). Irvine's (2003) research found that pre-service teachers hold negative beliefs and low expectations for the academic success of students of color, even after students had engaged in coursework in multicultural education. Barnes (2006) calls this "cultural discontinuity."

Teacher's attitudes can also be altered. Colby & Lyon (2004) explored changes in their own pre-service teachers' beliefs and proposed practices based on new understandings. Specifically, they examined changes in their students' attitudes after their students had read and reflected on a specific article by Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001). Some of the students' responses to the assigned reading illustrate new understandings:

"I felt like a light bulb had just gone off in my head...I didn't realize that there are children that feel like they had nothing to read and relate to..." (p. 25)

"I cannot fully understand what it must be like to have a dominant culture being portrayed everywhere I looked, however, I can only imagine the stifling effect it would impose on someone." (p. 25)

"Growing up, I turned to a book for comfort and to get away from life. It never dawned on me to think about what my African American friends were reading." (p. 25)

These comments highlight the priority of preparing prospective teachers to understand the concept that "everyone has a culture" (Gay, 2002) and what substantive things they can do to bridge the gap in their "cultural discontinuity."

### *Selection of multicultural literature*

Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2007) surveyed 142 English language arts teachers (grades 6-12) to determine the extent to which they integrate multicultural literature with the curriculum. Results revealed teachers' lack of expertise and knowledge as the largest prohibitor of the selection of multicultural literature in their curriculum. Teachers reported that their own lack of knowledge about multicultural literature restricted their curricular choices. The survey showed two categories of responses: teachers who claimed inexperience and did not include multicultural literature and those

who claimed to use multicultural literature, but the titles listed lacked authenticity and did not meet the definition of true multicultural literature.

A comprehensive resource for teachers on this subject is, "Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum" by Sims-Bishop (1997). Another excellent scholarly article is, "African American children's literature that helps students find themselves: Selecting guidelines for grades K-3" (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) is a book examination center and research library at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It features a multicultural booklist titled "50 Multicultural Books Every Child Should Know." The list, updated every year, is broken down into sub-sections based on the age of the reader. CCBC also offers lists on community, gender, and sexual orientation (multicultural). It could be beneficial for teachers to familiarize themselves with this list in order to select appropriate books for their classroom based on their student's individual needs and reading levels. A good evaluation tool that teachers can use on their own can be found in "Judging a Book by Its Cover: An Evaluation Tool for the Evaluation, Selection and Inclusion of Multicultural Children's Literature in the Elementary Classroom" (Schultz, 2010, pp.37-40).

### Teacher 3

*"Our last tutor let us read good stuff. We like you teacher but you picked a boring book." These words couldn't help but sting on my last day of tutoring. I had just spent ten weeks tutoring a group of three African American students for my graduate studies in Literacy Education. Kennedy wasn't just complaining. I knew she had a valid point. Student engagement is crucial in reading motivation, especially since I was using this one foundational text as the resource for all of my literacy lessons. My first reaction was perhaps I should have chosen a different text. However I had carefully selected the text after much consideration and it had earned the Coretta Scott King award for excellent multicultural literature. I remained puzzled, until I read about the critical component of combining culturally relevant teaching **methods** with culturally congruent materials.*

### **Culturally relevant teaching**

Rich discussion and support of the issues being related "within the culture" needs to happen (Schultz, 2010). Teachers must know how to draw on

students' culture as a basis for learning, capitalizing on students' prior knowledge, and seeing their culture not as an impediment to learning, rather as the means through which students can learn (Chen, 2009). This means being able to apply the knowledge of diversity of culture to everyday classroom practice.

### Teacher 3, Teacher 1, and Teacher 2

*Although we remember instruction on critical literacy theory and some direct instruction in working with ELL students, we do not recall any explicit training in either our undergraduate or graduate teacher preparation courses in culturally relevant pedagogy. In fact, the term itself was foreign to us. Once we became familiar with the term, we notice it has undergone many name changes.*

Culturally congruent teaching practices flow from the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy as pioneered by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1992. Culturally responsive teachers consider the cultural identities of their students when designing learning experiences and choosing curriculum materials. The terms culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally responsive, and culturally compatible have been used to describe this pedagogy.

"Multicultural children's literature is used best when culturally diverse students see clear, authentic representations of their culture throughout the curriculum and experience a strong sense of affirmation" (Hefflin, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1992) examined two teachers who effectively incorporate multicultural literature into their classrooms. Although the teachers used very different approaches and teaching styles, there was a common element to both. In both of the classrooms, the teachers "legitimate" diversity of culture by making them a frame of reference for all texts. The teachers did not shy away from discussing and reading about the issues of race and culture as a normal part of their classroom learning community.

*Learning to Develop Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Lesson about Cornrowed Lives* (Hefflin, 2002) is an exemplary study of culturally relevant pedagogy. What sets this article apart is the way it specifically describes the *process* of transforming a traditional language arts lesson plan into a culturally responsive one. In the study, two teachers work together very intentionally on a lesson plan. One is a third-grade teacher who is searching for a



way to integrate multicultural literature into her lessons. She seeks the advice of Hefflin, a specialist in culturally responsive teaching, who at one time as a fourth-grade teacher had struggled with the same question.

Hefflin develops a framework with the teacher that guides both the selection of materials and planning methods of instruction for the lesson. It is a framework that can be implemented by educators for their classrooms to adapt their own instruction to culturally responsive methods. This framework is based on cultural patterns that scholars characterize as central to the everyday lives of many African Americans (Foster, 1995; Ladson-Billing and Henry, 1990). Specific questions are posed to help teachers reflect on the implications of these cultural patterns while planning their lessons. Examples of the related questions found in Hefflin's framework are: *How can the methods I use integrate call-and-response interaction patterns? What children's literature invites call-and-response interaction during read-alouds?*

The *call and response* vocal communication pattern is similar to that heard during an African American church service (Smith, 1995). This pattern has deep historical African religious roots dating to the 1600s. It is recognized today in contemporary worship services where a pastor will routinely call out to his congregants and they will spontaneously and enthusiastically give a response. In the classroom a teacher calls out a word or phrase and the students respond verbally either individually or in unison to the teacher's call. This pattern may repeat during certain sections of the text or throughout an entire reading of a story. This is one example of what is meant by culturally responsive pedagogy.

### Teacher 3

*When involved in discussions on the importance of multicultural education, I have heard some teachers say, "I don't see color." The implication is that there is no need to address cultural differences in the classroom and that teaching practices need not be adjusted based on a child's ethnicity. "I don't see color" can be used as an excuse not to change. With a new awareness of why culturally responsive teaching matters, I can share this research with others.*

As educators in a culturally diverse society, we must take part in these kinds of discussions. We need to "see in color" and we need to teach our students

to see in color also. Multicultural literature is a vast resource of material that benefits all students. For students of color, it can play a critical role in affirming their cultural and social identities. For all students, it prepares and equips them with the knowledge and resources needed for the culturally diverse world in which they live. Once multicultural literature finds a place in which it "permeates the curriculum" (Nieto, 2000), we will be able to include all students in the rich conversations waiting to happen in our classrooms and in our world.

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