4-2010

What strategies can teachers use to identify titles and authors that accurately represent African American culture? How do students respond to these titles?

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Abstract
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Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
MS in Literacy Education

Department
Education

First Supervisor
Gloria E. Jacobs

Subject Categories
Education
What strategies can teachers use to identify titles and authors that accurately represent African American culture? How do students respond to these titles?

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

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April 2010
ABSTRACT

This study focused on the strategies teachers can use in selecting culturally relevant literature for use in read-alouds and how seven children of color respond to such texts. Providing the opportunity for children of color, specifically African American and Latinos/as to succeed in today’s formalized education is crucial. Traditionally, there have been very few works of literature published that accurately represents African Americans or Latinos. Teachers need to develop strategies that will assist them in finding and providing culturally relevant literature for their students. Providing and discussing culturally relevant literature with students is an excellent way that teachers can provide opportunities for students to succeed, therefore feeling a sense of pride for themselves and their cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

Cultural relevancy is the topic of this action research project. Cultural relevancy is important because students should be able to see themselves accurately represented in the literature they encounter and read in the classroom. When students see themselves in literature, they become more engaged and have the ability to succeed as a reader (Willis, 2009). As such, teachers and other professionals in the education field need to make sure that all students receive an education that helps them succeed. If this topic is not explored students of color will continue to find it difficult to make connections between their lives and the literature that is available in classrooms. Furthermore, students may begin to feel disenfranchised by formal education settings and may fall below New York State Standards and eventually drop out of school.
As a teacher in an urban setting I sometimes find it difficult to provide my students with literature that they can relate to. Throughout the last few years I have accumulated over 200 books from my classroom library. Most of these books were provided to my classroom through school grants, Collegeboard, donation or Scholastic book clubs. If I selected books from my classroom library that are written by African American or Latino authors or who have African American or Latino characters I would venture to say that the number would be significantly less than 50. To me this is simply not acceptable, especially because the majority of my students are African American or Latino. This imbalance of relevant material could be due to the fact that there are few books that are published that meet these characteristics. Although I let my students vote on books that they want for teacher read alouds, at times I feel like the selection from which they have to choose is not relevant to their culture and experiences. Focusing on the lives and achievements of African Americans only during Black History month is another aspect of cultural relevancy. According to a literature review that I completed for a previous course a large percentage of teachers shared books on African Americans only during the month of February and then placed these books in a box until next February. Prior to my first year of teaching I read *Teaching Children of Color* (Goodwin & Swartz, 2006); a book that explores the systems of education and how educators can reach students of color. The seven constructs of effective teaching in urban schools is an outline for this text. Through a thoughtful review of literature Swartz and Goodwin use these constructs to recognize that there are obstacles including historic, political, economic and social ideologies that effect children of color in urban school settings.
Theoretical Framework

As a professional in the education field it takes time to explore strategies and resources that will meet the needs of students. However it seems as though many teachers including myself have found it difficult to find resources and literature titles that are an accurate portrayal of African American and Latino culture. There are simply not enough resources and literature titles that represent these groups of people. The theories that best reflect the topic of cultural relevancy and availability are from the works of sociocultural and critical literacy theorists. According to sociocultural theory “literacy is a tool for interpreting what people from different communities do, not simply what they do not do when compared to a dominant group” (Larson, 2001, p. 101). It can be said that a variety of titles available to young readers reflect the ideas, themes, and traits of the dominant group. It is inevitable that most teachers will find it difficult to find literature titles that represent groups and communities beyond the dominant group. Rogoff defines a community as groups of people who have some common and continuing organization, values, understanding, history and practices (Larson, 2001, p. 107).” This idea of community includes classroom communities. Rogoff also explains that one of the key components of a community is that members of the community must be able to endure structured communication. Teachers and students engaging in conversations based on literature that is culturally relevant are aspects of critical literacy and sociocultural theory. In many cases students will be a part of different communities than that of their teacher (Gay, 2002). Teachers should develop strategies to enable them to select books from classroom libraries that feature African American and Latino characters. Many of the mainstream texts that are available have a limited amount of diverse characters and
themes. Using a variety of texts with diverse characters will show students that mainstream literature does not just have to show the dominant group, but that characters and themes from literature can relate to his/her home community and culture. Sociocultural theorists encourage teachers to take students culture into account and to highlight the practices and cultures of student into the curriculum (Larson, 2001, p. 101).

Sociocultural theories are very similar to the works of social constructionists. The idea that the “dominant groups have significantly less difficulty finding forums for their ideas and language because they have ready access to and control over these forums (Kucer, 2005, p. 230)” can be a direct correlation to the fact that there are far fewer titles that feature African American and Latino characters than White characters. The dominant group in America is white-middle class people. This has become evident in their control of various media including adult and children’s literature. The literature that is available in classroom, libraries and other forums seem to be targeted toward this dominant group. It is easy to believe that African American and Latino authors would find it difficult to get their work published because they are not members of the dominant group. The social constructionist view would argue that African American and Latino authors and publishers will be under scrutiny if their literature “challenges the positions of privilege and entitlement (Kucer, 2005, p. 203).” Another idea of social constructionists is that of knowledge. Communities and groups outside of the dominant group may have knowledge that is suppressed because it threatens the ideas of the dominant group. Banks (1993) outlines the five types of socially constructed knowledge. Although all play a vital role the type that most closely relates to the topic is the personal and culture construct of knowledge. This construct involves the knowledge that an individual or student
constructs from his/her experiences. These experiences will occur at home, within the family unit and within an individual’s community (Banks, 1993). Although the knowledge is formed outside of the formalized school setting it is still valuable. This knowledge construct allows students to come to school with background knowledge on specific topics that may differ from the background knowledge that a student’s teacher possess. This construct of knowledge also provides students with an opportunity to perform reading strategies such as making connections to various texts that are read. When culturally relevant text is provided to students they may begin to see themselves in the literature. Students will find it easier to complete strategies and succeed as literate beings. If teachers don’t have the strategies to locate texts that are culturally relevant how can we expect our students to succeed?

The theories of critical literacy and pedagogy are other areas that have influenced the research and methods for this topic. Critical literacy “locates schooling in political context and constantly challenges teachers and researches to uncover implicit oppressions (Larson, 2001, p. 40).” The works of Freire emerged from critical literacy where he argued that teaching should recognize students’ prior knowledge (Larson, 2001, p.41). Freebody and Luke’s work in critical literacy yielded the four resource model for reading. This model seeks to go through various reading stages where eventually the reader will develop a critical mind to ask critical questions, think critically and seek answers. This resource model included four main aspects that critical readers and writers should be able to accomplish: break the code of texts, participate in meanings of text, use texts functionally, and critically analyze and transform texts. The ability to critically analyze and transform text is the aspect of the four resource model most related to the research
question. Readers and writers at this stage of critically literacy are expected to understand that texts are not neutral; these texts are a means for dominant view points to be presented in texts while other points of view are silenced. These dominant view points are meant to influence the ideas of others; however this dominant view point should be critiqued and redesigned (Larson, 2001, p. 43). One of the key tenants of critical literacy most related to the research topic is that a “learners’ own cultural resources should be utilized within classrooms and their critical stances towards these resources [should be] recognized and extended (Larson, 2001, p. 45).”

**Review of Literature**

*Critical Race Theory*

Education systems today maintain relationships between subordinate and dominant groups. A primary goal of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is to explore and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that facilitate these relationships of power (Love, 2004). Theorists of CRT believe that reality is socially constructed by the dominate group, while silencing the realities of the subordinate group. Dominant groups construct a reality that all others must accept; the subordinate group’s ideas and realities are challenged and dismissed. When the subordinate group is able to have an input on their social reality it disrupts the power that the dominant group has previously obtained.

Multicultural literature engages readers in stories and experiences of people who are unlike themselves, therefore this engagement will help change the ways readers see the world and subsequently change the they look at reality (Bishop, 2008). Critical Race theory challenges this statement as they believe that reality is socially constructed over
many years by the dominant group. Changing of one’s realities is not an easy feat despite the exposure to authentic multicultural literature. CRT seeks to better understand the role of race and racism in American life including the inequalities of schooling and children’s literature (Love, 2004). CRT theorist would agree that the voices of African Americans and other people of color have been silenced by the dominant group in literature, specifically children’s literature. African American authors are not part of the dominant group and therefore their realities are ignored, and subsequently do not exist. When these author’s voices are ignored the opportunity for quality culturally authentic literature continues to be limited.

*Culturally Responsive Teaching*

Culturally responsive teaching is defined by Gay as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Gay (2002) outlines the essential elements of culturally responsive teaching. These include developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, the ability to demonstrate caring and building learning communities, the ability to communicate with ethnically diverse students and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. Instruction that is culturally responsive will have positive effects on the diverse students’ learning achievement. As Richards (2007) states from the work of Heath and Ladson-Billings, students will feel valued in this responsive environment, this form of teaching will also minimize the alienation that many students feel as they adjust to the difference between home and school communities.

If teachers are to be successful at becoming culturally responsive, teachers need to embark on a quest to learn about the beliefs and attitudes of themselves and others.
Culturally Relevant Literature 9

(Richards, 2007). The majority of teachers represent the cultural majority; in fact 80% of preservice teachers are from white, middle-class backgrounds. Most of who have never experienced cultural oppression and have no knowledge of how this oppression is perpetuated through the literature teachers select for their students (Woods, 2008). For many teachers it is difficult to see this oppression because it is masked by the beliefs and attitudes of the dominant group. The construction and implementation of majoritarian stories perpetuate this oppression into children’s literature and the other systems of education. These majoritarian stories “obscure white privilege and cause it to appear normal, natural and ordinary” (Love, pg. 229). The lack of multi-ethnic and culturally authentic literature proves that these majoritarian stories are far more prevalent in classroom libraries. Many teachers do not notice this imbalance of power because it is perceived as normal, ordinary or simply invisible to those who are members of the dominant group. Accordingly, teachers need to engage in self reflection, where they will explore and confront cultural biases they may have. On many occasions these biases are beyond one’s control. Woods (2008) indicates that many teachers lack the cultural references beyond their own. This lack of awareness is caused by their failure to explore and “acknowledge multicultural realities of the larger world” (Woods, 2008). These biases ultimately have an influence on teachers’ value systems. When exploration and confrontation of biases occur teachers will find it easier to “create an atmosphere of trust and acceptance for students” (Richards, 2007).

Culturally Authentic Literature

Fifty percent of School-aged children in the United States will consist of children from cultural backgrounds considered minorities by the year 2020. The population of
minority students will continue to increase until the minority is the majority (Wood, 2008). The increase in students of diverse cultural backgrounds should encourage teachers to develop strategies, curriculum, and skills that will meet the needs of their students. Reaching out to students of diverse cultural backgrounds through culturally responsive teaching is one way to accomplish this. Reading aloud culturally authentic literature is one way to reach out to these diverse students. Culturally authentic literature as defined by Hall is “literature from authors and illustrators who authentically depict various cultures and backgrounds.” Although authors of culturally authentic literature need not always be from the same culture group of its characters, authors that are members of the same cultural group of its illustrations and main characters are “cultural insiders [that] possess a unique ability to document their experiences as a person color (Willis, p. 39).” Willis (2009) argues that authors and illustrators attempting to depict the life of a member outside of one’s cultural group may not accurately represent the patterns of language, family and relationships as one who is from the specific cultural group. The work of authors and illustrators outside of the cultural group may be devalued because of the limited cultural connection he/she has.

The lack of culturally authentic literature has a historical foundation that buries its roots from the 18th century. During this time many of the images of African Americans reflected the stereotypes and inaccurate images that were imposed by slavery (Hefflin, 2001). Accordingly, teachers must not perpetuate these stereotypes. This is not to say that teachers should not use classic and popular literature from this era. Arguably, teachers must also explore classic works of literature written by African Americans and other people of color. Many works written by people of color have exhibited incredible
literary merit and have provided readers with the opportunity to hear voices that have traditionally been silenced or ignored in mainstream literature (Brooks, 2008). Although there is still not a strong African American voice in children’s literature, the 1970’s marked a significant change in the amount of culturally authentic children’s literature available. In 1998 three percent of books featured African Americans as main characters, and only two thirds of this literature represented African American authors or illustrators (Hefflin, 2001). Books that featured African Americans, Latinos and other children of color made up only 10 percent of books published in 2004 (Hall, 2008). Hall indicates that of that 10 percent only 4 percent were written or illustrated by people of color (2008).

When teaching classical works of literature written by mainstream and dominant groups, teachers need to reevaluate how such literature is introduced and taught within the classroom. Planning activities that encourage students to view literature through a sociohistoric lens will aide students in understanding the context and sociohistoric period of the selected text (Willis, 2009). Willis uses Leistyna, Woodrum, and Sherblom (1996) definition of sociohistoric lens as a reader’s ability to critically understand that our inherit beliefs, values and ideologies are influenced from social and historical forces around us. These beliefs, values and ideologies at times may need to be transformed. Teaching students to think critically about literature allows students to analyze and synthesize the authors’ point of view (Hall, 2008; Richards, 2007). Although biases and beliefs are often unintentional; these beliefs and biases are inadvertently presented in literature (Hall, 2008). Through the works of Friere; Souto-Manning indicates that when students are given the opportunity to view literature through a critical lens, they become “agentive
subjects rather than passive recipients of knowledge” (p.52). Accordingly, students are able to see multiple perspectives and viewpoints and are less likely to accept stereotypes (Richards, 2007). This can be done by “fostering children’s development of positive self identities and accurate, yet hopeful perceptions of the world outside their neighborhood” (Hall, 2008). The easiest way to do this is choosing and providing culturally authentic books in the classroom.

African American Literature

According to Taylor (2007), the majority of literature representing African Americans can be separated into three categories; socially conscious, melting pot books, or culturally conscious fiction. Socially conscious literature focuses on the conflicts that occurred during the Civil Rights movements between African Americans and European Americans. The intended purpose for socially conscious literature was to provide a resource to help European Americans “empathize with and tolerate African American children” (Taylor, 1997). Melting pot literature uses African Americans as supporting characters or as extras in books that are about non-African Americans. Differences are ignored and the themes of this type of literature do not involve racial prejudice, discrimination or conflict. Socially conscious and melting pot literature does not represent authentic literature; however they are not invalid in the classroom (Taylor, 2000). Teachers can utilize these types of books to activate critical thinking on the behalf of his/her students.

With the use of socially conscious or melting pot books, students can respond to the voices of the marginalized groups prompting social change (Bishop, 2008). When using socially conscious or melting pot books, children of color will not observe any
relevancy to their culture and/or experiences therefore will not “see themselves” in this type of literature. African American and other minority children who see themselves in literature will feel empowered and may readily see themselves as agents of social change (Bishop, 2008). Culturally conscious literature is most similar to culturally responsive and authentic literature. Culturally conscious literature is considered to be authentic. In these types of books “social and cultural traditions associated with growing up African American in the United States” (Taylor, 1997) are presented. Black English vernacular, relationships between young and old, extended families, awareness of skin color, tradition of naming, and the inclusion of historical, cultural and religious traditions are available. Counterstories also are a form of culturally conscious literature. Counterstories are detailed narratives that capture the voice and essence of those who have traditionally been oppressed by the dominant group. These narratives also contradict the assumptions and beliefs that some whites may have against blacks, therefore requiring that a member of the oppressed group use their voice to tell the story (Brooks, 2009). Selecting culturally conscious books can be difficult; however there are tools that can be used in order to identify appropriate books. Using a diversity wheel (Willis, 2009) to help identify culturally conscious books would aide teachers in selecting appropriate and authentic culturally conscious books. Users of the diversity wheel will work within two concentric circles in order to identify themselves as a member of a variety of social realms; including heritage, sexual orientation, gender, geographic location, family status, first language and work experience. Once users are able to identify their associations with a determined category, users examine the literature using the diversity wheel in order to identify these social realms of the character, author and illustrator of the text.
Pre-teaching Literature

Taylor’s (1997) research study reflected on the 1992 study conducted by Grice and Vaughn. Students were exposed to 24 culturally conscious books and were evaluated on their ability to comprehend, find realistic, identify with and enjoy these books. According to their findings, American and European Americans are not able to fully appreciate culturally conscious or authentic literature due to the lack of familiarity with the culture presented in text. Culturally responsive teachers need to pre-teach students about cultures presented in the literature they wish to share. If pre-teaching does not occur, students will not benefit from authentic literature.

Method

Context

Research for this study occurred in a sixth grade classroom at an urban elementary school in Rochester, N.Y. The building houses a half day pre-school program as well as grades kindergarten through sixth. During the 07-08 academic year there were 601 students attending the school. This school is considered a high needs school as 84% of the student population received free or reduced lunch. Student population at this school consists mainly of students representing ethnic minorities. 64% of students are African American, 25% are Latino/a, 9% white, and less than 1% of the students were Asian, Multi-racial or American Indian. Testing results demonstrated that 67% of 6th grade students scored at or above at performance level 3 and 70% of sixth grade students scored at or above level 3 for NYS mathematics exam.

Participants:
Throughout the school year I have observed students who are eager to participate and seem to enjoy different types of literature. I have also observed students who may be apprehensive about reading and providing responses to their reading. For this study, I selected seven students from each category. These seven participants were current students in my sixth grade classroom; three girls and four boys. All students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, indicating a low socioeconomic background. Students are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Two of the female participants are bi-racial, one student is a Latino and there are four African American participants. Participants have varying degrees of at home literacy experiences with parents. Two participants are bi-lingual, one speaking mostly Spanish at home.

Jade is an African American female. She is a high performing student. Based on her DRA score she is currently reading at level seventy which is approximately a seventh grade level. She received a performance level three on last year’s ELA New York state assessment. Her parents are very involved with her schooling, helping her with reports and projects at home. She also mentions that she has Saturday school at home with her mom and siblings. She gets along with peers and seems to enjoy reading fiction stories. Jade will select a book from the school or classroom library and will read it until she has completed it. During independent reading time she will read for the majority of the 45 minute time block but will often begin drawing when she gets bored with book.

Jaquan is an African American male who enjoys reading books of interest mainly sports articles from the newspaper or biographies about basketball players. His reading stamina is not particularly high; he often selects books that have a limited number of pages or sports articles that are relatively short in length. He enjoys sharing sports articles
with his peers and often debates with them about the best players of the game. According to DRA results Jaquan reads at a level 50 (5th grade). He is strong in literal comprehension and interpretation. Last year his performance level on the New York State ELA assessment was a level 3.

Kourtne is bi-racial student. Her mother is white and her father is black. Kourtne is currently reading below grade level, she reads at a low 50. Her previous NYS ELA assessments results indicated that Kourtne is at a performance level 2 and therefore qualifies for Academic Intervention Services. Kourtne’s main areas of weakness in reading are vocabulary, literal comprehension and interpretation of text. I tutored Kourtne at the beginning of the school year two times a week. During these sessions I taught and reinforced strategies that would improve her reading comprehension skills. She has made some improvements but still needs to progress in order to improve her reading ability. Kournte does not receive much reinforcement at home, however she has asked on numerous occasions for work packets that she completes over the weekends or during extended periods of time that she spends at her father’s house. During D.E.A.R time at school Kourtne often reads books that are below grade level and puts the book back on the shelf after D.E.A.R time is over without completing the book. During guided reading groups she is engaged in the conversations and seems to understand the book as I guide the students on a discussion.

Trevon is an African American male. He plays a variety of sports in neighborhood leagues and often states that he did not complete his homework at home due to sport’s practices. In the classroom he participates in all subject areas. His current D.R.A reading level is 70. Last academic year, his performance level was a 3.
opportunity to read in class for D.E.A.R time he chooses to read sports articles or biographies on basketball players.

Johnel is an African American male. He has a variety of literacy experiences outside of school and often has many insightful things to contribute to conversations in class. He has a great wealth of knowledge about animals, specifically lions. When selecting books from the school library, Johnel will typically select nonfiction texts. His current D.R.A level is a 50.

Eduardo recently moved to the states from Puerto Rico and speaks mostly Spanish at home. He is a quiet student who enjoys reading non-fiction stories specifically books about animals. He is currently reading at a DRA level 50. He struggles with interpretation of text; his responses at times can be too abstract with limited relation to the actual text.

Lilac is a bi-racial female student. Her father is black and her mother is from Laos. She works with the ESOL teacher on a daily basis and also works on Compass Learning Odyssey (a web based reading program) for thirty minutes every morning. She is currently reading below grade level at a level 40. Last year on the NYS ELA assessment she was at a performance level 2. She currently receives Academic Intervention Services. Lilac’s parents are active participants in her education and follow up with me about her academic progress in class. Her areas in need of improvement are vocabulary and comprehension. She works very well in guided reading groups, at times almost dominating the conversation about the texts. When she reads independently during D.E.A.R time she often becomes easily distracted. She will often select a book at the beginning of D.E.A.R time and then place it back on the shelf after independent reading time is over without completing the book.
Researcher Stance:

It is my belief that all students should be able to see illustrations in literature that looks like them. They should be able to read stories that represent their culture in an accurate way. Children should be able to realize that they are not the only ones that face hardships. When the children see accurate representations of people from their culture; they will feel a sense of pride. From elementary school through college I attended prominently white schools, where I was the only African American or minority student in class. Throughout my schooling I was not exposed to books that featured African Americans and other ethnic minorities as characters or African Americans as authors. I attended Nazareth College for my undergraduate degree in Sociology with a concentration in Inclusive Education, initially certified to teach grades one through nine special and regular education. It wasn’t until a literature class my freshman year at Nazareth College that I was required to read literature written by an African American. I have been teaching sixth grade in this urban school for four years. It wasn’t until my third year of teaching that I could name more than one African American author of children’s literature. I do not want my students to have the same ignorance towards African American literature that I did. I want my students to feel proud of who they are and I believe this sense of pride will come from the images and stories presented in culturally relevant literature. I want expose my students to literature that I was never exposed to.

Method:
I met with the participants on a weekly basis, meeting two times a week. The duration of the meeting was approximately 30 minutes. During this time I read a children’s book that has been deemed either culturally conscious, socially conscious, or a melting pot book (Taylor, 1997) aloud to the participants. The selection for appropriate titles were based on suggestions from articles and from my analysis using the diversity wheel (Willis, 2009). The majority of selected books represented culturally conscious books, therefore making them more culturally relevant than other types of literature. Small group discussions guided data collection. During group discussions students discussed their feelings and attitudes towards the literature presented. All participants provided written responses in writing journals; this is to ensure that students that may be apprehensive to share in a small group will have a voice. Participants filled out evaluations about the presented literature. Once the book was read aloud participants will provide oral responses and will provide written responses in a reading response journal. These written responses were collected, reviewed and evaluated based on the students’ personal opinions.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

According to Guba’s qualifications for valid research, research must have the following components: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Mills (2007) describes credibility as “the researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained” (p. 87). To ensure credibility during the methods portion of research I will implored a few strategies. I met with a colleague on a regular basis. This colleague has similar teaching experiences and teaches in similar classroom environment. I received
useful feedback from this critical colleague. During the methods portion of action research I was consistent with the collection of data and types of questions that are being asked. Transferability holds that ‘truth’ statements are not a goal of action research and that statements developed from action research should not be generalized to larger groups of people (Mills, 2007). Although the responses yielded from students can be used for comparison with other students in different populations with different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, they should not be used as a truth, but as one student’s opinion about a text. To ensure the next aspect of valid research; dependability, I will used the same prompts, discussion formats and literature evaluations for each piece of literature. I used a variety of methods to collect data, such as literature evaluations, response journals, and transcriptions of oral discussion. Confirmability is the final component of valid research. Confirmability refers to “the neutrality or objectivity of the data collected” (Mills, 2007, p. 87). I used the data collected to reveal my assumptions and stance on the topic of cultural relevant literature. I receive informed consent from participants’ parents. Parents were informed that their child’s participation in this action research project was not going to effect their final grades and did not hinder on their time for other academic subject areas. Participants’ names were not revealed, pseudonyms were used in place of real names.

Findings and Discussion

The seven, sixth grade students that were selected as part of this research study were asked to respond to several culturally relevant picture books. Uptown (Collier, 2000), I love my hair (Tarpley, 1998), Tar Beach (Ringold, 1991), and To be a drum (Coleman, 1998) were the text selected for read aloud. Once the read aloud was
completed students were asked to respond to a series of questions ranging from their thoughts on the race/ethnicity of the author and illustrator, their connections to the text based on personal experiences, sense of pride felt after listening to the book, and overall rating. Opportunities to engage in conversations with peers and teacher, connections to the text through life experiences or experiences of characters in media proved to be the most positive components of the meetings.

Literacy Environment

From the initial questionnaire the group of six students all indicated that they read very little for pleasure on a weekly basis. All six of them read for 0-2 hours on a weekly basis for pleasure, while the girls preferred fiction titles. All of the boys indicated that they mostly read non-fiction books and newspaper articles for pleasure. Students were also asked how they feel when they had to read at school, the girls indicated feelings of happiness while the boys seemed to be indifferent or “ok.” Exposure to text and reading at home also was something that decreased as the students progressed in age. Jonathan indicated that he reads at home by himself in his room, but did not indicate whether his mother read to him. Jaquan remembers being read to by his mother when he was little and remembered that his mother read him a Spiderman book. Another male student discussed a reading log, “when I was in third grade I had to fill out my reading log and my mom read to me and helped me.” Based on the information provided by students little reading support is done at home. When Kourtne was asked if she reads at home with her parents she responded with “no not really I would read on my own and if don’t know a word I’ll sound it out.” The use of the word “would” indicates that she may not currently
read at home. Fluency and decoding also seem to be a focus for Kourtne’s reading.

Making meaning from text and comprehension seems to be a the secondary purpose for Kournte’s reading. This is evident on many occasions when I have asked Kourtne to read a small chunk of text aloud, she is able to pronounce every word on the page, however when asked to retell or summarize the information she often finds it difficult. Although the students may have access to literature at home, it seems as though they do not take advantage of these mediums as all of them indicated that they only read 0-2 hours a week for pleasure. Throughout my observations specifically during the block of time designated to sustained silent reading most students will attempt to read a chapter book at the beginning of the reading time, read for about ten minutes and begin to draw or doodle.

**Students connecting to culturally relevant literature**

During the read alouds of *Tar Beach* (Ringold, 1991), *I love my hair* (Tarpley, 1998), *To be a drum* (Coleman, 1998), *Uptown* (Collier, 2000), the students were excited and engaged in the activity, on most occasions the teacher-led discussions emerged into student-directed, detailed conversations. During these conversation discussions students made personal connections with the text, often sharing personal accounts of how the book related to their lives. Students in the group easily made text-self connections between neighborhood, family, movie and dialect presented in the books.

All of the students live in an urban setting having a close knit relationship with neighborhood kids. *Uptown* (Collier,2000) and *Tar Beach* (Ringold,1991) were books that students made connections with to their own neighborhoods. In *Uptown* the main character talks about visiting the local barbershop. After reading the book the students
discussed waiting in line at the barbershop or even waiting at the hair or nail salon for their mothers to finish. The illustrations proved to be a powerful aspect of the books selected for read-alouds. Students were able to determine if the author was African American typically based on the pictures of the characters. All students had favorable ratings for the books that were read aloud. Most of the students felt a sense of pride for their culture when listening to the literature. When asked how she feels when she reads or listens to books about African Americans, Kournte responded that she feels “more comfortable because in most picture/word books, its like my family and it makes me feel like my family isn’t different than anybody else.” People will generally feel a sense of pride when belonging to a group, such as a family, an organization, or community. The inalization of African American students and other students of color is an ongoing problem within children’s literature; an issue that CRT theorists believe has been controlled by the dominant group. Kournte’s response demonstrates that there is literature available to children of color; this literature proves that students of color can be a member of a dominant group and that they are represented positively in the literature they encounter.

Although all of the students were children of color and all of the characters in the book were people of color, on a few occasions the students did not have first hand knowledge of some of the experiences that the main characters experienced. This did not disable the students in making connections with the text, however the students related the character’s experiences with movies and television shows they had watched. For example, all of the students had never ate a plate of chicken and waffles, however they were familiar with the restaurant Roscoe’s Chicken and Waffles from a movie that most
of them had seen. Students also discussed the television series *The Boondocks* after encountering the book *I love my hair*. Even though the students in the group did not wear elaborate hairstyles like afros or cornrows they talked about Huey, a character from the series Boondocks wearing an afro. After the initial connection to the book, the students began discussing some of their favorite episodes in the series. In the group students weren’t embarrassed to talk about books and all students felt as if they were bringing something meaningful to the conversation. In all of the literature that was read to students they were able to see themselves in the literature whether through the illustrations or experiences of the main character. Willis (2009) states that when students see themselves in literature, they become more engaged and have the ability to succeed as a reader. Although it wasn’t evident whether students were succeeding as readers, they were certainly engaged in the discussion of the literature. The books made them proud of who they are because the characters talked, looked, and behaved in a manner that resembled themselves or a relative.

Identifying with cultural hardships

Throughout the school year I have encouraged my students to select and read books that represent themselves not as slaves or immigrants but members of modern society. However after reading *To be a drum* (Coleman, 1998), the students identified with the struggles their ancestors had to endure when coming to this country, whether as slaves or immigrants. Many of them felt proud of whom they are and empathized with the struggles that people of color had to overcome. Trevon felt proud of his culture after
listening to *To be a drum*. When asked to explain why he was proud he states, “I am African American and if blacks never fought for freedom me and lots of blacks would be in slavery.” To be a drum would be considered a socially conscious book because it focuses on the conflicts that occurred during the Civil Rights movements between African Americans and European Americans. Taylor (1997) indicated that the intended purpose for socially conscious literature was to provide a resource to help European Americans “empathize with and tolerate African American children” (p. 37.) However when using it with my African American and Latino students, although the empathized with the character they also were able to grasp the deeper meaning of the text and that is for people of color the hardships that ancestors had to endure helped to provide the life they are privileged to today. Jaquan also felt a sense of pride after listening to *To be a drum* when asked to explain why he felt that way he indicated, “it lets me know that we fought for freedom.” The use of the word “we” is a term that shows ownership. Although Jaquan wasn’t alive during the civil rights he recognizes that “we” as people of color have fought to be where we are. On a one to ten scale all of the students rated this book a 10; 10 being the highest rating of the scale. The theme that students were able to relate to was freedom. Most of the students indicated that they liked reading stories of freedom because it reminded them of what their ancestors had to overcome. Lilac indicated that she liked the book because “it was about slavery and freedom.”

**Conversations using culturally relevant text**

The students also had a very entertaining conversation about the book *I love my hair* (Tarpley, 1998). The term “tender-headed” was discussed. A person that is
tenderheaded is someone that does not like their hair to get combed or braided because it hurts. The students began sharing tenderheaded stories of themselves or siblings. The movie *Good Hair* was also bought up. Students related their stories of getting their hair done to the documentary on African American hair. All of the students had a favorable rating to the book with the lowest score being an 8. The students really could relate to the book being about the texture of African American hair and the different styles that could be done with their hair. When asked if the students thought white people could relate to the book they said no, because they don’t have “our” kind of hair.

**Culturally relevant literature and pleasure reading**

As the students’ classroom teacher it was a bit disheartening to hear that they read for up to two hours a week for pleasure. It made me wonder what can I do as a teacher to ensure that my students develop an enjoyment for reading outside of school? How can I hold me students accountable for reading outside of school without making them feel as if it were a chore? Do the characters in the book have to be a member of their cultural group in order to make connections with literature? Providing students with the opportunity read for pleasure and to communicate with peers about books and experiences seems to be a reasonable suggestion for the first two questions. When students were asked “what can teachers do to make reading more exciting?,” students responded with a range of suggestions from giving more reading assignments, helping students make connections, or simply “nothing really. I read for fun even though it doesn’t seem like it.” From the conversations and the student responses it students
enjoyed talking, laughing and connecting with their peers around literature in a way that may have been unthinkable outside of my research project.

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that children of color need to feel a sense of pride when reading. Children of color make connections with greater ease when the characters act in a way that is similar to themselves, family and friends. Children of color are also able to connect text to other forms of media, particularly movies and television shows. Children of color and reluctant readers need to develop a sense of enjoyment for reading. Teachers can provide environments that make it easier for these populations of students to read for pleasure. Teachers may find it beneficial to scaffold, starting with read-alouds of culturally relevant literature. Following the read-alouds teachers should provide students with the opportunity to respond to the text while conversing with peers and teachers. Through read-alouds and discussions about the literature, students will begin to see that literature can be relevant to their culture and that reading can be pleasurable. Once students have become comfortable with listening and responding to literature read aloud by the teacher, students may engage in more involved interactions with literature. Literature circles will allow students to choose books from selected titles. The teacher can create time within the weekly schedule for student to meet with peers to discuss themes, topics, and characters from the literature. Students will be held accountable to come to their group meetings prepared to discuss the literature, when working with their group, students will feel motivated. Holding students and parents accountable is another way students may feel motivated to read more outside of the designated class time. This can be done with teacher logs and other communications with
parents. This action research study did have a few limitations. The first limitation was
time constraints. I met with the students during our lunch period. Many of the
conversations had to be cut short due to the short 30 minute lunch period. I would have
also liked to work with culturally relevant literature that was at their grade level.
Throughout the review of literature there were many chapter books that were
recommended, however there was simply not enough time to select a chapter book.
Because the group consisted of participants at varying reading levels, some students may
not have found ease in comprehending a text that was at a sixth grade reading level. A
second limitation was student absenteeism. On a few occasions one or more students was
absent from school on the days we met to conduct the read alouds. The absent
participants missed the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions about the
literature. Although these limitations were present in this study, the data yielded will be
useful to teachers that want to provide meaningful learning experiences to children of
color. Building opportunities for students to share their knowledge, experiences and
literature with peers will encourage students to read more. Although providing culturally
relevant literature is important, the opportunity for students to discuss literature is far
more motivating to students.
Reference List


