Spring 2011

Culturally Relevant Literature How to Identify and Use Culturally Relevant Literature

Alysse Ouimet
St. John Fisher College

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations.

This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/15 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Culturally Relevant Literature How to Identify and Use Culturally Relevant Literature

Abstract
In order to empower students as readers, teachers need to provide them with culturally relevant literature that they can see themselves in. Educators first need to be made aware of culturally relevant literature, to make it available to their students. important, and ways to use it during instruction. This paper looks at the components of culturally relevant literature, why using it in the classroom is The action research that followed taught two classroom teachers how to identify culturally relevant literature, and it was brought to their attention that all students regardless of their culture need exposure to diversity. At the end of the study, both participants articulated that they would now consider culturally relevant criteria when buying books for their classroom libraries.

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
MS in Literacy Education

Department
Education

First Supervisor
Gloria E. Jacobs

Subject Categories
Education

This thesis is available at Fisher Digital Publications: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/15
Culturally Relevant Literature
How to Identify and Use Culturally Relevant Literature

By

Alysse Ouimet

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

Supervised by

Dr. Gloria E. Jacobs

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

Spring 2011
Abstract

In order to empower students as readers, teachers need to provide them with culturally relevant literature that they can see themselves in. Educators first need to be made aware of culturally relevant literature, to make it available to their students. This paper looks at the components of culturally relevant literature, why using it in the classroom is important, and ways to use it during instruction. The action research that followed taught two classroom teachers how to identify culturally relevant literature, and it was brought to their attention that all students regardless of their culture need exposure to diversity. At the end of the study, both participants articulated that they would now consider culturally relevant criteria when buying books for their classroom libraries.
Culturally Relevant Literature

How to identify culturally relevant literature, also identified as culturally conscious, culturally specific, culturally appropriate, or culturally pluralistic literature should be a significant topic on every educator's mind, because so many students in today's classrooms are from different cultures. To be classified as culturally relevant, a piece of literature needs to be authentic, realistic, and uphold a culturally conscious ideology and message (Gray, 2009; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Inglebret, Jones, & Pavel, 2008; McNair, 2010; Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010). Identifying and then exposing students to literature where they are able to see themselves, their families, their cultures, and experiences similar to what they have experienced will give them the opportunity to connect with the literature they read, find literature that they like to read, and even help inspire them to write about themselves. This paper will look at the components of culturally relevant literature, why using culturally relevant literature in the classroom is important, and some ways to use culturally relevant literature for instruction. Lastly to make sure everyone is represented through literature, and able to make connections, this action research will look at how aware teachers are of culturally relevant literature, and what exactly they know.

Theoretical Framework

This section will look at two definitions of literacy that express how students use literacy through social interaction, and how what students acquire from literacy depends on their own background (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Lankshear & Knoble, 2006; Larson & Marsh, 2005; Otto, 2008). These definitions of literacy are based around sociocultural/cultural-historical theory with a focus on how cultural diversity impacts
literacy acquisition. Larson and Marsh (2005) state that, “learning occurs through participation in social practices” (p. 106), therefore students are learning by interacting with those around them: parents, teachers, peers, and community members.

It will also discuss how teachers can respond to the varying needs of culturally diverse students through culturally responsive pedagogy, and critical race theory. Gay (2000) states “culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education,” (p. 8) because as teachers it is important to understand that culture matters, and impacts everything people do: the choices they make, how they live their daily lives, and how they interact with others.

Definition of Literacy

Literacy has become integral to the field of education because it encompasses many areas; it has many definitions (Lankshear & Knoble, 2006; Larson & Marsh, 2005; Otto, 2008). Freebody and Luke (1990) define literacy as, “a multifaceted set of social practices with a material technology, entailing code breaking, participation with the knowledge of the text, social uses of text, and analysis/critique of the text” (p.15). In other words, literacy is made up of many dimensions, and can be acquired through different interactions with a text. As literacy today is dynamic, due to the ever-changing world in which we live, and multifaceted, in that there are many types of literacies linked to content areas, environments, and technologies, it is essential that individuals participate with literacy in multiple ways. Individuals acquire literacy through social interaction, by using and constructing meaning in their homes, their schools, and their communities on an ongoing basis. Children learn and experiment with literacy by
watching the ways adults in their lives use and model it for them. It is up to the adults to assist them in finding themselves in the print they are exposed to.

Lankshear and Knobel (2006) define literacy as, “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses” (p.64). These ways of acquiring and participating with literacy depend on an individual’s sociocultural backgrounds, identities, or the Discourses they belong to and the way they interact socially. Individuals need to be able to make meaning from the texts they read by interacting with the text, interpreting the authors’ messages, and finding connections to their own world.

**Sociocultural Historical/ Cultural-Historical Theory**

Sociocultural historical theory looks at how an individual’s background affects their learning (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Sociocultural learning theory is an integrated, inquiry based way of learning, where children are key to constructing their own learning (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Literacy instruction from the sociocultural historical literacies perspective should include: teaching students to read the word and the world, and to look at all students’ funds of knowledge. Using texts that are relevant to students’ lives, their families, their cultures, and their cultural histories allows them to make connections between their in and out of school literacies (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Asking families to fill out surveys is one way to learn about your students’ families, and their funds of knowledge. The idea is to learn what skills, and background knowledge that households possess, to include them in the classroom environment, and
CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERATURE

transform teacher’s assumptions about their students and their students families (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994).

Cultural-historical theory is similar to the sociocultural historical theory because it focuses on the individual, their family, their funds of knowledge, the culture they associate with, and their culture’s artifacts. This theory looks at how to learn about students’ literacy practices, and how to build upon their previous background knowledge (Pacheco & Gutiérrez, 2009). A culture’s artifacts according to Pacheco and Gutiérrez (2009) are both, “material artifacts, and ideational artifacts” (p. 62), the books, and recipes they may hold dear as well as the theories, ideals, morals, beliefs, and oral stories they share. By focusing on culturally relevant literature, students are able to see themselves and their culture’s artifacts in the texts they read through the experiences of the characters, and the connections they are able to make with their own lives (Gray, 2009; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Inglebret et al., 2008; McNair, 2010).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy looks at representing and validating the cultures of all students ((Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Gay, 2000, 20002a, 2002b; Ladson-Billings, 1994). “Good intentions and awareness are not enough to bring about changes needed in educational programs and procedure to prevent academic inequalities among diverse students”(Gay, 2000, p. 14). It is necessary for educators to understand culturally relevant pedagogy, and then use that knowledge as a culturally responsive teacher in order to support the students in their classroom (Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009). A large part of being culturally responsive should come from the literature students are exposed to. Teachers need to implement the teaching of cultural literature so students
develop a knowledge base about cultural diversity. Teachers need to be selective of the literature they read to students, put on display, or place in their classroom libraries. When they choose literature that represents culture, and then use that literature for their instruction students are given the opportunity to learn about their own and others sociocultural backgrounds (Gay, 2002a).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) links to both culturally responsive pedagogy and to the sociocultural historical theory. CRT looks at how the concept of race is socially constructed and the ways to challenge its impact on society (Willis & Parker, 2009). Willis and Parker (2009) state that the critical race theory, “involves acknowledging and valuing the cultures, knowledges, languages, and abilities of students of color” (p. 35), and that “teachers must consider how they will guide students to critically analyze” (p. 45) the characters and the texts they read. Choosing texts that are culturally relevant can help illustrate how individuals experience life growing up as a member of a minority culture within the dominant society. When students read or are read culturally relevant texts, it gives them many opportunities to see beyond of the ideology that whiteness is the norm, and to critically challenge their thinking of the dominant culture, its ideologies, and its social structure (Yoon et al., 2010).

Question

Understanding how to identify culturally relevant literature is essential for every educator because the average classroom in today’s world is made up of multicultural students. Although educators may have the best intentions of providing their students with multicultural literature, they may be sharing texts that promote assimilation to the
mainstream culture, inaccurate information, and/or melting pot texts, that ignore all differences except physical ones, without realizing it. Therefore, given how important it is for students to see accurate portraits of themselves and others in what they read, this action research project asks: what multicultural texts teachers have in their classroom libraries, if they meet the criteria to be culturally relevant, and how willing they would be to make a change in the multicultural literature they incorporate in their instruction and supply in their libraries (Dixson & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Gray, 2009; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Inglebret et al., 2008; McNair, 2010; Yoon et al., 2010).

**Literature Review**

**What is Culturally Relevant Literature**

Culturally relevant literature is literature that represents a culture authentically, and realistically, while upholding a culturally conscious ideology. Giving students the chance to read high-quality books written about people of their culture can engage their emotions and encourage them to find literature that they like. (Harris, 1997; McNair, 2010). “By sharing books written by authors from varied racial backgrounds, children are provided with a well-rounded selection of books that will expose them to a wide range of topics, linguistic patterns, historical information, and worldviews” (McNair, 2010, p. 104).

Gay (2000) reminds us that, “it is quite unlikely that any one author, book, or other reference is ever capable of providing a complete profile of ethnic groups and their cultures, contributions, and experiences” (p. 121). Not every culturally relevant text will have all of the following authentic, realistic, and culturally conscious elements, so it is equally important for teachers to use multiple resources to teach about diversity.
Authentic.

Culturally relevant literature that is implemented within the classroom should be authentic (Ching, 2005; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Inglebret et al., 2008; McNair, 2010; Yoon et al., 2010). Authenticity of culturally relevant literature should include accurate information, accurate usage and portrayal of language conventions, and have a common or universal experience within the storyline. All culturally relevant texts may not have all of these authentic elements within them. However the more authentic the text is the more likely students will choose to read it (Gay, 2000; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

Authentic information means accurate words and truthful images (Ching, 2005; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Inglebret et al., 2008). For realistic and historical fiction texts the vocabulary, terminology, and images should match the culture they are representing. Additionally historical fiction texts must portray authentic time frames, dates, and locations for the historical event they embody. Illustrations should also be of high quality and provide a purpose, especially book covers, because if students see people like themselves they will be more interested. Gray (2009) found that the image on a book cover was one of the most important criteria students used when choosing multicultural books in her study.

Authentic language usage is the correct portrayal of dialect (Ching, 2005; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Well-crafted language that is appropriate to the culture being portrayed, as well as using correct dialogue between characters should also follow the language patterns of the culture or community. For instance when reading a book that is about African American culture it should be a common occurrence to see African
CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERATURE

American English used as dialogue, such as: ain’t, the use of double negatives, or having final sounds dropped on some words, which are not common in the Standard English Language (McNair, 2010). Another important element to consider when identifying the authentic language used in a text is will the students be able to understand it, and respond to it according to the author’s purpose (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

An authentic common or universal experience should be written according to the culture context of the text (McNair, 2010). If the theme of a text is the universal experience of survival and it is culturally relevant African American literature, then it needs to be addressed from an African American perspective, and/or character, to maintain, cultural distinctiveness (McNair, 2010). Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) found that “when African American children encounter literature that offers messages about them, their culture, and their roles in society they have enhanced opportunities to reflect upon themselves as people and their own development” (p. 818) as literate individuals.

Realistic.

Culturally relevant literature that is implemented within the classroom should be realistic (Ching, 2005; Gray, 2009; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Realistic culturally relevant literature should involve real life images, contain relatable plots, or events, and give students of that culture the opportunity to connect with the real life or realistic characters in the story line. All culturally relevant texts may not have all of these realistic elements within them. However the more realistic the text is the more likely it will attract student attention, and be shared with others (Gay, 2000; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).
Realistic images and events depicted might not be truthful in context, but they should be relevant to the text (Ching, 2005; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). As mentioned above book covers should be authentic, but they should also be realistic. They should reflect reality, and be appealing. The culture should be represented through the physical features, and color of the characters, as well as the locations physical appearance. The events that are experienced should be ones that could happen or have actually happened to someone in real life and be integrated into the literature naturally. It is also important that within these events the author “resists stereotyping or romancing minority experiences” (Ching, 2005, 132), to hold true to that cultures experiences within the mainstream society.

The realistic or real life characters within the text should allow for students to find connections with their own lives (Ching, 2005; Harris, 1997; Gray, 2009). To be culturally relevant literature the characters should be presented in a positive light. Race and gender are also both important to the story, as are personal characteristic, in other words they need to matter to the story. When reading a text if the main characters race or gender can easily be swapped with little to no change in the story, then their culture is not validated (Harris, 1997). McNair (2010) critics Ezra Jack Keats text *Snowy Day* as a text of this nature as all cultural differences were ignored beside skin color. The characters should also identify themselves with the culture being depicted, and participate in and reflect the traditions, and ideologies of that culture. Gray (2009) in her research discovered that, “the connection readers felt or thought they would feel to the main character” (p. 476) was the most important factor when they were choosing books.
Culturally relevant literature that is implemented within the classroom should contain ideologies that are culturally conscious (Ching, 2005; Harris, 1997; Inglebret et al., 2008; McNair, 2010; Yoon et al., 2010). Culturally conscious ideologies within culturally relevant literature should have endings that hold true to the culture they are representing throughout the storyline. They need to be conscious of each cultures beliefs, and traditions without inferring or explicitly stating messages of assimilation, that American is a melting pot, or that America is the land of new opportunities and that old ideals should be left behind or forgotten (Ching, 2005; Yoon et al., 2010). All culturally relevant texts may not have these ideological elements within them. However the more conscious the text is to the culture it portrays the more likely students will respond to it positively (Gay, 2000; Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

The culturally conscious ideology held by the author, and/or characters within the text must hold true to the culture until the end (Inglebret et al., 2008; Yoon et al., 2010). The characters at the end of the book should still retain their primary culture, even if they accept the fact they need to learn about the dominant culture. The main characters may identify and recognize the fact that their culture has many similarities and differences with the mainstream culture. The reflection of similarities and differences is acceptable in culturally relevant literature, as long as the main character continues to maintain their own cultural identity, thereby also allowing the reader to validate their own cultural identity (Inglebret et al., 2008).

The culturally conscious ideology held by the author and/or characters within the text must not simultaneously have an assimilation ideology, or a melting pot ideology.
(Ching, 2005; McNair, 2010; Yoon et al., 2010). Often time texts that show characters accepting the dominant culture as their own at the end, also fail to mention that the supporting characters have taken no any interest in the main characters home culture (Yoon et al., 2010). “It is through literature that students learn those values prized by our society” (Yoon et al., 2010, p. 115) so culturally relevant texts should not infer the ideology of mainstream culture through the messages they send. The message culturally relevant literature sends should instead ensure the identity of the main character within, and pride for their native culture.

**Why Culturally Relevant Literature is Important**

Culturally relevant literature is important because it can lead students to academic achievement, create educational equity and critical consciousness within a classroom community, and teach all students to take on a global perspective and understand cultural competence. Gay (2000) states that “making explicit connections between instructional resources used in classrooms and lived experiences of students outside of school improves the mastery of academic skills as well as other dimensions of learning, such as interest, motivation, and time-on-task” (p. 118). When teachers include culture in the curriculum, they invite their students to participate in the classroom community, and learn from one another (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Academic achievement.**

Culturally relevant literature that is implemented within the classroom promotes academic achievement (Cartledge & Koura, 2008; Gay, 2002a, 2002b; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Lohfink, 2010; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2009). To promote academic achievement and success teachers need to create and nurture
cooperative environments. They may also need to reevaluate the way they plan and implement instruction in their classrooms. Changing the way they plan their lessons can be as simple as modeling and scaffolding, can use ethnic learning styles, and can use student’s strengths as the basis for instruction and assessment.

When teachers create and nurture cooperative environments, their students achieve academic success (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Gay, 2002b; Morrison et al., 2008). Teachers who create and nurture cooperative environments are warm demanders and care unequivocally for their students (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Gay, 2002b). They provide support for their students through “explicit verbal declarations positive nonverbal acts such as smiles, gentle touches, teasing” (Gay, 2002b, p. 621) as well as through the cultural literature and artifacts they integrate into their instruction. In their classrooms students interact with one another positively through classroom meetings, sharing events, and getting to know about each other through interviews, group work, or about me books (Morrison et al., 2008). In return the teachers expect that their students work together, “to learn collaboratively”, and “teach each other to be responsible for each other” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 55).

Teachers who are successful in creating a community of learners also invest and take personal responsibility for their students’ successes, and hold each of their students to high behavior expectations and standards. Teachers are prepared to work with their students to fix any misunderstandings quickly. By correcting student work, and returning it to them, students are able to keep up with what is going on in the classroom. Teachers should also consistently provide clear and measureable objectives, so students are able to help make and meet their own goals (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008), “while making
connections between their community, national, and global identities” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 25). Gay (2002b) additionally recommends using instructional strategies that reflect the “cultural values, characteristics, and socialization” (p. 625) of students’ academic efforts and increase achievement by using: motion & movement, cooperative learning, inclusion of ethnic content, varied formats.

When teachers change their instruction, their students achieve academic success (Gay, 2002a; Lohfink, 2010; Morrison et al., 2008; Souto-Manning, 2009). Teachers may need to explicitly model and scaffold their instruction, to clarify the challenging curriculum for students of different cultures. Using student’s strengths and “in-depth knowledge”, as instructional starting points and tapping into ethnic learning styles are two ways to positively enhance student learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 123). When students are interested in what they are learning they are more connected and willing to work hard to further their knowledge. Letting students who are English language learners use their home language within the classroom during brainstorming, pre-writing, and reading, gives them the opportunity to increase their oral language development (Morrison et al., 2008). Some of the ethnic learning styles Gay (2002a) mentions are preferred content, ways of working through learning tasks, techniques for organizing and conveying ideas and thoughts, physical and social settings for task performance, structural arrangement of work, study, and performance space, perceptual stimulation for receiving, processing, and demonstrating comprehension and competence, motivations, incentives, and rewards for learning, as well as interpersonal interactional styles.
Educational equity and critical consciousness.

Culturally relevant literature that is implemented within the classroom promotes educational equity and critical consciousness (Dixson, & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Morrison et al., 2008; Taylor, 2000). To promote educational equity and critical consciousness teachers need to emphasize critical thinking in their classrooms. Teachers should also encourage community problem solving, which can go hand in hand with critical thinking, as the next step. In any classroom promoting educational equity and critically consciousness, the teacher’s role is to step back and let the students share the power.

When teachers emphasize critical thinking, their students become critically conscious (Dixson, & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Morrison et al., 2008; Taylor, 2000). Teachers should address issues of white privilege, domination, racial oppression, and marginalization with students because in discussing controversial topics students learn more about themselves. When students are prompted to thinking critically they learn how explicit the power dynamics are within the mainstream society. In doing so they learn to validate their own and others cultures and can move forward to make change (Morrison et al., 2008).

When teachers encourage community problem solving, their students become critically conscious (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrison et al., 2008). When students learn to think critically about what they read, and how they fit into mainstream society. A second step to becoming critically conscious involves class cooperation to make changes. Students can work to solve problems in their schools and communities to facilitate social justice. Teachers should share their power in the classroom with their students allowing
them to decide on community involvement, and classroom choices of: activities, assessment, and curriculum.

**Global perspective and cultural competence.**

Culturally relevant literature that is implemented within the culturally responsive classroom promotes a global perspective and cultural competence (Au, 2001; Dixson, & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Lohfink, 2010; Mestre, 2009; Morrison et al., 2008; Taylor, 2000). To promote a global perspective and cultural competence teachers need to build on their students “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) when reshaping the curriculum to include all student cultures. Teachers need to stress the importance of appreciating diversity within their classrooms. They can do this by using culturally relevant literature to teach about culture and by exposing students to multiple perspectives.

When teachers build on funds of knowledge, their students learn cultural competence (Au, 2001; Dixson, & Fasching-Varner, 2009; Howard, 2003; Lohfink, 2010; Mestre, 2009; Morrison et al., 2008). Building on students’ funds of knowledge must first mean that teacher are honoring and respecting their students’ home cultures and languages. Teachers should also work on building good relationships between themselves and their students’ families, as well as with their students’ communities. To learn about families and their cultures teachers could begin by: sending home inventories asking about family funds of knowledge, setting up and completing home visits, and including families and community members within the classroom, and curriculum whenever available. Additionally using objects that are familiar to students’ cultures as manipulatives, primary source materials, artifacts, ethnic games, cultural activities, and
cultural artifact museum can make the required curriculum more relevant and captivating to students (Morrison et al., 2008).

When teachers stress an appreciation for diversity, their students learn cultural competence (Taylor, 2000). Teachers who stress an appreciation for diversity in their classrooms teach their student that, “by finding an appreciation of their own individuality, students face a strong possibility of valuing the diversity of others” (Taylor, 2000, p. 24). Teaching that every story or event has multiple perspectives is a necessary step to the process of becoming culturally competent, so students are learning how others perceive things according to their culture, and their position of power, or lack thereof. “By exposing students to carefully selected multicultural literature, we give them the chance for a bird’s eye view into the lives, behaviors, challenges, values, and customs of people who are different from themselves” (Taylor, 2000, p. 25). Therefore it is important to represent culture beyond those represented in the classroom in the literature chosen, creating more opportunities for students to expand on and explore their own experiences.

**Using Culturally Relevant Literature**

Gay (2000) believes that “individuals who subscribe to the belief that ‘good teachers anywhere are good teachers everywhere’ fail to realize that their standards of goodness in teaching and learning are culturally determined and are not the same for all ethnic groups” (p. 22). Explicit teaching and sharing of culturally relevant literature may require teachers to step away from their own cultural views, and in turn allow their students to take more active roles in the discussions, as they may have more background knowledge. Therefore before, during, and after reading techniques should be used when implementing culturally relevant literature, to insure students are given sufficient
background information, and supported throughout the text to continually demonstrate its importance.

**Before reading.**

Culturally relevant literature should be implemented within the classroom using before reading techniques (Brown, 2007; Hall, 2008; Mestre, 2009; Morrison et al., 2008). Culturally relevant literature should be displayed in the classroom library, or classroom book corner. Most culturally relevant literature that meet the identification requirements of being authentic, realistic, and uphold a culturally conscious ideology are written by authors and depicted by illustrators who are of the culture they are portraying. These multicultural authors and illustrators should be identified, and studied within the classroom. Hall (2008) states, “our classrooms are diverse, and the books we choose should be too” (p. 81). Therefore it is important to remember that the culturally relevant literature being implemented in the classroom should always represent a wide variety of cultures, and genres.

Before reading, culturally relevant literature should be displayed for students to see and browse (Brown, 2007; Hall, 2008; Mestre, 2009; Morrison et al., 2008). Books that are read aloud or on display need to be carefully and intentionally chosen to foster “children’s literacy development, empathy, and acceptance of themselves and others” (Hall, 2008, p. 86). Students need the opportunity to see themselves, and their families in the literature they read. One child in Hall’s (2008) kindergarten classroom saw Natasha Anastasia Tarpley’s text *I Love My Hair* on display, and said, “Hey, she’s got beads like me!” (p. 80). Finding connections to literature can foster student literacy development, through their desire to read about people like them, and to write about themselves with
more confidence. Diverse literature on display depicting many cultures will allow students to hear about other cultures. They will learn that their way of life may be different, but that they may also share some similarities.

Before reading the authors and illustrators of culturally relevant literature should be identified and studied (Gay, 2002a; Hall, 2008; Mestre, 2009). Many authors, and illustrators “high-profile individuals” (Gay, 2002a, p. 107), of culturally relevant literature write about their own lives, within their culture, and experiences common to people within their culture. In researching whom these individuals are, where they are from, and their accomplishments, students are able to establish connections between their lives. Students begin to see that they too can write, that they too can draw, that they too can go places, and that they too can achieve their goals and desires.

**During reading.**

Culturally relevant literature should be implemented within the classroom using during reading techniques (Lohfink, 2010). Students should be allowed and prompted to make personal connections with the characters, their own experiences, and their cultural values. Visuals, props, and artifacts should also be used to include all students in the conversation. It is important to remember that the culturally relevant literature being implemented in the classroom always represent a wide variety of cultures, and genres.

During reading individual students should be encouraged to make personal connections from the culturally relevant literature to their unique sociocultural backgrounds (Lohfink, 2010). As mentioned in the before reading section, students need the opportunity to see themselves, and their families in the literature they read, and culturally relevant literature enables them to make personal connections to characters,
their experiences, and their cultural values. Additionally, students who share their background knowledge as a classroom add much more experience to classroom discussions, as students are able to compare and contrast information. “Researchers have observed that culturally familiar content impacts reading comprehension positively” (Lohfink, 2010, p. 347). In her study, Lohfink (2010) used individual journals where students were responding to texts in their own words, and drawings. Using these while reading can help students to conceptualize their thinking, before sharing in English, or their primary language.

During reading visuals, props, and artifacts should be used to enhance all students understanding of the culturally relevant literature (Lohfink, 2010). Discussing artifacts or topics relevant to a book can allow better comprehension of the text for all students. Experiences artifacts in a hands-on setting, by: feeling, seeing, touching, smelling or tasting can “elicit students’ prior experiences” (Lohfink, 2010, p. 352) and add to their knowledge base. Students can even bring in their own visuals, props, and artifacts to add to their classmates understanding of the topic.

After reading.

Culturally relevant literature should be implemented within and outside of the classroom using after reading techniques (Au, 2001; Brown, 2007; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Ching, 2005; Gay, 2002b; Hall, 2008; Howard, 2003; Lohfink, 2010; Souto-Manning, 2009; Taylor, 2000). Book talks or discussions should be used to engage all students, and allow them to share their ideas and opinions. Any culturally relevant text should be analyzed critically, leading to authentic dialogue. Non-traditional assessments can also be employed to learn what students know. It is important to remember that the
culturally relevant literature being implemented in the classroom should always represent a wide variety of cultures, and genres.

After reading book talks and discussions of the culturally relevant literature should be open-ended allowing all students to contribute what they know (Au, 2001; Brown, 2007; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Gay, 2002b; Lohfink, 2010). Open-ended prompts such as: “what do you notice, what does that make you think of or remind you of, tell me more, why, what makes you think of that” (Lohfink, 2010, pp. 352-3). Lohfink (2010) was able to get students thinking about their own thinking, rather than answering questions that are looking for only one ”correct” answer. Collaborative grouping can allow students to share their thoughts with a small group and synthesize their ideas in a safe way, before sharing with the class, and teacher. Au (2001) found that in larger group discussions when students were allowed to engage in “overlapping speech”, which entails speaking over and with one another instead of raising a hand to speak, “children spent more time attending to reading, incorporated more text ideas in their statements, and made more logical inferences about the text” (p. 4). Overlapping speech can also let students feel more at ease with sharing their ideas, and get more thoughts flowing around the classroom, enhancing and deepening the discussion (Au, 2001; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008).

After reading, culturally relevant literature should be analyzed critically and any issues should be discussed (Brown, 2007; Ching, 2005; Hall, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2009; Taylor, 2000). Engaging students in authentic dialogue about, “learning multiple perspectives, as opposed to the right answer, the best way, or the absolute truth” (Souto-Manning, 2009, p. 59) is one way to start a conversation about critical literacies. By
taking a critical stance students can think about the ways a text is culturally relevant and critically look at the authors’ perspective and message. In looking through a critical literacy lens, children were found to be able to make comparisons between cultural knowledge and actions when judged against their own, and validating each of them equally (Souto-Manning, 2009). Additionally, Hall (2008) states that, “if a book contains stereotypes or oversimplification, discuss the issues with the children so they can build their critical thinking and reflective skills” (p. 82). Once students identify something critically a powerful discussion should ensue allowing them to articulate their points of view, and think about what they can do share this knowledge with others.

After reading, non-traditional assessments can better convey all students’ knowledge (Howard, 2003). Not all students are able to reflect their subject knowledge on formal tests. “Role playing, skits, poetry, rap, self-evaluations, Socratic Seminars, journaling, student-led conference, or cooperative group projects” (Howard, 2003, p. 200), are some non-traditional assessments. Gay (2002b) concurs that when strategies used “reflect the cultural values, traits, and socialization of African American students, their attention spans, quality of academic efforts, and achievement outcomes increase significantly” (p. 626). These assessments may take a little more work on the teacher’s part to create rubrics, make observations, or take anecdotal records, but it can equal the playing field for students to share what they think and know.

Methods

Context

The research of this study looked at the culturally relevant literature within the classroom libraries of two teachers at Milton Charlie’s Care (a pseudonym). Milton
Charlie’s Care is a school in western New York that works to meet a highly specific goal of teaching and supporting all children. Everything about the way Milton Charlie’s Care is run, is set up to enable and empower students through what they are learning. They are dedicated to provide the highest quality individualized care and services for children with developmental delays, and those with severe or multiple disabilities. Some of the ways the school enables its students is by providing equipment and resources necessary for each student to succeed.

The student population is very diverse, with students coming from many different home environments, ethnicities, cultures, and communities. Therefore, it can be difficult to include all students’ community culture into the curricula. The concern of this research study looks particularly at the books students have access to in their classroom communities, and whether or not these books are representing all students found within the school community. The school community meets the needs of approximately 300 students living within the surrounding metropolitan area, up to about an 80-mile radius from the city with 56% of students listed as students of color.

Participants

Two teacher’s classroom libraries are being used to conduct this study: Ann Brown, and Opie Tafuri (both pseudonyms). Ann Brown is a 27-year-old Caucasian woman, who is a first year teacher at Milton Charlie’s Care. She has worked as a staff person at this school however for over eight years. She is also going to school part-time to receive her master’s degree in literacy from a local university. Opie Tafuri is a 26-year-old Caucasian man, who is in his second year teaching at Milton Charlie’s Care. Before being hired by this school he worked as a long-term sub in a few other western
New York school districts. He is also going to school part-time to receive his master’s degree in literacy from a local university, but not the same one Ann Brown attends.

**Researcher Stance**

I am a 23-year-old Caucasian woman, currently employed at Milton Charlie’s Care, and attending St. John Fisher College as a full time graduate student. I am not originally from western New York, but spent much time here in my youth visiting relatives, and the last six years living here to achieve a BA in Childhood and Special Education and now a MS in Literacy Education.

I have known both of the participants in the study from working with them at Milton Charlie for a little over a year. One of the participants is the teacher of the classroom that I am a teaching assistant in, while the other participant has a different classroom, that I have never worked in. However, the other participant is also working on a master’s degree at St. John Fisher, and we both started the program last January. We have taken five classes together, and are often in collaborative peer groups.

**Methodology**

During this study I will analyze each teacher’s classroom library. I will be recording the total number of books that their library holds, the number of cultural books, and the number of culturally relevant books. I have defined cultural books to be books that meet one of the seven components listed in the section entitled *what is culturally relevant literature*: accurate information, authentic language used, common/universal experiences, realistic, relatable storyline, endings hold true to the culture, and conscious ideology not assimilation. To be counted in the culturally relevant literature category a
book has to include one component from each of the three subsections: authentic, realistic, and culturally conscious ideology.

I will work with the two teachers on an individual basis to discover what they know about cultural relevance and how willing they are to change their classroom libraries to make them more culturally relevant. This will be done through a pre-interview, a lesson about my culturally relevant research, an observation, and a post-interview. The pre-interview (Appendix A) will tell me if the teachers make a distinction between cultural, and culturally relevant. I also hope to discover what books they use as part of their instruction, if they use some or all of the texts in their classroom libraries, or if they have other books that they use for instruction that are kept elsewhere. The lesson about my culturally relevant literature will include: some background information about the research, them receiving a checklist (Appendix B) to help them to identify culturally relevant literature, and teaching them how to use it. Following the lesson I will give them a pre-selected set of texts (Appendix C) that may be cultural, culturally relevant or neither according the research and requirements I have set up. While they sift through the texts I will be watching them closely to fill out an observation form (Appendix D) about how they do. Lastly, the post interview (Appendix E) will tell me how the teachers now define cultural relevance, and what makes a book culturally relevant. It will also serve as an exit survey to see what they have learned, how they are planning to use this new knowledge in their classroom and while picking out new literature, and how interested they are in making their classroom libraries more culturally relevant.
Validity of Qualitative Research

When conducting qualitative research it is necessary to question its validity. Mills (2011) defines validity as, “how we know that the data we collect accurately gauge what we are trying to measure,” and this can be done by making sure the study has creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (p. 102). To ensure that this study has credibility I will practice triangulation, and will debrief the participants in the study. The data collected will “compare a variety of data sources and different methods” because I will collect interviews, examine the literature within the classroom libraries, and complete active observations of the teachers (Mills, 2011, p. 104). I organized this study with the help of two critical colleagues, and plan on debriefing with both of them to continually reflect on the actions and information of the action research.

To meet the criteria of transferability, I will collect detailed data so that educators can look at this study and make comparisons between the research setting I used, in order to think about and relate it to their own settings. I will also include a description of the research setting, so that educators can “make judgments about fittingness with other contexts possible” (Mills, 2011, p. 104). This study will be dependable because the methods of data collection are overlapped or triangulated, and I will create an audit trail. To overlap the methods of data collection I used Mills (2011) qualitative data collection technique chart to include “The Three E’s” (p. 89): experimenting, enquiring, and examining to triangulate the research. The two critical colleagues I am working with will also examine each step of the research, by looking at and having access to any information (names will be kept confidential) I acquire to create an audit trail. Lastly, to ensure confirmability I will again practice triangulation by cross checking any data that
was collected using different methods: interviews, observations, and field research. I will also practice reflexivity by reviewing any questions and conclusions with my critical colleagues to check for what Mills (2011) calls “underlying assumptions or biases” (p. 105), and sharing my stance as a researcher.

**Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

Before I begin my research both participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form that lays out the purpose, length, and benefits of the study. After signing each participant will receive their own copy of the form that additionally states their rights as a research participant: that they may withdraw from the program at any time, that they may refuse to answer a particular question, and be informed of the results of the study. Both participants will also be made aware that this study guarantees their confidentiality, by replacing their names and the name of the school with pseudonyms.

**Data Collection**

As discussed in the methods section, the data will be collected through personal interviews, explicit instruction, active observation, and field research. The personal interviews, explicit instruction, and active observation will be collected in one-on-one interactions with each teacher separately to ensure confidentiality. The field research will include the information that I have acquired on the data collection form (Appendix F) while studying each teacher’s classroom library. In studying each library I will be able to knowledge about each teacher’s culturally relevant knowledge, without any interference.

**Data Analysis**

The data that was collected through personal interviews, explicit instruction, active observation, and field research was looked over by myself, and my two critical
colleagues. I sifted through the data on three occasions to familiarize myself thoroughly, by labeling and flagging important features, and then sorted them into similar categories, that I shared with my colleagues.

**Findings & Discussion**

The analysis of the data showed consistencies and I was able to see reoccurring topics from the information collected on both participants. I have found the following to be the most important of my findings: teacher knowledge of diversity, awareness of culturally relevant literature, superficial features of literature, looking deeper at literature, and what to do now.

**Teacher Knowledge of Diversity**

The pre-interviews asked teachers to think about their understandings of culture, and what the term cultural means to them. The teachers stated that cultural means noticing, representing, and acknowledging differences, and different backgrounds. Then they were asked to comment more deeply on their cultural knowledge by explaining what they knew about the term culturally relevant. Ann Brown talked about applying what you know from your own culture to another culture. Opie Tafuri on the other hand shared more knowledge about topic. He first talked about cultural as relating to the lives and cultures of all of ones students. Then he made it clear that he believes teachers need to teach similarities and differences between cultures, so all students are able to feel connected to one another.

**Awareness of Culturally Relevant Literature**

The pre-interviews and classroom library field research gave two different perspectives on what teachers know about culturally relevant literature. I was able to
hear about each teacher’s personal knowledge, and also see from their libraries what actions they have taken to share cultural or culturally relevant literature.

The questions of the pre-interview showed me what each teacher knew about culturally relevant literature. The teachers were asked to be specific in their knowledge by defining what makes a book cultural, and what makes a book culturally relevant. Opie answered, “A cultural book has to do more than have different colored people, and it has to have actions, places, and events that clearly incorporate other cultures”. It was impressive to see some of the same language used from the researched literature in his answer. However, he then bypassed the second question of culturally relevance completely by stating, “My answer would mirror the answer from above”. Ann at least made an attempt to distinguish between the two questions, but had no precise reasoning behind the answers she gave. She said a cultural book exposes “differences of different backgrounds”, while a culturally relevant book lets the reader relate to the culture. This information made it clear that the next step of explicit instruction in the action research was necessary. In one case to distinguish between what may have some cultural aspects, and what can be deemed culturally relevant and in the other case to educate on what is cultural relevance.

In looking at the two classroom libraries for cultural and culturally relevant literature I was surprised by the data I collected. I wanted to see how many books each library had, and then look to see what percentage of them were cultural, and what percentage of them were culturally relevant. Cultural books needed to meet one of the seven section components of culturally relevant books: accurate information, authentic language used, common/universal experiences, realistic, relatable storyline, endings
holding true to the culture, and culturally conscious ideology not assimilation. While culturally relevant books needed to meet one component from each of the three sections: authentic, realistic, and culturally conscious. One classroom library contained 94 books, while the other had half as many, containing 46. Between the two libraries from a total of 140 books, 5 met my criteria of being cultural, and none of the books met my criteria of being culturally relevant. The final results showing that Ann’s, larger, classroom library was made up of three percent cultural books, and Opie’s, smaller, library was made up of four percent cultural books. Again it was clear that the two participants were either unaware of the importance of sharing culturally relevant literature or unsure what being culturally relevant means.

**Superficial Features of Literature**

In looking at the books that met my predetermined criteria of being cultural, it was interesting to see the similarities between the books and the criteria they met. All of the characters in the five cultural books were individuals of color, however the physical features of these characters did not in anyway match the color of the character. The characters were all hand drawn, and cartoonish. Some lacked any physical features, because they are round headed, flat faced, and two dimensional, and some had physical features, but those features mirrored those common among the mainstream culture, rather than the culture they were representing (Appendix G). The other common criterion that was found in four out of the five books was character vocabulary. In fact all four books that contained the vocabulary of the culture being represented were Hispanic in nature, and the vocabulary used was all Spanish. The term vocabulary is however misleading,
because some of the texts had one word in Spanish that replaced an English word, for instance the one text about a girl’s “mami” or mother.

After explicitly instructing the two teachers what cultural relevance, and culturally relevant literature is from the research I completed, I gave them the *How to Identify Culturally Relevant Literature* handout (Appendix B) I complied that guides them through the process of determining if a book is culturally relevant. This handout was also turned into bookmarks with a copy of the handout on the front and a list of the resources on the back. Some of the key points to look for when identifying a text are still superficial in nature, but it is also important to look deeper at the underlying messages being sent. Actively observing each teacher was the most informative piece of the process, because I was able to see them comparing each of the ten preselected texts to the guide that I created, and then hearing them decide whether each text was culturally relevant, cultural, or neither. Of the ten texts, four were culturally relevant, three were cultural and three were neither. Eight of the ten texts were classified as culturally relevant, cultural, or neither from various articles, and the other two were selected randomly.

The superficial features that often lead the participants to misclassify cultural texts as being culturally relevant were: cover illustrations of characters of color with accurate physical features, author’s and illustrator’s names, and language or vocabulary used. For instance, Ann and Opie both labeled a text, *Tom* by Tomie DePaola, that I had picked out to be neither, as cultural based on some of these features along with their own assumptions (Appendix H). They both placed over emphasis on character, looking at their features and color, and deciding that they were supposed to represent a culture aside from
the mainstream culture. This is necessary to note because at first I thought that there may have been an error with the how to guide. Then I considered the fact that maybe this text contained more cultural aspects than I originally considered. In order to gain more understanding and satisfaction about where this book belongs I would like to repeat this study with more participants.

Looking Deeper at Literature

To look deeper at the literature the teachers needed to evaluate the preselected texts according to the *How to Identify Culturally Relevant Literature* criteria: if the literature is authentic, realistic, and culturally conscious. To look deeper at authentic features, the participants needed to look beyond the cover, to make sure the illustrations seen throughout the text were also authentic, and that the storyline the characters go through is relatable. In Yoshiko Uchida’s *The Bracelet* the young girl, who is of Japanese descent, goes through the common/universal experience of moving. However when we look deeper at her experience it is clear that in her instance the time frame, and location of the setting are important because she is moving to a Japanese Interment Camp. The illustrations of the text accurately portray hers and her family’s physical features, color, and culture, and elaborate upon her experience by letting the reader see what it was like for her at the time.

To look deeper at realistic features, the participants needed to look beyond the color and physical features of the characters. In Natasha Tarpley’s *I Love My Hair* the little girl portrayed in the illustrations had skin tone, facial features, and hair that were all accurate to her African American culture (Appendix I). The characters in this text needed to be of African American descent because the storyline was about the little girl
getting her hair done, which is a common event that most children go through. She talks about how her mom pulls her hair when she combs and styles it, and the many styles people in her culture wear their hair and the heritage behind it. The other important thing to note is that the little girl’s perspective about her culture is always positive, and in the end we find out she loves her hair, and it is part of what makes her special.

To look deeper at a text to see how culturally consciousness it is, the reader needs to think about the authors underlying message. If a text discusses a culture assimilating into the mainstream culture then the text is not being culturally conscious. On the other hand for instance in Pat McKissack’s Goin’ Someplace Special the young girl, who is of African American descent is sad that she is unable to go and do things that other Caucasian individuals are able to go and do. Similarities and differences are seen in the characters clothing, speech, and actions, but in the end the young girl understands that things are the way they are, and even though she can not fit in everywhere due to segregation, there are places she can go that are special. She feels good about who she is at the end, and it doesn’t matter that she is not apart of the mainstream culture.

After conducting all the steps of the action research, each participant was asked to reflect upon the process of the study, and their learning in a post interview. Ann was able to elaborate upon her definitions of cultural relevance and what makes a book culturally relevant. According to Ann, cultural relevance meant having appropriate or accurate cultural ideologies, and for a book to be culturally relevant it should have characters with “appropriate skin color, physical features, and clothing”. Opie was able to distinguish between the terms cultural and cultural relevance. Cultural relevance to Opie now meant “the accurate and well balanced portrait of a people representing a culture”, and culturally
relevant literature should use a “plot driven story to teach people outside of a culture about that culture accurately” but also letting the student draw parallels between their lives and the lives of the characters.

What to Do Now

Both participants in this study felt that not only would they be more willing to include culturally relevant literature in the books they choose, but that they would expose their students to more culturally relevant literature in the lessons they teach. Ann additionally thought that the most useful thing she learned about culturally relevance or culturally relevant literature was coming to the understanding of, “how important it is for students to read or notice cultural relevant books to become aware of diversity and their own culture”. She also felt that she will use this knowledge when choosing new literature to place in her classroom library, because it have never been brought to her attention that all backgrounds should be exposed to diversity, and that using literature is a great way to do this. Opie felt that he would, “refrain from making a quick decision about a text” and look deeper at the meaning. He thought that using the identifying sheet was helpful because the information portrayed on it was well selected, and the using the guide when picking out literature was not only easy to implement but that the, “benefits would be beyond the effort put in”.

Implications

Educators need to be made aware of the importance of sharing culturally relevant literature and what being culturally relevant means (Ching, 2005; Gray, 2009; Hefflin, & Barksdale, 2001; Inglebret, Jones, & Pavel, 2008; McNair, 2010; Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010). Educators must first be aware of culturally relevant literature, in order to
empower their students as readers, teach them how to critically analyze texts, and how to create criteria for selecting texts. By exposing students, who identify with nonmainstream cultures, to culturally relevant literature educators give them more opportunities at achieving academic success. Students that feel comfortable, supported, and represented within their school community will have more confidence participating in their classrooms (Au, 2001). When asked to pick out an image of which skin tone was most like his own, one student’s in Ann Brown’s classroom chose one with white skin even though his skin tone is darker. If this student was exposed to culturally relevant literature with images of people similar to his own, he may be more aware of this own skin tone and culture. Educators also need to be taught how to distinguish between texts that may have some cultural aspects, and that can be deemed culturally relevant (Ching, 2005; Hefflin, & Barksdale, 2001; Inglebret, Jones, & Pavel, 2008; McNair, 2010). I discovered from my research that teachers may be aware of multicultural knowledge, but they do not necessarily understand the importance of cultural relevance.

Educators need to make literature culturally relevant available to the students they have in their classrooms (Ching, 2005; Hefflin, & Barksdale, 2001; Inglebret, Jones, & Pavel, 2008; McNair, 2010). Empowering students, by providing them with literature they can see themselves in, is a critical component of reading “Repeated exposure to engaging literature in which children find themselves establishing personal connections with characters, the likelihood is great that reading will become an appealing activity” (Hefflin, & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001, p. 818). Students need to know how to critically analyze characters and texts, to understand the power of perspective. Involving students in the process can also empower them, by asking them to accumulate their own selection
criteria for culturally relevant literature, and let them share their opinions on what educators buy and/or place in their classroom libraries. I found this particularly important because the literature I found in the participants libraries was lacking culturally relevant components, and when teachers are unaware of culturally relevant literature it proves difficult to find literature relevant to all the students and cultures represented in their classrooms.

I have more thoughts and questions after conducting this action research. I would like to investigate with others teachers to repeat the study and see what they have in their libraries, and whether the “multicultural books” they have are culturally relevant. I would like to create criteria for myself and for my students to help us choose what they read, and what is placed in our classroom library. Lastly, thinking about the texts I chose from the articles I read for the teachers to analyze, I would like to compile a list of culturally relevant texts that can be used in the classroom throughout the year.

**Conclusion**

This action research addressed the need of teachers to be made aware of culturally relevant literature, and what exactly they know. They were taught briefly about culturally relevant criteria in order to identify culturally relevant literature, and then given the opportunity to sift through some texts to experience their learning hands-on. Their classroom libraries were also explored to see how culturally relevant the texts they had were. When asked to reflect upon their participation in the study, they both felt that what they learned is essential information that all educators need to be made aware of and that this experience has changed the way they think about multicultural literature now and in the future.
Cultural relevance should be a topic on every educator’s mind. Educators need to be made aware of culturally relevant literature and include it in their classrooms so all students are able to see themselves in the literature they are exposed to. To do this, educators need to first understand that culturally relevant literature needs to be authentic: having accurate information, accurate language usage, and representing a common or universal experience, realistic: being true to real-life, and relatable so connection can be made to the main characters and the storyline, and uphold a culturally conscious ideology: having endings that hold true to the culture, and a message that is conscious about the culture being represented without idealizing assimilation into a mainstream culture. It is necessary to note that not every culturally relevant text will have all of the above mentioned elements, so teachers need to use multiple resources when teaching about diversity.

Secondly, educators need to be made aware that using culturally relevant literature can lead students to academic achievement by: changing the way they organize and implement their lessons and using student’s backgrounds and/or strengths to plan instruction and assessment, help them create educational equity and critical consciousness within a classroom community by emphasizing problem solving, and teaching students to take on a global perspective and understand cultural competence by building on “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Third and lastly, educators need to know how to then use culturally relevant literature in the classroom through the books that are placed on display, by studying authors/illustrators of culturally relevant literature, encouraging students to make personal connections to the literature, using props and artifacts to increase comprehension, holding books talks, discussing issues, and
conducting alternative or non-traditional assessments to better communicate student knowledge.
## References


Dixson, A. D., & Fasching-Varner, K. J. (2009). This is how we do it: Helping teachers understand culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms. In C. Compton-Lilly (Eds.), *Breaking the silence: Recognizing the social and cultural resources students bring to the classroom*. (p. 34-48). Newark, DE: International Reading Association, Inc.


doi:10.1177/0022487102053002003
doi:10.1080/0951839022000014349

doi:10.1598/RT.62.6.2


Willis, A. I., & Parker, K. N. (2009). “O say, do you see?”: Using critical race theory to inform english language arts instruction. In C. Compton-Lilly (Eds.), *Breaking the silence: Recognizing the social and cultural resources students bring to the classroom*. (p. 34-48). Newark, DE: International Reading Association, Inc.

APPENDIX A- Pre-Interview Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Interview</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant:</td>
<td>Time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location: Milton Charlie’s Care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. What does the term cultural mean to you?

2. a. Would you say that you have a cultural collection of texts in your classroom library?
   
   b. What makes a book cultural?

3. Do you use the books in your classroom library for instruction?

4. What does the term culturally relevant mean to you?

5. a. Would you say that you have a culturally relevant collection of books in your classroom library?
   
   b. What makes a book culturally relevant?

6. a. Do you have or use other books for instruction that are not in your classroom library?
   
   b. Would you say these books are more or less culturally relevant?
How to Identify Culturally Relevant Literature

Is it AUTHENTIC?
1. Is the information accurate?
   - Does the book cover reflect the culture?
   - Are the vocabulary, and images accurate to the culture?
   - Are the time frames, dates, and locations portrayed accurately? (historical/realistic fiction)
2. Is the language use accurate?
   - Is the dialect used accurately?
   - Is character dialogue correct?
3. Is there a common/universal experience within the storyline?
   - Does the theme of the text come from a cultural perspective, or character?

Is it REALISTIC?
1. Are the images and events realistic?
   - Do book covers reflect reality?
   - Are the physical features and colors of the characters portrayed realistic?
   - Does the culture or color of the characters matter to the story?
   - Could the events experienced happen to/have happened to someone else in real life?
2. Can connections be made to the characters and storyline?
   - Are the characters portrayed positively?
   - Do the characters identify themselves as apart of the culture represented?
   - Are traditions and ideologies depicted?

Is it CULTURALLY CONSCIOUS?
1. Do the endings hold true to the culture?
   - Is the characters primary culture retained at the end of the text? (The characters should not assimilate in anyway to the mainstream culture)
   - Are similarities and differences between that culture and the mainstream culture discussed?
2. Does the author’s message reflect a culturally conscious ideology?
   - Are cultural identities and values validated?
Culturally Relevant Texts

   Source: Lohfink (2010)

   Source: Gray (2009)


   Source: Au (2001)

Cultural Texts


   Source: McNair (2010)


Other Texts

   Source: Hall (2008)


# APPENDIX D - Teacher Observation Checklist

**Observation Checklist**

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Location:** Milton Charlie’s Care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Teacher Classification</th>
<th>Teacher Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culturally Relevant</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cultural</strong></td>
<td><strong>Neither</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Bracelet</strong> By: Yoshiko Uchida</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Name is Yoon</strong> By: Helen Recorvits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</strong> By: Eric Carle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benito’s Sopaipillas</strong> Ana Baca</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I Love My Hair</strong> Natasha Tarpley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One Green Apple</strong> Eve Bunting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goin’ Someplace Special</strong> Pat McKissack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Busy Year</strong> Leo Lionni</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tom</strong> Tomie DePaola</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Snowy Day</strong> Ezra Jack Keats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E- Post Interview Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Interview</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant:</td>
<td>Time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Location: Milton Charlie’s Care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. What does the term **cultural relevance** mean to you?

2. What makes a book **culturally relevant**?

3. What is the most useful thing that you have learned about culturally relevance or **culturally relevant literature**?

4. How will you use your newly obtained knowledge about **culturally relevant literature**?

5. Now that you know about **cultural relevance**, will you use this knowledge when picking out new literature?

6. How interested are you in making your classroom library more **culturally relevant** on a scale from 1-5, with 5 being the most interested?

   1   2   3   4   5
APPENDIX F- Data Collection Form

Data Collection

Date:

Time:

Location: Milton Charlie’s Care

Participant:

Demographic Information:

Classroom Demographic:

Classroom Library:
Number of Books

Number of Cultural Books
(books that meet one of the 7 section components of culturally relevant books: accurate information, authentic language used, common/universal experiences, realistic, relatable storyline, endings hold true to the culture, conscious ideology not assimilation)

Titles of Cultural Books

Number of Culturally Relevant Books
(books that meet one component from each section: authentic, realistic, and culturally conscious)

Titles of Culturally Relevant Books
APPENDIX G- Cultural Characters

Sample A: Round headed, flat faced, and two-dimensional

![Dora the Explorer](image)

Sample B: Physical features that mirror those common among the mainstream culture, rather than the culture the character is representing

![Jasmine from Disney’s Aladdin](image)
APPENDIX H- Text with characters in question

APPENDIX I- Culturally Relevant Characters

**Illustrations have skin tone, facial features, and hair that are all accurate to the culture being represented**


![Illustration of a girl with braided hair adorned with colorful beads.](image)


![Illustration of a young girl wearing a blue jacket and bracelet.](image)