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Representation of Race in Children's Picture Books
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St. John Fisher College

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Abstract

This study examined how race is represented in children's picture books and how students reacted to those representations. Research was conducted in a child care center.

Data was collected through field observations, interviews, questionnaires, and audio recordings. The findings showed that the students are familiar with multicultural texts and are able to point out differences among characters and cultures. However, the students did not analyze the text from a critical standpoint. In order for students to use critical literacy, educators must understand it and incorporate it into their classrooms.

Representation of Race in Children's Picture Books and How Students Respond to Them

Those who challenge traditional education argue that schools are simply socializing students into the dominant ideology and that they are organized to promote specific values (McDaniel, 2004). They feel that literacy education is focused on learning to read and not reading to learn (McDaniel, 2004). Such practices encourage students to find the "correct" answer and specific interpretations set forth and deemed correct by the teacher or curriculum set forth by school districts. Students in classrooms across the country come from various sociocultural backgrounds, and oftentimes, required texts in schools reflect the perspectives and beliefs of the dominant culture (Woods, A., Fisher, D., Bruett, J., & Fink, L., 2009). Educators across the country attempt to inject more multicultural literature into their classrooms and promote critical literacy (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000). The concept of critical literacy "pushes the definition of critical literacy beyond the traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of the text and society until it becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture and their connection to current social structure..." (Shannon, 1995, p. 83).

School districts and principles are stressing the importance of including critical literacy in the classroom, however many teachers are unsure of exactly what is meant by critical literacy (White, 2009). Oftentimes "...merely asking teachers to foster critical literacy in their students is too often asking the blind to lead the blind" (White, 2009, p. 2). Therefore teachers tend to adhere to the curriculum and standards (White). Most curriculum and texts, although claim to promote critical literacy, often only reflect the perspective of the dominant culture of the community (White). Students can be

consciously and unconsciously affected by the stereotypes presented to them in picture books. These books help to mold a child's thinking about different cultures and if the books are misrepresenting cultures children will have a misguided view of those cultures. It is important to be able to see the stereotypes within books and understand the affect they have on readers. In order to understand the affect representation of race has on children, teachers should learn what their student's already know, and build upon that.

Theoretical Framework

Literacy is typically understood as the ability to read and write. However, the ability to read and write is simply part of literacy. Literacy is active and multi-dimensional and ever changing with new technologies. In order to be literate one must be able to express oneself in every aspect of life and society, whether it is in school (academia), at home in one's community or any other community one might belong to such as clubs and other organizations. Being literate also means being able to use and understand new technologies. Kucer (2009) defines literacy as "...learning to effectively, efficiently, and simultaneously control the linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural and developmental dimensions of written language" (Kucer, 2009, p.5). Literacy is not something that can simply be learned. Literacy involves a mixture of acquisition and learning. Gee (2001) defines acquisition as "...a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models and process of trial and error, without a process of formal teaching." (Gee, 2001, p. 20) Critical literacy takes literacy a step further. Through critical literacy, literacy is understood as a social action through language use that develops us as instruments inside a larger culture (Shor, 1999).

Literacy itself is social; meaning and languages are typically structured by the social identity of the learner and the context in which it is being used. To become “literate means taking full advantage of social and cultural resources in the service of academic goals” (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994, p. 441). Further, the concept of critical literacy “pushes the definition of literacy beyond the traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text and society until it becomes a means for understanding one’s own history and culture and their connection to current social structure...”

(Shannon, 1995, p. 83). It is important for students to develop the ability to take a critical stance when reading texts, and has become crucial in literacy education (Hall & Piazza, 2008).

Critical literacy theorists believe that literacy education must include the analysis, interpretation, and critique of a text (Bourke, 2008; Hall & Piazza, 2008; Stribling, 2008; Luke, A., Woods, A., Fisher, D., Bruett, J., & Fink, L., 2009; McDaniel, 2004). Critical literacy has a deep history in education which can be traced back to Paulo Freire’s work with oppression in Brazil (Stribling, 2008). Freire saw literacy as a means of empowerment and stressed the importance of critically examining the world we live in to transform current structures through the power of words (Stribling, 2008).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) expands on the work of Freire. The heart of CRT is not simply an issue of black and white; it is the way anyone is positioned in relation to whiteness (Compton-Lilly 2009). It recognizes multiple forms of oppression including, race, class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, language, and immigration (Compton-Lilly, 2009). CRT also focuses on the importance literacy has on the lives of the oppressed (Compton-Lilly 2009). Critical Race theory and it’s “connection to literacy involves

acknowledging and valuing the cultures, knowledges, languages, and abilities of students of color” (Compton-Lilly, 2009, p. 3). CRT also stresses the importance for all teachers to be aware of and understand the relationships between race, racism, and power throughout history and now (Compton-Lilly 2009). CRT stresses the need to change the way Language Arts is taught in school (Compton-Lilly 2009). Harris (1992) states that:

“Literacy functions in an oppressive manner...when curricular materials, educational philosophy, and pedagogical techniques combine to inculcate an ideology that denigrates a group, omits or misrepresents the history and status of a group, or limits access to knowledge that would enable the individual or group to participate in all cultural institutions.(p.277).

Recognizing the validity of Freire’s belief that literacy is a means of empowerment, his peers have expanded upon his theory (Stribling, 2009). Theorists believe “literacy instruction must also include, in fact, must emphasize the critique of texts as they relate to issues of power, dominance and intergroup relationships. Instruction must examine how texts, readers, and writers operate within various sociocultural contexts. (Kucer, 2009, p. 315). If a reader is uncritical and just accepts the social norms, it could “lead to a reproduction of existing sociocultural dimensions within the classroom” (Kucer, 2009, p. 317). At the core of this approach to teaching is the belief that while literacy enables students to make meaning from texts, critical literacy will allow them to understand how texts are influencing them and changing them as

members of society (Stribling, 2008). Critical literacy models explicitly aim to develop mastery of text to transform social conditions (Woods et. al., 2009).

Research Question

Given that literacy is social and requires one to recognize the cultural implications of literature, this action research project asks, how is race represented in picture books and how do children respond to those representations?

Literature Review

Critical literacy is used in classrooms across the country. Teachers often implement critical literacy through a variety of multicultural literature. Multicultural literature has changed through the years along with the way different races are represented. This literature review discusses current research related to how race is represented in children's picture books. The research addresses critical literacy, including frameworks as well as teaching critical literacy. It also discusses multicultural literature and its benefits. The research then narrows in on how race is represented in children's picture books.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy has become a crucial part of literacy education. The definition of what it means to be literate is changing (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Seely Flint, 2006, p. 199). It is no longer defined as simply being able to read and write. Literacy is ...becoming literate is about what people do with literacy-the values people place on various acts and their associated ideologies...literacy is more than

linguistic; it is political and social practice that limits or creates possibilities for who people become as literate beings. (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Seely Flint, 2006, p. 199).

Critical literacy encourages students and readers to look deeper into a text and analyze its social and cultural implications (Hall & Piazza, 2008). Being able to interpret text through a critical lens "...can help students become aware of the messages that texts communicate about power, race, and gender; who should receive privileges; and who has been or continues to be oppressed"(Hall & Piazza, 2008). The way students interpret texts is influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds (Au, 1998). It goes beyond the concept of simply reading for comprehension, students must realize that they have the ability to interpret the text from their own socio-cultural perspective (Fisher, 2008).

Critical literacy takes the concept of critical thinking a step further. It calls for social action based upon deeper understanding one receives through critical reading and thinking (White, 2009). To participate in critical literacy students must learn to consider questions and concepts about other people's perspectives, contexts, cultures, genders, races, languages, powers, privileges and credibilities (Shanklin, 2009). Critical literacy allows students to step into someone else's shoes for a moment and see and understand concepts from their perspective. It allows students to develop empathy for others and consider whether their perspective is credible and legitimate (Shanklin, 2009). It also allows students to consider questions of power, equity, and fairness (Shanklin, 2009).

Critical Literacy Frameworks.

Various critical literacy frameworks are used by researchers to analyze data. All of “these frameworks propose ways of understanding critical practices that provide teachers, researchers, and teacher-researchers with questions to ask when studying classroom data.” (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Seely Flint, 2006). Lewison et. al, (2006) developed a four-dimensional framework to explain their understandings of critical literacy. The four dimensions discussed “are (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action and promoting social justice” (Lewison et al., 2006, p. 198). Not only did this framework explain understandings of critical literacy it also became a useful tool to help teachers try new critical practices in their classrooms (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Seely Flint, 2006)

Another important framework to consider when researching and implementing critical literacy is that of Freebody and Luke (1997). When reading from a critical perspective, readers rely on their background knowledge to understand the relationships between the author’s ideas presented in the text and their own ideas. The reader plays the role of code breakers, meaning makers, text users, and text critics.

Another framework to consider is that of Paulo Freire. Freire believed language and literacy were vital means for social reconstruction (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). Freire’s pedagogy begins with a set of “words selected both for their pragmatic value in the lives of the students and for their phonetic characteristics” (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001, p. 6). Next the teacher and

students continue with reading, writing and critical discussions related to the selected themes and thus “learn the words in the context of themes that relate directly to their worlds and felt needs (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001, p. 6). Freire’s goal was for students to establish a critical consciousness and “move beyond critical readings of texts to become actors against oppressive situations” (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001, p. 6)

Teaching Critical Literacy.

Critical literacy is crucial in all classrooms. Many educators who are not experts on critical literacy themselves have difficulty finding ways to incorporate it into their classrooms (Bourke, 2008, Hall, & Piazza, 2008). It is important that teacher’s understand that their “...role...is not to scaffold children towards uncovering the author’s intentions and meanings, but to empower them to bring their own understanding and experiences to the text” (Fisher, 2008, p. 20). Introducing critical literacy in the classroom begins with the teacher’s personal understanding and use of critical literacy which expands to teaching students about critical literacy (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004). It is important for teachers to identify their own beliefs and biases so they are able to avoid selecting texts that promote their own ideas and stereotypes (Hall, & Piazza, 2008). It is crucial that teachers model critical reading through everyday teaching as well as providing students with “...a variety of texts that represent critical literacy” (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004, p. 55).

Teachers should understand students’ views on reading and the world (Hall, & Piazza). It is important that teachers understand how their students feel about issues such

as race, culture and gender because it allows a teacher to understand why students are engaged in reading (Hall, & Piazza). In order to do this, teachers might need to be creative and need to work with their students and push them to broaden their thinking (Hall, & Piazza). Another factor Hall and Piazza suggest is making the issues of power central in the classroom. They suggest that texts can be used to help students understand the role of power in society and also in the classroom. Addressing the issue of power often make teachers nervous (Hall, & Piazza). Reading and discussing text that explore the role of power is a good way to start the discussion off in an impersonal way (Hall, & Piazza). Discussion of the role of power could then lead the discussion to other issues such as race and gradually open the discussion to the class and become more personal as long as students feel comfortable (Hall, & Piazza). It is important for teachers and students to "...reflect on what they know about being critically aware and how it helped them to understand the text" (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004, p. 56). Reflection allows students to make connections to the text (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004) as well as to "(a) see that not everyone shared their belief systems and (b) raise important questions about the stances they took on different issues" (Hall and Piazza,). In order for this to be successful, teachers must include multicultural texts that represent children and families from different racial, social, and ethnic classes (Hall, & Piazza, 2009).

Bourke (2008) feels it is important to take students from being readers who accept text as it is to readers who question text on a regular basis. He suggests that teachers familiarize their students and support them in the process of asking deeper questions (Bourke). Teachers need to facilitate questioning that requires students to see from the perspectives of the characters (Bourke). Conversely, Shanklin (2009) suggests that discussion formats that steer away from teacher questions; student answers and teacher

judgments of answers work best. In order to achieve this level of critical discussion, teachers need to model critical questions and thinking and get students involved in answering their own questions (Shanklin).

Multicultural Literature

What is Multicultural Literature?

Multicultural literature is crucial to implementing critical literacy in the classroom. There is a difference of opinion when it comes to defining multicultural literature. Some advocates of multicultural literature believe the definition of multicultural literature is restricted to that of people of color such as African-Americans and Asian Americans (Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough, 2003). They feel that people of color have suffered a great deal more, and that they should be the focus of the multicultural movement. They also feel that:

The dominated cultures have been and are still underrepresented in the curriculum. We should focus on the disenfranchised cultures rather than all cultures. To include every culture, the curriculum would not only be unmanageably large but also miss the ultimate goal of multiculturalism.(Cai, 1998. p. 318).

Advocates of multicultural literature at the wider end of the spectrum feel multicultural literature should include any group of people that can be recognized by certain demographic characteristics including religion, location, and language (Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough, 2003). Some feel it is important to study all

minority groups apart from the demographic characteristics that define them (Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough, 2003). Others feel that the main goal

...of multiculturalism is to bring recognition and respect to marginalized people, *all* marginalized groups should be included. Although people of color unquestionably have suffered attitudinal, institutional, and government discrimination for centuries, so have other groups. (Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough, 2003, p. 261).

By including all minority groups, it allows a greater number of people to identify with multiculturalism which in turn makes the movement much more powerful.

Although the discussion of the discrimination of other marginalized groups is less common, restricting the discussion of all marginalized groups perpetuates their marginalization (Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough, 2003).

Benefits of Multicultural Literature

There are many benefits to the use of multicultural literature in the classroom. It brings children in contact with cultures unfamiliar to them and increases respect and acknowledgement of the contributions minorities have made on society (Evans, 2010). Multicultural literature can also increase one's self-concept and awareness of his/her own culture and heritage (Evans, 2010). It can make students aware of the inequalities and prejudices and encourage them to work to eliminate those inequalities. Multicultural literature "... can be used to teach the foundations of democracy, common good, cultural

appreciation, social justice, caring and compassion, moral decision-making, and social responsibility.” (Evans, 2010, p. 94). Students learn to understand and accept different beliefs and value systems and recognize that people have similarities as well as differences. Multicultural literature also has other benefits, it:

helps students expand their understanding of geography and natural history, increase their understanding of historical and sociological change, broaden their appreciation for literary techniques used by authors from different cultural backgrounds, and improve their reading, writing and thinking abilities. (Norton, 1990 p. 29).

Because teachers and multicultural literature influence students greatly, text selection and open discussion are crucial. Educators have the ability “ to affirm students’ lives, language, cultural context, and voice as unique and important through the selections of literature that is read. Quality multicultural literature should lead students to think critically about society” (Evans, 2010, p. 94)

Multicultural literature in the classroom should be authentic, realistic, and contain positive representations of characters (Evans). It is vital that the text avoids false views of discrimination and text that supports prejudices and stereotypes (Evans). Multicultural literature used “...should enrich a view of history, explore dominant systems of power, give voice to those traditionally marginalized and show people taking action on social issues (Evans p. 95) Students can learn to identify with the characters in the text as well as the authors (Norton, 1990). Choosing text that positively represents different cultures gives students an example to follow.

Race Representations in Children's Picture Books

One of the major struggles in the United States is the social relationship between Blacks and Whites (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997). This struggle has not only affected African American legal, social and economic power, but also in the portrayal of race and race relations (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). Historically, African Americans "...have been ignored, stereotyped, or demeaned in cultural images" (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, p. 443). These cultural images can be linked to the social relationships and power shifts (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). Schudson (1989) agrees and argues, "Children's picture books are potent cultural objects-have rhetorical force, resonate with children and adults and are retained in institutions" (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997, p. 444). Children's literature could "...affect individual racial attitudes and reflect our society's racial climate..." (Edmonds, 1986, p. 30). The portrayal of race in picture books influences children's understanding of status, boundaries and power (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). Board books play a significant role in the cognitive development in infants and toddlers, "they help infants learn to recognize familiar objects and to develop basic concepts related to people, animals, possessions, familiar events, and daily routines (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox, 2010, p. 211). These board books may also contribute to infants and toddlers development of self-appreciation (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox, 2010). During the early years of a child's life significant development occurs:

Research shows the infants as young as four weeks old enjoy looking at human faces in picture books. As early as six months, infants begin to ask questions about differences in skin color. And by the age of three, children notice physical

differences such as hair texture and the shape of facial features, which leads them to categorize people and to begin to form attitudes about people of different races and ethnic groups. (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox, 2010, p. 212).

It is important, especially for children of color, to be exposed to multicultural children's literature. It can increase self-esteem as well as cultural identity (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox, 2010). However, it is common for:

Children of color to absorb many of the beliefs and values of the dominant white culture, including the belief that it is better to be white. Stereotypes, omissions, and distortions, combined with an image of white superiority, play a role in socializing children of color to value the role models, lifestyles, and images of beauty of white culture over those of their own cultural group. (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox, 2010 p. 214-215).

Schools, day care centers, and preschools try to counteract the prejudices and stereotypes with multicultural books, dolls, toys, decorations, DVDs, and TV programs (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox, 2010). Incorporating multicultural elements is an attempt to foster development of positive self-esteem for children of color (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox). Unfortunately until the 1960s literatures did not contain characters or settings of any culture other than white culture (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox). If they did contain multicultural images or settings, they were insensitive and inaccurate (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox). Through the years, the number of books containing African Americans increased but the portrayals continued to be negative and stereotypical (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox). Unfortunately this remains an issue in children's literature:

In evaluating and selecting multicultural literature, issues such as visual and verbal stereotyping, authenticity and authority, perspective and world view, and underlying ideology must be considered...present inaccurate portrayals of people of color confuse children, reinforce stereotypes, and can even be the source of harmful misconceptions for both children of color and white children. (Hughes-Hassell, & Cox, 2010 p. 216).

Finding literature that shows diversity within families of color is also difficult(Hughes-Hassell, & Cox). Children's books that depict African American children with very dark skin or very light skin are hard to find. The same is true for Hispanic children and multiracial children.

There have been claims that the racial portrayals in picture books has improved over the years, however, there have been several phases in which the depiction of race has changed. From 1937-mid 1950s, Blacks are modestly represented in picture books and whites are portrayed in a more positive light. (Edmonds, 1986). Many books portray only one Black character and are almost all about Whites with Blacks in minor subservient roles such as menial workers, servants, or slaves (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997). During this phase the relationships between Blacks and Whites are not deep and "reflects the superior status of Whites and the inferior position of Blacks" (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, p. 450). Also during this phase, Black characters are represented in multiracial groups of children in religious themed books (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). Blacks were often portrayed as being more musical than other groups, Hispanics participated in more religious activities, Native Americans were

portrayed as strong and brave, and Asians were shown as reserved with few identifiable traits (Edmonds, 1986). There is no mention of race and demonstrates no interaction between White and Black characters (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie).

In the second phase, from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, there is a disappearance of Black characters in picture books as, “Virtually no Blacks appear in children’s picture books published from 1958 through 1964” (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997 p. 452). However, one of the most well known children’s books was published during this phase: *The Snowy Day*. *The Snowy Day* is about a young, Black boy named Peter and his adventures playing in the snow.

From the mid-1960s through the 1970s, the number of books containing Black characters increases (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997). Also, the portrayals of Black characters improve and are not as stereotypical as in previous years (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997). During this phase several *Little Golden Books* were reissued and depicted Black characters, however, the illustrations of White children were simply replaced by Black children (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). Also, a handful of new *Little Golden Books* were published and included Black characters, but rarely as the main character (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). No *Little Golden Book* portrayed only Blacks during this phase.

In contrast to the *Little Golden Books* during this phase, “The reappearance of Blacks in the Caldecott Award books is striking” (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997 p. 452). The award panel chose several books that featured only Black characters (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). From 1937 through 1964, only six books across the series centered on Black characters alone (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). However,

during this phase the percentage of books depicting only Black characters increased by 10 percent (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). These books depicted images of Blacks in Africa that were considered safe. Some of the African themes included the following: “parents interacting with their children, families engaged in work activities, children playing, and groups active in storytelling, dance, and play” (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997, p. #). Many of the books simply focused on the alphabet, counting, and language, however the African families still remain central, none of the characters are singled out and named (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie).

After 1975, the percentages of books portraying Black characters stabilize; there was very little change of Black and White character relations in both the *Little Golden Books* and *Children's Catalog Books* (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997). Oftentimes Blacks were used simply to add to the graphic elements of the illustrations (Forster, 1989). Black characters are mainly portrayed in “‘crowd’ scenes on city streets, playgrounds, or in classrooms” (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, p. 454). In the Caldecott series, three things happened during this phase (after the mid 1970s). First, books featuring only Blacks, focused on both Africans and African-Americans. Second, in the 1990s, books presented clear interracial themes or addressed political issues (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie). Finally, the more recent award winning books portray more racial ambiguity (Pescoslido, Grauerholz, & Milkie).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to use critical literacy in the classroom. There are many ways to do this, one way is through multicultural literature. Multicultural literature

along with today's society has changed how different cultures and races are represented in picture books, and thus changing peoples' view on those cultures.

Methods

Context

Research for this study will occur at an upscale childcare center in a suburb in Western New York. The childcare center provides care for children from several surrounding towns. The center is in a central location to several area schools as well as several shopping centers. The socioeconomic status of the families who attend the center is upper middle class and middle class. The center itself is not very diverse, the majority of the children are white. In the Pre-Kindergarten classroom however, there are two students who are from Serbian speaking families and one student speaks mainly French at home.

Participants

The participants for this study included three 5 year olds from the pre-kindergarten class and four seven year olds from the school age class. The pre-kindergarten classroom can have up to 16 children with two adults and the school age classroom can have up to 20 children with two adults. Both of the classrooms have one female lead teacher and one female teacher's assistants.

Students

The students who participated in this study were five year olds: Claire, Amy and Peter; and four seven year olds: Renee, Sarah, Anna, Kade, and Adrian. Claire just graduated from Pre-K and will be attending Kindergarten in a local school district. She is an only child and lives with her parents; they are not married but are together. Amy also

graduated from Pre-K and will be attending kindergarten in the fall. She also an only child and lives with both of her parents. Peter graduated from Pre-K in June and will be starting kindergarten in the fall. He is also an only child and lives with his parents.

Teachers

The Pre-kindergarten teacher, Allison Brown (pseudonym) is a white female who lives with her husband in a suburb in Western New York. She certified in Early Childhood and Childhood education in both New York State and Ohio. She attended Ashland University in Ohio where she received her Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood and Childhood education. She is certified in both Ohio and New York State. She received her Master's Degree in Literacy from Nazareth College.

The school age teacher Callie Green (pseudonym) is a white female who also lives with her husband in a suburb in Western New York. She is certified in Art Education in New York State. She received her Bachelor's degree from Nazareth College.

Researcher Stance

As a researcher, I played a passive role throughout the study. As defined by Mills (2011), a passive observer “no longer assumes the responsibilities of the teacher-they...only focus on their data collection” (p. 75). I chose to take a passive role because I did not collect data in my own classroom. I wanted to conduct the research as part of their normal routine and I wanted them to feel comfortable enough to answer the questions. I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College. I am working on earning a Master's Degree in Literacy. I currently have a bachelor's degree in Education with certifications in Childhood and Special Education.

Method

During this study, I used three sources of data collection. For the first source of data collection, I observed the classroom teachers in the pre-kindergarten classroom and the school-aged classroom read a multi-cultural picture book to a small group of students. I observed the children's reactions to the book, and took field notes. I noted the children's body language, how they responded to the questions, and the questions they had about the text. In order to ensure that I was able to capture all of the children's comments and reactions I used an audio recorder.

I had the teachers pause throughout the story to ask the children questions. Some of the questions included: 'Why do you think it wasn't safe of the other side of the fence?', 'Why do you think Sandra said the girl could not play with them?', 'What do you notice about the characters?' and 'What is different about the two girls in this picture?'.

In the school aged classroom, I had Sarah and Renee complete a questionnaire after they had read the text. I asked the questions and recorded her answers. The questions in the questionnaire contained questions such as: 'What do you like in the story?' and 'What did you notice in the story and how did that make you feel?'

Quality and Credibility of Research

In completing this research, it is crucial to ensure the quality and credibility of the study. Credibility as defined by Mills (2011) is the ability of the researcher to take into account the complexities that arise throughout a study and to handle patterns that might be hard to explain. In order to ensure the credibility throughout this study, I applied certain strategies. I did continual observation in order to identify insidious qualities as

well as unusual characteristics (Mills, 2011). I will did peer debriefing in order to help me reflect on the different aspects of the study (Mills, 2011). It is helpful to have another person's input on your work as they may see something you missed or did not consider. I also applied triangulation during the study. Triangulation is when the researcher compares a variety of data sources to cross-check their findings (Mills, 2011). I collected my data using various sources. These sources included observing the students as they listened to the text, audio recording the students' responses during the story, interviewing individual students. During the interviews with students I asked them questions about the text they just heard,. I was sure to collect all audio recordings and artifacts throughout the study.

I also ensured transferability during my research. Transferability refers to the researcher believing that everything in the study is context bound and that the purpose of their work is not to make "statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people" (Mills, 2011, p. 104). I collected data and information that was specific to my study that gave me the ability to compare it between different contexts. I also provided detailed descriptions of the context that will allow for judgments to be made about the relevance with other contexts.

Dependability refers to the solidity of the data (Mills, 2011). For dependability, I again used the triangulation method and used different sources of data collection. That ensured that the weakness of one method was compensated by another method. I also had a critical colleague "examine the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation" (Mills, 2011, p. 105). The use of a critical colleague is known as an "audit

trail” (Mills) in which my colleague’s feedback will help guide my interpretations of the data I have collected (Mills).

Mills (2011) defines confirmability as the “neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected” (p. 105). I ensured confirmability during my research through the triangulation process and by practicing reflexivity. I kept a journal of my observations which allowed me to constantly refer back to my research questions and reflect on those questions in order to create new questions based on the results in order to research further.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants

Before beginning the research process, I collected informed consent and protected the right of all of the participants. This study was a qualitative study in which I worked with multiple classrooms of students. I sent home a consent form asking their parents’ permission to participate in the study. I also obtained verbal assent from each of the children participating in the study. Both the parents and the children were aware that for this study, all of the participants will remain anonymous and all identifying marks will be removed from the artifacts used during the study. All of the participants' names will be replaced with pseudonyms and confidentiality will be guaranteed.

Data Collection

As described earlier, I observed at least two classroom teachers read at least one multicultural picture book to a group of students. I recorded all of the reactions the students and teacher had during the reading of the text. I audio recorded one-on-one interviews with some of the students to obtain more specific reactions to the text. I

informally interviewed the classroom teacher to acquire any reactions she noticed while reading and asked about how multicultural texts are incorporated into the classroom.

Data Analysis

To collect data, I used field observation of students and their responses and reactions to different texts. I also had students complete a questionnaire that was reflective on the texts: *Little Black Sambo*, *Dick and Jane*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Other Side*. I also informally interviewed the teacher about how she incorporates multicultural literature in her classroom. To analyze the data, I looked for differences and similarities in the data collected. Looking at the similarities and differences, I came up with two codes which became the categories in which I discussed the data. I came up with the codes by looking at the field notes I took while observing the students, the responses from the questionnaires and teacher interview as well as looking at the transcriptions from the audio recordings of the students reactions to the texts.

Findings and Discussion

This action research project asked: how is race represented in children's picture books, and how do children respond to those representations? Based on the data collected there were instances where my data is consistent across the three sources of data collection. I found two major themes that were reflective throughout the data. The first theme is how the students identified the characters in the texts. The second theme is relationships and interactions the students pointed out in the texts. I was able to come up with these two themes based on the triangulation I used while conducting my research and analyzing the data I collected because I used multiple sources of data. I used four

children's books: *Little Black Sambo*, *Dick and Jane*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Other Side*.

Little Black Sambo written by Helen Bannerman is a children's picture book about a young Indian boy who outwits four tigers who threaten to eat him. Sambo saves himself by giving each tiger an article of his clothing. The tigers argue over which one of them is the most magnificent. The tigers chase each other around a tree so fast that they turn into butter. Sambo takes the butter home and uses it on the pancakes that his mother, Black Mumbo, made for him. *Little Black Sambo* is often criticized because of its negative portrayal of African Americans. The scene in which Sambo eats 169 pancakes is seen as a stereotypical image of African American greediness. The book also contains stereotypical illustrations including flashy multicolored clothing, bare feet, and abhorrently exaggerated physical features.

The Last of the Mohican's (Author unknown), is a children's picture book about a young Native American boy. It follows the boy and describes what his life as a Native American is like, including living in a teepee and activities such as archery, hunting, swimming. The book incorrectly portrays Native Americans. The cover in particular depicts a young Native American boy in a full headdress, long hair, and a very western face and features.

Dick and Jane is a series of readers published by the Scott Foresman Company. Its lead characters: Dick and Jane, along with their dog named Spot and kitten named "Puff" inhabit a wistful and pure American landscape with white picket fences. The content is limited and focuses more on methodology: non-phonetic sight reading and repetitive, limited vocabulary. *Dick and Jane* depicts a stereotypical white family. The

characters were viewed as the perfect mother, father, children, dog and cat in a seemingly perfect suburban neighborhood.

The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson is a children's picture book about a young white girl named Annie and an African-American girl name Clover, whose homes (and lives) are separated by a fence. Both of the girls are told by their mother's never to go over the fence. Annie sits on the fence daily and watches Clover and her friends play. Clover begins to wonder why the fence is really there. Eventually Clover asks her friends if Annie can join them while they were jumping rope, they agreed.

Identification

Across all three of my data sources, I found that the many of the students identify the characters in the text in a variety of ways. While listening to the text *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson, five year old Peter pointed out that the girls in the story are "different colors." He was the only one in the group that pointed out that the two girls were different races. Peter was the only boy in the group, and the girls seemed to be more concerned about the friendship between the girls. The student's observations show that there is a difference in what these boys and girls find important. Peter's parents are both teachers and may bring more multicultural texts into the home and may teach Peter to be more culturally aware.

During the picture walk (Looking through the story and discussing the pictures butand not reading the text) of the texts *Little Black Sambo*, *Dick and Jane*, and *The Last of the Mohicans* I wanted the students to notice certain things about the illustrations. In *Dick and Jane* I was hoping they would notice that all of the characters were white and

well-kempt. In *The Last of the Mohicans* I wanted the students to point out the stereotypical Native American clothing, including the feather head dress and bow and arrows. In *Little Black Sambo* I wanted the students to point out how dark the character's skin, the type of clothing they were wearing as well as the stereotypical activities including cooking in the kitchen. The four students Anna, Kade, Renee, and Adrian pointed out a variety of characteristics when identifying the characters in the stories. When looking at *The Last of the Mohicans*, the students tried to decide if the character on the cover was a boy or girl. Kade said he thought it was a girl because it had long hair and earrings and was wearing a skirt. The other students agreed with him. The student's observation could be because from what they observe in their own surroundings girls wear skirts, have long hair, and wear earrings and boys do not.

When looking at all three texts side by side, Renee noticed a difference in the clothing. She said that in *Dick and Jane* the characters were wearing "normal" clothes, in *The Last of the Mohicans* the characters were wearing "Indian Clothes" and in *Little Black Sambo* she was not sure what kind of clothing the characters were wearing. When I asked her what she meant by "normal" clothes, Renee explained that the characters were wearing clothes that she and her family and friends wear. I also asked how she knew the characters in *The Last of the Mohicans* were wearing "Indian" clothes, she replied that she had learned about it in school. Renee's observation makes me wonder what the students are being taught about Native Americans in school. She used the word 'Indian' instead of 'Native American' which tells me that that was the term used during instruction.

When asked what else they noticed about the characters, Renee said that the in *Dick and Jane* the characters had “light skin,” in *The Last of the Mohicans* the characters had “dark skin” and in *Little Black Sambo* the characters had “darker skin”. She was the only one out of the four students who noticed that the characters were of different races. Renee’s observation could be that Renee’s parents and/or teachers have taught her to be more culturally aware or that she is surrounded by more diverse groups of people at home and at school. Renee’s observation tells us that she could be more culturally aware than Adrian, Kade, and Anna through her interactions with the environment.

Relationships

Another theme that surfaced during data analysis is that of relationships and how the students identified them. During the reading of *The Other Side*, the girls Claire and Amy were very concerned with the friendship between the two girls. They wanted to know why they could not be friends and really wanted them to become friends and be able to play together. The character’s friendship is something they focused on throughout the entire book. I think this shows that girls value their friendships with other girls especially.

When looking at *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Dick and Jane*, and *Little Black Sambo* all of the students pointed out various relationships they observed. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, they pointed out the Native Americans doing various activities with their friends: shooting bows and arrows, swimming, hunting, and fishing. In *Dick and Jane*, they pointed out that the family did various activities all together such as running, watching an airplane, and playing with their pets. In *Little Black Sambo*, the students noticed the relationship between the little boy and his mother as well as the relationship

between the little boy and the tiger. The students' observations tell me that they noticed differences in the types of activities each of the characters participated in. I was hoping the students would make the connection that the characters in the books were doing activities that were common in their different cultures. However, none of the students mentioned anything about it, they just pointed out what the characters were doing.

When I asked what they thought about the various relationships, Anna said that she thought the family in *Dick and Jane* was a "nice family" and the other students agreed with her. Adrian said that he thought the mother in *Little Black Sambo* "looked mean" and that he thought "she was making him do things like chores". The students also agreed with this statement. When I asked them why they thought the mother looked mean, they all said "I don't know". I do not know why Anna thought the family in *Dick and Jane* was nice and not the families in the other books. Maybe it is because she thinks white people are nice and black people are not because they all agreed that the mother in *Little Black Sambo* looked mean.

Implications

Based on the understanding of the data, it is crucial that critical literacy and multicultural literature be incorporated into classrooms. Based on my findings, I believe that most of the students I worked with are not familiar with critical literacy. Based on my research, critical literacy helps students interpret text and become aware of what the text is communicating about power, race, and gender (Hall & Piazza, 2008) and in order for students to participate in critical literacy, students must learn to consider questions and concepts about other people's perspectives, contexts, cultures, genders, race, languages, powers, privileges, and credibilities (Shanklin, 2009). The students I worked

with did not examine the text through a critical perspective; they simply pointed different aspects on the surface and did not look any deeper into the texts. Most of the students did not point out aspects of race, gender or power that was represented in the texts.

As a teacher, I feel it is extremely important to teach students how to examine texts critically and understand the deeper messages a text portrays. Based on the data, it is clear that critical literacy needs to be introduced and utilized in all classrooms, including pre-school and the primary grades. I think it is important that all teachers be educated on critical literacy and implementing it in their classrooms. I also think parents should be aware of critical literacy and how to promote it at home with their children. Children should be able to look deeper into the books they read and question the meanings of the texts. I also think it is important for children not to be “colorblind” and be able to recognize and respect other cultures.

Conclusions

Through this research project, I set out to determine how race is represented in children's picture books and what affect it has on children reading the text. To guide my research project, I turned to the critical literacy theory. Critical literacy takes the concept of literacy a step further. It is understood as a social action through language use that develops us as instruments within a larger culture (Shor, 1999). Paulo Freire saw literacy as a means of empowerment and stressed the importance of critically examining the world in which we live in order to change current structures through words (Stribling, 2008).

After completing my research project, I have realized the importance as well as the lack of critical literacy in classrooms. Many of the students barely recognized

different cultures in the texts that were presented to them. They did not examine any of the texts critically; they simply pointed out what they saw at first glance. Even when questioned about what they saw in the texts, they still only recognized things on the surface. The students' observations tell me that these students are unfamiliar with critical literacy and that as educators we need to first understand critical literacy for ourselves and then be able to teach our students how to take a critical stance when reading a text.

There were several limitations throughout my research. Time was a big limitation. It was difficult for me to find the time to observe in classrooms, as I work full time and during the hours in which I could observe. I also had to work around the students' summer camp schedule as well as their field trips. I was only able to work with students that attend the child care center I work at because it was the end of the school year. Another limitation I ran into was getting the parent consent forms back. I was only able to work with a handful of students because I did not get parental consent forms from all of the students. If I were to do this action research project again I would work with students from many different age groups as well as work with students from different cultures. At the end of the research I am still left with questions. I want to know what takes place in the students' classrooms at their elementary schools and how and if critical literacy is implemented at all. I want to know if and how parents utilize critical literacy at home and what parents teach their children about other cultures. I also want to know how to appropriately incorporate critical literacy in Pre-Kindergarten classrooms.

Primary students were found to have some concept and understanding of multicultural literature. The students' abilities to point out cultural differences and characteristics in multicultural texts can be used as a foundation to incorporate critical

literacy in the classroom. In order for students to examine texts from a critical standpoint, they need to be instructed on how to do so.

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Appendix A

Student Questionnaire

1. Who do you like in the story?
2. Which people don't you hear in the story? And what might they say if you heard them?
3. What did you notice about this story?
4. How does that make you feel?
5. Who has power in the story?
6. Who is obeyed and tells the other characters what to do?

7. Who makes decisions in the story?

Appendix B

Teacher Questionnaire

1. What reactions did you notice while reading the story?
2. Did any of them surprise you in any way?
3. Do you typically incorporate multicultural literature in your classroom?
Why or why not?