

Multicultural Literature and the Children's Literary Canon

by [Kira Isak Pirofski](#), San Jose State University

ABSTRACT

This article reviews historical research that has affirmed the value of multicultural literature in school curriculum. It summarizes the outcomes of pioneer pilot programs which successfully integrated culturally authentic literature into school reading and social studies programs. The article documents findings of researchers who investigated the lack of multicultural literature in the children's classics, Newbery Medal, Caldecott Award books, trade books and best sellers. The author discusses reasons for under representation of minorities in the children's literary canon and offers possible solutions to the problem.

For past three decades, researchers have continued to affirm that culturally authentic children's literature engages the imagination and enhances the language skills of minority children. In addition, during the last three decades, there have been successful children's literature programs which attest to the unique ability of multicultural literature in improving the reading skills of minority and at risk children. Despite this clear indication of the merits of multicultural literature, a concurrent body of research has found that there is a historic and current lack of culturally authentic literature in the existing literary canon for children including classics, Newbery Medal and Caldecott books, tradebooks, best sellers.

This paper presents an historical overview of research and reading programs which have found that multicultural literature is a valuable learning tool as well as research which documents the longstanding lack of multicultural literature in the children's literature. Reasons for the exclusion of culturally authentic reading materials in the canon are discussed as well.

Pioneer researcher, Florez-Tighe (1983), was one of the first educators to advocate the use of multicultural literature in school curriculum. Her research indicated that culturally authentic children's literature enhances language development and thought processes of African- American children (Florez-Tighe, 1983). Florez-Tighe (1983) believes that use of African American folktales by teachers in the classroom can teach respect for African- American culture and affirm a child's feeling of self worth (Florez-Tighe, 1983).

Grice and Vaughn's (1992) research involved 9 African American and 4 Caucasian third grade children who attended a southern metropolitan area elementary school where fifty-eight percent of the population were African-Americans. Grice and Vaughn (1992) were able to document that a measurable percentage of African American children responded more positively to books with African American themes than they did towards books with Caucasian characters (Grice & Vaughn, 1992). The children who showed a preference for multicultural books had been labeled slow learners and their reading level was two grades below their actual grade level. Yet responses gleaned from post study interviews showed that the children were able to recall story lines, assert whether or not the characters were authentic, and whether or not the children could imagine themselves as one of the book's characters. They were also able to comment as to why or why not they liked the book (Grice & Vaughn, 1992).

At the conclusion of the program, the 9 children in the research group who had scored below the

twenty-fifth percentile on the MAT 6 nationally standardized achievement test, were able to connect to the characters and situations presented in the African American centered books they had selected. And as noted by the researchers the children, "overcame some of their earlier problems with stories" (Grice & Vaughn, 1, 1992).

Smith (1995) found that African- American children prefer to read culturally conscious, multicultural books. In her study of three African- American fifth graders, she discovered that when instructed to self select literature, African- American children chose books that dealt with African American experiences. In subsequent one -on -one interviews, the students were more likely to respond favorably to texts that had illustrations and themes that reflected their own culture than those which did not (Smith, 1995).

Taylor (1997) conducted a study of twenty-four African- American and Hispanic American fifth grade students from the Southwest. The children were given twenty-four picture books and were instructed to give their opinions of each book. Two categories of books were offered, one were 'Culturally conscious.' These books used African-American vernacular, highlighted awareness of skin color, included Afro-American history, tradition, religious faith, and portrayal of extended families. The second group of books were 'melting pot' books which largely ignored ethnic differences and issues like prejudice, conflict or discrimination (Taylor, 1997).

The fourteen African- American children in the study emphatically identified the culturally conscious books such as *Jambo Means Hello*, by Muriel Feelings, *Tar Beach*, by Faith Ringgold, and *She Come Bringing me that Little Baby Girl* by Eloise Greenfield, as their favorites. They did not give high approval ratings to the melting pot books, *Daddy*, by Jeannette Caines which dealt with a young girl and her divorced father (Taylor, 1997). Taylor's (1997) results suggest that to increase an African- American child's interest in reading, and improve their reading proficiency, culturally conscious books can be a valuable asset.

In addition to research which documents the value of multicultural literature, there have been successful pilot programs which have used multicultural literature in elementary and secondary school curriculum. Follow Through, a 1966 Arkansas based reading program, funded by the Arkansas Department of Education, was one of the first programs which used multicultural literature to improve the reading skills to at risk school children. The children in the program were African- American children grades 3 through 8 all of whom had been labeled "at-risk" students (Building,1999).

Follow Through used a specialized reading curriculum called McRat, (Multi cultural Reading and Thinking). Following the administration of McRat curriculum, significant advances in cognitive skills, analysis, inference, comparison and evaluation skills among the African- American students who enrolled in the program were documented (Building,1999). The successes of the pilot program resulted in its adoption by forty-four elementary schools in Arkansas.

Project REACH (Respecting Ethnic and Cultural Heritage), developed in Reston, Virginia, uses multicultural materials for teaching social studies to middle school students. REACH integrates culturally authentic literature addressing the history and practices of minorities groups into the class curriculum. It is used in twelve states and roughly 60,000 middle school students have participated in the REACH project (Webb, 1990).

Following the implementation of a district desegregation plan, the Portland Public School system began to implement a multicultural education program. The program made use of culturally authentic

essays which discussed the contributions of African- Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans. This multicultural curriculum is used district wide in Portland (Porter, 1986).

In 1980 the Standard English Proficiency Program, a multicultural reading program was formulated and subsequently implemented in 1995 through 1996 in the Oakland Unified School District. The target population for the program included the African- American student body, grades K-12; 3,000 students, 132 teachers, and 100 parents (Standard,1999). This program, relied heavily on the use of teaching Ebonics, as well as multicultural themed reading material (Standard, 1999). The results of the program, revealed that students in the program scored higher than they had previously on the Comprehensive Test for Basic Skills (CTBS). Participating students gained an additional 7.6 national curve points on the exam. Students not enrolled in the Proficiency Program, and students in comparison programs showed no improvement in their CTBS scores (Standard, 1999).

Reading programs which advocate use of multicultural literature include the Michigan Reading Association (MLA). This group of seven reading experts joined forces with the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) and compiled an early literacy curricula for the new millennium (CIERA,1999). Recommendations of the MRA and CIERA include the use of multicultural literature. The need for multicultural literature for minority and African- America children was articulated in the following statement:

Effective instruction includes assessment, integration, and extension of relevant background knowledge and the use of texts that recognize these diverse backgrounds (CIERA,1999).

Successful programs like McRat, Standard English Proficiency Program, MLA and CIERA curriculum have been implemented to target populations and for limited periods. The need for permanent inclusion of culturally authentic literature persists. Webb (1990) believes that for minority children to benefit from multicultural literature, it should be used year round. Hylton and Dumett (1986) submit that introducing multicultural literature on a limited basis, for instance during Black History Month, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday or during Kwanza, is not aggressive enough (Hylton & Dumett,1986).

Despite studies indicating the value of culturally authentic children's literature in stimulating interest in reading as well as reading proficiency of minority children, children's classics, tradebooks, Newbery Medal books, Caldecott books, and best sellers do not feature multicultural characters, themes, and settings.

More than 2 decades ago Adams (1981) conducted a content analysis of multicultural representation in children's classics, Newbery and Caldecott award books (Adams,1981). For her analysis she selected thirty-two Newbery Medal books which were published from 1950-1981, and twenty-five children's classics published from 1697 to 1934. The multicultural factors she considered were: age, gender, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, disabilities, ethnic ancestry, illustrations, regional culture and language (Adams,1981).

Adams (1981) included classics: Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift., Swiss Family Robinson by Johann David Wyss, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson, Heidi by Johanna Spyri, Peter Pan by J.M. Barrie, Bambi by Felix Salten, Mary Poppins by P.L. Travers, and Moby Dick or the Whale by Herman Melville, in her reserch (Adams, 1981).

Adams (1981) found only twenty-one of the fifty-seven combined Newbery and children's classics books she had selected were acceptable in terms of some of the criteria she had established. Broken down further, Adams found that 3 of the twenty-five classics were acceptable, nineteen of the 32 Newberys were acceptable, this constituted a 39 percent level of acceptability, just over one thirds of the books surveyed (Adams, 1981). The multicultural aspects that were most acceptable were socioeconomic status, age, and regional culture.

Newbery books tended to have higher percentages of acceptable multicultural representation than classics (Adams, 1981). Only 3 classics, and twelve Newberys presented acceptable language patterns in multicultural characters. One classic Adams (1981) found unacceptable based on language was *Mary Poppins*. In Chapter 6, *Mary Poppins* travels to the South Pole where she meets two African- American characters, a man and woman. The woman says to *Mary Poppins*:

"Ah bin 'specting you a long time Mar' Poppins... You bring dem chillun dere into my li'l house for a slice of watermelon right now. My but dem's very white babies. You wan' use a lil bit black boot polish on dem" (Adams, 1981,p.19).

Other distortions of the African American dialects were found in many other of the books deemed children's classics (Adams, 1981).

The weakest category of acceptability was presentation of Non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic background characters Twelve texts had acceptable representations, but none of these was a classic. Representation in the classics of non -Anglo -Saxon persons, existed in negative stereotyped form and appearance (Adams, 1981). Adams (1981) offers the character of Prince Bumpo, an African-American in *Doctor Doolittle*, as an example of a derogatory non-Anglo-Saxon stereotype. Prince Bumpo says to *Doctor Doolittle*,

If you will turn me white. I can go back to the *Sleeping Beauty*. I will give you half my kingdom and anything else besides ...Nothing else will satisfy me. I must be a white prince "(Gary, 1984, p. 20),

Gary (1984), who conducted a content analysis of Newbery Medal winning books published between the years 1963-1983, also found negative stereotypes of African- Americans. Based on 3 categories, physical description, language, and status in the community, Gary (1984) determined that negative stereotypes of African-Americans were present in numerous Newbery and Caldecott book winners (Gary, 1984).

According to the findings of Gary (1984) , 8 Newbery books and 7 Caldecott had negative stereotyping in terms of physical description. An example of this can be found, according to Gary (1984), in the 1963 Caldecott award winning book titled, *The Snowy Day*. In this picture book, the African- American boy has an enlarged head and the mother, who is clearly obese, has a broad, black featureless face (Gary, 1984).

Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry, a 1977 Newbery Medal Book has negative, stereotyped physical descriptions of African-Americans too (Gary, 1984). Gary (1984) noted the book cover featured an African- American girl with braided, kinky hair, enlarged lips, and broad nose (Gary, 1984). Furthermore, 10 Newberys and 1 Caldecott had negative stereotyping in use of language. The 1974 Newbery Honor book *Philip Hall Likes Me, I Reckon, Maybe* was deemed by Gary (1984) to have distorted, substandard grammar and dialect (Gary, 1984).

Moreover, 8 Newbery books had negative stereotyping in terms of status of community, 2 Caldecott award books employed these stereotypes (Gary, 1984). An example of negative stereotyping, offered by Gary (1984), includes the 1970 Caldecott honor book *Goggles*. In this book the neighborhood where the main African- American

characters lived, was described as being dilapidated, unkempt, disorderly, and crowded (Gary, 1984). Researchers MacCann and Woodward (1972) also have raised questions about the portrayal of African - Americans in Newbery Medal winners and children's books in general. They believe that not only are librarians and educators unaware of racist content in books circulated in classrooms and libraries, but the authors believe that several of the books which have been awarded the Newbery Medal display racism in terms of representation of African American (MacCann & Woodard, 1972).

Aside from offering negative stereotypes of African- Americans, the literary canon is deficient because it under represents African- Americans in general. A content analysis of Newbery winners conducted by Adler and Clard (1991) disclosed that among the 10 Newbery Medal winners and honor books published in 1984-1988, "white males were over- represented" (Adler & Clard, 1991, abstract)

Reimer (1992) found that trade books and basal readers tend to not feature minorities. While researching trade books and basal reading programs designed for third grade school children, Reimer (1992) found that none of the main characters in the selected books were from multicultural backgrounds (Reimer, 1992).

Reimer (1992) also reviewed a recommended children's reading list generated by former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennet and Jim Treslease. Their list of suggested readings did not feature diversity and multicultural content (Reimer, 1992). The books that had minority characters relied heavily on stereotypes of African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians.

Larrick (1978) onetime president of the IRA (International Reading Association), an organization responsible for selecting an annual IRA Children's Award, has also noted a lack of representation of African- Americans in children's literature.

In 1965, Larrick (1978) surveyed in excess of 5,206 trade books published during the years 1962-1964. She found that, "Of the 5,206 children's trade books launched by sixty- three publishers in the three year period, only 349 include 1 or more Negroes- an average of 6.7 percent" (Taxel, 1986, 25). As late as 1972, Larrick (1978) continued to assert, vis a vi children's fiction, "Integration may be the law of the land, but most of the books children see are all white" (Taxel, 1986, 25).

When Larrick's (1978) study was replicated in 1975, 689 of a sample of 4,775 children's books contained one or more significant African- American characters and 85.6 percent of the books did not feature African- Americans (Taxel, 1986).

The same lack of African- American representation in children's literature was found by Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Milkie (1997). The researchers evaluated 2,400 children's picture books published from 1937-1990 and found that there were African- American characters in only 15 percent of the books surveyed. Their sample was taken from Caldecott Medal winners, Children's Catalogue books, and the Little Golden Books' (Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Milkie, 1997).

From the years 1958 - 1964, very few African American peopled books for children were published

and, since 1965, the number of multiracial children's books published has remained essentially the same (Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Milkie, 1997).

Lack of multicultural portrayal in children's books is manifest in best sellers as well as trade books, classics, Newbery, and Caldecott books. A book is deemed a best seller if it has sold in excess of 1 million copies. During the last two decades, only 4 best sellers out of 253 featured African-Americans (Fiction, 1999).

The 4 books that involved African American characters include the *Cay* by Theodore Taylor which was published in 1970 and sold 2,300,000 million copies. The second book was *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry*, written by Mildred D. Taylor and published in 1991 it sold 2,310,000 copies. *Souder* sold 1,921,023 copies it was written by William Armstrong and was published in 1972, the last best seller which featured an African -American character was, *Snowy Day*, by Ezra Jack Keats. It was published in 1976 and 1,045,688 copies have been sold (Fiction, 1999).

The reasons for the omission of culturally authentic characters in children's books are numerous. The lack of African-American authors, in part, accounts for the lack of children's books with African-American characters. The sentiment that more African- Americans authors are needed, was echoed by Boyd (1991) who stated, vis a vi Newbery Medal winners, there is a,"need for children's literature by and about African- Americans" (Boyd, 1991, abstract).

The Council of Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) believes that publishing companies are responsible for the lack of multicultural representation in books. They offered the following remark:

When a publishing firm continually selects for publication, without meaningful counsel or input from minority group members, manuscripts that include certain facts and viewpoints and exclude others, and when the selections and rejections are determined by the publisher's own unconscious racist and sexist attitudes, then racism, sexism and censorship can be said to have joined hands. Through covert censorship, racist and sexist stereotypes and attitudes have passed from generation to generation. Consider, too, that no malicious intent need be involved. It is primarily a matter of orientation--a white male, middle/upper class, ethnocentric orientation (Gary, 1984, p. 15).

Larrick (1978) does not necessarily believe that the publishing industry deliberately practices racism in terms of the publication and promotion of books. Instead, Larrick (1978) has stated that there are too few multicultural books being written. She stated:

This year as a member of the Children's Book Award Committee of the International Reading Association, I saw the 1974 books by new authors--first or second books, As I recall the lists, only three were about Black children: one picture book about children in Nigeria, the other two about Black children in the United States. These were three of the most appealing and best written of the books submitted to the committee, But three is a very slim proportion of all the books that came in (Gary, 1984, p. 25).

Ten years after her original statement, Larrick (1978) still felt that there were insufficient numbers of quality books being published about African- Americans. She stated:

I am fearful that the flow of newly published interracial books for children is slowing down. Despite the efforts of the Council on Interracial Books for Children and of many publishers, we do not have enough highly readable, stereotype free books which will

contribute to children's understanding and sympathy toward our multiracial world (Gary, 1984, p. 25)

Underrepresentation of minorities in books awarded the Newbery may involve the lack of racial diversity among committee members. Since 1959, Newbery Medal books have been selected by children's book librarians, children's public school librarians, members of the ALA (American Library Association), and the ALSC (Association for Library Service to Children) (Peltola, 1996). The committee does not make provisions for admitting minority members into the decision making process.

The selection committee criteria is based on interpretation of a theme or concept, clarity, organization, development of plot and character, appropriateness of style, delineation of setting, and accuracy of information (Peltola, 1996). Conceivably a book with biased language and stereotypes could qualify for the Newbery Medal. Conversely, a book with social merit could be overlooked.

Either by oversight or by intent, the publishing industry has contributed towards making the literary canon for children a predominately Caucasian dominated enclave in terms of titles and authors.

For multicultural curriculum to have an impact on minorities, the literary canon for children must include more culturally authentic books. Without fundamental changes, specifically insuring that the Newbery and Caldecott advisory boards include minorities in their decision making process, and pressuring publishing houses to seek out minority authors, the literary canon will remain, "all white" and the historical lack of good multicultural literature for children will persist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, Karen Irene, "Multicultural Representation in Children's Books," ERIC, ED219750, 1981,32 p.

Aiex, Nola Kortner, 1989, Literature as Lessons on the Diversity of Culture. ERIC Digest.,ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills Bloomington IN. ED306602

Boyd, Candy Dawson. Crisis Time: The Need for African-American Literature in the World of Children's Books. School Library Media Annual (SLMA); v9 p49-59 1991. 1991
<http://ericir.syr.edu/plweb-cgi/fastweb?search>

The Building Tool Room: Effective and Replicable Programs for Students Placed at Risk in /Elementary and Middle Schools." <http://www.newhorizons.org/trm-atrosread/html#read1>, 1999

Fiction List for Children, best sellers, <http://130.108.134.29/dept/eng/child.htm>, 5/5/99

Florez-Tighe, Viola, and others," Multiethnic Literature Supplements for Basal Readers," ERIC no.246391, 1983, Forbes, Beth," Children's Books: Very Little Written in Black and White," Purdue News, January 17, 1997

Gary Doris Christine, "A Study of Black Characters in Caldecott and Newbery Award and Honor Books for Children," ERIC No. ED354527, April 1984, 178 p.

Grice, Mary Oldham, Vaughn Courtney, "Third Graders Respond to Literature for and About Afro

Americans," *Urban Review*, 1992, 24,2, June 149-164

Hylton, V.W., & Dumett, L. (1986). *Multiethnic/multicultural materials*. Richmond: Virginia State Department of Education, Division of Technical Assistance for Equity in Education. (ED 272 440) http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed327613.html

Jones, C. (Ed.). (1986). *Elementary social studies curriculum guide (K-5)*. Albuquerque: Albuquerque Public Schools. (ED 274 614) http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed327613.html

Larrick, Nancy. *Classroom Magazines: A Critique of 45 Top Sellers*. Learning; v7 n2 p60-69 Oct 1978. <http://ericir.syr.edu/plweb-cgi/fastweb?search>

Ott, Elizabeth, "The Language and Reading Education Program of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory," ERIC no.:ED016542, 1967

Peltola, Bette,(1998), " Newbery Description, History & Criteria," American Library Association (ALA) , Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) <http://www.ala.org/alsc/nmedal.html>

Pescosolido, Bernice A; Grauerholz, Elizabeth; Milkie, Melissa A. 1997."Culture and Conflict: The Portrayal of Blacks in U.S. Children's Picture books through the Mid-and Late-Twentieth Century," *American Sociological Review*, 62, 3, 423-444 p.

Reimer, Kathryn Meyer , 1992, *Multiethnic Literature: Holding Fast to Dreams*. Technical Report No. 551, ERIC_NO: ED343128

Sexton, P. (1986). *A statistical portrait of the multicultural/multiethnic student population in Portland Public Schools. A Summary Report*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. (ED 276 797)http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed327613.html

Sims, Rudine, "Strong Black Girls: A Ten Year Old Responds to Fiction about African Americans," *Journal of Research and Development in Education* v 16 n3 p21-28 Spring 1983

"Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Politics," *The Contrarian: News & Comments on Women's Issues*, vol.. 2, No.6, March 19, 1998, <http://www.pacificresearch.org//contrn/98-03-19.html>

Smith, Elizabeth Bridges, "Anchored in our Literature: Students Responding To African American Literature," *Language Arts*, v 72n8p571-74 Dec 1995

Taxel, Joel," *The Black Experience in Children's Fiction: Controversies Surrounding Award Winning Books*," *Curriculum Inquiry*, v16 n3 p245-81 Fall 1986

Taylor, Gail Singleton," *Multicultural Literature Preferences of Low Ability African American and Hispanic American Fifth Graders*," *Reading Improvement*, v34 n1 p37-48, Spring 1997

Webb Michael, "Multicultural Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools," ERIC Digest Number 67, Jul. 1990, ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education New York, NY. ED327613 <http://ericae.net/edo/ED327613.HTM>,