

## **Building Momentum: The Importance of Multicultural Literature in the Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

*It is often said that reading is fundamental. Reading is part of every educational subject. Research has found that when students have a strong literacy and reading background, it enhances their overall achievement (Cunningham, 2005; Howard, 2010). However, the literature available in the classroom often does not match the diversity of students in the classroom, creating a disconnect between the classroom and student. This chapter examines literature regarding reading engagement of children from diverse backgrounds.*

The work of this manuscript resulted from the 2013 TALE Conference session called *Children's Literature: The Key to Academic Classroom Success*. The session discussed the importance of engaging students' interests, assisting in making connections across content area, and developing problem solving and divergent thinking skills. Yet a review of National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that students of color are not achieving academic success at the proficient levels. Including multicultural children's literature would support academic success by assisting the children in making connections with the characters in the literature. It would also support students of other cultures by allowing them to see different points and inspire divergent thinking. This is why multicultural literature is often called a mirror and window. Using multicultural literature in the classroom is one way to build momentum in a student's academic success.

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The student population in the United States will continue to grow more diverse in the next two decades in terms of race, ethnicity, and language (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). By 2022, over 50% of students in K-12 will be of a race or ethnic group other than White, and currently, several states are already in this category, including Texas, California, New York, and Hawaii (Kyles & Olafson, 2008). This diversity has caused some researchers to question if a Eurocentric curriculum taught by a majority of European American teachers is appropriate for a diverse student population (Herrera, 2010). The cultural mismatch or cultural discontinuity that often

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occurs in schools has prompted some educators to advocate for the usage of culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural education in school systems (Banks & McGee Banks, 2009; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). This chapter presents a review of the research regarding the use of multicultural literature in the classroom.

### **Introduction**

It is often said that reading is fundamental. Reading is part of every educational subject and has been called the “most important subject area for academic success” (Howard, 2010, p. 15). Yet a review of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for 2013 show that only 17% of African American students, 20% of Hispanic students, and 21% of American Indian/Alaska Native students scored proficient or above. In comparison 46% of White students and 52% of Asian/Pacific Islander students scored proficient or above (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013) on the NAEP. This chapter examines how multicultural literature can increase students’ reading engagement, thereby increasing students’ reading achievement.

Social constructivism, according to Au (2011), is “a powerful and generative framework for thinking about the literacy achievement gap” (p. 27). Using this perspective, Au offered five explanations for the literacy achievement gap evidenced by the research described above: linguistic differences, cultural differences, discrimination, inferior education, and rationales for schooling. Au (2011) proposed several methods for closing the literacy achievement gap. Specifically, she posited that if teachers begin using the works of authors of diverse backgrounds, using materials that present diverse cultures in an authentic manner, and becoming culturally responsive in their management of classrooms and interactions with students, they will assist in the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds. This chapter provides insight into the need for increased multicultural literature in the classroom, including its impact on reading engagement and comprehension.

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### **Reading Engagement and Comprehension**

Guthrie (2004) examined NAEP and PISA data and suggested that engaged reading can prevail over the reading achievement gap in spite of gender, parental education, and income. There are three components of engagement in reading in the PISA: diversity of reading, frequency of leisure reading, and attitude toward reading (Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2007). After examining the PISA data for 15-year-olds in 27 countries, the conclusion was drawn that “the level of a student’s reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background, indicating that cultivating a student’s interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantage” (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004, p. 8). This conclusion was also evidenced in the PISA 2009 results (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010).

Research has shown there is a decline in children’s reading for pleasure between the ages of 8 and 11 (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995; Scholastic, 2008). A Scholastic (2008) survey found children between the ages of 9 to 11 were three times as likely to be identified as low-frequency readers as children between the ages of 5 to 8. Thirty-four percent of children between the ages 9 and 11 said one of the top reasons they did not read for pleasure was because they were unable to find books they liked. This may be because this is the period when children are transitioning from picture books and easy readers to chapter books (Barkley, 2009).

Strauss (2011) found that level of agreement (i.e., agree or strongly agree) for the statement that reading was a favorite activity was similar for Whites (33%), African Americans (34%), and Hispanics (27%), and Asians (44%). However, for White and Asian students who strongly disagreed with the statement, they scored 77% and 76%, respectively, at or below the basic reading level. African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans who disagreed with the statement scored 93%, 91%, and 89%, respectively, at the basic or below basic reading level (Strauss, 2011). Therefore, children of color who dislike reading score at the basic or below basic reading level.

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As they progress through elementary school, children tend to become less motivated to read and often develop negative reading attitudes and beliefs which impact their future reading achievement (McKenna, et al., 1995; Wigfield, 1997). Students who have reading problems in the fourth grade tend to continue to have reading issues in future grades (Allington, 2002). The Casey Foundation (2011) found students who had not reached a proficient reading level at third grade were four times as likely to have left high school than students who were proficient readers in third grade. They also found students who were not basic readers in third grade were six times less likely to graduate from high school than proficient readers.

Reading comprehension, which is one of the focuses of the reading achievement tests, has been substantially correlated to reading motivation in later elementary grades (Guthrie et al., 2007). Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) developed an engagement model of reading comprehension development. One premise of this model is that reading comprehension is the result of a time spent engaging in reading. In Guthrie et al. (2007), engaged reading is described as “motivated, strategic, knowledge driven, and socially interactive” (p. 283). Engaged reading is influenced by the types of experiences students have in the classroom (Guthrie & Cox, 2001). Based on previous research (Baker and Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), children’s reading motivation in later elementary grades was based on several factors: curiosity or interest, preference for challenge, involvement, self-efficacy, competition, recognition, grades, social interaction, and work avoidance (Guthrie et al., 2007). A student’s interest in reading has been shown to correlate with (a) deep processing of individual texts (Schiefele, 1999); (b) elementary students’ reading grades (Alexander & Murphy, 1998); and (c) elementary students’ ability to recall passages (Renninger, 1992).

Guthrie et al. (2007) examined reading motivation and comprehension using pre- and post-interview data, teacher ratings, motivation self-reports, and reading comprehension scores of four fourth-grade students. They found that highly interested students had a positive attitude toward certain authors and books and had favorite topics, while the least interested readers tended not to have a favorite book

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and did not enjoy any authors. They also did not list reading as a preferred activity. Those students who expressed a high interest in reading tended to like being able to select what they read, while children who showed less interest in reading did not believe selecting what they read was important. Reading motivation was found to increase reading comprehension as measured by changes in comprehension on the standardized test. However, reading comprehension did not influence motivational growth.

Straus (2011) examined the motivation to read, application of reading strategies, activation and use of readers' knowledge, and social interaction around texts using the 2007 NAEP scores of eighth-graders. Straus (2011) suggested not only that reading achievement could be predicted by engaged reading but that classroom instruction influenced reading engagement. Motivation to read was found to be the strongest predictor of reading achievement, though all four constructs were significant predictors for all ethnic groups and genders.

Using the Guthrie and Wigfield model (2000), Padak and Potenza-Radis (2010) suggested that there are three keys for motivating struggling readers. The first is purposeful, authentic reading programs that consist of texts that are connected to students' interests, lives, and the real world. These types of texts assist students in becoming engaged readers. Authentic texts have natural language patterns that assist struggling readers in using their oral language competence. The other two keys are having time for independent reading and having an authentic and purposeful instructional routine. With motivation impacting student achievement, teachers must consider ways to improve the motivation of all students, including students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds. As stated previously, CLEED students are more likely to score in the basic or below basic in their reading levels. Increasing the amount of multicultural literature would allow these students to see themselves in the story and bridge the home and school gaps, as well as increasing their reading motivation, reading engagement, and reading achievement, therefore, building momentum for the overall reading success of CLEED students.

The introduction or inclusion of culturally relevant texts has also been shown to assist in improving the motivation to read of culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and economically diverse

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(CLEED) students (Cleary, 2008; Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004). Cleary (2008) conducted a study of Native American students and found that they were more likely to read when the reading materials included representations of their culture. When Native American students were asked how teachers could improve instruction, they answered that teachers should include more stories that related to their lives and were about their culture and their people. Gangi (2008) argued that children need books reflective of their culture in order to start the process of becoming proficient readers. Children's multicultural literature could increase students' engagement in reading by allowing them to make self-connections to the text. This process may also impact the students' ability to perform well on standardized tests.

Exposure to culturally and linguistically relevant reading material impacts many aspects of reading. McCollin and O'Shea (2005) found that multicultural literature increased the reading comprehension and fluency and decreased phonological awareness gaps of culturally and linguistically diverse students. They suggested that relevant reading materials assist in supporting the students' reading acquisition skills and motivation to read.

### **Lack of Diversity in Children's Literature**

Teachers need to examine the diversity of their classroom library. The foundational study that examined the lack of diversity in children's publications was completed by Nancy Larrick (1965). Larrick examined over 5,000 books published between 1962 and 1964. She found only 6.6% of the books published during that time period included an African American character and less than 1% had a contemporary African American character. Larrick discussed the negative impact this absence of African American characters could have on African American children. The lack of African American characters could also impact society because the majority of images in children's literature were White children. Some believe this study was the beginning of the multicultural publishing movement (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010).

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Multicultural literature may remain limited in availability (Horning, Febry, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2011). In 2009, only 15% of all children's literature published was considered multicultural (Children's Cooperative Book Center, 2010). A review of the National Endowment for the Humanities' summer reading list found that less than 5% of the recommended books were multicultural (Gangi, 2005). McNair (2008) reviewed Scholastic's Seesaw and Firefly book order forms for 6 months and discovered that of the 1,200 books listed, only two books were written by Hispanic Americans and one book was written by an Asian American. There were not any books written by a Native American. African American authors were listed more frequently but they tended to be featured during Black History Month.

The lack of multicultural representation of literature in the classroom begins at an early age. Pentimonti, Zucker, and Justice (2011) examined the read-alouds of 13 preschool teachers during an academic school year. The teachers read 426 books, but only 10.6% of the children's literature was identified as multicultural. This discrepancy continues as students grow older. Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, and Glimore-Clough (2003) found one-sixth of the sample of books for middle-grade readers had people of color as the main or major secondary characters.

Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010) examined children's board books published between the years of 2003 and 2008 and evaluated them for the representation of people of color using critical race theory and a typology developed by Rudine Sims Bishop. They found that of the 218 books reviewed, 89.9% contained White characters and 36.6% contained characters of color. In addition, 59.6% of the books contained only White people, while 5.5% of books contained only people of color. Finally, 22.9% showed multiple racial and ethnic groups, and 9.6% of the books examined were bilingual or Spanish.

Several studies have examined books for transitional readers who are moving from early readers to independent, self-regulating readers (Szymusiak, Sibberson, & Koch, 2008). Second- through fifth-grade students (transitional readers) tend to decrease their frequency of reading and tend to develop a negative attitude toward reading as a pastime and as a school-related activity (Lempke, 2008; McKenna et al., 1995; Scholastic, 2008). In an examination of transitional books, Barkley (2009) found 81%

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contained White main or major secondary characters, 16% contained African American characters, 1% contained Hispanic characters, 0% contained American Indian/Alaska Native characters, 5% contained Asian/Pacific Islander characters, 14% contained characters classified as other, and 3% were unidentifiable. There were 106 books containing main characters from two races/categories and 11 books that had main characters from three different races. Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, and Koehler (2009) examined transitional books on the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book List database (<http://www.fountasandpinnellleveledbooks.com>) and found that approximately 16% included literature about African American children.

The lack of representation of people of color impacts students. Students are more likely to read and value the importance of reading when they are able to see characters that are like them and with whom they are able to connect (Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). When students were able to identify with the characters in the text and their experiences, the students' level of reading enjoyment increased (Cianciolo, 1989; Jose & Brewer, 1984). Eight- to 11-year-olds often read to gain assistance in answering life's basic questions, including who they are and why they are the way they are, as well as questions about the world. The text and illustrations help students develop a sense of identity that stays with them (Cianciolo, 1989). However, multicultural literature not only assists CLEED students but also allows all students to move beyond stereotypes (Rochman, 1993).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

According to the review of literature students need to be engaged readers. Reading is fundamental to almost every academic area. The more students read the more likely they are to succeed academically. For CLEED students reading can open the doors to success in all areas of their lives. However, the lack of diversity in books creates a space where students may not be able to see themselves in the literature available in the classroom. Therefore, they do not become engage readers because they do have anything they are motivated to read.

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America has not reached the goal of all children performing on grade level in reading, especially students who are of color or who come from low-income families (The Education Trust, 2008). This is a major problem as the student population continues to become more diverse. The classroom literature needs to reflect the diversity of the student population. However, research has shown that the majority of the literature available is Eurocentric (Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010); Horning, Febry, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2011; Pentimonti, Zucker, & Justice).

The lack of characters of color lessens the teachers' ability to use literature to bridge the cultures of students' home and school as culturally responsive pedagogy suggests. Cummins (2007), in discussing the issues with Reading First and No Child Left Behind, stated that culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2004) should "emphasize that cultural validation promote engagement with instruction and is particularly important for student whose culture is devalued in the wider society" (p. 560).

Research has found that when students have a strong literacy and reading background, it enhances their overall achievement (Cunningham, 2005). The lack of characters of color also impacts the literacy engagement of children of color. Literacy engagement as evidenced by reading motivation increases reading comprehension. Guthrie (2004) examined NAEP and PISA and suggested that students that are engaged readers can prevail over reading achievement factors (i.e., gender, parental education, and income). After examining PISA data of 15-year-olds in 27 countries, the conclusion was drawn that "the level of a student's reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background, indicating that cultivating a student's interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantage" (OECD, 2004, p. 8). The same results were duplicated in PISA 2009 results (OECD, 2010). The Matthew Effect becomes evident because those who are engaged in reading increase their vocabulary and their understanding of academic writing, and therefore increase their comprehension skills; while those who do not engage in reading have the same level of skill or their skills become weaker (Stanovich, 1986).

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One way to reverse this Matthew Effect is for administrators, teachers, and literacy specialist must analyze the literature available in their curriculum for diversity. The literature available should reflect the diverse world in which we live. Research has shown that CLEED students need to be able to see themselves represented in the literature that they read. When they are able to see themselves in the text and use their prior knowledge, their reading engagement and skills increase, which leads to increased reading achievement (Cianciolo, 1989; Jose & Brewer, 1984).

In addition, it is recommended teachers need to measure student engagement and comprehension with children's multicultural literature. Student's engagement with multicultural literature can be measured by how well they focus on the text and avoid distractions, along with the attention given the literature and the dialogue that occurs (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Reading engagement occurs when students are able to see themselves in the literature they are reading, and reading engagement leads to reading comprehension. When students are engaged readers, they score higher on reading achievement tests. If teachers know what multicultural children's literature their students find engaging, they can increase their students' reading comprehension and reading achievement scores.

Finally, it is recommended that administrators provide professional development for teachers that keeps them updated on the latest multicultural children's literature and trains them on how to use multicultural children's literature in the classroom. Research has found that when teachers use multicultural children's literature, they tend to avoid controversial topics (Gonzalez, 2008). Including multicultural literature in the classroom can increase the engagement and comprehension of CLEED students, moving students to proficient and advanced levels on the NAEP and building momentum for their overall success in the academic arena.

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