

**The Use of African American Children's
Literature in the Classroom**

Thesis

**Submitted to the Graduate Committee of the
Department of Education and Human Development
State University of New York
College at Brockport
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Education**

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August 1998**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is threefold beginning with determining if teachers are using African American children's literature in their classrooms. The second purpose is to determine if the books that teachers are using reflect a wide range of experiences of African Americans. The third purpose is to determine why some teachers are not using African American children's literature.

One hundred surveys were distributed in two urban elementary schools and two suburban elementary schools in Monroe County. The subjects were the forty - seven teachers who responded to the surveys.

The survey was designed to obtain information about the use of African American children's literature by teachers in urban and suburban schools.

A descriptive analysis of the data from the surveys indicates that all the subjects in the study are using African American children's literature in their classrooms. The fiction books which they are using reflect a wide range of experiences by African Americans. The

overwhelming number of nonfiction books were about famous African American entertainers or civil rights leaders.

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Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

Purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold beginning with determining if teachers in urban and suburban schools are using African American children's literature in their classrooms. The second purpose was to determine if the books that teachers are using reflect a wide range of experiences of African Americans. The third purpose was to determine why some teachers are not using African American children's literature.

Need for the Study

Books have the potential to socialize young readers and transmit values to them. Books also have the potential to reflect young readers' self image, attitude, and emotional and intellectual development.

According to Kutenplon and Olmstead (1996) children and teens have to be seduced by reading if it is to hold their interest in the face of competition from television, action movies, and the street. If African American children are exposed to books that fail to interest them, if they do not see themselves reflected in the characters and the situations portrayed, they are not going to like reading. Reading requires more energy than most forms of entertainment, but ultimately it can deliver far more as well. It holds within it the possibility of opening new worlds, teaching kids to think for themselves, and facilitates educational success. African American children deserve to read books with multilayered characters, interesting plots, beautiful language, realistic dialogue and complex issues that are similar to the issues that they are dealing with in their lives.

Not only African American children should read these types of books. This literature can also be beneficial to other children as well. Children cannot be sensitized to the existence of people who are not like them by merely being told to like others. Attitudes are hard to

change. Literature can help effect multicultural understandings. Through reading, we briefly share in the lives and feelings of the characters. Literature can develop and expand multicultural understandings by depicting experiences that are common to all and by relating the things that make each cultural group special. A strictly Eurocentric curriculum gives young people a misleading conception of the world and their relationship within it (Bieger, 1996).

When children are left on their own, they will generally choose literature that is familiar and reflects their own interests and culture (Richard & Ernst, 1993). Therefore it is important that teachers expose children to literature that reflects many cultures, themes and views. African American children's literature can be a valuable tool in both urban and suburban classrooms.

The literature reviewed have offered compelling reasons why African American children's literature should be a permanent part of every school district's curriculum. But there were no specific data that revealed how extensively African American children's literature is

being used in American classrooms. Therefore, a study such as this one can be used to determine if teachers in Rochester, NY are exposing their students to these books.

Questions

1. Are teachers in urban and suburban schools using African American children's literature in their classrooms?
2. Do the African American children's books that teachers are using reflect a wide range of experiences?
3. Why are some teachers not using African American children's literature?

Definitions

African American children's literature – children's literature that is written by either African Americans or non – African American

authors, that feature fictional or nonfiction African American protagonists.

Protagonists – the leading character or hero of a drama or other literary work.

Chapter I I

Review of the Literature

Purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold beginning with determining if teachers in urban and suburban schools are using African American children's literature in their classrooms. The second purpose was to determine if books that teachers are using reflect a wide range of experiences of African Americans. The third purpose was to determine why some teachers are not using African American children's literature.

Introduction

African Americans are the largest minority group in the United States, therefore it is imperative that literature that features African Americans as the main characters be used in today's classrooms. This

literature is not only important for African American children to see themselves, but for children of other races to see as well (Stewart, 1995). Carlsen (1971) stated, “ Young people want to read about people like themselves with whom they can identify” (p.208).

If African American students cannot find themselves and people like them in the books they read and have read to them, they receive a powerful message about how they are undervalued in both school and society (Bishop, 1990).

African American children’s literature is written specifically for children or, rarely, written for adults but claimed by children for their own use. It focuses primarily on African American people, their cultures, histories and experiences. The literature may be written by African Americans or people who are non-African American (Harris, 1991).

History

Children’s literature has been used to educate, entertain and

socialize children since the eighteenth century. African Americans have been depicted in general literature since the seventeenth century. Literature created by African Americans for children first appeared in the late nineteenth century (Harris,1990).

The first one hundred years of children's literature was created predominately by and for European Americans. Most of the early texts that included African Americans as characters were filled with stereotypes. The seven most prevalent stereotypes of African Americans in literature were "the contented slave", "the wretched freeman", "the comic Negro", "the brute Negro", "the tragic mulatto", "the local color Negro", and "the exotic primitive" (Brown,1933). Each of these stereotypes appeared in children's literature as well. For example, in *Epaminondas and his Auntie* (Bryant,1907;1938) slave Epaminondas is depicted as inherently stupid. Helen Bannerman's book *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899; 1923) is considered perhaps the one book which cemented stereotyped images of African Americans. In this book some of the illustrations

show Black people with protruding eyes, large red lips, extremely dark skin and long , gangly arms. Such books were not exceptions. but typical of their time. Many remain in circulation today as reprints or they are available in libraries. Others are passed down within families as treasured artifacts.

Literature created by African Americans for children first appeared in the late nineteenth century (Harris, 1990). Most of the few known works by African American writers were published by religious publishing houses or relatively small and sometimes poorly financed black publishing companies. The church played a important role in promoting education and literacy.

From 1887-1889, Mrs. A.E. Johnson edited and marketed a magazine for African American children called *The Joy*. *The Joy*, published by the European American administered Baptist Publication Society, featured African American characters in church oriented stories. In the 1900s, an emerging formally educated, literate, African American middle class demanded culturally authentic literature for

their children. In the 1920s W.E.B. DuBois and Augustus G. Dill formed the DuBois and Dill Publishing Company. They produced Elizabeth Ross Haynes twenty- two volume biography series of African Americans called *Unsung Heroes* and the *Brownies Book*. The *Brownies Book* was the premier periodical for African American children until it folded after two years in 1922.

Arna Bontemps and Langston Huges published children's books, beginning in 1932 with their joint juvenile picture book, *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti*. Critics characterized Bontemps, with his sixteen books for children, as the contemporary father of African American children's literature.

In 1967, Bradford Chambers founded the Council on Interracial Books for Children. The Bulletin of the Council on Interracial Books for Children played an instrumental role in improving images of African Americans in children's books. The bulletin sponsored contests for unpublished African American illustrators, which sparked the careers of the core of today's best known authors.

In 1969, African American librarians established the Coretta Scott King Award which is administered through the American Library Association. The purpose of the award is to formally acknowledge excellence in published writing by black authors of books for children and young adults.

Since the 1970s, the number of books published by African Americans or others about African American experiences has hovered around 200 books per year. Rarely is that number surpassed and sadly, many African Americans remain unaware of the existence of these books. Many of these books never reach the hands of African American children. Some have been out of print for significant time periods. According to Bishop(1990), less than two percent of the children's books published each year feature African Americans as major characters. As a result, these few books are often unknown to classroom teachers. Thompson and Meeks (1990) stated that many teachers are not familiar with children's literature that reflects the country's cultural diversity. Due to the fact that publishing is an

industry that responds to profit, the law of supply and demand ultimately determines the future of African American children's literature (Kutenplon & Olmstead, 1996).

African American children's literature has never been a central component in schools. One important reason for this is the existence of literary canons. Canons or sanctioned lists of books perpetuated by critics, educators and cultural guardians, constitute the literature many students read. Unfortunately, most of the books on literary canons reflect experiences, values, perspectives, knowledge and interpretations of Whites. Very few of the texts written by African Americans or other people of color are designated classics. This is in spite of the fact that many are extremely well written and provide a forum for authors that have silenced or ignored for years. (Harris, 1990).

Benefits of Using African American Children's Literature

As early as 40 years ago, Jackson (1944) exposed white

adolescents to a set of books which portrayed African Americans in a favorable light. She found that, following experience with the books, the experimental group showed more positive attitudes towards African Americans than a control group. Reviews of more recent research also indicate that literature has an effect on its readers' attitudes. Campbell and Wirtenberg (1980) state unequivocally that books can make a difference and cite 12 studies in which exposure to "multicultural" materials, i.e. books which portrayed African Americans and other people of color in a positive manner, had a positive effect on children's self concepts, academic achievement, or attitudes toward so-called minorities.

Currently more African American books are being published, and much of the literature available to children does show characters who are part of the mainstream of American society, living in relatively secure home situations and engaged in the normal activities of children. However African American literature in school libraries is often limited to reading African or American folktales, histories of

life during slavery, or else contemporary stories that focus on the problems children face such as poverty and racism. The problems of poverty and racism do exist, but images of African Americans enjoying life in the United States should also be available to children. There is a need for teachers to make available a wide selection of African American literature (McGlenn, 1994).

An argument can be made that the culturally conscious books are essential for African American children only and not for all children. Purves and Beach (1972) found that children prefer literary works with subject matter that related to their personal experiences. They seek out works with which they can identify or which contain characters whose experiences reflect their own.

Fielding (1984) has done research in cognition that supports the notion that familiarity with and interest in a topic that has been read increases comprehension. Arguably, reading comprehension among African American children would improve if the literary materials were more meaningful to them (Madhubuti, 1989). If African

American children do not see reflections of themselves in school texts or do not perceive any affirmation of their cultural heritage in those texts, then it is quite likely that they will not read or value schooling as much (Harris, 1990).

Walker-Dalhouse (1992) completed a study to see if the use of African American literature would increase the ethnic understanding of her fifth and sixth grade students. Walder-Dalhouse concluded that she saw an increase in the multicultural awareness of the students as well as a greater effort by the students in trying to understand their feelings and those of their classmates from another culture.

Very little research has been conducted involving African American students' responses to African American children's literature . Sims (1983) studied a 10 year old African American girl and her preferences in literature. The subject, Osula, responded that she especially appreciated books that feature "strong black girls".

Almost ten years later in 1992, Grice and Vaughn (cited in Taylor,1994) interviewed 13 African American and European

American 3rd graders in order to determine their ability to comprehend, find realistic, identify with and enjoy 24 culturally conscious books. Grice and Vaughn concluded that the unfamiliarity with African and African American culture and history prevented them from fully appreciating these books.

Researchers agree that there are many benefits in using African American children's literature in today's diverse classrooms. They include developing of vocabulary, stimulating imagination, facilitating empathy, increasing knowledge of one's own heritage, fostering positive self concepts and identity and pure enjoyment (Bishop, 1990; Harris, 1990; Norton 1995).

Chapter I I I

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold beginning with determining teachers in teachers in urban and suburban schools are using African American children's literature in their classrooms. The second purpose was to determine if books that were used are reflecting a wide range of experiences of African Americans. The third purpose was to determine why some teachers are not using African American children's literature.

Methodology

Subjects

Subjects for this study were forty-one regular education and special education elementary classroom schoolteachers. Twenty-five of the subjects teach in two separate suburban schools in the same

district. Sixteen of the subjects teach in two separate urban schools in the same district. One suburban school teaches grades K-2 and the other teaches grades 3-5. Both urban schools teach grades K-6.

Materials

A nine question survey was used to obtain data from the subjects. A cover letter was also used to introduce the researcher, explain the nature of the research and give directions on how to return the survey.

Procedure

The researcher selected two suburban schools in the district in which he resides and two urban schools in the district in which he is employed. The researcher was aquatinted with at least one teacher at each of the schools that were used. These individuals were contacted by the researcher and asked if they would assist in collecting the completed surveys from their colleagues. After they agreed, the

researcher met with the principals at each of the schools to discuss the nature of the research and obtain their permission to proceed with distributing the surveys at their schools. The surveys were then placed in the individual office mailboxes of all of the classroom teachers at each school. The responding subjects complied with returning the completed survey to the designated teacher. The teacher then forwarded the completed surveys to the researcher.

Analysis of Data

A descriptive analysis of the data collected from the surveys was conducted to determine if African American children's literature is being used and what factors are associated with its use or lack of use.

Chapter IV

Analysis of Data

Purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold beginning with determining if teachers in urban and suburban schools are using African American children's literature in their classrooms. The second purpose was to determine if books that teachers are using reflect a wide range of experiences of African Americans. The third purpose was to determine why some teachers are not using African American children's literature.

Results

Question 1

Are teachers in urban and suburban schools using African American children's literature in their classroom?

The information gathered and analyzed from the surveys provide insight into the extent that African American children's

literature is being used in urban and suburban schools. The overall results of the study indicate that all of the teachers that responded to the survey were using this type of literature in their classroom. The mean number of African American children's books that were used during the 1996-97 school year and so far this school year is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean Number of Books Used

	Mean	
School Year	1996-97	1997-98
Urban Schools	9.1	10
Suburban Schools	6.8	7.4

The figures indicate an increase in the use of this type of children's literature this year compared to last year, in both settings. There was only a slightly higher number of books used in the urban schools.

The surveys indicated that both urban and suburban teachers are using African American children’s books that are fiction and nonfiction. Both picture books and stories for younger readers were also used. These data are reflected in Table 2.

Table 2

Classification of the African American Children’s Books Teachers Used

	Picture Books		Chapter Books	
	Fiction	Nonfiction	Fiction	Nonfiction
Urban	60%	15%	23%	62%
Suburban	58%	8%	15%	51%

Fictional picture books that contained African Americans as the primary characters were widely used by both urban and suburban teachers. The overwhelming majority of chapter books used by both groups were nonfiction. These books were primarily biographies about famous African Americans. Most of the biographies described

the lives and accomplishments in either the field of entertainment (sports, music, acting, etc.) or in the area of civil rights.

Question 2

Do the African American children's books that teachers are using reflect a wide range of experiences ?

Teachers that were part of the study identified the specific titles of the African American children's books that they have used in their classrooms. Table 3 lists the titles of the five fiction and nonfiction books that appeared the most frequently on the surveys submitted by both groups of teachers.

Table 3

Most Widely Read African American Children's Books

Fiction	Nonfiction
1. Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters	1. I Have A Dream
2. Amazing Grace	2. The Underground Railroad
3. Abiyoyo	3. The Story of Ruby Bridges
4. The Black Snowman	4. Harriet Tubman
5. Flossie and the Fox	5. Frederick Douglas: Freedom Fighter

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters was a title that appeared on 85% of the surveys. This African tale evokes the Cinderella story in its portrayal of two sisters and the young king searching for a bride. None of the characters in this book are African American so one could argue that this is technically not an African American children's

book. This reasoning also applies to Abiyoyo, a South African folktale. The main character in *Amazing Grace* is an African American girl that loves to act out her favorite stories. When her class learns that they will be doing a class play of *Peter Pan*, the other kids tell Grace she can't have the lead because Peter is neither black nor a girl. In *The Black Snowman*, fantasy and reality are blended in this story about an urban African American boy that is distressed with his family's poverty. *Flossie and the Fox* is a story about how a wily fox who is notorious for stealing eggs and a bold little Black girl that he meets in the woods. Most readers would assume that the little girl is of African American decent and not African. All of the stories, whether about Africans or African Americans, featured characters that were involved in a variety of different experiences.

All of the books that are listed as the top five nonfiction titles feature individuals that were involved in either the freeing of slaves or the African Americans struggle for equal rights in America. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* is about the first African American child to attend an

all white elementary school. The other stories feature well known African Americans: Dr. Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass.

Question 3

Why are some teachers not using African American children's literature?

When this study it was assumed that there would be some teachers responding to the survey that were not using African American children's literature. This was not the case. All of those that responded were using this type of literature in their classrooms.

Summary

African American children's literature is being used in both urban and suburban schools. The majority of books being used are fictional picture books. These books display a wide variety of

experiences by African Americans. The majority nonfiction books that are being used are biographies about famous African Americans that are either entertainers or civil rights activists.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold beginning with determining if teachers in urban and suburban schools are using African American children's literature in their classrooms. The second purpose was to determine if the books teachers are using reflect a wide range of experiences of African Americans. The third purpose was to determine why some teachers, if any, are not using African American children's literature.

Conclusions

The data clearly show that African American children's literature is being used by both urban and suburban teachers. It is encouraging to see that not just teachers who work primarily with

African American children are using these books. Readers of every background can come to understand and appreciate African American culture and contributions through exposure to these books. The African American children's books that the teachers in this study used do not perpetuate the stereotypes and racist attitudes that were so prevalent in children's literature years ago. The African American children's books that have been published over the last twenty or so years portray African Americans in a much more positive way. These books can have a tremendous impact on the self esteem and self awareness of African American children.

Implications for the Classroom

It is important that children are exposed to books with characters to whom they can relate. It is equally important that children's books supply accurate images of people no matter what their racial or ethnic group. Teachers can play a major role in

decreasing the racism and intolerance that is still quite prevalent today.

With African Americans composing the majority of students in most large urban public school systems today, the need to locate and use good African American children's literature has become increasingly more vital. Many of these students have become alienated from school and read poorly and reluctantly, if at all.

The use of these books can contribute to higher achievement in school and a greater appreciation for reading. For non- African American children these books also serve an important purpose. In a diverse society, few children can avoid coming in contact with people from a different culture. Will the result of that contact be cooperation or conflict? Will there be a feeling of mutual distrust or mutual understanding. There already exists an overwhelming number of children's books that are written from the perspective of the majority

European American culture. Children's books can provide a wonderful tool to acknowledge and explore African American culture as well. By doing this, all children will be able to benefit.

One major concern that surfaced in reviewing literature for this study was the fact that African American children's literature is not as readily available as children's literature that features European Americans. Finding just the titles of these books requires a fair amount of research. The process is made considerably easier if one has access to the internet and is somewhat knowledgeable about how to use it. The average teacher may not have the equipment, knowledge or time to find a varied list of all the African American children's books that are available.

Another problem is finding these titles at local bookstores. In most cases this researcher had to order these books by using the title, author or ISBN number. Using the ISBN number is the most effective way to locate and order any book. It would be difficult for the average child or parent to find a variety of these types of books. These books

are probably easier to find in urban areas that have a large percentage of African Americans living there. In these areas one can usually find at least a few book stores that specialize in books for and about African Americans.

It is imperative that teachers who teach in these areas, or even smaller cities that have even a small percentage of African American, use this type of children's literature in their class. If schools don't expose them to it, who will? African American children, in general, are just not spending as much time reading as other children. Many of these children simply do not enjoy reading so therefore they don't read. Making African American children's literature a part of every reading and English curriculum, especially in urban schools, makes sense.

Implications for Research

Further research needs to be done to answer the following questions:

1. Does the use of African American children's literature improve the academic achievement of low achieving African American students?
2. Can the use of African American children's literature motivate African American students who are reluctant readers to read more and thus improve their reading and writing skills.
3. Does this type of children's literature increase the understanding, tolerance and harmony between non- African Americans and African American children? Do these attitudes remain into adulthood and do they affect their interaction with individuals from cultures that are different from their own?

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Appendix

Survey

Please circle or write the appropriate response.

1. Number of years teaching 1-5 6-10 11-16 over 16

2. Grade level that you are presently teaching 1 2 3 4 5 6

3. Ethnic makeup of class: Please write the number of students that are members of the following ethnic groups. ____ Caucasian ____ African American ____ Hispanic
____ Asian ____ Native American ____ Other

4. Number of books, with an African American as the main character, that were either read to the students or they were assigned to read.

Last Year 0 1-3 4-6 7-9 over 10

This Year 0 1-3 4-6 7-9 over 10

5. Type of African American children's literature that was used

fiction nonfiction picture book poetry other _____

6. How do you acquire the African American children's books that you use in class?

school library public library personal collection book store

other _____

7. Briefly describe some of the obstacles that you encounter in using African American children's books with your students.

8. Please list the titles and/or authors of African American children's books that you have used with your students.

9. How did you become aware of this type of literature?

Thanks again for your help. Please feel free to expand or clarify any of your responses.