

# Knowledge of Multicultural Literature among Early Childhood Educators

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## Introduction

“Mirror mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” In today’s ever changing multicultural society, it is imperative for early childhood educators to be adept at facilitating the learning and progress of all children. In the United States, children of color make up about 40% of the population, and across the world children of color make up approximately 70% of the population. A primary goal in early childhood programs is to welcome and embrace the diversity of children and families in today’s multicultural society.

Therefore, early childhood educators need to hone their interpersonal skills, increase their knowledge about different cultures, and facilitate learning activities that compliment children from diverse populations. These efforts can be supported by incorporating culturally-specific literature that is reflective of all children and their families into daily reading practices. Culturally specific books define characters as members of a specific cultural group with details like family relationships, religion, language, names, and illustrations that portray many cultural details (Bishop, 1992).

All children need to be exposed to positive images that represent their culture and themselves in the literature they are hearing and reading. Reading to young children from culturally diverse, family-centered literature benefits children of all backgrounds (Brinson, 2005). Hence, pivotal to facilitating change in the instructional approach of early childhood educators is acquisition of a wealth of knowledge about multicultural children’s literature, including both what we refer to as “mirror” books and “window” books.

Mirror books are those that reflect and

expand upon the culture of the child reading the book, thus reinforcing the culture of that child. Window books, in contrast, offer the child an opportunity to learn about other cultures by providing a window into new experiences.

What follows is information culled from a summary of a survey of early childhood educators related to multicultural literature. The summary includes and highlights an analysis of the data and implications for educational practices.

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to assess the knowledge of early childhood educators about multicultural literature for children. I developed an instrument entitled “Survey of Multicultural Children’s Literature” and administered it to preservice and inservice educators in Shelby County, Tennessee. A total of 113 early childhood educators completed the instrument; 33 were preservice teachers and 80 were inservice educators.

Qualitative data collected in this study were the result of recorded responses to the survey questions and an analysis of the responses. Creswell (2001) distinguished the difference between quantitative and qualitative research by noting that qualitative research asks open-ended questions which enable the participants to share their views about the issue being studied.

The survey reported on here consisted of six, open-ended inquiries. The inquiries required participants to identify two children’s books each in categories featuring African-American characters, Anglo-American characters, Asian-American characters, Latino-American characters, Native-American characters, and multicultural characters respectively.

When open-ended inquiries are utilized in this manner, a multitude of different responses are reported. Generally the data are clustered and summarized (Cox, 1996). In order to synthesize the data, all of the surveys were analyzed. The responses

to the open-ended inquiries were recorded in a database.

## Analysis of Data

A summary of the number of responses and frequencies registered in the six categories by the study participants appears in Table 1. An analysis of these results follows in the discussion section of this article.

This study was limited to preservice educators majoring in early childhood education attending an urban university along with inservice early childhood educators in Head Start Programs in Shelby County, Tennessee.

## Discussion

Study participants were asked to identify two children’s books featuring characters from five different cultural groups, as well as two books featuring specifically multicultural characters. The results showed that the majority of the participants (61) were only able to identify two books for just one group—Anglo American. The identified books included, for instance, *I Love You Stinky Face* by Lisa Mccourt, *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* by Marianna Mayer, and *The Wednesday Surprise* by Eve Bunting.

In the school life of young children from diverse populations, what does this kind of response indicate? If early childhood educators cannot readily identify culturally-specific and multicultural books for children, this then clearly suggests that there is not an adequate supply of such books included in early childhood programs.

Moreover, this lack of identification strongly indicates a failure to know about and to integrate the culturally-specific books that are needed in daily reading practices to reflect all children in the typical classroom. Gangi (2008) noted that classroom libraries need to reflect our diverse population, and that by focusing on mirror books for many, window books are provided simultaneously.

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### Anglo-American Characters

Unfortunately, too often classroom collections provide many more mirror books for Anglo-American children than for children of color. In addition to the impact on children of color, what is the impact on Anglo-American children when they find themselves mirrored so frequently with few windows into cultures beyond their own?

Walters (2002) speaks of the necessity to better balance these practices. It is important for individuals to have lifelong experiences with literature that provide windows through which to view others. Equally, individuals should also have lifelong experiences with literature that provide mirrors in which to see those who are like themselves and their loved ones.

### African-American Characters

The survey results indicate participants had minimal awareness of African-American literature, with less than half (53) of those surveyed able to identify two books

featuring African-American characters. Yet children's books that focus on their own culture help African-American children flourish in print-rich experiences. Books with culturally-specific information and illustrations can nurture positive self-esteem in African-American children, while also encouraging children of other backgrounds to see African Americans in an informed and positive way (Brinson, 2009a).

These results further revealed that participants lacked crucial information about children's literature since the majority of these early childhood educators were not able to identify any children's books featuring Asian-American characters, Latino-American characters, Native-American characters, or multicultural characters.

### Asian-American Characters

The term Asian American refers to four major subgroups from some 29 countries and encompasses a wide variety of national, cultural, and religious heritages (Feng, 1994). However, as widely diverse

as the Asian-American culture is, relevant children's literature was virtually unknown by the majority of the participants (68) in this study. Those 68 respondents could not identify any children's books featuring Asian-American characters.

Yet culturally specific children's literature can acknowledge and highlight the diversity of Asian Americans and give insight into distinctive customs. Children's books that accurately represent the modern lives of Asian-American cultures may also help children move beyond the stereotypical "chopsticks and dragons" view of Asian peoples and lifestyles (Pang, Colvin, Tran, & Barba, 1992).

### Latino-American Characters

Latino Americans comprise the largest and fastest growing ethnic group in the United States and yet most of the participants (67) in this study could not identify any books featuring Latino-American characters. Isom and Casteel (1997/1998) have noted that Hispanic literature can introduce young children to a broad and rich literature by Latino authors, encourage self-acceptance among Latino children, and facilitate an understanding of the many ethnic groups within the overall Latino culture. Smole and Ortiz-Castro (2000) have pointed out that culturally-specific literature can also help children from other cultures develop an understanding and appreciation of the Latino culture.

Likewise, there are many bilingual children's books (e.g., *My Papa Diego and Me / My Papa Diego y yo: Memories of My Father and His Art / Recuerdos de mi padre y su arte* by Guadalupe Rivera Marin, *Mr. Sugar Came to Town / La visita del Sr. Azucar* by Harriet Rohmer and Cruz Gomez, and *Tan to Tamarind: Poems about the Color Brown* by Malathi Michelle Iyengar) available to promote familiarity with and respect for the Spanish language, culture, and heritage.

### Native-American Characters

The time has long passed for the silenced voices of the Native-American culture to be acknowledged and embraced, yet the opposite is demonstrated by the majority of the participants (73) in this study who could not identify any children's books featuring Native-American characters. As part of the best educational practices to foster respect for and counter misassumptions and stereotypes about Native Americans, it is important for young children to develop accurate, well-balanced perspectives.

**Table 1**  
Survey Participants' Identification of Books in Six Categories

Participants' identification of books with African-American characters:		
Two = 53	One = 24	Zero = 36
Participants' identification of books with Anglo-American characters:		
Two = 61	One = 15	Zero = 37
Participants' identification of books with Asian-American characters:		
Two = 34	One = 11	Zero = 68
Participants' identification of books with Latino-American characters:		
Two = 25	One = 21	Zero = 67
Participants' identification of books with Native-American characters:		
Two = 24	One = 16	Zero = 73
Participants' identification of books with multicultural characters:		
Two = 28	One = 11	Zero = 74
<b>Tabulation of frequencies of total responses:</b>		
<b>Highest Responses</b>		
Two Books:		
Anglo-American = 61	African-American = 53	Asian-American = 34
One Book:		
African-American = 24	Latino = 21	Native-American = 16
<b>Lowest Responses</b>		
Two Books:		
Native-American = 24	Hispanic/Latino = 25	Multicultural = 28
One Book:		
Asian-American = 11	Multicultural = 11	Anglo-American = 15
<b>No Responses</b>		
Multicultural = 74	Native-American = 73	Asian-American = 68
Hispanic/Latino = 67	Anglo-American = 37	African-American = 36

Hence, books should relay the message that although many Native people maintain their tribal traditions, they are also very much a part of the fabric of the modern United States. Good books also demonstrate the great diversity among the 400 or more American Indian tribes, each with its own history, religion, language, and government (Anderson, 2009).

**Multicultural Characters**

Stellar multicultural books enrich readers’ appreciation of persons of various cultures and help them overcome stereotypical views (Anderson, 2009). Unfortunately, most of the participants (74) in this study could not identify any books featuring multicultural characters. High quality children’s literature about diverse cultures should be readily available in all early childhood programs. Including such multicultural literature in the school curriculum will reinforce a sense of community, enhance young children’s understanding of and identification with diverse cultures and families, and provide immense enjoyment of a mosaic of literary heritages (Lilly & Green, 2004).

In their work with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, McCollin and O’Shea (2005) found that using culturally and linguistically diverse reading material facilitated reading comprehension, helped address phonological awareness gaps, and contributed to improved fluency. They noted that using materials that are meaningful to the students is essential in supporting their reading acquisition skills and strengthening their reading motivation.

**Implications**

The results of this study demonstrate a critical and comprehensive need for professional development for preservice and inservice early childhood educators to increase their knowledge about culturally-specific and multicultural literature. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (2010) reported that approximately 5,000 children’s books were published in 2009. Yet, only 331 of these books were about ethnic groups of color such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans.

McNair (2008) examined the Firefly (preschool) and Seesaw (K–1) Scholastic Book Club order forms for a year to determine which authors and illustrators of children’s literature, particularly those of color, were routinely included or excluded.

Her analysis showed that the names of authors and illustrators of color appeared 34 times, while the names of Anglo-American authors and illustrators appeared more than 600 times. These findings indicate that there is a selective tradition within the context of the Firefly and Seesaw Book Clubs that excludes the voices and viewpoints of people of color.

Lareau and Horvat (1999) have defined cultural capital as knowledge or resources unique to a given cultural group that provides social advantage to members of that group. Although all families, communities, and cultures have cultural capital, not all cultural capital is valued equally in certain settings. Foremost, early childhood educators should understand the social and emotional benefits for young children who are involved in reading activities that include multicultural literature. Namely, highlighting books about culturally-diverse families and related activities can nurture positive self-concepts in young children, build upon their innate cultural capital, and attune them to be understanding and appreciative of cultures other than their own.

Also important are opportunities for children to process literature through individualized expressions that boost self-confidence (Brinson, 2005). Culturally-specific literature should be used to illuminate young readers’ reflections of their own experiences through a variety of genres like fables, legends, fantasy, and contemporary and historical fiction. Children who are exposed to engaging stories cherish and remember them through to adulthood. Often such books model primary characters or act out central themes (Brinson, 1997).

**Recommendations**

Utilizing guidelines for the selection of multicultural books can help bridge the gap of knowledge for early childhood educators. Multicultural literature is designed to give all children a SIP, or “Strong Self-worth; Information/Inspiration; and Pleasure” (Brinson, 2002). Children need to be immersed in a variety of literature experiences that make them feel good about themselves in all aspects of their development.

Literature provides a wealth of information that can stimulate a lifelong thirst for learning. Literature that taps into the intelligences, strengths, and interests of children can facilitate thought-provoking competencies and achievements. Literature can also uplift children in a gale of positive energy, amiable perspectives, and good-humor (Brinson, 2009b).

Accordingly, awareness of the concept of building SIP is recommended when choosing developmentally appropriate children’s books to affirm, enlighten, inspire, and delight young readers. Teachers need to know where to find quality multicultural literature, so that students of color can benefit from reading books that depict their lives. Children from diverse populations also deserve access to mentors, roles that writers and illustrators from their own backgrounds can play (Gangi, 2008).

Subsequently, educators should strive to build anti-bias libraries in early childhood programs that include a wide variety of culturally specific and multicultural books. Reading multicultural stories provides students opportunities to gain an understanding of how the authors use language to share diverse experiences through their powerful descriptions and

**Children’s Books Cited**

Title	Author & Illustrator	Publisher
<i>The Wednesday Surprise.</i>	Bunting, E. Illus. Donald Carrick.	Clarion Books. 1989.
<i>Tan to Tamarind: Poems about the Color Brown.</i>	Iyengar, M. M. Illus. Jamel Akib.	Children’s Book Press. 2009.
<i>My Papa Diego and Me My Papa Diego y Yo: Memories of My Father and His Art / Recuerdos de Mi Padre y Su Arte.</i>	Marin, G. R. Artwork by Diego Rivera.	Children’s Book Press. 2009.
<i>The Twelve Dancing Princesses.</i>	Mayer, M. Illus. Kinoko Y. Craft.	HarperCollins. 1990.
<i>I Love You Stinky Face.</i>	Mccourt, L. Illus. Cyd Moore.	Cartwheel. 2004.
<i>Mr. Sugar Came to Town / La Visita del Sr. Azucar.</i>	Rohmer, H., & Gomez, C. Illus. Enrique Chagoya.	Children’s Book Press. 1989.

realistic dialogue (Jetton, Savage-Davis, & Baker, 2009).

Early childhood educators should be informed about notable literary awards to help jumpstart the selection of high quality, multicultural books for children. For example, the American Indian Youth Services Literature Award identifies and honors the very best writing and illustrations by and about Native Americans. Similarly, the Asian Pacific American Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature honors exceptional books by authors and illustrators of Asian and Pacific Islander descent. The Coretta Scott King Award is given to African-American authors and illustrators whose books promote an understanding and appreciation of the cultures of all people, and the Pura Belpre Award is given to authors and illustrators who best portray and celebrate the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth. Early childhood educators should be also aware of resources like the Children's Choices list and the Children's Book Council to help identify books of high interest for children.

Increased knowledge about multicultural literature comes with the responsibility for early childhood educators to advocate for more culturally specific books. Therefore, as early childhood educators obtain information about multicultural literature, a "train-the-trainers" model should be practiced to pass it on to colleagues for increased use in reading activities that engage children in the context of their cultures. The use of multicultural literature enhances student self-esteem, involvement and engagement, and academic performance in literacy (Spears-Bunton, 1992; Willis & Johnson, 2000).

Also, educators should share high quality multicultural literature with parents to encourage reading activities for children in their home settings. Teachers who recommend outstanding books to families model respect for the culture and provide a high standard of book selection for families to adopt (Lilly & Green, 2004).

### Conclusion

Children seek guidance from adults and we nurture children's spirits when we respect and accept them as they are and celebrate life with them (Taylor, Brinson, & Turner, 2005). Books are a powerful means of providing positive images and interesting material to young children (Banfield, 1998). The analyses presented here has demonstrated the need for professional development in the area of multicultural

children's literature for preservice and inservice educators.

Consider these startling facts: Participants were asked to identify only two books each featuring African-American, Anglo-American, Asian-American, Hispanic/Latino-American, Native-American, and multicultural characters respectively. Just two books in each category! Yet, with the exception of Anglo-American characters, most of the study participants did not have answers. Even more alarming, barring the identification of some books with African-American characters, the majority of the participants could not identify any culturally specific or multicultural books at all.

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (2010) noted that all children deserve books in which they can see themselves and the world in which they live reflected. As a result, heightening efforts to help early childhood educators become more informed about multicultural books can lead to increased use in classrooms and libraries, and more importantly, place these books in the hands of teachers, parents, and children alike.

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