Racial Harmony & Heroes: A Content Analysis of the Pearson Reading Program "Good Habits, Great Readers"

Brandelyn Tosolt & Bettina L. Love, Northern Kentucky University

Introduction

Multicultural education is a term with a variety of definitions growing from a number of different disciplines (e.g. Gay, 2003; Nieto, 2004; Pang, 2005). For the purposes of this chapter, we chose to approach multicultural education from the perspectives presented by James Banks. Banks defines multicultural education as having three components: an idea that all students should have access to equal educational opportunities; an educational reform movement to provide all students with those equal educational opportunities; and a process by which educational reform can occur that will ensure equal educational opportunities (Banks, 2007). Beyond this definition of multicultural education, Banks also provides tools for conceiving of aspects of multicultural education. In this chapter, we use two of Banks' tools: the five dimensions of multicultural education and four approaches to curriculum reform to examine the Pearson Reading Program "Good Habits, Great Readers," a popular reading series that is used in schools across America.

We argue that in order for schools to create classrooms where multicultural education is practiced in accordance with Banks, schools must be equipped with textbooks, books, and reading programs that are designed to empower school culture and social structure (Banks, 2004). Thus, it takes more than just willing, culturally-sensitive school officials to enact multicultural education; a school needs educational tools that mirror the multicultural educational goals and needs of the school. Moreover, we contend, that culturally relevant instruction is central to the overall academic achievements of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1992). According to Ladson-Billings (1992), culturally relevant instruction empowers "students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitude" (p. 328). With these issues in mind, we conducted a content analysis of the popular elementary reading series, "Good Habits, Great Readers," for its cultural relevance and alignment to Banks' approach to multicultural education.

Dimensions of Multicultural Education

Banks defines the five dimensions of multicultural education as being content integration, an equity pedagogy, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, and an empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 2004). Content integration is the deliberate inclusion of examples and content from a variety of cultures in their content area. An equity pedagogy refers to teaching techniques designed to build on a variety of culturally-based learning styles. The knowledge construction process is the extent to which teachers help their students understand the limitations placed on their knowledge because of deficit perspectives and a lack of honest dialogue. Prejudice reduction refers specifically to teachers' knowledge and reduction of their students' prejudices through teaching methods. Finally, an empowering school culture and social structure is one in which grouping, whether academic, social, or extracurricular and across the staff, faculty, and students empower students from all social groups. Banks argues that the first

four dimensions are not sequential, but that they interact with each other to help form the foundation for an empowering school culture and social structure. Together, these five dimensions of multicultural education function to provide specific examples of what multicultural education looks like in practice.

In addition to defining dimensions of multicultural education, Banks (2004) also outlines four approaches to curriculum reform. Banks defines the four approaches to curriculum reform as the contributions approach, the additive approach, the transformation approach, and the social action approach. Unlike the dimensions of multicultural education outlined above, this model is hierarchical, meaning that each one is considered a fuller approach to multicultural education than the level below it. The contributions approach is what is often called a "heroes and holidays" or "food, folks, and fun." In this approach, individual aspects of a variety of cultures are examined one after the other. The additive approach refers to a curriculum in which concepts and themes that span cultures are included, though the underlying structure of the curriculum remains the same. The transformation approach alters the structure of the curriculum to facilitate students' understanding of events and concepts from a variety of perspectives. Finally, the social action approach allows students to make decisions and take action on issues that are important to them or to society as a whole. With each increasing level in this model, the learning that occurs in (and sometimes out) of classrooms is closer to the full five-dimension model of multicultural education discussed above.

While multicultural education is often portrayed by its detractors as being basket-weaving (May, 1993) or a feel-good pedagogy (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001), research supports a correlation between multicultural education and educational outcomes. Multicultural education is correlated with increased school achievement and morale in Native American and black students (Erickson, 1987). Several studies have found that when culture is used as an asset in planning and implementing instruction, students of color benefit disproportionately (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005). In Sheets' (1995) case study describing the use of multicultural education in the case of Latino students who had academic records of failure, the author was able to bring about positive changes in their academic performance, self-esteem, and other critical factors. For example, she was able to help all of these students pass Advanced Placement exams in Spanish language and/or literature after placing them in Advanced Placement courses designed with multicultural education practices. Finally, Allen & Boykin (1992) demonstrated that black children were able to learn more effectively in classroom contexts that took into account their different norms. Thus, multicultural education, to the contrary of its detractors, can be a powerful model for increasing school achievement for students.

It is particularly crucial to find models that increase school outcomes for students who are identified as African American, as their outcomes are demonstrably different from outcomes for those students who are identified as White (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). For example, African American students tend to score lower on standardized tests than do White students (Capraro, Capraro, & Wiggins, 2000; Kunjufu, 2002; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). African American students are more often suspended than are their White peers (Blomberg, 2004; Rausch & Skiba, 2004). In addition, African American students are more often retained than their White counterparts (Harrington-Lueker, 1998; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003). All of these school outcomes contribute to drop out rates; thus, it is no surprise that African American students are more likely to drop out of school than their White peers (KewalRamani et al., 2007). The effect of dropping out of high school is clear: higher rates of adult unemployment than the general population and differential earning potentials, both in

the short term and over a career (KewalRamani et al., 2007). Finally, African American students are less likely to attend a college or university than are their White peers (KewalRamani et al., 2007). Taken together, these statistics, while individually alarming, paint a portrait of systemic exclusion from meaningful education.

Culturally-Relevant Literacy Instruction

One of the clearest predictors of frustration with school is the ability to read (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Unfortunately, we also know that if a child is not reading on grade level by the end of third grade, he or she is unlikely to ever "catch up" to reading at his or her current grade level (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996). Thus, students who do not experience success with reading in the primary grades can be likely to experience the other facets of negative school outcomes discussed above.

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST), in their publication *Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction* (Callins, 2006), explains that multicultural literacy includes the following aspects: willingness to use literacy, reading and writing, constructing meaning, printed text, and social context. Further, NCCREST reports that there are specific literacy practices that promote achievement in students from a variety of backgrounds. Finally, NCCREST focused on the importance of multicultural literature in classrooms as a "new pattern of instruction that can facilitate school literacy development of culturally and linguistically diverse learners" (p. 7). Thus, NCCREST lays out a clear pathway for early literacy instruction for diverse groups of students.

Similarly, Beaulieu (2002) argues that African American children, along with other culturally and linguistically diverse learners, are at risk for being screened out of kindergarten readiness and other forms of grade retention. In response, Beaulieu offers a clear solution: "Approaches to curriculum and instructional practices for African American children that *address issues of culture and language* indicate the greatest promise for helping African American children to become successful readers" (p. 137, emphasis added). Thus, both Beaulieu and NCCREST argue that attention to culture results in more positive literacy experiences for African American students, as well as other groups of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

It is our contention that one of the reasons that some African American kids hate school is that their literacy instruction does not reflect the principles discussed above or laid out by Banks. Instead, we argue that vast numbers of African American children, particularly those concentrated in urban areas, experience literacy instruction that is disconnected from their own experiences. Thus, we decided to look at a popular reading text used in urban schools to determine whether or not, even if divorced from the principles of multicultural instruction, the reading text itself facilitates literacy success by African American students.

Methods

We conducted a content analysis of the Pearson reading program "Good Habits, Great Readers" for grades fourth and fifth. The qualitative approach of content analysis allows researchers to examine text "through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278). Through content analysis we were able to extract themes and patterns embedded within "Good Habits, Great Readers" to describe the phenomena within the text. As all "curriculum can be understood as racial text, gendered text, political text, autobiographical text, and so on" (Baszile Taliaferro, 2009, p. 10), we were able to look at the

messages the "Good Habits, Great Readers" series gives to its readers. Thus, content analysis provided the framework to examine the Pearson text as a living document that shapes its readers.

We chose this reading series because of its popularity in urban schools. According to Pearson (2009), "139 school districts in 22 states across the country" (Pearson Education, 2009, para, 4) are using or have used "Good Habits, Great Readers" reading and writing curriculum since 2006. The reading program incorporates shared and guided reading instruction, which Pearson suggest increases reading proficiency by one full grade level.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is both a theoretical perspective and a research paradigm that is designed to provide alternatives to prevailing social narratives (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). CRT is generally considered to have six major tenets; for the purposes of this research, we focused on two aspects. First, we challenged the dominant narrative of knowledge as neutral through examining more closely the implications of the stories told through the reading series. Second, we demonstrate the importance of historical and political context in interpreting the stories in the reading series. It is through this lens that we approached the task of examining "Good Habits, Great Readers" series.

We analyzed Pearson's popular elementary school reading and writing curriculum through a CRT lens by individually open coding the shared reading books within the "Good Habits, Great Readers" series. After independently creating axial codes, we then shared these codes with one another. For the purposes of this analysis, we are reporting on the codes referred to as "school knowledge (Banks, 1993), "the contribution approach" (Banks, 2010; Milner, 2005), and "the additive approach" (Banks, 2010).

Findings

School Knowledge

According to Banks (1993), while school textbooks are the primary source of school knowledge, within their pages the racial, gender, and class divisions that exist within society are minimized to reinforce unity. Textbooks present ethnic groups of color and Whites as "largely in harmony in the United States" (Banks, 1993, p. 11), which also does not mirror U.S. history or the present day (Bell, 1992; Wise, 2009). Previous studies (Anyon 1979, 1981; Sleeter & Grant, 1991) examining school textbooks argue that textbooks reaffirm the status quo and fail to help students understand the complicated structures of racism, sexism and classism which are embedded within American society (Banks, 1993; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). This narrow worldview depicted within school textbooks is also a part of "Good Habits, Great Readers" as demonstrated below.

In the book *A Band of Brave Men: The Story of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment*, author Ellen Dreyer chronicles the first African American regiment to serve in the Civil War. The story reinforces manufactured school knowledge because it does not incorporate an in-depth analysis of slavery as a calculated, abominable act that took the lives of millions of Africans. The book discusses the plantation as a place where Africans Americans worked for their "plantation owners" (Dreyer, 2005, p. 5). At no point in the book does the author discuss the callous treatment of slaves or the inhumane conditions that the slaves endured. On page 5 of the book, slaves are shown working in the fields fully dressed in red and blue, almost as if in uniform. In the same picture, a male slave is shown working in the fields with a content look on his face. Such depictions, in combination with the glossed-over text, can lead students to believe that Whites and Blacks lived and worked on the plantations in harmony.

In discussing the events surrounding the Civil War, the book cites President Abraham Lincoln and the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation Act for freeing "3 million enslaved African Americans" (p. 7). Thus, the book leads its readers to believe that all African Americans were freed by the stroke of Lincoln's pen, thereby defining Lincoln as a textbook hero. The White heroism depicted within *A Band of Brave Men* is an element of school knowledge. Banks (1993) writes that textbooks teach that "America's founding fathers, such as Washington and Jefferson, were highly moral, liberty-loving men who championed equality and justice for all Americans" (p. 11). The book fails to mention that Lincoln did not think African Americans were equal to Whites and wanted to send African Americans back to Africa (Zinn, 2003), nor does it address that the Emancipation Proclamation applied only to the states still belonging to the Union, meaning that slaves in Confederate states were not affected until the states rejoined the Union. This sort of contrived history only perpetuates stereotypes of the White hero.

Throughout "Good Habits, Good Readers," people of color are depicted as working hand-and-hand with Whites. Issues of racism, sexism, and classism are lost between the lines of short-lived unity. The series also tells the story of Cuban immigrant Gloria Estefan and her struggle to become a world-famous music superstar after fleeing Cuba as a child. The book states that Gloria's family left Cuba because, "[i]n 1959, the government of Cuba changed, and the people who did not like the new leader of Cuba fled the country" (Walker, 2005, p. 85). The story completely neglects Fidel Castro, the Cuban revolution, and the U.S. embargo against Cuba.

Repeatedly throughout this series, conflict that may depict the U.S. in a less-than-favorable light is excluded from the textbook, and, ultimately, hidden from our students. School knowledge rests upon "mainstream academic knowledge" (Banks, 1993, p. 11) that views history from the privilege of the White male lens and silences perspectives that challenge or counter the moral American White male narrative.

Banks (1993) argues that "students should be given opportunities to investigate and determine how cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and the biases within a discipline influence the ways knowledge is constructed" (p. 10). As demonstrated above, the perspectives presented in "Good Habits, Great Readers" series promote the false idea that Blacks and Whites worked side-by-side in racial harmony. In addition, the series perpetuates the stereotype of the White hero. Finally, the series encourages an ethnocentric view of world events by only presenting the U.S.'s side of the story. In the next section, we explore how "the contribution approach" reduces the social and culture accomplishments of people of color to trivial, "safe" multicultural education.

The Contribution Approach

In 1998, Banks outlined the four levels of multicultural curriculum integration that teachers use to incorporate multicultural education into their classrooms or curricula. The lowest level of the model is "The Contribution Approach," where teachers, "[f]ocus on heroes, holidays, and isolated events of culturally and ethnically diverse groups and individuals" (Milner, 2005, p. 397). In implementing this approach, teachers tend to select "safe" famous Black Americans to highlight, while the more radical figures are ignored (Milner, 2005). For example, in *A Band of Brave Men*, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman are mentioned as abolitionists; however, Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser, who led massive slave revolts that contributed to the pressure on Lincoln to free the slaves, are not discussed.

Moreover, within "The Contribution Approach," ethnic and cultural groups' contributions to society are "framed by celebration" (Milner, 2005, p. 396) of food, dance, arts and crafts. This

approach diminishes the significant contributions of people of color and "superficially" (Milner, 2005, p. 397) incorporates the achievements of those groups. In Unit 2 of the series, "Great Readers Make Sense of Texts," students read stories regarding different foods that are prepared in America and how immigrants have influenced American cuisine. Additionally, the same text contains two stories on dancing traditions around the world. These two lessons make up more than 35 pages of the text and only serve to diminish the contributions of people of color to food and foreign dances. Such narrow teachings prevent students from meaningfully examining culture and the contributions of their ancestors. Moreover, students of color experience their culture sporadically and at the margins of the classroom.

Additive Multicultural Education

These two themes of school knowledge and the contribution approach lead to Banks' theory of "the additive approach," where multicultural education is secondary to the formal school curriculum. Here, stories of people of color are intermittently incorporated within text, allowing teachers "to put ethnic content into the curriculum without changes its basic structure, purpose, and characteristics" (Banks, 2010, p. 240). This approach fails to challenge students' understanding of racism, sexism, and classism, and reinforces the marginalization of students of color as they learn about themselves and their history in merely episodic narratives. As we examined "Good Habits, Good Readers" through a CRT lens, we discovered that the text introduces students to different cultures; however, they are left with a mere introduction. Throughout the text, students are exposed to issues of racial conflict or cultural differences in sporadic fashion that lacks critical examination from multiple perspectives. Issues of difference occasionally appear throughout the text, but are marginalized by diluted facts and narrow representations of people of color. According to Banks (2010), "[t]he people who are conquered and the people who conquered them have histories and culture that are intricately interwoven and interconnected" (p. 241). For example, African American and Native American histories are distorted when students, no matter their race, do not learn history from multiple points of views, especially those groups that were conquered (Banks, 2010). This fuller picture of history illuminates the interconnectedness of U.S. history to people of color. "Good Habits, Good Readers" sporadic and superficial integration of people of color within the curriculum is problematic, especially for students of color, who learn about themselves and their ancestors from the margins of school curriculum.

Conclusion

Banks (2010) suggests that the four approaches to integrating multicultural content can be mixed and blended to move students to the final approach, "social action." This approach builds on the contribution, additive, and most importantly, the transformative approach to help students "make *decisions* and take *actions* related to the concept, issues, or problem studied in the unit" (Banks, 2010, p. 245). As we have outlined, the plight of African American students is grim in U.S. schools. Students of color are withdrawing from school, experiencing academic disidentification (Griffin, 2002), and, yes, even hating school because of the inconsistencies between school and their social realities. Literacy that excludes and belittles people of color exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and can leave students questioning the value of their culture and racial worth. When "Good Habits, Good Readers" fails to capture the last two modes of multicultural curriculum integration, it presents a shallow narrative of African American life. The text perpetuates the perception of the contributions of African Americans as insignificant and having no link to the successes of America, contributes to the manufacture of White heroes, and misrepre-

sents relations between Blacks and Whites as harmonious, a perspective that does not explain the current and perpetual incidents of racial profiling, hate crimes, and injustices towards people of color.

In contrast, the social action approach allows students to investigate the nature of intolerance and discrimination. Furthermore, it allows students to explore how these social constructs operate on multiple levels throughout society and leads students to take action for social change (Banks, 2010). Thus through literacy, issues impacting students of color can be addressed while empowering students to make decisions that will influence their own school and local communities. Textbooks and reading series like "Good Habits, Good Readers" can be a start to multicultural integration, but they cannot be the end. Teachers need a school curriculum that helps engage students in constructing meaningful literacy experiences, students need a school curriculum that parallels Banks' tenets of and approaches to multicultural education, and communities of color need a curriculum that prepares future leaders to transform communities and combat patterns of educational disenfranchisement.

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