

Reflections of the Caribbean in Children's Picture Books

A Critical Multicultural Analysis

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What were your experiences like growing up in the Caribbean? What is the Caribbean like? Why do Caribbean folks come to America if life is so hard for them here? Why do we not see more normal stories about Caribbean children in these picture books?

During a children's literature class discussion about the representation of Caribbean children, the above questions sparked our interest. Two students had just shared their findings of realistic picture book stories about Caribbean children. One student was concerned because the only stories she could find articulated stories of poverty, "Stories about the Caribbean always seem so depressing but when I visited Jamaica and the Bahamas, I saw varying levels of people."

The issue of multicultural literature in classrooms is a prominent one in contemporary educational environments, particularly in its application within urban schools (Lalas, 2007). This can be attributable to the increasingly diverse nature of our society and the influence of a progressively globalized learning space that endorses cultural competence, tolerance, and an appreciation for social justice.

In light of these considerations, education stakeholders are more cognizant of the application of multicultural literature and critically oriented multicultural approaches in the teaching and learning environment. These cultural representations are also inclusive of diverse portray-

als of the Caribbean region. Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, and Short (2011) assert that multicultural literature should reflect the diverse cultural representations that are in our society and that all children should "find their lives and cultural experiences reflected within classrooms and the books they read" (p. 214). Children need to see their lived experiences in the books they read.

In this article, we argue for a critical analysis of the books that are used to represent different cultural groups in the United States. We advocate exposing pre-service teachers and others to the diverse experiences of young children in books, to the ways in which these books can be used in classrooms, and we argue that the stories presented should reflect the diverse nature of the cultures being represented.

Books, then, should be queried to see how they fit in the overall representation of a particular cultural group, looking closely to see if they provide one side or many sides to understanding that culture. One fundamental issue in the analysis of any literary source is the cultural sensitivity and authenticity of the material. A consideration of the interplay between text and illustration in its ability to represent historical elements, cultural details, and regional authenticity are viewed as central to its success in this regard (Mahurt, 2005). Botelho and Rudman (2009) contend that critical multicultural analysis allows readers to assess representations of power and unmask dominant ideologies so they may connect textual messages with issues of social change and justice (p. 9).

In the remainder of this article, we discuss our search for Caribbean representations in children's literature, looking particularly at books that are available in our local libraries. The picture books discussed in this article offer multiple opportunities for such critical analyses in

their representations of the Caribbean and its people.

We wanted to see what aspects of Caribbean life are readily available in picture books to young children as well as to others curious to understand the life of Caribbean children. Because Caribbean immigrants, particularly Jamaicans, are the largest Black immigrant group in the United States (Banks, 2009; Waters, 1999), we posit that books representing this group of children should be available within multicultural literature for all children.

Caribbean Children in Picture Books

Wanting to know more about the types of children's books representing Caribbean children that were available in the local library, we did a general search using key terms such as Caribbean, West Indies, and Islands and gathered all that we could find. This extensive search of the local libraries yielded very few books portraying contemporary experiences of Caribbean children.

Although the selection of books was limited in scope, we found several books that were available in multiple copies across the library system: Monica Gunning's *A Shelter in Our Car* (2004) and *Not a Copper Penny in Me House* (1993), Regina Hanson's *A Season for Mangoes* (1995) and *The Tangerine Tree* (1995), Rachel Isadora's *Caribbean Dream* (1998), and Jeanette Winter's *Angelina's Island* (2007).

We decided to focus on these books that were available in multiple copies since they were dispersed across various branches of the library system and thus were available to a wider audience of readers. We read the books to determine the "story" they represented about the Caribbean to young readers. Several thematic trends are noted in the picture books generated through this search.

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Thematic Trends in Caribbean Children's Picture Books

One central theme in the available books found in our search was the transition experiences of young Caribbean children. These transitions occurred either via immigration or death of a loved one. *A Shelter in Our Car*, *The Tangerine Tree*, and *Angelina's Island* all target the impact of immigration on the child.

A Shelter in Our Car depicts the struggles of an immigrant single mother and daughter forced to live in their car based on financial struggles due to the death of the father figure and adjustment to their new homeland. The mother is portrayed as a strong, patient, hardworking female in her quest to make a better life for herself and her daughter, Zettie, through menial jobs and impoverished lifestyles. Zettie is depicted as fearful and anxious of this new lifestyle while yearning for the pleasures of her island home. Assimilation is also addressed in her mother's removal of the national flag of her native land in an effort to make Zettie more comfortable about her transition and avoid teasing from classmates.

In *The Tangerine Tree*, Hanson addresses Ida's adjustment to her father's immigration to the United States for work opportunities. The story portrays Ida's attempt to understand the need for the separation, chronicled as an inability to find job opportunities on the island instead of in the United States, and the search for a connection to her father in their tangerine tree and the hope that he will return by the time she is able to read his gift to her of her own reading book.

Angelina's Island also depicts an immigrant child's experience through Angelina, who dislikes the peculiarity of her new home, New York, and yearns for the family, friends, and lifestyle left behind in her island home. She is finally able to adjust through participation in the West Indian day parade which reminds her of home.

In each of these stories the United States is depicted as the "land of better opportunity," with the Caribbean located as a simplistic, less desirable option, though the children clearly have attachments to many elements of their Caribbean homeland. This potentially aligns the Caribbean with stereotypical images of "suffering" and "inferiority" to young readers. Nonimmigrant children may rely on picture books about immigrants to learn about the immigrant experience and gain exposure to different cultures, while immigrant children may

utilize such reading as validation of their experiences (Lamme, Fu, & Lowery, 2004).

Thus, it is critical that authenticity be ensured in depictions of cultural experiences. The text and imagery in these books do depict aspects of the bright colors and the strong family connection, food, sounds, and sights of the Caribbean throughout the narratives, which may connect with young Caribbean readers whether immigrant or nonimmigrant.

Hanson's *A Season for Mangoes* (1995) is the story of a young girl's (Sareen) attempt to come to terms with the death of her grandmother at the traditional "nine-night" celebration held to assist spirits to transition to the other side. Through the love and support of her family and her participation in the ceremony, Sareen is able to better adjust to her loss and hold onto happy memories of her grandmother. The images in the text are vivid and authentic. Once again, food and family are core elements represented in the storyline, with the additional emphasis on traditional folklore and practices. Contemporary Caribbean readers may not readily connect with the practices identified in the text, but it serves as an attempt to validate and maintain knowledge of these practices for younger generations.

Another dominant theme in the readings was stories depicting the scenery of typical Caribbean life. Gunning's *Not a Copper Penny in Me House* (1993) and Isadora's *Caribbean Dream* (1998) clearly portray this theme. *Not a Copper Penny in Me House* uses poetic prose to depict different experiences such as Christmas, hurricanes, laundry day, shopping, festivals, and school and church life. Undoubtedly, Gunning and illustrator Lessac, in their text and imagery respectively, do capture key aspects of the Caribbean lifestyle—the focus is distinctly rural and traditional in nature. Some Caribbean students may not be able to connect with the contexts presented in the text, but it can serve as a lesson on past or historic elements recognizable to their parents or grandparents. There is also the danger of other children presuming these are authentic portrayals of the typical contemporary Caribbean lifestyle.

Caribbean Dream, which focuses on childhood reflections of the Caribbean, also uses poetic prose and readers can make connections to childlike depictions of Caribbean life. However, as both author and illustrator, Isadora conjures very rural, generic, and simplistic images of Caribbean lifestyle that may not evoke an authentic representation of the Caribbean to many

readers. Though both *Not a Copper Penny in Me House* and *Caribbean Dream* utilize vibrant imagery, both texts represent only one view of Caribbean life. There is a clear disassociation in these images from the diverse and mixed racial heritage that actually characterizes the Caribbean, and this constitutes a neglect of the urban development that characterizes much of the contemporary Caribbean existence.

Critical Multicultural Analysis

From a critical multicultural perspective there are several considerations to be made about the inherent representations within these texts. Botelho and Rudman (2009) suggest that picture books provide dual sources of information and emotional response through the combination of visual image and text, and that children are never too young to be influenced by ideology or the transmission of existing norms that lead to internationalization without question.

Therefore, it is critical that authors and illustrators recognize the power of their productions. Additionally, children should be encouraged to become critically literate from an early age. The representations we have identified in the books discussed here should be viewed in light of these considerations.

Among the children's books discussed, *A Shelter in Our Car*, *Not a Copper Penny in Me House*, *A Season for Mangoes*, and *The Tangerine Tree* seem most authentic in the duality of text and imagery. In these texts one or both contributors are originally from the Caribbean. In contrast, *Angelina's Island* and *Caribbean Dream* present very simplistic representations of the Caribbean which miss the cultural nuances reflected by the former texts.

This realization contradicts Mahurt (2005) who asserts that she "would argue against trusting authors from former colonial powers when they write about the culture where they resided" (p. 279). Though these texts do have somewhat linear and stereotypical representations, they are authentic in depicting one segment of the Caribbean experience. However, readers may not be aware that what they are reading is only one representation of a segment of Caribbean life and experiences and may assume that these experiences are true for all people of the Caribbean.

Botelho and Rudman (2009) accurately express this duality in their assertion that "insider authors and illustrators are more versed or have more access to culturally specific discourses and histo-

ries” (p. 104). One aspect that needs to be explored in such texts, however, is a wider representation of issues surrounding race and class. The true Caribbean experience is much more diverse than the experiences portrayed in these books. The Caribbean cultural experience has not been static and to some extent these texts present a limited perspective in this regard.

Botelho and Rudman assert further that culture is “not static, isolated, permanent...but dynamic, relentlessly changing and influenced by historical, sociopolitical, and economic factors” (p. 72). Children’s books representing the Caribbean should show these varying experiences.

Multiculturalism as a Mechanism for Social Justice

Multiculturalism has been irrefutably linked to social justice issues in its ability to recognize racial and cultural differences, social norms, and personal perspectives while espousing social, political, and economic realities (Lalas, 2007). This is a central concern in urban classrooms characterized by diverse populations that bring diverse and distinct experiences and mores to the learning environments. Yokota and Kolar (2008) assert that high quality multicultural books can promote cultural and global awareness, which in turn advocates for peace and social justice.

Multicultural literature is a viable way of incorporating social justice issues in the classroom. Tyson and Park (2006) posit that children bring a cultural knowledge to the classroom through historical events as told by their families and communities, their social, economic and cultural contexts, and their daily lived experiences.

The use of such authentic cultural materials, coupled with asking critical questions that help students focus on their experiences in relation to their readings, and using literature as a catalyst for change are all fundamental to an appreciation of social justice through multicultural literature (Tyson & Park, 2006; Yokota & Kolar, 2008). Multicultural literature is a vital tool in deconstructing stereotypical ideologies and assisting in the construction of values reflective of justice, fairness, and tolerance.

Multicultural Literature Classroom Techniques

There are several viewpoints on the most effective principles and techniques for utilizing multicultural literature in class-

rooms. Soter (1999) contends that teachers need principles related to contexts, values, and perspectives that may be unfamiliar to their students to guide them toward understanding multicultural stories. In a similar vein, Louie (2006) suggests seven principles to successfully achieving this objective: (1) checking the authenticity of the story, (2) understanding the world of the ethnic characters, (3) seeing the world through the characters’ perspectives, (4) identifying values that shape the characters’ conflict resolution strategies, (5) relating self to the text and critique the portrayal of characters in the text and in popular media, (6) using variants of the same story or collection of stories to help students to build schema, and (7) talking, writing, and responding throughout the reading of the multicultural texts. Louie’s techniques can be individually and collectively utilized to support multicultural literacy teaching in classrooms for all students.

Mahurt (2005) supports the need for analyzing the authenticity of the story and the cultural sensitivity in the portrayal of characters and themes within the text and illustration. DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006) propose that “when students are able to see their own lives in a text, they are more likely to identify critical encounters in their reading outside the classroom” (p. 168).

This suggests a fundamental principle in the ability of participants in a multicultural-rich classroom to assume a critical frame that welcomes the incorporation of diverse experiences and viewpoints in the navigation of their readings. Page (2004) advocates that teachers who understand students’ lives outside of the normal classroom help to foster a caring environment in which all students can thrive. These teachers go “beyond the book” in a powerful way towards continual learning about cultural diversity and social justice (p. 15).

Preparing Preservice Teachers for Diverse Literature Integration

Student teachers are recognized as the future proponents in facilitating multicultural awareness in classroom environments. Therefore, their ability to enter their new professional environments with the necessary skills is important for their future success as multicultural-oriented teachers. Preservice teachers have been characterized as having unexamined beliefs regarding diversity issues, often with minimal understanding of how their beliefs may influence their interactions within their classrooms (Sleeter, 2001; Wiggans & Follo, 1999).

Harlin, Murray, and Shea (2007) suggest that student teachers should have multiple opportunities to examine, explore, and revise their cultural values through their program of study (p. 300). This becomes even more salient as the cultural and philosophical divide widens between the current generation of students and the teachers they encounter in their classrooms. Techniques such as student-centered, experiential learning through ethnographic and field study experiences in urban classrooms and exposure to multicultural literature are viewed as mechanisms to assist these teachers in navigating critical issues of race, class, and power and thus becoming culturally responsive teachers (Garmon, 2004).

Additionally, strategies such as community-based cross cultural immersions, multicultural education components, increased retention of teachers of color, and open discussions on diversity issues and the concept of Whiteness are identified as critical considerations for teacher education programs (Glazier & Seo, 2005; Harlin et al, 2007; Sleeter, 2001; Ukpokodu, 2007). All of these issues highlight the undeniable need to consider multiple strategies in preparing critically engaged teachers who recognize the power of diverse pedagogies.

Beyond the Stereotypes

Although the books discussed here are representative of elements of the Caribbean experience, it is critical that authors who reflect this and other cultures present more diverse representations so young readers, preservice teachers, and others involved in teaching young children see a range of authentic images of the Caribbean. It is also important that Caribbean students themselves do not experience feelings of invisibility or misrepresentations in the texts.

Undoubtedly the power of publishers in providing access to quality diverse picture books is also a consideration, particularly given the expense associated with publishing texts by unknown authors residing in the Caribbean. Such considerations could also limit availability of publication for authors who may have been born in the Caribbean but now reside in the United States. Hopefully through increased publications about the Caribbean the resulting representations will offer deeper, more diverse descriptions and give readers a more nuanced journey through their literary explorations.

Pedagogically, a more diverse range of texts on the Caribbean would offer an opportunity for classroom teachers to explore different cultural depictions with their students. The availability of authentic and varied representations of the Caribbean in reading material will offer a platform through which to expose teachers and their students to different conceptualizations of the Caribbean experience and provide a lens beyond stereotypical associations.

Walker-Dalhouse (2005) offers four crucial factors to consider in choosing culturally-authentic books. Culturally-authentic books should (1) feature well-developed characters in authentic and believable contexts, (2) incorporate authentic and realistic language and dialogue with dialects consistent to the characters, (3) include illustrations that portray characters and settings in realistic and authentic situations, and (4) contain accurate information. These elements become particularly important, especially in education of pre-service teachers through critical multicultural literature. These are prospective teachers who will then use these sources in their interactions with their own students.

Telling The Full Story

Exposing teachers in training to stereotypical, misrepresented, or one-sided examples in the characters, illustrations, language, and overall content of their readings will serve only to sustain distorted impressions of the Caribbean. This becomes even more pressing when one considers the existing demographic separation between many pre-service teachers and their class populations.

Sleeter (2001) suggests that there are specific issues to identify when considering the largely Anglo-American background of pre-service teachers. First, White pre-service teachers may fail to recognize the pervasiveness of racial inequity. Second, they may hold deficit views about and lower expectations for students of color. Third, they may adopt a colorblind approach to teaching and ignore the importance of race in their practice. These pre-service teachers may also lack a sense of themselves as cultural beings and the effect of their assumptions or perspectives on the classroom experiences of their students.

This connects to the larger issue of different realities that exist based on unequal power and privilege ascribed to different social relationships. The ability of these teachers to critically consider is-

issues of power and privilege in their social environment speaks to a needed level of sociocultural and critical consciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). This in turn will influence their ability to critically consider the reading materials they utilize in their classrooms. It will also suggest their willingness to go beyond the familiar in choosing reading material that may have been largely Anglo-American and intentionally choose texts that are instead representative of the diverse backgrounds of their students.

As a result, students who are interested in reading about cultures different from their own and those from immigrant populations may have a greater likelihood to see atypical representations in their class readings. This could heighten students' level of cultural awareness and encourage interesting and dynamic class discussions on reading content.

In choosing multicultural texts, teachers must be cognizant of certain criteria for quality book selections. Some of the criteria that are relevant to books representing the Caribbean include selecting:

1. High literary quality including well-developed plots and characters;
2. Settings in the United States so readers can understand the nature of cultural diversity in the United States and the legacy of many different cultural groups;
3. Carefully chosen illustrations to enhance the quality of the texts;
4. No negative or inaccurate stereotypes;
5. Genuine lifestyles or characters who exhibit authentic and realistic behaviors;
6. Qualified authors/illustrators who deal with the cultural group accurately and respectfully; and
7. Minority characters as leaders and problem-solvers. (Jetton & Savage-Davis, 2005)

The ability to consider such criteria in the selection of reading materials and to be open to creating an environment for discussions on diversity issues as explored in these texts is crucial. This fosters a welcoming environment for all students to seek out readings that are illustrative of different backgrounds so that the students feel comfortable and confident in addressing such content in a multiculturally-sensitive learning space.

Toward Diverse Representations in Caribbean Literature

Teachers with students of Caribbean

descent in their classrooms have to be extremely resourceful in locating reading materials that offer diverse representations of the Caribbean. In order to decipher authenticity in materials, this may require these teachers to conduct additional research before introducing material to their classes. Institutions such as the University of the West Indies and its Resource Center for Caribbean Children's Literature offer a valuable resource committed to having Caribbean children "learn about themselves and develop self-esteem and pride in their cultural heritage as they see themselves and their lifestyles positively portrayed in the literature."

Additionally, they respond to research requests on available literature and offer online resources that consistently critique and review resources on the Caribbean for interested parties. Teachers, librarians, and others working with children should also utilize available resources such as the Americas Award offered through the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs (CLASP) for English or Spanish language works of fiction, poetry, folklore, or non-fiction that recognize literature that accurately represents Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States.

Other sources may include online resources of Caribbean children's literature such as www.jackmandora.com and www.caribbeaninspired.com that offer bibliographic listings and summaries for perusal. In view of the limited resources that may be available in school and local libraries, teachers may increasingly need to access alternative resources to find varied reading materials for a diverse student body.

Conclusion

Given the ethnically diverse composition of today's classrooms, it is crucial that teachers who seek to infuse diverse literature are cognizant of all the resources at their disposal. Students of Caribbean background need to see themselves represented in their reading materials, particularly those who immigrated to the United States and are in cultural transition.

However, teachers have a responsibility to critically review available resources to ensure that they offer a balanced and authentic portrayal of Caribbean experiences. In order for this to happen, teachers need to first be aware of the importance of diversity in classroom literature and their facilitation of a diverse and welcoming classroom environment. Environments

that encourage open discussion and appreciation of such literature will significantly change the reading landscape for learners and offer a wider market for authors of diverse Caribbean children's literature on a global scale.

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