The Influence of Race, Culture and Gender of Storybook Characters on Students’ Picture Book Choices and Interest and Engagement During Read-Alouds

Kathryn Rogers

University of Florida
Abstract

The purpose of this inquiry is to investigate students’ pertinent connections developed with books that are obtained through critical thinking and determine the importance of these connections during independent student book selection. Focusing on book characters’ race, gender and ethnicity in relation to the readers’ traits will foster understanding of the importance of personally connecting with texts. This project was conducted in a Kindergarten classroom at Newberry Elementary School in Newberry, Florida. Twelve of eighteen students participated in this investigation. Six of the participants were female and six were male. Of the six females, one was African American, three were Hispanic and two were Caucasian. There were two African American males, one Hispanic male and three Caucasian males. Participants were given a choice of three books, each representing Caucasian, Hispanic or African American characters of the students’ similar gender on the cover. Isolated independently, students selected their book and explained why they chose the specific book over the other two choices. Although a majority of students did not select their own race or ethnicity, two students directly identified with their race/ethnicity by selecting the text that represented their lives and stated a connection that correlated with their race/ethnicity.
Introduction

Interactions with multitudes of picture books prior to and during students’ early literature exposure are defining precursors to students’ ultimate reading success. Environments where print is readily available increase students’ desires to read (Mohr, 2003). Students’ experiences with multicultural children’s literature are pertinent to their growth of multiple perspectives and in overcoming classroom differences. Exposure to multicultural literature decreases stereotypical beliefs in young elementary students (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Students exposed to multicultural literature developed more positive attitudes towards various cultural groups than students who were not exposed (Wham, Barnhart & Cook, 1996). This multicultural exposure increases students’ sense of pride for their own gender, culture and race. In addition, multicultural exposure can increase motivation, and students’ ability to self-select also increases excitement for reading (Pressley, 2006). Additional factors such as genre, familiarity, topic and illustrations, also influence the students’ decision-making process when self-selecting.

In addition to picture book exposure, multicultural literature, and self-selection increasing students’ reading motivation, various reading situations increase students’ desires to read. Although some students’ experiences begin outside the classroom, introducing children to a wide-range of children’s literature, including read-alouds, expands students’ literacy skills, oral language and motivation to read (Goldenberg, 2002). “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (National Academy of Education, 1985, p. 23). Increasing students’ engagement during read-alouds increases their abilities to make connections and generate understanding (Sipe, 2002).
Through active participation, increased connections and oral discussion during read-alouds, and in addition to multicultural literature, book availability and self-selection, students’ reading experiences continuously flourish as their overall motivation towards reading increases.

Importance of Picture Books in Emergent/Early Literacy

*Picture Book Availability*

Although students’ early exposure and interaction with children’s literature proves beneficial, various obstacles often impede their ability to access books. Socioeconomic status sometimes limits the availability of books in students’ homes (Bachman, Connor & Morrison, 2006). Stemming from minimal income, students struggle to obtain books, lack engagement in parent-child reading and oftentimes are significantly behind their peers academically (Neuman, 2006). Over time, students living in poverty persistently fall behind their peers, forming a steadily increasing “knowledge gap.” Without books in students’ homes, access to literary resources or literary exposure, the knowledge gap will continue to widen.

According to Krashen (1993), allowing students’ exposure to books results in increased reading. Print-rich environments with readily available books for students to self-select and read enhance young children’s motivation and willingness to read (Mohr, 2003). Although some students may lack reading materials at home, educators have grown to understand this issue and attempt to integrate reading into the curriculum as much as possible. Books are available before, during and after school. Primary grades with classroom libraries use books’ visibility, accessibility and attractiveness to entice students into actively participating in reading and increase their interest (Neuman & Roskos, 2002). By allowing reasonable student privacy within the classroom library, conversation between students expands to foster understanding and comprehension. Books are placed in both open-faced bookshelves and organized bins to balance
attractiveness and functionality. A comfortable setting and engaging literature activities make classroom libraries effective and exciting. Increased contact with books fosters students’ respect and, when exposed to books during self-selection and after-school, students cared for the books; when books were used or taken home, there was minimal loss or damage (Haupt, Larsen, Mohlman & Robinson, 1997).

Most schools allow students to check out books from the school library to take home. A study by Krashen and Ramos (1998) reported students’ increase in motivation towards reading when books were made available and students were exposed to books borrowed from the public library. More students chose to take books home than students who did not want to take books home. Students reported enjoying their library visit, reading more following their experience and an increased desire to go back again (Haupt, Larsen, Mohlman & Robinson, 1997). Multiple exposures with literature, by increasing students’ opportunities to interact with books, foster students’ motivation to read and, in turn, enhance their overall experiences and attitudes towards books.

*Interactive Picture Book Read-Alouds*

Exposure and simple interactions with literature drastically shape students’ future reading ability; however, read-alouds, which can be referred to as interactive read-aloud, is the most important activity to foster students’ emergent literacy skills, whether it be parents, teachers, or parents and teachers who are reading (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). During read-alouds, adults and children establish a reading normality based on their interests, personalities and skills. Read-alouds can be interactive, passive, elaborated, one-sided or non-existent. Different cultures value and interact with books and book reading in various ways, specifically, concerning interaction during book read-alouds (Bus, 2001). Many African
American families pass down stories through oral language or storytelling and may be unfamiliar with the traditional classroom read-aloud experience (Craig & Washington, 2006).

In addition to variations in cultural differences limiting read-alouds, parents’ literacy abilities can also limit children’s exposure and engagement with literature. A majority of students from Caucasian middle-class households have more exposure to reading at home than African American students. African American students typically have more exposure to reading at home than Hispanic students (Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2002). Parents learning English as their second language, with low to pre-production English proficiency, could struggle to read aloud with young children based on the reading difficulty of the literature. Literacy development is fostered by children’s linguistic experiences from copious book exposures; however, if caregivers struggle with reading, challenging literature exposure may be limited (Bus, 2001). Even if low reading parents do participate in read-aloud experiences with their children, they may not actively make connections between themselves, their listening children and the books due to their inexperience and uninformed understanding of reading.

While read-alouds vary based on participants’ characteristics, they can also differ due to the many different approaches of reading aloud. Interactive read-alouds are based on the Sociocultural Theory of using conversation to create meaning by making personal connections to students’ own lives (Goldenberg, 2002). A standard approach to read-alouds focus on text selection, teacher preparation and preparedness, establishing clear purpose, and modeling fluent reading while using expression. Following the read-aloud, text discussion, independent reading and independent writing help students create meaning while fostering their development of the reading components (Fisher, Flood, Lap & Frey, 2004).
A varied approach, Text Talk, uses pictures, vocabulary and scaffolding to foster students’ comprehension during read-alouds. Teachers scaffold students’ conversations in order to keep students on topic, foster connections and correlate individuals’ background knowledge with the text. Teachers scaffold students through a series of questions beginning with initial open-ended questions to prompt students’ ideas. Follow-up questions are scaffolding questions to guide students to elaborate on their original idea. Teachers then repeat, rephrase or add additional information to students’ questions to clarify, expand and reiterate the students’ thinking. Once students have an initial understanding, they are encouraged to use pictures to further their ideas. Text Talk also focuses on explicitly teaching vocabulary in addition to fostering conversation. Text Talk vocabulary can be used with additional activities for word acquisition, as pertinent information for story comprehension and vocabulary expansion (Beck & McKeown, 2001).

Dissimilar to Text Talk, Dialogic Reading switches adult and student roles to make students responsible for their own success; however, Dialogic Reading still includes communication as an effective learning tool (Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Payne, Crone & Fishel, 1994). Through repetition, expansion and modeling of listeners’ answers, the reader facilitates active listening and participation by asking questions focused on the story or pictures (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Traditional read-alouds and its varied approaches focus on conversation as a key tool to active participation and understanding. Read-aloud involvement increases students’ oral language by encouraging students to participate through communication and print knowledge (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Text Talk during read-alouds promote oral language and comprehension (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Oral language and comprehension go hand-in-hand because comprehension is used for both oral comprehension and reading comprehension. In
order to promote students’ oral language development during read-alouds, it is important to encourage children to attempt to answer questions, both open-ended and “what” questions. Teachers should provide feedback, support, expansion and repetition in regard to students’ answers. Also, to keep a positive reading and learning environment for both teachers and students, teachers must praise students’ responses and understand that language is a gradual process (Whitehurst, et al., 1988).

Development of oral language skills correlates with comprehension and early reading by creating a connection between alphabetic and orthographic representation of words. This connection is made during read-alouds through print concepts and phonological processing (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Print awareness fosters the understanding of the relationship between oral language and written language (Justice & Ezell, 2002). A study focusing on read-alouds’ effects on print awareness concluded that read-alouds containing explicit verbal and non-verbal print references increase students’ print awareness, specifically, words in print, print recognition and alphabet knowledge (Justice & Ezell, 2002). Although read-alouds helped those areas, there was no correlation between increasing read-alouds and increasing skills in letter orientation and discrimination, print concepts and literacy terms.

Similar to explicit vocabulary instruction during Text Talk, word elaboration during storytelling and read-alouds fosters word learning and is supported by two of the three theoretical perspectives on vocabulary acquisition (Justice, Meier & Walpole, 2005). Vocabulary knowledge is a gradual process and is influenced by adult input; however, unknown vocabulary is not learned through mere incidental exposure. Using vocabulary words in context and defining them, asking open-ended questions, and encouraging student conversation using vocabulary words are suggestions to promote word learning (Wasik & Bond, 2001). To further increase
students’ vocabulary learning during read-alouds, teachers must increase word exposure through definitions, supportive contexts and repetition; include questions, comments and active student participation; provide multiple forms of word representation; and, encourage students to use vocabulary in various contexts (Justice, Meier & Walpole, 2005).

In this study by Brabham and Lynch-Brown (2002), researchers compared the effects different reading styles with various levels of engagement on vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. To appropriately test students’ vocabulary acquisition based on different read-aloud strategies, read-aloud features are adequately used during this study; however, each strategy differs by levels of student involvement. Students can be involved using interactional structures focusing on facts, inferences, story concepts, story structure and word meaning while the read-aloud is occurring. Performance is similar to interactional, but during performance, conversation is completed immediately following the read-aloud. Strictly reading is the least interactive strategy. All reading styles have effects on vocabulary development, but each varies. The styles are listed in order from least to greatest depending on their effects on vocabulary acquisition: Just Reading, Performance and Interactional. Interactional and Performance are supported by Vygotsky’s Theory of Sociolinguistics because these two styles’ use of scaffolding and social interaction to promote learning and growth (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002).

Interactive read-aloud, as supported by the Sociocultural Theory, focuses on conversation and communication to foster comprehension. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interaction and discussion are pertinent to creating and understanding meaning. Constructing ones’ own meaning is defined as comprehension. The goal of read-alouds aims to foster interactive discussion and create meaning by assuring students have time to create their own understandings, share with peers and generate a deeper relationship with the story (Hoffman, 2011). This goal
fosters critical thinking through making connections from understanding and engaging with the text (Sipe, 2002). Discussions allow higher-order critical thinking that is guided by peer communication, listening and perspectives, in addition to teacher scaffolding (Wiseman, 2012). Open-ended conversations develop students’ connections, thinking and ideas through teacher scaffolding. With conversation, students share meaning, opinions and feelings and their own personal understanding, which results in gaining insight on multiple perspectives (Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp, Shih & Worthy, 2012). Comprehension and comprehension strategies are strengthened when students have experiences with multiple perspectives (Wiseman, 2012).

For struggling readers, one of the most important benefits of read-alouds result in students’ increase in reading motivation. Motivation to read increases because listening to a read-aloud doesn’t require students to openly demonstrate their reading abilities or oral language. This is specifically related to English Language Learners (ELLs) and increases the enjoyment of the activity and reading as a whole (Meier, 2003). Since listeners do not feel pressure to focus solely on reading the words, read-alouds increase students’ self-perceptions as readers. Increasing students’ views of themselves as readers can, in turn, decrease the reading achievement gap in later grades (Wiseman, 2012). To further increase effectiveness of read-alouds, teachers should differentiate between constructing meaning and retelling, realize the difficulty of comprehending for young readers, focus questions on building meaning, foster connections with background knowledge, engage students with pictures only after identifying students’ initial understanding and expose children to quality vocabulary words incorporated in texts (Beck & McKeown, 2001).

Incorporating children’s literature into all aspects of students’ lives increases their educational success and decreases the achievement gap. By integrating books into elementary
environments, students’ oral language, literacy skills, reading comprehension and reading motivation can be positively affected. Students’ exposure to a wide variety of literature is pertinent to their individual emergent and early literacy success, which can be a precursor for their future reading abilities. Students should gain experience with various genres, topics and styles of books to further increase a widened view of literature and independent reading skills.

**Importance of Multicultural Diverse Children’s Literature**

*Culturally Responsive Classroom*

Teachers must see students as individuals of cultural, racial, ethnic and class differences. Doing so will foster teachers’ abilities to meet students’ needs within the classroom (Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). “Culturally Responsive Teaching” refers to teachers valuing students’ cultures, emphasizing collaboration, raising standards and recognizing students’ home and school life as an intertwined connection (Conrad, Gong, Sipp & Wright, 2004). Ladson-Billings (1994) describes “Culturally Relevant” literacy teaching as:

- Students whose educational, economic, social, political, and cultural futures are most tenuous are helped to become intellectual leaders in the classroom. Students are apprenticed in a learning community rather than taught in an isolated and unrelated way. Students’ real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the “official” curriculum. Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and oratory. Teachers and students engage in a collective struggle against the status quo. Teachers are cognizant of themselves as political beings (p. 117–118).

Being culturally accepting occurs with both academics and social actions. Culturally Responsive Classroom Management greatly affects students’ learning and achievement in the classroom.
Teachers should be culturally open and follow culturally relevant guidelines (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran, 2004).

Pictures and illustrations are important to students’ understanding and respect for other cultures. Using them strategically, teachers can promote critical thinking and cultural openness at the same time. Students can think critically and share their personal connections and perspectives of various cultures while making new connections and broadening their cultural diversity exposure and discussion. During read-alouds, teachers can use the technique Text Talk. Culturally Responsive Teaching is simply using students’ prior experiences and background knowledge to help foster students’ connections and learning (Conrad, Gong, Sipp & Wright, 2004).

Ladson-Billings discusses teachers’ conscious efforts to be “color-blind” within the classroom as a way of treating students with equity and not based on the color of their skin. Although all students should be respected equally, students are not all the same and, therefore, cannot be treated the same. Ignoring students’ backgrounds also affects teachers’ abilities to individualize curriculum and lessons to benefit all students. Students’ needs may be overlooked in attempts to be “color-blind.” Teachers should see color and every other aspect of their students in order to integrate and individualize ways that will connect to students’ needs and lives (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Race Representation in Multicultural Children’s Literature

When exposed to multicultural literature, students of different cultures gain pride and self-esteem. Students also show enjoyment in their culture (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2001). When exposed to multicultural literature through a “Multicultural Cinderella Project,” students’
interest toward learning about their own culture and other cultures increased. Students felt more appreciated after discussing cultural similarities and differences (Alexander & Morton, 2007). Through exposure to multicultural literature, children learn and become informed about cultures other than their own (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2001). Multicultural literature shows students that cultures other than the majority are welcomed and worthy of being in the classroom. All cultures should be included in our funds of knowledge. When presenting bilingual books in the classroom, the message that both English and the native languages are important is portrayed. These books can be shared to demonstrate that the languages are equal when they are written and read aloud (Meier, 2003). Listening and reading about various experiences through different cultures help foster students’ multiple perspectives, which reduces prejudices and stereotypes.

Reading multicultural literature to students helps increase connections between students, books and the world around them. Reading about problems of children in other cultures may help students make connections and help them overcome difficult situations (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2001). Students who connect to their own culture through reading are motivated and are able to make cultural background connections with the text. This background connection helps students participate in discussion, which in turn increases students’ overall engagement and participation. Also, by incorporating bilingual books and discussion, students bridge the gap between their native language and their second language acquisition (Lohfink & Loya, 2010).

Gender Representation in Multicultural Children’s Literature

In the United States, cultural norms are passed through generations by the use of language, specifically in children’s literature (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). The use of children’s literature in the classroom can positively influence students’ stereotypical gender beliefs and attitudes (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Once children are in kindergarten, they have
the preconceived understanding of what actions, interests, characteristics and roles are stereotypical of males and females; however, gender stereotypes differ across cultures (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). Children’s interpretation of gender depends on cultural influences. Fox (1993) states, “Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men. We who write children’s books, and we who teach through literature, need to be sure we are opening doors to full human potential (p. 84).”

Visual sexism and occupational sexism are two kinds of gender stereotypes seen throughout children’s literature. Visual sexism includes character location, pictures, posture, height, eye aversion and so on. In a study examining children’s books, female gender stereotypes were unveiled (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus & Young, 2006). There were more male main characters and pictures of male characters. Female characters were represented more often as nurturing and caring than males. Males were found outdoors more often and females were indoors. Neither was more active or passive. Occupational sexism focuses on traditional and non-traditional career paths for both men and women. In the same study as visual sexism, gender stereotypes were discovered in the children’s books. More male and female occupations were traditional than non-traditional. Males had a broader range of occupations. Females were more often depicted as not having an occupation outside the home. Gender stereotypes and underrepresentation of females are proven to influence children’s development, limit career dreams, influence personalities and set pre-distinguished parental duties. In a study integrating multicultural literature, both boys and girls changed their gender occupational role ideas after being exposed to non-stereotypical children’s literature and viewed more occupations as being for either sex (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999).
Approximately 14% of Caldecott Medal picture books from 1938-2011 include characters with unidentified genders (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). Leaving characters with no set gender allows readers from various cultural backgrounds to identify the characters’ genders based on their own understandings. Although some authors and illustrators include cultural cues, physical attributes, and/or atypical actions within the story to insinuate the characters’ sex, readers interpret these cues differently according to their background. Readers can identify characters based on their own personal beliefs by either acknowledging or disregarding the hidden gender cues. The ultimate goal of un-gendered characters is to allow readers to use interpretation and connect to characters based on commonalities. In addition to giving hidden gender clues, authors and illustrators often depict both male and female gender clues. This allows readers to use their own discretion and, ultimately, critical thinking skills when identifying the characters’ genders. Readers could only recognize male clues or female clues and overlook the opposing gender clues, or readers could interpret the character as being both genders.

Although various authors and illustrators leave characters’ gender identification in the hands of readers, society sometimes labels unidentified characters as male or female and sets the cultural norm for that particular individual’s attributes. Movies, author interviews, book series, research studies, book reviews and additional activities identify characters’ genders and mold readers’ previous conclusions. When incorporating literature into the classroom, it is pertinent that students make gender identifications based from both the text and illustrations within a story, discounting gender stereotypes. Gender is represented in a plethora of ways, and incorporating a wide variety of gendered and un-gendered literature in the classroom will expand students’ views on gender complexity.
Incorporating or excluding diverse children’s literature in elementary classrooms can relay underlying messages to students. Although not explicitly stated, character portrayals within children’s books can be stereotypical towards races, cultures and genders. Due to overrepresentation of Caucasian and male characters, students’ exposure to a diverse selection of literature greatly determines their behaviors and actions towards others. Students exposed to multicultural literature focusing on both gender and race exhibit positive attitudes and beliefs about their own race and gender, in addition to improved tolerance of race and gender of their peers.

Students’ Book Selection Based on Main Characters’ Race/Gender/Ethnicity

Student choice increases motivation, particularly with book selection and reading. Also, since all students are diverse, both personally and educationally, students’ selections will vary. This allows students to choose books that will best benefit them and their learning abilities (Hendricks & Swartz, 2000). When selecting books, students are more likely to select familiar books than new books (Haupt, Larsen, Mohlman & Robinson, 1997). In a study by Martinez and Teale (1988), students showed they were more likely to choose books that have already been read aloud to them. A study in 1997 concluded that when primary grade teachers read aloud to their students, they raise the likelihood that their students will read those books on their own (Martinez, Gough, Roser, Strecker & Worthy, 1997). Other than familiarity, book characteristics influence students’ self-selections.

Books’ locations in the classroom libraries and their mode of display are factors that have been questioned and regarded as possible influences in students’ book choice decision-making process. Students viewed more books with covers showing than books with spines showing; however, placement of the book on the shelf did not matter, which shows students do not select
out of convenience (Haupt, Larsen, Mohlman & Robinson, 1997). Due to students’ increase in interest of books with outward facing covers, libraries are encouraged to have both forward-cover book displays and organized bookshelves or book bins.

With outward-facing bookshelves, students are able to use their book-cover-focused mode of self-selection. Students look at book covers, read titles and inspect characters. Out of thirty-one students, seventeen chose books where they identified with a character or had experiences similar to a character (Hendricks & Swartz, 2000). African American students’ third book choice aspect was based off realistic book covers (Gray, 2009). Students connect with book characters through race and gender. With a selection of similar book covers, reading levels and topics, third grade students chose books with covers portraying characters of a different race than themselves. Both Caucasian and African American third grade students did not pay attention to race on the covers. Although students were not influenced by race, students were influenced when their peers recommended books to select (Holmes, Holmes, Powell & Witt, 2007).

Additionally, third grade African American boys were more likely to choose books with male characters than female characters. Boys also chose more books with both male and female characters than just female characters. They were also more likely to choose books with both Caucasian and African American characters on the cover, but they chose more Caucasian characters than African American characters. Third grade African American girls were more likely to choose male characters than female characters, but girls chose more female characters than boys. Girls chose more books with neither male nor female characters than books with both male and female, but they chose more female only books than neither. They were also more likely to choose African American characters than Caucasian characters and more Caucasian characters than books with both Caucasian and African American characters.
In addition to familiarity and book covers, students based their decisions off of books’ genres and topics. African American students’ second book choice aspect was based on realistic book covers (Gray, 2009). Their first book choice aspect was based off non-fiction topics (Gray, 2009). More first grade students selected nonfiction books than multicultural literature (Mohr, 2006). Hispanic/Non-Hispanic first grade students chose nonfiction texts over narratives, but boys chose nonfiction more (Mohr, 2003). First grade students’ selection processes relied more on books’ topics than the front cover. First grade boys focused on topics more than girls. First grade students focused on text-to-world connections and preferred books about animals (Mohr, 2006). No Hispanic first grade boys chose bilingual texts and only 12% of Hispanic girls chose them. Non-Hispanic first grade students chose twice as many Hispanic texts as Hispanic students (Mohr, 2003).

Although mere exposure to literature increases students’ motivation to read, individual book selection also boosts students’ desire to read. While choosing literature, students consider various aspects of the literature itself. Finding books that personally interest students is extremely important. Students base their decisions on prior knowledge, experiences and personal connections or interests. Ensuring students have appealing literature to select is pertinent to increasing their motivation. In addition to understanding books students select, teachers should also be aware of the reasons for their selections and how their choices can benefit or hinder students’ reading success.

Teachers’ Book Selections for Read-Alouds

Teachers’ book selections for read-alouds, similar to students’ book self-selections, vary depending on individual interests, characteristics, focuses and practicing beliefs. African American teachers are not any more likely to have African American literature in the classroom
than Caucasian teachers (Gray, 2009). In Hart and Rowley (1996), pre-service teachers in a multicultural literature class were surveyed to uncover on what they based their read-aloud book selection. Over half of the pre-service teachers revealed their choices were based on instructional reasons, which consisted of appropriateness, reading level, student engagement, promoting student learning, multicultural understanding and curricular integration. Students’ second highest reasons were due to personal motives such as prior experiences and pleasant memories. Production quality reasons, including quality of illustration (characters, clarity and distinctiveness) and quality of print (font, size and readability), were the third highest motivation behind specific book selections.

Similar to teachers’ use of various actions within different types of read-alouds, teachers also select a multitude of books with specific characteristics. During storybook read-alouds, students are encouraged to make connections; therefore, teachers choose books to foster students’ ability to relate to the book. Also, storybook read-alouds require narrative genre texts. Colorful illustrations to support meaning and unfamiliar vocabulary are two aspects of books teachers look for to generate opportunities for students to gain comprehension skills. Appropriate length and developmentally engaging features are also important to keep students interested and engaged with the storybook read-aloud (Justice, Meier & Walpole, 2005). Teachers select texts using similar traits to foster both engagement and critical thinking. This connection, however, is solely focused on students’ abilities to make connections. Teachers must know their students’ cultures, interests and background knowledge to accurately choose literature to which they can relate. Teachers should also realize which texts are currently popular because these texts greatly influence what students will and will not enjoy. In addition, teachers should try to foresee students’ connections between known content and new content to effectively choose resources
and texts to bridge the gap (Wiseman, 2012). While selecting texts for read-alouds involving Text Talk, teachers choose books that foster engaging and intellectual student conversation. Books should be somewhat challenging and foster reader exploration to encourage critical thinking and discovering individual ideas. Storylines should be complex and allow room for introduction of unknown content. Challenging students to think beyond what they know will lead to richer and instructional conversation. Comprehension will be derived from text instead of pictures. Ideas, specific details and expression should all be gained through reading and shared through language. Since students are focusing and searching text for understanding, the language should be appropriate and decodable (Beck & McKeown, 2001).

When deciding on literature for read-alouds, teachers’ individual personalities, beliefs and interests determine which books they select. Similar to students, teachers’ selections depend on various aspects of their lives. Teachers’ choices are greatly affected by their desires, goals and focuses at the time. Students, life outside of school and curriculum can all be deciding factors that can repel or attract teachers to certain books. Teachers’ literature selections are a reflection of their overall professional and personal identity.

Students’ Interest and Engagement During Read-Alouds

**Level of Engagement Factors**

Quality of reading and students’ level of engagement during read-alouds can positively or negatively affect learning outcomes. Students’ levels of engagement can vary based on their reading ability. ‘Descriptor,’ ‘Comprehender,’ and ‘Performance-Oriented’ are the three levels of engagement Reese and Cox (1999) attribute to varying learning success. Students as descriptors are the least demanding level of engagement where students are required to label and describe pictures. Describing is often used with low readers. Comprehenders, which are often average-
ability readers, participate through predictions and inferences about storyline and characters’
emotions. The most demanding type of participation is used with high readers and is called
performance-oriented. Students introduce stories with five components that give a brief overview
of the story and follow the finished story by including five inferences and evaluations that
correspond with the original pre-reading components. All three of these levels of engagement
focused on vocabulary, print and story comprehension. Students who acted as comprehenders
asked questions throughout the story to increase critical thinking skills. This resulted in increased
vocabulary and print skills over both describers and performance-oriented readers; however,
performance-oriented students increased vocabulary for already advanced students (Reese &
Cox, 1999).

In addition to reading ability, other factors contribute to students’ abilities to participate
and become actively engaged in read-alouds. Students from various cultures view education
differently. Some students may see children conversing as a sign of disrespect towards the
teacher. Also, some cultures believe that active participation only undermines learning because
teachers should be the only ones talking. Teachers have been viewed as pools of knowledge and
students are receptacles waiting to be filled by the teachers. American society now views
education as a collaborative effort and as a “give and take” experience between teachers and
students, but other countries view education differently. Students’ individual reader
characteristics also affect their active participation during read-alouds. Students’ home
experiences with reading can pre-determine how they should act at school. Students who have
never been exposed to read-alouds prior to schooling may not know how to act during read-
alouds. Students can also see their first exposure to books as their original exposure, which
should not be tainted or altered by their input. Although students’ characteristics play integral
roles in students’ involvement, text characteristics are important as well. Some books are simply more engaging than others. Teachers should carefully select books that foster students’ active participation. In addition, teacher and classroom characteristics can hinder or help students’ interactions with books. If teachers are willing to allow exciting engagement, students will be more apt to participate. Also, classrooms should have an open and welcoming environment to foster engagement without isolating students to listen without sharing (Sipe, 2002).

Students’ participation and critical thinking throughout read-alouds is dependent on their ability to make connections. Readers and listeners should be able to make connections with texts using their background knowledge and information they already know or have had experiences with (Sipe, 2002). Using prior knowledge increases students’ engagement and interaction because they have background knowledge to connect with (Pearson, Hansen & Gordon, 1979). Students can make connections between the text and the author, the text and themselves, the text and another text or the text and the world around them. Increasing connections increases engagement; the more connections a student can make, the more involved they will be with the text and during discussion (Sipe, 2002). Students’ engagement can be measured through their contributions in literature discussions, by using surveys and teacher observations (Hoffman, 2011). Also, students’ abilities to retell stories with or without books measures their involvement and active listening during read-alouds (Lindauer, Lowrance, Isbell & Sobol, 2004).

*Teachers’ Involvement with Students’ Engagement*

Teachers can foster students’ involvement in read-alouds and directly affect their learning outcomes. Engaging students in read-aloud discussion through fostering open-ended dialogue, providing a comfortable speaking community, accepting controversial dilemmas and giving encouragement foster and spark active participation. Once students feel comfortable openly
talking about stories, interaction and engagement increase (Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp, Shih & Worthy, 2012). Text Talk increases student participation by encouraging students to answer teacher questions throughout the reading and making connections based on the continuous discussions (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Students are encouraged to share their own ideas and beliefs without feeling a sense of judgment by their teacher or peers (Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp, Shih & Worthy, 2012). Vygotsky’s use of scaffolding aimed to take students through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) from their actual abilities to their potential abilities. Students’ comfort within the classroom is a pertinent factor to take them beyond their current knowledge. Scaffolding needs vary with students’ current and ever-changing abilities, which can be from low to high levels of scaffolding support. Teachers need to differentiate scaffolding strategies depending on the needs of their students. Teachers use significantly more low support strategies than high support strategies (Justice & Pentimonti, 2010). They use generalizing the most and reasoning more than predicting. For high support strategies, they use co-participating the most and reducing choices more than eliciting. During Text Talk, teachers are involved in clarifying content and vocabulary and involving children in ongoing reading through questioning. This form of scaffolding helps students gain new vocabulary and ensure their understanding of the content presented through careful questioning (Beck & McKeown, 2001).

Teachers’ reading traits and characteristics affect the attractiveness of read-alouds and can influence students’ interests during read-alouds. Readers’ reactions, attitudes and presentation of texts can positively or negatively influence students’ feelings towards individual books and reading as an entirety because children at young ages follow mimicry (Moschovaki, Meadows & Pellegrini, 2007). Lindauer, Lowrance, Isbell and Sobol (2004) compare and contrast the ideas of storytelling versus story reading and their effectiveness with active student
involvement. During storytelling, readers do not read word for word nor do they memorize. Instead, readers add onto the original text, paraphrase, or recall from subtle memory; therefore, storytelling is sometimes a variation of the original story. Storytelling is often described as effective retelling with constant characters, morals and settings. Storytelling often has better formal endings and more descriptive and imaginative images due to exaggeration by the reader. Allowing readers to deviate from the original story fosters their ability to include student listeners and encourage active participation. Unlike storytelling, story reading only allows listeners to look without engaging in the reading. Story reading relies on illustrations for descriptions and details. After implementing a study on storytelling and story reading, both fostered oral development and story comprehension; however, storytelling promotes further story comprehension, retelling and remembering elements of a story (Lindauer, Lowrance, Isbell & Sobol, 2004).

Ways to Improve Student Engagement

Using strategies to improve students’ engagement during read-alouds may foster student learning and book comprehension. Students’ motivation depends on the context of reading situations, selection of texts and interest in materials (Pressley, 2006). Through these three factors, teachers can work to increase students’ motivation and, in turn, foster student involvement. Whitehurst, et. al. (1994) introduced a read-aloud strategy called Dialogic Reading that changed read-alouds by providing teachers with tools to increase students’ willingness to participate. The goal of Dialogic Reading is to have active participants. This is accomplished through an adult and child interactive picture book read-alouds. Using the CROWD strategy, specific types of questions incorporated in read-alouds, students are constantly being called on. CROWD stands for completion prompts (fill-in-the-blank), recall prompts, open-ended prompts,
wh-prompt (what, where, why) and distancing prompts, which help foster students’ abilities to make connections. Once the CROWD strategy is implemented, readers can use PEER to foster appropriate use of students’ question responses. PEER stands for prompt, evaluate, expand and repeat. Teachers prompt students to respond to the book, evaluate students’ responses, expand on students’ response by repeating and adding information and, finally, repeat the expanded version of the students’ original response. A study was conducted which focused on Dialogic Reading in small groups at school and one-on-one Dialogic Reading at home. Students’ language skills only increased when school-based Dialogic Reading was combined with home-based one-on-one Dialogic Reading. Students benefit most from the smallest groups possible – one-on-one is most effective (Whitehurst, et. al., 1994).

Although read-alouds are imperative to students’ reading success, varying levels of engagement, interest and connections made can affect its overall effectiveness for students. Strategies such as PEER and CROWD can be used to further students’ involvement during read-alouds. Scaffolding students’ critical thinking processes throughout read-alouds can foster students’ connection-making skills and ultimately increase reading motivation. Through the use of integration, active participation and scaffolding, teachers can accommodate all students and incorporate individual personal actions to help all students positively gain from the literature.

Application

Purpose

This inquiry focused on the importance of students’ connections with main characters and how they influence students’ self-selection of books to read. Focusing on racial and cultural influences, books were chosen to represent African American, Hispanic and Caucasian characters. These characters were depicted on each book cover and all consisted of characters
with the same gender as the reader. Since multicultural literature and self-selection increase motivation, implementing self-selection based on different races provided multiple forms of motivation. Students’ focus on making self-connections with texts, authors and the world, drove this investigation to determine characters’ connections and the power of their influence over students’ self-selection. My hypothesis was that if students independently made individual connections between main characters’ race or culture and their own lives, then students would be motivated to read the book with characters that most resemble themselves.

**Instruments and Procedures**


This application project was conducted in a Kindergarten classroom at Newberry Elementary School in Newberry, Florida. Twelve of eighteen students participated in this inquiry. Students were selected based on their race and ethnicity provided in their school profile. Six of the participants were female and six were male. Of the six females, one was African
American, three were Hispanic and two were Caucasian. There were two African American males, one Hispanic male and three Caucasian males.

One by one, students were called to the back of the classroom during free time at the beginning of the school day. Other students were instructed to avoid the back table to ensure students’ book selections were not influenced by peers’ book selections, comments or recommendations. Upon arriving to the selection table, each student saw three books laid on the table in random order. When asked which book they would want to read, the students answered. Students were not read the titles of each book. Following the student’s choice, the student was asked to explain why they chose one particular book over the other two. Students’ book choices and question responses were recorded.

Data Analysis

Immediately following the application project, students’ book choices and response questions were strategically organized. Students’ book choices were placed into tables according to gender. Each book was identified by title and the race of the main character. Separating students’ selections based on gender made my comparing and contrasting each category’s choices extremely straightforward. Boys’ and girls’ book selections could easily be compared based on race. Once gender groups were organized and analyzed, individual students’ responses played a substantial role in determining students’ thinking behind their selection. By analyzing each response, students could be compared to their peers of similar gender.

Details of the student’s race and gender, book selection, the main character’s race and gender, and the student’s response question were all included in data collection (see Appendix A). From analyzing students’ selections and responses, various patterns seemed apparent and guided preceding data organization strategies. For each gender, books were ordered from most
popular to least popular (see Appendix B). This ordering of books consisted of the book’s rank, title, author and year, main character’s gender and the main character’s race. From this data, books’ selection frequency is attainable.

Results

When exposed to unfamiliar multicultural children’s literature containing main characters of same gender but different race/ethnicity, more children chose books depicting characters of other race/culture than themselves. Boys chose *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (Viorst, 1972) more than *Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad* (Levine, Peete & Millner, 2002), but less than *Gracias, Thanks* (Mora, 2009). Girls chose *A Box Full of Kittens* (Manzano, 2007) more than *The Sandwich Swap* (Al Abdullah & DiPucchio, 2010) but less than *Jamaica’s Find* (Havill, 1986). One Hispanic male student chose *Gracias, Thanks* (Mora, 2009) and pointed to ‘Gracias’ on the cover when asked why he chose the book. One Caucasian male chose *Gracias, Thanks* (Mora, 2009) and, when asked why he chose that book over the others, he stared blankly at the character on another book. When asked why he did not choose the book he was staring at, the student replied, “I don’t know.” Then, when asked if it was because of the boy, the student said, “Yes, he’s black.” Then, he was asked if he wanted to read that book and he responded, “No.” One African American female chose *Jamaica’s Find* (Havill, 1986) and responded to the question by saying, “It’s a girl. I like her braids. She has big braids.” One Hispanic female chose *A Box Full of Kittens* (Manzano, 2007) and said that she liked that book. One Caucasian female chose *Jamaica’s Find* (Havill, 1986) and justified her choice by saying, “She looks like my friend Nyla and Natasha.”
Discussion

Boys chose books with Caucasian characters more than books with African American characters but less than books with Hispanic characters. Girls chose books with Hispanic characters more than Caucasian characters but less than African American characters. Two girls chose books depicting races/cultures of their own, while only one boy chose the book similar to his race/culture. Girls are more attentive to recognizing race/culture differences than boys. Girls are more inclined than boys to independently select books they can racially/culturally connect with. Both African American boys chose the same book, which did not reflect their race; however, one of the students did connect with the messy room illustrated on the cover. His connections with the messy room reflect the findings of Gray (2009) that African American students choose realistic books more than any other book.

More students chose books with main characters depicting races/cultures different than their own races/cultures, which correlates with research that suggests students are not influenced by race (Holmes, Holmes, Powell & Witt, 2007); however, some students voiced their acknowledgement of race through their responses. One female chose a book based on the main character’s similarities to her friends. One student chose a book based on the race/culture of the main character of an undesired opposing book. Similar to Mohr (2003), more non-Hispanic students chose Hispanic books than Hispanic students did. More students neglected race/culture of main characters than students who acknowledged the race/culture of the books’ main characters.

Implications for Practice

Allowing students to self-select from a collection of multicultural children’s literature within the classroom not only benefits minority students, but also widens all students’ exposure
to different groups of individuals. Meier (2003) suggests expanding students’ exposure to varying multicultural children’s literature to increase students’ respect for other races and cultures. By including multicultural literature in the classroom, minority students and students who contribute to the majority population are more likely to make connections with the literature. Incorporating a wide variety of literature into both read-alouds and availability for student self-selection amplifies the chances of generating at least one self-to-text connection for each individual student (Sipe, 2002). Increasing students’ opportunities to connect with books projects a positive likelihood of students actually making multiple connections. Through connections, increased respect, student self-selection and numerous exposures, students’ motivation to read can be positively enhanced (Pressley, 2006).

Recommendations for Future Research

Since student self-selection increases students’ motivation to read and increases students’ abilities to make connections, self-selection should be further explored. Examining students’ self-selection factors based on the main character’s gender may unveil a correlation between the reader’s gender and the main character’s gender. Research showing the relationship between race and gender may also uncover factors affecting students’ book choice. Researching student connections with main characters during read-alouds and the effects of those connections on varying levels of engagement could further teachers’ understanding of students’ reading motivation. Characters’ race, gender and culture can be explored.

Conclusion

Although multicultural literature has been underrepresented in my past and present experiences in elementary classrooms, minor exposures to literature containing variations in gender, race and ethnicity can have positive effects on both students and teachers. Prior to
implementing the application portion of my inquiry, the mentor teacher in my student teaching classroom had not incorporated any multicultural children’s literature into the curriculum. Only literature containing Caucasian characters was shared in the culturally diverse kindergarten classroom. Highly interested in students’ responses to the diverse literature of my inquiry, my mentor teacher requested a copy of the results. The following week, the first multicultural book was read-aloud to the class.

During the read-aloud, I observed an African American female student who is typically off-task and extremely talkative while the teacher is reading; however, during the multicultural literature reading portraying African American characters, the young kindergartener stared straight at the book and remained engaged and focused during the entirety of the read-aloud. Looking back on my inquiry results, the same student made direct connections with the girl’s braids on the cover of *Jamaica’s Find*. Although other African American students were not overwhelmingly affected by the multicultural literature containing characters similar to their own race, one student, who is generally unengaged, was able to make connections and flourish from this exposure.

This project not only brought light to the benefits of students’ connections with literature, but also examined the importance of students’ self-selection and ability to personally choose books based on those connections. Incorporating books into the curriculum based on students’ prior selections can increase student engagement and motivation. Although students’ interests and similarities with characters may be extremely diverse, including at least one piece of literature reflecting an aspect of each student’s life can be a pertinent tool in making vital connections with literature and increase reading motivation for future reading success.
Appendix A
Kindergarten Students’ Book Choices

Male Kindergarten Students’ Book Choices:

Terrell (African American Male)
*Alexander & the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “I wanted that one!”

Jordan (African American Male)
*Alexander & the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “His room isn’t clean—he’s being lazy! He wants to sleep but in this one he’s just sitting down (pointing to Henry’s Freedom Box.)

Carlos (Hispanic Male)
*Gracias, Thanks!*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “Because I like that book.” (He pointed to Gracias on the cover.)

Joseph (Caucasian Male)
*Gracias, Thanks!*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “Because it’s his birthday. There’s music.”

Alex (Caucasian Male)
*Gracias, Thanks!*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “Cause I don’t know.”

Michael (Caucasian Male)
*Gracias, Thanks!*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “I don’t know.”
Is it because of the boy? “Yes, he’s black.”
So you don’t want to read this one? (Pointing at Henry’s Freedom Box) “No.”

*Students’ names changed to ensure confidentiality.*
Female Kindergarten Students’ Book Choices:

**Natasha (African American Female)**  
*Jamaica’s Find*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “It’s a girl. I like her braids. She has big braids.”

**Claire (Hispanic Female)**  
*A Box Full of Kittens*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “Because I like that book.”

**Pamela (Hispanic Female)**  
*The Sandwich Swap*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “There’s two. They’re friends.” Which girl do you like better? (Pointed to the Caucasian character).

**Emma (Hispanic Female)**  
*Jamaica’s Girl*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “Girl!”

**Nicole (Caucasian Female)**  
*Jamaica’s Find*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “I read it before at my old school. She looks like my friend Nyla… and Natasha” (Nicole’s Classroom Buddy).

**Lauren (Caucasian Female)**  
*A Box Full of Kittens*

Why’d you choose that book instead of the others? “Because I like kittens.”

*Students’ names changed to ensure confidentiality.*
### Kindergarten Boys’ Book Selections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>(Author, Year)</th>
<th>Main Character’s Gender</th>
<th>Main Character’s Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Gracias, Thanks</em></td>
<td>(Mora, 2009)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad</em></td>
<td>(Levine, Peete &amp; Millner, 2002)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Kindergarten Girls’ Book Selections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>(Author, Year)</th>
<th>Main Character’s Gender</th>
<th>Main Character’s Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Jamaica’s Find</em></td>
<td>(Havill, 1986)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>A Box Full of Kittens</em></td>
<td>(Manzano, 2007)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>The Sandwich Swap</em></td>
<td>(Al Abdallah &amp; DiPucchio, 2010)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian and Arabic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Children’s Literature References


References


