

The Unbearable Whiteness of Literacy Instruction: Realizing the Implications of the Proficient Reader Research

By Jane M. Gangi

The proficient reader research (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Mantione & Smead, 2003; Miller, 2002) has in the last decade revolutionized the way reading comprehension is taught in schools of education. Based on the research, teacher educators now routinely model for their students ways to question, summarize, determine importance, infer, synthesize, visualize, and activate prior knowledge. Most of this instruction is done in connection with what is called “quality” children’s and young adult literature, which too often privileges literature by and about White people.

In this article, I look at the ways that, taken as an aggregate, literacy textbooks and professional books—along with booklists, awards, school book fairs and book order forms, and children’s literature textbooks—advantage White children and marginalize children of color. Since children must be able to make connections with what they read to become proficient readers, White children whose experiences are depicted in books can make many more text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections than can children of color. Pre-service and in-service teachers need to know where to find quality multicultural children’s literature, so that their diverse students can benefit from reading texts that depict their lives. In addition, children of color deserve access to mentors, roles that writers and illustrators from their own backgrounds can play.

Bebot and His “Mirror” Book

Several years ago, while working with a diverse group of fourth and fifth graders during a storytelling event, I found out that one of the students, whom I will call Bebot, came from the Philippines. I had recently received a copy of the Children’s Book Press title *Lakas and the Manilatown Fish/Si Lakas at ang isdang Manilatown* (2003) by Anthony Robles, the first book published in the United States in both English and Tagalog. I pulled the book off the shelf and showed it to the children. “Oh, Bebot,” cried the other children, “Lakas looks just like you.” Bebot beamed. I did a brief picture walk and then asked Bebot if he would like to hold the book. For the rest of the hour, Bebot clutched the book to his chest, occasionally turning it this way and that, leafing through its

pages, and then tenderly placing it under his heart once again. An hour later on the way out, Bebot, who was still embracing *Lakas*, longingly asked me, “May I keep this book?” As I was picturing myself giving away 25 books to 25 children, his teacher rescued me, promising to purchase the book for his school. In a follow-up call, I learned that not only had the teacher purchased the book for the school but Bebot’s father had also purchased a copy for him to have at home.

I believe this was the first time Bebot had ever seen himself in a book; that he cherished the occasion was obvious. Using Rudine Sims Bishop’s metaphor (1990), for Bebot, *Lakas* was a “mirror” book—for himself, his family, his community, and his culture. For me, *Lakas* was a “window” book, helping me see into an unfamiliar world. All readers need both, but it is in the “mirror” books where proficient reading begins: Readers who can make text-to-self connections move more quickly along the road to proficient reading. In the United States, children of color make up almost 40 percent of the population; in the world, children of color make up 70 percent of the population. Our classroom libraries need to reflect this diverse population and, by focusing

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on mirror books for many, window books are provided simultaneously; as for Bebot and me, a mirror book for one is a window book for another. Unfortunately, classroom collections too often provide more mirror books for White children than for children of color.

Disparities in Opportunity: Children’s Literature Textbooks, Booklists, Book Order Forms, and Awards

I became aware of disparities in opportunity several years ago when preparing my book, *Encountering Children’s Literature: An Arts Approach* (2004). As part of the writing process, I reviewed current texts. Having graduated from college during the height of the civil rights movement, I was saddened to see the lack of multicultural content in many of the children’s literature textbooks. Mary Scroggins and I later published an article in *MultiCultural Review* (Scroggins & Gangi, 2004) in which I reported the status of multicultural literature in children’s literature textbooks

and Mary spoke of the pain of raising her three daughters with so little literature in the school's curriculum to reflect their African-American heritage. The title of our article, "Paul Laurence *Who?*," came from Mary's experience in a graduate poetry class at a highly regarded university where she learned that none of her fellow classmates had ever heard of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Mary's favorite poet. From my own research, I was not surprised. For instance, one textbook published in 2002 profiled 15 poets, only one of whom was of color. Another textbook, from 2004, offered a chart of 500 years of children's books, with only two authors of color.

Booklists and Book Order Forms

A 2005 article in *Reading Today* (Richardson, 2005) lamented the decline in children's reading over the summer. The author recommended the National Endowment for the Humanities summer reading list. Less than 5 percent of the 300 recommended books were multicultural. I wrote a letter to the editor of *Reading Today* (Gangi, 2005b), offering to help readers find multicultural literature. Soon after, I received e-mail requests from all over the country. I also received an e-mail from Jonda McNair (2008), who was working on a study of Scholastic book order forms. She had examined Scholastic's Seesaw and Firefly book order forms from 2004 and 2005 [see her article published in this issue of *MCR*]. Of approximately 1,200 books offered in a six-month time frame, two books were written by Latin Americans, one by an Asian American, and none by a Native American. "Books by African Americans," McNair wrote, "were included more frequently than books about other racial groups, but the numbers were still small." And, of those small numbers, a disproportionate number were couched in terms of Black History Month, even though books by and about African Americans (and others) should be available year-round. Because of its Book Club program, Scholastic has great influence on teachers' selections and is the major supplier of trade books to classrooms. The company rewards teachers' orders with Bonus Points, which teachers can then use for free books. While Scholastic publishes many wonderful multicultural books, it is not necessarily these books that end up in the book fairs, of which Scholastic has a near monopoly, and on book order forms. Teachers, who often pay for materials out of their own pockets, cannot be blamed for taking advantage of the point system Scholastic offers to increase the size of their classroom libraries. Nevertheless, in most cases, it is the White children who are advantaged.

McNair also sent me a copy of an article by Bell and Clark (1998), which showed that African-American children made greater gains in comprehension when they were given culturally relevant reading material, thus confirming the proficient reader research: Creating circumstances for children to activate schema contributes to the development of comprehension.

More Booklists

In its February/March edition of *Reading Today* (Anonymous, 2006), to promote the March celebration of Read Across America, books from two National Education Association (NEA) surveys conducted in 1999 and 2000 were recommended. The NEA

offers two lists of 100 books each: Teachers' Favorites and Children's Favorites. Because it is teachers who most often introduce children to books, the Children's Favorites, with the exception of a few titles like *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, reflect the teachers' choices. Christopher Paul Curtis (*The Watsons Go to Birmingham*) and Mildred Taylor (*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*) are the only authors of color on the list, comprising 2 percent of the total. There are a few good multicultural books on the NEA lists by such White authors as Scott O'Dell (*Island of the Blue Dolphins*), Jerry Spinelli (*Maniac Magee*), and Ezra Jack Keats (*The Snowy Day*); there are also books that are deeply offensive, especially to Native Americans because of the way they perpetuate negative stereotypes. Examples are *The Indian in the Cupboard* and *The Sign of the Beaver*; see Oyate's "Books to Avoid" for why these books should be retired and replaced with books by "cultural insiders"—those who share the culture about which they write. There are many Native Americans, such as Joseph Bruchac, Louise Erdrich, and Cynthia Leitich Smith, who are and have been writing wonderful children's books.

Awards

I also looked at awards (Gangi, 2005a). Today there are various multicultural awards: the Pura Belpré, the Tomás Rivera, the Coretta Scott King, and others. Still, the Caldecott and the Newbery are the most prestigious. These two awards guarantee any author or illustrator a lifetime revenue stream, as virtually all libraries purchase the winning titles, they are displayed in most bookstores, and teachers rely heavily on them. In a society as pluralistic as ours, this automatic reliance on the Newberys and Caldecotts should be questioned. The committees that decide on the Newberys and Caldecotts are made up of librarians who, like teachers, are mostly White and middle class and, therefore, more likely to choose books that resonate with them. These are the books they can connect to on emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural levels—the books with which they can make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections. Although the Newbery committee has recently chosen some books by authors of color—books by Christopher Paul Curtis, Linda Sue Park, and Cynthia Kadohata—the Caldecott committee seems to favor visual artists who illustrate in the realistic and cartoon styles. Excluded are those artists, many of color, who work in the expressionistic, folk, and Native American ledger art styles. The Coretta Scott King and the Pura Belpré, also awarded by American Library Association, recognize and honor the art of African Americans and Latinos/Latinas respectively. Even so, the winners of the Coretta Scott King and Pura Belpré awards are not purchased as frequently as the winners of the Caldecott. A WorldCat search (a catalogue of most of the world's books) shows that libraries have purchased 3,086 copies of the 2006 Caldecott, *The Hello Goodbye Window* by Norton Juster and illustrated by Chris Raschka. In contrast, libraries have purchased 2,515 copies of the 2006 Coretta Scott King, *Rosa* by Nikki Giovanni, illustrated by Bryan Collier, and 1,424 copies of *Doña Flor* by Pat Mora, illustrated by Raúl Colón (WorldCat, 2007).

In the spring of 2006, Aimee Ferguson, who was a student in my Emergent Literacy class at Manhattanville College, challenged what she was hearing from me in class (I like students like

Aimee). She went to see for herself, in the classroom in a diverse city where she had been doing her student teaching. In a reflection piece, she wrote that she was “shocked” to find that the only books about people of color were on Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King. Aimee took on the project of sharing multicultural books with students of color, and she describes her experiences and results in an article in *The Tennessee Reading Teacher* (Gangi & Ferguson, 2006).

Literacy Textbooks

It is not my intention to denigrate authors of literacy textbooks when evaluating their inclusion of multicultural literature. My aim is to demonstrate the paucity of multicultural literature, taken as an aggregate, and how that omission creates diminished opportunities for children of color to develop reading proficiency. Most of the books I examine here serve wonderful functions and are widely used across the country. While I do not think it is intentional, however, the summative effect is to normalize “whiteness” and marginalize “color.”

Besides marginalization—and the way marginalization diminishes opportunities for children of color to make connections with what they read—there is another facet of literacy instruction that is lacking and should be addressed, that of providing mentors for children of color through author and illustrator studies. We bemoan the urban Black child’s desire to become a basketball player and a basketball player only, yet we do little to introduce him to any Black authors besides Mildred Taylor (whose contributions to historical fiction are seminal). Author and illustrator studies could and should be much more inclusive; there are many, many fine authors and illustrators of color who could be introduced [see Appendix D, “Multicultural and International Authors and Illustrators of Color,” in Gangi (2004)]. It is equally important for White children to know that talent comes in *all* colors.

The books considered here educate educators, and educate them well—I use or refer to most of them in my literacy classes—on the various facets of literacy: guided reading and leveled books, comprehension based on the proficient reader research, vocabulary, word study, the writing process and the writer’s craft, phonological and phonemic awareness, content area literacy, and assessment. Yet, to make children’s literature choices based on what literacy textbooks recommend is not usually in the best interest of children of color, although busy teachers understandably rely on these recommendations. While considering the consequences for children, especially based on the proficient reader research and the firmly established notion that children must be able to activate prior knowledge, a question that might simultaneously be asked is: What is the impact on White children when they find themselves mirrored so frequently with few windows into cultures beyond their own?

Professional Literacy Textbooks Examined

Guided reading and leveled books. An influential book is *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children* by Fountas and Pinnell (1996). The premise of the book is grounded in the work of Marie Clay and others who have devised ways for children to

keep moving along the road of reading proficiency by first reading books at their level, then gradually with instructional support in small guided reading groups move on to more challenging texts and, thus, become independent readers. To this end, Fountas and Pinnell append an abundance of leveled books. Of approximately 2,500 recommended titles of leveled books, fewer than ten authors of color are represented, about 1 percent (pp. 288–338). While there are in Fountas and Pinnell’s list some multicultural books in leveled publishers’ series (in which the authors are unnamed), it is safe to say these easy readers are not terribly inspiring as literature. Children of color should be able to see pictures of authors and illustrators who look like they do on book jackets, as White children can. Fountas and Pinnell’s *Guiding Readers and Writers Grades 3–6: Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy* (2001) is better in its inclusion of multicultural literature, but the recommendation of 44 author web sites (Appendix 54) includes only one author of color, the late Virginia Hamilton. Another book on leveled texts is Lucy Calkins’s *A Field Guide to*

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the Classroom Library (2002); of 36 “Benchmark Books for Each Text Level,” only one is by an author of color, and it is also the only multicultural book on the list (p. xvi). Some literacy educators have expressed concern about the intense focus on leveled books throughout the country (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2003), especially after second or third grade when motivation and interest take over; if we are going to have so many leveled books, at least 40 percent should be multicultural so that *all* children can make text-to-self connections. Lee & Low’s *Bebop* books fill a huge gap for easy leveled multicultural books, and all of Lee & Low’s books are leveled by Lexile, DRA, and Scholastic Reading counts.

Word study. Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston’s *Words Their Way* (2004) is one of the best books available on word study; it offers children much more engaging activities with the content than the way word study and spelling have traditionally been taught. The authors recommend 49 children’s books, none by an author or illustrator of color (p. 418). The 43 pages of pictures also default to whiteness, as the pictures of children are identifiably White children. Brand’s *Word Savvy: Integrated Vocabulary, Spelling, & Word Study, Grades 3–6* (2004) is more representative; of 70 recommended books, five are by authors of color—about 7 percent.

Comprehension based on the proficient reader research. The seminal text in the proficient reader research is *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop* by Keene and Zimmerman (1997); the language of the book now permeates most state

standards. Yet, in 216 pages of text, fewer than five multicultural books are mentioned. And, *Knots on a Counting Rope*—a book supposedly about Native Americans though much despised by them—is used as a touchstone text (see Oyate’s “Books to Avoid” on why this book is objectionable). *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding* by Harvey and Goudvis (2000) provides in Appendix B an excellent bibliography with much authentic, high-quality multicultural literature. However, to teach specific comprehension strategies, the authors recommend few books by authors of color. The chapters are organized by specific strategies and include both general recommendations and Author Sets:

- Making Connections and Author Sets—zero authors of color
- Questioning—one; Author Sets—zero
- Visualizing—two; Author Sets—zero
- Inferring—zero; Author Sets—zero

Unfortunately, these are the sections that teachers, in their genuine desire to teach comprehension strategies, are likely to study most closely. Similarly, in an otherwise excellent book, Sibberson and Szymusiak recommend in *Still Learning to Read: Teaching Students in Grades 3–6* (2003) over 200 children’s books. There are six authors of color, about 3 percent. They also recommend *Annie and the Old One* by Miles Miska, which is criticized for its lack of cultural authenticity and specificity pertaining to Native Americans (Slapin & Seale, 1998).

Vocabulary. One of the best books on teaching vocabulary, also widely used in many school districts, is Beck, McKeown, and Kucan’s *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* (2002). It, too, falls short on recommendations for multicultural children’s literature. Of 80 recommended books, there are about three that could be called multicultural (Appendix A). An otherwise fine book, Ganske’s *Word Journeys: Assessment-Guided Phonics, Spelling, and Vocabulary Instruction* (2000) recommends 117 children’s literature titles, none by an author of color and only three that could be called multicultural—the Julian stories by White author Ann Cameron.

The writing process and the writer’s craft. Now in its second edition, Avery’s . . . *And with a Light Touch: Learning about Reading, Writing and Teaching with First Graders* (2002) is a lovely book to help teachers teach writing to younger children. However, of the recommended 97 books, only one is by an author of color. *Interactive Writing: How Language and Literacy Come Together, K–2*, by McCarrier, Pinnell, and Fountas (2000) recommends 700 books, with 13 authors of color, about 1 percent. Ray (1999) is better; of about 200 books, there are 26 authors and/or illustrators of color, about 13 percent. Like Keene and Zimmerman, Ray recommends the objectionable *Knots on a Counting Rope*. Fletcher and Portalupi’s (1998) *Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K–8* is also better. For grades five through eight, 41 books are recommended, with five authors of color and some good multicultural books by White authors. (It is certainly acceptable for White authors to write about cultures not their own, if they are respectful and do the required work of careful research.) For grades three and four, there are eight authors of color in the recommended 35 books. Of real concern is that only two authors of color appear in the K–2

section, where 35 books are recommended. Lucy Calkins’s hugely influential *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1994) highly recommends the opprobrious *The Indian in the Cupboard* in her annotated bibliography; of the 74 annotated books, there are four authors of color. Young children of color who are studying the writer’s craft need to see people who resemble them—and writers who share their heritage.

Phonological awareness. In Ericson and Juliebo’s *The Phonological Awareness Handbook for Kindergarten and Primary Teachers* (1998) there is an appendix called “Sources for Nursery Rhymes, Rhymes, Poems, and Songs,” which features about 90 titles, with two authors and illustrators of color. Their Children’s Book References contains 26 titles, with no authors or illustrators of color. Yopp’s (1995) helpful work in identifying books for developing phonemic awareness is well-known and her approach is humane and effective, as she encourages playfulness when sharing books with children. Of the 44 annotated books, though, there are few multicultural books.

General literacy textbooks. In *Welcome to Kindergarten: A Month-by-Month Guide to Teaching and Learning* by Walmsley and Wing (2004), nine of ten of the books recommended for a unit on Native Americans are by White authors (p. 84). Of recommended books on Thanksgiving, none is by a Native American (p. 87). Of the touchstone books for teaching writing, 11 of 13 of the authors are White (p. 89). Lenski and Nierstheimer’s *Becoming a Teacher of Reading: A Developmental Approach* (2004) recommends 57 books with six authors of color, at 10 percent, a higher percentage than most literacy textbooks. They also recommend *My Heart Is on the Ground* by White author Ann Rinaldi (p. 367), the worst choice for depicting the Indian Boarding School experience; again, see Oyate’s “Books to Avoid” for why Native American leaders asked Scholastic to withdraw the book from the market (Scholastic didn’t). Cooper and Kiger’s *Literacy: Helping Children Construct Meaning* (2006) recommends approximately 130 titles, with 14 authors of color (about 10 percent), better than some textbooks, but still a long way to go to reflect 40 percent of the nation’s schoolchildren (and 70 percent of the world’s children).

Content area literacy. Manzo, Manzo, and Thomas (2005) wisely point out the validity of using picture books in the upper grades. In their list of 28 recommended picture books and informational books (pp. 242–243), there are no authors or illustrators of color and only one book that could be called multicultural, *A Chair for My Mother* by White author Vera Williams.

Testing and assessment. Several years ago, African-American children sat down to take an Illinois state test. Their third grade teacher was pleased to see a selection from Ann Cameron’s *More Stories Julian Tells*, thinking the children would do well because they were familiar with Cameron’s series, which features African Americans. The teacher’s delight was short-lived; children immediately saw that the test illustrator (who was different from the book’s illustrator) had illustrated the characters as White, not African American. This was of course deeply troubling to the children, whose tests results were no doubt skewed downward by this affront. There were apologies all around, including from Cameron, who was blameless in the incident. What is even more disconcerting is that the test had been reviewed by over 100 educators before the test makers issued the test (Margolis, 2000); such is our professional knowledge of children’s literature. With

all due respect to Cameron, test makers could, instead of repeatedly turning to well-known White authors, include passages from authors of color themselves.

More humane and probably more informative than standardized tests, qualitative assessments must also be scrutinized for their inclusion of children of color. In Roe & Burns's *Informal Reading Inventory* (2007), Appendix A is designed to help teachers choose and support children's reading proficiency. Of the 19 recommended books on the pre-primer level, none are by or about people of color. Of the 37 books on the primer level, two are by African Americans—John Steptoe and Donald Crews. Of the 48 books on the First Reader level, two are by Shigeo Watanabe; all other authors are White. On the second grade level, Pat Cummings is the only author of color. In the 20 storybooks in the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), children of color do appear in the pictures (Beaver, 1997); of the 35 recommended comparable texts (a comparison set of books, relating such books as *Are You My Mother?* to the DRA levels), there is only one author of color, John Steptoe, and one multicultural book by a White author, Ann Cameron. *Little House on the Prairie* is recommended; while Laura Ingalls Wilder was a writer of her time, the demeaning portrayal of Native Americans in this book should be discussed.

Freeing Children of Color from an Unbearable Burden

Teacher education and professional books, book lists, awards, Internet resources (for which no study on inclusiveness exists), school book fairs and book order forms, and classroom libraries must honor all children by equitably providing both mirror and window books for all. Such books are available, of high quality, and abundant, especially from small publishers with a multicultural mission statement: Lee & Low, Greenwood, Children's Book Press, Cinco Puntos, Arte Público/Piñata Books, Kane/Miller, Northland/Rising Moon/Luna Rising, Salinas Bookshelf, Just Us, Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Marshall Cavendish, North-South, and Fulcrum (all of their homepages can easily be located by googling their names in quotes on the Internet). After I share books from these publishers, many of my White students regret that they were not exposed to these books during their schooling. Because they are entering a helping profession, most education students embrace learning about books that will help them reach children of all colors. This is especially important for boys of color. Hall (2006) observes, "As the adolescent male of color seeks out his social role, he finds no clue of it in textbooks or classroom activities that largely reflect Eurocentric frameworks and perspectives. From social studies to the sciences, and from language arts to mathematics, much of the curriculum that students of color are exposed to is short of cultural representation and social relevancy. Teacher lesson plans that coincide with required textbooks either minimize cultural aspects of Latino and African American students or omit them altogether" (p. 18).

In addition to reaching equity in children's literature, we need to think differently about the ways we introduce and use multicultural children's literature by including more interactive and culturally responsive methods (Gangi, 2004; Gangi & Ferguson, 2006; Gay, 2000; Hale, 1994; Hall, 2006; Heath, 2004; Ladson-

Billings, 1994). A culturally responsive pedagogy is often arts-based and involves group collaboration: inviting children to enact through pantomime, improvisation, story dramatization, tableaux, choral reading, and readers theater. Music and the visual arts are also powerful learning mediums. Current and future teachers may not have experienced such approaches themselves and so should have that opportunity in their teacher education programs and in their professional development.

Lack of equity in representation places an unbearable burden on children of color. In addition to presenting more diverse characters and settings, we must provide more access to authors and illustrators of color. We must resist the temptation to choose for read-alouds and teaching writer's craft those books that only resonate with us; we must instead choose books that will resonate with the children we teach. In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, biographer Tracy Kidder (2003) describes Dr. Paul Farmer's life goal as "to provide a preferential option for the poor" (p. 81), which Farmer, a medical doctor, carries out by serving the poorest of the poor in Haiti and throughout the world. Because children of color have so often been left out of children's literature and literacy textbooks, practitioner books, booklists, book fairs, book order forms, classroom libraries, and awards, we must make a similar preferential effort in our literature choices.

For multicultural bibliographies, please see my web site: <http://faculty.mville.edu/gangij/bibliographies.htm>; or e-mail gangij@mville.edu if you need help finding and using multicultural books.

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