

Growing the Use of Multicultural Literature Through Accretion

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

Children's books play a significant role in students' academic progress as well as in social and cultural learning. The opportunities afforded children through picture books should be a result of intentional choices. In this article, we provide guidance to preservice teachers on intentionally selecting multicultural literature. Current research suggests that authenticity and accuracy are two important elements of multicultural literature. We add to the body of research on multicultural literature by presenting *accretion*, the concept of expanding breadth of a cultural aspect. Included is a list of suggested picture books that demonstrate three expanded areas of accretion: content, illustrator studies, and awards.

Keywords: multicultural literature, preservice teachers, classroom library, picture books

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Growing the Use of Multicultural Literature Through Accretion

The story begins with Ms. Jones (all names are pseudonyms), a preservice teacher who is teaching in a third-grade field placement. Like many preservice teachers, Ms. Jones had a developing awareness of the importance of including multicultural books in her future classroom. As the school year neared winter break, Ms. Jones contemplated holiday books that would be appropriate to read to students in her field placement. In her search, Ms. Jones discovered a book about Kwanzaa, an African holiday celebrated around the time of Christmas and Hanukkah. She purchased the book to read to the class and thought that this would be a wonderful addition to her growing collection of multicultural books for her future classroom library. Something Ms. Jones had not considered was that the book about Kwanzaa was the only story related to any African culture in her collection of books.

Ms. Jones' story describes the actions of many well-intentioned, preservice teachers who lack a clear plan for moving forward with gathering multicultural literature for literacy instruction. It is well-documented that children's main access to literature is through core reading curricula, and the role of these texts in the transmission of societal values is significant (Hunter & Chick, 2005). Unfortunately, the stories found in mass-produced reading curricula have not traditionally offered enough diverse perspectives in terms of culture and race (Bishop, 1990). Educators can supplement stories that their students are exposed to by acquiring books for their read alouds and classroom libraries. However, even trade books do not typically provide diverse points of view as books written by and about people of color are sparse (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2022). This is problematic because lack of representation, and often misrepresentation, serves to marginalize children's learning (Gultekin & May, 2019). The

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purpose of this article, then, is to review the current landscape of multicultural children's literature, both in terms of publishing and collections of stories within instructional materials (i.e., core reading curricula and trade books), and provide a basis for action for preservice teachers. We address multicultural literature in these ways: authenticity, accuracy, and a new term we introduce to represent building a repertoire of books around a cultural topic – *accretion*. In the next section, we discuss the conceptual framework for this article.

Conceptual Framework

Critical multicultural and social constructivist frameworks guided this work. Humans learn from and through their environment, making meaning by interacting with others within their community (Sleeter & Grant, 2009; Vygotsky, 1934/1986). Through these shared contextual experiences, humans learn frameworks and social rules of interacting with one another, which play roles in defining cultural dimensions (Shachar, 2012). Historically, *culture* has been a difficult term to define given the ever-changing landscape of global human experiences; however, a working definition of culture should consider “the values, traditions, worldviews, and social political relationships” (p. 171) of a given community (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

In this way, a social constructivist perspective provides the context for understanding how shared social transactions with books influences children's beliefs, attitudes, and identities (Halliday, 1973; Mead, 1995). Furthermore, the environment in which these transactions with books take place influences the way in which children construct knowledge from these events (Moshman, 1982). Because children's literature greatly influences children's lives, books serve a vital role in critical multicultural education (Fox & Short, 2003; McNair, 2008). “Using books with a multicultural focus broadens children's cross-cultural, intra-cultural, and multi-cultural understanding” (Nganga, 2020, p. 94). Providing children with images of people who look like

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them and stories that positively reflect their culture and race contributes to their development of an appreciation of self (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010).

Through critical multicultural and social constructivism educational frameworks, children's literature can promote an understanding of others and ways to think critically about important cultural and racial issues (Nganga, 2020). Although textbooks or reading curricula alone do not determine what is taught in schools, the wide use of packaged reading curricula in elementary classrooms compels readers towards certain perspectives and away from others (Bryan, 2012). The stories in core reading curricula, as well as children's books that preservice teachers may use to supplement these curricula, provide entrée to specific ideas and information, which inform students' thinking, their identities, their actions, and the ways in which they envision themselves and others (Gultekin & May, 2019; Bishop, 1990). In the next section, we share statistics about the lack of diversity in children's books and authors and illustrators as well as in core reading curricula.

The Changing Landscape of Children's Books

Larrick (1965) surveyed 5,000 trade books published in 1962, 1963, and 1964, and found that only 6.7 % (349) contained one or more African American characters. When African American characters did appear in the books Larrick surveyed, they often only appeared as faces in a crowd or as characters with skin darkened in a way that was barely recognizable as indicative of a racial difference. Twenty years later, in 1984, after noticing a drastic underrepresentation of books published by people of color, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) began to document the number of books published by authors of different races (Horning, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2014).

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As of the last updated date, the CCBC received 3,427 children's literature books that were published in 2021 (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2022). Of those books 13.2% (452 books) had significant Black/African content. Even more surprising is that only 9.2% (315 books) were written by Black/African authors. This trend continued across books published by all people of color (see Table 1). These statistics do not indicate that all other books published in 2021 contained White characters, because there are many books published every year with animal characters. However, these statistics do indicate that there is a lack of diverse, multicultural content in children's books that is mirrored by the lack of diverse authors and illustrators whose books are published.

Furthermore, Buescher, Lightner, & Kelly (2016) found that widely used core reading series used in first grade classrooms severely lacked in the diversity of authors and illustrators (see Table 2). Kelly & Iaconelli (2018) followed up with a similar study focusing on race and gender of characters in first grade reading curricula that is available for free or for a small fee (see Table 3). Taken together, these data suggest that although people of color are writing and illustrating books, their books are published at lower rates than those of White authors and illustrators. They also suggest that characters in children's literature proportionately underrepresent people of color, particularly people identifying as Latinx and Black.

Unfortunately, the statistics reported by the CCBC also suggest that despite the multiplicity of perspectives and cultures in the United States, books published for children and teens reflect only a limited scope of the actual diversity within American culture (Horning et al., 2014). Therefore, preservice teachers must be intentional in selecting multicultural literature for use in their field placements and future classroom libraries.

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Multicultural Literature

Multicultural children's literature offers students mirrors to see themselves, their families, and their cultures and communities, windows to see different or unfamiliar people and cultures, and sliding glass doors to walk through and take part in new experiences (Bishop, 1990). Furthermore, it is well-accepted that multicultural literature should be available in classrooms and incorporated into instructional materials (Bishop, 1990; Gultekin & May, 2019; Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Nganga, 2020). But herein lies the paradox: *multicultural literature* is a term used often in educational discourse, yet it is often not exemplified in the classroom. So, what is multicultural literature, and what tools can we use to identify it?

Various definitions of multicultural literature exist in research; however, almost all exclude evaluative boundaries such as considering the accuracy or the positionality of the work (e.g., Cai, 2002; Gopalakrishnan & Persiani-Becker, 2011; Short, 2016). For example, Norton (2011) defined multicultural literature as "literature about racial or ethnic minority groups that are culturally and socially different from the white Anglo-Saxon majority in the United States, whose largely middle-class values and customs are most represented in American literature" (p. 73). This definition captures the essence of a broad array of texts depicting characters of color and representing non-American cultures. Yet, it fails to delineate authentic, accurate multicultural literature, from the thinly veiled "cultural" literature written from White viewpoints that continue to flood the publishing market. Therefore, next, we discuss three evaluative components to supplement Norton's definition of multicultural literature: authenticity, accuracy, and accretion.

Authenticity

A text is culturally authentic when the author writes about their own personal experiences

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or the author writes with great expertise, detail, and sensitivity about another culture (Yokota, 1993). Authenticity is evident when cultural information is naturally embedded into the story and reflects a culture's values and practices that are accepted as norms (Short & Fox, 2004; Yokota, 1993). Further, the cultural practices presented in the text should be a part of the "central code of a culture" (Short & Fox, 2004, p. 380) and resonate with readers who are insiders to that particular culture.

Accuracy

Determining a book's accuracy requires examination of the nuances of cultural representations portrayed in books, with particular sensitivity to avoiding stereotypes formed by misrepresentations or presenting a single narrative (Gultekin & May, 2019). Accuracy focuses on presenting cultural facts and practices well, including the "visible facts of external reality and the invisible facts of internal reality" (Short & Fox, 2004, p. 379). Evaluating characteristics of a text such as setting, dialogue, and illustrations is important when determining if the story accurately represents a culture.

Accretion

We are adding to the existing literature on multicultural literature with a new term, *accretion*, which means "an increase by gradual addition" or "the growing together of separate parts into a single whole" (www.dictionary.com). In this way, the idea of accretion makes sense in respect to multicultural literature. First, teachers accumulate texts for many reasons, including for instructional purposes, for classroom libraries, and sometimes even for personal pleasure. Second, the process of accumulating texts is a gradual one, particularly for preservice teachers. Teachers who have taught for several years can attest to how book collections grow over time due to discovering newly published authors (e.g., Oge Mora), participating in

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organizations/groups (e.g., International Literacy Association), and teaching newfound writing styles (e.g., graphic novels). Lastly, the idea of accretion goes deeper than bringing in a new text; it conveys the practice of bringing single texts together to form a broader, more complete understanding of a cultural facet. In sum, accretion is the process of gradually collecting multicultural texts to present multiple narratives, perspectives, events, and features within or about a culture.

Together, these three elements – authenticity, accuracy, and accretion – form the basis for building a multicultural literature collection. It is important that preservice teachers apply these evaluative elements of multicultural literature as they begin to accrue books for their field placements and future classroom libraries. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the element of accretion as preservice teachers begin to collect books as the other two elements have been commonly written about by other scholars (Gultekin & May, 2019; Short & Fox, 2004; Yokota, 1993).

Using Accretion to Select Multicultural Literature

Our idea of accretion stems from the previously cited concerns that limited exposure to or use of multicultural literature leads to harmful depictions of certain cultures or leaves those cultures underrepresented in school curriculum and classrooms. Presenting one story or perspective of a culture can lead one to surmise inaccurate cultural images. Gultekin and May (2019) described a situation where using a single text depicting Muslims could suggest that Muslims are often involved in war or that they practice archaic rituals. Considering accretion when selecting multicultural texts helps to minimize these negative effects of the single story.

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The next section presents three ways that preservice teachers can take up accretion by adding breadth to their multicultural literature collections: content, illustrator studies, and awards.

Content

A book's content is one way that preservice teachers can add breadth to their literature collections. It is important to have a variety of content available so that students can find books that match their interests and therefore increase their motivation to want to read (Gambrell, 2015). Also important is broadening students' worldview as they explore books that contain new information. There are many ways that a preservice teacher can compile books focused on a myriad of topics. Let us return to Ms. Jones' story as we explore how we can further assure that students are offered books with diverse content.

After returning from winter break, Ms. Jones attended a conference session where a presenter read aloud *14 Cows for America* (Agra Deedy, 2016) which takes place in Kenya and tells the true story of the Maasai people who gift 14 cows to an American diplomat after learning about the September 11, 2001 attacks. Ms. Jones remembered noticing that she had one book that related to Africa, *Together for Kwanzaa* (Ford & Hehenberger, 2000), before winter break and decided that she would purchase *14 Cows for America* (Agra Deedy, 2016) for her collection to add breadth to content about African culture.

Ms. Jones wanted to further expand her collection of books focused on the second largest continent and researched children's literature that took place in Africa. Using online resources, she generated a list of books. Ms. Jones noticed that one website, Read the World: Books About Africa for Kids at <https://kidworldcitizen.org/books-about-africa-for-kids/>, promoted books that were categorized by African countries and took this into consideration as she did not want only

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one or two countries represented in her compilation, creating inaccurate cultural images (Gultekin & May, 2019).

After reviewing some of the books on her list at the local library and watching some of them being read aloud on YouTube, Ms. Jones acquired more books to add to the breadth of her book collection (see Table 4). Adhering to Yokota's (1993) advice, she examined literary elements such as plot, theme, setting, characterization, and style as she selected books; only texts with good literature standards would be included, not just any book that happened to focus on Africa.

Ms. Jones purchased *Grandpa Cacao: A Tale of Chocolate, from Farm to Family* (Zunon, 2019), a story featuring a father who tells his daughter about her Grandpa who worked at a village in the Ivory Coast to harvest the essential ingredient for chocolate, cacao. She also bought *Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah* (Thompson, 2015), a true story about a young boy who lives in Ghana and has a deformed leg. Ms. Jones was eager to share this book with students in her field placement; none of them were from Ghana or had physical disabilities, and she wanted to provide a window into one boy's experience (Bishop, 1990).

Additionally, Ms. Jones selected *Nelson Mandela* (Nelson, 2013), an autobiography of the famous South African who served as an anti-apartheid political leader and President after being imprisoned for his beliefs for almost three decades. While she knew that there were over 50 countries in Africa and it would take time to acquire multiple books that focused on this continent, Ms. Jones was excited about the growing content represented in her collection.

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Illustrator Studies

After discovering an exceptionally well-illustrated children's book, preservice teachers can explore other books with the same illustrator, find more books of interest, and gather these books for their compilations. For example, Ms. Jones decided to research other books that Kadir Nelson illustrated as students in her field placement enjoyed his artwork in *Nelson Mandela* (Nelson, 2013). After discovering multiple books that Nelson illustrated, Ms. Jones again perused books at her local library or listened to them being read aloud online before making any purchases. She learned that Nelson's work included various genres and typically illustrated Africans and African Americans using a photorealistic style. His books would provide some students with a mirror as they resonated with character representation and experiences (Bishop, 1990), supporting a positive sense of belonging (Gultekin & May 2019). Ms. Jones also realized that, for other students, his books would serve as a window of authentic portrayal of an unfamiliar culture (Bishop, 1990), and minimize biases and stereotypes.

A little at a time, Ms. Jones added books illustrated by Kadir Nelson to her collection, furthering the breadth of books available. For example, she provided historical fiction books such as *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad* (Levine, 2007) which depicts Henry, a slave who mails himself in a box to find freedom in the North. She also included contemporary fiction books illustrated by Nelson, for instance, *Please Puppy Please* (Lee & Lee, 2005), a story about two young children who find joy and challenges in owning a highly energetic and unruly puppy. Ms. Jones knew that she needed to be particularly intentional in adding this genre to her book compilation as it best reflects what a child experiences daily (Harlin & Morgan, 2009; Henderson, Warren, Whitmore, Flint, Laman, & Jagers, 2020; Yokota, 1993).

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The Undefeated (Alexander, 2019) was another book that Ms. Jones selected. Using poetry, this book celebrates the Black American experience in the United States and highlights accomplishments of heroes and heroines such as Jesse Owens, Phillis Wheatley, and Ella Fitzgerald. Ms. Jones was purposeful in discussing Kadir Nelson's books with students in her field placement; they noticed some of the patterns in his artwork and agreed that he was one of their favorite children's literature illustrators.

Awards

Including award winning books in the classroom library is yet another way to provide students with a breadth of multicultural literature (Crisp, Knezek, Quinn, Bingham, Girardeau, & Starks, 2016; Howlett & Young, 2019; McNair, 2016). Books that have won awards can be a great place to start in finding well-written or illustrated books; as Gultekin and May (2019) state, "audiences can benefit from the high-quality depictions of particular communities selected by award committees, typically made up of experts in the field" (p. 628).

Returning to Ms. Jones, when conducting her research, she discovered that *The Undefeated* (Alexander, 2019) won a Coretta Scott King Award. She learned that the award was given to African American authors and illustrators who exhibited "an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values" (American Library Association, n.d., para. 1). Ms. Jones decided to further delve into books that received this award as they were likely to present authentic and accurate portrayals about African American experiences (Gultekin & May, 2019; Yokota, 1993). As she had done with the other two categories to broaden her book collection focused on Africa (content and illustrator studies), Ms. Jones explored recipients of the Coretta Scott King Award at her local library and online to determine what books she wanted to purchase (see Table 4).

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Ms. Jones thought *Trombone Shorty* (Andrews, 2015), illustrated by Bryan Collier, would be a great addition to inspire young students to achieve goals. The autobiography is an enticing book about how Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews becomes a popular musician, carrying a trombone twice as long as his height and beginning his career in New Orleans at an early age.

Another book that Ms. Jones wanted to purchase was illustrated by April Harrison, *What is Given from the Heart*, (McKissick, 2019). In this story, a boy named James tries to find a gift for a young girl who lost all her belongings in a fire. After watching his Mama sew the girl’s mother an apron using her favorite tablecloth, James realizes that he too should find something “from the heart” that he could give to the young girl. The story describes how James decides on a thoughtful, meaningful gift, and Ms. Jones believed the compassionate characters could serve as positive role models for her students.

Another book that interested Ms. Jones was *Out of Wonder: Poems Celebrating Poets* (Alexander, Colderley, & Wentworth, 2017). Not only did the book receive the Coretta Scott King Award, but it was also poetry, a genre lacking in her book compilation. The book is illustrated by Ekuia Holmes and includes various poems that the co-authors wrote, paying respect to 20 famous poets who inspired them. Some of the honored poets are Robert Frost, Pablo Neruda, and Maya Angelou, authors that Ms. Jones hoped her future students would further explore on their own and use as mentors in writing their own poetry.

In all, Ms. Jones considered accretion when selecting multicultural texts for her book collection. She realized that several books, much less one book, could not represent a specific culture and pondered what books might be mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for students in her field placement as well as future students in her own classroom (Bishop, 1990). Ms. Jones

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wondered what students would know about communities after reading the new additions to her book collection (Gultekin & May, 2019; Harlin & Morgan, 2009), and she planned to add more books over time, providing diverse narratives, perspectives, and facets of varying cultures.

Conclusion

It is critical that preservice teachers prepare to be purposeful in collecting multicultural literature as texts written by and about diverse people are limited in both core reading curricula and trade books (Buescher et al., 2016; Kelly & Iaconelli, 2018; Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2022; Horning et al., 2014). Further, multicultural literature provides a venue for students to see themselves and others, promoting self-affirmation, cultural awareness, and empathy (Bishop, 1990; Cunningham & Chengo, 2021). Using accretion, preservice teachers can gradually and intentionally begin to accumulate books to assist students in their field placements and future classrooms in forming a deeper understanding about cultural facets. Considering content, illustrator studies, and awards are just a few ways to use accretion to expand a preservice teacher's book collection.

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