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African-American Stories and Literary Responses: Does a Child's Ethnicity Affect the Focus of a Response?

Jennifer L. Altieri

The importance of using multicultural books with children has become of increasing concern to the educational community. "Within the past year multiculturalism has been the focus of articles in many important shapers and reflectors of public opinion including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Republic*" (Taxel, 1992). A criticism frequently found in such writing is the lack of multicultural books published. During a three-year period in the 1960s only four-fifths of one percent of the books published dealt with contemporary black Americans (Larrick, 1965). Even though the situation has slightly improved for all minority cultures, the percentage of books published about people of color continues to remain between one and two percent (Bishop, 1992). The most dramatic increase has been in the number of quality African-American books produced. In the last ten years, seven of the Caldecott Award winners or Honor Books contained African-American characters.

Even though there are now a number of award winning African-American books, the debate continues on whether or not multicultural literature can be effective with all children. Very few research articles dealing with this type of

literature have been published in the field. Research which has been conducted tends to focus on the attitude changes and ethnic understanding which can result from children being exposed to African-American stories (Bazelak, 1974; Litcher and Johnson, 1969; Walker-Dalhouse, 1992). While this is important, key questions still remain unanswered. This study represents a look at the literature from a different perspective. It is not examining the value of such literature to teach or to instill specific values. If multicultural literature is to be used in education it needs to be as literary works, not merely in lessons designed to modify attitudes or as didactic materials. The researcher is interested in using the literature just as any other literary work might be used, as an opportunity for a literary experience.

Research from a reader-response perspective focuses on the fact that the meaning does not lie in the text but rather is a result of a transaction between the reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1983). This study focused on the aesthetic transaction which can occur when reading literary works. In this type of transaction, readers' attention is focused on what they are living through during the reading event. To obtain a high quality aesthetic transaction, the reader must be engaged in the text.

The purpose of this study was to examine the written responses of Hispanic, African-American and Caucasian elementary students after listening to various African-American stories to see if engagement with the text was related to student's ethnicity. Specifically this study sought to determine if a relationship exists between the ethnicity of a student and the level of engagement achieved after listening to an African-American story as demonstrated in free responses given in writing. Furthermore the researcher examined the complex aesthetic responses to the stories in

light of the factors enabling that complexity to be reached to see if the focus of response was related to the student's ethnicity.

Method

Subjects. Subjects for this study were 60 third-grade students in three self-contained classrooms in an urban elementary school in the Southwest. The majority of the children come from homes with a low socioeconomic status. The school contains approximately 1,000 children pre-kindergarten to fourth grade. The subjects were categorized according to ethnicity of the student as provided by parent information. The ethnic groups included Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic. Two of the students in the study could not be classified as one of the above ethnicities, and their responses were not included in the data analysis.

Materials. Six African-American stories were selected for this study. The books were chosen because of their literary quality and because they were age appropriate. The books represented a variety of content that might be found in African-American literature. Two of the books, *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (McKissack, 1988) and *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986) contained African-American characters but did not make race an issue. Two others, *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991) and *The Black Snowman* (Mendez, 1989), dealt with characters who needed to develop pride in their cultural background. The final two, *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990) and *The Gold Cadillac* (Taylor, 1987), dealt with issues of prejudice.

Procedure. The three teachers involved read two African-American stories a week for three consecutive weeks to their class. After each story was read, the students were directed to "write anything you want to about the

story." The stories were read in the order listed above. This sequence remained consistent for all three teachers so that the stronger subject matter of the later books would not affect the students' responses to the other stories. To maintain consistency among the classes, teachers did not discuss the stories with their students.

Table 1
Aesthetic Levels of Responses

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 | Little or no evidence of story experience: <i>I like the book.</i> |
| 2 | Slight evidence of story experience: <i>I did not like the story because I did not like the characters.</i> |
| 3 | Evidence of story experience with little presence of aesthetic elements: <i>She wants to be Peter Pan. The kids voted for her.</i> |
| 4 | Some presence of aesthetic elements which directly relate to the story experience: <i>I liked the story because I liked when Lois was holding on to the knife.</i> |
| 5 | Detailed presence of aesthetic elements which give evidence of the personal significance of the story experience: <i>I liked when Pee Wee put his arm around Jackie Robinson and they began to be friends. I think other players will want to be friends with him too.</i> |
| 6 | Highly inventive and mature presence of aesthetic elements which enhance the personal significance of the story experience: <i>It was not nice for those people to say that about Grace. Color does not matter to me. No matter what color you are. Like Nana said, you can be anything you want to be no matter what color you are.</i> |

Data analysis. After all responses were gathered, data were analyzed for the complexity of the student's aesthetic responses using an instrument developed in earlier research examining third-grade students' responses to literature (Wiseman, Many and Altieri, in press). The instrument examines the degree to which a response reflects a personal aesthetic experience of the literary work (see Table 1). The first two levels represent very superficial evidence of story experience. Although specific characters or objects from the story might be mentioned at Level 2, no attempt is made to show a connection between them. Often

the response consisted of a list of words. Level 3 and Level 4 represent clear evidence of story experience. These responses not only make reference to the story but connections are made. At the latter level students go so far as to discuss certain parts which were personally relevant for them. Often it involved discussing their favorite part. At the last two levels, there is evidence of personal involvement in the story experience. At Level 5, the response is much more detailed. It not only discusses parts which are personally significant but discusses why these connections can be made. At the highest level, the response is highly inventive and exemplifies a mature presence of aesthetic elements. Here one can see a weaving of the response from the text to a personal experience and back into the text.

Individual analysis of variances were used for each text to examine if a relationship existed between ethnicity and level of complexity achieved. Then all responses which achieved a level of five or six in aesthetic quality were then sorted by content using Beach's (1985) clustering technique. This allowed for an individual examination of the responses, and responses were sorted according to their focus. A chi square analysis was used to examine possible relationships which existed between the content cluster and a student's ethnicity.

Results

The analysis of variance revealed that no significant difference existed between ethnicity and level of complexity. Therefore students were equally capable of engagement in the African-American stories regardless of ethnicity.

These data-driven clusters emerged as a result of the content analysis: 1) humor; 2) transference of idea in book to "real world"; 3) evaluation; 4) inferencing; 5) discussion of

likes/dislikes; 6) putting themselves in the story. The chi square results revealed that there was not a significant relationship between the factors enabling the complexity to be reached and student ethnicity (see Table 2).

Table 2
Percentage of Responses in a Cluster for
Each Ethnic Group

	African-American	Caucasians	Hispanics
1 humor	15.1%	11.5%	13.6%
2 transfers occurrence(s) in book to real world	22.6%	34.6%	27.3%
3 evaluative	30.2%	15.4%	18.2%
4 makes inferences	13.2%	11.5%	13.6%
5 discusses likes & dislikes	18.9%	19.2%	22.7%
6 puts self into story	0.0%	7.7%	4.5%

Responses which were placed in cluster one focused on an incident or character in the story in which the student found humor. The second cluster involved responses where the student chose to take an occurrence in the story and apply it to the everyday world with which the student is familiar. The third cluster contained responses written by children which focused on making a judgment of events or characters. A value statement was made about incidents in the book. Responses which were mainly the result of the student drawing inferences were placed in cluster four. The next group of responses, cluster five, contained responses in which the student chose to focus on what was enjoyed and/or disliked about the book. Finally, cluster six dealt with responses where students placed themselves into the story. They often discussed how they would react if they had been a character in the story.

Summary and implications

The least common type of response for all children involved putting themselves into the story. An example of this is as follows:

If I caught Brother Wind I would ask for uhundred wishes. Then I would tell him clean up the house...I am stell not going to let you go untell you build me a toy store...After he would building I would let him go...

This is interesting to note because although the books contained black characters, African-American students were no more likely to put themselves into the story than the other ethnicities represented in the study.

Also since two of the books dealt with the issue of prejudice, and two others dealt with children who needed to develop pride in their culture, one might expect African-Americans to find less humor in the books. Once again this was not the case. Focusing on incidents or characters which were funny was as common as a type of response as inferencing characters' feelings.

The most common type of response was transferring an occurrence in the book to the real world. For example:

I think Grace could play Peter Pan even if she was black or if she was a girl... I think every one should be able to do any thing they want. I'm going to be an artist when I grow up and Grace can be anything she wants.

A significant relationship did not exist between the ethnicity of the student choosing to transfer an incident in the story to the real world. It was a very common choice of response for African-American, Hispanic and Caucasian subjects.

After a look at the last ten years of Caldecott winners, it is obvious that there are more award-winning books about African-Americans than Native American, Hispanic and Asian combined. Certainly those books are the most readily available for teachers to use in their classrooms. If teachers are starting to use these multicultural books with their students, it is important to find out how children from different cultures will respond to the various subject matter presented in the stories and the books in general.

These books represent a variety of subject matter that can be found in African-American books. Since the use of multicultural literature in the classroom can be a very controversial issue, research needs to be conducted to see if certain ethnicities encounter difficulty in becoming engaged in the text. While some research has been conducted with multicultural literature, no studies prior to this have examined aesthetic quality. The results of the study support the idea that multicultural literature is for all children regardless of race because the responses of Caucasian and Hispanic students were not found to be significantly different from those of African-American children.

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