

The Importance of Visibility: Students' and Teachers' Criteria for Selecting African American Literature

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Teachers know what types of books African American students want to read; the problem is finding the time or resources to make these books available in their classrooms.

Can you imagine going through elementary school without ever finding a book that includes characters that look like you or remind you of your family? As a child, I loved to read Beverly Cleary's Ramona series because I could relate to her relationship with her family. I vividly remember feeling a sense of relief that I was not alone: Thinking my brother was a pest was OK. Unfortunately, after several years of teaching, I realized I was denying the majority of my students the same opportunity of relating to literature. As a fifth-grade teacher of primarily African American students, I was not sharing literature that reflected them and their families. African American literature was not celebrated or even available in my classroom.

Throughout this study, I will refer to African American literature as literature that is written by African American writers or includes African American characters that are culturally specific. Bishop (1992) has defined *culturally specific literature* as literature that includes main characters with cultural details that are woven into the plot of the story. Note that there are books that include African American faces or names in the text; however these aspects alone would not fit this definition. For example, *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) would fit this

definition because the main character, Bud, is African American, and the entire book focuses on his journey to find his father. However, *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) would not be considered African American literature because the only African American character is not essential to the plot.

Availability of African American Literature

Fortunately, the literature Bishop (1992) advocated for is more available today. The Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/pcstats.htm) documented the publishing rates of African American children's literature. In 1985, out of the 2,500 books published, only 18 were eligible for the Coretta Scott King award, which recognizes outstanding African American children's literature (www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/rts/emiert/corettascottkingbookaward/corettascott.cfm). In 2006, out of the estimated 5,000 new books published, 153 included significant African American content or characters (Schiesman & Lindgren, 2007). Although still disproportionate to the population of school children in the United States, this does represent an almost ten-fold increase.

As a result of the increased availability, more African American children's literature was being displayed in mainstream bookstores. This increased exposure, as well as an advanced children's literature course I took as a graduate student, made me realize that my classroom library did not provide my African American students with enough opportunities to see

themselves in literature. At the end of the semester, after my fellow graduate students and I finished presenting on children's book authors, I realized that all of the authors were Caucasian. This astounded me, because many of my fellow classmates also taught in schools with large African American populations. How could we allow such an oversight? At that moment I knew I had to increase the availability of African American literature in my classroom.

After this realization, I began to purchase books for my classroom library. I incorporated approximately 100 African American titles. My initial selection criteria were books that had been recognized with either the Coretta Scott King award, Newbery Medal, or Caldecott Medal. Another valuable resource was *Black Books Galore's Guide to Great African-American Children's Books* (Rand & Parker, 1998, 2001). This series lists hundreds of African American titles. The editions of this guide were helpful, but these guides were not sufficient. Future selection decisions needed to include my students.

Research on Selection Criteria

In a previous edition of this journal, Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) offered selection criteria for teachers. They proposed specific criteria that could be used to identify authentic African American literature. Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd emphasized that in the primary grades, students rarely “see” African American characters in books. They further asserted that because these students were not exposed to culturally relevant characters, it was difficult for them to affirm their own identity through literature. For instance, Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) interviewed African American adults who did not find characters they could relate to until the age of 15. These adults said that they found it difficult to connect to the literature that was shared in school. One adult said, “My learning experiences did not speak to me because people who looked like me weren't in the literature” (p. 811). Third-grade students were also interviewed about their impressions of selected books. An African American student, Marissa, commented that in literature, African Americans are portrayed as uneducated and ill mannered. “When you see (Black) people like that, (White) people think that we're stupid” (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001, p. 811).

Similarly, others have used open, aesthetic response as a means for uncovering selection criteria.

An *aesthetic response* has been defined as one that emphasizes the reader's personal involvement with the text (Altieri, 1993; Saccardi, 1993). Therefore, researchers have used students' response to investigate the rationales behind their text selection. Altieri (1993) studied the relationship between fifth and seventh-grade African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian students' responses to literature. She concluded that the students' responses were not significantly connected to the students' ethnicity. However, out of the three groups, African American students were most likely to connect to the characters. Because students' aesthetic responses revealed personal connections to the book, Altieri found that students' journal entries and comments about text allowed her to determine the reasons behind their selections. Instead of using journal entries, Saccardi (1993) chose to collect information on how students selected different types of literature using a ballot. Students were asked to evaluate books on a 4-point scale and explain their rating. Saccardi found student responses could be categorized into a few themes, including a book's interest level, a book's ability to remind readers of an event or person in their life, appreciation of figurative or creative language, and connections to other books students had read. Both Altieri (1993) and Saccardi (1993) found that by studying students' responses to African American literature, rich information about what students valued emerged.

Previous research has identified some selection criteria educators can use for selecting African American literature to add to their classroom library (Altieri, 1993; Bishop, 1992; Diller, 1999; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Reutzell & Gali, 1998; Saccardi, 1993; Smith, 1995; Tyson, 1999). However, research that explores the relationship between student criteria and teacher criteria is sparse. Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), this study aimed to answer two questions: (1) What are the specific characteristics African American students use to select African American literature? and (2) How do students' selection criteria for African American literature relate to teachers' selection criteria?

Data Collection Methods

Setting and Participants

Student participants attended an urban elementary school in a southern state where I taught fifth grade.

The school served approximately 540 kindergarten through fifth-grade students. Approximately 72% of the students received free or reduced-cost lunch. The largest ethnic group represented in the school was African American (61%) followed by Caucasian (25%) and then Hispanic (14%).

Students. Two classes were selected because they were students in my 55-minute writing blocks. This was a sample of convenience because the writing block allowed time to share and discuss African American children’s literature. To engage students in thoughtful response, I explained that one day a week their role was of a young book critic for a local newspaper. Literature, including a variety of characters from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, was critiqued. The 41 participants were approximately 70% African American, 20% Caucasian, and 10% Hispanic. During the eight-month study, one class period each week was dedicated to answering the questions of this study.

Teachers. Of the 15 third- through fifth-grade teachers asked to participate in the survey, 7 agreed to participate. These 7 included teachers with 4 to 29 years of experience. Three of the 7 teachers were Caucasian and 4 were African American. Five of the teachers were female and 2 were male. These participants represented a good cross-section of the teachers at this particular school.

Role of the Researcher

My role was of a teacher researcher. Although balancing these roles was difficult, creating the task of involving my students as literary critics for a newspaper seemed to blend these roles together. Further, I wanted to increase the personal connections my

own students had with the literature in my library; therefore, my students needed to be involved in the selection process. As their teacher, I responded and discussed all of the literature they critiqued, but as a researcher, I only collected, coded, and analyzed their responses to African American literature.

Data Sources

Students were asked to respond to African American children’s literature in several different ways. Students wrote journal entries that were shared with other students, evaluated African American literature using a book ballot, and participated in book battles that gave students an avenue for discussing selection criteria.

Discussion Journals. Student discussion journals were used throughout the study to document student responses to African American literature. These journal responses were prompted by an introduction to a set of books, a whole-class read-aloud, or a general question about children’s literature. An example question would be, “If you were an author, what would you do to make your book appealing to readers?” After students wrote their response, they could pass their journal to other classmates who could also respond in writing. Students wrote in these journals approximately every other week during the study (see Table 1). These responses were used to triangulate the other data sources. Because the audience for the journals was other students, not I, more authentic responses were expected.

Book Ballots. Book ballots (Saccardi, 1993) are another way to elicit students’ opinions about selecting literature (see Figure 1). Students were asked to complete a book ballot when they finished a book. The book ballot included questions that asked students to

Table 1
Data Collection Methods

Student data	Number collected	Teacher data	Number collected
Response journals	15	Survey	7
Book ballots	160	Classroom visits	7
Book battles	6		

Figure 1
Student Book Ballot

Book Ballot

Title of Book: _____

First Name: _____

1: The book was not very good 2: I liked the book a little

3: The book was good 4: The book was one of the best books I've read

Circle your rating for this book: 1 2 3 4

Please write a few details on why you gave the book this rating.

rank books on a scale of 1 to 4. After students ranked the book, they were asked to explain their ranking. This information provided a way for identifying the features students considered as they evaluated books. Throughout the study, I collected approximately 160 ballots.

Book Battles. After students were introduced to and read African American literature, groups of students participated in six book battles. The book battle groups were made up of five students and each group was given six books to evaluate. Books may have been new to the students or previously read, but all of the books were randomly selected from those available in the classroom and school library.

After a 10-minute review period, group members were asked to select the book they considered most intriguing. Then students were asked to orally defend their personal choice to their group, each

giving reasons for the selection. Following these reasons, other students in the group were given time to express their agreement or disagreement with the selection. The book battle sessions were audiotaped and then transcribed for later analysis.

Teacher Survey. A survey was administered to the seven participating teachers toward the end of the study. The survey included questions that asked teachers to list the types of text they had available in their classroom and rank the specific selection criteria suggested by Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001). Following the survey collection, I visited each of the seven classrooms as a means of validating the information from the collected surveys. During this visit, I documented the books each classroom had displayed and the books teachers had in their classroom libraries. I then compared the books they listed on their survey with the books inventoried during my visit.

Analytical Methods

These data sources were analyzed in the following manner. First, any responses related to African American literature were coded. Then as groups of related codes or categories emerged, each was given a label (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and tallied. For example, when analyzing the selection criteria students used, all of the responses that gave the same reason for selecting a book (e.g., book summary, book cover, and characters) were listed. Next, a frequency count was done for each time a selection criterion was given. After a second review of these categories, categories with similar responses were merged. For instance, liking the main character and a response including, “the character reminds me of my brother” were placed in one category. After collapsing the categories, 12 categories were supported by the written and recorded data sources (see Table 2).

To check for reliability, a member check was completed (Patton, 1990). Also, after a draft of the results was written, student participants were asked to join a focus group. Their participation in the research was summarized, and an explanation of why it was important for them to read over their contributions to the study was discussed. The participants expressed agreement and did not have any concerns about how their responses were presented.

Selection Criteria

Student Selection Criteria

In *Thank You, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.!* (Tate, 1997), the main character Mary Eloise feels that her current and past teachers’ book selections were not balanced throughout the year. “February is when almost everybody in school and at church and on TV pulled out stuff about Black History. Black, Black, Black, Black everywhere! And then we don’t hear hardly anything about it until next February” (p. 48). Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) raised a related point:

All too often books used in primary classrooms contain too few African American characters, or they include characters who are African American in appearance only. Many of these stories say little about African American culture, or they present only the history of African Americans as slaves without including any “nonslavery” or modern representations. (p. 810)

Students in this study agreed with Mary Eloise. They wanted books that were connected to their lives today. They wanted to read books related to their life, their family, and their interests. As revealed in Table 2, the three most reported student selection criteria were (1) the connection readers felt or thought they would feel to the main character(s), (2) the genre of

Table 2
Categories of Student Selection Criteria

Selection criteria	Frequency	Percent of response
Connection to the character	72	40
Genre (realistic fiction)	26	14
Book cover	19	11
Summary on the back of the book	11	6
Humorous events or characters	11	6
Theme/message	10	5
Concerns about Accelerated Reader	9	5
Title of the book	5	3
Figurative/creative language	5	3
African American history	5	3
Length of the book	4	2
Detailed description	3	2

the book, and (3) the appeal of the book's cover. Each of these is described below in more detail.

Connecting to the Characters. Connecting to the character was the most important criterion used by students to select books. Based on journal entries and book ballots, two books seemed to exemplify this criterion. These books were *Gettin' Through Thursday* (Cooper, 1998) and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1996). In *Gettin' Through Thursday*, many students related to the main character's feelings of unhappiness. In the story, the mother was paid on Friday. Thursday was the longest day of the week for the young male character because that was the day most things around the house ran out.

In a section of a discussion journal, Roderick (all student names are pseudonyms) wrote about a connection he shared with the main character in *Gettin' Through Thursday*. The excerpt below is from Roderick's discussion journal. A fellow classmate wrote that she liked another book better than *Gettin' Through Thursday* (Cooper, 1998). Roderick did not agree. He found validation for his emotions through his connection to the main character.

Roderick: I like *Gettin' Through Thursday* better because they go through almost the same thing we go through. That's why I chose this story instead of the other one. It's a good book to me because they had to pretend they were having a party because the Mom didn't have any money.

Roderick: You should have liked *Gettin' Through Thursday* better because I've been through some of those things. Me and my family do and I know yours do, tell me the truth, don't they?

Students also read and listened to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1996). When asked which character they most resembled, all of the African American participants were able to list a character. However, only 1 of 8 Caucasian students and 1 of 4 Hispanic students connected with a character. Likewise, African American students compared their families to the Watsons more often than Caucasian or Hispanic students.

Genre: Realistic Fiction. The second major criterion was the genre. Students preferred realistic fiction, which unlike other types of fiction, includes plots that could happen only in the real world. These findings correlate with Tyson's (1999) findings that

upper elementary students did not enjoy fairy tales or fantasies. The most popular books were centered on everyday life experiences. Some of these books could also be classified as historical fiction because the realistic story was woven into a major historical event. However, the fact that the book was also realistic was essential to the selection of these books. These books were read or selected by at least a quarter of the participants.

As noted in Table 3, realistic fiction was popular with students, even though there were more biographies available than any other genre. Realistic events and characters were the main elements of realism students looked for in selecting these books.

My final indicator that realism was a selection criterion was during a dream sequence in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. This was the only part of the book that was not realistic. In the story, Kenny believes there is a spirit living in a lake. He believes he almost drowned because a spirit grabbed hold of him. I almost lost some of the students' enthusiasm for the book when the plot included this fantasy element. Students were confused, as evidenced by their facial expressions. Several students began to read aloud to themselves (a sign of reaching frustration), and one student put the book down and didn't pick it back up until it was time to discuss the reading. These students preferred the realism the Watson family had to offer.

Book Cover. Having a realistic cover was the third key selection criterion used by students. The novel *Running Back to Ludie* (Johnson, 2001) had a cover that included lifelike pictures of characters. The cover featured a mother and a daughter. During a book battle, Tamara defended her book choice by referring to the photograph on the cover: "It [the cover] reminds me of me and my mama when she is talking to me about stuff I'm going to have when I grow up."

Later in the study, the same group was battling the book *Between Madison and Palmetto* (Woodson, 2002). The girls in the group were intrigued by the cover. One student called out, "Wow, it looks so real! Ms. Gray, is that a real picture? This is the book I'd choose." Soon all of the girls in the group were circled around the book staring at the picture. This was an example of the cover having a positive influence on selection.

Table 3
Most Selected Titles by Genre

Realistic fiction	Biography	Historical fiction
<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i> (Curtis, 1996)	<i>NBA Superstar Shaquille O’Neal</i> (Buckley, 2001b)	<i>Goin’ Someplace Special</i> (McKissack, 2001)
<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i> (Curtis, 1999)	<i>NBA All-Time Super Scorers</i> (Buckley, 2001a)	<i>Freedom Crossing</i> (Clark, 1991)
<i>Philip Hall Likes Me. I Reckon, Maybe</i> (Greene, 1974)	<i>Duke Ellington</i> (Pinkney, 1998)	
<i>Gloria’s Way</i> (Cameron, 2001)	<i>Hangin’ With Lil’ Bow Wow</i> (Johns, 2002)	
<i>Running Back to Ludie</i> (Johnson, 2001)	<i>Hangin’ With Lil’ Romeo</i> (Walsh, 2002)	
<i>A Piece of Heaven</i> (Wyeth, 2001)		
<i>Koya DeLaney and the Good Girl Blues</i> (Greenfield, 1992)		
<i>Oh, Brother!</i> (Wilson, 1988)		

Relating Student and Teacher Selection Criteria

Realism was the common thread that tied the students’ selection criteria together. Students wanted characters they could connect to, realistic plots, and realistic illustrations on covers. As noted in Table 4, from the five criteria listed, teachers chose memorable characters as the most important selection criterion. Following memorable characters, the character’s ethnicity and realistic settings also influenced teachers’ book selections. However, when asked to list the books teachers read to their students during the school year, only 9% of the books had African American authors or main characters. Only one of those listed was realistic fiction. So, although the teachers and students valued the role of the character in the selection process, the books these teachers offered in their classrooms did not match the students’ desire for realistic plots or their desire for covers that featured realistic photographs.

Further, when teachers listed the books available in their classroom, biographies, folk tales, and nonfiction were listed most often. When asked about the African American literature they shared, one teacher wrote that she read *How Anansi Obtained*

the Sky God’s Stories (Skivington, 1991), an African folk tale. She used this book as part of a unit on family. Other answers included curriculum-related themes, but most often, a note was written to the side by the teacher that indicated the book was part of her Black History Month unit. Because of the historical emphasis of February, the teachers seemed to choose more biographies to prepare students to do biographical projects or presentations on famous African Americans. Even an African American teacher had a box of books in a covered container labeled *February*. Inside were several examples of quality African American literature that were shared only during the month and then packed away.

After making an inventory of each of the teachers’ classrooms to identify the availability of African American children’s literature, only 10% of these books would fit this study’s definition of African American literature. In addition, analysis of the teacher surveys showed that African American teachers were no more likely to have African American children’s literature in their libraries or as part of their read-aloud collection than Caucasian teachers. Therefore, the ethnicity of the teacher was not a factor.

So, What Can We Do?

The purpose of this study was to uncover the criteria used by fifth-grade students to select African American children's literature and to determine if students' and teachers' selection criteria were similar at this urban elementary school. Fifth-grade students do notice the ethnicity of the characters in books, and it does play a role in their selection, particularly for realistic fiction. Although it took time for students to articulate their selection criteria, once they did it became clear that students looked for books that included realistic characters and events. Students also wanted the book's cover to include realistic pictures or drawings. Finally, teachers' reported selection criteria were similar to the students' selection criteria. Unfortunately, these selection criteria did not match the books made available in their classrooms.

Why Is There Incongruity in Teachers' Use of Realistic Literature?

As the teacher surveys indicated, the criteria teachers deemed important (namely memorable characters and realistic settings) were not supported by the selections they made available to their students. For instance, only one of the African American selections listed on the teacher survey was realistic fiction.

What accounts for the gap between teachers' reported criteria and what they make available in their classrooms? The problem is not solely availability. The literature is available, as indicated in several editions of *Black Books Galore! Great African-American Children's Books* (Rand & Parker, 1998, 2001). Each edition contains more than 400 African American children's books. However, teachers, as I can personally attest, have difficulty setting aside time to read recent children's literature. Staff meetings, paperwork, curriculum planning demands, and morning and afternoon duties, as well as family obligations, limit the time teachers have to keep up with the growing number of titles that become available each year. Teachers need time to read African American children's literature because recent publications are more likely to include realistic fiction and characters with whom students can relate. Having biographies or nonfiction is important but not sufficient. Being aware of more recent African American children's literature is necessary to facilitate the availability of

Table 4
Teachers' Selection Criteria Rankings

Selection criteria	Average rank
Memorable characters	4.3
Character's ethnicity	3.5
Realistic settings	2.5
Truthful themes	2.5
Language that reflects the mood of the book	2.2

Note. Teachers were asked to rank the criteria from 1 to 5. The most important criterion was given a 5 and least important criterion was ranked a 1. These criteria were based on Hefflin, B.R. & Barksdale-Ladd, M.A. (2001) African American children's literature that helps students find themselves: Selection guidelines for grades K-3. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(8), 810-816.

African American children's literature year around, not just in February.

Many researchers (Flood & Lapp, 1994; Hoerr, 2007; Kooy, 2006) have written about the power of teacher book clubs; perhaps having one dedicated to new children's literature may be worthwhile. Furthermore, one might assume that teachers of other ethnicities would have fewer African American titles in their classrooms; however, based on this study, the dearth of African American literature was not the result of a mostly Caucasian teacher workforce. I was astonished that the four African American teachers had few books in their classrooms that would fit this study's definition of African American literature. As a Caucasian teacher, this finding lessened some of the guilt I felt for not providing my students with quality African American literature.

Visibility of African American Authors

From student discussions and writings before, during, and after reading *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995), it was clear that students enjoyed fiction that included characters with whom they could connect. Students can connect indirectly to Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, and George Washington Carver, but not in the same way they can connect to Byron, Kenny, or Bud. However, most fiction featuring African Americans was written after 1990. Before then, most books were either nonfiction or biographies. Who

is responsible for providing realistic fiction to students and teachers? Students in this study wrote in their journals that the reason there is not enough African American literature is because there are few African American writers. This sentiment was emphasized in "Writers Like Me" (Southgate, 2007), an essay that appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* in which Martha Southgate highlighted some of the roadblocks she faced as an African American author. It is important for authors like Southgate to become more visible to our students. The following journal entry by Antawan, an African American student, is evidence that teachers need to make African American literature, especially literature written by African American authors, more prominent in their classroom libraries.

Black people want to get into basketball or football not no writing books. If they want to write books they can but they don't. I'm thinking about being a basketball or football player too. I guess it's just in our blood or something. White people probably want to be a writer. I guess that's in their blood too. That's why there are not many black people today writing.

In summary, after a year of actively searching for books with pivotal African American characters, I conclude that realistic African American literature is available but must be actively sought. Students like Antawan need exposure to these books and must become familiar with African American authors. At 10 years old, Antawan had already formed an image, based on books and television, that writing is not in his blood.

Further, as indicated by students' preference for covers that include realistic pictures, students' classrooms must also include books that are able to visually compete with their other media interests, such as video games and television. Today, our students are accustomed to graphics that visually stimulate their interest. Therefore, the books in our classrooms must engage students in a similar manner.

Thankfully, there has been an increase in the number of books available, even from popular figures such as Will and Jada Pinkett Smith and Tiki and Ronde Barber. These authors' books meet the selection criteria asked for by the students in this study because their books include characters that students can connect to, realistic plot elements, and visually engaging covers. Similar criteria were suggested by Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) for kindergarten

through third grade. Therefore, these same criteria may also be applicable to young adult African American literature. Further study on any selection differences based on age would be valuable.

Because the teachers in this study also valued characters and realistic settings, it seems awareness and the time and money to purchase books are necessary. As educators, we must ask our students about their selection criteria, give them our catalogs or book club orders to obtain their opinions before we order, and allow them to select books for the classroom libraries. Most importantly, we need to find time to read new children's literature. Our African American students know what they want; it is up to us as educators to provide it throughout the entire school year, not just in February.

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