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Fostering Culturally-Relevant Children's Literature Knowledge with a Community-Engaged Literacy Event

Susan M. Tancock, Eva Zygmunt, Patricia Clark, Winnie Mucherah, Jon Clausen

Abstract

This paper describes a community-engaged project in which preservice teachers selected culturally-relevant children's literature and then facilitated a literacy event in which they presented the books to community members for their critique. Community members made decisions about which of the books they believed would be best for the children in their community. Implications for affecting teacher candidates' understanding of cultural relevance while involved in a community-university partnership are described.

Fostering Culturally-Relevant Children's Literature Knowledge with a Community-Based Literacy Event

Teacher education candidates traditionally have little opportunity to be immersed in the communities in which they complete their field experiences (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner, 2010). They typically do "guerilla teaching," in which they visit a school for a few hours each week, do some observing or teaching, and then return to the university for the remainder of their coursework. As candidates are planning instruction for children in the classrooms in which they do their practica experiences, they struggle because they do not understand the history, frames of reference, funds of knowledge, daily life experiences, or routines of the children for whom they are planning the lessons (Greenberg, 1989; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Nor do they understand the aspirations, desires, and dreams parents in the community have for their children. This makes it nearly impossible for candidates to understand the nature of culturally-relevant instruction, develop an affirming view of diverse students (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), or plan and implement culturally-responsive learning instruction in a way that truly impacts children. Delpit (2012) asserts that in order for white teachers to effectively educate children of color, or "other people's children," they must confront issues of power and be able to communicate across cultures. Further, she argues that teachers must truly understand their students' lived experiences--their cultures, interests, and histories in order to provide high-quality instruction.

Most teacher education candidates are white, middle-class women, yet the children they will teach will likely come from diverse backgrounds (Lowenstein, 2009; Sleeter, 2001). Candidates must have the opportunity to discover that there may be differences among their cultures and those of their students that will present challenges (Delpit, 1995; Delpit, 2012), challenges that need to be discussed and directly addressed as candidates move through their teacher education program. How issues of race and culture affect instruction and student learning are essential discussion topics and are included in many teacher preparation courses.

However, authentic opportunities to wrestle with these issues are not often a part of teacher preparation. Teacher education candidates need opportunities to develop and implement culturally relevant pedagogy in their practica experiences in order to build the specific teaching skills necessary to offer high-quality instruction to African-American children (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and maintain high standards for them as well.

In this paper we describe a community-engaged project in which teacher education candidates selected culturally-relevant children's literature and then facilitated a literacy event where they presented the books to community members for their critiques. Community members made decisions about which of the books they wished to be used with children in their community, and the candidates learned which books would be best to integrate into their teaching curriculum.

Educating Children Across Cultures

One of the most important factors in planning culturally-relevant instruction is developing community and collaborative partnerships (Murrell, 2001). Delpit (cited in Goldstein, 2012) argues that new teachers need various experiences to develop knowledge of their students, such as participating in community organizations, visiting churches, and working with children in after-school programs. Contributing greatly to a candidate's toolkit would be the opportunity to participate with members of the community to plan for that community's children.

Many different routes to developing culturally-relevant dispositions, skills, and knowledge bases have been implemented, on a continuum from traditional university-based coursework, to fully immersive, field-based experiences. Courses focused specifically on culturally-relevant teaching, as well as anthropology courses focusing on culture, with opportunities for students to read, discuss, and respond to professional literature about culturally-relevant teaching, provide one route to knowledge and skill building for candidates (Colby & Lyon, 2004; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Another approach has been to offer restructured field experiences for candidates so they can observe expert teachers and models of culturally-relevant teaching (Frye, Button, Kelly, & Button, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Teacher education candidates also have been involved in the reading and discussion of children's literature to build an understanding of cultures, foster empathy, and instill a sense of social justice (Escamilla & Nathenson-Meija, 2003; Fredricks, 2012; Howrey & Whelan-Kim, 2009; Laframboise & Griffith, 1997; Whitney, 2005). Alternatively, case-based instruction methods have been implemented in lieu of direct experiences for candidates in the field (Gunn, 2010; Laframboise & Griffith, 1997). In another project, Dana & Lynch-Brown (1993) had candidates communicate as pen

pals with children from diverse cultures and offered field trips and community experiences for their candidates.

Each of the previously mentioned routes/frameworks/experiences for building culturally-relevant teaching expertise with teacher education candidates has shown some positive movement toward the goal of preparing quality teachers who can provide culturally-relevant instruction. University instructors, practica supervisors, teachers, and administrators have partnered in a variety of ways and struggled with how best to offer meaningful, research-based, practical opportunities for candidates to build competence for teaching a diverse population.

The Need for Culturally-Relevant Literature

All children need to see themselves reflected in the literature they read and the literature that teachers present to them. Our classrooms need to be places where all children from all cultures in American society can find their mirrors (Sims Bishop, 1990). At the same time, children from the dominant cultural groups need to have books about the reality of others who are not like them so they can view themselves as a part of the larger community, one in which the importance of their cultural group is not the sole focus.

Peter Murrell (2002) suggests that culturally-relevant children's literature can play a major part in the identity development of African-American children. But, in order for this to happen, the books must be a part of the curriculum. Getting them into the hands of candidates is a first step in getting them into the hands of the African-American children they may teach one day.

This project was an attempt to offer an experience for teacher candidates to learn about African-American children's literature while at the same time developing their foundation for what makes texts culturally relevant to the community in which they were teaching and learning.

Developing an Idea

The teacher education candidates in this project were involved in a nationally-recognized, immersive, and culturally-relevant teacher education program called Schools Within the Context of Communities (SCC), in which they take all of their courses at a community center in a low-income, African-American community near the university campus for a semester (Zygmunt & Clark, 2015). The candidates complete their practica experiences in the elementary school in the morning and then take their university courses in the afternoon at the community center, with the five faculty members (the authors of this manuscript) providing experiences, facilitation, and instruction in an integrated fashion. After school, the elementary children come to the community center for three hours of after-school programming, led by licensed teachers who are assisted by candidates. In addition to their in-school and after-school work with children, the candidates attend many community-based activities such as religious services, community council meetings, community clean ups, fundraisers, school open houses, and school chili suppers, to name a few. Each candidate is also matched with a host family whose members serve as the candidate's liaison to the community and with whom the

candidate interacts professionally, personally, and socially throughout the semester. The SCC faculty members strive to create a circle of practice that includes faculty, parents, community-engaged educators, and cooperating teachers who work toward improving education for children in the school and community while at the same time educating the preservice teachers (Murrell, 2001).

Three of the faculty members who led this project are White women, one is a White man, and one is an African woman who was raised in Kenya and came to America as an adult. The idea for this project was born when teacher candidates involved in the SCC Program began asking the faculty members for suggestions regarding children's literature to use with the children in the after-school program. All of the faculty members had some background in multicultural children's literature, but they were uncomfortable giving advice about the texts. They believed that because they did not come from this community they were not experts on which books would be best to use with the African-American children in the program. They decided to enlist the help of the candidates in discovering how to determine which books would be used in the after-school program. Together with the candidates, they developed a process for determining a collection of books to present to community members for their review and approval.

Determining Evaluation Criteria

To start the process of discovering the best children's books, the candidates were tasked with finding existing evaluation criteria on the Internet. They spent several hours searching for checklists, rubrics, and descriptors. A Google document was created, and as candidates found criteria for evaluating African-American children's literature, they added those criteria to the document. Once they began to find duplication, they ended the criteria search and the result was a checklist (see Appendix A), which was later used to evaluate the books. This search offered a purposeful experience for candidates to become familiar with awards given to diverse children's literature and writers, such as the Coretta Scott King Award, the Carter G. Woodson Book Award, the Children's African Book Awards, and the Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Candidates also became familiar with blogs, Facebook pages, and sites recommending diverse literature, such as [Just Us Books](#), [Black Threads in Kids Lit](#), [Children Kissed by the Sun](#), [The Brown Bookshelf](#), [A Mighty Girl](#), [Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature](#), and [Ashay by the Bay](#). They looked at publishers and distributors of books for African-American children, including [Brown Sugar & Spice Book Educational Services](#), [Lee and Low Books](#), and [Black Books Direct](#), as well as organizations that focus on issues related to multicultural children's literature and education, such as the [Cooperative Children's Book Center](#) and [Teaching Tolerance](#). Taken together, the lists, blogs, and publishers fostered the development of a foundation of knowledge and understanding of African-American children's literature for the candidates.

Finding High-Quality Books

To begin searching for high-quality books, candidates

created a database in Google Docs and began to add book information. Candidates developed a guideline that each book must be listed on at least two award lists, booklists, or book review sites to be included on the database. This process allowed the instructors to discuss issues of how to determine a reliable source. That is, they explored how to find and evaluate the credentials of the organization or author of the list. To determine if the creator of the booklist or review was credible, they examined the type of web site (i.e., government, commercial, university, non-profit), as well as the credentials of the list's author. Candidates looked to see if the booklist's author had experience creating lists about diverse cultures or if there were other links to academic articles and resources to support the booklist's development.

At the end of two weeks, the candidates had a list of books on the database that had been recommended by at least two credible sources, and they began collecting the books to read. Books came from a variety of sources: instructors' collections, public libraries, elementary teachers' libraries, bookstores, and library sales.

Reading and Reviewing the Books

Candidates collected over 100 books to read and review. In small groups they skimmed the books and sorted them into categories by theme. As the candidates read the books there were many interesting conversations. The conversation topics included wonderings such as, "Why are there so few books with multiracial families?," "Why are there few variations in the skin tones and hair colors of the people in the illustrations?," "Why are there so many books focused on slavery, discrimination, and segregation?," and "How will the children respond to dialogue written in African-American dialect?" The instructors circulated around the room and stopped at each group to facilitate discussions about these topics as they ensued. Rather than the instructors deciding a priori what the topic of discussion would be during class time, sorting the books offered an opportunity for these topics to authentically emerge.

Since the candidates designed the checklist, they had the book evaluation criteria in mind as they read and reviewed the books, and they also considered the children they knew from their practica classrooms and from the after-school program at the community center. The sorting and evaluation process narrowed the collection into 66 books, all of which met the evaluation criteria and had been recommended by two reliable sources. The books were made available to the candidates who read them during their lunch time and after classes were over for the day. With each phase of the project, candidates became familiar with more of the books until they were ultimately acquainted with the entire collection. Finally, the groups sorted the books into categories and named the categories: Folktales & Fairy Tales, Culture & Traditions, Race & Self-Acceptance, Friendship & Family, Slavery & Segregation, and Reaching Goals.

Preparing Booktalks

The candidates selected one of the themes and became a facilitator for the community members' reviews of the books in that theme on the day of the literacy event. Candidates

selected two books from their theme for which they prepared booktalks. The booktalks provided an opportunity for the students to practice the skill of introducing, creating interest in, summarizing, and "selling" a book.

Inviting Community Members

Because the SCC immersive experience was in its third year, the faculty members were embedded in the community and had established a high level of trust with community members. Invitations to the literacy event were sent via US mail and e-mail, which were accepted by parents, clergy members, teachers, school administrators, family members, day care staff, community center personnel, local politicians, local business people, church members, and the principal of the elementary school. As the 20 community members checked in on the day of the event, they received a nametag and a small bag containing pens, sticky notes, and colored dots that they would use for voting on the books. The community members were assigned one table at which to begin their reviews. Three candidates were stationed at each table, and each table contained books pertaining to one of the themes. Signs with the themes were at each table along with the evaluation rubric for reference.

An introduction was made by faculty welcoming the participants and reminding the community members that they were the experts on their children and that the faculty and candidates were grateful to them for sharing their expertise—that the faculty and candidates had much to learn from them. At each table the candidates gave one booktalk for one of their favorite books in that category. As they listened to the booktalks, community members took notes that they later shared with candidates. Participants then skimmed and read the books at the table. It was expected that the community members would give their critiques and insights about the children's literature, but what actually happened was more valuable. The participants began to tell stories about their childhoods that related to the books. They talked about how a book evoked fond memories for them. They talked about how they had recently experienced discrimination, similar to what happened in the book in the 1960s. They talked about their struggles with their skin color and with their hair. They talked about participating in sit-ins at lunch counters and about marching in protest rallies during the Civil Rights Movement. They talked about remembering when the local public pool first opened to African Americans and how they felt about that. They talked about recently being denied entry to a wedding ceremony because they were African-American. They talked about how their family came up from the South, as in *The Great Migration* (Lawrence, 1993) or that they were descendants of the Ibo people as in the book, *In the Time of the Drums* (Siegelson, 1999). The candidates, most of whom were White, had never heard firsthand accounts of these types of experiences before. One of the candidates said:

One of the books was about Michael Jordan, and that was a powerful one. One of the community members was reading it, and it was amazing how she just brought it to life and connected with it. It was really wonderful to see how the community members could connect with these books. They

said that certain people they know looked like the ones in the book, and they thought that their stories would connect with the children.

In addition, the participants talked about how specific children in the community would love certain books and why. This was especially poignant because the candidates knew the children to whom the community members referred. The candidates made connections with the participants and felt honored to have heard their stories. One candidate expressed this:

Being able to join with the community members to pick those books out...literature opens up people in a way nothing else can. They would start tearing up and have these amazing stories of their own to tell. It was absolutely amazing!

After the participants had reviewed all the books at one table, added comments on sticky notes to the books, and made notations to themselves about the books, they moved to the next table containing the next category of books.

Once participants had visited each table and reviewed all of the books, they were told they could place only one colored sticker on each book until they used all of their ten dots. As they made their decisions, participants referred to their notes, and talked to one another before placing their votes. All of this talk was processed by the candidates and helped them understand more clearly why community members placed value on certain aspects of the books. In the end, the 22 books with the most dots were included on the list (See Appendix B). The books were taken into the room where lunch was served, and the “winning” books were announced.

Realizations Made

There were several important outcomes of this event. The candidates were able to observe and learn which books the community members preferred and why. Some of the books that were favorites of the candidates were not chosen by the community members. The candidates were able to hear firsthand what the community members liked and disliked about the books, what memories the community members had about the topics in the books, how the community members believed the children in the community would react to the books, and the degree to which the community members believed the themes and topics in the books accurately portrayed their history and daily realities. For example, one parent said:

Coming to the literacy event here as a parent and a community member, it gave me a chance to say, “This looks like a fine book, but this is not one I would want my child reading. This is a little bit too strong-a little bit too harsh”. Or, “it’s a little bit too fake. It’s not realistic. They can’t relate to this”.

Most importantly candidates saw the value in holding the community as knowledge experts in the instructional process. They saw how this project positioned the community members as experts and how that positioning strengthened the relationship between the university and the community. Candidates were able to see the value in eliciting the perspective of the community in helping them choose what is

culturally relevant for the children they teach. This experience gave them a framework for understanding how important understanding the culture of children is in planning instruction for them. As one candidate said:

It definitely reminded me that since I may not be a member of these communities I may be teaching in—that I might not identify with them directly, it is important to have conversations with them and interactions with them that will let me know what they need as a community, what their values are, and what they want to see in the literature that their kids are reading.

Following Up after the Literacy Event

Sets of the 22 books were donated to a variety of agencies and organization in the community, including a day care center, preschool, church, and community center. In addition, sets were given to the elementary school. To maintain momentum after the literacy event, additional events were held to introduce community members to the canon of children’s literature chosen during the event at one of the churches and at the Community Council meeting. An article published in the local paper that gave the list of the top-ranked books helped publicize the event.

The literature continues to get wide exposure in the community, where many of the community members noted that they were not even aware books like this existed for their children. Some pilots of curriculum development have been offered to the community and are being used in a local day care center as well as an after-school program. Books from the collection are used extensively by candidates in planning classroom lessons and guided reading lessons for their tutoring sessions with children. Pertinent books have been used to develop a week-long Civil Rights Unit in the after-school program. During the next academic year candidates in the teacher education program will develop expansive culturally-relevant literacy curriculum around these books that will be used by all the classroom teachers in the elementary school. The future impact of this project is still evolving.

This project is an excellent example of how cross-cultural communication can be achieved (Gay, 2002). Candidates, university faculty members, and community members came together and learned from each other in a circle of practice (Murrell, 2001). The community members were introduced to the high-quality and culturally-relevant literature. The candidates were able to listen to the points of views of the community members and see how they rated the books, and the university faculty members learned from observing the interaction between the two groups.

In their research and development of a tool for observation and assessment of culturally-responsive literacy instruction, Powell and Rightmyer (2011) present criteria for parent collaboration that includes honoring community funds of knowledge and using that to plan for instruction. Because this was a positive experience for all involved, there is likely to be more involvement by community members when they are asked to participate in future events. Candidates have experienced a successful model for how to meaningfully plan and involve parents in a way that honors their funds of

knowledge and one that may foster the learning of students of diverse backgrounds by creating a new balance of power between the community, the university, and the school. These connections to the community resources will result in greater teaching and learning (Au, 2011).

This project also has implications for how higher education trains teachers. Teacher education programs must change in ways that make community-based practica experiences for candidates more available. It is nearly impossible to develop a theoretical and practical understanding of culturally-relevant instruction if candidates are not immersed in communities as they develop their teaching knowledge and dispositions. This project can be an example of the fundamental principle of immersing candidates in the community in order to assist them in developing an understanding of culturally-relevant instruction and helping them learn to develop community-school partnerships. As one of the faculty members in this project stated:

This is probably one of the most significant events I have had with preservice teachers and the community coming together in a truly collaborative and interactive fashion—probably one of the most significant embodiments of how community members can be enlisted as teacher educators.

Appendix A

Criteria for Evaluating African-American Children's Literature

Relevance to the Child

- Are the situations in the book realistic ones children in this community could experience?
- Can the child see her or himself within the story (relate)?
- Does the book show positive role models?
- Does the book reflect the history of the students in this community?
- Is the overall message of the story positive or negative?

Illustrations

- Do the illustrations accurately show African American culture and people?
- Are the story and/or illustrations offensive?
- Do the illustrations show people with varied skin, eye, and hair colors?

Cultural Appropriateness

- Does the book reflect the values, traditions, histories, and experiences of this culture?
- Does the literature show the strong religious ties in the African American community?
- Does the book focus on the wide range of experiences of African Americans--not just in the South?
- Does this book portray the strength of the African American family?
- Does the book dispel prejudices instead of

enhancing them?

- Does the book make race seem like a problem to be fixed?
- How does this book portray African Americans as a people (e.g., strong, proud, weak)?
- Does the literature emphasize that not just a few leaders were in charge of change in the African American community?

Language:

- Does the book use offensive language, negative attitudes, or stereotypes?
- Is the dialogue in the book culturally authentic?
- Is the language used by the narrator or main character language children would hear in an African American family or community?

Credibility

- Does the book have any culturally meritorious awards, such as the Coretta Scott King Award?
- Are the author and illustrator African American?
- Are there any citations in the book showing research has been done?
- Has the author experienced the culture and/or is a part of the culture?

Appendix B

Final Booklist

- Allen, D. (2000). *Dancing in the wings*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Bradby, M. (1995). *More than anything else*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Diggs, T. (2011). *Chocolate me!* New York: Fiewel and Friends.
- Dungy, T. (2008). *You can do it!* New York: Little Simon Inspirations.
- Cummings, P. (1991). *Clean your room, Harvey Moon!* New York: Alladin Paperbacks.
- Giovanni, N. (2008). *Hip hop speaks to children*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Jabberwocky.
- Greenfield, E. (2007). *Honey, I love*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Greenfield, E. (1998). *For the love of the game: Michael Jordan and me*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Hamilton, V. (2004). *The people could fly*. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers.
- Howard, E. F. (1995). *Aunt Flossie's hats (and crab cakes later)*. New York: Scholastic.
- Igus, T. (2013). *I see the rhythm*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.
- Isadora, R. (2007). *The princess and the pea*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Isadora, R. (2008). *Rapunzel*. New York: Putnam Juvenile.
- Johnson, A. (2007). *Wind flyers*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

- Levine, E. (2007). *Henry's freedom box*. New York: Scholastic.
- McKissack, P. (1996). *Flossie and the fox*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Mitchell, M. K. (1998). *Uncle Jed's barbershop*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Nelson, K. (2011). *Heart and soul: The story of America and African Americans*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Pinkney, A. (2010). *Sit-in: How four friends stood up by sitting down*. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Pinkney, S. (2000). *Shades of black*. New York: Scholastic.
- Step toe, J. (1987). *Mufaro's beautiful daughters*. New York: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard.
- Tarpley, A. (1998). *I love my hair*. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Wiles, D. (2001). *Freedom summer*. New York: Alladin Paperbacks.
- Yarbrough, C. (1997). *Cornrows*. New York: Puffin.
- Gunn, A.A. (2010). *Developing a culturally responsive literacy pedagogy: Preservice teachers, teaching cases, and postcard narratives*. ProQuest LLC.
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- Lowenstein, K.L. (2009). The work of multicultural teacher education: Reconceptualizing White teacher candidates as learners. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 163-196.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
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- Siegelson, K.L. (1999). *In the time of the drums*. New York: Scholastic.
- Sims Bishop, R. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix-xi.
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