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## The Missing Mirror: A Critical Content Analysis of Multicultural Children's Literature with Black Male Characters

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THE MISSING MIRROR:  
A CRITICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS  
OF MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE  
WITH BLACK MALE CHARACTERS

by

Wendy Kearse Harris

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

In

Early Childhood and Elementary Education

In the

Bagwell College of Education

Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2019

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Wendy Kearse Harris, 2019

## DEDICATION

First, I dedicate this work to my mother and father, Elnora and Mathis Kears. Although they are now deceased, they always wanted me to finish my doctorate. I know they are smiling down from Heaven, especially my mother. Somehow, I can still sense her joy all the way from Heaven for another prayer answered. In her own way, she always strengthened and inspired her children to advance. She fought for us and pushed us forward, all at the same time. They both worked hard and sacrificed for us, and I would like to say, "Thank you so much". I understand a little better now.

Secondly, I dedicate this dissertation to my daughters, Nora, Sarah, and Victoria. They have encouraged me tremendously throughout this process, and I am so grateful to them for their understanding and for their prayers. They say they are very proud of me, but I feel even more proud of them. They work hard to improve their lives and make the world a better place. I pray that they will always put God first and persevere against the odds to reach their goals: the sun, the moon, and the stars.

I would also like to add a special thank you to my friends, Minister Jocelyn Wood and Minister Ruby Sanford, for their continued prayers and support throughout this process. My dear friends, you helped me more than I can say with your kind words and powerful prayers.

Lastly, I dedicate this whole achievement to God because I could not have done it without Him. He made a way for me to come this far, and He's calling me to continue to serve. Press forward. As my grandmother, Mrs. Martha Wright, told me at my high school graduation years ago, I have crossed the bay. Now there is the ocean. I must continue with the work that God has called me to do.

The effectual, fervent prayers of a righteous man availeth much.

James 5:16

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord...

Jeremiah 29:11

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I will bless those who bless you....

Genesis 12:3

Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it?

I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:19

## ABSTRACT

Education in America is facing many challenges, such as the adoption of common core standards and the demand for highly qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Further, the achievement gap lingers on, with Black males often performing poorly on national assessments of reading proficiency (Tatum, 2005). Although Black males are highly literate, they may feel alienated from traditional school systems and classroom reading selections (Kirkland, 2013). One of the most effective strategies for teachers to bridge the gap in reading is to inspire Black males to get engaged with their books and read for longer periods of time. However, children are more likely to engage with characters who look like them, and it is difficult to find books with Black male characters (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noguera, 2008; Sims, 1982; Tatum, 2005).

The purpose of this dissertation is to identify more culturally conscious children's books with Black male characters. It is a qualitative study, a critical content analysis of multicultural children's books. The study has been guided by Multicultural Education Theory and Rudine Sim's theory of Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors (1982). The books I analyzed were selected from a website sponsored by the *Conscious Kid*. This organization's goal is to cultivate a list of children's books that affirm and celebrate Black males. Convenient access to such a list on the Internet would serve to help teachers find culturally conscious books for culturally relevant teaching. Three research questions guided my study:

- 1) How are Black male characters in books from the *Conscious Kid* website portrayed?

- 2) How, if at all, is the content of the books aligned with the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization?
- 3) What are the overarching themes of the books on the list?

I found that the Black characters in books from the *Conscious Kid* website were portrayed in a positive and empowered light, and the books' contents were aligned with the mission. They also revealed a host of sociopolitical themes. These themes were: the importance of family and parent/child relationships; perseverance to overcome adversity; fighting for equality and civil rights; the importance of church and spirituality; growing up and coming of age; the prevalence of mental health issues; the importance of education; and working class struggles. These books provided a microcosm of Black life in America. I also used a rubric adapted from literacy researchers to determine whether or not the books were of high quality (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). I concluded that these selections are high quality culturally conscious books that would make an appropriate addition to a classroom library.

*Keywords:* Black males, critical content analysis, elementary students, multicultural education, multicultural literature, reading, windows and mirrors



## PREFACE

### My Visit to the Book Fair

I walked into the Media Center at my elementary school in October of 2019, excited to visit the Scholastic Book Fair. Once every semester, the Fair came to my school, and I looked for new books with Black characters to add to my collection. Even though they didn't have many Black books, there were always a few that caught my interest to buy new books for my classroom. This time, I was thinking of my dissertation topic, the Missing Mirror, referring to the lack of children's books about Black boys. Out of curiosity, I decided to make a rough count of the books in the Fair. To my surprise, I found that there was actually an infinitesimal number of books about Black people. Out of approximately 550 books at the Fair, I saw eight books that had a group of children on the cover, one of whom appeared to be Black. There were twelve books with Black females on the cover. However, only five books had Black males on the cover. Of those five, three of the books were about historical figures: Martin Luther King, Jr., Satchel Paige, and Troy Andrews. Even though I knew from my research that the number of children's books about Blacks published each year was very small, I was still shocked at seeing such a huge discrepancy. Less than 1% of the books featured a Black male as the main character. Further, there were so many books about animals and inanimate objects that I had trouble counting them all. "It's not surprising that teachers have such a hard time finding books about Black children", I was thinking. Scholastic is a convenient source for teachers to get children's books for their libraries but much more diversity is needed. Years ago, Rudine Sims had argued that children need to see themselves in the text, like a mirror, in order to develop positive feelings of

self-worth and feel that they are valuable members of society (Sims, 1982). Once again, I began to worry about my grandson who is currently in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. What would he find in his teachers' classroom libraries? How would he ever see himself in the text and feel that he belongs if so few books about Black boys were available?

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### School Memories

Recently, my difficult search for Black children's literature stirred up a memory I had long since forgotten. I remembered myself as an inner city first grader, the year I first started riding the school bus to integrate a new school across town. The neighborhood school I attended in kindergarten was old and decrepit, with darkened hallways. In stark contrast, the new school was a huge shiny red brick building with large, brightly lit rooms, and hallways that seemed to go on forever. Initially, I was excited about the opportunity to learn new things in such a beautiful place. However, it immediately became clear to me that some of my teachers were not happy with my arrival. I noticed I could not find a single book in the classroom that reflected my image in the mirror, or that of any other Black people. Perhaps that's why I did not have a favorite book during my childhood. My experience in second grade is my worst memory. I was seated with the other Black children, far away from the teacher and the blackboard, our raised hands ignored. I would look over from across the room and try to follow along. I had an older sister who answered my questions about the more advanced coursework the White children were assigned. Each night, she gently explained the steps and filled in the gaps when I couldn't see it all. I refused to settle for the simple tasks the teacher gave my group; I was always striving to learn more. I pushed myself to learn because I was so driven, and I was blessed to have such a helpful older sister. Years later, I am a teacher myself and I find myself worrying: What about those Black students who needed more help and more mirrors in school? What can we do to help them?



The achievement gap in American education has persisted over many years, and Black boys have performed among the lowest groups in reading according to national tests (Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005). I believe that reading is the most important subject in the curriculum because students can never access the other subjects independently unless they become proficient readers. Reading engagement is critical for students if they are to make connections with the text and focus on the materials they are reading (Bishop, 2012; Noguera, 2008; Sims, 1982; Tatum, 2005). Such connections produce more responses from students and more motivation to read (Brooks & Browne, 2012; Scieurba, 2014). For Black students, it is important to find books and stories that include Black characters in major roles if students are to be engaged. Black boys who may appear to be uninterested in reading may need to see other Black males in the texts (Tatum, 2005). Books can serve as both windows and mirrors for children to allow them to see themselves in the texts and to learn about parallel groups in society. If the book serves as a mirror for readers, their interest may be ignited. Books for Black boys should be culturally conscious, or books that provide an accurate portrayal of Black characters, dialect, and cultural characteristics (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2012). Culturally conscious books are a subset of Multicultural literature which I will discuss later in this study. It is possible that such books might capture the interest of these young readers and produce greater motivation to read, and increased time spent on reading (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Studies show that the more students read, the more they are able to improve their reading skills (Brooks & Browne, 2012; Scieurba, 2014). Given the importance of closing the gap, it is critical that teachers learn everything they can that has the potential to improve the reading performance of Black students.

As an early intervention teacher, I am privileged to work with teachers and students in many different classrooms throughout my school. I often see students riveted to exciting stories

that the teacher reads aloud during interactive read aloud segments. Picture books are included in every grade level, especially when introducing a new standard in upper elementary classes.

Students enjoy listening to the stories; answering teacher questions as the plot unfolds and new characters are introduced; and searching for details in the pictures.

When it is the students' own reading time, however, I rarely see the same level of engagement displayed when the teacher reads aloud. In one fourth grade classroom, I closely watched the reading behavior of the Black boys during independent reading time. This classroom was composed of roughly 30% Black males. There were both advanced and struggling readers in the group of Black boys. The struggling readers had difficulty reading classroom texts on their own because they read below grade level. Other Black males appeared to find their own book less exciting than the classroom selection, possibly because it was more difficult to find engaging books at the right reading level for them to read independently. The availability of engaging books with Black characters may be very limited at the elementary level (Bishop, 2019; Mahiri & Maniates, 2013; Sims, 1982). However, diverse books are necessary for diverse student bodies, and effective, culturally relevant teaching strategies require that teachers provide multicultural literature for their students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Yenika-Akbaw, 2014). My goal as an intervention teacher has always been to provide the most effective strategies and resources available to help all my students succeed. These efforts have prompted my interest in conducting this research on Black children's literature for boys.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The education gap in America is a critical challenge that must be addressed for the welfare of the whole nation (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). All students need to be educated well enough to reach their greatest potential and make their own contributions to our society in technology, science, literature, and the arts. I strongly believe that every child has a great deal to learn and a great deal to offer to the world. However, struggles with reading fluency and comprehension make learning difficult. Black students consistently score lower than White students in reading. In 2017, Black students scored 22 points below their White counterparts on the National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) reading proficiency assessment. Further, Black males consistently score lower than all other subgroups (Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005), a finding that motivated me to focus on Black males for my research. There are many strategies to improve reading performance, and one of these is to provide culturally conscious Black books for Black boys (Gay, 2009; Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005). Culturally conscious books that serve as mirrors where children may see their own images reflected in the texts may inspire increased reading engagement for children (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2012). In this study, I will use qualitative methodology to conduct a critical content analysis of a set of Black children's books for boys to determine whether or not these books are culturally conscious.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Multicultural Education Theory**

The theoretical framework for my study will be provided by Multicultural Education Theory. Multicultural Education theory is well established in the field of education, dating back to the 1960's. It was developed during the Civil Rights Movement (Banks & Banks, 2005). As

activists fought to dismantle segregation and put systems in place to improve the lives of Black Americans, educational inequities were addressed. Multicultural Education theorists study the current and historical impact of race and racism on the institution of education in America.

Banks (1991) developed the theory of Multicultural Education to delineate the systems and structures that school systems should develop in order to provide equal access to education for all children. His theory has five facets:

- 1) content integration
- 2) construction of knowledge
- 3) prejudice reduction
- 4) equity pedagogy
- 5) empowering school culture

The three most important tenets for the purpose of this study are content integration, construction of knowledge, and prejudice reduction. Content integration focuses on the selection of books and materials for classroom use. It posits that diverse resources must be used for diverse student bodies. Students' differing cultures must be acknowledged and valued, and books that feature their various cultures must be included in the classroom. Construction of knowledge entails the recognition of bias in all written works based on the worldviews and biases of the authors. Books are not purely factual, unbiased documents, whether they provide historical information or narratives. Instead, they represent the worldview of the author who wrote them. Prejudice reduction involves the possibility of increasing tolerance among different groups within the school system. This theory is important to my study because it allows me to consider the impact of race when selecting books for the classroom, and the importance of providing Black children's literature for Black children. It also allows me to discuss the differing author

biases that are present in children's literature, and the ways in which this literature may help in intergroup prejudice reduction.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for the study will be provided by Sims' theory of windows and mirrors. When Sims published her seminal work on Black children's literature almost forty years ago, she analyzed children's books published from 1965 to 1979 to determine how Black people were represented in the texts (Sims, 1982). She then isolated and studied those books which portrayed Black characters. She found that often people of color were depicted in negative ways, based on stereotypes about them held by the dominant group. Their language was reported inaccurately; their social interactions and family values were misconstrued; and their motivations were misrepresented. She determined that children's books about Black children that were written by Black authors were preferable because they provided an accurate representation of the culture. Further, they depicted strong minority characters who were proud of being Black and who were good citizens and high achievers, making positive choices given the constraints on their lives.

Sims selected five Black authors who were writing high quality stories for children, whom she classified as Image Makers: Lucille Clifton, Eloise Greenfield, Virginia Hamilton, Sharon Bell Mathis, and Walter Dean Myers. Books by these authors had the following positive characteristics: (1) Afro-American heritage and history; (2) pride in being Black; (3) a sense of community among Blacks; (4) the importance of warm and loving human relationships, particularly within families; (5) a sense of continuity; and, above all; (6) the will and strength and determination to cope and survive (Sims, 1982, p. 96). For the works to be included in the Image Makers category, they had to show how Blacks overcame obstacles and succeeded in the

past and demonstrate to children how they could overcome obstacles in their own lives in order to be successful. Sims also pointed out that literature serves as both windows and mirrors to children. It can provide a mirror which allows children to see themselves in the text, and it can also provide a window through which they can view and learn about people from other cultures (Sims, 1982). Children's literature plays a critical role in children's education and social learning.

Collier (2000) reported that multicultural children's literature is an effective means to improve the educational experience of Black children by immersing them in stories of their own people and allowing them to see a cultural mirror image. This experience can help in the positive socialization of school children by disrupting the negative images and lack of representation of Blacks that they may be exposed to in the media, mainstream textbooks, and other sources. It can also interrupt the Ethnic Encapsulation that occurs when students read only about the dominant culture in their school literature and textbooks, and never learn about any other cultures besides the mainstream culture (Kruse, 2001). As Copenhaver has written, "How will all children learn how to value diversity if they do not know how to acknowledge its existence?" (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 9). This isolation is harmful for every child in the classroom, whether they are members of the dominant group or parallel cultures because all children must learn to respect and value people from other cultures (Sims, 1982).

Multicultural Literature is an important part of Culturally Relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Yenika-Akbaw, 2014). Culturally relevant teachers seek to build relationships with their students and families by getting to know them and encouraging them. They sincerely believe that their students are intelligent and capable of performing at high levels of academic

achievement. They provide books and reading materials with Black characters and Black perspectives in order to build interest, excitement, and engagement among their Black students.

Selection of the right children's literature is a very important part of culturally relevant pedagogy.

### **Research Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to identify culturally conscious children's books with Black male characters in major roles. Culturally relevant teachers should provide culturally conscious literature in their classrooms, but it is often difficult to find such books (Brooks & McNair, 2009). Currently, teachers most often search for resources on the Internet because of its accessibility and extensive offerings. One possible source for Black children's literature that is available online is *The Conscious Kid*. This organization has the stated mission to find books that center and affirm Black males. These books may meet the qualifications to be considered culturally conscious books (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2012).

This study is needed because the depiction of Black males in children's literature has not been fully researched (Brooks & McNair, 2009), and teachers often need help to find and identify appropriate Black books for classroom use. Further, it is unclear whether the books on the *Conscious Kid* website fulfill its mission to portray Black males and their families in a positive, empowered light. This study will provide a critical content analysis of these books to see whether they fulfill the website's mission to provide children's books that feature positive and empowered Black male characters. If the study determines that these books are culturally conscious, teachers might be able to access this list on the Internet to find appropriate books for their classrooms that might engage Black boys with greater success (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings,

2009; Sims, 1982; Tatum, 2005). This strategy has the potential to encourage Black boys to spend more time reading which might improve their reading performance.

### **Research Questions**

My research has been guided by my interest in the following questions:

- 1) How are Black male characters in books from the *Conscious Kid* website portrayed?
- 2) How, if at all, is the content of the books aligned with the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization?
- 3) What are the overarching themes of the books on the list?

### **Multicultural Literature**

Multicultural literature has become a popular phrase in today's educational circles but it has different meanings to different speakers. Some researchers use the term to refer to literature produced by all people of color; some emphasize the fact that all people are representatives of more than one culture; and some researchers believe that all literature is multicultural (Cai, 1998). For example, from the perspective of many publishers, any books that are written about nonwhite characters are considered to be multicultural, regardless of ethnicity, authorship, or character representations (Hill, 1998). However, for this study, the lens will be narrowed to include only culturally conscious books, which are a subcategory of Multicultural Literature (Harris, 1990). Such books offer authentic representations of the members of a culture (Sims, 1982).

Culturally conscious books have "major characters who are members of a particular ethnic group, textually identified as members, with a story set in an ethnic community or



home,... told from the perspective of a member of that ethnic group”. In addition, the author is a member of the same ethnic group (Harris, 1990, p. 550).

It is possible for white authors to write children’s books that accurately portray Black culture (Sims, 1992). However, this study will be further narrowed to focus on the set of culturally conscious books from multicultural literature, written and illustrated by Blacks, which focus on Black characters. This decision was made because these books are most likely to provide authentic representations of the Black culture (Sims, 1992; Yenika-Akbaw, 2014). In addition, I think it is important that people from every culture should be permitted to tell their own stories rather than have others do it for them.

Prior to the 1960’s, it would have been difficult to find Black people in children’s literature in America. Larrick (1965) reported that the world of children’s books was all-white, with only 6.7% of the children’s books published that year having any Black characters at all, even in minor roles. Each year since then, the percentage has fluctuated only slightly. More books with Black characters are available now because these books are accumulating over the years, and not because many more are being published each year. For example, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center reported that only 7.6% of all the children’s books published in 2015 featured Black characters (“Publishing Statistics on Children’s Books”, 2018). However, many of the books in that 7.6% may not provide an accurate representation of Black culture (Sims, 1982; World, 2019). Not all children’s books that feature Black characters are authentic, nor do they provide positive or empowered portrayals of Black characters.

For all of these reasons, this study will focus on culturally conscious multicultural literature which features Black characters. The emphasis will be given to those books written

about Black children by Black authors, as are the books on the *Conscious Kid* website. As Sims discovered so many years ago in her examination of children's literature, I believe that these books will have the most authentic and positive portrayals of Black characters.

### **Review of Relevant Terms**

The relevant terms in my study include: Black, Black males, Black boys or men, critical content analysis, critical race theory, culturally conscious books, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, multicultural education theory, multicultural literature, and race. The working definitions that are used for the purposes of this study are provided below.

**Black.** An ethnic group residing in America which is descended from any of the Black groups originally from Africa (Sims, 2018).

**Black males.** Any male descended from any of the Black groups originally from Africa (Sims, 2018).

**Black Boys or Men.** Any boy or adult male (over the age of 18) descended from any of the Black groups originally from Africa (Sims, 2018).

**Critical Content Analysis.** Critical content analysis is a type of qualitative research methodology that is used to analyze written texts and illustrations based on a guiding theoretical framework, and conducted through systematic procedures by coding and identifying themes (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017; Krippendorff, 2004).

**Critical Race Theory (CRT).** A theory that was developed in critical legal studies and later applied to the field of education, it argues that race is central to American society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

**Culturally Conscious Books.** Written by and about Blacks, these books provide authentic representations of Black characters and more accurate portrayals of Black culture and language (Sims, 1982).

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.** A description of techniques, attitudes and strategies adopted by successful teachers of Black students (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.** A set of instructional strategies for developing the higher learning capabilities of ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their academic and psychosocial abilities by learning about and accessing the strengths of their cultural groups (Gay, 2009).

**Dominant Group.** The group that controls the power, rewards, and social status in a given group. In America, the dominant group is the majority group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

**Multicultural Literature.** Literature that is written about people from any minority culture. It may be written by members from any group (Cai, 2002).

**Race.** Race is “the socially constructed meaning attached to a variety of physical attributes including but not limited to skin and eye color, hair texture, and bone structures of people in the United States and elsewhere” (Singleton and Litton, 2006, p. 39).

### **Summary and Overview of Chapters**

Developing strong literacy skills is critical to the academic achievement of elementary students. The more children read, the better readers they will become. Black males are often found on the lowest end of the spectrum on assessments of reading performance. Providing literature with strong Black male characters may increase their motivation to read and their reading performance. Therefore, it is critical that teachers find culturally conscious multicultural

children's books that portray positive Black characters and promote more reading engagement. In this study, I will conduct a critical content analysis of the children's books on the *Conscious Kid* website to examine the nature of the books of the list.

In Chapter One, I will provide an overview of the study and introduce the relevant theoretical frameworks which guide this study on Black multicultural children's books. In Chapter Two, I will provide a review of the significant literature related to this topic, including the research on Black males and reading engagement. I will also provide more information about the guiding theories. I will describe the critical content analysis methodology used for the study and explain why I chose a qualitative technique for this inquiry in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, I will explore the information and illustrations from the texts; their relationship to the guiding theories; and the sociopolitical themes revealed through the analysis. Finally, in Chapter Five, I will discuss the findings, the limitations of the research, and the implications for future research and practice.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The field of education is currently facing numerous challenges in providing equal access to education, adopting common core standards on a national level, and closing the education gap in literacy, among many other concerns (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Tatum, 2005). As an early intervention teacher who works with elementary students who read below grade level, my focus for the past few years has been on reading. I have sought to learn various instructional strategies in literacy; to acquire new Black children's literature for my classroom; and to push beyond the basics of phonemic awareness or whole language in my practice. Meeting children where they are in their literacy journey; facilitating reading engagement; and scaffolding instruction to push them to new heights in their reading achievement has been my constant endeavor.

In this chapter, I will discuss the education gap in student reading achievement, as well as the reading performance of Black males. I will engage the insights of Ladson-Billings on the education gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). I will explore the seminal work by Rudine Sims (1982) on the need for authentic Black literature, and the function of books as mirrors and windows. Due to the low performance of Black males on national reading assessments, I have chosen to focus my research on Black boys, and books with Black male characters. Many theorists have found that books with Black male characters can lead to increased reading engagement in Black boys (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005). Such books must be culturally conscious to have a positive effect on the readers (Bishop, 2012; Sims, 1982). Therefore, a critical content analysis of books with Black male characters is required. The critical

content analysis in this study will be guided by Multicultural Education Theory and the conceptual framework of Sims' theory of windows and mirrors (Sims, 1982).

### **Student Achievement and Race**

White students consistently score higher on nationally standardized reading tests than Black students, and this gap has persisted over many years (Dexter & Simon, 2009; Tatum, 2005). No Child Left Behind (NCLB), legislation enacted in 2001, was the federal government's attempt to close the gap. The law made three critical requirements for Black students: it emphasized the importance of teaching every child to read in America's schools; it acknowledged the fact that an achievement gap between Black and White children still exists; and it stipulated that school systems must take action to close the gap (Dexter & Simon, 2009). Teachers must be highly qualified to serve students. Educators must learn all they can to effectively serve Black students and ensure that all students in the classroom are making progress to become proficient readers.

Any discussion of the achievement gap would be incomplete without employing Ladson-Billings's (2006) analysis. In her 2006 Presidential Address, Ladson-Billings made the connection between the achievement gap and the education debt in America. She contended that the achievement gap is a logical outcome of the systematic discrimination in our country. "I am arguing that the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5). For example, in America's history, it was against the law for enslaved people to be taught to read. Even after these people were freed and allowed to get an education, Black schools did not receive the government funding that was due to them. The playing field was never equal. Black children who could have grown up to be scientists, doctors, or lawyers instead were forced into

lives of poverty, welfare, and crime. There is such a “legacy of educational inequities in the United States” that most schools for Blacks are still underfunded and undersupplied when compared with their counterparts in majority white communities (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2006). These and other systemic inequities have resulted in the achievement gap.

Given this differential, it is of utmost importance that Black students receive rigorous instruction in reading. This instruction does not address or rectify the root cause of the problem which Ladson-Billings has identified as systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, teachers must do all that they can for the children in their care. Disparity in reading ability is a critical part of the academic gap. Grade level reading abilities are needed to independently access Social Studies, Science and Math word problems, in addition to the Reading standards.

A higher level of motivation and engagement with the text might lead to increased reading outcomes for Black students, and many researchers have found that students who see themselves in the text may be more motivated to read (Bishop, 2003; Brooks & McNair, 2009; Sims, 1982; Tatum, 2005). This study will focus on Black boys because this group has shown the most struggles with reading performance (Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005).

### **Multicultural Literature**

Multicultural Literature focusing on Blacks was begun by Black educators in the United States who observed that Blacks were either omitted from textbooks or portrayed in a negative light (King, 2014). For example, when W.E.B. Du Bois researched the mainstream textbooks and writings from the Reconstruction era, he discovered disparaging representations of free Blacks and derisory caricatures of former slaves (Du Bois, 1935). Some educators responded to

this problem by writing their own books about African- American history and accomplishments (King, 2014). Although their writings were not actually identified as Multicultural Literature at that time, this was the beginning of the long battle to interrupt the negative mainstream narrative of Blacks.

Between the years of 1890 to 1940, educators such as Carter G. Woodson (1922), Lelia Pendleton (1912), and Meryl Eppse (1937) wrote textbooks about the history of Blacks which were designed to be used in Black schools when teaching Black children. These authors described a proud history of accomplishments and agency for the historical figures they described. The objective was to tell a counter story to the dominant narrative about Blacks told in mainstream history texts; to fully describe the wealth of Black contributions that were almost always omitted by white authors during that period; and to communicate the continuing negative impact of racism on the lives of Blacks (King, 2014). Today, Black children's literature continues to serve a critical purpose in the lives of Black youth. The Black authors of Black children's literature seek to provide an authentic and positive depiction of Black families and Black culture (Bishop, 2019). These culturally conscious Black books allow Black children to see themselves in the text, and feel proud of being Black (Bishop, 2012). Multicultural literature is important to the current study because I will conduct a critical content analysis of multicultural literature that features Black males as the major characters.

### **Multicultural Education Theory**

Multicultural Education theory was developed during the 1960's as an important part of the Civil Rights Movement (Banks & Banks, 2005). This theory represented an idealized goal for the educational system in America: all children would be welcomed and provided with a good education regardless of their race or ethnicity. Children would have educators of all races who



were trained in inter-cultural communication and the use of differentiated teaching strategies to provide the most effective instruction for each child. The result would be effective and equitable outcomes in education for all students. Banks (2013) developed the theory of Multicultural Education to delineate the systems and structures that an equitable school system such as this should strive to achieve.

There were five dimensions which served as the pillars of Multicultural Education (Banks, 1992). These dimensions were developed out of Banks' research and work in the field of education from the 1960's through the 1980's: "(a) content integration; (b) the construction of knowledge process; (c) prejudice reduction; (d) an equity pedagogy; and (e) an empowering school culture and social structure" (Banks, 1992, p.5).

Content integration required that teachers should use writings, examples, and works developed by people from a variety of different cultures and ethnicities (Banks, 1991). For example, a Black scientist such as Dr. George Washington Carver could be used as an example when teaching about science, history, or reading standards. In many schools in mainstream America, the whole curriculum has focused only on the accomplishments and historical accomplishments of the majority (Banks, 1991; Gay, 1997; Nieto, 1997). The inclusion of authors from other cultures would provide a more accurate and diverse view of American society, as well as increasing the students' understanding of different historical perspectives (Brooks & McNair, 2008; Collier, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Such inclusion would foster a climate that is more open and welcoming to people from other backgrounds. Children would have the opportunity to learn about parallel cultures and become more tolerant and well-rounded.

The construction of knowledge involves the whole procedure whereby textbooks, instructional videos, and other media are created for use in our schools, and the cultural traditions and perspectives that influenced their creation (Banks, 1992). These materials are all slanted by the biases of the authors and illustrators who created them. In most cases, almost all materials used in America's schools were created by White males. When educators explicitly teach the process of knowledge construction, children can come to understand that the information they learn in school is not infallible. It has been generated and created by other human beings who were influenced by various critical factors such as race, class, and the dominant worldview during the period of time in which they lived and wrote (Banks, 1991). These authors' perspectives have therefore been biased by their memberships in the dominant group and their situations in history. Students learn to interrogate the authenticity of knowledge by considering the biases of its sources. For example, when a group of prominent colonists wrote the Constitution of the United States, they explicitly stated that "all men are created equal". These words sounded wonderful until Americans realized that when they stated "all men", they did not include minorities, women, or white men who did not own property. They were referring only to White males in the upper classes. Such knowledge about their perspectives and biases will undoubtedly help children gain a more thorough understanding of the whole history of protests for human rights in America (Banks & Banks, 2005). This premise was important to the development of critical literacy.

An equity pedagogy required that teachers learn about the cultural differences of the students in their classrooms. With this knowledge, teachers can use methods and techniques that recognize and include the learning styles of parallel cultures so that students from all races and cultural groups can be successful (Banks, 1992). Culturally responsive teaching grew out of this

dimension of Multicultural Education (Gay, 2010). This branch of the theory was directed toward the process of instruction; how teachers could create a positive learning environment, introduce strategies, and modify instruction in order to meet the learning needs of all students in the classroom.

Prejudice reduction involves the possibility of increasing tolerance among different groups within the school system. It was necessary to increase tolerance and reduce conflict among groups in order for integration to be successful. This is an important step for multicultural education to take place. Early studies on prejudice reduction were conducted by Gordon Allport, and involved the impact of intercultural group contact on reducing levels of bias among different communities (Allport, 1954). Later studies began to investigate how exposure to various media about different groups might have an impact on the reduction of prejudice (Dovidio, Gaertner, Isen, & Lowrance, 1995; Harwood, Hewstone, Amichai-Hamburger, & Tausch, 2012). This topic is very important to the research questions, and will be discussed in greater detail later.

Multicultural Education is a requirement if all of our children are to receive a well-balanced education. Nieto (1997) stated the obvious: instructing our children is the true purpose for the creation of the public school system, so all of our students should be learning. In order for all students to make academic progress in today's pluralistic society, multicultural education is a necessity. Nieto (1997) defines Multicultural Education as an educational system that "challenges and rejects racism and all other forms of discrimination in schools,...[that] permeates the curriculum and instructional strategies used in schools....[and] promotes the democratic principles of social justice" ( p. 390). If this theory is put into practice, student achievement will naturally be increased. Five provisions are necessary:

- 1) the schools should be antiracist
- 2) all students should be viewed in terms of their strengths
- 3) critical pedagogy should be employed to guide school reforms
- 4) high expectations must be maintained for all students; and
- 5) parents, teachers, and students must all take part in decision making (Nieto, 1997).

In addition, adequate funding must be provided for the school's functioning by the Board of Education and other government agencies. With these key criteria in place, along with the appropriate teacher preparation programs and Black role models, we can ensure that all students will learn (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Nieto, 1997).

Diller (1999) provided an excellent example of Multicultural Education in her practitioner research. As a White elementary school teacher with a classroom that was over 90% Black, she took action to provide a welcoming space for her students. She displayed posters showing minorities around her classroom, and reached out to parents. Although she could not rewrite the school curriculum, she made significant modifications as she implemented it in her classroom. Whenever possible, she used works by culturally conscious Black authors; she inserted a unit on Africa; she facilitated student discussions on slavery and racism; she built relationships with parents; and she maintained high expectations of all students. She did not pretend to be colorblind or try to treat everybody the same. Instead, she worked diligently to meet the needs of individual students. Her students' academic performance improved as a result (Diller, 1999). Her efforts to supply culturally conscious literature and modify the curriculum to include Black authors and topics provided a clear example of Multicultural Education in action.

The theory of Multicultural Education is important to this research because it clearly delineated the importance of the types of texts that teachers select for instruction. For example, content integration required that teachers carefully choose the texts that they use in their classrooms. These materials should accurately portray the culture and ethnicity of the students. Authenticity is critical. This research is based on a critical content analysis of Black children's literature which might potentially be found appropriate for use in the schools.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The research of Rudine Sims Bishop will serve as the conceptual framework for this study. Her work is pivotal to establishing the importance of text selection in the classroom. She first introduced the analogy of how books serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors almost four decades ago (Sims, 1982). A story can serve as a window for the readers when it allows them to observe the lifestyle and behaviors of a group of people from another culture or living situation. Window books broaden the child's understanding of the world and the wide variety of people who live here. Equally importantly, they also help children avoid ethnocentricity (Kruse, 2001). A story can serve as a mirror for readers when they are able to see reflections of themselves and their own lives in the pages. In this instance, a book may affirm the importance of that child's existence and the formation of a positive self-identity (Wright, Counsell, & Tate, 2015). Sims asserted that children need to see themselves reflected in the literature in positive ways (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2003).

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can

also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop, 1990, p. ix)

Although her research was first published in the eighties, Sims raised issues that can still be observed in children's literature today (Bishop, 2003; Brooks & McNair, 2009; Sims, 1982). It is still true that there is only a small percentage of Black children's books published each year; many of these books are authored by Whites; and sometimes the representation of Black culture is inaccurate (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2003). Sims concluded that Black children's books created by Black authors were preferable because they provided a more accurate representation of the characters' language and culture. They steered clear of negative stereotypes and demeaning imagery. Further, they depicted strong minority characters who were worthy of serving as role models for children, demonstrating intelligence, competence to readers. It is important to note that Sims also made it clear that some White authors have successfully depicted Black characters and culture in their children's books (Sims, 1997). However, for this study, I have chosen to focus on books about Black male main characters, written and illustrated by Black authors and illustrators.

Sims selected five Black authors who were writing high quality stories for children, whom she classified as Image Makers: Lucille Clifton, Eloise Greenfield, Virginia Hamilton, Sharon Bell Mathis, and Walter Dean Myers. Books by these authors explained Black culture or heritage, and the characters demonstrated loving relationships and a sense of pride in being Black (Sims, 1982, p. 96). For the works to be included in the Image Makers category, they had to show how Blacks overcame obstacles and succeeded in the past, and demonstrate to children

how they could overcome obstacles in their own lives in order to be successful. Because books can provide mirrors that allow children to see themselves in the text, it was very important that the characters should demonstrate strength and resilience (Sims, 1982). The characters served as positive role models for the readers. Clearly, then, children's literature plays a critical role in children's education, well-being, and social learning. These premises provided a strong conceptual framework for this study in which critical content analysis of Black children's books will be conducted.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Black boys and reading**

“For me, reading became my saving grace. My growing interest in reading was supported both at home and at school.” (Tatum, 2005, p. 10)

Evidently, reading provided a powerful influence on Alfred Tatum when he was a child. Reading might also provide a “saving grace” (Tatum, 2005) for other Black boys, as well, helping them to overcome societal obstacles such as poverty, discrimination, or educational inequities. According to results from national reading tests, not all Black boys are in a position to utilize reading as a saving grace. Black boys have consistently been earning low scores on fourth grade reading assessments (Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005; Wood & Jocius, 2013). The National Assessment of Educational Progress found that Black boys scored the second lowest of all sub-groups tested in reading comprehension (NAEP, 2011). These low scores have been consistently observed in spite of the fact that Black boys are highly literate and capable (Kirkland, 2013; Tatum, 2005).

The impact of mainstream culture on the academic performance of Black boys is captured in the statement made by bell hooks: “it is clear that this society sends black male

children the message that they do not need to be readers” (hooks, 2004, p. 40). Media images abound of successful Black males as athletes, comedians, musicians, and performers. Other images portray them as atrocious criminals, a subgroup of violent offenders who make up the highest percentage of prison inmates in America (Noguera, 2008). However, it would be extremely difficult to find any images at all in the media of the Black male as a reader or a successful academician. For example, when I prepared my presentation for my proposal defense, I wanted to add pictures to the slides. I searched for images of Black boys reading books on the Internet. I could not find any. I then searched on private websites that sold pictures for presentations, and I still couldn’t find anything. Ultimately, I used a few colorful pictures of book jackets from Black children’s literature.

Further, when many youngsters do begin to be avid readers, they discover that the setting depicted in the book is totally different from the world in which they themselves reside. Most children’s books in America are about White children. Very few children’s books portray authentic stories of Black males. “The characters’ world was free of the suffocative elements rooted in historical mistreatment” (Tatum, 2005, p. 20). Historically, Black boys have not been able to find accurate representations of themselves in the literature, a fact that makes it more difficult to engage them as readers (McNair, 2008; Scieurba, 2014; Sims, 1982; Tatum, 2005).

Alfred Tatum, a prominent Black researcher, grew up poor in inner city Chicago, and he recounted the many problems he experienced trying to both survive on the streets and excel in school (Tatum, 2005). Even though his parents supported his academic endeavors, the inner-city schools he attended and the urban environment he lived in were less than supportive. He was stopped by the police for crimes he did not commit, and even taken to jail for a line-up on more



than one occasion. His experiences in school were most often disappointing. In one of his poems, he wrote:

Hell, you can't even teach me how to read – Mr. and Mrs. Teacher

Then you flunk me, and blame it on me

(Tatum, 2005, p. 7)

This researcher knows firsthand the difficulties experienced by young Black males in the school system, and the dire need for Black children's books and culturally relevant teaching strategies.

Tatum has focused his research on building the strengths of Black boys rather than maintaining a deficit model. He has developed several strategies to help teachers become more effective at teaching reading to this group of children (Tatum, 2005). His suggestions include:

- 1) culturally responsive teaching strategies;
- 2) a variety of different assessments;
- 3) teaching students to question author bias;
- 4) literature with strong Black characters; and
- 5) professional learning communities where teachers can support one another's efforts to more effectively serve Black boys.

In addition, reading teachers should provide vocabulary instruction and word studies; reading materials that interest boys; lessons on syllabication; and oral dictation of grade level attention-getting materials to grab students' interest. Students should also be encouraged to complete frequent writing assignments as a part of reading instruction. He admonished teachers to encourage parental support, and provide specific information to parents on how they can best

support literacy at home (Tatum, 2005). Tatum's research is important to this study because of his emphasis on the selection of reading materials. An important part of his model for encouraging Black boys to persist in their reading and improve their reading skills is the use of materials with central characters which are positive, strong, and Black. Tatum's writings support the need for the current study on finding Black culturally conscious books for Black children.

Similarly to Tatum, Noguera is a Black male researcher with a personal understanding of the struggles of the Black male in American society and school systems (Noguera, 2008). He has focused his research on how to improve the performance of Black males in public school because it is the only institution we have where everyone is admitted, and services are in place to help students at every level (Noguera, 2008). There are proven approaches to help students who are struggling become successful. He recommended that teachers should do the following in order to help Black males improve their performance in reading and other subjects: 1) Teachers should not allow students to segregate themselves by race. If necessary, teachers can use assigned seating and form groups that are heterogeneous. 2) Teachers should encourage students to try new things both within the institution and outside of school, such as activities and clubs which are not associated with their racial stereotypes. For example, Black males might be directed toward the swim team, the math club, or the debate team rather than to basketball or football. 3) Teachers should include reading materials that include characters of different ethnicities and races, and that tell stories of positive accomplishments with positive role models for Black students. 4) Teachers should get to know their students on a personal level so that they can have a greater impact when they talk to them, and encourage them to work hard and pursue their studies. Students need mentors and caring adults in their lives to help them succeed. "I believe that many young people are crying out for supportive relationships with caring adults"

(Noguera, p.15, 2008). Many of these same suggestions have been offered by the theorists behind culturally relevant teaching, who also have encouraged teachers to become engaged with their Black students as a means of improving academic outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2009). By applying these and other culturally responsive strategies in the classroom, teachers can begin to improve the academic outcomes for Black males (Gay, 2010). Noguera's work supports the current research because his third tenet directly instructs teachers to search out and obtain reading materials with Black characters for their Black students in order to improve their reading skills and academic outcomes (Noguera, 2008).

Kirkland, another Black male researcher, has completely focused on the strengths of Black boys in literacy (Kirkland, 2011, 2013). His work offered a counter narrative to the reports that Black males are performing poorly on nationally standardized tests of reading proficiency. He has chosen to study Black males' cultural assets and academic strengths. After spending many months in the company of inner city Black boys, he concluded that they have multiple literacies. Because the long-established school curriculum excludes books and writings about Blacks, Black boys may feel alienated and disengaged in the traditional classroom. Timeworn lessons and rigid assignments may not engage them. This doesn't mean that they're not literate. Kirkland observed that Black boys expressed their reading and writing abilities through rap music, journaling, tattoos, and writing songs, short stories, and poetry (Kirkland, 2013). They displayed multiple literacies and cultural strengths.

Wood and Jocius (2013) found that Black boys in elementary school who appeared to hate reading could be motivated to read when teachers changed their reading materials and teaching strategies. These boys responded extremely well to culturally relevant texts and critical conversations, and they were engaged by collaboration with their peers. The researchers

documented moments when Black students who had previously refused to read became excited when they were given a book showing a character who looked like them in a setting that they recognized. Students enjoyed discussing the books in reading groups and being allowed to work with other students rather than relying on independent reading alone. They were able to use the skills of critical literacy to analyze the books and make connections to their own lives and to the wider society (Wood & Jocius, 2013). These researchers concluded that providing Black literature to Black boys facilitated the literacy process.

One first grade teacher has successfully used several steps from culturally relevant teaching to build interest in reading (Mahiri & Maniates, 2013). Her perspective was that schools must recognize and value the diversity that students bring to the classroom, otherwise they will be “set up for failure” (Mahiri & Maniates, 2013, p. 259). She created a safe space for students to take risks by building a community of interdependent learners. She then developed a sense of capability and self-efficacy in the learners. Selecting the content of their reading material was very important to the strategy for student success. In recognizing their differences, she purposefully chose reading materials that reflected their culture, sometimes deviating from the book suggestions in the Common Core standards. She observed that the “reading curriculum [was] not super diverse”, so she maintained a large selection of multicultural books in her classroom library in order to make students “more excited about reading” (Mahiri & Maniates, 2013, p. 261). She was often able to substitute a culturally conscious book with themes and characters students could identify with to teach the same instructional goal in the standards. The authors pointed out that off task behavior can be misinterpreted as lack of interest. Black students need Black books to capture their interest for longer sessions of reading.

Much of the reading literature documents the importance of culturally relevant texts for Black males to be engaged and improve their reading skills (Husband, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Scieurba, 2014; Tatum, 2005;). Husband (2012) determined that the texts that are most inviting to young Black males are non-fiction texts that contain a lot of action, or fantasies about super-heroes and science fiction. These books should also have a powerful male figure as the main character. Texts such as these speak to the imaginations and longings of the boys who read them. Scieurba (2014) stressed that the boys should be able to see themselves in the text as much as possible. Further, teaching strategies that are most beneficial are those which include activity, motion, and auto-kinesthetic features, such as tapping, rhyming, reader's theatre, and interactive read alouds (Husband, 2012; Scieurba, 2014; Turner, 2005). It is possible to engage Black boys and increase their reading performance by carefully selecting both the text and the teaching strategy.

In reviewing all of this research, it is clear that many studies promote the importance of obtaining books with positive Black themes and characters in order to improve the reading performance of Black males (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mahiri & Maniates, 2013; McNair, 2014; Noguera, 2008; Scieurba, 2014; Tatum, 2005; Wood & Jocius, 2013). The current study is designed to conduct a critical content analysis of a set of Black books to see if they are culturally conscious and potentially useful in the classroom to help promote reading engagement for Black boys.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

The Multicultural Education movement, with its emphasis on the importance of reading materials and teaching strategies, led to the development of Culturally Responsive teaching

(Banks, 1977; Gay, 2010). The premise of culturally responsive pedagogy is that teachers can use the cultural characteristics, capabilities, and strengths of racially diverse students as building blocks to make connections with them. These connections allow teachers to provide more effective and personalized instruction, producing greater academic outcomes and success (Gay, 2002). This theory promoted the use and application of several practical steps, such as the use of more physical activity in the classroom, making home visits, and building relationships with students and their families.

Culturally responsive teaching requires continuing education for teachers, including intercultural communication; demonstrating a deep level of caring for students; maintaining high expectations; building learning communities; and delivering instruction using relevant texts (Gay, 2010). The application of these steps in the classroom will produce an increase in academic achievement for everyone. Theorists from the multicultural movement are seeking to improve the academic experience of all students, whether they are Asian, Latino, Native American, Black, or members of any other subgroup. Multicultural theorists conduct research with all of these communities (Gay, 2010). In contrast, culturally relevant pedagogy was developed by Ladson-Billings to delineate and publicize the strategies that teachers can use to help Black children succeed. Although it focuses on Black students, the caring teacher strategies can help all students do better in school (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

As mentioned above, culturally relevant pedagogy was developed as a result of one theorist's search for teachers who obtained successful outcomes with their Black students, and the effective strategies they employed (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As a researcher in Critical Race Theory (CRT), Ladson-Billings believed that a focus on race is fundamental to life in America,

and that racism is prevalent. Critical Race Theory has five basic premises: (1) race is central to American life and racism is normal; (2) interdisciplinary studies are encouraged; (3) scholars must challenge the dominant ideology; (4) experiential knowledge is valuable; and (5) social justice is the ultimate goal (Bell, 1995; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). CRT writers, having begun their analyses in the legal field, work to dismantle the unspoken power structure of White males which includes only White voices. They struggle to include the marginalized and often unspoken stories of Blacks who have long been silenced. CRT researchers want to make Black voices heard, and to provide a space for a counter-story to be told.

Ladson-Billings applied CRT to the field of education because she was concerned about the impact of race relations and racial tension in school settings (Ladson-Billings, 1998). When she began her studies to explore academic issues around Black student performance, the literature was replete with articles about academic deficits and culturally disadvantaged Black students. There was no literature base on Black student success and what teachers could do to facilitate positive outcomes for Black children. To this end, Ladson-Billings began to conduct research on those educators who produced successful outcomes with Black students, and she described that approach as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These teachers consistently expressed deep caring for their students; built relationships with parents; made visits to student events and activities outside of school; and maintained high expectations for student performance. She defined three criteria for culturally relevant pedagogy: “a) students must experience academic success; b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160) Culturally relevant pedagogy is not just the addition of a few multicultural books in the classroom; displaying cultural posters or quotes;

or performing a class play for Black History month (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Teachers who exhibit these competencies care deeply about their students and work hard to integrate students' cultures into the classroom curriculum, almost seamlessly blending classroom life with home life (Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

In Howard and Terry's (2011) research with teachers who had been identified as practitioners of culturally relevant pedagogy, their students described them as caring teachers who had developed a caring community of learners in the classroom. These students worked in heterogeneous groups interdependently and thrived in a supportive and exciting classroom environment (Howard & Terry, 2011). The academic engagement and achievement of these students provided strong support for the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. In her most recent research, Ladson-Billings has advocated for culturally sustaining pedagogy. She called for new practitioners who seek to promote and build upon her earlier research in helping Black students achieve academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

Researchers in both culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy maintain that students should be nurtured daily in a caring and supportive learning environment. Further, the type of instructional delivery and materials that teachers select is critical (Diller, 1999; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers should find ethnic role models in books and stories for language arts and history lessons, current news stories, and passages on character development. The story of Blacks cannot be restricted to a historical narrative of slavery, poverty, and hardship. Instead, the story must also include successful, modern Black role models and engaging fictional characters. Teachers should also deemphasize direct instruction and lecturing, and try to present more lessons in a cooperative or interactive instructional style (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Zambo, 2009).



Culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy are important to the current research because they emphasize the importance of teachers supporting their students' culture and making connections to their home lives. Researchers from both theories stress the importance of selecting texts that feature positive Black characters in a major role. By conducting a critical content analysis of Black children's literature, more texts can be identified that help students see themselves in the text and bridge the gap between home and school.

### **The Importance of High Interest Reading Materials**

As the foregoing sections indicate, one key way to improve reading incomes for Black males may lie in the selection of reading materials. Black students may be more motivated to read texts with Black characters (Bell & Clark, 1998; Cartledge, Bennett, Gallant, Ramnath, & Keesey, 2015; Gambrell, 2011; McNair, 2014; Tatum, 2006). Educators, parents and other concerned adults need to know how we can modify the learning environment to facilitate increased academic success for Black students. Gambrell (2011) specifically addresses the importance of engaging the reader in order to motivate them to read for longer sessions. The more students read, the more they will improve their reading skills. Gambrell (2011) developed seven rules of engagement for teachers to captivate the fledging readers in their classes, and both rule one and rule two describe the need to provide a wide range of reading materials that are relevant to their lives and their interests (Gambrell, 2011). It is not enough for teachers to merely follow the lessons they learned in their preservice reading education classes about decoding, phonics, and phonemic awareness in order to teach their students to perform basic decoding. Some students may need more support in order to grow into proficient readers.

Specifically, Black students can be engaged by providing stories and texts that include Black characters (Bell & Clark, 1998; Cartledge, Bennett, Gallant, Ramnath, & Keesey, 2015;

Tatum, 2006). In their study of 109 elementary school students, Bell and Clark found that the Black students had better comprehension of the text if the story depicted Black characters (1998). It is significant for teachers to learn that Black student comprehension may be improved simply by providing Black students with reading materials that include characters who are comparable to them.

Similarly, Tatum has done extensive research on how to teach reading to Black males most effectively. Professor Tatum found that much of the literacy research he reviewed was lacking the critical component of high interest reading materials to engage Black readers. He postulated that Black students have four critical needs to improve their literacy – academic, cultural, emotional, and social (Tatum, 2006). Tatum stated, “Historically, texts have been central in the literacy development of Black males, with the connections among reading, writing, speaking, and action eminently clear. The literacy development of Black males... [must be] connected to larger ideals, such as cultural uplift, economic advancement, resistance to oppression, and intellectual development” (Tatum, 2006, p. 45). With this in mind, each year I purchase more culturally conscious Black books for my classroom library, and I try to place them strategically in view in the display case. Culturally conscious Black books depict positive images of Black people, written and illustrated by Black authors and illustrators (McNair, 2016; Sims, 1982). I want the Black children who come to my classroom to be able to see themselves as they look at illustrations of characters who look like them. I hope they will be intrigued enough to pick up the book and begin to read.

Given the potential impact on literacy development, it would be advantageous for teachers to have available a list of culturally conscious Black children’s books and novels which may be more engaging for their students. This study will provide a critical content analysis of

books on a website, *The Conscious Kid*, to investigate whether they fulfill the mission of the organization to portray Black males in a positive and empowered light. If so, they would be classified as culturally conscious and appropriate for use by Black children.

### **Content Analysis of Black Children's Literature**

Content analysis is a qualitative research method that is now well established in children's literature. It has been widely used to explore the authors' perspectives, hidden messages in the texts, and cultural representations (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Johnson, Mathis & Short, 2015; McNair, 2008; Sims, 1982). Several recent dissertations have also used this method (Jordan, 2015; Mann-Boykin, 2016; World, 2019). Rudine Sims (1982) conducted the first comprehensive study conducting content analysis of Black children's literature. Prior to that time, Nancy Larrick (1965) had conducted a comprehensive review of children's literature. She concluded that it consisted primarily of stories about White children and animals; Black children were almost invisible.

Rudine Sims chose to investigate the contents and quality of those children's books about Black families that were available (Sims, 1982). She found that positive images of Blacks in the literature were rare, and that negative stereotypes with unflattering illustrations were prevalent. She identified a few of the positive Black books she found as culturally conscious literature for Blacks. Culturally conscious books portrayed Black families in a positive light, with characters who were independent, intelligent, and empowered. They solved their problems on their own, and they provided role models for Black children on how to overcome racism and succeed in American society. She maintained that books can serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors so that children can see themselves in the stories; see parallel cultures in the texts; or walk

through the door to be immersed in the story. She concluded that it was very important for Black children to have books available to them that served as mirrors, so they could see themselves in the text and be affirmed as important members of society.

Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001) conducted a content analysis of Black children's literature to "locate literature that speaks to ... [Black] children about themselves and their lives" (2001, p. 812). They had observed that Black children had very few mirrors in classroom texts. There is a danger of isolation for Black children who cannot see themselves in the texts, as well as a danger for parallel cultures who might only see negative stereotypes and demeaning images of Blacks (McNair, 2016). The researchers developed a rubric to help teachers identify positive and authentic children's literature for Black children (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). A modified version of this rubric will be used to analyze the Black children's literature in the current study.

Jonda McNair (2008) conducted a critical content analysis of Black children's literature by comparing the historical Brownie's book, created by W.E.B. DuBois, to works by contemporary author, Patricia McKissack. McNair's study was guided by Multicultural Education Theory (2008). She analyzed the two sets of texts and concluded that they had many similarities, such as a desire to portray Black children in a positive light and help Black children find authentic images of positive, strong Black families.

Walker-Dalhouse & Risko (2008) also used Multicultural Education Theory to conduct a critical content analysis of Black children's literature to find books that might provide mirrors for the Black boys in an elementary classroom. Walker-Dalhouse used culturally relevant teaching strategies that emphasized the importance of finding positive Black children's literature to

provide the most effective instruction for Black children. Using critical content analysis, she identified a set of books that provided mirrors for her students and successfully engaged them. The current study will also use critical content analysis to analyze Black books that may provide mirrors for Black boys.

### **Summary and Implications of the Literature Review**

Learning to read is a critical first step in education, but some Black boys are having trouble becoming proficient readers (Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005). Books that feature Black males as the main characters may inspire more reading engagement in Black males (Gambrell, 2011; Sciurba, 2014; Tatum, 2006). More research is needed on the existence of children's books that provide positive Black role models and may be used in culturally relevant pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2011; McNair, 2016; Tatum, 2006). The examination of books with Black male characters on the *Conscious Kid* website will be useful if the books fulfill the organization's mission to provide books that depict Black males in a positive and empowered light. Teachers may be able to quickly find books that may be more engaging for Black male students. Such selections may help educators and parents alike to improve the reading performance of students at school and at home by providing more engaging texts. Multicultural Education Theory and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy concur that there is a need to conduct research in this area (Banks & Banks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Sims' research on windows and mirrors established the significance of the book's impact on the readers and why children need culturally conscious books almost forty years ago (Bishop, 2003; Sims, 1982). It is hoped that this investigation, by conducting a critical content analysis of children's books on a website, will identify more culturally conscious books for Black boys.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I describe the research methodology that I will use in this study. I will conduct a critical content analysis as described in the qualitative research literature (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017; Krippendorff, 2004). I will briefly explain the history of qualitative research and content analysis, and why this approach is appropriate for the present study. This chapter will include a detailed account of the website where the books in the study were discovered, and a short summary of each book to be analyzed. I will explain how the books to be included were selected, as well as an explanation of why some books were eliminated. A complete list of books that will be analyzed and those that were excluded is provided at the end of the chapter, as well as a copy of the modified rubric that will help to guide the analysis. For those who would like to examine the original rubric developed by the researchers (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001), a copy can be found in the Appendix.

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is used to discover in-depth information about a given topic, and there are many different approaches (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, Hanson, Plano & Morales, 2007). Normally, it is done when there are many compelling variables of interest and the topic cannot be easily understood (Merriam, 2001). This type of investigation yields a great deal of information and a deep level of understanding which is the outcome I hoped for when I decided to analyze this set of books for Black boys.

In addition, qualitative researchers acknowledge that reality is constructed by individuals depending on their point of view, so describing a phenomenon or a text is not just a matter of

making objective observations and reporting them (Creswell, Hanson, Plano & Morales, 2007).

Writers are influenced by the wider society in which they live, and readers interpret the story based partly on their own biases and life experiences (Bishop, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1982).

Researcher observations must be supported by critical details and meticulous description. In addition, the researcher must provide some type of positionality statement in order to be transparent about personal biases and their potential for impact on the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 2001). I will provide a researcher positionality statement later in this chapter.

A qualitative study is appropriate when the questions that must be answered are open-ended because little is known about the topic (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell, 1998). As mentioned already, the researcher's meticulous attention to detail will usually result in rich descriptions of the phenomenon or book (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The audience for the research must be receptive to this type of study, and the researcher must be willing to accept the role of an active learner rather than an expert (Creswell, 1998). I definitely feel like a learner when I am reading these books for Black boys; they are opening my eyes to the richness and complexity in children's literature. I realize that I can no longer be casual about the process of building a library for my classroom. The critical importance of the set of books I acquire for my students has been clearly expounded to me in the literature. As I discussed in Chapter One, I've realized that it is essential to provide culturally conscious reading materials for Black boys, and to ensure that books are available to them that tell their stories. In both historic and contemporary studies, qualitative research has often been done to tell the story of marginalized groups whose stories have not been fully elaborated in the traditional narrative of America and its history (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 1998). This is because the qualitative report provides more information; validates the experiences of the group members; and supports their

personal view of the world. Experiential accounts are very important in Critical Race Theory, where one often finds qualitative studies. Members of marginalized groups are strongly encouraged to share their stories; this is one of the foundational tenets of CRT.

### **Rationale for a Qualitative Design**

I selected a qualitative approach for the current study because it involves a critical content analysis of children's literature with Black boys in major roles. "Qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). My approach has been guided by constructivism because I believe that the perception of reality depends on the viewer's stance. I have taken a critical perspective because I believe that hidden messages concerning our society, its political assumptions, and the author's worldview are present in every text (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Although my analysis will be guided by several theoretical frameworks, I will allow the themes in the books to reveal themselves through many careful readings rather than starting out by applying the theories to the texts. I have no way of predicting the dominant themes in the texts or whether they fulfill the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization. Therefore, the evaluation of the books will be guided by a rubric as well as careful coding procedures. The characters in the stories and the authors and illustrators of the books are all members of a marginalized group, Black people who live in America. These writers and illustrators are seeking to tell their own stories, many of which have never been told before. For all of these reasons, I chose qualitative methodology for this study.



## Critical Content Analysis

Content analysis is a qualitative technique for reducing large amounts of data into smaller, more manageable units that are coded for easier understanding (Krippendorff, 2004). It dates back to the seventeenth century when religious authorities used it to check newspapers and other written materials for inappropriate content (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017). At that time, they counted the number of inappropriate words in the text to decide whether the articles were suitable for the public. In the United States, content analysis was first used to analyze newspapers at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These early analyses used word counts and column size in order to compare the differing amounts of coverage of various topics. Using these quantitative methods, the authors then drew conclusions about potential reader impact (Krippendorff, 2004).

Content analysis has come very far since then, having become popular in the United States in the 1950's as an analytical tool in the social sciences. It is an empirically grounded method concerned with the interpretation of signs, symbols and their meanings in both written materials and illustrations (Krippendorff, 2004). The methods used must be as systematic as possible so that the study can be replicated (Creswell, Hanson, Plano & Morales, 2007; Stemler, 2001). Qualitative content analysis is based on the fact that the meaning of symbols goes far beyond the images on the page to include the intention of the author and the interpretation of the viewer in constructing meaning, as inferences are made to construct meanings (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017; Krippendorff, 2004; Tobin, 2005).

In children's literature, content analysts focus on what the text is about. Historically, children's text analysis was done quantitatively, by counting the presence or absence of certain cultural groups, or by counting the number of certain key words that appeared. However,

content analysis is also used to inform the analysts about the political context in which the text was written (Krippendorff, 2004). When it is guided by a theory to make connections to the wider society and the political context, the method is known as critical content analysis ((Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017).

Content analysis must begin with simply reading the text for its effect on the reader to induce an aesthetic response for the first two readings (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017). After this, multiple readings are done for the purpose of coding. If a theory or rubric is used to guide the readings, then codes are developed based on these guidelines. This is known as a priori coding (Stemler, 2001). If the researcher is not being guided by a theory, then codes or categories may simply be identified as they present themselves in the readings; this is known as emergent coding (Stemler, 2001). Often, both types of coding are done in a given study. After all texts and illustrations are read and viewed multiple times and coded, then the information is combined and condensed into a set of coded variables and presented on tables, charts, or commentaries. This is accompanied by a thorough discussion on its social and political impact and embedded meanings. Critical content analysis is appropriate for the current study because it is being guided by the framework of Multicultural Education, as well as the seminal work on windows and mirrors in children's literature done by Rudine Sims Bishop (Sims, 1982). The goal of the study is to explore the meanings and dominant themes in a set of children's books from the *Conscious Kid* website to determine whether or not they fulfill the mission of the organization to identify Black children's literature that affirms and empowers Black boys.

### **Critical Content Analysis of Black Children's Literature**

Critical content analysis of Black children's literature was first done by Rudine Sims Bishop in her groundbreaking study addressing the scarcity of children's books that featured

Black children, and the poor quality and content of many of those texts that were available (Sims, 1982). She analyzed the books that featured Black children based on how well they reflected authentic Black families in America, and the extent to which they were controlled by stereotypes that prevailed in the dominant culture. She acknowledged that the sociopolitical context of the books deeply influenced both the authors' worldviews, and the production and contents of the text. Since the publication and widespread circulation of Sims' study, content analysis and critical content analysis have been widely applied to Black children's literature (Botelho, Young, & Nappi, 2014; Brooks & McNair, 2008; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2015; World, 2019).

McNair used multicultural education as a theoretical framework to investigate the similarities between the *Brownies' Book* (W.E.B. DuBois, the first magazine published for Black children, 1920) and the more contemporary fiction of Patricia McKissack (McNair, 2008). She discussed the persistence of the achievement gap in education between White students and Black students, and the need for the educational system to address the gap by interrogating the institutional practices in schools, such as tracking, differential special education placements, and teacher expectations. She emphasized the importance of providing Black literature to Black children that affirms and empowers them rather than denigrating and belittling them. McNair observed that, "From its inception, ... African American children's literature has battled against racism" (McNair, 2008), drawing conclusions from the content analysis of many historical writings.

In a similar vein, Walker-Dalhouse & Risko (2008) cited the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2004) and noted the continuing differences in the performance of Black and White students, particularly in literacy. Walker-Dalhouse proposed that the most effective

strategy to overcome the disparities in racial achievement in reading was to provide positive African American literature to Black boys who were struggling with their reading (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008). According to this teacher researcher, “the literature used [in the classroom] must provide a window as well as a mirror that reflects the lives of readers” (p. 205). She conducted a content analysis of several different Black children’s books in order to find a selection that met the needs of the students in her classroom to see themselves portrayed in the texts.

The use of critical content analysis of Black children’s literature is widely accepted in the field of education both to identify noteworthy children’s books, and to interrogate the impact of race, power, and sociopolitical conditions on children’s literature. Many contemporary dissertations in the field of early childhood education are based on critical content analysis of multicultural children’s literature (Jordan, 2015; Mann-Boykin, 2016; World, 2019). In this study, my goal mirrors that of the early work by Rudine Sims (1982): to identify Black children’s books that portray Black families in such a positive and authentic manner that they may be used by teachers, librarians, and families alike. For reasons already stated, I chose to focus my search on books that highlight Black males, and to select the books from the list on the *Conscious Kid* website, “*Black Books Matter: Children’s Books that Celebrate Black Boys*”. The organization states that this list will feature only those children’s texts that affirm and celebrate Black boys.

### **Authentic Black Characters**

To discuss the authenticity of Black characters, one must first acknowledge the great diversity among Blacks in America. The texts cannot be limited to stories of fatherless children in inner city neighborhoods who are constantly fighting against gangs, poverty, and crime (Sims,

1982). Nor can they be limited to historical stories of slavery, poverty, and the struggle for civil rights. Instead, the public must realize, and sometimes must be taught, that the Black experience is the “human experience”, and the topics covered must be broad and varied (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2003). Culturally conscious children’s literature describes those books that provide an accurate reflection of the social and cultural traditions that are associated with growing up Black in America (Sims, 1982). These cultural traditions may be portrayed in illustrations, language, dialect, Black communities, religious practices, family interactions, and many other ways. It is critical that Black children be exposed to authentic Black American characters so that they may see themselves in the texts.

### **Authentic Illustrations**

Illustrations in Black children’s literature can vary widely just as storylines do because Black Americans range in complexion from very light to very dark. However, if a book purports to tell the story of Black children, it is helpful if the illustrations can easily be identified as a Black child rather than a racially neutral or ambiguous portrait of a child. For example, in some books, the drawing of a child with white features is merely painted brown in order to represent a Black child, and this is not an authentic illustration (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2003). The book, *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats is an example of a book that depicts a child with white features who is merely painted brown (Bishop, 2003). In contrast, it can be very affirming for Black boys to be exposed to children’s books with strong, positive Black male characters and attractive, culturally accurate images in the texts.

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study is to identify children’s literature that may serve as high interest texts for Black boys because they have Black male characters in major roles. Such texts might

allow the children to see themselves in the pages, and thereby improve their motivation to read, amount of time spent reading, and their reading performance (Campbell, 2011; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; McNair, 2014; Tatum, 2005). Classroom libraries often have very few books about Black boys, and teachers need to know where they can find such books for their lessons and classroom libraries to engage all of the students they teach (Brooks & McNair, 2009; McNair, 2014; Mann-Boykin, 2016; Noguera, 2008).

In search of books that feature Black males as main characters, I explored the Internet using Google. At first, I considered using Caldecott books but very few of these award winning texts featured Black characters. I considered using children's books that had won the Coretta Scott King Award or the NAACP Image-Makers Award. However, very few of these books featured males in prominent roles. I also searched book lists that were sponsored by the American Library Association and the National Education Association's Teachers' Top 100 Books for Children. However, I found that these lists contained very few Black selections. Finally, I considered using the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) list of all books published in 2018 but it is a very long list to explore that did not necessarily meet the needs of my study. Having read previous analyses of the books on the CCBC, I learned that very few Black titles are published each year (about 7%), and even fewer with Black males as the main character. Because the goal of my study was to identify culturally conscious books with Black males in major roles, I needed another source of books.

Therefore, I continued to search until I found a website called, *The Conscious Kid*. This organization has defined itself as "an education, research and policy organization dedicated to reducing bias and promoting positive identity development in youth" ("*Conscious Kid, Black Books Matter: Children's Books Celebrating Black Boys*", n.d.). Their book list has been

developed to include only those books that are about Black males, written and illustrated by Black authors and illustrators. Its stated mission was a conceptual match for the investigation I had proposed:

Black people have historically been, and continue to be, underrepresented, misrepresented, or invisible in children's literature. Black male characters are even less visible, and even fewer still, are books reflecting positive and empowered depictions of Black boys. These books center, reflect, and affirm Black boys, and were written and illustrated by Black authors and artists. (The Conscious Kid Library, n.d.)

If the books on their list are an accurate representation of their stated mission, it could potentially serve as an excellent resource for teachers who are searching for culturally conscious books for their Black male students. These books may provide a mirror for them. Therefore, I will conduct a critical content analysis of the books for elementary students from the website, focusing on books that have been selected for grades K-4. Focusing on this set of books will allow me to identify books that I may use in my practice as an early intervention elementary school teacher, and potentially discover books that will be useful to other teachers. I will also be able to view illustrations as well as reading the text when determining the impact and quality of the selected texts. This website was chosen because its mission is to provide a list of books that portray Black males in a positive and empowered light. They partner with many different organizations and concerned citizens across the country to achieve the goal of making more multicultural literature that is positive and affirming available to children. Their partners are: *The Children's Museum of Art and Social Justice; Brooklyn Children's Museum; Moms of Black*

*Boys United; Raising Race Conscious Children; Line 4 Line Barbershop Literacy Program; Howard University's #Bison Write; and American Indians in Children's Literature.* These partners have joined with the *Conscious Kid* organization to identify and promote positive multicultural literature for children. *Moms of Black Boys United* assisted the *Conscious Kid* organization with identifying the twenty-five books for Black boys on the list that I have accessed for this study.

My research has been guided by the following questions:

- 4) How are Black male characters in books from the *Conscious Kid* website portrayed?
- 5) How, if at all, is the content of the books aligned with the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization?
- 6) What are the overarching themes of the books on the list?

### **Procedures and Criteria for Book Selection**

The selection criteria for the books were that the texts must be classified as appropriate for children in grades K-4, and they must be picture books. As previously described, all of the books in the study were selected from the website called the *Conscious Kid.org*. This website is dedicated to researching and providing literature by and about underrepresented groups in America. All of the books were considered for the study but only ten of them were selected. These books are all appropriate for elementary children, grades K-4, and they all include pictures of Black boys, who are the main characters. They were also written and illustrated by Black authors and illustrators. They were selected because they meet the goal of this study, to identify books for elementary students that feature Black males in major roles and that may portray them



in a strong and positive light. This study will explore whether the organization achieves its mission in the selection of these books.

### **Books that were Eliminated**

The selection criteria for the study focused on picture books that are appropriate for elementary students, grades K-4. There are twenty-five books on the list of children's books for Black boys on the *Conscious Kid* website. Of these, fifteen books were excluded because they are either for children that are too young, infants to preschool, or they were written for adolescents who have reached middle and high school. Although the books all seemed worthy of analysis and consideration, the range of age groups that the books were directed toward was too great to include all of them. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to focus on books for students in elementary school. As an elementary school teacher at this time, this focus is most appropriate for the students I am serving and with whom I hope to be able to share this literature. A full list of books that were eliminated is provided at the end of this chapter.

### **Trustworthiness**

The issues of reliability and validity are considered as a matter of trustworthiness for qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative study is judged to have internal validity and reliable findings only to the extent that the researcher conducting the study has established himself or herself as a trustworthy observer and reporter of the observations. The investigator must ensure that there is a good fit between what is observed and what is reported as data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000). To help confirm the credibility of this study, I have followed the guidelines provided by Creswell (1998) and Hsieh & Shannon (2005). I will address the following issues in order to ensure that I adhere to the highest standards of credibility that I can achieve for this study: prolonged engagement, bias, and thick description.

I will read each book a minimum of four times, and then study the illustrations on each page four times or more in order to provide prolonged engagement with the books. I will provide a rich, thick description of the findings as objectively as possible (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 2002). By reading these detailed descriptions of what I read and how I analyzed the texts, other researchers and interested parties will be able to arrive at their own conclusions. I will control for the impact of bias to the greatest extent possible by acknowledging my own bias which I have done with my statement of the researcher's positionality. In addition, the credibility of the work will be checked by a committee of education scholars. These professional committee members will perform the most extensive check possible by reviewing the study and discussion to check for accuracy.

### **Researcher Positionality**

It is critical to describe the positionality and subjectivities of the researcher in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study. The researcher must provide some information about his or her own background and personal experiences in order to increase the credibility of the research (Merriam, 2001). As an author, I must acknowledge the presence of researcher bias in my investigation. This acknowledgement is a critical part of the verification of the study in qualitative research (Creswell, 1998).

As a Black female, I have a personal perspective of growing up Black in America based on my own experiences which may or may not be representative of what other Black Americans have experienced. It is impossible for anyone to be completely objective because personal experiences and backgrounds will always affect our perspective (Creswell, 1998). I am the grandmother and the mother-in-law of two Black males, one in elementary school and the other

in college. I am deeply concerned about their educational opportunities in America, and the need for my grandson to be exposed to culturally conscious, Black literature.

In addition, I have faced some discrimination during my lifetime, and I have worked hard to overcome those difficult circumstances. Both my parents grew up on farms in the south, and they were part of the great migration of Black families from the south to the north seeking employment and greater opportunities. I was in elementary school during the 1960's, the height of the Civil Rights Movement. My grandfather actually helped the Freedom Riders in the South, and survived encounters with the KKK on more than one occasion. My parents sheltered their children from life's harsh realities as much as they could but some circumstances they could not protect us from. For example, I attended school in an inner city community in the northeast where it was mandatory for Black children to ride the school bus across town in order to integrate the closest White school. This was often a difficult experience. I found some degree of discrimination and ostracism during my school years, both in regular school and in graduate school. As a young adult, I returned to the south where I have strong family connections.

Since then, I have seen the research on the Black - White achievement gap and I felt drawn to work in the effort to help close the gap (Dexter & Simon, 2009). I chose to focus primarily on Black males because the research indicates that they are the most disadvantaged group, often performing at the lowest level in reading proficiency tests (Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005; Dexter & Simon, 2009). Many of these boys may feel alienated and unwelcome in the school system (Kirkland, 2013), just as I did so long ago. I believe that reading is critical to school achievement because if students can become competent readers, it helps their self-esteem and their academic performance across all content areas. By conducting a critical content analysis of books with Black male characters, I hope to identify books that are culturally

conscious and that may be used in the classroom. Using books as mirrors is important for culturally relevant teachers (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998). My expectation is that these books will help all Black children feel more welcome in the classroom and help to engage Black males in their reading.

### **Analysis and Coding**

I will analyze the books by immersing myself in the literature, taking time to read through each book many times over. First, I will read the books for the aesthetic experience as suggested by content analysis experts (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017). Then, I will use the modified rubric (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001) to consider several different specific aspects of the stories, including character portrayal, language use, illustration authenticity, and information accuracy. The use of the modified rubric will aid in the analysis and discussion of these points. As I make notes and prepare to write the discussion on these aspects of the literature, I will then search for any common themes that may emerge in the texts. The themes and messages that I discover will then be coded and combined into a more manageable set of data. My search for themes and socio-political messages will be guided by the theoretical frameworks of the study, Multicultural Theory (Banks & Banks, 1995), and Sims' theory of windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2012). I will also use Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) as an additional lens through which to view, analyze, and discuss the literature. As I analyze the information I gather from these texts, I will be guided by my research questions. Finally, using all of this data, I will discuss the findings and how they resolve the questions of interest. In short, here are the steps I will use in my analysis:

- 1) Read books twice for aesthetic response
- 2) Read a third time to answer questions on the rubric

- 3) Read a fourth time or more to search for common themes
- 4) Identify overarching themes or messages
- 5) Set up coding for themes and social/political categories & messages
- 6) Answer the guiding research questions
- 7) Discuss the quality of the books based on all of this data

I will attempt to be as systematic as possible in conducting this research and analysis.

### **Limitations**

This study will add to the body of knowledge about multicultural children's literature, specifically those books with Black male characters in a major role, written and illustrated by Black authors and illustrators. However, even though the research shows that literature in which children can see themselves in the story may increase the students' motivation to read, there is no causal relationship established between the content analysis of the book and the potential amount of time students will spend reading it. Further, there is no guarantee that if a teacher decides to use one of the books from this list, she will automatically produce more intrinsic motivation in the students. It is a qualitative study which conducts a critical content analysis of a set of Black children's books to determine whether or not they are culturally conscious; whether they fulfill the mission of the *Conscious Kid* website; and whether they might be suitable for classroom or library use. The study cannot be generalized further than this.

### **Summary**

I will conduct a critical content analysis of ten Black children's books from the *Conscious Kid* website. I will use the methodology from research literature as described by

established researchers in the field (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017; Krippendorf, 2004), as well as a rubric adapted from Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001). I will identify common themes in the books, and determine whether they fulfill the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization to provide books that celebrate and empower Black males by presenting them in a strong and positive light.

**Table 3.1. List of Books from the *Conscious Kid* that were Included in the Study**

<b>Pub. Date</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Age Range</b>
2017	Barnes, D.	<i>Crown</i>	Fiction	3-10
2015	Nelson, V.	<i>The Book Itch</i>	Biography	7-10
2013	Shabazz, I.	<i>Malcolm Little</i>	Biography	6-10
2013	Beaty, D.	<i>Knock, Knock</i>	Fiction	4-7
2008	Weatherford, C.	<i>Before John Was a Jazz Giant</i>	Biography	4-8
2005	Andrews, T.	<i>Trombone Shorty</i>	Biography	4-8
2005	Nelson, K.	<i>He's Got the Whole World</i>	Poetry	4-8
2005	Step toe, J.	<i>Radiant Child</i>	Biography	6-12
1994	Hughes, L.	<i>I, Too, Am America</i>	Poetry	4-8
1993	Perkins, U.	<i>Hey, Black Child</i>	Poetry	3-10

**Table 3.2. List of Books on the *Conscious Kid* that were Eliminated from the Study**

<b>Books for Very Young Children</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Age Range</b>
Grimes, N.	<i>Welcome, Precious</i>	0-3
Hughes, L.	<i>Lullaby</i>	0-4
Jordan, D.	<i>Baby Blessings</i>	0-4
<b>Books for Older Children</b>		
Abdul-Jabbar, K.	<i>Becoming Kareem</i>	8-12
Alexander, K.	<i>The Crossover</i>	10-12
Alexander, K.	<i>Playbook</i>	10-12
Davis, S., Jenkins, G. & Hunt, R.	<i>The Pact</i>	10+
Kamkwamba, W. & Mealer, B.	<i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i>	11-16
Lewis, J., Aydin, A. & Powell, N.	<i>March</i>	10-15
Moore, D.	<i>The Stars Beneath Our Feet</i>	10-14
Reynolds, J.	<i>Ghost</i>	10-14
Smith, C.	<i>12 Rounds to Glory</i>	10+
Stone, N.	<i>Dear Martin</i>	14-18
Shabazz, I. & Magoon, K.	<i>X. A Novel</i>	13-18
Williams-Garcia, R.	<i>Clayton Bird Goes Underground</i>	8-12



**Table 3.3. Annotated List of Books in the Study**

<b>Author</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Plot Summary</b>
Andrews, T. (2005)	<i>Trombone Shorty</i>	This book recounts the childhood of a famous musician from New Orleans, Troy Andrews.
Barnes, D. (2017)	<i>Crown</i>	The buoyant story of a boy's trip to the barber shop to get a fresh cut.
Beaty, D. (2013)	<i>Knock Knock</i>	The heartrending account of a young boy whose father is incarcerated when he is three years old.
Hughes, L. (1994)	<i>I, too, am America</i>	The classic poem tells the story of growing up Black in America.
Nelson, K. (2005)	<i>He's Got the Whole World</i>	This slave spiritual is retold with authentic and colorful illustrations.
Nelson, V. (2015)	<i>The Book Itch</i>	A story of the life of Lewis Michaux, Sr., who founded the Harlem Bookstore.
Perkins, U. (1993)	<i>Hey, Black Child</i>	An inspiring poem that seeks to motivate Black children to set high goals and work hard to achieve them.
Shabazz, I. (2013)	<i>Malcolm Little</i>	Told from his daughter's point of view, this story chronicles the early life of Malcolm X.
Steptoe, J. (2005)	<i>Radiant Child</i>	A brightly colored mosaic of pictures and symbols, this book tells the story of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.
Weatherford, C. (2005)	<i>Before John was a Jazz Giant</i>	The life of musician John Coltrane when he was a boy.

**Table 3.4. Specific characteristics of high-quality Black children’s literature**

(adapted from Hefflin &amp; Barksdale-Ladd, 2001)

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Questions</b>	<b>Discussion</b>
<b>Character portrayal</b>	*Does the author identify the character as Black?	
	*Does the author include current and accurate and information about Black American beliefs, traditions, shared values, and other cultural referents?	
	*Does the author present realistic and positive images of Blacks?	
<b>Language Use</b>	*Does the dialogue correctly portray Black dialect?	
	*Is the language authentic and realistic?	
<b>Illustration authenticity</b>	*Do the illustrations reflect reality?	
	*Do they reveal variety in settings and Black physical features and coloring, or are characters merely colored brown?	
	*Do the illustrations present positive images of Blacks in aesthetically pleasing ways?	
<b>Information accuracy</b>	*Does the story contain a motif or an authentic aspect of Black history?	
	*Is the information accurate?	
	*Does the story add a distinctive voice or worldview?	

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the findings of my critical content analysis of this set of picture books from the *Conscious Kid* website. Although the books were written for children using shorter words, simple phrases, and peppered with rhymes, the themes they embody and the sociopolitical constructs they portray are both complex and compelling. I was able to come to a deeper understanding of the state of Black males in America after I considered how they were portrayed in this literature. As I explained in the introductory chapters, my research has been guided by my interest in the following questions:

#### Research Question 1

How are the Black male characters in books from the *Conscious Kid* website portrayed?

#### Research Question 2

How, if at all, is the content of the books aligned with the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization?

#### Research Question 3

What are the overarching themes of the books on the list?

I didn't realize when I began this study that the poignant stories I encountered in these books would be so endearing. They actually increased my heartrate sometimes. I didn't know they would bring me joy and constrict my chest with sorrow. They have helped me to more fully

grasp the childhood stories and early struggles of some well-known Black men, and to see the story of Black men in this country in a microcosm. There are many aspects of the Black experience in America unveiled and displayed in these children's books, much more than I expected to find.

I will conduct this critical content analysis in the order of the questions of interest, starting with a discussion of how Black males are portrayed and ending with an analysis of the themes I discovered in the books. I examined the themes found in certain groups of books and analyzed the literature based on relevant theories. A more in-depth discussion and analysis of the findings and the theoretical significance will be presented in Chapter Five. I decided to discuss a sociopolitical message as a theme if it was present in three or more of the books. One exception to this is the theme of mental illness. The mothers' mental illness was present in only two of the books but was included in the discussion due to its significance as a commentary on the Black American experience. I have placed a chart at the end of this chapter that lists the themes of each book, its abbreviation for the purposes of this discussion, and its genre. Many books will display evidence of more than one theme. For the purpose of this study, the content of the books is defined as both the text and the illustrations, acknowledging the power of both words and pictures to convey the message.

### **Research Question 1**

**How are the Black male characters in books from the *Conscious Kid* website portrayed?**

Overwhelmingly, the Black male characters in the set of books from the *Conscious Kid* website are portrayed in a constructive and affirmative light, showing the reader some positive

aspect of their personality, whether it be their intelligence, strength, wit, artistry, or perseverance. In each one of the books, the main characters are Black boys who are positioned in a context of family love and support, and the author described either a negative incident that they overcame or a neutral incident that they transformed into a joyful or successful experience. Five of the books are accounts of the lives of famous Black men when they were children; two of the books tell about an incident in the author's life; one of the books is an old Negro spiritual with pictures; and two of the books are illustrated poems. All of the books use both words and pictures to portray the Black male characters in a positive light. I will begin this section by discussing the five books that provided life stories of famous Black males: *Trombone Shorty* (Andrews, 2015); *The Book Itch* (Nelson, 2015); *Malcolm Little* (Shabazz, 2013); *Radiant Child* (Step toe, 2016); and *Before John was a Jazz Giant* (Weatherford, 2008).

Andrews' *Trombone Shorty* is the childhood autobiography of the musician, Troy Andrews, and how he grew up to create a famous jazz band (Andrews, 2015). His story is illustrated by Bryan Collier, who painted accurate complexions, facial features, and even the texture of the Black hair on the characters (Collier, 2015). The hairstyles and clothing for the adults and children are age appropriate and accurate (Von Blum, 2012; Sims, 1982). In the illustrator's note, Collier said he purposely selected "beautiful colors and shapes that swirl out of Troy's trombone" and colorful balloons that are "dancing throughout the book" to show how music was always present in Andrews' neighborhood (Collier, 2015) There are no blank spaces on the pages but watercolored skies in light blue, leaf textured trees tall against the sky, and wallpapered walls in his mother's kitchen. The illustrations transported the reader to another time and place, allowing us to visit New Orleans and watch part of the parade, and observe the young Troy with his band. Andrews' described the richness of his childhood in the book. His story

showed how he overcame the limitations of growing up in a family without much money because he focused on the overwhelming benefits of his childhood rather than the financial deficits. He emphasized the joy of living in a neighborhood filled with music; the love of a mother who recognized his love for music and supported him; the encouragement of his brother James who gave him his famous nickname; and the companionship and creativity of the Five O'clock Band. As a small boy, Troy was invited to perform onstage with another famous jazz musician, Bo Diddley, because his mother had surprised him with a trip to the concert and he played his trombone there. The old trombone that Troy found on the street was far too big for him, and sometimes he fell down from the sheer weight of it. However, he always got back up and kept playing. When he was a teenager, his brother James invited him to join his band. These incidents and other details in the book show how greatly loved he was by his family. Even though he began his career with a homemade instrument, and then found a damaged and discarded trombone that was far too large for him, he has now traveled all over the world to perform with his band. He has also started a foundation to support other young musicians. This young boy overcame all the obstacles in his life to achieve his dream and now he is reaching back to help others. He is portrayed in a position of strength and philanthropy.

Nelson portrayed the Black men in the story in a position of strength and perseverance in *The Book Itch* (Nelson, 2015). The narrator of the story is young Lewis Micheaux, Jr., the son of the man who started the famous National Memorial African Bookstore in Harlem in the early 1900's. It was written by their cousin, Vaunda Micheaux Nelson. The book is a biography about Lewis Micheaux, Sr., and how he opened the store. Mr. Micheaux called it "The House of Common Sense and the Home of Proper Propaganda" because he wanted Black people to have the resources to learn about their history and contemporary issues (Nelson, 2015). At its prime, it

held the largest collection of books by and about Black people in the country. Mr. Micheaux opened the store with just five books. When he went to the bank to get a business loan, the loan officer told him, “Black people don’t read books”, and refused to grant him the loan (Nelson, 2015). If he wanted to sell fish and chips or fried chicken, the loan officer said he would approve the loan.

However, Mr. Micheaux did not give up on his dream. He believed that reading books written by and about other Black people would help Black readers improve their lives. He washed windows and sold books from a cart on the street and eventually, he earned enough money to open the store. He faced the obstacle of institutionalized racism in his life when the loan officer refused to give him a loan for his store, but he worked hard and overcame that barrier. He opened the bookstore and developed it into an extremely successful business, frequented by many prominent Black people of the day, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Muhammad Ali, and James Baldwin. He is clearly positioned in a nexus of strength and perseverance, successfully overcoming the obstacles in his lifetime. The illustrator, R. Gregory Christie, does an excellent job drawing the likenesses of the famous Black people in the book, and uses paint to portray their complexions in various shades quite realistically (Christie, 2015). He also used stimulating colors to portray the city of Harlem, the interior of the bookstore, and the engaging characters. The book’s text and pictures both portray the Black male characters in a positive and empowering light.

Ilyasah Shabazz portrayed her father, Malcolm X, in a resoundingly positive light in *Malcolm Little* (Shabazz, 2013). She began the story before he was born, showing how his parents met and married and then had children. Malcolm’s father was a fiery preacher who

taught his congregation about freedom and equality for all people. Because of his teachings, he was assassinated. His mother could not afford to support the family. She was labelled as mentally incompetent in some way, and was removed from the home. The actual details are not provided. All eight children became wards of the state; they were separated and sent to live with friends of their parents.

Young Malcolm became rebellious and had to go to reform school. He finally settled down but became depressed because he missed his parents and siblings so much. Finally, at the end of the story, he overcame his depression and began to apply himself in school. He was voted class president, and excelled with his schoolwork. He realized that the love that his family had for him would always be a part of his life. The plethora of negative and egregious events in his life served only to emphasize the overwhelming accomplishment he achieved when he overcame both the rebelliousness and the depression, and spread his wings like the butterfly he so admired. The story of his life showed a young man who was an overcomer, positioned in a positive and empowering light, overcoming adversity against all odds.

In *Radiant Child*, Steptoe is both the author and illustrator, and he portrayed the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat in a positive and empowered light using both words and pictures (Steptoe, 2016). The story started when Jean-Michel was a small boy, coloring on the floor with his mother, being taken to museums, artistically encouraged, and nurtured by her. Even at this early age, his goal was to become a famous artist. As his young life continued, he was critically injured in a car accident and had to be hospitalized for a long time. After this, his mother began to have mental problems. She had trouble cooking, keeping house, and taking care of her family. Finally, she was removed from the home. Her loss was a terrible blow to him. However, he was



permitted to visit her and show her his artwork, and this helped him tremendously to cope with her absence. He left home when he was seventeen and supported himself by selling postcards and other items that featured his artwork. His work was displayed in Times Square when he was twenty, and he had his first solo art show in Italy when he was only twenty-one years old. His biography detailed the hardships he faced in his life but also showed how he overcame them with hard work and perseverance. He was portrayed in a strong and positive light throughout the book, and the pictures, one showing him with a crown above his head, supported the text consistently.

In *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*, Carole Weatherford told the story of John Coltrane when he was a boy (Weatherford, 2008). The story focused on all the different sounds John heard when he was growing up as the grandson of a Methodist minister. He and his family lived with his grandparents, so he often heard the sound of the choir, the sound of the preacher, the sounds of his mother's phonograph, his father's ukulele, and his grandmother's "hambones knocking" in the pot (Weatherford, 2008). This whole medley of sounds inside of him became the fuel for the music he would later ignite, a mixed up creation called jazz. The artist, Sean Qualls, filled every page with color and light; the young John looked appealing with racially accurate features and a dark coffee complexion. Other characters appropriately have varying complexions and suitable hairstyles. Often, he depicted the sounds coming from the instruments as swirling colors and shapes on the page. On the first page, the adult Coltrane is depicted, dressed in dark suit and tie, his lips pressed to his saxophone, a cacophony of colors representing the sounds emanating from his horn. The rest of the book focused on portraying him as a child, drinking in the sounds of his surroundings so he could later pour them out in such astonishing

new combinations. The boy's artistic gifts and accomplishments were plainly presented in both words and illustrations, and the book fully portrayed him in a positive and empowering light.

Two of the books described incidents in the authors' lives, *Crown* (Barnes, 2017) and *Knock Knock* (Beatty, 2013). In *Crown* by Derrick Barnes, illustrated by Gordon James, the protagonist is a Black boy around ten years old who makes an exciting trip to the barber shop each week (Barnes, 2017; James, 2017). In the Author's Note, Barnes told us that the experience is based on his own childhood, when his mother left \$8.00 on the table every Thursday so he could go to the shop after school. He joyfully described the euphoric sense of elevation he felt every time he went. He actually felt more intelligent, as though he would earn all A's at school the next day. He felt excited for his girlfriend to see him and have all her friends whispering about how fine he was. He felt as though every other customer in the shop secretly wanted to give him a standing ovation because of how good he looked. In sum, he felt like a prince in royal robes when he sat in the barber's chair, and the feeling of euphoria continued when he stood up because he had a "flawless line" and "more waves ... than the Atlantic ocean" (Barnes, 2017). Barnes' enthusiasm is contagious for the reader: I shared in his joy and excitement as he sat in the barber's chair and was magically transformed to a handsome prince: "Magnificent. Flawless. Like royalty" (Barnes, 2017). Barnes also provided information about other customers in the shop, and he described the Black men there as tremendously important men. In the descriptions, they sound powerful: important enough to be a "CEO or to own real estate on Saturn" (Barnes, 2017). The illustrations accurately show Black people with different complexions, and the facial features are drawn in appropriate proportions and flattering earthtones (Bishop, 2003; Von Blum, 2012; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). The artist successfully captured the shading and clothing of the people at the shop; the reader was transported to the event with the narrator. This

book might successfully serve as a mirror for many Black boys who can completely relate to the narrator's feeling about the trip to the barber shop (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 1990). It can also serve as a window for members of parallel cultures and others who do not make the trip. The main character is successfully centered and affirmed, and he is portrayed as attractive, intelligent, and strong.

In *Knock, Knock, My Dad's Dream for Me*, Beaty took an incident which could have been a source of weakness and failure in his life and described how he overcame it (Beaty, 2013). At the start of the story, Beaty's father was his primary caregiver, waking him with a knock on his door every morning, affirming his love with both words and scrambled eggs. However, his father was incarcerated when he was quite young. In the author's note, Beaty shared that he was only three when this occurred. He became very depressed; he had a hard time handling the loss of his dad. He wondered how he would learn to do important things like driving, shaving and fixing cars. During the course of the story, he shared a letter his father wrote to him to share his dream. His father dreamed that he would overcome obstacles that his father could not, and open doors that his father could not, and achieve his dreams. "Knock, knock for me, for as long as you become your best, the best of me still lives in you" (Beaty, 2013). The illustrations by Bryan Collier provided strong support for the story line, and by the end of the story, he was painted in a starched white shirt and tie, having achieved success as a young man (Collier, 2013). The story demonstrated that even after a major stressful event such as the incarceration of a Black boy's father, that boy can still overcome the loss and achieve success in his life. In spite of these difficult circumstances, the boy overcame the loss of his father. He is portrayed as a young man with strength and perseverance. On the very last page of the book, we see that his father returns after many years, and we are left with the image of father and son

embracing. At that point, the young man's chin was resting on his father's shoulder because they are the same height. Father and son were reunited, so the story concludes on a hopeful note of reconciliation and reunion. Collier commented, "This book is not just about loss, but also about hope, making healthy choices, and not letting our past define our future" (Collier, 2013). This is clearly a positive message for children demonstrating resilience and agency in the face of loss and separation.

"He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" is an old Negro spiritual that the artist, Kadir Nelson, illustrated for the present day (Nelson, 2005). He chose a Black family with both parents and four young children to serve as the representation of the song. The notes on the jacket said that he wanted to portray a "multiethnic family, representative of the earth's diversity" but in most of the pictures, they appear to be Black. The father and son, both clearly Black males with dark skin and Black features, are the main characters. The book opened with a dark night sky and the long streak of a falling star moving across the page, accompanied by the words, "He's got the whole world in His hands" (Nelson, 2005). On the next page, we see a long row of skyscrapers in the distance, based on San Francisco's skyline. The third page first introduced the little Black boy holding a hand-drawn picture of his family, with another picture of children on the wall. In these pictures, you can see that the people have different complexions, some very light and some very dark.

The next pages in the book show pictures of a darker skinned Black family, always engaged in a fun outdoor activity with the children. The family was shown fishing by the river with the mountains on the horizon with only Dad and the children. The little Black boy is the central figure in the painting. The family was shown submerged to their waists in the ocean,

watching a sailboat in the distance under a clear blue sky. The little boy was perched on his father's shoulders with a sister standing on either side. In another scene, only the father and his son were pictured, sitting cross legged on the floor facing each other with a game board on the floor between them. The song ended with a final view of dark outer space, this time showing the spinning earth in the foreground with the moon behind it. The refrain was repeated here, "He's got the whole world in His hands" (Nelson, 2005).

Reading through the book and looking at the picturesque, meticulously accurate paintings on each page has the effect of transporting the reader to a quiet, pastoral setting where all is well with the world. The Black family was portrayed in a position of strength, with scenic views and appealing portraits on every page. The father looked strong, protective, and loving; we see him actively engaged with his family throughout the book. The young son appeared to be happy and well cared for by both parents; he appeared on every page that has people in the picture. On two of the pages, he is the only figure in a welcoming nature scene. In two other paintings, he is the only child portrayed in the picture, sitting or standing with his father. In every case, the small boy looks protected by the presence of a large, attentive Black male, at times riding on his father's back, sometimes looking diminutive as he perched at his father's feet. The overall effect of the illustrations, along with the words of the song, is to see a happy Black family thriving in a busy world. The adult Black male is portrayed in a loving and supportive position, taking care of his family and children. The small boy is centrally positioned in a nurturing and supportive family with two parents and three siblings, successfully interacting with his environment under the constant guidance and care of his family.

Two of the books were illustrated poems. In *I, Too, Am America*, Hughes' poem is also illustrated by Bryan Collier (Collier, 2012; Hughes, 1953). This is the only book that focused on Black men and portrayed a Black boy only at the end of the last few pages. The book portrayed the characters in a position of strength with both words and pictures. In the poem, we learn that the speaker, who represents Black America, described himself as the "darker brother", the one who is "sent to the kitchen when company comes" (Hughes, 1953). This character is excluded from American life, the pursuit of happiness and liberty. However, the speaker in the poem is not deterred, telling us, "But I laugh, and eat well and grow strong". Here, we see resilience and strength in the face of adversity. Then, the poet assured us that a new day is coming: "Tomorrow, I'll be at the table when company comes." In this new day, they will "see how beautiful I am" and "be ashamed" (Hughes, 1953). Ultimately, the speaker overcame the harsh circumstances in his life.

Hughes wrote this poem prior to the start of the Civil Rights Movement; the first copyright was 1915. Here he functioned as a prophetic voice for his people, predicting that a better day for Black Americans would come in the future, a day when they would not have to live under a cloud and retreat to the background of American life. In spite the harsh conditions that Blacks lived under during Hughes' day when Jim Crow laws were still in full force, the poem showed the Black character in a position of strength. Collier chose to use Black Pullman porters to illustrate the poem because of the harsh conditions they had to endure for a hundred years of serving as butlers, maids, and cooks on the trains with sleeping cars, showing "relentless courage and dignity" (Collier, 2012). By the end of the poem, we see beautiful Black children in modern day trains and subways, sitting in the front seats of the train. On the last page, there is a Black boy looking through an American flag at an "unknown future" (Collier, 2012). Collier

chose to depict the flag motif throughout the book in order to use it as a “metaphor for the growth of our people in this country” (Collier, 2012). The artist believed that Black people have come very far in America since the poet’s time, and the days of the Pullman porters, and that Blacks can have a very bright future. Here again, we see that both the text and the illustrations portrayed the Black man in a position of strength: he has overcome harsh conditions and survived to this present day in a better social position, with an even brighter future ahead.

*Hey, Black Child* by Useni Perkins is actually an illustrated portrait of a poem from Perkins’ musical, *The Black Fairy* (Perkins, 1993). In the play, the characters take a trip to Africa to learn about the many important contributions that Black people have made to the world. Perkins wrote the poem as the culminating message in the play to encourage Black children to work hard and be all that they can be. Through their efforts, they can change the world into a more welcoming place for Black people. The illustrator, Bryan Collier, portrayed the children in the book engaging in many positive and sometimes difficult activities, such as playing the piano, becoming an astronaut, and reading a book. The author promises the children, if you will work hard, “tomorrow your nation will be what you want it to be” (Nelson, 1993). The illustrations in this book featured both Black girls and Black boys making accomplishments, sometimes including an appreciative audience. The Black boys are portrayed in a position of strength, as they learn all they can and do all that they can do to develop themselves to their highest potential and have a positive impact on the whole nation. The boys were consistently depicted in a positive and empowering light.

In summary, all of the books in the set from the *Conscious Kid* website portrayed the Black males in a position of strength, situated in a supportive family, showing agency and initiative to effect change in their lives through hard work, intelligence, and perseverance.

## Research Question 2

**How, if at all, is the content of the books aligned with the mission of the Conscious Kid organization?**

In order to consider whether the Conscious Kid organization has selected books that are appropriately aligned with its mission, I went back to the website to consider their stated purpose:

The Conscious Kid is an education, research and policy organization dedicated to reducing bias and promoting positive identity development in youth. We partner with organizations, children's museums, schools, and families across the country to promote access to children's books centering underrepresented and oppressed groups.

When introducing their collection of books for Black boys, they stated:

Each year, there are more children's books published about animals than Black people. Black people have historically been, and continue to be, underrepresented, misrepresented, or invisible in children's literature. Black male characters are even less visible, and even fewer still, are books reflecting positive and empowered depictions of Black boys... These books center, reflect, and affirm Black boys, and were written and illustrated by Black authors and artists.



As I said in the introduction, I chose to use the book list on the *Conscious Kid* website for my study because their mission of identifying books that featured positive and empowered depictions of Black boys is such a close match to my interest in finding culturally relevant and engaging literature for this group. In Research Question 1, I considered how the Black male characters in the books are portrayed. I found that the books from the website center and affirm Black boys by providing positive, empowered representations of them. Inadvertently, my analysis resulted in the conclusion that these books fulfill the organization's mission of providing a selection of books that center and affirm Black boys.

In Research Question 2, I will specifically consider how the content of the books is aligned with the mission of the organization. Having determined that the books provide an empowered and positive depiction of Black males already, I will now change my focus. In responding to Question 2, I will discuss whether the books may be used to reduce bias and help children develop a positive self-image. In this way, I can fully address the organization's mission.

The content of the books for elementary aged boys that I have selected from the website for this study is aligned with the organization's mission in the following ways: (1) the books feature a Black boy as the main character; (2) all of the books affirm the existence and life choices of the boys; (3) most of the books demonstrate that the boys were able to persevere and overcome obstacles; and (4) all of the books portray Black boys in a positive and empowered light. In addition, all of the books were written and illustrated by Black men and women.

To fully discuss whether the content of the books is aligned with the organization's mission, I must include a discussion of the illustrations because this study has defined the content

of the books as equally consisting of the text and the pictures. Without exception, the artists did an excellent job of portraying Black people in the illustrations with varying complexions and individual identities, consistently avoiding stereotypes. This absence of stereotypes is one important way that illustrators can help to reduce bias and provide accurate mirrors and windows for children (Derman-Sparks, 1998; Santora, 2013).

Bryan Collier created the artwork for four of the books: Andrews' *Trombone Shorty* (Collier, 2015) ; Beaty's *Knock, Knock*; (Collier, 2013) Hughes, *I, Too, Am America* (Collier, 2012); and Perkins' *Hey, Black Child*, (Collier, 2017) (Andrews, 2015; Beaty, 2013; Hughes, 1953; Perkins, 1993). R. Gregory Christie designed the illustrations for Nelson's *The Book Itch* (Christie, 2015; Nelson, 2015), while A.G. Ford painted the pictures for Shabazz's *Malcolm Little* (Ford, 2013; Shabazz, 2013). Gordon James illustrated Barnes' *Crown* (Barnes, 2017), and Kadir Nelson painted the images for *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands* (Nelson, 2005). Sean Qualls created the paintings for Weatherford's *Before John Was a Jazz Giant* (Weatherford, 2008). Finally, the last book in the set, *Radiant Child*, was both written and illustrated by Javaka Steptoe (Steptoe, 2016). As the artist who provided more illustrations in the set than any other, Bryan Collier had a huge impact on the findings. His illustrations have been consistently representative of Black people. Close observation of the books he illustrated revealed that he portrayed Black characters with accurate facial features, realistic varying complexions, and age-appropriate hairstyles and clothing. It almost looked as though the viewer could feel the curly texture of the short afro hairstyles worn by Troy Andrews and his friends. These illustrations accurately represented, celebrated, and affirmed the existence of the Black boys and their family members who were portrayed.

If Collier's work set a high standard of accuracy for the collection, then the other artists accepted and met the challenge. Christie used the motif of African kente cloth to design the border of the cover of Nelson's *The Book Itch* which is perfectly suited to this story about the establishment of an African bookstore (Christie, 2015). Kente cloth originated in Africa about four hundred years ago, and the red, green, and yellow design is familiar to many Black people. The illustrations of the Black people seem a little less like painted photographs and a little less accurate. However, the features of the famous men are clearly identifiable and the skin tones clearly match the men they are meant to portray. In addition, the illustration of various expressions, such as surprise, pleasure, and sorrow, is easily identifiable.

In Shabazz's *Malcolm Little*, Ford clearly depicted that Malcolm had a light skinned mother from the islands with long brown hair and a tall, broad-shouldered father with a darker complexion and round glasses (Ford, 2013). The children in Malcolm's family, of various ages, were all drawn in various shades of sepia with different, age-appropriate hairstyles. At the funeral, you could clearly identify the sorrow on the mourners' faces; the illustrations seemed more like portrait paintings; the backgrounds in nature were flawless detailed drawings with naturalistic shading.

Gordon James did the illustrations in *Crown*, and he maintained the high standards set by his peers (James, 2017). He painted in oil rather than water color so his illustrations have a slightly different feeling and appearance because the color was layered on. The viewer can clearly see the different shades of caramel, mahogany, and sepia layered on and mixed in to create each face in a unique and beautiful shade of brown with white specks that mirrored the reflection of bright lights in the barber shop. The little boy who is the main character was clearly

recognizable on each page, with accurate facial elements, skin tone, and hair. The other characters have appropriate skin tones and hair styles, as well. This book was more challenging in that area because many more hairstyle drawings were required at the barber shop. James flawlessly depicted the different hairstyles, faces, and facial expressions with rich colors, joyful countenances, and accurate shading.

Similarly, Kadir Nelson could have chosen his book, *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*, to advertise his skills as a painter (Nelson, 2005). Several of the characters have dark coffee skin and some were more like caramel but all of them look realistic and attractive, with shadows, light, and shading that enhance and crystallize their facial features and bodies. Reflections of light glistened on their faces. He achieved his goal of painting a family that would be “representative of the earth’s diversity” (Nelson, 2005). Their facial features were consistent and recognizable across the pages, and they had accurate facial elements, as well as appropriate hairstyles and clothing.

Step toe’s *Radiant Child* had accurately painted faces and complexions, and settings that immersed the reader in the story. I felt as though I were getting to know Jean-Michel while watching him grow from a small child at his mother’s knee to a young man supporting himself as an artist in New York (Step toe, 2016). Step toe said in the Author’s Note that he was influenced by Basquiat’s painting style, so he used textured pieces of wood, bright colors, and symbols such as crowns and eyes, as did Basquiat (Step toe, 2016). His painting style looked more like modern art but his characters are realistic with accurately drawn facial features, complexions, and hairstyles.

In Weatherford's *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*, Sean Qualls had a daunting task to measure up to the level of artistic production offered by his fellow artists in the set but he met the challenge (Qualls, 2005). Although the faces are a little more flat and less like portrait paintings, they clearly depicted the rounder lips and fuller noses of the Black people on the pages. The hairstyles are realistic and age-appropriate, and complexions varied. Young John clearly looked like a Black boy and not just a generic child with brown shading. Although the paintings have less detail and realism, the mood is set by the use of colors in nature, characters' body postures and the angles of their heads, and the colors of their clothing. For example, when they lost a loved one, the image clearly depicted "the sobs of kinfolk at family funerals" (Qualls, 2008; Weatherford, 2008). In sum, the illustrations in all of the books in the set successfully center and affirm the Black boys in a positive, appealing, and empowered light. The reader can actually see how attractive and compelling these Black males are. When characters are represented in a positive and attractive light, it helps to reduce bias in the readers (Derman-Sparks, 1998).

For Question 2, in discussing how the content of the books is aligned with the mission, I will focus on whether the books might successfully serve the purpose of reducing bias and helping with positive identity development in youth. In order to answer this question, I researched the topics of bias reduction and how to promote positive identity development in children.

Bias reduction has been a popular subject of research ever since Gordon Allport developed his intergroup contact hypothesis and began writing extensively on prejudice and how it can be reduced (Allport, 1954 as cited in Harwood, Hewstone, Amichai-Hamberger, & Tausch, 2012). It is also a very important tenet in Multicultural Education theory because intergroup

conflict and prejudice must be reduced in order for children to go to school together. Although Allport's original theory was based on face-to-face contact in order to reduce bias (Allport, 1954), subsequent theorists have explored whether bias reduction can be effected through contact in different forms of media (Dovidio, et al, 1995; Harwood, et al, 2012; Schieferdecker & Wessler, 2017). Intergroup contact theory posits that contact between groups generally has positive effects, and this contact can be indirect, through various forms of media (Dovidio, et al, 1995; Harwood, et al, 2012). Institutional support is one pillar that promotes the effect of bias reduction, and if teachers consistently read culturally conscious books to their students, a solid form of institutional support would be provided. Even though the size of these effects may be small, it would set the stage for increased tolerance in children and adults if each teacher made a contribution by providing books that portrayed Black males and Black families in a positive and empowered light. It would be extremely helpful to America's diverse society if prejudice might be gradually reduced through story time and other reading experiences in school. Exposure to these vibrant children's books that center positive Black male characters and their loving families may help facilitate bias reduction among parallel cultures. Furthermore, they offer a powerful counter-story to the images of illiterate, violent, or comical Black men that often dominate the popular media such as television and internet news outlets (Noguera, 2008).

According to the literature, promoting positive identity development is extremely important for Black youth. Ever since Thurgood Marshall argued in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* that many Black children in America may have a negative self-concept due to segregation, this has been a popular subject of research in both psychology and education (Branch & Young, 2006). Educators have sought to determine how schools can help students develop cultural competence and a positive self-identity through culturally sensitive teaching

strategies (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Some theorists speculate that it is very difficult for Blacks to develop and maintain a healthy self-identity in America because the racial history and contemporary discrimination and media images make it very difficult to achieve (Branch & Young, 2006). “Self-identity answers the question, ‘Who am I?’”, and it is very important for young children to be able to provide a confident answer to that question, and to construct a positive image of themselves in the world (Wright, Counsell, & Tate, 2015, p.26). The development of a positive self-identity is a critical part of culturally relevant teaching and anti-bias education.

Many researchers posit that books which provide mirrors and windows to young children showing parallel cultures in positive ways can serve a strong role in helping students develop positive self-images (Derman-Sparks, 1998; Sims, 1982; Wright, et al, 2015). When children are able to see representations of themselves in the story, depicted in a positive light, they can feel affirmed, and this book can serve as a mirror that helps them develop a positive self-image. When children can read about parallel cultures that are depicted in a constructive manner, these books can serve as windows that help children learn about other groups of people in ways that respect and honor their cultural differences. Window books that accurately portray other cultures and respect their diversity can help to reduce bias (Wright, et al, 2015).

Teachers can contribute to African-American boys’ discovery of who they are, both historically and culturally, by designing a celebration of self-identity through African-American children’s literature that ensures that Black boys see themselves in books (Wright, et al, 2015, p. 27). The books that I selected from the *Conscious Kid* website would serve as a perfect fit for a “celebration of self-identity” in the classroom because they might help to reduce bias, as well as

promoting positive identity development in Black boys. The authors and illustrators avoided stereotyping of Black characters; the facial features are accurate rather than showing tinted versions of white people; the Black males are empowered; and the storylines encourage “active resistance” (Derman-Sparks, 1998). Furthermore, societal conditions that create family separations are explained, and the heroes are serving the interest of their own culture. The authors and illustrators are all Black themselves, so they are writing and illustrating representations of their own culture with an insider’s knowledge (Derman-Sparks, 1998). These books allow Black boys to see positive images of themselves in the pages, and they allow children from parallel cultures to learn about the experiences and family lives of Black children, thereby potentially reducing bias and laying the foundation for positive relationships across cultures. Perkins (1993) went so far as to state in the author’s note that he wrote his poem, *Hey, Black Child*, (and the play it was taken from, *The Black Fairy*) in order to help Black children develop a positive self-identity. Clearly, the *Conscious Kid* organization has met the goal of selecting Black children’s books that may be useful both in the reduction of prejudice and promoting positive identity development among Black male children.



**Table 4.1 The Overarching Themes in the Book Set from the *Conscious Kid* website**

Author & Title	Pub. Date	Coming Of Age	Crowns	Educ.	Equality & Civil Rights	Family & Community	Mental Health	Perseverance & Overcoming	Working Class Struggles
Andrews <i>Trombone Shorty</i>	2015	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Barnes <i>Crown</i>	2017		✓	✓		✓			
Beaty <i>Knock, Knock</i>	2013	✓				✓		✓	
Hughes <i>I, Too, Am America</i>	1953 2012	✓			✓			✓	
Nelson, K. <i>He's Got the Whole World</i>	2005					✓			
Nelson, V. <i>The Book Itch</i>	2015			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Perkins <i>Hey, Black Child</i>	1993 2017							✓	
Shabazz <i>Malcolm Little</i>	2013	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Step toe <i>Radiant Child</i>	2016	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Weatherford <i>Before John Was a Jazz Giant</i>	2008					✓		✓	

### Research Question 3

#### **What are the overarching themes of the books on the list?**

The overarching themes I discovered in the books were representative of life in America for Black people; and the experiences of the characters often resonated with my own experiences. The analysis of the themes helped me to gain an understanding of the books as a whole, and the message they communicated to the reader. The themes I identified in this set of books were: the importance of family and parent/child relationships; perseverance to overcome adversity; fighting for equality and civil rights; the importance of church and spirituality; growing up and coming of age; the prevalence of mental health issues; the importance of education; working class struggles; and the use of crowns to represent royalty and importance. These themes were determined during the process of careful reading and rereading of the texts. As I read the books multiple times, took notes, and reflected on the messages they conveyed, I coded each one for themes that became apparent. Each theme is found in three or more of the books. Mental illness of mothers was found in only two of the books but I found it striking that in such a small set of children's literature, two different mothers would become mentally ill. I had not previously seen this topic addressed in children's books. Steptoe, one of the authors, also shared that there was mental illness in his family, and that Black communities needed to be more open and supportive about it (Steptoe, 2016). Having agreed with the author and having first-hand experience with these issues in my own family, I felt it was important to include a discussion of mental illness here.

Many of these themes in themselves are representative of the experiences of Black people in America, as there has always been a struggle to survive against the crippling effects of

systemic racism and exclusion, as described by Sims' Theory of Windows and Mirrors and Critical Race Theory (Sims, 1982; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that race is central to life in America, and racism is part of the daily experience of Black Americans which they must always struggle to overcome. It also posits the importance of the counter-story for Blacks. After having been marginalized for so many years, it is critical that Black people find their voices and tell their own stories (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In addition, historically, Blacks have been required to work hard for civil rights and equity in education as described by Multicultural Education (Banks & Banks, 2001). These theories will serve as frameworks to inform this critical content analysis and deepen the understandings which can be inferred from each text. As I stated previously, for the purposes of this study, each text is considered to consist of the messages and images found equally in both the words and the illustrations.

### **Importance of Family and Parent/Child Relationships**

The first theme that presented itself to me was the overwhelming importance of family and parent/child relationships. The most significant impression that came to mind as I considered all ten books was the consistent support and presence of parents and extended family for each of the boys. Whether it was dedicated mothers, doting grandmothers, or supportive fathers, they each were portrayed as growing up in families who made their children's care and their family's welfare a priority. In Shabazz's *Malcolm Little*, Malcolm's father is seen marrying his wife in a church, and his mother is shown kneeling to teach her son about her gardening. Both parents spend time with the children and carefully explain life principles to them (Shabazz, 2013). In

Steptoe's *Radiant Child*, Jean-Michel's mother lies down on the floor to color pictures with him, and his father fills the house with jazz music and joy (Steptoe, 2005).

Nelson's main character, Lewis, in *The Book Itch*, spends more time with his father than with his mother, working in his well-stocked and famous bookstore in Harlem (Nelson, 2015). He had the opportunity to meet Muhammad Ali and other famous Black Americans there, and he was happy and fulfilled with his family's life in Harlem. These books, along with the entire set, used both words and illustrations to position the boys in strong, supportive families who consistently ensured that they were well provided for, well-educated, and given life instructions from older family members at home. The importance of family is clearly evidenced within this set of books.

However, highlighted within this picture of family love and support, there is a clear illustration of the family dynamics regarding Black American fathers. There is a critical component of family life found in the relationship portrayed between fathers and sons, or the lack thereof. When the fathers are present, they are shown as dependable and effective guides and role models for their sons, but they are often removed from their families. It struck me that the precarious position of Black men in America described in Chapter Two was evident even in these ten picture books for children because only 40% of the books had a father included in the text or the illustrations. In the majority of the books, the father was not present in the family. This separation of the father from his children and family is representative of America's current demographics where we find that 66% of all Black infants are born to single mothers and are raised by single parents due to separation, divorce, or singleness of the parent at the child's birth (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004).

Several books showed evidence of the father who has been removed from the home. In Beaty's *Knock, Knock, My Dad's Dream for Me*, the story opens with the description of a strong and loving father figure who is the primary caregiver for his young son (Beaty, 2013). The father awakens the youngster with a knock at his door each morning and a whisper of love for him. But on the fifth page of the book, the knock never comes. We learn that his father was incarcerated. We are never told the reason why, and perhaps that is because for the purpose of its impact on his son, it does not matter. In the remaining thirty-seven pages of the book, the boy lives only with his mother, and he grieves over the absence of his father, who will not be there to teach him how to shave or how to drive and fix automobiles. The little boy is shown struggling through his childhood without a father, dejected and downcast. He longs for his father to come home to help him get ready for school, and make scrambled eggs for breakfast. In America, almost one third of all Black males get arrested or spend time in jail or prison at some point in their lives (Noguera, 2008). This book is clearly representative of that fact of Black American life.

In a similar vein, in Shabazz's *Malcolm Little, the Boy Who Grew Up to Become Malcolm X*, Malcolm's father, Rev. Earl Little, was portrayed as strong and loving, a hardworking provider for his family (Shabazz, 2013). The illustrations showed him building a house for his family singlehandedly, perched high up on a ladder with his hammer and nails in view. However, about halfway through the book, Rev. Little was assassinated by the Ku Klux Klan because of their "hate and fury" about his beliefs in freedom and equal rights for all people (Shabazz, 2013). In the end, eight fatherless children are left behind in the Black community, and they are all divided among the parents' friends. Malcolm suffered deeply from the loss of his father, becoming rebellious at first, and then depressed. In the other four books that do not include a male parent, there is no mention or portrayal of a father or father figure in either the

words or the illustrations. We see only the mothers providing for their sons in single parent families and extended families, just as we see in our current society.

Despite the absence of the father in these texts, the strong support of loving families is clearly evident. The boys suffer sorrow and anguish when the fathers are taken away from them, but they are eventually depicted as well adjusted, having begun to flourish again with the consistent encouragement of extended family and community. Ultimately, the stories show strength and the ability to overcome the loss of a parent when consistent love and support is provided by the adults in the child's life. For example, Beaty's father in *Knock, Knock* writes a letter to his young son to instruct him to "knock down the doors that he could not", to "open new doors" to his dreams and reach his "bright and beautiful future" (Beaty, 2013). The little boy is shown growing up into a successful young man wearing a starched white shirt and striped tie. It is critical to note that the possibility of these books serving as mirrors (Sims, 1982) for young readers in single parent families is increased because the boys in the books do not have their fathers present, either, and they still manage to flourish with strong family support. In this way, these texts can show the readers how to overcome the difficult life circumstance of growing up without a father, as do some boys in the Black community, and still manage to achieve high goals and prosper. They can also serve as windows for children who grow up in different life circumstances.

### **The Struggle for Equality and Civil Rights**

The theme of struggling for equality and civil rights provided a strong foundation that positions the books as uniquely portraying the condition of Blacks growing up and/or living in America. Four of the books explicitly referred to this struggle. In Shabazz's *Malcolm Little*,

young Malcolm X was shown as the son of a minister who was a civil rights activist. He preached about “universal equality and justice” and the importance of “faith, self-reliance, and hard work” (Shabazz, 2013). The family’s home in Omaha, Nebraska was burned down because of Rev. Little’s teachings. Later, after they move to Lansing, Michigan, Malcolm’s father was assassinated by “the brute force of racism and narrow-mindedness of Ku Klux Klan members” because “they disagreed with Earl and Louse’s beliefs in equality” (Shabazz, 2013). Malcolm never forgot the strong family values he learned from his parents, or the teachings on equality he absorbed from his father.

In Nelson’s *The Book Itch*, the adult Malcolm, who has now assumed the name, Malcolm X, was a frequent visitor at the National Memorial African Bookstore during the 1960’s which provided the setting for the story. As a Muslim minister, Malcolm preached from a platform in front of the store. “People come to hear about fighting for the same rights white people have” (Nelson, 2015). The crowd was enthusiastic with clapping and cheering. They responded loudly when Malcolm X said, “Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you’re a man, you take it” (Nelson, 2015). Before the book ended, however, Malcolm X was assassinated. Young Lewis and his father both spend the night of his death in tears.

In Perkin’s *Hey, Black Child*, we were given a poem that is intended to inspire young Black children to work hard and learn all they can so that tomorrow, “your nation will be what you want it to be” (Perkins, 1993). Although the struggles against racism and discrimination are not explicitly stated in the poem, we can infer from the message of the poem that the children must work hard to overcome adversity stemming from racism. The author told the children that they are very strong, and instructed them: “Be what you can be; Learn what you must learn; Do

what you can” (Perkins, 1993). In the author’s note, Perkins explicitly told the readers that he has written this poem as the culminating piece from his play, *The Black Fairy*. In the play, the Queen Mother took the characters through Black history to Africa where they learn about the many accomplishments of Blacks to help the children create a positive self-image and reach for equality.

In a similar vein, the classic poem, *I, Too, Am America*, by Langston Hughes, encouraged Blacks to persevere in the struggle for civil rights. This version has been illustrated in full color with racially accurate portrayals of the poem’s characters. The illustrator, Bryan Collier, chose to illustrate the poem using pictures of Pullman Porters because they are iconic in America’s history, showing how the types of jobs that Blacks could hold were limited and demeaning (Collier, 2012). The opening line of the poem asserted, “I, too, am America. I am the darker brother” (Hughes, 1953). The poem described how the Black man has been relegated to the kitchen when company comes, meaning that he must remain in the background of American life. He can’t eat in the dining room with the dominant group. However, a day is coming when they will see “how beautiful” he is (Hughes, 1953). They will “be ashamed”, and allow him to sit in the front rooms with everyone else (Hughes, 1953). Clearly, the Black man in the poem is depicted as a man who is immersed in a struggle for equality and civil rights. He must struggle to survive until a better day comes for his race. In the meantime, he worked hard in the service jobs that were available to him, and he “grows strong” (Hughes, 1953). In all of these stories, the characters are depicted as resilient and empowered; they demonstrated agency and perseverance in the various ways that they struggle for equality and civil rights.

### **The Importance of Church and Spirituality**



Four of the books in the set featured the importance of church and spirituality, an essential part of life for many Black Americans. The frequent references to the church and the angels is significant because of the major role that has been played by the church in the Black community (Robinson, Jones-Eversley, Moore, Ravenell, & Adedoyin, 2018). Historically, the Black church has played a pivotal part in the community, providing a central gathering place for socializing, transmission of news and important information, food sharing, transportation, and civil rights leadership (Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000). In Shabazz's *Malcolm Little*, Malcolm's father is Rev. Earl Little, an outspoken minister (Shabazz, 2013). He is depicted in the illustrations standing in the pulpit of a church, preaching to the congregation about justice and equal rights for all. He is also shown in the church when he gets married as a young man to Malcolm's mother. References are made throughout the book to the importance of his ministry and teachings to Malcolm's early life and development.

Nelson's *Book Itch* takes the story of Malcolm's life even further by telling about his preaching in Harlem, New York. At this point in his life, he was a Muslim minister, and he delivered fiery messages about the importance of perseverance and hard work for the Black man to achieve equality in America.

In Weatherford's *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*, we learned all about the music that John Coltrane was exposed to as small boy growing up in High Point, North Carolina (Weatherford, 2008). His grandfather was a minister, so he was often in church, surrounded by preaching and soulful gospel music, or attending funerals and hearing sorrowful songs accompanied by weeping. All of this music in his life contributed to the creative jazz music that John later composed and shared with the world.

In Nelson's version of the song, *He's Got the whole World in His Hands*, we find beautiful illustrations showing a smiling and beautiful Black family with two parents and four children engaged in various activities such as playing board games, fishing, and star gazing (Nelson, 2005). The happiness of the family appeared to be upheld by the God who is holding them and the rest of the world in His hands. Their spirituality shines in their eyes and shows up in the joyful way they interact with the world and take their children to parks and playgrounds without fear.

In *Crown* by Derick Barnes, we are introduced to the overwhelmingly positive effect that a haircut can have on a Black youngster (Barnes, 2017). He skillfully described how proud, smart and overjoyed a Black boy can feel after he gets a great haircut; he might earn A's on all of his exams the next day, make the principal's honor roll, and feel like royalty admired by all. He also included the great effects that are produced on other customers he sees at the barber shop. In one instance, he tells us that the "Black dude in the chair to the right" looks as though "thousands of black angels [are] waiting to guide and protect him as soon as he steps foot out that door" (Barnes, 2017). The experience of the fresh cut is so elevating that it is spiritually uplifting and life-changing. These references to the church, the angels, and Black spirituality are representative of the Black community in America because the church plays such a significant role.

### **Struggles of the Working Class**

The theme of the struggles of the working class is particularly relevant in America where 34% of the Black children born in 2007 began their lives in poverty, and the efforts to provide enough income to buy food for the family to eat and keep them clothed and sheltered can be heartrending (Wilson, 2011). Four of the books in the set portray boys whose families have

clearly shared in the struggles of the working class as we are informed by the texts. In Andrews' *Trombone Shorty*, the author told us that he grew up in a poor neighborhood in New Orleans called Tremé where "people didn't have a lot of money" (Andrews, 2015). However, we are enlightened through the illustrations that portray him in a comfortable home with his family with adequate resources to feed them. Sometimes they just took out a big pot and threw "whatever's in the kitchen into it" and called it gumbo, a technique that later inspired Andrews to create "musical gumbo" (Andrews, 2015). The Andrews family could not afford to buy an instrument for the little boy who loved to make music but he found an old, discarded horn on the street and made it his own, even taking it to bed with him at night.

In Nelson's *The Book Itch*, Lewis' father only had five books when he decided to open a bookstore in Harlem, New York. When he went to the bank to get a business loan for the store, the loan officer refused to grant him the loan, so he pushed a cart on the streets of New York and sold his books outdoors. Eventually, he saved enough money to achieve his dream: "He washed windows, saved his pennies, and opened the bookstore" (Nelson, 2015). Later, after he opens the store, he allowed customers to read books in the store like a library if they didn't have enough money to buy the books.

In *Malcolm Little* by Shabazz, we find that the family began to have money troubles after the death of Malcolm's father so his mother "sewed, crocheted, and rented out garden space on her land" (Shabazz, 2013). The older children worked very hard but it was difficult to earn enough money to support the family. "It was the era of the Great Depression, and times got harder and harder" (Shabazz, 2013). Finally, their mother was not able to care for them and she was taken away. The children became wards of the state, and none of them were able to remain together. The loss of his parents and the separation from all of his siblings was extremely

difficult for young Malcolm. At first, he became rebellious and had to be sent to reform school. Later, he became “sad, lonely, and confused... The grief was stifling and nothing seemed to help – Malcolm was broken” (Shabazz, 2013). Clearly, the struggles produced by poverty and racism have a strong deleterious effect on this small boy.

In Barnes’ *Crown*, the author told us in the Author’s Note that the story about the trip to the barber shop is based on his own experience as a young boy. Every Thursday, his mother left \$8.00 on the kitchen table for him so he could ride the bus to the barber shop after school and get his hair cut. The fact that she always left eight dollars for him, rather than ten, may be an indication that the family was experiencing working class struggles. When there is only just enough money to cover the family’s expenses, caregivers are forced to provide their children with the exact amount of money needed for a service or activity. The money may be difficult for the family to spare. The extra two dollars can potentially be used for a loaf of bread or a gallon of milk or other food items for the family.

Finally, in *I, too, Am America*, by Langston Hughes, the illustrator, Bryan Collier, depicted his characters and setting for the poem using Black Pullman porters, who provided butler service on America’s trains with sleeping cars for a hundred years, from the late 1860’s to the late 1960’s. In the illustrator’s note, he wrote that he chose to use Pullman porters to illustrate the poem because they worked “day in and day out, in a job and in a country where they suffered injustice and unfair treatment and working conditions based on nothing but the color of their skin” (Collier, 2012). The images and the commentary clearly portrayed the struggles of the working class, as we see the Black porters in the illustrations standing on their feet, working in cramped conditions, and maintaining an obligatory smile on their faces while in the company of paying customers. In fact, the whole set of books appear to portray families from the working

class; no one is wealthy or living in luxurious surroundings. Even when the text does not mention their financial circumstances, the illustrations show families who are clearly working class and lower income. This portrayal is strongly representative of life for Blacks in America where 34% of the Black children are born into poverty and even Black males who earn a Master's degree earn almost \$20,000 less than their White counterparts (Wilson, 2011). The lack of sufficient income for many Black families creates a whole new set of challenges for Black boys growing up in this country, and many share in the struggles of the working class.

### **Perseverance to Overcome Adversity**

Nine of the books feature the main characters overcoming adversity through perseverance, as shown on the Theme Data Chart at the beginning of this chapter. This is a very prevalent theme for Black people living in America. This adversity may be related to poverty, family separations, racism in America, or other sources. In Nelson's *The Book Itch*, Lewis' father requests a loan from the bank and the loan officer denied his request, commenting that "Black people don't read" (Nelson, 2015). Rather than giving up, Mr. Lewis starts selling books from a cart on the street, and when he started, he only had five books. Eventually, he raised enough money to open the bookstore but he still sold books on the streets sometimes in order to be able to reach more people with knowledge.

In Shabazz's *Malcolm Little*, young Malcolm faced a series of tragic setbacks. He first lost his family home to fire; then he lost his father to assassination; finally his mother was removed from the home (Shabazz, 2013). He and his siblings were placed into foster care, and they were all separated from one another. Malcolm missed his family terribly. At first, he was very quiet and depressed. Gradually, however, under the loving care of his parents' friends who take him in, he began to blossom and communicate again. He refused to accept it when a teacher tells him

he cannot become a lawyer because of his race. He knew for himself that he was very intelligent and capable. By the end of the story, his class votes for him as the class president because he is so friendly, outgoing, and self-confident. “When they looked at Malcolm, they no longer saw a mournful child lost in the world; now they saw a smart, insightful, charming winner” (Shabazz, 2013).

In a similar vein, the young Basquiat in *Radiant Child* became depressed when he lost his mother to mental illness and she is removed from the home (Step toe, 2016). Although he missed her tremendously, he used his art as a way to express his feelings. He left home at the age of seventeen and worked hard on his creations to become a famous artist.

In Andrews’ *Trombone Shorty*, the young Troy longs to play in a band and make music, but his family cannot afford to buy him an instrument (Andrews, 2015). He and his friends make their own musical instruments and start a band of their own. Then one day, he finds a damaged and discarded trombone that is much too big for him but he picks it up and plays it anyway. His brother begins to call him Trombone Shorty because he is so small compared to his large instrument. He would often fall down in the early years as he struggled to play the instrument, but he always got back up. As a small boy, he was invited to play onstage with Bo Diddley, a famous musician. Eventually, he grew tall enough to manage the trombone with ease, and he was asked to play in his brother’s band. When he grew up, he started his own band and he now plays all over the world. However, he always returns to New Orleans where he started a foundation to help young musicians just as his older brother had helped him.

The little boy in Beaty’s (2013) *Knock, Knock* was left sorrowful and lonely when his father, who had been his primary caregiver, was incarcerated when he was very young. He

deeply missed his father, and he could not understand why he was longer there. Throughout his life, he was raised only by his mother but he often thought of his father, who sent him a powerful letter of encouragement from prison. His father reminded him that he is strong and capable, and that he must “knock, knock down the doors that I could not; knock knock to open new doors to your dreams” (Beaty, 2013). The illustrations showed the little boy growing into a successful young man who manages to overcome the obstacles to success that his father was not able to overcome.

Weatherford's *Before John was a Jazz Giant* tells the story of John Coltrane when he was a boy (Weatherford, 2005). The story portrayed his immersion in the sounds he heard in his family and the community. The author's note described how the family suffered the deaths of his grandparents, with whom they lived, and his father around the same time. This forced his mother to leave her children with relatives and go to the city to work to support her family. These painful losses of those he loved were hard for John to deal with but he overcame his sorrow and poured all of his experiences into his music. He became an accomplished and sought-after jazz musician, and overcame the losses and struggles from his childhood.

In Hughes' *I, Too, Am America*, the poem described the struggle of Black people who are rejected and marginalized by American society (Hughes, 1953). In the poem, the Black man asserted that he, too, belongs here, even though he is “sent to the kitchen when company comes.” (Hughes, 1953). In spite of the rejection, the poet speaks of a time to come in the future when “they'll see how beautiful I am”. When that time comes, no one will dare say, “Go eat in the kitchen then!” The author predicted that they'll “be ashamed” (Hughes, 1953). The illustrator, Bryan Collier, chose to use Pullman porters to depict the action of the poem (Collier, 2017). The

porters were shown diligently working on the trains, serving the white passengers while maintaining their smile and their dignity.

In the story, *Crown*, by Derrick Barnes, Barnes described the details of a trip to the barber shop for a young Black boy (Barnes, 2017). We are told that a seat in the barber's chair had a tremendous impact on this child. He feels more intelligent, more handsome, more valuable to his mother, and absolutely regal after his "fresh cut" (Barnes, 2017). We are also told that three of the customers, all Black males, look very "important" (Barnes, 2017). The word "important" is repeated in three consecutive images as the reader observed the portraits of Black men who are looking official, powerful, worthy of protection by the angels, and yes, important. The repetition of the word "important" would not be so meaningful unless we reflect on the state of Black males in America. They are most often viewed as unsuccessful, violent, unintelligent, and unworthy (Noguera, 2008; Sims, 1982). That the young boy in the story insisted that they are "important", and that he himself is intelligent and royal, allows the readers to see a counter story to the usual portrayal of the Black man in the media (Noguera, 2008, Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This Black child has overcome the negative stereotypes of his group and was able to see himself as a beautiful and accomplished intellectual; he is able to see the older Black men in the shop as "important" and capable (Barnes, 2017). In this country, Black people must overcome the negative messages and harmful impact of racism every day (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Through the poem, *Hey Black Child*, Perkins provided encouragement to Black children through repeated affirmations that they can be whatever they want to be (Perkins, 1993). They must learn what they need to learn, do all that they can do, and become all that they can be. The illustrations portrayed the children playing the piano, dancing the ballet, and reading a book. The poet finished the motivational poem by advising them that this country can be what they want it to be



if they work hard to achieve their goals. In the Author's Note, Perkins told us that he wrote the play to help children learn about the positive contributions from Blacks in Africa and see themselves in a more positive light. Once again, we see the importance of the counter story (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Historically, Blacks had to struggle to overcome racism to survive in America. An important key to survival was to provide positive and encouraging messages to Black children growing up under the influence of so many negative stereotypes and demeaning messages from the media (Du Bois, 1935; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; hooks, 2004; Brooks & McNair, 2009; Noguera, 2008). Likewise, Sims found many detrimental images of Blacks in children's literature, portraying them as unintelligent, clownish, or dependent upon Whites to solve their problems (Sims, 1982). She described the importance of providing books in which children could see positive portrayals of Blacks in the literature, Blacks who were empowered, independent, and successful. The theme of persevering to overcome adversity and achieve success has been soundly demonstrated by the books on the Conscious Kid website.

### **Growing Up and Coming of Age**

The theme of growing up and coming of age can be found in four books out of the set. The books portray the boys as young children who overcome obstacles and grow up into successful young men. In Beatty's *Knock, Knock*, the story opens when the protagonist is a very young boy (Beatty, 2013). His father, who serves as his primary caregiver, comes to his room each morning to knock on his door and whisper loving words. After his Dad has been incarcerated, the little boy appears to be in a state of depression. In the Author's Note, Beatty shares that his father was imprisoned when he was a little boy, and that a visit to the prison when he was three was extremely traumatic (Beatty, 2013). The book expressed his father's dream for him, to overcome obstacles that he could not by symbolically opening doors that his father could not open. The

little boy comes of age before his father gets out of prison but he still manages to succeed with his mother's steady support.

In Andrews' *Trombone Shorty*, little Troy Andrews appears to be around two or three years old when he first became interested in becoming a musician (Andrews, 2015). He says that the neighborhood he grew up in was poor but was always filled with music. Although his family cannot afford to purchase an instrument for him, he begins by creating a homemade instrument and later finds a damaged horn on the streets. It's so big that he falls over sometimes when he tries to hold it up to play it but that does not discourage him; he keeps on playing. He grows up to become a famous jazz musician and reaches back to help others.

In Shabazz's *Malcolm Little*, the story actually began when Malcolm's parents first meet, marry, and have children (Shabazz, 2013). Malcolm was portrayed as a well-adjusted child who had a strong relationship with both parents who nurtured him and taught him about the ways of the world. His father was an outspoken minister and civil rights activist who served as a role model for Malcolm. The boy came of age after losing his home to fire; losing his father to assassination; and losing his mother to mental illness. The conditions in the larger society that led to his family's separation were clearly explained (Derman-Sparks, 1998). After a period of withdrawal and depression, he rebounded and later grew up to be an outspoken minister and civil rights leader like his father.

In Nelson's *Radiant Child*, young Jean-Michel was pictured in a two parent family, with a devoted mother and father who both work hard to take care of him (Steptoe, 2016). His father worked outside the home to support the family and his mother worked inside the home, to decorate, cook, clean, and care for her son. As a young boy, Jean-Michel was struck by a car and

seriously injured. It took time for him to overcome his fears after the accident. His mother bought him a book about the physiology of the human body to help him better understand what happened to him. She also spent a great deal of time nurturing him and supporting his artistic endeavors. He left home at age seventeen, after his mother was institutionalized for mental illness, and supported himself as an artist. All four of these young men were supported by loving, supportive family members even though they may have been separated from one or both parents at some point in their lives. Taken together, the books communicated the message that an important part of growing up is facing adversity and overcoming it to become a man. The boys all worked hard to overcome the obstacles they faced while growing up, and they reached manhood as positive, successful young men.

### **The Importance of Education**

In six of the ten books, the importance of education is portrayed. However, it is critical to note that education for Black children may need to be somewhat different than education for the majority group. In *Crown* (Barnes, 2017), *Knock, Knock* (Beatty, 2013), and *Trombone Shorty* (Andrews, 2015), references are made to getting ready for school, earning good grades in school, and doing homework after school. However, in two of the books, we find that direct statements of caution are made about education. In *The Book Itch*, Lewis' father tells him, "You go on to school. There are things you can learn from your teachers, but don't you stop thinking for yourself. And don't you stop asking questions" (Nelson, 2015). Clearly, the elder Micheaux is describing the need for critical thinking so his son would interrogate the societal messages and hidden implications in the lessons he was taught in school, rather than accepting all the information at face value. His father also stated, "You are not necessarily a fool because you didn't go to school" and "Don't get took! Read a book!" (Nelson, 2015). Mr. Micheaux strongly

believed that it was very important for Black people to read and learn independently about the world rather than relying on the school system to teach them everything they needed to know for a successful and empowered life. In one of his most revealing quotes, he says, “Knowledge is power. You need it every hour. Read a book!” (Nelson, 2015).

In a similar vein, Malcolm Little finds that his desire to advance his education is discouraged in school rather than supported (Shabazz, 2013). When he was in the middle grades, Malcolm had already started to excel academically. When his teacher asked him what he wanted to do when he grew up, he shared that he wanted to be a lawyer. However, “his teacher did not believe that African Americans should have high expectations for themselves or aspire to excel” (Shabazz, 2013). Instead of providing encouragement for Malcolm to continue his education, his teacher discouraged him. Rather than accepting his teacher’s judgment about his academic ability and his future, “Malcolm learned how to rise up with ... bold determination” (Shabazz, 2013). He grew up to be a civil rights leader and a highly respected minister, just like his father. For Blacks in America, the books’ message appears to suggest that the institutionalized system of education may not provide all the knowledge and encouragement that a Black child may need to succeed. Strong support from the family, independent reading, and self-determination may be required.

In support of independent learning, a close analysis of Perkins’ *Hey, Black Child* (Perkins, 1993) reveals that the children in the poem are encouraged to excel in a wide variety of settings but none of them feature a school setting, either in the text or the pictures. The children are featured at the museum, attending a political rally, performing at both piano and ballet recitals, and participating in science and technology activities. The inference is that Black children cannot depend solely on the school setting in order to learn what they need to know to bring about

positive changes and social justice in America. Black children need an education that extends further than the traditional classroom.

In conclusion, education is extremely important for Black children but their instruction must go beyond the school system. The Black child's education must include strong family involvement to provide exposure to inspirational messages in books, museums, science seminars, and other outside opportunities to learn and grow. Parents must instill in their children a strong determination to excel and succeed regardless of any contradictory messages they may receive from school or the wider society.

### **Mental Health Issues**

It is noteworthy to observe that in two out of the ten books, mental health issues are present. Even though two is not a large percentage of the books, I was surprised to find the issue appear twice in such a small set of children's books. The critical importance of this issue to the Black community led me to include the topic with other important themes. Some studies have found that Black people in America have a stronger likelihood to have mental health issues due to the effects of racism and poverty (Mouzon & McLean, 2017; Snowden, 2014). Black women can be even more susceptible to mental health struggles because they must deal with all the stressors of racism in addition to the highly stressful demands of womanhood, including the discrimination accorded to both groups (Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015). In this set of books, I found that two of the stories depicted Black mothers who provided excellent care for their children and families in the beginning of the story but later showed evidence of mental illness. Their mental state interrupted their ability to continue to care for their families, and both were institutionalized. In Steptoe's *Radiant Child*, Basquiat's mother was portrayed as loving and supportive when he is a young boy (Steptoe, 2016). She stayed at home to take of him; she

decorated their home and cooked delicious meals; she took him to museums and got down on the floor to color with him. She recognized his love for art and his gift for artistic expression so she encouraged him to use his gifts. Basquiat even stated that he received the gift of art from her. However, at some point, it became apparent to the artist that there was something wrong with her mind. She sat by the window and was no longer capable of caring for her family. We know from the literature and personal experience that Black women face many stressors living in America: racism and poverty, and the stressors of caring for children, household, and husband. This combination of demands may have been more than she could bear.

Similarly, in Shabazz's *Malcolm Little*, Malcolm had two dependable parents at the beginning of the story (Shabazz, 2013). Both parents worked hard to care for their children, buying land for the family where they gardened and grew their own food. His father built the house for the family and mom taught the children how to take care of a garden. She cooked for them and took care of their home. As the story progresses, we learn that their first home was burned down by the KKK, and they moved away. After Rev. Little built them another home and continued to preach his message of freedom and equality to the local Black community, he was assassinated. Malcolm's mother tried to take care of the children on her own but she was struggling to manage. Finally, the children were taken away from her and she was institutionalized. In both these stories, we see Black women who struggled with mental health. Given the persistent stressors of racism and poverty that Blacks continue to endure in this country, it is very significant to find the theme of mental health included in this small set of children's books. Many researchers believe that Black women are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues because they occupy the intersection of race and gender, two highly stressed and vulnerable categories (Stevens-Watkins, Perry, Pullen, Jewell & Oser, 2014). Steptoe added

a note to *Radiant Child* to comment on this issue: “As someone whose mother suffers from mental illness, I believe this story touches on an important topic, as diagnosable mental disorders affect about one in four adults in the United States every year” (Steptoe, 2016). As the author of this study, I must share that mental illness has also tragically affected my family: my beloved niece committed suicide after struggling with depression for many years. She was only in her twenties, a brilliant young college student with her whole life ahead of her. These are painful revelations. However, I believe that the more we talk about mental illness and normalize the process of sharing the information and getting treatment, the more we can help to reduce the stigma and lack of help-seeking in the Black community. This is a critical issue for the Black community to address.

### **The Use of Crown Imagery**

In four of the books in the set, the artists chose to use crown imagery in their illustrations. The image of the crown conveys a sense of elevation, royalty, and importance, as stated by the authors and illustrators (Barnes, 2017; Steptoe, 2016). This is significant because Blacks have not been elevated or seen as royalty historically in American society, but have often been portrayed as unattractive, violent, or comical both in the literature and in the media (Bishop, 2003; Noguera, 2008; Sims, 1982; Von Blum, 2012). They have been characterized as unintelligent and dependent upon clever majority figures in the story, and they have been drawn with exaggerated features and drab complexions that look like caricatures rather than real Black children (Bishop, 2003; Von Blum, 2012). In strong opposition to these negative portrayals in the literature, the illustrations in these books show the Black boys in a position of power, grandeur, and agency with accurately drawn and shaded facial features and complexions. In Andrews’ *Trombone Shorty*, the diminutive protagonist, Troy, started a band with his childhood

friends using their homemade instruments when they were very young. They called it the Five O’Clock band because they practiced at five, after they got home from school and did their homework. Even though their families could not afford to buy them real instruments, they loved music so much that they created their own instruments, and happily shared in the creation of harmony in their community. The illustrator, Bryan Collier, stated in the Illustrator’s Notes: “I decided to give them crowns in my painting because, early on, they were like royalty” (Collier, 2015). These young boys used their personal creative power to design working musical devices and make music in their community so they acted as powerful change agents in their world, just like royalty.

In Steptoe’s *Radiant Child*, we find that the artist, Basquiat, who is the subject of the biographical story, often used crowns in his artwork (Steptoe, 2016). In the author’s note, Steptoe stated: “For Basquiat, crowns represented many things, such as power or strength, and he often ‘gave’ crowns to others in his artwork as a sign of respect” (Steptoe, 2016). Steptoe also portrayed the young Jean-Michel wearing boxing gloves and holding a crown high above his head. The text beneath the picture read, “in his heart, he is king, so he draws crowns for himself and others he admires” (Steptoe, 2016). Basquiat had truly become a king in the art world; he had both met and exceeded his childhood goal of becoming a famous artist.

Perkins’ *Hey, Black Child* is a poem of encouragement for Black children, advising them to work hard; participate in as many learning activities as they can; and excel in everything they do. In this way, they can change the world (Perkins, 1993). On one page, these words are written: “Do you know who you are, who you REALLY ARE?” (Perkins, 1993). For this message, the artist chose to feature a Black king wearing a crown and royal robes, and a drawing of Africa overlaid across the middle of the page. In the Author’s Note, Perkins stated that the poem was



originally written for his play, *The Black Fairy*, in which a little boy named Johnny met the Queen Mother, who is the “personification of Africa” (Perkins, 1993). She accompanied him on a trip through history where Johnny learned about “the many accomplishments black people have given to humankind” (Perkins, 1993). In the Illustrator’s Note, Collier stated that he intentionally chose to incorporate African royalty in the pictures. This choice fulfilled Perkins’ goal of showing children who they really are: the descendants of royalty, powerful and distinguished.

Finally, in Barnes’ *Crown*, the artist, Gordon James, created a circle of eight crowns around the boy’s head on the cover illustration. The story was about a young boy’s trip to the barber shop each week, and how it made him feel. On the first page, the boy’s head was held at a regally high angle, tilted back even, so that he had to hold his eyes in a slit in order to look down at the reader. After the main character described his trip to the barber shop and how awesome the fresh cut made him feel, he also described some of the other customers in the shop. He provided details about three of the Black men who get their hair trimmed while he is there. Even though he does not paint a crown in the illustrations, the text beneath each Black man’s painting stated how “important” he looked: important enough to be the CEO of a tech company; important enough to own property on another planet; important enough to be guided by thousands of angels. The repetitive use of the word “important” on each page describing the Black men had the same impact as adding a crown in the illustrations. In the author’s note, Barnes’ says about Black males:

Deep down inside, they wish that everyone could see what they see: a real live, breathing, compassionate, thoughtful, brilliant, limitless soul that matters – that desperately matters. We’ve always mattered (Barnes, 2017).

As a Black man who shared in the Author's Note that he wrote the book to tell the story of his own experiences going to the barber shop each week, Barnes was able to personalize his remarks about the state of Black men when he said, "we've always mattered" (Barnes, 2017). Only in a society where racist people may sometimes act as if you are nothing would an author feel compelled to write that Black boys have souls that "desperately matter" (Barnes, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The use of the crowns in the illustrations and the use of the word "important" both signify that the authors are telling a counter story about the value of the Black males in these stories.

### **Summary**

After performing a critical content analysis of a set of books for elementary aged students on the *Conscious Kid* website, I found that the Black male characters in the books are portrayed in a positive light from a position of strength. Although they faced many obstacles in their lives, such as the loss of parents and the struggle for civil rights and equality, they worked hard to overcome these problems and succeed. The content of the books is perfectly aligned with the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization because these stories center and affirm Black boys, and portray them in a positive and empowering light by showing them as capable, independent human beings who are active agents in creating a better life for themselves and others. In addition, the analysis established that the books might be useful in the reduction of bias, and in helping Black boys develop a positive self-image.

There are many themes in the books that are closely aligned with the condition of Blacks living in America, such as the struggles of the working class, the importance of church and family, and the fight for equality. Further, these themes are handled in a sensitive and accurate

manner. In short, the set of books that I chose to analyze for this study are closely aligned with the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization; they celebrate Black boys and men. In the next chapter, I will discuss the books in terms of the rubric; the significance of the findings in light of the theoretical frameworks; the limitations of the study; and the implications for future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide a thorough discussion of the findings; limitations of the research; researcher comments; relationship of the findings to previous literature and the theoretical framework; and implications for the field of early childhood education. I will begin by discussing each research question in light of the theoretical framework and other relevant theories. Finally, I will discuss the content analysis rubric (modified from Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001), and make a determination about the quality of the books and whether or not they are culturally conscious. I will also consider whether the books can be used as windows or mirrors in the classroom (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2012).

Before I began this study, I reflected on my years of experience as a teacher, especially the last ten years when I have been teaching in elementary school. I thought about my excitement when I learned to teach children how to read, and the importance of establishing a strong foundation in reading while they are young. I also reflected on the achievement gap, and my strong feelings about trying to help young Black males because some of them are performing lower than any other group in reading (Noguera, 2008). This reflection led me to do research on the state of Black males in America and how I might help to close the gap. As a teacher of young children, I have seen the excitement and interest that the right book can spark in a young reader. I have also seen the boredom and disengagement the wrong book can elicit. I learned that many researchers believe that children need to see themselves portrayed in children's literature in a positive and an affirming light. An absence of multicultural literature in the classroom can make children feel invisible and decrease their motivation to read (Brinson, 2012; Brooks & McNair, 2009; Scurba, 2014; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, A., 2014). I wanted to identify books that

feature Black males as the main character in interesting, engaging stories so that Black boys might feel more motivated to read. I discovered that it is very difficult to find such books, and my search led me to the *Conscious Kid* website. Their mission was an excellent match to the search I was conducting: to identify books that center and affirm Black males and portray them in a positive and empowered light. I decided to select a set of books from this website that were appropriate for elementary aged boys and determine whether or not they were aligned with this mission. I will discuss the findings in the section below.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Research Question 1**

Black male characters in books from the *Conscious Kid* website are portrayed in a positive and affirming light.

I was very pleased to find that the Black male characters in the set of books from the *Conscious Kid* website were centered in loving families, actively engaged in positive activities, and portrayed in a positive and empowering light. Historically, the majority of stories about Black Americans portrayed them in a negative light, as unintelligent, unattractive, and unable to function independently (Du Bois, 1935; McNair, 2008; Sims, 1982). In contrast, the Black males in these books demonstrated resiliency, intelligence, and perseverance to overcome obstacles consistently, such as Jean-Michel in *Radiant Child*, the young Derrick in *Knock, Knock*, and Lewis Micheaux in *The Book Itch*. Such portrayals allow Black children to see themselves in the mirror of these stories, facing obstacles in their lives, but endowed with the resiliency and intelligence to solve the problems and be successful (Bishop, 1990). This finding is important because elementary teachers need books like this in their classrooms in order to provide

culturally relevant instruction, to help reduce bias, and to facilitate positive identity development in Black males (Derman-Sparks, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Wright, et al, 2015).

Therefore, the list of books on the *Conscious Kid* website might serve as a resource for elementary school teachers when they are seeking to add new titles to their classroom libraries, and to find appropriate books to teach the standards in Reading, English Language Arts, and Social Studies.

## **Research Question 2**

The content of the books aligned with the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization in many ways. The mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization and its book list for Black males is stated as follows:

*The Conscious Kid* is an education, research and policy organization dedicated to reducing bias and promoting positive identity development in youth. We partner with organizations, children's museums, schools, and families across the country to promote access to children's books centering underrepresented and oppressed groups. (The Conscious Kid, n.d.)

When introducing their collection of books for Black boys, *Black Books Matter*, *Children's Books Celebrating Black Boys*, the organization's website stated:

Each year, there are more children's books published about animals than Black people. Black people have historically been, and continue to be, underrepresented, misrepresented, or invisible in children's literature. Black male characters are even less visible, and even fewer still, are books reflecting positive and empowered depictions of

Black boys...These books center, reflect, and affirm Black boys, and were written and illustrated by Black authors and artists. (The Conscious Kid, n.d.)

As an underrepresented group in America, Black people have been given a powerful voice through the books that were written, selected, and displayed on this website. Increasingly, teachers search for classroom materials and teaching inspiration almost exclusively on the Internet. All teachers, including myself, rely heavily on technology. The presence of a website that promotes Black books for children which are anti-bias, and that center and affirm Black boys, will provide a tremendous boost to a teacher's ability to locate and acquire appropriate books to use in the classroom. These books can serve as mirrors to Black male students; windows to children from parallel cultures; and assist with positive identity development in Black boys. Given all of these positive contributions, this website is extremely important to the field of elementary education. It is also important for other websites that purport to offer book lists for teachers to improve their offerings to include a more culturally diverse listing so that it will not be so difficult for teachers to find books for Black children, especially Black boys.

I found that the books were aligned with the mission of the *Conscious Kid* organization by consistently centering and affirming Black males; aiding in the reduction of bias; promoting positive identity development in Black boys; and centering an underrepresented group, Black males. All of the books were written and illustrated by Black authors and illustrators; two were written by Black females, and the remaining eight were written by Black males. All ten of the books were illustrated by Black males. Scholars in Critical Race Theory have long proposed that Blacks, after having their cultural experiences omitted or distorted in American literature for so many years, should have the opportunity to give voice to their lives (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). As one Black author clarified, the issue is not about hindering

White authors from writing books about Blacks. Instead, “We want the chance to tell our own stories” (Woodson, 2003, p.45) The fact that all of the authors and illustrators of the books in the set are Black could potentially be empowering for young Black readers who might recognize the fact that one day, they too, might author or illustrate a children’s book (Du Bois, 1935). In *Trombone Shorty*, Troy Andrews wrote a childhood autobiography and told the story of how he grew up in a poor neighborhood in New Orleans (Andrews, 2015). Two of the authors wrote children’s books that described actual events they experienced as a boy: *Crown* by Derrick Barnes, and *Knock, Knock* by Daniel Beaty (Barnes, 2017; Beaty, 2013). The effect of these authors sharing their personal experiences was very powerful, and their stories are compelling and authentic. Authenticity is one important way to affirm the group you’re writing about, and these books are authentic in terms of storyline, dialect, and illustrations. The other important point about the content is what was missing: stereotypes. None of the Black males were portrayed as a negative stereotype, with exaggerated facial features, lack of intelligence, or buffoonish characteristics (Von Blum, 2012). Instead, the stories provided positive images of strong, intelligent Black boys and Black men, working hard to succeed.

**Dialect.** The type of language an author chooses to represent a character in a book is critical to the readers’ perceptions and understanding of the book and the people it represents (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2003). If the language is inaccurate, then the book will not ring true. For example, some authors from outside the Black culture have inaccurately tried to represent the Black dialect by incorrectly using the verb “to be” (Bishop, 2003). Sometimes outsiders may have a difficult time portraying the Black dialect accurately because they have only read about the way some Black people speak, or heard it infrequently (Woodson, 2003). However, Woodson wrote that Black language “tells its own story, and woven through it are all the places



we've been, all that we've seen, experiences held close, good and bad" (Woodson, 2003, p. 41). The books in this set from the *Conscious Kid* website books made accurate representations of Black American dialect in all of the books where the authors chose to include it. For example, in *Trombone Shorty*, Andrews tells us that "Where y'at?" is an expression commonly used by Blacks in New Orleans to greet a friend, just as someone else might say hello. In *Crown*, Barnes uses Black vernacular throughout the book. For example, he described the trim over his forehead as a "flawless line...that...frames your swagger" and a great haircut was described as "fresh!" (Barnes, 2017).

Lewis Micheaux, in Nelson's *The Book Itch*, advertised his bookstore on the street with sayings like, "Don't get took, Read a book!" (Nelson, 2015). The addition of ethnic expressions such as these adds to the cultural realism of the books. This is important because authenticity is a key factor in the ability of books to serve as windows and mirrors, and ethnic language increases authenticity (Sims, 1995; Bishop, 2003). Black boys can more easily see themselves in the mirror of the book if the characters speak the same ethnic language that they do. Other children can gain more insights and understanding of the culture and use the book as a window if its cultural portrayal is authentic. All children are then empowered to use the book as a sliding glass door to enter the realm of another child and become fully immersed and engaged in their stories.

**Illustrations.** The illustrations in this set of books accurately depict the diversity of the Black boys and their families through varying complexions, facial features, hair types and styles, and clothing. The quality of the illustrations is extremely important in a children's picture book because the text and the pictures work together to convey information about the characters and communicate the story to the reader (Bishop, 2012). Even if the text is excellent, if the illustrations are of poor quality or inaccurate, the story will suffer as a result. Historically,

images of black people in the literature have not been accurate. “Especially from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century through the mid-twentieth century, popular cartoons, posters, advertisements, and other visual forms reflected the Jim Crow and minstrel visions of African-Americans as... lazy.... childish, irrational, and buffoonish” (Von Blum, 2012, p. 41-42). In children’s literature published prior to 1965, the majority of the books that featured Blacks depicted them as “objects of ridicule and generally inferior beings” (Bishop, 2012, p. 6).

In contrast, this set of books featured words and images that portrayed Black people as strong, independent, and commendable. The illustrations are high quality paintings done in watercolor or oil, sometimes aided by collage or by painting on various surfaces such as wood. The features of the black people are accurately drawn in proportionate sizes; their complexions are varied with striking shades of coffee and sepia; and their hair texture and hairstyles are age-appropriate and accurately drawn and colored. To look through the books without the reading the words, studying only the paintings, is similar to the experience of a stroll through an art museum. Each illustration is worthy of prolonged study to take in all the details, imagery, and skillful use of color. The high quality of the illustrations is important because the pictures carry equal responsibility with the text in accurately telling the story, and helping the reader follow and understand the sequence of events. Poor quality of illustrations can ruin an otherwise well-written story. As Rudine Sims Bishop has described, inappropriate illustrations from the past were stereotypical and unflattering (Bishop, 2003). The fact that these illustrations are accurate and exceptional adds to the ability of the authors to accurately communicate the characters’ feelings and actions, and for the books to serve as mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors for children (Sims, 1982). It also aids in the capability of the books to serve as anti-bias materials and promote positive identity development in Black boys (Derman-Sparks, 1998). The

illustrations have a huge impact on the usefulness of the books in the classroom because good illustrations capture the attention more quickly and they increase the appeal of the books to children.

**Authenticity.** Although it is difficult to define what makes a book authentic (Fox & Short, 2003), I have chosen to use the definition provide by Bishop (Bishop, 2003). Authenticity can be determined based on two criteria: observing the cultural, physical, or social environment an author chooses to write about and whether this environment is portrayed in a negative light or a simply factual or descriptive light. The second is the “authenticating details”, such as the dialect, clothing, family life, and aspects of life the characters found important. Writers from outside the culture often miss what is important to those inside a culture, or make negative or harmful misrepresentations (Bishop, 2003). For the last thirty years, African American children’s literature has been guided by Black authors’ “desire to affirm, empower, and inform Black children” (Bishop, 2003, p. 33). These children have needed both affirmation and empowerment due to the historic lack of positive images of Blacks in children’s literature, coupled with an abundance of negative images of Blacks in the popular media.

Based on this broad definition, I determined that all the books in the set from the *Conscious Kid* website provided authentic representations of the lives of Black children in America. The historic biographies accurately portrayed the past, and the contemporary books did an excellent job of representing Black life in modern day America. None of the characters portrayed any of the negative stereotyping from the past, such as exaggerated features, inaccurate dialect, or comical behavior.

### Research Question 3

The overarching themes of the books on the list are the importance of family and parent/child relationships; perseverance to overcome adversity; fighting for equality and civil rights; the importance of church and spirituality; growing up and coming of age; the prevalence of mental health issues; the importance of education; working class struggles; and the use of crown imagery.

The nine themes that I discovered in the literature are the importance of family and parent/child relationships; perseverance to overcome adversity; fighting for equality and civil rights; the importance of church and spirituality; growing up and coming of age; the prevalence of mental health issues; the importance of education; working class struggles; and the use of crown imagery. These themes are important to the field of elementary education because teachers are charged with the task of providing a well-rounded education to the children in the classroom, including the importance of teaching equity and social justice (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The wide range of topics that are included in the book themes will allow teachers to discuss a variety of different social situations in America, both historically and currently, and help children learn to question the status quo. Children might also develop an interest in how they can help to bring about social change.

Further, culturally responsive teaching states that educators should use a child's cultural knowledge and prior experiences to make education more personal and effective for them (Gay, 2000). Multicultural literature used in the classroom should relate to the students' lived experiences. The literature identified in this study has many themes that are recognizable to Black people living in America. These books can help Black students maintain their identity,

their connections with their cultural groups, and develop a sense of community and shared responsibility (Gay & Howard, 2000).

I was amazed at finding so many themes in the books that were pertinent to the experience of Blacks growing up and/or moving to America. Even in such a small set of books, they are extremely rich in cultural information. Many of the books' themes had a strong sociopolitical significance (Koss, 2015; Bishop, 2012), such as the fight for social justice, the struggles of the working class, the significance of church and spirituality, and the importance of family, even when the father may be absent. In both of the books where the father left the home during the course of the story, the societal structures that led to his removal were clearly explained (Beaty, 2013; Shabazz, 2013).

Critical Race Theory allows the reader to examine the positioning of Blacks within power relationships in America (Crenshaw, 2011). Blacks are viewed as a subculture with a lesser degree of power, opportunities, and societal resources. This position has forced Black people to have to organize for civil rights and social justice. Also, as part of a parallel culture with less power and authority in society, they often must work hard to make ends meet and to survive from day to day while negotiating institutionalized racism. I will discuss three of the most salient themes I found in this section: the fight for social justice; the importance of the family and the absence of Black fathers; and the prevalence of mental illness in the Black community.

**The fight for social justice and civil rights.** There is an ongoing fight for social justice in America, and this battle can most clearly be seen in the state of Black men in this country (Noguera, 2008). They are in a very precarious position, academically, financially, and socially. Critical Race Theory posits that race will always be central in American life, and racism has

become normalized, so the struggle against its pernicious effects in society must continue (Crenshaw, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Books such as *Malcolm Little* and *The Book Itch* provide children with an introduction to the social injustice that led to organization of the Civil Rights Movement, and they help children gain multiple perspectives on important issues (Morgan, 2009). These books can be used to introduce the topic of Civil Rights in upper elementary classrooms, and spark a conversation among students about major historical incidents and their antecedents and outcomes. The books can also be used in lower elementary classes as part of a lesson to either inform students about the movement; the need to work for social justice; or the characteristics of nonfiction books and the author's purpose. Many different teaching goals can be fulfilled with any one of the books in the set, whether the students are learning about main ideas, characters, setting, plot, or a host of other literary elements. Teachers can select from a range of high quality children's literature that features Black males and Black families in order to assist them in providing culturally relevant teaching in their classrooms.

**The importance of family and the absence of Black fathers.** Many critics agree on the importance of family in Black life (King, Harris & Heard, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ruiz & Carlton-LaNey, 2009). It is significant that all of the books in the set positioned the boys in strong, supportive families even though a number of the fathers were absent. The portrayal of fathers who had been removed from their homes, while highlighting a disturbing feature of life for many Blacks in America, may be helpful for some children. When children seek a positive representation of themselves in the literature, it is very helpful to have books with a variety of family compositions available. In the past, the vast majority of children's books featured Caucasian nuclear families with both parents in the home (Rodman & Hildreth, 2002). While this representation is not damaging in itself, there is also a need to portray other types of families in

children's literature so that children may see themselves and their families represented in a positive light (Koss, 2015; Morgan, 2009). In this set of books, children are able to see that the boys were able to adjust to the parental absences in their lives with consistent support from extended family and friends, and they went on to lead successful lives.

The absence of Black fathers is also an area where more action is needed. The two books in the set that portrayed Black fathers as active and engaged in their sons' lives also showed the fathers ultimately being removed from the home through incarceration and assassination. However, there are many homes today where Black fathers are actively present, making a positive difference in their children's lives. More of these stories need to be told. Children should not be left to infer that there are few Black fathers in the lives of Black children. The call for authenticity and accuracy must also include the call for the stories of Black fathers to be included in the literature. The organizers of the *Conscious Kid* would do well to conduct an active search for stories that center and affirm the presence and the positive contributions of Black fathers in the home. In this way, children will have greater opportunities to see themselves in the books, and to use the books as windows and sliding glass doors into accurate cultural settings featuring healthy and whole Black families.

**The prevalence of mental illness.** Mental illness also affects Black families significantly. Before beginning this study, I had not thought about the prevalence of mental illness among Blacks, even though my own family has been impacted. Statistics show that Blacks are twice as likely as Whites to suffer with mental health issues but they do not seek help as often (Brown & Keith, 2003; Williams, 2008). The books in the study featured only Black women who were suffering in this area, possibly due to the adverse impact of their membership in two oppressed sub-groups: Blacks and females (Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015). Both of the

boys' mothers who became mentally ill were removed from the home. Here again, the books might possibly serve as mirrors for students in this same situation who may feel isolated and misunderstood. It is important to provide books that can serve as mirrors for Black students in the classroom who otherwise may feel marginalized and alone (Johnson & Koss, 2016; Bishop, 2012). These mirrors can center and affirm such students, and provide important role models for surviving difficult situations.

### Discussion of the Rubric

The categories of the rubric were Illustrations, Language, Accuracy, and Cultural Representations. I analyzed each book in light of these requirements. All of the books consistently met the requirements to be considered to be high-quality, according to the researchers (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Specifically, the illustrations portrayed Black skin tones and facial appearance in a pleasant and inviting way, in contrast to the negative imagery often used in the past (Von Blum, 2012). Images in the past often had ink Black skin tones that were not representative of Black skin, and exaggerated features with bright red lips and huge eyes, like caricatures. In contrast, these books had facial features in lifelike proportions and skintones that were authentic and aesthetically pleasing. Cultural referents were accurate and portrayed positive attributes of Black men and Black families as intelligent, loving and proactive, taking action to solve life's problems independently. When Black dialect was included, it was not exaggerated, demeaning, or inaccurate. Instead, it added to the understanding of the story, such as the many ethnic descriptions like "fresh cut" used in *Crown* (Barnes, 2013). In short, based on the application of the rubric, these books meet the qualifications as high quality Black children's literature.



### **Limitation of Findings**

This study will add to the body of knowledge about Black multicultural children's literature, specifically those books with Black male characters in a major role, written and illustrated by Black authors and illustrators. However, even though the research shows that literature in which children can see themselves in the story may increase the students' motivation to read, there is no causal relationship established between the content analysis of the book and the potential amount of time students will spend reading. Further, there is no guarantee that if a teacher decides to use one of the books from this list, that she will automatically produce more intrinsic motivation in the students. It is a qualitative study which conducts a critical content analysis of a set of Black children's books to determine whether or not they are culturally conscious; whether they fulfill the mission of the *Conscious Kid* website; and whether they might be suitable for classroom or library use. I reviewed the books on only one website; many other websites that I searched had few books that featured Black families at all. The study cannot be generalized further than this.

### **Researcher Comments**

This study has been conducted as a qualitative study using critical content analysis. Writing this dissertation has been my first time having the opportunity to use this method of inquiry. I have read many qualitative studies in school settings and I have always found them extremely informative. However, I had not read any studies where content analysis on a set of books had been performed. On reflection, I have found the critical content analysis of children's literature to be extremely powerful and revealing.

When I began this study, I did not imagine that so many important themes and sociopolitical constructs would be revealed in this small set of children's books. Although I

recognized that children's literature can show us a great deal about the societies in which we live, I did not realize just how informative these books would be. I naively considered picture books to be lightweight, meant primarily to entertain children, and sometimes to provide introductory information about a topic of inquiry. I had not deliberated on the truth that children's books are all shaped by cultural and historical factors; they communicate the worldview of the author; and they often hold hidden messages and ideologies (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017). As critical readers and concerned educators, we must interrogate both the existence and the meaning of the messages.

### **Relationship of Findings to Previous Literature**

This set of books has a strong association with the previous literature and research topics that have been discussed, including the achievement gap, multicultural literature, culturally relevant teaching, and teaching Black boys to read. In this section, I will discuss the relationship of the findings about the literature on the *Conscious Kid* website with these issues.

### **The Achievement Gap/Black Boys and Reading**

The existence of the achievement gap in education has been well documented and has been the subject of many studies and controversies (Dexter & Simon, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Tatum, 2005). The disparity in reading achievement is particularly problematic because competence in reading is required for students to access all the other academic subjects. Black boys, in particular, are in a precarious state near the bottom of many assessments in reading (Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 2005). Therefore, it is extremely important to intervene in their schooling experiences with rigorous and appropriate literacy instruction. Many studies have demonstrated that if black children are provided with books in which they can see themselves, their reading engagement may be increased (Bishop, 2012; Brooks & McNair, 2009; Cartledge,

Bennett, Gallant, Ramnath, & Keeseey, 2015; Johnson & Koss, 2016; Scieurba, 2014; Sims, 1982; Tatum, 2005).

However, it can be very difficult for teachers to find engaging Black literature, especially literature with Black male characters in a major role (Mann-Boykin, 2016; Mendoza & Reese, 2001; Smith-D'Arezzo & Musgrove, 2011). The books on the *Conscious Kid* website that were selected for this study may allow teachers to locate appropriate Black books both for their lessons and their classroom libraries. These books are extremely engaging; they all feature Black boys in a positive light and a major role; and they are culturally conscious and appealing. In fact, they fully meet the requirements that Bishop (2012) has outlined. This set of books:

- (1) Celebrates the strength of the black family as a cultural institution and vehicle for survival;
- (2) bears witness to Black people's determined struggle for freedom, equality, and dignity;
- (3) nurtures the souls of Black children by reflecting back to them, both visually and verbally, the beauty and competence that we as adults see in them;
- (4) situates itself through its language and its content, within African American literary and cultural contexts; and
- (5) honors the tradition of story as a way of teaching and a way of knowing (Bishop, 2012, p. 273)

In short, teachers may confidently select books from this set to provide culturally relevant teaching in their classrooms as they work to close the achievement gap. The results of my analysis of the books using the content analysis rubric (modified from Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001) found that the books are authentic and well-written; these findings support my willingness to recommend these books to teachers.

## **Multicultural Literature for Black Children**

Multicultural literature is a necessity in today's classrooms which are increasingly becoming more diverse (Brinson, 2012; Koss, 2015; Smith-D'Arezzo & Musgrove, 2011). However, historically, it has been very difficult to find multicultural literature that portrayed Blacks in a positive and affirming light (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2012; Smith-D'Arezzo & Musgrove, 2011). Currently, more books are available that feature Blacks but it is still a very small number compared to the number of children's books published annually, and the growing numbers of Black children in America's classrooms. Therefore, it has become even more important to select children's literature for Black youngsters with great care and discernment (Smith-D'Arezzo & Musgrove, 2011). Just because a book may feature Black characters, a teacher cannot automatically assume that it is a worthwhile book to acquire for the classroom library or read to her students (Smith-D'Arezzo & Musgrove, 2011). The children's literature on the *Conscious Kid* website that I analyzed for this study provides authentic representations of Black families, centering Black males and portraying them in a positive and affirming light. This is culturally conscious multicultural literature for Black students at its best interpretation.

## **Application of the Rubric to the Book Set**

When I applied the rubric to the book set, the findings were positive. As I described previously, this instrument was modified from a rubric developed by Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001). The authors developed the rubric in order to help teachers find high quality African American children's literature for their classrooms. Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) posited the importance of providing positive multicultural children's literature with Black characters for Black children, not just any book that featured Black characters. They acknowledged that some books portrayed Black people in an offensive or inaccurate manner. By referring to the rubric,

teachers may select appropriate Black children's literature for use with their students along the following categories: characters identified as Black; cultural accuracy; realistic and positive; authentic Black dialect and illustrations; variety in settings and physical appearance of Black characters; accuracy of information; and distinctive worldview. Please refer to the chart on the following page for a quick overview of the findings. All the books in the set portrayed characters who were identified as Black; accurate cultural references and language; positive images; variety in settings and physical appearance; information accuracy; and Black characters who were aesthetically pleasing. Based on these findings and the authentic representation of cultural themes in Black America, I determined that these books were very high quality. The books from the *Conscious Kid* website were positive and authentic; I would highly recommend them to teachers for classroom use.

**Table 5.1 The Results of Applying the Content Analysis Rubric to the Book Set**

Author & Title	Char. Identified Black	Accurate Cultural Referents	Realistic/ Positive Images	Accurate Portrayal Of Language	Authentic Dialect	Illustrations Reflect Reality	Variety in settings & Physical Appearance	Black Characters Aesthetically pleasing	Information Accuracy	Distinctive World view
Trombone Shorty (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Barnes <i>Crown</i> (2017)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Beatty <i>Knock, Knock</i> (2013)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Hughes <i>I, Too, Am America</i> (1953, 2012)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nelson, K. <i>He's Got the Whole World</i> (2005)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Nelson, V. <i>The Book Itch</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Perkins <i>Hey, Black Child</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓
Shabazz <i>Malcolm Little</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Step toe <i>Radiant Child</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Weatherford <i>Before John Was a Jazz Giant</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	

### **Culturally Relevant/ Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching are theoretical approaches to classroom instruction that provide a set of strategies for teachers to deliver more effective instruction for their Black students, as well as other students from parallel cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1992, Gay, 2009). These theorists both insist that teachers should provide books and reading materials with African-American characters and minority perspectives in order to build interest, excitement and engagement among their students from parallel cultures. They should also get to know the students' families, attend student functions outside of school, and provide consistent encouragement and positive supports for their minority students. The guidelines promoted by these strategists would easily be fulfilled by accessing the books on the *Conscious Kid* website which would consistently provide engaging literature for their students.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Among its tenets, Critical Race Theory posits that race is central to American life, and racism has become normalized (Crenshaw, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). It also argues for the importance of telling one's own story from one's own experience in order to provide a counter-story to the narrative provided by the dominant group which is often inaccurate or incomplete. The books in the set depict a group of Black men and boys who are clearly situated within the milieu of difficulties that beset Black families living in America, from difficulties in finding support for one's academic aspirations (*Malcolm Little*) to problems getting a business loan from a bank (*The Book Itch*). The wonderful observation that the reader makes, however, is that these Black boys are resilient. They persevere in the face of the crushing obstacles in America, and they are not crushed. They overcome the odds; they surmount the waves of

negativity and oppression; and they soar. Critical Race theory provides both a lens to understand their struggles, and their means of survival.

### **Multicultural Education Theory**

Multicultural Theory holds that school curriculums should be altered to include the stories of all the minorities in the country, and not just the history of the dominant culture. Parallel cultures are just as important because they have made significant contributions to their country, and children should be informed about the history, writings, inventions and involvement of all people in a society. Therefore, the story of Blacks in America must be included in the classroom, not just as an occasional offering, but it should be integrated into the lessons on a regular basis. The books on the *Conscious Kid* website could be selected as part of a thrust to create a more inclusive curriculum.

### **Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors**

Rudine Sims set the standard for critical content analysis of Black children's literature with her groundbreaking study, *The Shadow and the Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (Sims, 1982). In this study, she developed the theory of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, and it is still relevant today. She analyzed the children's literature that was published between 1965 and 1982, finding that many books contained representations of Blacks that portrayed them in a demeaning, unintelligent, or inaccurate light. She also identified those books that were culturally conscious, written by Black authors about Black families. These books depicted Black people in a positive light, as strong, intelligent, and capable of solving their own problems and showing the way for others. Further, she recognized five Black authors who were writing high quality literature for children that



portrayed loving family relationships and a sense of pride in being Black; they were called Image Makers (Sims, 1982, p. 96). These authors were Lucille Clifton, Eloise Greenfield, Virginia Hamilton, Sharon Bell Mathis, and Walter Dean Myers. Image Makers had to show how African-Americans overcame obstacles and succeeded in the past, and demonstrate to children how they could overcome obstacles in their own lives in order to be successful. Because books can provide windows and mirrors for children to see themselves and learn about other cultures, it is very important that the images portrayed must demonstrate strength and perseverance. In keeping with the high standards set by the original Image Makers, the authors of the set of books on the *Conscious Kid* website have portrayed an exceptional level of Black family representation. This set of books can be favorably compared with the original works that Sims identified as Image Makers because the characters are authentic, positive, and proactive. In addition, the illustrations portray Black families in an attractive and appealing manner, with no caricatures, inaccurate dialect, or inappropriate shading or facial features. Instead, this set of books has positive images in which today's Black children can see their own families reflected, while viewing strong and independent role models. These children's books can serve as windows, mirrors or sliding glass doors in the classroom. Black boys can see themselves; children from parallel cultures can look through the window and gain a deeper understanding of Black culture; and all children can have the opportunity to walk through a sliding glass door and be immersed in a riveting story. The lives of all children can be affirmed through exposure to high quality literature.

### **Implications for Future Research**

More research is needed on the content and messages of literature for Black children. Too often, the literature from the past for Black children was filled with negative stereotypes and

demeaning imagery. The set of books on the *Conscious Kid* website portrayed Black males as strong and resilient but future research might be extended to include the remaining titles on the website. Do the books recommended for older children also fulfill the mission of the organization? More authentic books about Black children of all ages are needed. It would also be productive for researchers to focus only on the illustrations at some point to determine how messages are embedded and transmitted through imagery. What is the difference between a positive representation of a Black male and a negative one beyond the obvious clues found in complexion, facial features, hair, and clothing? Much more may be found if the whole image is analyzed for hidden messages, and the additional information images provide to the reader about the people and the setting in the stories.

Out of the set of ten books, half of them were biographical, telling the stories of famous men in Black history. Of these, one was an autobiography. Although it is very valuable to recount the history of Blacks in America, many children's books have already done so. There is also a need for Black children to have books from other genres available to them, such as science fiction, adventure, and fantasy. It would be helpful for future researchers to identify titles that fall into these categories and conduct a critical content analysis of the books. Similarly, future researchers might be able to locate and identify other existing book lists that have recognized commendable examples of Black literature for Black children.

There is also a need for more books that center and affirm Black girls, and portray them in ordinary and/or exciting settings, such as science fiction or mysteries. Many books about Black girls are historical biographies, or portrayals of Black girls in a negative or comical light. Children need books about Black girls that show them in ordinary settings such as school and

home, building friendships, engaging in academics, sports, clubs, family life, and a variety of different settings and adventures.

Finally, there is a critical need for ongoing research on the connection between books with Black characters in major roles and reading engagement in Black males. Can researchers go further to establish a connection between the type of literature provided to Black children and their academic performance in the classroom? Will this connection extend to show improved performance on their scores on national reading assessments? Research on these questions is critical if we are to reduce and ultimately eliminate the achievement gap. As teachers, researchers, and all concerned stakeholders in our society, we must continually ask ourselves: What more can we do to ameliorate the plight of Black males in America, as a society and as individual teachers and stakeholders? Conducting critical content analyses of Black children's literature is just the beginning.

### **Implications for Teachers**

Clearly, the results of this study support the premise that teachers should use culturally conscious Black children's literature with Black males in major roles in the classroom in order to provide windows and mirrors for their Black male students (Sims, 1982; Bishop, 2019). Black boys need to be able to see themselves in the text in order to help develop a positive self-identity (McNair, 2014; Wright, Counsell & Tate, 2015), and all children will benefit from multicultural books in the classroom (Cai, 1998). In addition, culturally responsive teaching methods require that teachers provide students with books that have characters who look like them (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Student engagement and their time spent reading may both be increased by providing books that children enjoy (Noguera, 2008; Scieurba, 2014; Tatum, 2005; Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Teachers should make every effort to build and maintain a diverse collection of

books for their classroom libraries both to provide a welcoming atmosphere for their students, and to facilitate their academic success.

In addition to providing literature with authentic, culturally conscious Black characters for Black students and for classroom lessons, teachers should seek out some type of professional development in order to discuss racial matters with their students. Often, it may be difficult for White teachers to understand and relate to Black boys, and they may find it stressful to discuss issues of race. Teachers may feel inadequate to facilitate discussions on racism or class differences in America. Black middle class teachers also might have a hard time understanding some of the cultural practices of Black boys who make choices based on being cool or belonging to a certain group of youth. Teachers may need assistance in acquiring some strategies for leading classroom discussions, and some practice to become more comfortable talking with students and parents of a different race or social class (Kirkland, 2018; Mahiri & Maniates, 2013; Singleton, 2015). Teachers should consider this professional development as an important part of becoming a culturally responsive teacher, and moving toward serving the needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

Finally, the *Conscious Kid Library* collection is readily available to teachers on the *Conscious Kid* website. In this study, I have extensively examined ten of the children's books on the site, and found them to be authentic and culturally conscious. In fact, they may be considered to be Image Makers. I would recommend these books to teachers for classroom use. This website may serve as a future resource for teachers seeking books to engage the students in their classrooms. Further, the rubric I used in the study may be used by teachers to assist them in identifying other books they might find. The authors designed the rubric to assist teachers in identifying high quality African American children's literature (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd,

2001). Both the website and the rubric may provide guidance in the future to teachers who are striving to provide culturally relevant instruction to their students.

### **Conclusion**

The books in this study were selected by the *Conscious Kid* organization, and featured on their website. The findings indicated that the books successfully centered Black males and portrayed them in a positive and affirming light. The books are also useful for anti-bias education, and the promotion of positive identity development in Black boys. I learned a great deal about the value of children's books as representations of the sociopolitical constructs and dominant ideologies in society, and the hidden messages that they contain. It is important for teachers to use books that impart positive messages to Black readers and children from parallel cultures. Teachers have very little time to search for and analyze children's books. Further, they are usually not prepared to make decisions about whether the book is culturally accurate or relies too much on dominant stereotypes. This study can assist teachers with locating culturally conscious and authentic literature for Black boys, written and illustrated by Black authors and illustrators. More research is needed on the connection between using Black children's literature with Black students and their performance both in the classroom and on reading tests. Preliminary studies have indicated a positive relationship. I would feel comfortable highly recommending these books to teachers as read-alouds for their students; as examples of culturally conscious Black children's literature when teaching the standards in reading, language arts, or social studies; and as additions to their classroom libraries.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 2**  
**Specific characteristics of high-quality African American children's literature**

Feature	Questions	Rating				
Character portrayal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the author identify the characters as African American?</li> <li>• Does the author include current and accurate information about African American beliefs, traditions, shared values, and other cultural referents?</li> <li>• Does the author present realistic and positive images of African Americans?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Language use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the dialogue correctly portray African American dialect?</li> <li>• Is the language authentic and realistic?</li> <li>• Will students understand, identify with, and accurately reflect upon the characters' language?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Illustration authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the illustrations reflect reality?</li> <li>• Do they reveal variety in settings and African American physical features and coloring, or are characters merely colored brown?</li> <li>• Do the illustrations present positive images of African Americans in aesthetically pleasing ways?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High
Information accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the story contain a motif or an authentic aspect of African American history?</li> <li>• Is the information accurate?</li> <li>• Does the story add a distinctive voice or worldview?</li> </ul>	1 Low	2	3 Medium	4	5 High

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