Tensions and Pitfalls in the Depiction of Multiracial Characters in Children's Picture Books: A Critical Content Analysis

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Tensions and Pitfalls in the Depiction of Multiracial Characters in Children’s Picture Books:

A Critical Content Analysis

Melody Green

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Tensions and Pitfalls in the Depiction of Multiracial Characters in Children’s Picture Books: A Critical Content Analysis

Melody Green
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Master of Arts

The United States is becoming more and more multiracial, but little research attends to multiracial characters in children’s picture books. This research employed a critical content analysis using the lens of critical race theory to examine eight children’s picture books published after 2000. This study sought to answer two questions. First, using a critical race theory lens, what patterns and tensions emerge in the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books? Secondly, how do the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books perpetuate deconstructed conceptualizations of multiracial identity? Common themes that presented themselves in this study were (a) how food is used to represent a multiracial character’s skin color, (b) the similarities and differences of the multiracial characters’ cultures, (c) the multiracial characters’ appearance, specifically their hair and eyes, (d) the affirmations given to and received by the main characters, (e) and love and unity. The analysis is followed by a conclusion for implications for parents, teachers, authors, and publishers.

Keywords: biracial, multiracial, children’s books, Critical Race Theory
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I cherish the early childhood memories of story time that my mother and I shared daily. As Mom read each new book aloud, I naturally imagined a protagonist that physically resembled me. This instinctual idiosyncrasy allowed me to connect to the storyline. The desire/need to relate to fictional characters continued as I entered the primary grades and learned to read independently. I vividly recall when I realized that my classmates did not necessarily visualize fictional characters the same as I did.

As an adolescent, I recall my excitement when first reading Harry Potter. J. K. Rowling (1997) described Hermione as having “bushy brown hair and brown eyes” (p. 79). Finally, I had discovered a fictional character who possessed physical characteristics with which I could personally identify! Imagine my disappointment when I later realized that Hermione was in reality, one more white character. Even as an adult, I tend to “befriend” literary characters with whom I can relate on a personal basis. It is a rare treat to read of characters who share my ethnicity. As a result, I have become increasingly aware of the absence of “me” in children’s literature.

Although human inhabitants of the 21st century consider themselves enlightened, the reality of an individual being born biracial singularly and automatically compartmentalizes that person’s placement in mainstream society (Brown, 2010; Motoyoshi, 1990). In this study, multiracial and biracial will be utilized interchangeably. At the same time, biracial is a more specific term that refers to being two races that leave out those who do not fit within the binary of white\(^1\) and Black. This study goes further to address not only biracial but multiracial

\(^1\) I capitalize marginalized groups in this thesis. In so doing, I intend to draw attention to the fact that they are marginalized. Through the capitalization I hope to center their experiences. I use a lower-case w when referring to
individuals. As a biracial educator and mother to multiracial children, this complex and multifaceted reality funnels for me to a specific literary concern. Why do we not regularly see fictional stories in which primary characters are multiracial?

David Hollinger’s (2006) book *A Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* describes America as the nation that has produced more mixed-race people than any other. In 1967, the United States Census purported that interracial couples comprised 3% of the American population. That statistic rose to 17% by 2015 (Bruch et al., 2019). However, it was not until 2000 that Americans were allowed to self-identify and distinguish themselves as biracial or multiracial on the United States Census (Bruch et al., 2019). In the 2010 census, nine million individuals (2.9% of the population) self-identified as biracial. That statistic rose to 3.2% in 2018. With the advent of genetic DNA testing, the Pew Research Center conservatively estimates that 6.9% of Americans have multiracial backgrounds (Bruch et al., 2019). If America is recognized as a leader in the procreation of mixed-race people (Wardle, 2000a; Wardle, 2000b), why do we not see more literature highlighting biracial and multiracial children?

Society’s awareness of racial diversity and the multiple factors that impact the experiences of marginalized peoples have increased in the past several decades (Bryant et al., 2017; Buttery, 1987; Gardner & Hughey, 2019; Root, 1992). At the same time, controversy and push-back emanating from individuals entrenched in and comfortable with “white entitlement” sentiment has generated denial and unrest in a society newly recognizing racial oppression (Bryant et al., 2017; Buttery, 1987; Gardner & Hughey, 2019; Root, 1992). Traditional and stereotypical conceptions of diversity (primary race) do not address the reality of biracialism

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white culture, which is the dominant culture in terms of power, resources and representation in the United States. The decision regarding capitalization or non-capitalization are particularly appropriate and important for my research topic.
Rather, an errant binary (white or non-white) perception persists. Research has unequivocally established the lack of representation of racial and ethnic minorities in the American school curriculum (Anderson, 2012; Luckett & Shay, 2020; Ryan et al., 2020; Small, 2020; Taylor, 2020; Yosso, 2002). Further, Wardle (1992) purports that the lack of representation of racial and ethnic minorities is not exclusive or limited to school curriculum. He explicitly states that there is a gaping ethnic and racial deficiency in every facet of literature (Wardle, 1992). Rodriguez and Kim (2018) agree and acknowledge that research has unequivocally established the necessity and importance of multicultural literary figures and opine that although in the past decade there has been an increased number of published books representing diverse (primary) races/cultures, society has not yet eradicated this literary deficiency.

By definition, the biracial child is a mesh of two distinct cultures; tragically, the reality is that that multiracial child is often not wholly accepted or welcomed by either culture. A personal reality can best illustrate this social phenomenon. During my early childhood, my Black cousins refused to refer to me by my given name. I was unceremoniously referred to as “the yeller one.” Conversely, although my white extended family superficially accepted me, they believed that my Black bloodline resulted in me being academically inferior to my white cousins. Therefore, their “support” of me felt somewhat condescending. My above stated reality is only one example of a phenomenon unfamiliar and incongruent to individuals from primary race bloodlines (those who only identify with one race). When one contemplates the concept of cultural diversity, unlike the “pure” races, the biracial voice singularly remains silent and ignored.

In her seminal piece “Windows, and Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors,” Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) emphasizes that “When children cannot see themselves… they learn a powerful
lesson about how much they are undervalued” (p. 13). She concludes that children need to see themselves in books that reflect their culture, values, customs, etc. Experts emphasize the importance of providing diverse books within the classroom that engage students by subconsciously encouraging them to draw connections to themselves within the text (Roethler, 1998; Taylor, 2020; Yosso, 2002). Anderson (2012) purports that an imbalance of majority culture representation in the current classroom curriculum promotes an unhealthy self-awareness in multiracial students. Not only is the biracial child not acknowledged, but the dominance and superiority of the favored race are (perhaps subconsciously) underscored and inadvertently reinforced. As a direct consequence of biracial children being excluded and absent in today’s literary curriculum, biracial children remain largely marginalized in American schools (Wardle, 1992).

**Statement of the Problem**

Our society has constructed racial binaries in which we continue to live. Multiracial children straddle the identities of two or more races. In my research, I strive to highlight the need to examine books with multiracial representation for the possible “good” and “harm” they may do. This need is augmented in America, as it is the country with the highest population of mixed-race individuals.

**Statement of the Purpose**

This study aims to investigate how multiracial children are depicted in children’s picture books. It is my belief that understanding these literary spaces as a teacher or as a parent of multiracial children can impact young learners in ways that we do not yet know.
Research Questions

This study explores the following research questions:

1. Using a critical race theory lens, what patterns and tensions emerge in the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books?

2. How do the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books perpetuate or deconstruct conceptualizations of multiracial identity?

In the following chapter, I present the review of the literature and the theoretical framework of critical race theory. I then describe the methods I employed in this study in Chapter 3. I present my findings in Chapter 4 and conclusions in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Biracial/Multiracial

Brunsma (2005) suggests that biracial people have historically presented a social dilemma for the United States. This is because they do not fit neatly within the framework of America’s racial hierarchy and the sustaining of white privilege (Baxley, 2008).

A cursory summation of the history of biracialism in America seems appropriate here. In 1838 in America, legislation proclaimed it illegal for a white person to enter into marriage with a Black person. In many states, this indiscretion was punishable by death. The ban on miscegenation (interracial marriage and the interbreeding of people who are from diverse racial types) was upheld until June of 1967, when the case of Loving vs. Virginia prevailed in the Supreme Court (Baxley, 2008). Although interracial marriage became legal in the United States in 1967, prejudice dies slowly. Fifty years ago, it was commonplace for biracial children to be derogatorily labeled as “mongrels” or “mutts” (Baxley, 2008). Perhaps this historical snippet clarifies why multiracial children remain marginalized in mainstream society decades later.

Today, it is considered socially inappropriate to voice repulsive ethnic slurs, however sentiments die hard. My own grandmother abhorred my mother’s choice to marry a Black man, and my uncle’s decision to marry an Indonesian woman. As a result, my grandparents chose to legally disown my mother and her brother. To her death, my grandmother refused to acknowledge her “mixed breed” grandchildren.

Multicultural and diversity experts view America as a “salad bowl” with separate racial/ethnic additions. Wardle (1992) opines that multiracial children are excluded and ignored within the diversity constrict of academia. Wardle states, “Academics acknowledge diversity from the narrow-minded American viewpoint and rely on one critical theory—the ownership of power—
that requires each race/ethnic group to be completely ensconced in a hierarchically oppressed system” (p. 231). Wardle and Cruz-Janzen (2004) purport that multiracial students are invisible in our educational system and the current curriculum—no stories, pictures, articles, reports, books, textbooks, or substantive educational devices of any kind exist that reveal the irreplaceable family experiences of biracial and multiracial people.

**Critical Race Theory**

In the 1970s, a progressive social movement headed by law professors Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman emerged. Critical legal studies theorized that the law is intertwined with social issues. Moreover, the law has inheritable social biases. Critical legal studies (CLS) was foundational to the concept of critical race theory (CRT; Ladson-Billings et al., 1995; Taylor, 1998). Educators felt limited within CLS because CLS did not address social issues and inequities inherent to education, for example, prejudice, classism, etc., in actual classroom and school settings.

To further a discussion of historical and continuing patterns of inequities in schools, intellectuals expanded CLS and created a theoretical framework called critical race theory. CRT allowed scholars to look beyond the law and examine education and society. Solorzano and Yosso (2001) describe “five themes of CRT: (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective” (pp. 2-3). The five themes of CRT are particularly applicable to this critical content analysis of the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books because they allow us to look at the inequities that currently exist in the world of education.

My study addresses not only the patterns and tensions that emerge in the depictions of the multiracial characters in picture books, but how the depictions of multiracial characters in those
children’s books perpetuate or deconstruct conceptualizations of multiracial identity. Because the five themes of CRT are central to my research, I will refer to them frequently throughout this paper.

CRT’s insistence on the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism allows me to identify the role of the educational system in selecting and purchasing books that are introduced into elementary schools. Incorporation of this tenet of CRT increases the educator’s awareness of the need to address racism and diversity. By extension, I can then analyze how the books that are selected and purchased impact students.

CRT positions me to challenge dominant ideologies and aids my research because it grants us the opportunity to examine “social and cultural” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2) assumptions and argue privileged views. CRT allows me to look through a lens that dispels the conscious or subconscious racist agenda found in multiracial picture books. The centrality of experiential knowledge recognizes that the knowledge that multiracial people have is legitimate.

Utilizing CRT in my research facilitates me to legitimize my personal experiences as a biracial person. Additionally, other multiracial people can legitimize their own experiences through the analysis of the picture books that I include in my study. The fifth theme of CRT, the interdisciplinary perspective, supports my research because I refuse to conduct an ahistoric examination of these books. I insist on, and CRT facilitates my decision to, examine both the written text and the illustrations through a historic consideration of systemic racism and its impact on children’s lives.

The adoption of CRT tenets allows educators to understand the mindset of multiracial children. The teachers can then redirect their pedagogy to become more inclusive teachers. The themes of CRT strengthen and support my research and guide me as I analyze the books in my study.
Self-Awareness and Identity

Research conclusively establishes that the systematic development of identity is a process that is critical in one’s lifetime (Roethler, 1998). It is a universal developmental phenomenon that between the ages of 6 and 14, children begin to experience crucial developments regarding their sense of identity (Eccles, 1999). The social construct of ethnicity plays a significant role in any individual’s sense of identity. The ability for a child to identify with an ethnic group is essential to that child’s psychological health and well-being (Phinney, 1990). It is a basic tenet of humanity that individuals seek to belong. The self-image of an impressionable child who does not experience a sense of belonging, is negatively impacted. The books found in classrooms and school libraries subliminally influence the multiracial child’s perception of self (Phinney, 1990).

On the educational spectrum, children who struggle to identify with literary characters in a specific curriculum face issues of isolation and decreased self-identity (Spencer & Markstrom, 1990; Taylor, 2020. Young children develop self-awareness and identity utilizing not only the written words contained in the text but also by visually analyzing the accompanying drawings and artwork that illustrate the text (Roethler, 1998). A child’s identity and self-awareness are substantially affected by the books that children read and interact with (Chaudhri & Teale, 2013). A dual-purpose emerges as children read and are allowed to explore a variety of books; first, the child cultivates a sense of self, and secondly, the child learns to decisively assess their world and the accompanying perceptions of that world (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016; Chaudhri & Teale, 2013; Koss & Paciaga, 2020; Thein et al., 2007). Hence, literature is a significant element in the identity formation of a child (Chaudhri & Teale, 2013; Gee, 2000; Heath, 2011). Moreover, the visual representations that illustrate the texts utilized in children’s classrooms can explicitly and subliminally influence a child’s awareness of their racial identity (Chaudhri & Teale, 2013).
Imagine for a moment my personal disappointment upon realizing that although Rowling’s character possessed bushy brown hair similar to my own, Hermione was undeniably, and quite predictably, Caucasian. I can personally attest to the empowerment I would have experienced as a child if one single heroine in one book possessed flawless olive skin, luminous brown eyes, and curly brown hair! Rudine Sims Bishop is quoted as, “they not only connect to the story world but also feel valued as human beings. Literature then ‘becomes a means of self-affirmation’” (as cited in Koss et al., 2016, p. 19).

**Diverse Books**

Larrick established in 1965 that “integration may be the law of the land, but most of the books children see are all white” (p. 1). During the past 56 years since Larrick noted the lack of integration in children’s literature, not much has changed regarding the inclusion of multiracial characters. It is imperative that biracial and multiracial characters be proportionate and prominently represented in American children’s picture books. The literature that allows a reader to self-identify also allows that reader to shape awareness and sensitivity of the meaning of being biracial and multiracial (Chaudhri & Teale, 2013).

It is vital that the book publishing industries diversify. The publishers of children’s picture books must, of necessity, prioritize and recognize that the books they publish explicitly influence the cultural identities of the children who are reading them (Crisp et al., 2016). Organizations such as the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign on social media and blogs such as Reading While White and American Indians in Children’s Literature currently strive to highlight the lack of diversity in children’s literature (Crisp et al., 2016).
**Sharing Stories in the Classroom**

From guided reading, to silent sustained reading, to classroom read alouds, children are exposed to texts that inform their identity. Sharing stories, especially picture books in the elementary classroom is a routine activity that might happen multiple times a day. Read alouds are one way that is frequently used to share stories. Read alouds are an essential method utilized by teachers to expose children to new ideas presented in the text while simultaneously guiding and assisting students in responding to children’s picture books. Wadsworth (2008) defines and identifies several significant educational and instructional benefits of read alouds: “to motivate, encourage, excite, build background, develop comprehension, assist children in making connections, and serve as a model of what fluent reading sounds like” (p. 1). Experts are in consensus that this exercise is a dynamic teaching method for presenting and coping with complex topics (Wiseman et al., 2019). Picture books provide an easy access point for teachers to focus on life’s integral and potentially difficult emotions and experiences. Illustrations and artwork assist the child in relating to real-life experiences and emotions. Children can then simultaneously contemplate and acknowledge their personal feelings regarding the topic addressed within the read-aloud (Wiseman et al., 2019).

As teachers, librarians and other adults in elementary schools share and display stories, they can highlight pertinent topics and then sensitively guide the students into participating in appropriate conversations and discussions necessary to address critical issues. Simultaneously the sensitive teacher can provide emotional support and comfort for the child who may be personally experiencing the harrowing issues addressed in the selected books (Wiseman et al., 2019). Sharing stories additionally allows students to participate in conversations that reinforce the students’ backgrounds. The students gain familiarity in making connections and clarifying the thinking between their peers and teachers (Wadsworth, 2008).
Society is dependent on a teachers’ innate ability to draw upon children’s picture books and expose children to stories detailing life experiences divergent from their own. By vicarious exposure to diverse literary characters, children can gain compassion and understanding for others. Educators have the responsibility to expand the literary curriculum and discuss crucial aspects of race and racism with sensitivity, while simultaneously advocating for children of mixed ethnicity within the walls of their classrooms (Wiseman et al., 2019). It is imperative to stock the shelves in classrooms and libraries etc. with books that encourage children to empathize with people of divergent backgrounds.

**Summary**

The goal of the American educational system should be to provide a balanced curriculum for children of all ethnic groups (Small, 2020). Experts agree that creating an equitable experience for all students is a significant component for establishing and developing ethnic and cultural identity (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). By extension, an imbalance of ethnic and racial equity in the curriculum promotes inappropriate and unhealthy self-awareness in all students (Anderson, 2012). Currently, an undisputed discrepancy exists in cultural representation in children’s literature. As a result, there is a legitimate concern and indeed a reality that children of neglected ethnic groups may feel overlooked, unimportant, or invisible. Educators must begin to incorporate strategies to level the playing field (Ogbu, 1992).

A plethora of research exists that documents the inequity of ethnic literary curriculum and systemic forces within our educational system. However, that research specifically targets and focuses on children from primary ethnic and racial groups. By comparison, very little attention/research addresses the dearth of literary representation allocated to the biracial student (Wardle, 1992). These children are further separated and alienated from the mainstream student in that they not only are not white, but they do not belong to a primary ethnicity; instead, they
span two ethnicities and often are not completely endorsed or welcomed by either race (Wardle, 1992). As educators and researchers, we cannot ethically allow these children to remain isolated and silenced. Effective education must be all-inclusive (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The intent of this critical content analysis is multi-layered. Through my study, I sought to extrapolate the effect that the lack of cultural representation in the literary curriculum has on biracial students. I developed my initial research questions which remained somewhat broad and inclusive prior to my analysis. As I continued to conduct my research and immersed myself within the picture books that I included in my critical content analysis, I was confident that my preliminary research questions would be refined and condensed to more specific research questions.

My research questions were:

1. Using a critical race theory lens, what patterns and tensions emerge in the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books?
2. How do the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books perpetuate or deconstruct conceptualizations of multiracial identity?

The first step in beginning this research was to familiarize myself with critical race theory (CRT). I took the time to research and ground myself within the theory. The tenets of CRT seemed to naturally align with and be relevant to my research. Critical race theory allows researchers, me included, to isolate, study and analyze components of the American racial justice system through social, cultural, and legal lenses. (Please see Chapter 2 for a more complete discussion of CRT.)

Critical Content Analysis

In this study, I desired to pinpoint and expose the racial tensions within the biracial community that are embedded within existing children’s literature. I conducted a critical content
analysis in this study. A critical content analysis is built upon a content analysis. Johnson et al. (2016) explain that a qualitative content analysis is used to “make inferences from texts and to make sense of these interpretations within contexts surrounding the texts” (p. 2). A content analysis centers literature as representation of human experiences. While employing a content analysis it leads the researcher to ask higher level questions about the magnitude of the events in the content being researched (Johnson et al., 2016). In order to transform a content analysis into a critical content analysis the researcher must add a lens of criticality. To fully be able to address the cultural contexts of biracial people in the United States, I needed to identify the ways in which those cultural contexts historically emerged and impacted access to differential power. Identifying and critiquing such historical cultural contexts and power differential constitutes employing a lens of criticality. Adding a lens of criticality to a content analysis further deepens the inferences that a researcher can draw from the texts.

A critical content analysis was appropriate for my research questions because I wanted to make sense of these interpretations within the cultural contexts of biracial people in the United States and their power relationship with the dominant culture. My critical content analysis was grounded in critical race theory (CRT). I detailed the major components of critical race theory previously and those components strengthen the criticality of my critical content analysis exploring depictions of biracial character in children’s picture books.

**Data Collection**

For this study, I consulted with two expert professors in the field of children’s literature to help identify appropriate children’s picture books. In addition to the literature recommended by the two experts, I located additional books through a database, WorldCat. I acquainted myself with 10 potential texts before I chose the specific literature to be included in my study.
I focused on books that were traditionally published in the United States within the past 20 years that had protagonists who were children and biracial. I intentionally selected books in which the characters were people, not animals. I was purposeful and specific in this narrow parameter, because of my intent to address the societal disruptions and tensions that multiracial children face living in the United States during the 21st century. I was only able to identify eight texts that fit within the confines of my research (see Appendix).

Data Analysis

As I gathered the books I would use in my study, I initially read each text aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1986). I allowed myself the opportunity to simply “respond to the whole text as a reader” (Johnson et al., 2016, p. 8). During subsequent readings, I began pinpointing and isolating specific visual and textual elements regarding multiracial dynamics and creating notes of those specific observations. It was important that as I analyzed the text, I intentionally looked at the cover, spine, end pages, and everything in between.

During ensuing readings, I then analyzed not only how multiracial characters were depicted in the text (written words) but by extension, how that idea was conveyed and reinforced visually through the accompanying artwork. My objective was not to opine or draw conclusions based on the quality of the children’s books, but to “connect them to larger cultural constructs and social forces that may simultaneously reflect or subvert structural inequalities” (Grzanka, 2014, p. 135).

As I familiarized myself with reading and re-reading the selected children’s literature, I made notes that responded to my research questions about how multiracial children were depicted in these children’s storybooks. As I read these texts, I hoped to gather information that drove the discussion of this research. As I read and pondered the content of these books, I compared my notes for each book and attempted to make connections and identify differences
between the texts. I utilized color coded sticky notes tabbed within the various books and subsequently followed up with the questions that stimulated this research.

Finally, after my introductory analysis, I revisited CRT, and concluded with a final close reading of each children’s book. During this reading I analyzed specific experiences of the biracial characters, through the lens of the five CRT themes. Once again, I made notes regarding the texts and illustrations. I then reviewed my annotations and isolated and identified specific themes and patterns that were consistent and uniform throughout the children’s picture books. Throughout the analysis of the picture books, I sought to identify a dynamic and nuanced concept of racial identity.

Given the epistemological stance of the method of critical race theory, throughout my analysis of the depictions of multiracial characters I intertwined my own experiences as a mixed-race woman. I did not strive for the illusion of an objective analysis of the picture books. Rather, given the method and theoretical lens employed in this study, I recognized that my own reactions to the books, based on my background, informed and enriched my analysis. While I analyzed these texts, I understood that given my racial background, I have been socialized to be sensitive to specific details, and that sensitivity would affect the questions that I would raise. For example, I might ask, “What is the color of the character’s skin? What does their hair look like? What are they wearing?” As I made these queries I purposely self-checked and tried to ascertain the reason for my reductive thoughts. I continued my analysis by asking, “What else could I have attended to? As a multiracial reader, what underlying ‘messages’ do I find in these texts? How are the texts telling me to act, feel, and be? What in the texts, if anything, resonates with or differs from my lived experiences?”
As I engaged in critical analyses of the texts in this manner, I found several key themes relating to the ways multiracial identities are depicted in children’s picture books. I discuss them at length in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4

Findings and Discussions

In this study, I examined children’s picture books and how they depict multiracial characters. Furthermore, I wanted to understand the experiences that the authors and illustrators created for the characters in their stories to teach or express messages from a multiracial character’s point of view. I conducted a critical content analysis and applied critical race theory as a lens through which to understand and expand my findings. In the following sections, I present my findings, illustrating those findings with examples from the picture books from my study, and then demonstrate how the findings relate to one or more of the five themes of CRT as identified by Solorzano and Yosso (2001). As I discuss my findings in this chapter, I first give a more macro description of my findings, and I then continue the discussion of my findings to address the more specific themes that were exhibited in the texts that were analyzed.

Depictions of Multiracial Characters

Throughout the books, there were many variations of how the authors and illustrators depicted the multiracial characters, and I discuss these at length in this chapter. In general, however, it was easy to identify characters as multiracial through authors’ descriptions and illustrators’ visuals showing characters as “not-quite-this” and “not-quite-that.” Additionally, in all the books that were analyzed in this study the parents were present in the illustrations, providing readers with visual cues about characters’ biracial backgrounds. In a few of the books, racially and ethnically contrasting grandparents were also depicted, further solidifying the idea that each main character was indeed biracial or multiracial.

Another important delineation is that each main character in each story was a child. Five of the eight books had female children as main characters. Two of the books highlighted male protagonists. One of the books revolved around a set of twins, a boy and a girl.
Seven of the eight stories depicted families in which the parents were Black and white. With that being stated, the book *I Am Mixed* (Beauvais & Jones, 2012) was a little bit more ambiguous because it stated that the family was from more than two countries (Ireland, parts of Africa, Cuba, Haiti, China, and Mexico). The story concluded that “I am the best from all over the world. I am like every boy and every girl” (Beauvais & Jones, 2012, n.p). This statement led to a more subtle depiction of the race of the twins. Another story, *Marvelous Maravilloso Me and My Beautiful Family* (Lara, 2018), depicts a girl who is bi-cultural, biracial, and bilingual (mentioned in the author’s summary of the story). The author expressed the character’s mixed identities through both the illustrations and in the words of the story. On each page, the sentences are primarily written in English with a single word written in Spanish. For example, the main character refers to both her grandmother as well as her abuela.

My analyses of the children’s books included in this study reveal depictions of a multifaceted and nuanced reality of being mixed race. While the storylines for these picture books may not represent all multiracial children, they do open a dialogue for educators who desire that their diverse students see and make sense of their individual and collective life situations. As stated previously, a central tenet of critical race theory is that children’s personal experiences are legitimate (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). In the sections that follow, I describe how the written text and illustrations in the books used in this study work together to depict mixed-race characters and the strengths they have as individuals and as parts of families. Additionally, I discuss the ways the texts show various challenges that mixed-race children and their families face.
Themes

**Food to Skin Representation**

Comparing a character’s skin tone to food was a recurrent theme in the multiple texts I analyzed. In many of the texts, food was used to describe the color of the multiracial character. The books would describe family members and the foods that their skin tones represented, and subsequently, the main character would often attempt to identify foods that would be represented by their skin tone.

*I Am Mixed* (Beauvais & Jones, 2012) is about twins and how they are “mixed.” Nia expresses that she is “mixed with all kinds of goodies. Like chocolate chunks and marshmallow delights, candy canes with licorice stripes” (n.p.). In the illustration, the twins are at a picnic devouring various kinds of candy. While it is expressly stated what types of foods Nia is mixed with, her brother was illustrated eating a licorice straw and a chocolate bar. In another illustration, Nia and Jay are shown at a theme park where they are eating ice cream, chocolate bars, and lollipops. Here her brother Jay voices that he is “Mixed with all kinds of goodies like vanilla beans and cinnamon sticks, rainbow sherbet with chocolate chips” (n.p.).

In *Honeysmoke* by Monique Fields (2019), Simone is shown looking for her color (see Figure 1). In her dilemma to find a color that describes and represents her skin tone, the illustration shows her snuggling with two bears looking forlorn. She calls one bear chocolate and the other peanut butter. She finds no solace in these two bears because they are not “her” color. Again, the examples of foods that are used are foods that children would most likely be familiar with.
Similarly, the book *Mixed Me* by Taye Diggs (2015) describes the mom as “rich cream and honey” (n.p.). Here, too, the analogy utilizes food that children would be familiar with. This isn’t to say, however, that all comparisons made about one’s skin related to food, as the father on this spread (an illustration or illustrations being viewed from the picture book) is described as “deep brown” (n.p.). In the illustration, Mike is being held by both parents, while holding a brown and peach crayon in his hands (see Figure 2). Even so, while the crayons symbolize his parents’ skin colors, the fact that skin has already been compared to appetizing food both objectifies the characters and makes one—the parent with the lighter complexion, in this case—seem more desirable.
Figure 2

Example of Food to Skin Representation


From my own lived experience, I know that these overly simplistic comparisons of skin color to food can be damaging and hurtful. One would be hard-pressed to find a book describing a white child’s skin to mashed potatoes, almond milk, or peach ice cream. Yet, the above examples illustrate how frequently a multiracial child’s skin tone is related to familiar food. Here in lies the imbalance. The third tenet of CRT (the commitment to social justice) suggests an agenda that focuses on the “elimination of racism” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 3). One way this might be accomplished through children’s literature is if authors and illustrators were to consider different metaphors and similes other than the “low-hanging fruit” that often relates a person’s skin color to food. This, I believe, might be a positive step to counteract the potentially damaging narratives of constantly comparing multiracial children’s to “mixed-up” foods.
**Similarities and Differences**

The written text in these picture books introduce the concept that although the characters come from very different backgrounds, they can possess some similarities. The accompanying illustrations visually support and augment this concept. While the written text often explains more concretely, the illustrations further solidify and exhibit what the written text is trying to convey.

**Mixing of Cultures.** One of the most prominent themes discovered in the texts was the idea of mixing two or more cultures. This theme helped facilitate the idea that the characters are indeed mixed race. In Floella Benjamin’s (2009), *My Two Grannies*, the story revolves around a granddaughter whose parents go on vacation, and she is left with both grannies taking care of her (see Figure 3). Her maternal grandmother is from Trinidad (Granny Vero), while her paternal grandmother is from Blackpool (Granny Rose). The grandmothers disagree for the majority of the story about what they do, eat, and even the stories that they tell their granddaughter Alvina.

All the disagreements stem from the fact that each granny comes from a different culture. This is best illustrated when Alvina wants to play a game. Granny Rose suggests Snakes and Ladders, while Granny Vero suggests playing Dominoes. Again, when they decide what to make for dinner, Granny Rose proposes “steak and kidney pie with mashed potatoes and carrots” (Benjamin, 2009, n.p.). In contrast, Granny Vero would rather make “rice and peas with chicken and plantains” (n.p.). In the illustrations of this text, you observe Granny Rose and Granny Vero at the forefront of the picture, almost as if they are intimately talking to the reader. It is interesting how the illustrator positioned each Granny. It is almost as if they are fighting for the space on the page, just like they are fighting about what they do with Alvina. The illustrator and author used speech bubbles to make it look as if each Granny is interrupting the other. At the bottom of the left page, Granny Vero and Granny Rose are sitting at the opposite ends of a table.
They are making eye contact with each other as if they are arguing. This continues until Alvina advocates for her grannies to take turns on the things that they do each day.

**Figure 3**

*Example of Mixing of Cultures*

![Image of Mixing of Cultures](image)


*Maisie’s Scrapbook* by Samuel Narh (2019) exhibits this same theme of cultural difference. Based upon the written text, the reader assumes that the family is living in a white culture. The white mother’s culture is documented in concrete concepts, “Maisie hides behind the shrubs. Mama looks for her behind the trees” (n.p.). The Black father’s culture is always referred to in abstract terms, “Dada points out turtles swinging on chandeliers in the night sky” (n.p.). The accompanying illustrations suggest that they live in the mother’s country of origin and that the father immigrated from Africa. In one specific illustration, Maisie and her dad are
mentally envisioning Africa. The father tells Maisie stories from his home country. This exhibits how the mixed culture is displayed textually in these children’s picture books. In one of the first illustrations in this book, Maisie and her father sit on her bed in the foreground. At the same time, the picture’s background shows an archetypal African landscape with African folktale characters dancing in the sky.

This umbrella theme of divergent cultures possessing both similarities and differences is emphasized at various times throughout the text. For example, when the author states, “Mama says tomato. Dada says “aamo” (Narh, 2019, n.p.), readers notice the differences between the two cultures. Then, when the author follows this comparison by stating, “They hug her (Maisie) in the same way” (n.p.), readers also recognize the similarities despite the obvious differences. The theme is reiterated elsewhere when the author states, “Mama wears linen. Dada wears kente cloth. They praise her in the same way” (n.p.). Thus, the text shows that differing cultures may use their own vocabulary, while human experience and emotions tend to be reflected universally. Therefore, the language that is spoken does not erase or alter basic human emotions; rather, it simply situates them culturally and linguistically.

The second tenet of CRT, the challenge to dominant ideology, is expressed as a way to “critique societal inequality” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2). When cultures are mixed, white culture has been summarily established as dominant, which seemed to be the case in the picture books examined in this study. For example, in the book Maisie’s Scrapbook by Samuel Narh (2019), the reader intuitively understands that the family is currently living in a white culture. As such, one subliminal message that the reader may absorb is that white culture is superior or preferable because Maisie’s parents have decided to reside in the mother’s homeland instead of the father’s homeland of (somewhere in) Africa. While this is not to say that this is the only way to read this scenario, as a woman and educator of color, I felt that that the mother’s home place
presented as superior. Thus, in the best interest of multiracial students, educators must challenge this racial societal hierarchy, even in texts that might otherwise contain positive messages about mixed race families.

**Extension of the Outer Shell.** The unique physical traits that an author ascribes to a character combine to constitute what I call their “outer shell.” The reader identifies a character’s outer shell through a combination of written word (text) and illustration. By extension, the outer shell is augmented when the reader learns of the character’s likes and dislikes. This information allows a literary character to come to life. One text that powerfully depicts this theme is Benjamin’s (2009) *My Two Grannies*. In what follows, I concentrate on a specific spread (two illustrations viewed together from the picture book that I am analyzing) that illustrates the two Grannies dancing on their page (Figure 4), focusing on the interesting dynamic created by how Granny Rose and Vero are each positioned on their page.

Granny Rose, who listens to brass band music, has one foot on the ground and dances with her arms up (Benjamin, 2009). Her hair is down, and it’s moving with her dancing. Granny Vero, whose favorite music is Calypso and steelpan, has both feet planted on the floor; her arms are up in the air, similar to Granny Rose, but her hair is tied back in a hair tie.

When we look at the outfits that each Granny is wearing, it shows how different each Grannie’s narrative is (see Figure 4). In Granny Rose’s section of this illustration, she is wearing glasses, bright pink lipstick, jewelry, a thick cardigan, pants, and flats for her shoes. Her clothes are made up of yellow and bright pinks and a brown floral cardigan. In contrast, Granny Vero has no jewelry. Her hair is pulled back and she is not wearing lipstick. She is wearing a one-piece dress that goes to her knees, bright red with white polka dots on it, accompanied by brown high heel shoes. The contrast between the portrayal of the two grannies “outer shells” is visually compelling. The simplicity that Granny Vero exhibits is strikingly juxtaposed to the eclectic style
of Granny Rose. Even the physical stature of Alvina’s grannies is different. Granny Rose is short and stout, while Granny Vero is tall and slender.

**Figure 4**

*Example of Extension of Outer Shell*

![Image of Granny Vero and Granny Rose dancing](image)


Since race is a social construction (Dorris, 2009), the concept of race has evolved and changed throughout history, particularly in U.S. History. Societies have created policies that categorize and define their race, but these definitions are not static. They have changed and will continue to change. Members of one culture may not view customs similarly to a person of a divergent culture. Stereotypes fail to encapsulate any culture. The illustrations in the books I analyzed further depict the nuances and fluidity of race. Granny Vero is dressed in an Americanized modern-day outfit as opposed to being represented as wearing the native dress of her homeland of Trinidad. Similarly, Granny Rose is the antithesis of a prim and proper British
The first tenet of CRT is the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism. The consciousness and unconsciousness of racism and how it invades the lives of multiracial people are clearly exhibited within these texts. Neither granny intends to actively model racism for Alvina, but as a result of this unfortunate “everyday” conflict, Alvina, a mixed-race child, is not only embroiled in racism, but is forced to evaluate both cultures. In order to work against systemic racism, it is essential to realize the role of racism, how it has developed and been institutionalized, and how it even invades the texts that young readers may engage with in school settings.

**Appearance: Hair and Eyes**

From my analysis, two physical traits, hair and eyes, continually surfaced in the stories. Many of the stories comment on the character’s eyes, specifically how they are shaped and their color. The physical obsession is readdressed when describing a character’s hair.

In Selina Alko’s (2009) *I’m Your Peanut Butter Big Brother*, the big brother and the main character, wonders what his unborn sibling will look like (see Figure 5). He asks the question, what color will their eyes be? And the answer in the text is a question of whether they will be like their “dad’s charcoal tires” or mom’s “honey roasted almonds” (n.p.). Interestingly, in the illustration the future sibling is depicted as a white child with blue eyes instead of a “typical” mixed child or someone who looks more like his sibling. Somewhat shockingly, the mom’s eyes are not colored in a natural way. She has no white in her eyes; they are entirely brown like the honey-roasted almonds the story uses for an analogy. Similarly, the dad’s eyes are just black circles that look like the charcoal tires to which the story ascribes him. In the illustration, the dad
and the mom are on the opposite ends of each page, where we only see their profile. It looks as if they are staring at one another. It appears as though mom is smiling while dad is not, perhaps perpetuating the notion that whiter is “better” and happier.

**Figure 5**

*Example of Hair and Eyes*

![Illustration](image)


When examining this illustration, it clearly shows that these two children are mixed based on the descriptions within the text. The same book asserts that the big brother’s hair is “soft, crunchy billows of cotton candy” (Alko, 2009, n.p.). The illustrator depicted the main character as having long curly squiggles with brown shading around his hair. Similarly, another character was described as “a cappuccino-frosted ‘fro bouncing along” (n.p.). In the illustration of Lola, a secondary character, her hair almost looks untamable and has no natural shape. There are circles drawn around her hair to suggest curls.
Elsewhere, *Mixed Me* (Diggs, 2015) describes a character’s hair “as a zig zag curly do” (n.p.). His hair looks free and crazy in the illustration with a curly pattern used to color his hair (see Figure 6). Later in the text, the author expresses “they (his peers) care too much about his hair so much that it is not straight enough, that it is his hair and don’t touch” (n.p.). In the illustration that accompanies this text, the artist shows arms of children with scissors, rulers, brushes, combs, and even a bow to help Mike “manage” his hair.

**Figure 6**

*Example of Hair and Eyes*


It is my opinion that many multiracial people can relate to having hair that differs from the hair of European descent. Sadly, the lived experience of people of color is often silenced (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The theme of the centrality of experiential knowledge in CRT
expresses how important the voices of People of Color are. While the books are superficially addressing the issues of unique physical characteristics of the multiracial child, the end result is that multiracial readers may feel further marginalized because their physical characteristics do not and cannot conform to the specified norm of dominant white culture. Only when a child’s differences are authentically appreciated can it be healthy to highlight them. Many children may not consider tire shaped eyes, or cotton candy hair, or wind combing through their curly ‘do to be a positive portrayal of their appearance. While physical characteristics are a reality, those same physical characteristics do not define the child in their entireties.

**Affirmations From Self and Others**

In these texts, it was apparent that positive affirmations about the characters’ appearance came primarily from parents or the main characters themselves. These affirmations affect the main characters’ self-esteem concerning their physical appearance. In *I Am Mixed* (Beauvais & Jones, 2012), Nia’s mother states that Nia’s “skin is the night and your eyes are the stars. Your smile is the moon… that kisses my heart” (n.p.). Her father explains to her twin, Jay, that his “eyes are the sky and his skin is the gentle cloud, his smile is the sun that makes him proud” (n.p.). In the story, the twins are comforted by their parents’ positive affirmation.

The characters in the next two books demonstrate their own innate self-esteem. In *Honeysmoke* by Monique Fields (2019), Simone endorses her skin color as she relates to positive things around her with which she can identify. Having managed to define herself positively, Simone’s attitude changes from worry and concern to peace and happiness. Similarly, in *Mixed Me* (Diggs, 2015), the main character internalizes the nickname Mixed-up Mike. Ultimately, he concludes that he isn’t mixed up; he “just happens to be mixed” (n.p.).

Just as people turn to their parents, family members and friends for insight and guidance, books are an additional resource for people to gain understanding. The text can serve as an
affirmation not only to the characters, but by extension to the reader. Ideally, a child reading a text empathizes with the life struggles of the literary characters. An astute author/illustrator has the ability to teach and guide children through potential difficulties by using likable characters to model positive behavior and problem-solving skills. Different cultures prioritize “intelligence, language and capability” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2) differently. Using CRT’s theme of the challenge to dominant ideology lends itself to understanding how others may embrace different life choices. Highlighting this ideology in children’s books is essential. Thus, it is vital to ensure that the variance of cultural priorities is positively affirmed.

**Being “Just Right.”** Another theme that prominently emerged from my analysis of these books was the idea of being “just right.” The platitude refers to the myth of being racially mixed in a “perfect way,” a way that is “just right.” For example, in *Not So Different* (Riley, 2020), the main character asserts, “her mama is Black, my daddy is white. Put the two together, and I came out just right” (n.p.). In another story, *Mixed Me* (Diggs, 2015), the main character explains that his “mom and dad say he’s a blend of dark and light. ‘We mixed you perfectly and got you JUST RIGHT!’” (Diggs, 2015, n.p., capitalization in the original).

The fallacy of this claim is the implication that if the biracial child is “just right,” any other child or individual exhibiting different physical characteristics is not. If the biracial child is “just right” are we concluding that a parent, sibling, friend, or acquaintance that does not share the child’s same physical attributes is not “just right?” Society must find a way to concede that every child, regardless of skin color, body shape, hair type, eye shape or any other physical attribute is “just right.”

**Mixture Equivalent to Being Mixed Up.** Sometimes, the sub-theme that emerges in these mixed-race stories is negative. Where characters in the stories are trying to “fix” the mixed-
race main character, characters would comment about how the main character looked with their family, how their hair looked, or having to pick friends based on the main character’s skin color.

In the story *Mixed Me* (Diggs, 2015), Mike, the main character, struggles as his peers at school confront him about being mixed up. Mike talks about how when his family goes out in public “people stare” (n.p.). This uncomfortable dynamic continues at school when Mike’s peers tell him, “your mom and dad don’t match” (n.p.). Mike queries, “why pick one race?” while the kids at school encourage him to choose who he “cruises with” (n.p.). The assumption is that due to his skin color he must make a definitive choice to align himself with either his Black or white peers.

The illustrations in this narrative clearly exhibit the state of being confused and mixed up (see Figure 7). In one specific illustration, Mike’s outfit is entirely mixed-matched. The sleeves on his shirt are two different colors, the cuffs on his pants are different colors, and even his flip flops are mixed-matched. He has socks hanging out of his pants pocket that are not a pair.
Two tenets of CRT are demonstrated in this theme. The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism and the commitment to social justice both help deepen my analysis. Our society is based on a dominant race (white). To be referred to even playfully, as mixed up because one is of mixed race can perpetuated the erroneous concept that white is always right. It is essential to interject the tenet of the commitment to social justice into this theme because the tenet offers liberation from the doctrine that one race is superior to another. It is imperative that the multiracial children and their peers understand that multiculturalism is not defined as being “mixed up.”


**Love and Unity**

Throughout the various texts, love and unity were common themes. The theme of coming together was grounded in the concept that diversity makes society stronger. Love and acceptance unify the characters, and by extension, the readers.

The picture book *Not So Different* by Cyana Riley (2020) highlighted this theme of love and unity (see Figure 8). The author talks about celebrating differences and disseminating love. The text states that “deep inside of each of us, so much love can be found” (n.p.). In the accompanying illustration this theme, the illustrator depicts six kids of diverse backgrounds lying on the ground in a circle. Each child seems to be making eye contact with other students. This story concludes with the concept that just because you may be different doesn’t mean I can’t love you.

**Figure 8**

*Example of Love and Unity*

![Example of Love and Unity](image)


*Marvelous Maravilloso Me, and My Beautiful Family* (Lara, 2018) is about a child who notices all the beautiful colors in the world (see Figure 9). She chooses colors that define her
parents. She concludes that her family is a “colorful, beautiful, lovely family, and you can see all the colors of amor– love” (n.p.). The illustrator depicts this scenario in a field of beautiful bright flowers. The little family is all nestled together; the daughter is on the dad’s shoulders, and the mom and dad embrace. This illustration shows a loving family. Thus, this child inherently understands that the unique composition of her family enhances and enriches her life.

**Figure 9**

*Example of Love and Unity*

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The fourth tenet of CRT is the centrality of experiential knowledge. This tenet of CRT supports the understanding that lived experiences of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) are indeed knowledge. Specifically, this tenet of CRT enables me to recognize that epistemological traditions (what is considered and counted as acceptable and important
knowledge) are controlled by the dominant cultures. All people yearn to be loved. The sentiment that love conquers all is expressed through pop culture, music lyrics, scriptures, etc. From the perspective of a Person of Color, the sentiment that love can conquer all as it is expressed in these picture books perpetuates ignorance and disallows People of Color’s experiences to be seen as knowledge. Unfortunately, society has not attained the idyllic realization that the purpose of life is to love. The unattainable belief that we can simply find love in our differences ignores the fact that for this to happen we all have to work to make our world a better place. We must all openly embrace the differences that our world can offer.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The purpose of my research was to answer two questions. First, using a critical race theory lens, what patterns and tensions emerge in the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books? And secondly, how do the depictions of multiracial characters in children’s picture books perpetuate or deconstruct conceptualizations of multiracial identity? As I organized and constructed this critical content analysis study, and pondered the questions I wanted to answer, I began to realize how much of my own persona as a biracial woman is intertwined with this study and the issues it addresses.

Findings Expanded

One of the findings that I have identified is the practice of using food to represent a character’s skin tone. As a young biracial child, my mother repeatedly told me the story of how I was “made.” The story goes like this, God was making sugar cookie people. First, he put my mom into the oven; he took her out a little too early, and she came out white. When God put my dad into the oven, he accidentally left him in too long, and he came out burnt black. But when God put me in the oven, he left me in for the perfect amount of time, and I came out golden brown. This described to me how my interracial family came to be. My white mother and Black father created a mixed-race child. As a child, I struggled with the fact I did not look like either of my parents. As a result, my mother borrowed this story to reassure me that I belonged. I vividly remember begging my mom to admit that I was adopted. The reality was, I was not adopted. The fact that I looked different from any of my relatives was a difficult concept to grasp as a child. I knew my mother loved me, but did I really belong?

Another component of my research was the identification of the “outer shell.” Biracial tension is evident not only in the written text, but it is mirrored in the illustrations for example,
the two feuding grandmas in Floella Benjamin’s *My Two Grannies*. The conflict between these grandmas seeps into the tensions of the biracial struggle. The underlying conflict is far more significant than two grandmas disagreeing on how to care for a granddaughter. The illustrator utilized stereotypical references that neither culture could ignore or deny. It is up to the reader then to take sides. Which grandmother is deemed desirable by society’s standards? By extension, which culture should be viewed as dominant?

My mother is white. She recently experienced a personal epiphany that has enabled her to better understand the internal racial unrest that I have struggled to explain to her my entire life. Mom accepted a position of music teacher at a private school. On her first day, it was intensely unsettling for her to realize she was literally the only “non-Catholic” person on the faculty, staff, and student body. For the first time in her life, she experienced the intensely uncomfortable societal sensation of being undeniably different. She found herself unexpectedly immersed in a challenge to dominant ideology, which is the second tenet of CRT. This ideology addresses the assumptions of privileged racial groups (or any social grouping that enjoys majority control). By extension, CRT can be applied to my mother’s story. As part of her curriculum, my mother has taught units on the lives of great composers. Because she is teaching in a religious school, she emphasizes the fact that many of the great composers ascribe their inspiration as having come from God. She is amused by the fact that whenever a composer writes of their love for God, her students automatically assume that composer had to be Catholic.

The picture books that I analyzed in this study exhibit the inner tension that multiracial individuals experience in the United States. Solorzzano and Yosso (2001) highlight the widespread belief that minoritized racial groups within the United States exhibit inferior beliefs regarding “culture, language and capability” (p. 2).
As a biracial individual living in a predominantly white society, I have experienced that discomfort every day of my life. It is my reality. I straddle two distinct cultures. My two races are constantly in conflict, one against the other. My relatives are unable to recognize that fact that I as a biracial person am personally enriched; I choose to embody and exhibit to the world the best of both cultures. No individual of pure racial descent has that inherent ability. The pervasiveness of preconceived culture-based myths among even the well educated in today’s society is alarming.

Let me share a personal anecdote. I have a white family member who believes that the Black race is inherently intellectually inferior to the white race. When I was in the first grade, she dared to opine to my mother, “Melody will never be college material, but that is okay. She will make a sweet little wife one day.” This coming from a person with an education degree! This same individual openly states, 20 years later, that my academic and professional success is due to the concessions that schools and society has made to facilitate the success of a Black student. Even as an adult, as people make snap judgements based solely on my skin tone, I find myself constantly self-reflecting. The ever-present question is, “Melody, who ARE you?”

The fact that I am biracial does not directly impact my intelligence or my academic performance. My academic achievements are not pursuant to my ethnicity. Rather, my race influences my life experiences. My race is one of many components that have molded me into the woman that I am today. The fourth theme of CRT is the centrality of experiential knowledge. This theory acknowledges that a Person of Color’s experiences are legitimate and that those experiences can be perceived as strengths.

This internal battle extends beyond who I am within the construct of my two families. It is common for people to adopt different personas which are defined by the individuals with whom they socialize. Who I am, and how I relate to my white family and friends differs from the
way I relate to my Black family and friends. The battle between Granny Rose and Granny Vero (Benjamin, 2009) symbolizes the code-switching I personally experience between my two racial identities. In the story, Alvina is able to resolve the conflict between her two grannies. However, the opposition that biracial children experience internally will not be resolved until society at large discards and rejects its racial biases.

My examinations of the books included in this critical content analysis highlighted the importance of an individual’s physical appearance. Typically, in mainstream children’s literature, very little space is dedicated to describing a main character’s appearance. A child is after all, a child. Typically, their physical appearance is somewhat inconsequential. However, this is not the case in the eight books that I analyzed. The books used in this study were selected because they were the only recommended books from the literary database, WorldCat. Most of the books included in this study, revolved around the character’s appearance; in fact, in many cases the protagonist’s appearance became the central theme.

Two physical characteristics were consistently focused on in these picture books. Attention to hair and eyes seemed of great importance. As a child raised primarily by a white mom, I vividly remember my mom trying to comb and detangle my hair. The tears shed were copious, the bottles of L’Oreal detangler were countless. When my mom had had enough, she took me to a white hairstylist. As I sat in the chair and she fingered through my hair, she told my mom that my hair was too Black for her to style. So, my mom packed me up and took me to a Black hairstylist. As I sat in the chair, she reiterated that my hair was much too white and that she wouldn’t touch it. After more tears and detangler, my mom finally found a Latina woman who would religiously French braid my hair each week.

I remember as a child wishing I could have hair like the Disney princess, Ariel. My hair is actually the antithesis of Ariel’s. I would describe my hair as soft, loose curls. In contrast, my
white family, including my own mother has laughed and described my hair as “crazy, wild banshee hair.” As an adult, I have learned to confidently style my hair after pouring money and product into it. To this day, I have residual self-esteem issues associated with my hair. The prevailing pattern evident in the books I analyzed was a superficial affirmation to the biracial child. The prevailing message was that it is okay to share similar physical characteristics with the main character. Interestingly, the authors do not necessarily provide a positive endorsement of the physical characteristics. The message the authors communicated was simply that it is okay to possess these characteristics.

This pattern is troubling on two fronts. First, that authors of the 21st century, writing for multiracial children, feel it is necessary to validate the physical traits of a biracial child. Secondly, that society is unprepared to allow multiracial children to simply be children. The multiracial child is so much more than a conglomerate of “undesirable” physical characteristics. Why are there not more multiracial children’s picture books in which the multiracial protagonist is simply a child, who likes to play with their dog, ride their bike, or engage in a plethora of child-oriented activities? This is what we must communicate to authors and publishers of children’s literature. The multiracial child is simply that, a child. A child whose racially blended family potentially has a unique set of traditions, and certainly family histories, that are not only interesting but enriching to society at large.

The first theme of CRT is the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism. The tenet states that there are four dimensions of racism. First, racism embodies both micro and macro components. Secondly, racism exemplifies both institutional and individual forms. Thirdly, racism possesses both conscious and unconscious elements. Lastly, that racism has a cumulative impact on both and individual and the marginalized group (Solorzano & Yosso,
These tenets of CRT legitimize the lasting impacts of racism. During my life, I have experienced both overt and covert racism. This reality has forever impacted my psyche.

The theme that was excessively repeated in the picture books was the idea of being “just right.” I have heard this “just right” affirmation ad nauseam. The sentiment was soothing in my early childhood, but I resented hearing it as an adolescent. A young child places complete faith in their parents, but as adolescence approaches, the commentary from peers becomes impactful. My mother and my peers at school had different discourses. While my mom viewed me as “just right,” my peers perceived me as “mixed up.”

The picture books in this study illuminated the societal tensions unique to multiracial children. One can hardly argue that the state of being “mixed up” or even being perceived as “mixed up” is a positive statement. From second through fifth grade, I was welcomed into a consistent group of friends. However, in sixth grade, the same group of friends created the “blonde-hair, blue-eye club.” Suddenly, I found myself an outcast. I had not changed; I simply did not have blonde-hair or blue-eyes. It was inevitable that I was slowly excluded. These former friends effectively communicated that I was not one of them. You see, I was “mixed up.”

Subsequently, I learned to see myself through others’ eyes. In high school, I was the Black best friend. Altruistic acquaintances labeled me as their “Oreo” (Black on the outside, white on the inside). I faced an identity crisis. Why couldn’t I just be me, Melody?

The solution is not one of simplistic platitudes. No one child whether white, Black, or green is “just right.” Just as no one child is “mixed up.” Educators, authors, and publishers in the 21st century need to step to the forefront of society and work in unison to obliterate the tenets of racism. Until society better understands, considers, and recognizes the role color playing in our society, the plight of the multiracial child will continue. Educators, authors, and publishers can lead this crusade by creating three dimensional, real, multiracial characters in children’s
literature. We must write and publish stories of multiracial children who live and breathe; children who love ballet, and baseball, and swimming, and dogs. Allow all children to move beyond the stereotypes that society has assigned them. As idyllic as it sounds, I believe this is the true solution.

Having analyzed the eight texts in this critical content analysis, I have become intensely aware of both the intentional and subliminal messages that can be communicated in seemingly innocuous picture books. I am certainly not an advocate of censorship; however, I wish to underscore common themes revolving around multiracial literary characters. It is sometimes difficult to relate to life circumstances divergent from your own. My personal perspective as a biracial woman places me in a unique position to translate and interpret multiracial children’s realities. The issues addressed in this study are my personal realities. Unfortunately, the books that were available for my analysis would not have bolstered my childhood self-confidence or assuaged my insecurities resulting from the fact that I was a biracial child living in a predominantly white society.

Looking Forward

My hope is that my research will inspire authors/educators to write of biracial protagonists in future literary pursuits. In their future depictions in text and illustrations, I urge them to decry the common stereotypes that I have identified in this critical content analysis. My research calls upon publishers to print and distribute outstanding literary works that define the biracial child as simply a unique and loveable child. Educators must incorporate these works into the mainstream curriculum.

Finally, my research enables and facilitates teachers, principals, parents, and marginalized people to better comprehend and effectively address potential issues, including poor scholastic performance and low self-esteem, and enable the building of positive self-
identity among biracial students. To quote a cliche, Dorothy Nolte opined, “children are what they live” (as cited in Nolte & Harris, 1998, p. xii). Truer words were never spoken. If educational materials suggest that multiracial children are unworthy of mention, we should not be shocked that those children become unworthy. If books fail to properly recognize the multiracial child, society should not be alarmed when those very children fail to seek positive recognition. Every child should experience the excitement of recognizing themselves in picture books and eventually literature. When they recognize themselves, they have the right to be proud. Multiracial children should not have to be subject to only stories that teach society about the superficial plights of being multiracial.

My positionality as a cisgender, straight, biracial woman enhanced my research. In the future, I imagine myself recommending books for other teachers and librarians to keep on their shelves and encouraging principals to purchase books for their schools that advocate for multiracial children.

Unfortunately, in the scope of this study I was unable to include an analysis addressing the ethnicity of the authors of multiracial children’s literature. I call upon future research to address this question. Is a Black or biracial author more sensitive to the realities of the biracial child than a white author? Another potential limitation of my study was that seven of the eight texts which were analyzed were specifically addressing only Black/white multiracial children’s fiction characters. Additional books featuring multiracial children from other ethnic mixes are needed. While this study focused on biracial characters that were Black and white, it would be essential for follow up research to analyze specific alternative multiracial mixes. The life perspective of ALL multiracial peoples would enrich society.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Picture Books Included in This Critical Content Analysis

These eight texts were found through the database, WorldCat. In searching for these texts’ four keywords were utilized: biracial, multiracial, years: 2000-2020, children’s books. A total of 10 texts were found but two of the texts were not used in this study because they were about either (a) were about a biracial animal or (b) did not fit in the time span of this research.


