Mirrors and Windows: Literature for African American Male Youth

Jane M. Gangi, PhD
Mount Saint Mary College
janegangi@snet.net

Building a Bridge to Literacy for African American Male Youth
June 3-5
Chapel Hill, NC
The Story of Bebot
and His Mirror Book
Rudine Sims Bishop (1990): All children need “mirror” and “window” books.

Proficient reading begins with books where children can make connections with what they read.

In other words, proficient reading usually begins with mirror books.
Before the Proficient Reader Research...

• We asked, “What’s wrong with poor readers and how do we fix them?”

• The proficient reader research asked, “What do good readers do, and how do we teach it?”
The Proficient Reader Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proficient Readers:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visualize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-correct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Make-text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections.*

Or, in other words, activate prior knowledge.

Black boys often have more “window” books into a White world than “mirror” of themselves, their families, and their communities.

When classroom and library collections are largely by-and-about White people, White children have many more opportunities than children of color to activate their prior knowledge and, therefore, are more likely to become proficient readers.

The default to Whiteness continues in....
Best-Selling Children’s Literature Textbooks

• A chart of 500 years of children’s literature had 2 authors of color in 2004
• A poetry chapter that introduced 15 poets in side boxes had 1 poet of color in 2002
• A folklore chapter that recommended 9 books of American Indian folklore had no American Indian authors in 2002
• And so on...

(Scroggins & Gangi, 2004)
Booklists

• Of 300 books recommended for summer reading on a National Endowment for the Humanities website, K-12, less than 5% were by authors of color, and most of those were at the secondary level (Gangi, 2005)

• The top one hundred books recommended by the National Education Association in 1999 and 2000 were mostly White (Gangi, 2004)

• In a May 2012 issue of The New York Times Book Review, of 15 books and series recommended for “reading on the road,” none were by or about people of color (Shulevitz, 2012)
Of 1200 books in 2004-2005, there were:

- 2 books by-and-about Latinos/Latinas
- 3 books by-and-about Asians
- None by-or-about American Indians
- There were more by-and-about African Americans, though the books were often couched in terms of Black History month, or books that would appeal to no child, such as books on how to have manners (McNair 2008a, 2008b)
Classroom Collections and Curriculum

• In a classroom of 60% children of color, Ferguson found 2 multicultural books—one about Rosa Parks, and the other about Martin Luther King, Jr. (Gangi & Ferguson, 2006)

• In his research Tatum (2006) has found a “glaring omission: the role of text in literacy development” (p. 45)
Literacy Textbooks (Gangi, 2008)

• Beck, McKeown, and Kucan’s (2002) book on vocabulary: 80 children’s books, with 2-3 that could be called multicultural
• Fountas and Pinnell’s (2001) book on literacy for upper elementary recommends 44 author studies, with one author of color
• Fountas and Pinnell’s (1996) book on leveled reading recommends 2,000 titles, with less than 10% by-or-about people of color
• And so on... (literacy textbooks on writing, assessment, comprehension, fluency, readers and writers workshop—all default to Whiteness)
Literacy Textbooks, continued
(Reilly and Gangi, in-process)

- A 2006 book on writer’s craft for boys had no multicultural books
- A 2006 book on closing the literacy gap recommended only two multicultural titles
- A 2006 book on English Language Learners recommended 41 children’s books with one author of color
- A 2008 book on core reading programs recommended 190 titles and authors; four were authors of color
- A 2007 book on nonfiction author studies had no authors of color
- A 2008 book on matching readers with books for independent reading had no authors of color
Transitional and Board Books

• Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler (2010) studied 32,000 transitional books, which are predominately White.

• Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010) studied board books; most characters and authors are White.
Young Adult Book Covers

Hart (2012) studies the “monochrome approach to models”:

• Of 233 recent YA book covers, 224 were of White girls

• In 2011, of 624 “traditionally published” covers, 90% featured a White person; 1.2% featured a Black person

• In 2011, of 200+ independently published books, none of the covers represented a person of color
The Common Core State Text Exemplars for Elementary Children

• Of the 88 books recommended, 69 of the authors are White

• Only 6 of the 88 books focus on the poor and working class

• All of the stories recommended for Kindergarten and first grade are White

• All of the stories for grades 2-3 are White
All this, taken as aggregate, adds up to:

*The Unbearable Whiteness of Literacy Instruction* (Gangi, 2008)

Yet Bell and Clark’s (1998) study showed that culturally relevant reading material aided African American’s children’s comprehension.
Proficient reading is a worthy goal, but there is more...

“They are asking us who they are and we are telling them.”

Julius Lester

Children who are marginalized in classroom and library collections can internalize the experience negatively, thinking there is something wrong with who *they* are—not the adults in power.
African American teenager:

“If them dudes hanging over there on that corner could read something about their history and their culture, they would know that hanging on the corner ain’t so cool. It ain’t what Black is really about.”

(as cited in Spears-Buton, 1998, p. 33)
There is also

**LANGUAGE**

and

**DISCOURSE**

to consider
“We don have no backyard
frontyard neither
we got black magic n
brownstone steps
when the sun go down
we don have no backyard
no sof grass rainbow kites
mushrooms butterflies
we got South Philly summer
when the sun go down” (n. p.)
As Asa Hilliard (2002) reminds us...

- Standard English is a form of nonstandard medieval German

- A medieval German might hear our Standard English the way some hear African American Vernacular English—as ignorant—when, in fact, it has its own beauty and structure

- Our Standard English is only the “standard” because of those who had power
Discourse Analysis: Big D Discourse and little d discourse

Gee (2005):

“We are all members of many...different Discourses, Discourses which often influence each other in positive and negative ways, and which sometimes breed with each other to create new hybrids” (p. 7).

Gee compares what we do when we punish or make children feel bad about their Discourse (which includes much more than language) to the Chinese practice of foot-binding.
Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*

- Studied in the Piedmont Carolinas middle-class White families, working-class White families, and African American working-class families (Trackton)

- Discourse styles of White middle-class children matched that of their teachers: IRE (initiation—response—evaluation)—“What’s the color of the book?” “Red.” “Great!”

- Trackton grandmother: “We don’t talk to our chil’rn like you folks do. We don’t ask ‘em ‘bout colors, names, ‘n things” (p. 109)—but they did ask them how to solve problems, and to make metaphors and analogies
Recommendations

• Find ways to bring diverse texts in a range of genres into all subjects, including books like Ruth Forman’s

• Acknowledge that students whose primary Discourse may not have been the Discourse of school have more challenges in gaining academic Discourse than students whose primary Discourse is similar to the Discourse of school

• Avoid binary terms about language: correct/incorrect; right/wrong; proper/improper.

• Validate the student’s primary Discourse

• While Standard English must be taught, do it in a way that does not denigrate
Consider nonhierarchica] visuals

Standard English

We do not have a backyard nor a frontyard.

We have a South Philadelphia summer when the sun goes down.

African American Vernacular English

We don have no backyard frontyard neither

we got South Philly summer when the sun go down
Pedagogical Considerations

- Embrace culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Callins, 2006; Ladson-Billings 2009, 2002)

Culturally relevant pedagogy:
- Focuses on students’ academic achievement
- Supports students’ cultural competence
- Promotes students’ socio-political consciousness

(Ladson-Billings, 2002, pp. 110-111)
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
Includes:

• Culturally relevant texts (mirror books) about issues that matter (Flowers & Flowers, 2008; Husband, 2012; Morrell, 2004, 2008; Tatum, 2005, 2006)

• Such texts may help in the development of identity; identity is a significant factor in Black males’ success (Davis, 2003)

• Choice from a wide range of genres, including humor, horror, action, and informational texts (Flowers & Flowers, 2008; Husband, 2012)
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Also Includes Tapping Into the Literacy Practices of Much of the African American Community:

- Storytelling (Flowers & Flowers, 2008; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012)

- The arts—visual arts, drama, and choral performances (Bishop, 2007; Boykin, 1994; Ford, 2002; Hale, 2004; Hall, 2006; Heath, 2004; Marzano, 2003; McMillon & Edwards, 2008; Sanacore, 2004; Winner & Hetland, 2000)

- Other forms of active learning (Bandy & Moore, 2012; Callins, 2006; Husband, 2012)
Active Learning to Engage Black Boys

• Chorally read 10-year-old Brandon Johnson’s *Black Ancestors* from Davida Adedjouma’s *The Palm of My Heart*

• Create tableaux

• Allow the tableaux to come alive through storytelling
Davida Adedjouma, and Gregory Christie’s

*The Palm of My Heart: Poetry by African American Children*
Unison
Black

Solo
ancestors
died for my

Unison
Freedom

Antiphonal I
My great uncle

Antiphonal II
Jimmy

Line Around
RISKED
his life to help
Black people vote.

Reverse Cumulative
My great great grandmother
voted
for the first time
when she was
80 years old

Cumulative
Black
is
boldness.
Check-It-Out Circle

In a circle:

• Preview book

• Pass to the right after about a minute; with 20 children, in 20 minutes 20 books will be introduced

• Upon completion, ask: “Which books did you see that you want to go back to during independent reading time?” and “How did you go about previewing the book in such a short time?” (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2003, p. 95)
Variations

Slow down the check-it-out circle and ask:

- What the children notice about the art?
- The language?
- Other observations?

Merle Rumble (in-process), when collecting data for her dissertation, conducted the check-it-out circle six times to introduce Black boys to literature depicting Black males with powerful results.
Use the Books Depicting Black Males to Teach Writer’s Craft

**Endings**, from Savion Glover and Bruce Weber’s *Savion: My Life in Tap*

“And if I have anything to do with it, tap is going to keep growing. It’s going to have its proper place at last. I want tap to be like a baseball game, a football game, people coming to see us at Yankee Stadium. I want tap to be on TV I want tap to be in the movies. I want tap to be massive. Worldwide.” (p. 78)
Simile (and personification)
Melrose Cooper and Nneka Bennett’s (2000)
Gettin’ Through Thursday

“Mondays and Tuesdays amble by just fine.”
But, as funds begin to dwindle, by Wednesday,
“[W]e feel it comin’, like an earthquake rumblin’ underground, makin’ folks edgy before they even know why. And the next day, my family and I grit all we got toward getting’ through Thursday. That’s because payday at Mama’s school where she’s a lunch lady doesn’t come till Friday” (n. p.).
Other important factors

• Parent involvement (Bandy & Moore, 2012; Edwards, 2010; Harris & Graves, 2010; Head Start, 2012; Irvine, 1990)

• Critical literacy (Haddix & Rojas, 2011; Morrell, 2004, 2008)
Promising Practices

• Transmediation (Reilly, Gangi, & Cohen, 2010): Create opportunities for students to compose meaning across symbol systems. Reilly’s work with middle school English Learners resulted in deepening literacy learning—and the ELLs, who had a passing rate of 0% on state tests, moved to 50% in six months

• Acknowledge and encourage multimodal literacies and the New Literacy Studies (Morrell, 2004, 2008; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009)

• Delpit (1995) has suggested drama and theater as way to help African American children gain Standard English
Future Research

• Boute (2012) examined 429 articles on urban education from 2005-2010; less than 8% were on early childhood and elementary

• Harris and Graves (2010) say there is a “dearth of literature on constructs related to reading achievement in the elementary school” (p. 447).

• Davis (2003): “Scant attention” has been given to early literacy

• I searched EBSCO: “Early literacy” + “African American males” (“black males,” etc.): ONE hit.
Future Research, continued

Tatum (2012): “I could not identify one urban school district in the United States with 40 percent or more of African-American males reading at a proficient level” (p.2)

Support Dr. Tatum’s Center for Reading Achievement of African-American Adolescent Males

Start a similar center for early childhood and childhood
Paradigm Shifts

Edmin (2012): “Different is not deficient”

Funds of Knowledge (FoK) (Moll & Cammarota, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2005): FoK assumes families are not deficient, and they have expertise and resources that can inform classroom instruction. Teachers become students not only of their students but of their families as well. FoK disrupts the “discourse of deficiency” (Oughton, 2010)

“At-potential” (thanks to Laconia Therrio for this insight) instead of “at-risk”

“You have to believe in your students’ ability to learn” (Dichele & Gordon, 2006, p. 269)
Consider Political Action

Express concern about the lack of representation of children of color and the poor in the Elementary Text Exemplars of the Common Core State Standards

Express concern about the 13 years of “close reading” in the Common Core State Standards, which omits the active, engaged, embodied learning Black boys need (Rashid, 2009)

Express concern about the handing over of $16 billion to test makers and computer makers, which siphons off money that could go to the purchasing of books depicting Black males and the professional learning of teachers on how to effectively work with Black males from an early age (Rashid, 2009)
Contact

The U. S. Department of Education:
Arne.Duncan@ed.gov
Massie.Ritsch@ed.gov

The Council of Chief State School Officers
http://www.ccsso.org/

The National Governors Association
http://www.nga.org/cms/home.html

Students Achievement Partners
info@studentsachieve.net

Obama for America: call 312-698-3670
Write: Obama for America, P.O. Box 803638, Chicago, IL, 60680, c/o Obama for America Feedback.
References


Edmin, C. (2012). Yes, black males are different, but different is not deficient. *Phi Delta Kappan, 93*(5), 13-16.


References, continued


References, continued


