ORIGINAL PAPER

Stories of Multiracial Experiences in Literature for Children, Ages 9–14

Amina Chaudhri · William H. Teale

Abstract This study analyzed 90 realistic novels written and published in the United States between the years 2000 and 2010 and featuring mixed race characters. The researchers examined specific textual features of these works of contemporary and historical fiction and employed Critical Race Theory to contextualize the books within paradigms about multiracial identity. Findings indicated three broad trends in representations of mixed race identity with an almost equal number of novels falling among three descriptive categories. Books in the Mixed Race In/Visibility category depicted stereotypical experiences and provided little or no opportunity for critique of racism. Mixed Race Blending books featured characters whose mixed race identity was descriptive but not functional in their lives. Mixed Race Awareness books represented a range of possible life experiences for biracial characters who responded to social discomfort about their racial identity in complex and credible ways. This study has implications for research and pedagogy in the fields of education and children's literature as they expand to become more inclusive of this type of diversity.

Keywords Mixed race · Biracial · Multiracial · Children's literature · Multicultural literature

Amina Chaudhri is an Assistant Professor in the Teacher Education Department at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. She teaches courses in Reading and Language Arts.
William H. Teale is Professor of Literacy, Language and Culture at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He teaches courses in Children's and Adolescent Literature.

A. Chaudhri (✉)
Northeastern Illinois University, 5500 N. St. Louis Avenue, LWH 4019, Chicago, IL 60625, USA
e-mail: a-chaudhri@neiu.edu

W. H. Teale
University of Illinois at Chicago, 1040 West Harrison Street (MC 147), EPASW Room #1230, Chicago, IL 60607, USA

🍎 Springer

Introduction

There has long been, and continues to be, debate about what literature "is" and the roles it plays in people's lives (Garber, 2011; Kant, 1892): Does it serve social ends? Moral ends? Is it fundamentally an aesthetic experience? But no matter what one's beliefs about literature's purposes, theory and research in children's literature make one thing clear: literature can serve as a tool for growth, a significant factor in children's identity formation (Gee, 2001; Heath, 2011). Thus, the content of what is available for children to read and what teachers select for use in their classrooms can influence the direction of children's growth.

Over the past two decades in the United States, as issues of multiculturalism and civil and human rights have become more prominent on the cultural landscape, identity-based movements have received increasing attention. One issue in this realm that is currently taking on increased significance is mixed race/multiracial identity. In the 1990s, pressure from groups such as Project RACE and The Association for MultiEthnic Americans forced Congress to urge a change in the U.S. Census standards. Accordingly, the 2000 Census allowed Americans to "mark one or more" racial categories, and 6.8 million people identified as multiracial. In 2010 that number increased to 9 million. These figures suggest a significant shift in the ways Americans view themselves racially.

Parallel to the ways that feminist, civil rights, and LGBTQ movements have impacted the creation of various bodies of literature, the multiracial movement can be viewed as influencing the work being published as children's literature. Whether young readers are actively seeking racial affirmation or looking for insights into others not like themselves, representation in books can explicitly or subliminally influence understanding of racial identity. Accordingly, we examined all the children's books we were able to identify using various processes (described below) featuring multiracial characters that were deemed appropriate for 9–14 year-olds and were published between 2000 and 2010 in order to get a sense of what young readers might understand about multiracial identity as imagined by the authors of these works.

Stories of Multiracial Experiences

Novels featuring mixed race characters are generally folded into the larger category of multicultural literature and frequently are classified according to the non-white element in the story. In some respects, in the U.S. context, creators are ahead of researchers in addressing the role of mixed race for readers in the 9–14 age group. Authors such as Jacqueline Woodson, Mildred Taylor, Jamie Adoff, Sharon Flake, and Richard Peck, for example, have been including characters of mixed racial heritage and addressing this heritage as a central feature of their stories.

In general, the body of research in multicultural literature makes only sporadic or tangential mention of mixed race issues. Yokota and Frost (2002/2003), Smith (2001a), Sands-O'Connor (2001), and Reynolds (2009) have written specifically about multiracial characters in literature, but this work has not comprehensively examined novels written for the intermediate/middle school student. The relative lack

of research in this area has resulted in a lack of language with which to discuss such literature and also means that there is a need for describing what literature exists.

Our starting point for this study, then, was creating parameters for identifying books featuring a mixed race protagonist or important secondary character. We used the terms "mixed race," "biracial," and "multiracial" in our search to identify published novels. Contemporary scholarship in mixed race studies uses these and other descriptors with the understanding that they are all socially constructed labels. Thus, we employ the terms interchangeably in this discussion in keeping with current discourse. We were interested in both contemporary realistic fiction and historical fiction, as these genres were, in the course of their narratives, most likely to address societal and personal issues related to being mixed race.

Overview and Theoretical Frame of the Study

This study was a descriptive content analysis of children's contemporary realistic and historical fiction that includes characters of multiracial heritage. It sought to understand the nature of multiracial representation in the literature with respect to dominant ideological perspectives about mixed race identity. The study was guided by the question: what is current children's literature aimed at 9–14 year-olds saying about the experience of being mixed race?

The work was grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), which puts race at the center of the analysis. CRT is based on the notion that racism is ubiquitous and must be revealed as such. Literary analysis that uses CRT describes the myriad ways in which racism operates in the language, character portrayal, and creation of a book. In exposing overt and subtle ways racism permeates literature, such analysis has an epistemological function in that it contributes to awareness about ideological manifestations of racism. Most critical race theorists in the U.S. (e.g., Gloria Ladson-Billings, Derrick Bell, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks) look at issues pertaining to African Americans. CRT-based research in children's literature has exposed racial stereotypes and other derogatory representations of people of color, most frequently of African Americans; but others have examined racial constructions of Latinos (e.g., Chappell and Faltis, 2007; Mestre and Nieto, 1996; Heller et al., 1999), Asians (Aoki, 1981; Ching, 2002; Khorana, 1993), and Native Americans (Stewart, 2002; Franklin, 1993).

In literary analysis, CRT makes use of counterstory, the story that speaks against the dominant narrative and seeks to create a diverse and complex story of human experience. Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) paper, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education" offers a nuanced explication of ideas useful to this study of mixed race identity in children's literature. They highlight Delgado's (1995) premise that social reality is a construct of discourse, with storytelling as a way of challenging oppressive discourse, beginning with "naming one's own reality" (p. 57). In fiction, the way authors and characters name racial reality contributes to a reader's identity construction and is part of that discourse. Literature plays a key role in telling the counterstories, adding to the diversity of human experiences. Children's books that include mixed race characters have the potential to add to the diversity in that they may interrupt the focus on (assumed) monoracial identity. However, the extent to which

those books have been crafted as, and can be read as, counterstories remains to be seen and is a guiding question in the analysis in this research.

The study involved (1) identifying the corpus of novels in which mixed race identity is a factor, followed by (2) analyzing the literary representations of mixed race characters within their social and historical contexts. For the latter purpose of analyzing literary representations, Chaudhri (2012) adapted the framework created by Sims Bishop (1982) in her categorization of African American experiences represented in children's fiction. Sims Bishop's framework analyzed books from three perspectives. Texts characterized as "Social Conscience" books reflected the social concerns at the time of creation of the books and centered on issues of integration of African Americans into white society. "Melting Pot" books focused largely on universal themes; they reflected a fully integrated world in which differences, that is, non-white traits, were erased, resulting in harmonious assimilation. The third category was described as "Culturally Conscious," literature that sought to affirm a diverse, rich and complex set of African American experiences as distinctly different (socially, historically, culturally) from hegemonic society.

These three categories were conceptually adapted for this study to frame representations of mixed race identity in children's literature as:

- Mixed Race In/Visibility (MRI/V): biracial identity is a source of external or internal conflict.
- Mixed Race Blending (MRB): biracial identity is marked but inconsequential to story.
- Mixed Race Awareness (MRA): recognition of biracial heritage, complex negotiation with credible resolutions.

Sims Bishop reminds us that literature has the ability to provide readers with mirrors in which they see themselves, and windows through which readers can learn about the experiences of others. In today's increasingly racially-mixed world, it is significant that multiracial identity be represented in literature, be received by readers, and play a role in shaping a perception of what it means to be multiracial.

Methodology

The study employed systematic content analysis procedures (Cohen et al., 2007) applied through a lens of CRT (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) to describe the corpus of books focused on mixed race characters published in the United States between 2000 and 2010 that were deemed appropriate for children aged 9–14. We examined the set of texts described below, coding and statistically analyzing them. CRT informed our examination and critique of racial construction in the books.

The first step in the study was identifying the list of titles with relevant content. Selection of books was constrained within three parameters: publication date (2000–2010), genre, and age of intended readership (9–14). We chose to focus on contemporary realistic and historical fiction because these narrative genres function to recreate realistic situations and characters that readers can view as windows or mirrors in relation to their own lives. Fiction writers tend to pay close attention to

features such as complexity of character, description and language. These three features in particular allow for theoretical analysis because of the personal connections readers can make. Many in-print and online bibliographies, listservs and book lists exist for multicultural children's literature and include books with mixed race content, but they generally do not identify books focused on mixed race content as such; so the first phase of the search reached out broadly. The Library of Congress (LC) uses the subject heading "racially mixed people–fiction"; and at the time of the search, identified 157 titles for children and young adults as such. Searches of online sites (Cooperative Children's Book Center, *Horn Book Magazine*, Chicago Public Library, Amazon) as well as personal websites and relevant children's literature blogs (by both children's literature authors and critics/bloggers) yielded additional titles not identified by the LC. An initial review of all of the books identified through these means was conducted, taking into account the three aforementioned parameters; this yielded a final corpus of 90 titles.[1]

The content analysis involved reading all the books and (1) identifying patterns in specific elements of each book (e.g., character's racial mix, gender, age, socio-economic environment, racial makeup of character's environment) that gave insight into the characteristics of the corpus and (2) describing the books within the conceptual frame articulated previously: MRI/V, MRB, or MRA.

Findings

As a preface, it is worth noting that the final corpus of 90 books was published over the course of a decade. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, approximately 5,000 children's books are published annually in the U.S. That makes these 90 books approximately 0.2 % of the books published in the past decade. If we were to estimate that perhaps 20 % of the children's books published in a year had an intended readership of children aged 9–14, that still means that only 1 % of published books aimed at this age range included mixed race protagonists. This clearly indicates a dearth of mixed race voices and stories in the realm of children's literature.

Looking at patterns in content elements across the 90 books yielded a number of interesting results. For this phase of the analysis, we examined eight content features of the texts (see Table 1). These features were used because they represent potential influences on characters' lives vis-à-vis their racial identity. As such, the features serve as lenses on the corpus of books addressing mixed race identity for readers aged 9–14.

Content Features: Mixed Race Elements of the Books

Examination of patterns across the eight elements summarized in Table 1 provides several insights into the nature of realistic and historical fiction featuring racially mixed characters.

---

[1] The complete list of titles is included as supplementary material on the Springer website.

Table 1 Features of books with mixed race characters

Feature	Number (total = 90)	Percentage of sample
Genre		
Contemporary fiction	59	66
Historical fiction	31	34
Racial mix		
African American and white	32	36
American Indian and white	19	21
Asian and white	16	18
Latino and white	11	12
Non-white mix	12	13
Gender		
Female	57[a]	63
Male	37[a]	41
Age		
8–12	36	40
13–16	54	60
Family situation		
Biological parents absent	45	50
Biological parents play peripheral role	12	13
Biological parent(s) and/or grandparent(s) play significant role	31	34
Foster parents play significant role	2	2
Socioeconomics of environment		
Struggling	23	26
Managing	22	24
Comfortable	17	18
Unable to determine	28	31
Racial makeup of environment		
Racially homogeneous	36	40
Racially heterogeneous	16	18
Lacking community	38	42
Setting of book		
Urban	46	51
Rural	23	26
Small town	11	12
Suburban	5	5
Unable to determine	5	5

[a] Some books had both male and female mixed-race characters so total exceeds n of 90. Percentages are rounded

First, with respect to the *racial mix of protagonists*, 87 % (78) of the books featured characters who were part white and part non-white. The remaining 13 % (12) of the books portrayed characters who were some combination of non-white races (Black and Asian, Latino and Arab, American Indian and Latino). Work in mixed race studies (e.g., Brunsma, 2005; Spencer, 2011; Williams, 2005) argues

that mixed race issues tend to attract scholarly and/or political attention when one of the races is white. This same trend, therefore, is also seen in children's literature.

Information about mixed race *characters' environments* was also interesting. Approximately half of the overall corpus of books was set in urban contexts and approximately one quarter in rural settings. By the same token, of the 59 contemporary realistic fiction books, 69 % (41) were in urban settings while only 16 % (5) of the 31 historical fiction books were in urban settings. This suggests that when contemporary authors address racial mixing, they tend to associate it historically with rural areas, and currently with urban environments. Furthermore, of the 23 novels set in rural areas, 70 % (16) had American Indian and white biracials; the predominance of American Indian and white biracial characters associated with rural settings and historical times suggests an essentializing of this population's life experiences that in the literary world for children at least, is rarely imagined beyond those boundaries. All but one author of these 16 books was white, suggesting a predominance of outsider perspective in the literary telling of this population's history. There was more diversity of racial mixing in books set in urban areas: specifically, 100 % of the non-white mixed characters were found living in urban settings.

Additional information about context included characters' socioeconomic circumstances, family structures and the racial and ethnic makeup of their environments. These features were studied because race and class are intricately connected factors in North American society and tend to bear significantly on identity construction. Family and community influences are integral to how children understand their identities. A salient finding about *family situations* was that in almost half of the books one or both biological parents were absent, dead, or basically uninvolved in the their children's lives. Solitary protagonists are common in children's literature and support an individualistic ideology, so this finding was perhaps not surprising. However, interracial relationships described as failing because of "racial incompatibility" echo and sustain segregationist notions. Biracial characters either speculated about the notion that racial or cultural differences were the likely reason that their biological parents were not together or were directly told so.

Finally in terms of *context*, it was useful to examine the racial/ethnic makeup of the community in which authors placed their mixed race protagonists since racial environment influences one's racial self-concept (Rockquemore et al., 2009). Only 18 % of the books' protagonists operated in racially diverse contexts. In 40 % of the books, biracial characters lived in racially homogeneous contexts. That is to say, these protagonists were the only biracials in monoracial environments. Of these 36 books, 29 had biracial characters in white communities and 7 had biracial protagonists in Black communities. In almost half of the sample of 90 books, protagonists were alone or disconnected from people around them. In other words, there were no adults or peers with whom racial identity could be compared or contrasted, and characters' understanding of who they were developed in relative isolation. This was particularly true of American Indian characters who were depicted as being on journeys that removed them from populated environments. With the exception of two books, all the racially-diverse and homogeneous African American contexts were urban.

The general *socioeconomic situation* of the child protagonists was able to be determined for 70 % of the books. Of these 63 books, situations were varied across Struggling, Managing and Comfortable. When examined by genre, half of the historical fiction economic situations could not be determined and the other half were predominantly Struggling, with a few Managing. Contemporary realistic fiction novels provided more information and represented more economic diversity. Overall, 50 % of the characters were in Struggling or Managing situations. These results suggest an association of mixed race lives with economically precarious urban environments.

Deeper Analysis of Texts

The content analysis just described revealed thematic patterns across the 90 books. The deeper literary analysis using a CRT lens was needed to contextualize the representations of multiracial characters with respect to dominant ideological perspectives about mixed race identity within their social and historical milieu. This phase of the analysis served to add insight to the question of what current children's literature says about the experience of being mixed race.

As mentioned earlier, Bishop's (1982) rubric was adapted to frame this phase of examining representations of mixed race identity. Grouping the literature in the three analytic categories of MRI/V, MRB, and MRA provided a means of talking about the salient issues in the books vis-à-vis current discourse about mixed race identity. In the following section we describe the features of the three categories used to examine the books and provide examples of representative texts.

Mixed Race In/Visibility

The distinguishing feature of this category derives from Sims Bishop's "Social Conscience" category in which being African American was represented as the problem rather than the existence of racism as the problem. Being multiracial was also depicted as problematic for the characters and for those around them in approximately one-third (34 %) of the books in the corpus. We labeled this category In/Visibility (rather than Invisibility or Visibility) because it captures the concurrent state of being both highly visible—owing to a racially ambiguous appearance—and at the same time marginalized because of it. Often, physical appearance was the only marker of racial assignment in MRI/V books. In these books mixed race identity was the central focus of the story, and negotiation of racial identity was a source of external or internal conflict. For example, Danny Lopez, the protagonist of *Mexican WhiteBoy* (de la Peña, 2008), has to negotiate his discomfort in both Latino and white contexts. He feels out of place and is unable to connect with people because he perceives himself as a misfit.

MRI/V books typically presented biracial characters in seemingly monoracial settings with monoracial characters who did not suffer identity crises because of their racial heritage. In Carolyn Marsden's (2010) novel, *Take Me With You*, all the characters are orphan girls in post-WWII Italy, but only Susana is convinced that she will not be adopted and attributes that largely to her biracial identity. The other

girls do not have such concerns. Such a depiction reinscribes false notions of racial homogeneity and further locates the "problem" of being mixed within the character rather than in society.

MRI/V books featured characters experiencing isolation from multiple groups, usually both groups to which they were racially affiliated. In Jaime Adoff's (2008) novel in verse, *The Death of Jayson Porter*, Jayson's self-hatred is rooted in his racial identity and the rejection he experiences as a result of being biracial and unable to find acceptance in either African American or white communities. Thus, for the mixed race character, racial visibility was constant because outward markers such as appearance and/or a name, were called into question. MRI/V books highlighted the element of being mixed either by itself or conflated with other identity questions. In many, if not all cases, being mixed race was viewed as one more problem in a string of problems facing a character, as if adding salt to the wound.

Characters in these books underwent some kind of transformation in order to resolve the identity conflict. In *Black Mirror* (Werlin, 2001), Frances shields herself from hateful comments about her racially-ambiguous appearance, "dwarf, freak, mix, some kind of Asian" (p. 4) by withdrawing socially and emotionally and hating her body and face. Ultimately, success in solving the mystery of her brother's death provides a glimmer of self-confidence in which she accepts her appearance. Thus, protagonists in MRI/V books were depicted as having to internally resolve emotional conflict about their racial identity, while critique of racist environments was completely missing. MRI/V books reflect stereotypic master-narratives about dysfunction and trauma as inevitable in the lives of biracial people.

Mixed Race Blending

These books were similar to Sims Bishop's "Melting Pot" books. Approximately one-third of the corpus (34 %) fit in this category. As a group, MRB books contained a more diverse range of mixed race experiences than either MRI/V or MRA. At one end of the range MRB books depicted mixed race characters who were no different from the other supposedly monoracial characters present: they "blended" into their environments. The African American-white protagonists of *Cashay* (McMullen, 2009) and *Stringz* (Wenberg, 2010) self-identified as African American and were accepted as such. The detail of a white parent was descriptive and explained the protagonist's lighter skin tone, hair and/or eyes. Racial identity was of little consequence to these stories, as plot and character development relied on other elements. The two aforementioned and three other similar characters were depicted in homogenous African American contexts. For characters in homogenous white contexts, the non-white element of their identities was descriptive, explaining appearance or providing a "multi-culti" (Reynolds, 2009, p. 21) flavor.

Some MRB books depicted mixed heritage as tangential to the plot, though the heritage factor provided an instrumental narrative detail such as serving to mark the character as atypical in a variety of ways, one of which was racial. The biracial identity of D, in *After Tupac and D Foster* (Woodson, 2008) adds to her enigma; she comes and goes unpredictably and seems to have no roots. Lin, in *Hiroshima Dreams* (Easton, 2007) is a spiritual, reflective child, whose cerebral nature allows

her to make friends with a diverse group of unconventional peers at school. In these books being mixed race puts the protagonists on the margins of their context and either promotes social isolation or alliances with other marginalized characters. At the furthest end of the range of MRB books were ones in which a character's mixedness was revealed by accident or through necessity. In these cases the biracial character lived as white prior to the revelation, as in the following three historical fiction novels. Georgie, in *Say You Are My Sister* (Brady, 2000), lives precariously as white in Georgia in 1944, knowing that her mother was black. Celli, in *Black Angels* (Murphy, 2001) discovers that her grandmother is African American, which in the context of Jim Crow South would mean she was "passing," though this discovery does not impact her life. Eva in *Last Dance on Holladay Street* (Carbone, 2005) thinks she is a light-skinned African American until she learns that her mother was a white prostitute who gave her up for adoption to save her own life.

Mixed Race Awareness

A little under one-third (31 %) of the 90 books depicted MRA. Based on Sims Bishop's "Culturally Conscious" category, these novels included characters who recognized and were recognizable for their cultural/racial differences, and who knew something of their ancestral heritages. The characters had community, people who participated in the development of their identities in a variety of ways. Biracial characters in MRA books were aware that their mixed race identity afforded access to different groups, even as they may have been marginalized because of it. Mai and Ming, the brother and sister in Sharon Flake's *Money Hungry* (Flake, 2001) and *Begging For Change* (Flake, 2004), negotiate their Korean/African American heritage in a range of credible teenage ways: rejection, celebration, exoticization, acceptance. Cassidy, in *Rain is Not My Indian Name* (Smith, 2001b) learns that she must recognize her own assumptions about other people's identities even as she disabuses them of stereotypes about American Indians.

   Some MRA books focused on mixed race identity but not in the problematic way represented in MRI/V books. MRA characters grappled with racism/racial group membership, often linked to other social factors and resolved problems without tragedy or trauma. Protagonists responded to prejudice with believable self-confidence, indicating that the foundations of their racial identity were secure. They emerged from their experiences intact. Minnie, the protagonist of *The Other Half of My Heart* (Frazier, 2010), and Brendan, in *Brendan Buckley's Universe and Everything In It* (Frazier, 2007) are rejected by people who do not accept their biracial heritage. With help from supportive adults and peers they challenge prejudice and change attitudes with some success. Joseph Bruchac's novels *Hidden Roots* (2004) and *The Dark Pond* (2004) expose the systemic racism inflicted on American Indians, some of whom were forced to shed tribal identity in order to survive eugenics efforts. Sims Bishop describes culturally conscious books as coming from within the culture. An insider perspective can help lend authenticity and complexity of experience since it is not the telling of the story of the "other."

   Table 2 summarizes the categorization of the 90 books, by genre, into the three categories just described.

Table 2 Frequency of mixed race representation across genre and category

| Racial mix | Mixed race category | | | | | |
| | In/visibility | | Blending | | Awareness | |
	CRF	HF	CRF	HF	CRF	HF
African American & white	7	3	7	4	6	6
African American & Latino	1	–	2	–	–	–
African American & Asian	–	–	–	–	2	–
Asian & white	2	2	10	–	5	–
Latino & Arab	–	–	1	–	–	–
Latino & white	3	1	4	–	3	–
American Indian & Latino	–	–	1	–	1	–
American Indian & white	2	10	–	2	2	3
Total by genre	15	16	25	6	19	9
Total for both genres	31		31		28	

Patterns Across Books: Content and Literary Features

Several findings emerged by examining patterns across the 90 books when both Mixed Race Category and Genre were considered. First, as mentioned previously, the books were fairly evenly distributed among the three categories: 31 books (34 %), were MRI/V; 31 books (34 %) were MRB, and 28 (31 %) were identified as MRA books. When examined by genre, however, it was found that, of the contemporary realistic fiction books, 25 % (15) were in the MRI/V category, 42 % (25) in MRB, and 33 % (19) in the MRA category. By comparison, 52 % (16) of the historical fiction books were in the MRI/V category, 19 % (6) in MRB, and 29 % (9) in MRA.

Table 2 also reaffirms a finding noted earlier: mixed race identity tends to be thought of in terms of a white and non-white binary—91 % (82) books in this study featured characters who were part white, and part non-white. In the remaining 9 % (8) characters were some combination of non-white races. This finding stands in contrast to a recent *New York Times* report (Saulny, 2011) of Census data indicating considerably higher proportions of intermarriages among people of color. By far the largest number of white/non-white books focused on mixed Black and white heritage ($n = 33$, 35 %). Yet, according to the same *New York Times* report, Black and white intermarriages are the fewest of all groups. Hispanics have the highest rate of intermarriage with other groups of color. Yet, these stories are virtually absent in the books represented in this study.

Several other features stand out among the findings. First, 66 % (59) of the entire corpus is contemporary realistic fiction, supporting the myth that racial mixing is a recent phenomenon (though expression of biracial identity *is* fairly recent). The largest proportion of contemporary realistic fiction novels fell into the Blending category 81 % ($n = 31$), with 48 % ($n = 31$) in the In/Visibility, and 67 % ($n = 28$) in the Awareness categories. This suggests that more books represent

"generic" forms of biracial identity rather than problematic or affirming forms. There were 17 contemporary fiction books with Asian and white characters. Ten of those 17 (59 %) books fell into the MRB category, suggesting that readers looking for Asian-white experiences are most likely to find books in which biracial identity is inconsequential. Only half as many contemporary fiction, Asian-white books (29 %) exhibited significant, positive representation (MRA books). African American and white mixed race stories fairly evenly distributed across the categories within contemporary realistic fiction, but other mixes were rarely represented (1–4 books).

Of the 19 books about American Indian and white biracials, 15 were historical fiction, 10 of which fell into the In/Visibility category, suggesting that problems are associated with being American Indian and mixed and that these stories belong only in the past. This finding stands in contrast to the *New York Times* (Saulny, 2011) report on Census data that finds contemporary American Indians are as likely to marry whites as another American Indian. Readers looking for novels that speak to these changing demographics are not likely to find any contemporary representation, only problematic historical representations full of stereotypes.

The lack of representation of Latinos in this corpus of books is striking. According to the U.S. Census, Latinos are the largest racial minority in the U.S., and intermarriage between Hispanics and other groups is common (Saulny, 2011). These stories were the least represented in either genre. One explanation for the scarcity of such mixed race representation in historical fiction might be that multiracial identity as a separate kind of racial identity has only recently entered the national discourse, making it anachronistic to mark stories in the past with the label. In other words, there may be more books with mixed race characters than can be found through systematic searches.

Discussion

The significance of children's literature in the education of an increasingly diverse population in the U.S. is appreciated by scholars, educators, parents and librarians, so it makes sense that the realm of multicultural children's literature be expanded to include stories that reflect the lives of multiracial Americans. Through content and literary analyses this study sought to describe experiences of being racially mixed that appear in contemporary children's literature. This issue was investigated along two lines:

- What historical/ideological perspectives inform books about multiracial characters?
- To what degree are contemporary authors maintaining or challenging racial paradigms?

Overall, the study found that there are currently too few books easily available to readers interested in mixed race windows or mirrors. Nine million Americans indicated in the 2010 Census that they identified as multiracial, and the range of mixes is vast. Our findings indicate that only a small section of mixed race America

is represented in contemporary realistic and historical fiction. The most frequently occurring image in children's books of the past decade that feature mixed race characters is that of a teenage, female, African American-white biracial protagonist (56/90 female, 21/56 B/W female). Most mixed race characters are shown to be economically struggling or just managing; and it is likely that one or both of their biological parents are dead, absent, or peripheral. Stories are equally likely to be set in urban or non-urban areas, and the characters' immediate surroundings are racially homogeneous (mostly white), with the protagonists being the only biracials. With such a typical depiction and the overall dearth of books featuring mixed race characters that are available, it seems unlikely that many multiracial American children are seeing themselves in the stories they read.

Historical Perspectives and Current Stereotypes

In the early 1900s scientists and sociologists (e.g., Gobineau, 1853; Stonequist, 1937; Delany, 1879) disseminated theories that ascribed biological reasons for mental, physical and social instability to mixed race people. Accordingly, this Marginal Man theory became manifest in literature as the tragic mulatto/a, mixed race orphan, and mentally unstable characters. Perceptions of biracial people being inherently troubled in various ways thus seeped into the national cultural consciousness.

As found in this study, the Marginal Man theory remains present in today's children's literature, with approximately one of every three books featuring mixed race characters being categorized as MRI/V. These books contained mixed race characters for whom racial identity was a source of conflict. From the start these characters had internalized racism and exhibited the effects in the form of low self-esteem and self-hatred (Delgado, 1995). What the characters experienced leading up to this point is not shown in the books and as a result, being biracial seems to be the *reason* characters are isolated and unhappy. Depictions of racism are filtered through the targets' memories, dreams, diary entries, even as imagined moments. Their plight invokes our sympathy, but isolation comes across as a reasonable choice for them.

Another trait of this paradigm about mixed race people is what Reynolds (2009) calls the "Missing Half" status of the mixed race subject. In 1937 Everett Stonequist put it this way: "There is something universal in the problem of racial hybrids … Theirs is a problem of incomplete social assimilation as well as of incomplete biological amalgamation" (as cited in Ifekwunigwe, 2004, p. 65). Characters felt incomplete because they lacked connections with an absent parent who they imagined would fill a racial/cultural gap. Those connections were described in terms of complexion, language and/or traditions. Since most of the characters felt the absent parent left because they could not accept their children, the implication is that the biracial subject is the cause of isolation and thus they were doomed to a hopeless lifelong quest to seek acceptance.

This theme of being socially and biologically incomplete as an essential feature of mixed race identity—rather than the construct of a racist ideological paradigm—is present in far too many books for 9 to 14 year-olds and perpetuates problematic depictions of biracial identity. Such books rest on the myth of the "inevitability" of mixed race dysfunction by linking contemporary literature with century-old science.

The longevity of these ideas says something about how much still needs to be done to change them. One the one hand, these books show us that prejudice operates in subtle ways, like neglect, isolation and invisibility. On the other hand, even readers who can relate to these stories of despair may come away feeling that only drastic events, total emotional independence, and sheer force of will can effect change.

As Williams (2005) points out, protecting children's self-esteem was key for the advocates of the multiracial movement: the damage to self-esteem is evident and critically important. But to treat it as inherent to the biracial experience is dangerous. We hope that our finding that many children's books currently available present such depictions of being biracial exposes this myth of inevitability and will cause educators to think deeply about what image of being biracial a book takes on. Teachers and librarians who select books with such MRI/V depictions may want to rethink their choices or at least also provide books depicting a variety of biracial experiences so as not to perpetuate this particular paradigm.

MRB books depart from the paradigm described above in that they do not focus on harmful stereotypes, and have engaging plots and characters. Some MRB books reflect the reality of many mixed race people who transform hypodescent into pride. Rockquemore et al. (2009) discuss the racial pride movements in the 1960s that encouraged biracial Americans to embrace their African American heritage, stating that "development of a Black identity was considered the healthy ideal for mixed race individuals" (p. 17). Accordingly, since a large number of African Americans believe themselves to have multiracial heritage, it was not considered necessary to think of people with one black and one white parent any differently. Like the Black Power movement of the time, La Raza and the American Indian Movement encouraged members of the community to assert racial identity and claim group membership (DaCosta, 2007). Racial pride, knowledge of history, culture and languages, and group loyalty in order to increase visibility and power created an environment that made the inclusion of mixed people desirable and necessary. Children's books like *Stringz* (Wenberg, 2010), *Cashay* (McMullen, 2009), and *We Were Here* (de la Peña, 2009) in which characters identify with the non-white element of their heritage can be understood as representative of this dimension of the racial identity construction.

MRB books in which racial identity was depicted as inconsequential represent another dimension. Their call to consider universally human traits is attractive, but as Sims Bishop points out, the problem with such books is that they "not only make a point of recognizing our universality, but that they also make a point of ignoring our differences" (p. 33). These books subscribe to the notion that we are now in a "post-race" era in which race is no longer noticed, providing affirmation of culture-free biracial identity no different from any other kind of American identity. In other words, these characters are part of an assimilated population assumed to be culturally and historically neutral. The insight these books offer is that mixed race experiences are no different than mono-racial ones—which is in fact the case for many people. When the realm of books with mixed race content has expanded to include much more diversity than currently exists, these books will represent one of several ways of "being mixed."

The books in the MRA category share the theme of characters who negotiate awareness of biracial identity along with the other trials and tribulations of growing up. They are not consumed by their racial identity, nor are they oblivious to it. Characters respond to racism or prejudice in believable ways. They are hurt and confused, and also confident and resilient. They emerge intact from painful experiences, with healthy self-images and strong connections to people around them. Some authors are heavy-handed in their positive representation of biracial identity, while others are more nuanced. Some MRA books include counterstories— voices of biracial characters who "name their own reality" (Delgado, 1995, p. 36) and tell stories that reject the paradigm of the dysfunctional, introverted or the fully assimilated, "race-free" biracial. A few of the characters in this group of stories not only successfully negotiated social expectations, they occasionally changed their environments. Robin in *Angelfish* (Yep, 2001), Clifton in *Gray Baby* (Sanders, 2009), and Joey in *Stealing Home* (Schwartz, 2006) compelled adults who rejected them for being biracial to confront and change their racist attitudes.

Storytelling is an important part of critical race scholarship, primarily, as Ladson-Billings (2004) reminds us, because narratives "add the necessary contextual contours to the seeming 'objectivity' of positivist perspectives" (p. 53), so it is pertinent to regard the works of mixed race authors as part of the effort to tell the stories of race. A few mixed race authors (Smith, Cruz, Frazier) have commented on the absence of books reflecting their childhoods and consider their work an effort to interrupt that silence. The range and variety of MRA books is reflective of some of the diversity of people's experiences and self-perceptions. The hope is that more voices are added to this group so that mixed race identity is represented through a variety of responsible creative imaginings.

According to sociologist Brunsma (2005), racial identity is impacted by a number of factors such as social class, racial composition of environment, family structures and phenotype. For the authors of the novels in this study, and for many scholars in mixed race studies (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Gaskins, 1999; Rockquemore et al., 2009; Root, 1992, 1996), mixed race identity begins with phenotype—with appearance that defies certain racial classification. Consequently biracials are called upon to explain their racial heritage when their appearance comes up against conventional expectations. This raises the question—is mixed race identity defined primarily by how closely a person resembles conventional perceptions of a racial appearance?

Perhaps phenotype is the starting point. The findings from this study suggest that it would certainly appear that characters' lives are defined by how their racially marked bodies allow them to move in the world. Some like Cashay (*Cashay*), Jace (*Stringz*), and D Foster (*After Tupac and D Foster*) blended into their African American contexts afforded by an accepted range of phenotypes. Others like Celli (*Black Angels*) and Eva (*Last Dance on Holladay Street*) passed for white. Matt (*All the Broken Pieces*), Frances (*Black Mirror*), Robin (*Angelfish*) and Yumi (*I Wanna Be Your Shoebox*, 2008), whose bodies marked them as Asian, identified as Asian through various degrees of association with language, history, traditions, memories and bonds with people. Danny Lopez (*Mexican WhiteBoy*), Willa Lopez (*A Clear Spring*, 2002), Cesi Alvarez (*Border Crossing*), Naomi Soledad de León (*Becoming*

Naomi León), and other characters with Latino heritage were marked by their names and sometimes by their light brown skin. When phenotype belied non-white heritage as it did for characters like Harold (*Hidden Roots*), Armie (*The Dark Pond*) and Minni (*The Other Half of My Heart*), identity depended on racial pride learned from people who taught them the values and struggles specific to American Indian and African American populations. With very few exceptions, the books in this study represented mixed race identity as concerned with learning (a little or a lot) about one's non-white heritage. There was a conspicuous lack of consideration of what it meant to be part white unless it was described by physical markers such red hair and freckles (Irish) or immigrant experience (Jewish or Scottish).

Teachers may find that phenotype marks the beginning of racial awareness for their young students who can share their own observations about themselves and/or their peers. Including literature about mixed race characters can provide opportunities for discussions about social constructions of race and identity especially since many of these books demonstrate the arbitrariness of racial categorization in the U.S. We hope that this study will broaden the scope of multicultural education to include children's literature with mixed race characters and further the discussion about the dynamic nature of our diversifying environment.

References

Adoff, Jaime. (2008). *The Death of Jayson Porter*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children.

Aoki, Elaine M. (1981). Are You Chinese? Are You Japanese? Or Are You Just a Mixed-Up Kid? Using Asian American Children's Literature. *The Reading Teacher*, *34*(4), 382–385.

Bishop, Rudine S. (1982). *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. (2003). *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Brady, Laurel. (2000). *Say You are My Sister*. New York: HarperCollins.

Brunsma, David L. (2005). Interracial Families and the Racial Identification of Mixed-Race Children: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. *Social Forces*, *84*(2), 1131–1157.

Bruchac, Joseph. (2004a). *Hidden Roots*. New York: Scholastic.

Bruchac, Joseph. (2004b). *The Dark Pond*. New York: HarperCollins.

Carbone, Elisa. (2005). *Last Dance on Holladay Street*. New York: Knopf.

Chappell, Sharon, and Faltis, Christian. (2007). Spanglish, Bilingualism, Culture and Identity in Latino Children's Literature. *Children's Literature in Education*, *38*(4), 253–262.

Chaudhri, Amina. (2012). *The Skin We're In: Representations of Mixed Race Identity in Children's Literature*. Dissertation, University of Illinois, Chicago.

Ching, Stuart. (2002). Memory as Travel in Asian American Children's Literature: Bridging Home and School. *The New Advocate*, *15*(1), 23–34.

Cohen, Louis, Manion, Lawrence, and Morrison, Keith. (2007). *Research Methods in Education* (6th ed.). New York: Routledge.

DaCosta, Kimberly McClain. (2007). *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

de la Peña, Matt. (2008). *Mexican White Boy*. New York: Delacorte Press.

de la Peña, Matt. (2009). *We Were Here*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Delany, Martin. (1879). Comparative Elements of Civilization. In Jayne Ifekwunigwe (Ed.), *'Mixed Race' Studies: A Reader* (pp. 52–53). London: Routledge.

Delgado, Richard (Ed.). (1995). *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Easton, Kelly. (2007). *Hiroshima Dreams* New York: Dutton Children's Books.

Flake, Sharon. (2001). *Money Hungry*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children.

Flake, Sharon. (2004). *Begging for Change*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children.

Franklin, Mary R. (1993). Beyond Feathers and Tomahawk: Lessons from Literature. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 6(2), 13–17.

Frazier, Sundee Tucker. (2007). *Brendan Buckley's Universe and Everything in it*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Frazier, Sundee Tucker. (2010). *The Other Half of my Heart*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Garber, Marjorie. (2011). *The Use and Abuse of Literature*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Garcia, Cristina. (2008). *I Wanna Be Your Shoebox*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Gaskins, Pearl F. (1999). *What Are You?: Voices of Mixed-Race Young People*. New York: Henry Holt.

Gee, James P. (2001). Identity as an Analytical Lens for Research in Education. In W.G. Secada (Ed.), *Review of Research in Education 25* (pp. 2000–2001). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Gobineau, Joseph A. (1853). Recapitulation: The Respective Characteristics of the Three Great Races; The Superiority of the White Type, and, Within This Type, of the Aryan Family. In Jayne Ifekwunigwe (Ed.), *'Mixed Race' Studies: A Reader* (pp. 39–41). London: Routledge.

Heath, Shirley B. (2011). The Book as Home? It All Depends. In S.A. Wolf, K. Coats, P. Enciso and C. Jenkins (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature* (pp. 32–47). New York: Routledge.

Heller, Craig, Maldonado, Nancy, and Heller, Hannah. (1999). Mi Papi: A Look at Latino Fathers and Father Figures in Children's Picture Books. *MultiCultural Review*, 8(2), 18–32.

Ifekwunigwe, J.O. (2004). *'Mixed Race' Studies: A Reader*. London: Routledge.

Kant, Immanuel. (1951). *The Critique of Judgment* (J.H. Bernard, Trans.). New York: Hafner Publishing (Original Publication Date 1892).

Khorana, Meenah. (1993). Break Your Silence: A Call to Asian Indian Children's Writers. *Library Trends*, 41(3), 393–413.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. (2004). Just What is Critical Race Theory and What's It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education? In G. Ladson-Billings and D. Gillborn (Eds.), *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Multicultural Education* (pp. 49–67). New York:RoutledgeFalmer.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria, Tate, I.V., and William, F. (1995). Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 46–62.

Marsden, Carolyn. (2010). *Take me With You*. Somerville: Candlewick Press.

McMullen, Margaret. (2009). *Cashay*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Mestre, Lori, and Nieto, Sonia. (1996). Puerto Rican Children's Literature and Culture in the Public Library. *MultiCultural Review*, 5(2), 26–38.

Murphy, Rita. (2001). *Black Angels*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Reynolds, Nancy T. (2009). *Mixed Heritage in Young Adult Literature*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.

Rockquemore, Kerry A., Brunsma, David L., and Delgado, Daniel J. (2009). Racing to Theory or Retheorizing Race? Understanding the Struggle to Build a Multiracial Identity Theory. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65(1), 13–34.

Root, Maria P.P. (1992). *Racially Mixed People in America*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Root, Maria P.P. (1996). *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*. London: Sage.

Sanders, Scott Loring. (2009). *Gray Baby*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sands-O'Connor, Karen. (2001). Why are People Different? Multiracial Families in Picture Books and the Dialogue of Difference. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 25(3), 412–426.

Saulny, Susan. (2011, January 30). Black? White? Asian? More Americans Choose All of the Above. *The New York Times*, pp. A1–A20.

Schwartz, Ellen. (2006). *Stealing Home*. Plattsburgh: Tundra Books of Northern New York.

Smith, Cynthia L. (2001). Interracial Themes in Children's and Young Adult Fiction. *Library Talk*, (Jan/Feb), 14–16.

Smith, Cynthia Leitich. (2001). *Rain is Not My Indian Name*. New York: HarperCollins.

Spencer, Ranier. (2011). *Reproducing Race: The Paradox of Generation Mix*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Stewart, Michelle P. (2002). Judging Authors by the Color of Their Skin? Quality Native American Children's Literature. *Melus*, 27(2), Summer, 179–196.

Stonequist, Everett V. (1937). The Racial Hybrid. In Jayne Ifekwunigwe (Ed.), *'Mixed Race' Studies: A Reader* (pp. 65–68). London: Routledge.

Wenberg, Michael. (2010). *Stringz*. Lodi: WestSide Books.

Werlin, Nancy. (2001). *Black Mirror*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Williams, Kim M. (2005). Multiracialism and the Civil Rights Future. *Daedalus, 134*(Winter), 53–60.

Wilson, Barbara. (2002). *A Clear Spring*. New York: Feminist Press.

Woodson, Jacqueline. (2008). *After Tupac & D Foster*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Yep, Lawrence. (2001). *Angelfish*. New York: Putnam's.

Yokota, Junko, and Frost, Sharon. (2002/2003). Multiracial Characters in Children's Literature. *Book Links*, December, 51–57.