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The Importance of Multicultural Literature
For Biracial Students

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Senior Capstone

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Abstract

It is evident that many classrooms do not have literature that displays a multiracial character to reflect the biracial community which one of the fastest growing populations in the U.S. today. This senior capstone research project examines the benefits of multicultural literature displaying a multiracial character on biracial students through the use of literature review, teachers and librarian surveys. The results reveal that having biracial character reflected in the literature at schools bring them self-awareness and self-identity that affect their social skills and their academic achievement. Therefore, it is crucial that mixed-race students be represented through the literature in their schools.

Background and Introduction

There is an unseen population of students that are in the classrooms throughout the United States. They identify themselves as being a part of two or more races. For the purpose of this senior capstone research project, the term “biracial” will be used interchangeably with “multiracial” “mixed-race” and “interracial”. It is crucial to understand the history of what it means to be biracial in the United States because it provides an image for the significance of what that community has become to get to where they are today. Biracial children and their families bring confusion and the paradigm debate to the common mono-racial population. Multiracial people have always been of a concern in American society because their existence goes against the norms of the social structure of the American racial order and preserving white privilege for the social majority (Brunsma, 2005).

Prejudice against multiracial children is made apparent with the introduction of the “one drop rule.” The “one drop rule” was created by the United State Census Bureau and practiced during the 1920’s to 1960’s. This rule was established once white slave owners and enslaved African American women were producing biracial offspring. These children became referred to as “mulattoes” due to having a light-skinned appearance that put their race into question. However, during this time in history, these biracial kids couldn’t choose to celebrate both races. Instead, the “one drop rule” categorized these biracial children by their minority race. Stating any individual with a portion of African American ancestry must be classified as African American (Neil, et all, 1999). This rule was not only limited to White and African American biracial children, it was also applied to Japanese American descents who were born during World War II. It forced those who were mixed with Japanese and White races to immediately claim only their minority race as being Japanese. Enforcing this regulation was based on the impression that the

“one drop rule” was the most efficient way to keep the white race “pure,” by giving biracial children the inability to claim this white race.

In the case of *Loving v. Virginia* that took place in 1967, the Supreme Court ruled against the marriages between people solely on the basis of racial classifications (Cornell Law School, n.d.). This ruling was a win for the interracial relationships everywhere. Multiracial relationships were now legally acceptable and started the spread of becoming socially adequate. The amount of marriages consisting of people that are a part of a different race or ethnicity increases from 3.2% in 1980 to 15% in 2010 (Wang, 2012). Today, mixed-raced marriages are now completely legal and on the rise. The number of biracial children are expected to be in the years to come.

It wasn't until years later that those biracial children were able to be represented in the Census. The 2010 census was the first time that individuals were given the option to identify themselves with more than one race category (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Prior to the 2010 census, people were forced to claim a mono-racial background even if they were biracial. “The share of the U.S population with two-race ancestry has nearly doubled, from 2.2% in 1980 to 4.3% in 2010-2012” (Pew Research Center, 2015, para. 48). Those statistics aforementioned were the results of the 2010-2012 Census; however, once Pew Research Center (2015) did their own study, they discovered about 6.9% of the American population are multiracial. These numbers aren't slowing down any time soon. In fact, the multiracial community is one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. As stated by the United States Census Bureau (2012), the growth of multiracial community is expected to be triple in numbers or more to reach 26.7 million by 2060.

As a future elementary school teacher, it is critical to have a deep understanding of the growing underrepresented community of multiracial students. In order to accommodate these

biracial students, so that they develop a sense of self-esteem and empower them to fully express both of their racial identities in a welcoming environment. Given this situation, this senior capstone research project is to examine the importance of multicultural literature for biracial students.

My primary research question is: *Why is multicultural literature important for biracial students?* Following my secondary or related research questions: *What does research say about the importance for multicultural literature? Are there any multicultural literature books for biracial students in the school districts? If there are, how do they impact the identity of biracial students? How do teachers incorporate and implement multicultural literature books for biracial students in the classroom? Are there sufficient resources for teachers to include multicultural literature books for their biracial students in the classroom? If there are not, what could teachers do or what could be done for teachers to support the education of biracial students? Given the presence or absence of multicultural literature books available to biracial students how does it strengthen or weaken the relationship with their mono-racial peers and at the same time, empower them for academic success?*

While building on the history behind this topic and working to properly answer these questions, I will begin my exploration through academic journals and literature. Critically examining what professionals have already discovered through their own studies and research.

Literature Review

In order to properly conduct my research, I must first define and understand the key terms, multicultural literature and biracial/multiracial. It would be overly simplified to say that multicultural literature consists of any texts that include people of color outside of the mainstream of society. However, it is much more than that, especially for those multiracial

students who may be from a member of the minority race and a member of the mainstream white race. Multicultural education has four main intentions according to Webb (1990), “(1) to remedy ethnocentrism in the traditional curriculum; (2) to build understanding among racial and cultural groups and appreciation of different cultures; (3) to defuse intergroup tensions and conflicts; and (4) to make the curricula relevant to the experiences, cultural traditions, and historical contributions of the nation's diverse population” (para. 2). A more intrinsic definition of multicultural literature is literature that embraces people from diverse cultural, linguistic, racial, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds (Canales et. al, 2002). Defining biracial identity as explained by Baxley (2008), “Biracial heritage can mean mixed parentage of any kind. This can include, but not limited to, African American, white, Latino, Asian, and Native American” (para. 2). Categorizing oneself as biracial or multiracial is typically done by the individual or their families. Throughout this research paper, the terms “biracial,” “multiracial,” “interracial,” and “mixed-race” will be used interchangeably to define an individual who defines themselves as having two or more ethnic identities.

It is important to note that with a highly diverse and growing population multicultural literature is necessary for a variety of students to feel they are being represented in the school's texts. While multicultural literature began with illustrations of the characters for mono-racial minority students, multiracial characters have now been included in the illustrations of the main characters as well. In order for a multicultural literature book to be considered as representing biracial individuals, the main illustration of multiracial characters must be included with high quality experiences that multiracial children can relate to.

While multiracial families have become one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, it only makes sense that the literature books should start to reflect that population

as well. Pew's Research Center (2017) has found that 17 percent of all marriages in the United States are between two people from different races. However, it is unfortunate to note that the amount of quality of multiracial literature books is scarce. Quality biracial literature would fall under this category if it contains biracial identity in a theme in the story. A mixed-race character is working to sort out external/internal conflict with reasonable resolutions. It will acknowledge the multiracial heritage and brings awareness to multiracial struggles. There are roughly 4,000 multicultural children's books that are published every year in the United States (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2018). While conducting independent research, Chaudhri and Teale (2013) were able to find 90 books that center around a multiracial character for ages 9-14, meaning that this only makes up approximately 0.2% of the books that were published within the last decade. If we were to be generous and say, by quadrupling that 0.2% to make up the equivalent of multicultural literature for multiracial students of all ages currently on the market this would still only mean that multicultural literature for biracial students only makes up approximately 1% of the books today.

It is disheartening to see such low numbers of quality biracial literature books that are out there for this rapidly growing community. Unfortunately, with the implementations of the Common Core State Standards in our schools, there is nothing to require schools to obtain texts that represent the multiracial student population. As mentioned on the Common Core State Standards website (2019), "The College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards form the backbone of the ELA/literacy standards by articulating core knowledge and skills, while grade specific standards provide additional specificity" (p. 1). Nothing was elaborated on what those core knowledge and skills consisted of, other than being under the categories of stories, poetry, and informational texts. There was no discussion on the website on how to incorporate rich

literature in culture, diversity, or races. Looking more in depth at the grade specific standards on what should be included, there were mentions of books, such as *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLauchlan and *The Secret Garden* by Frances Burnett (Common Core State Standards, n.d.). However, there were no indications of multicultural literature within the recommended texts, and definitely, there are children's multicultural literature books that focus on multiracial representation.

The history of biracial people has led me to have a deeper understanding of the origins of the conflict and the discrimination that follows biracial children to even today. Throughout my exploration of the importance of multicultural literature for biracial students, I was able to discover how much this biracial community is growing, the numbers of publication of literature for multiracial students and it looks like, and what the Common Core State Standards says when it comes to incorporating these types of books into the curriculum. To continue the progression of research, the next approach was to take it to the next level, past of what was already learned. I would do this by going out into the field myself to collect survey data from teachers and librarians.

Method and Procedures

In order to seek the answers to the research questions that were posed in the Introduction and Background section besides literature review, a minimum of two librarians from two different school districts in the Salinas area and five teachers were contacted to participate in this senior capstone research project. A set of survey questions were designed to gather data from teachers (See Appendix A) to determine if there were multicultural literature books with a biracial character in their libraries. In addition, another set of survey questions was

designed to gather the data from the librarians (See appendix B) whether there was a sufficient amount of multicultural literature books about biracial character and whether there are sufficient resources for them to include these types of books in schools.

The process began by looking at different school districts in Salinas. Once narrowing down the list to a few schools in separate districts, surveys were sent out to the schools. Unfortunately, only two teachers responded to the surveys. Therefore, the next step was by going to the schools in person. Two different schools in the Salinas area and each librarian at those schools were visited and completed the survey. Finally, ten (10) different teachers, (five from two different schools in separate school districts) responded to the survey questions.

Results and Findings

After receiving the completed surveys back from the ten teachers at two separate schools in different districts, I was able to analyze my results. Out of all ten teachers surveyed, four (4) teachers stated that they had “multicultural literature” available to their students [Survey Respondents 1-4, personal communication, 28 October 2019], but failed to mention if it was specific to multiracial students even though specific survey question was asked about the book containing a mixed-race child. Three other teachers said that they had multicultural literature for biracial students [Teachers 1, 2 & 3, personal communication, 28 October 2019]; however, they failed to name any of the books that fell under this category that was in their personal libraries. The three remaining teachers either didn’t answer that question or answered “I don’t know.” [Teachers 1-2 & 3, personal communication, 28 October 2019]. The results on teachers answering the question, do you feel there are sufficient resources for teachers to include multicultural literature books for biracial students in your classroom, were split. Some educators

felt as if there weren't sufficient resources for them to include these types of literature in the classroom, while others said they did believe there was enough. Those who answered negatively, indicated that they had sufficient trainings on biracial children in the classroom, and multicultural literature books for multiracial students that were donated to their libraries. They would be beneficial for them to support their biracial students. All teachers surveyed agreed that they did not believe that enough was done for the biracial community in today's literature.

In regards to the surveys sent out to two different librarians in two different school districts some of the responses were varied. Each of the librarians agreed that they had multicultural literature available to students in the school's libraries [Librarians 1 & 2, personal communication, 28 October 2019]. However, only one librarian could attest to the fact that they had multicultural literature for biracial students. Neither of the librarians was able to name off any multicultural literature books for multiracial children, even the librarian who claimed that she did have these types of literature available in the school's library. Together both librarians responded that they don't think that enough resources are available to them to include multicultural literature books for biracial students in today's schools. One librarian went further to explain that out of the hundreds of books she has, the books that feature a multiracial character is minimal. It is like finding a needle in a haystack. One librarian believed that if there was more funding for the library, they would be able to go find good multiracial literature books to have a section in their library. The librarians from both schools also agreed that there isn't enough being done to represent the biracial population in today's literature [Librarians 1 & 2, personal communication, 28 October 2019]. One librarian commented that while there are some multiracial books out on the market, it would be amazing to see the numbers grow and make up a

large piece of the children's literature industry [Librarian 1, personal communication, 28 October 2019].

My copious amount of research and development into this project has helped me answer my secondary research questions that were posed at the beginning. The first question addresses: *What does research say about the importance of multicultural literature for biracial students?*

The importance of multicultural literature for biracial students developed the base for the majority of my research discussion. Overall the implementation of multicultural literature for biracial students in the classroom has positive benefits for both the mixed-race students and their mono-racial peers. Tatum's (1997) research shows that many unresolved racial identity issues are due to biracial children's unique experiences and heritages are not being properly celebrated by schools. Therefore, by properly applying multiracial literature in the schools can go a long way for mixed-race students feeling a strong connection to both of their heritages. Steiner (2001) explains that multicultural literature for multiracial students creates a sense of global community by showing interactions in the literature with people of diverse cultures, ways of properly encountering and effectively solving conflicts, respecting each other through differences, and creating solidarity. A classroom that celebrates their student populations differences through multicultural literature creates a warm inviting environment for everyone.

Integrating multicultural literature for biracial children in the classroom plays a huge role on the identity development of those mixed-raced students. According to Wardle & Babtiste (1988) in order for a child to develop a positive identity of self it depends on how secure they feel about themselves, where they are from, as well as how their families and communities support their identity. If biracial children don't see themselves represented in the literature and support from their teachers on their racial background in the classroom, they're going to have a

negative reflection of self. Critics may say that as long as there is multicultural literature of mono-racial minorities that relates to each of the races the biracial children are a part of, is sufficient enough. However, this is not the case. Wardle's (1992) research shows that the biracial identity development is distinctive from that of their mono-racial white and minority peers. Multiracial children face separate challenges and live with different family realities by celebrating both racial heritages. Making it crucial that multicultural literature specifically relating to the experiences and struggles of multiracial children are incorporated into the classroom.

Moving forward to my second question being: *Are there any multicultural literature books for biracial students in the school districts? If there are, how do they impact the identity of biracial students?*

The findings from the surveys can contest that there aren't enough books for biracial students in the school districts. The lack of these types of literature that are available to students who identify themselves as multiracial can have major negative outcomes on the student's self-reflection by not being represented in the curricula. McRoy and Freeman (1986) suggested that the most critical developmental stages to facilitate a positive racial identity happens between the preschool and elementary school years. While a healthy racial identity continues to grow through adolescence, the early stages are crucial to have a positive outlook on one's ethnic identity to build on. Growing up biracial requires a different development of racial identity that of mono-racial children. McRoy and Freeman (1986) asserted that "Intervention with family members and school staff, as well as within the community environment may be necessary in order to facilitate the development of a positive racial identity" (p. 3).

The research is sparse regarding biracial children and their identity; however, there are some studies that state that mixed-race children are confused about their identities (McRoy & Freeman, 1986). Wardle (1992) indicated that “Part of this confusion is due to a lack of exposure to their minority heritage; part is due to a lack of acknowledgement of their unique heritage” (p. 167). Without quality literature that shines light on the life and struggles of biracial individuals, multiracial children will be lacking the exposure of the realities people like them face. Literature that includes their experiences gives these children a sense of belonging and ability to build their own positive racial identity.

The third question: *How do teachers incorporate and implement multicultural literature books for biracial students in the classroom?*

The results from the surveys have concluded that teachers have a variety of ways of including multicultural literature for biracial students in the classroom. From having multiracial literature books available in their classroom to reading a book with the children and allowing a discussion to be held. A study done by Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf (2005) discussed how a fifth-grade classroom incorporated a multiracial discussion by allowing mixed-race children leading a conversation with their peers on the complexities of race and how to claim membership of multiple racial categories. These types of personal conversations require a safe space to have the discussion and how to structure their comments positively. Teachers around the United States are becoming aware of the underrepresented multiracial and are finding new methods on how to get all of their students engaged in these important topics, whether it be with festivals, discussions, or appropriate literature.

My fourth secondary research question: *Given the presence of absence of multicultural literature books available to biracial students, how does it strengthen or weaken the relationship with their mono-racial peers and at the same time, empower them for academic success?*

Having multicultural literature available for biracial students in the classroom gives the ability for not only multiracial children to be represented, but also gives their peers a more accurate perception of what it means to be mixed-race. Baxley (2008) asserted that, “Biracial individuals may begin their schooling having embraced their double heritage and possessing positive self-images; however, their mono-racial classmates may not understand them, and, even worse, may have preconceived notions regarding race” (para. 10). This can result in teasing or bullying to multiracial children when they appear to be “white,” but walk in with their African American parent, only to receive comments stating “that can’t be your parent, you don’t ‘look African American,’” or similar statements. Social categories comparable to the ones that put a label on race and ethnicity are too often viewed as, “fixed and often essential categories rather than as multifaceted, situated, and socially constructed processes” (Orellana & Bowman, 2003, p.26). If children aren’t exposed to the realities of their multiracial peers, they will continue to feel the urge to put them in mono-racial categories based on their appearance. It’s crucial that children learn that race isn’t a one sided one category fits all concept; however, it is an intricate and multidimensional conception that differs between people and their families.

When mono-racial peers are exposed to appropriate multiracial literature, they receive a deeper understanding and become more aware of these diverse populations norms. They are able to get an outlook of other races that they may not encounter in their everyday lives. High quality multicultural literature for multiracial students will also reveal issues and provide examples of how to navigate through these difficulties. Baxley (2008) stated that, “Living in a racially and

culturally conscious climate should deal fairly with racially charged issues and enable students to work toward positive solutions” (para. 10). By seeing these mixed-race children displayed in the literature, their mono-racial peers will know more about their norms, such as having two different raced parents and how to properly interact with them due to their deep understanding. Therefore, the relationship between multiracial and mono-racial peers would strengthen inside as well as outside the classroom. Social and emotional interactions in the classroom between students have strong ties to the emotional climates. These characteristics are a key part of academic outcomes (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Having positive relationships with classmates leads biracial children to feel more understood and comfortable in their classroom environment, leading to better academic success.

My final question being: *Are there sufficient resources for teachers to include multicultural literature books for their biracial students in the classroom? If there are not, what could teachers do or what could be done for teachers to support the education of biracial students?*

The outcomes from my surveys indicated that teachers were split when deciding if they felt that there were sufficient resources available to them to include multicultural literature books for biracial students in their classroom. However, the survey results also showed the lack of multiracial literature that was available to these students by both in their teacher’s private libraries as well as the school’s library.

The incorporation of multicultural literature for multiracial students in the curricula would be a major stepping stone in the right direction to help teachers support the education of biracial students. This would be most productive if done through the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards is an educational intuitive that determines what

students will learn in grade k-12 throughout the United States. If multiracial literature was to be added to this curriculum, then teachers across the United States would have the ability to easily work in these types of literature and discussions during their lesson plans. This can be done by insuring that all teachers have multiracial literature in their personal and school libraries. Also, celebrating multiracial communities can be done through multicultural festivals. Where schools can promote the celebration of their school's diverse student population. This will allow students to share their multicultural traditions and mixed-race backgrounds with their peers. Furthermore, it will also allow students, teachers, and staff to become more accepting and understanding of one another. Whilst, displaying pride in their cultural and racial differences.

Discussion

It was discouraging to find out that the amount of multicultural literature available for multiracial children is minimal to none at the local schools in my community. In addition, it was disappointing that neither of the librarians could name any multiracial literature books in their library, it is because they didn't have any or they weren't able to find any literature about biracial students. Despite their frustration of the results, I was also not very surprised.

Another interesting finding is that teachers are unprepared to have discussions and support their multiracial children's heritage. Many teachers responded to the surveys that additional trainings in supporting biracial children in the classroom would be beneficial to biracial students. The multiracial community is growing every year and these students will continue to be invisible from their peers, teachers, and school staff. If schools do not validate their identity and heritage displayed through biracial literature.

Problems and Limitations

A limitation that I came across during my exploration was that while some teachers responded positively to having multicultural literature for biracial students, none of them went as far as naming what kinds of multicultural literature books they have available in their school libraries. Another limitation I came across regarding my teacher survey (See appendix A) is that, I could tell many of the teachers were fairly new to the topic because there were a few “I don’t know” responses to some of the questions. The most frequent response is, “I don’t know” came from the question number 8, “Do you feel enough is done to represent the biracial population in today’s literature? Why or why not?” Even when I did get a response such as yes or no, not many went further in to elaborate on the rationale why they felt that way.

A drawback from my librarian survey (See appendix B) was that, no librarians had mentioned any of the book titles that would fall under the multicultural literature for biracial student’s category. Even the librarian that had answered yes to having these types of books in the school’s library, so they skipped answering the question on what those book titles were. Another problem I had during my research was not being able to tell how often these books were checked out by the student population.

Recommendations

It is evident as supported by research that having literature in the classroom and school libraries that represents their student population is crucial for their academic and personal success. Each student deserves to know that they are regarded, noticed and valued in the literature, not just those who are from the majority of students. Having access to these books are critical to the students, so my recommendation would be to have multicultural literature books for multiracial students available at the library by allocating the necessary funds for the librarians to purchase multicultural literature bearing multiracial characters.

My next recommendation is to mandate schools to have multicultural literature for multiracial students as part of the curriculum throughout the United States. It would be best to implemented as part of the Common Core State Standards. This can be done by incorporating multiracial literature as part of the English language arts requirements. Furthermore, new multicultural literature that incorporates biracial historical figures, such as Barrack Obama, would need to be written for biracial students who deserve. To feel included in our history in that there are other multiracial individuals who have done great things in history.

Conclusion

This senior capstone research project examines the importance of multicultural literature for biracial students. Every student deserves the right to be seen in the literature and curricula in the schools that they attend. It is a shock to find out that biracial literature is missing for the biracial community throughout history even today in our schools. Everyone needs to be more conscious about the alarming realities that the multiracial community is on the rise and they deserve the attention to be seen on the spot light. The biracial population is not new to the American community. Multiracial individuals have been present for decades; but, still nothing is being in our schools for this multiracial student population.

While this topic may be taboo to discuss due to its ties to race, we need to eradicate that stigma and address this issue head on. It is the goal that this senior capstone research project will initiate a change in our schools and common core curriculum. Having multiracial literature in the classroom will bring recognition to the community and they will feel socially accepted amongst other mono-racial children, so that biracial students could learn about themselves in the

classroom, speak for themselves. It is important to note that biracial students are entitled to the same equal representation just like their mono-racial peers.

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Appendix A

Survey for Teachers

1. Do you have Multicultural literature books in your classroom?
2. Do you have multicultural literature books that represents biracial students in your classroom? (Where a character is of two or more races, not two different mono-racial characters.)
3. If you do have multicultural literature for biracial students in your classroom, how do you feel that impacts the identity of biracial students?
4. Do you feel there are sufficient resources for teachers to include multicultural literature books for biracial students in your classroom?

Appendix B

Survey for Librarians

9. Do you have Multicultural literature books offered in the library?

10. Do you have any Multicultural literature books in the library that represents a biracial character? (Where a character is of two or more races, not two different mono-racial characters.)

11. If you have books in the library that represents a biracial character available, what are some books you may have?

12. Do you feel there are sufficient resources for librarians to include multicultural literature books for biracial students in today's schools?

13.If not, what do you believe could be done to help support you as a librarian to be able to incorporate multicultural literature for biracial students?

14.Do you feel enough is done to represent the biracial population in today's literature? Why or why not?