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What happens when you use multicultural mentor texts as read alouds to generate ideas for writing personal narratives?

Catherine McConathey

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**WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU USE MULTICULTURAL MENTOR TEXTS
AS READ ALOUDS TO GENERATE IDEAS FOR WRITING PERSONAL
NARRATIVES?**

by

Catherine E. McConathey

A Thesis

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Thesis Chair: Marjorie Madden, Ph.D

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Abstract

Catherine E. McConathey

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU USE MULTICULTURAL MENTOR TEXTS AS READ ALOUDS TO GENERATE IDEAS FOR WRITING PERSONAL NARRATIVES?

2014

Marjorie Madden, Ph.D

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study is to determine what happens when you use multicultural mentor texts as read alouds to generate ideas for writing personal narratives in 3rd grade readers and writers. By utilizing these mentor texts as read alouds this study seeks to determine what affects they have on writing personal narratives. The students in this study listened to weekly teacher read alouds and participated in writing activities over a five week period. Through teacher observations, whole class discussions, student writing journals and essays the study showed a greater depth of understanding, interest, and increase in writing in student responses. Out of fifteen focus group participants, all of the students improved in writing descriptive narratives that reflected connections and associations made during the multicultural mentor text read alouds. The findings of this study suggest that by reading relevant multicultural mentor texts that

students can connect to, students are able to generate more ideas and description in writing personal narratives.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Purpose Statement	4
Statement of Research Question	8
Story of the Question	8
Organization of the Paper	11
Chapter 2: Review of Literature	13
The Power and Possibilities of Using Multicultural Literature	16
Read Alouds Using Multicultural Literature	19
Connecting Reading and Writing	22
Additional Effects of Using Multicultural Literature to	
Elicit Response	25
Conclusion	30
Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design	32
The Study and Instructional Plan	35
Data Analysis	41
Context	42
Community	42

Table of Contents (Continued)

Classroom	46
Next Chapters	46
Chapter 4: Data Analysis	47
Revisiting the Study	47
Making Connections with Read Aloud Themes	50
Recognizing and Accepting Differences Through Thoughtful Discussions	57
Writing with More Depth and Breadth	62
Excitement and Enthusiasm to Share Writing	65
Summary of Data Analysis	67
Chapter 5: Summary of Findings	70
Conclusions	72
Implications	75
Limitations	77
References	79
Appendix: Multicultural Literature	84

Chapter 1

Introduction

“When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. Our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors” (Sims Bishop, 1990).

My student teaching began ten years ago in a classroom with 28 third grade students in a large multicultural school district with a large Hispanic population. Some were children of seasonal migrant farm workers which meant they moved often and their housing situations did not always reflect the 21st century that most of us are accustomed to. Polite, respectful, and eager to learn would be adjectives that I would definitely use to describe these students. One day as we were preparing to write an essay for a 30-minute timed picture prompt of a parade float, one of the little boys quietly raised his hand. I hurriedly walked to his side and he looked me in the eyes and innocently asked, “What is a parade?” I was taken back and completely blind-sided by this question which as I came to understand that he originated from a home environment that did not always include running water and electricity.

Reality hit me hard that day and at that point I knew our education system did not adequately reflect and take into consideration all of the cultures and races of our student population. The more I thought about this picture prompt of a parade float and asking myself how on earth could a child not know what a parade or parade float is, I thought that was an assumption that the test-creators did not take into consideration for testing all of the students fairly. And worse, consider how can a child be expected to write about something he knows nothing about? It cannot be assumed that every child gets the privilege to sit down on Thanksgiving Day in the comforts of their warm home and watch a parade on a big screen television, let alone travel to the parade and watch it in person.

As I delved into more test practice prompts, I found the entire scope of the questions and topics focused on the background knowledge and experiences of the mainstream population and completely omitted any minority cultures except for adding a few "minority-sounding-names." Looking through the classroom library, I found more of the same problem. Most of the books were written about middle-class white children and their experiences with little or no representation of other cultures. It seemed that the mainstream dominant culture was always covered in textbooks and story book pictures, but did not fairly and accurately depict minority groups. As I spent more and more time talking to students and

understanding their background I realized they knew quite a bit more than we gave them credit for, but were not asked, included, or referred to in any of the reading materials. And so began my foray into the world of multicultural literature.

Since my own educational background included learning mostly about “other” cultures through over-stereotyped movies and outdated books I knew that I had the task of locating high-quality reading materials for all students that make up my classroom population. Students need to see themselves accurately and fairly reflected in books that they are reading but also need to learn about other cultures depicted in the proper light and context. Our country is more diverse today than it has ever been and now is the time to include multicultural literature on the top shelf with mainstream cultures and embed it into our curriculum on a daily basis.

Ten years have gone by in my inner city classroom and even though this was my sentiment in the past, today you would still find multicultural literature a prominent part of my library, used as mentor texts, and daily read alouds. Multicultural literature is a normal part of our classroom activities and all of my students are represented, validated, valued, and accepted. I go out of my way to find high-quality multicultural literature but do other teachers? If not, then why?

Do teachers, especially those who do not teach in inner cities feel the need to expose their students to multiple cultures and perspectives? These questions are why I felt it was imperative that I contribute to the studies that have been done showing the need and reasons for using multicultural literature as mentor texts for read alouds to generate narrative writing.

Purpose Statement

In order to get students motivated to read, they must be interested in what they are reading about. When students feel disconnected to the characters, story lines, and illustrations, they have no vested interest in reading the material. The simple and honest truth is students need to see themselves, cultures, and experiences represented in the literature they read to feel accepted, important, and validated. The problem with getting students to read and then respond adequately to the text is that they often feel unrepresented and cannot make connections to what they are reading about let alone respond with an elaborate descriptive essay. This applies to children that do not fall into the mainstream culture as well as those in the mainstream culture because they often know nothing about cultures that are different than their own.

Acceptance and knowledge of diverse cultures is the key to understanding each other's differences especially in today's world. Using multicultural

literature can be one way to offer that insight into each other's lives where we can respect, accept, and appreciate the diversity instead of condemning it.

Multicultural literature helps children identify with their own culture, exposes children to other cultures, and opens the dialogue on issues regarding diversity (Colby & Lyon, 2004). When students see themselves represented in characters and situations in the books they are reading, it helps them to make connections and reflect on their own cultures in which they can identify with. When this is done using multicultural mentor texts as read alouds to generate ideas for narrative writing, students are able to relate this experience to their own, thus translating and responding with a greater understanding and interest in their narrative writing. Children need to receive affirmation of themselves and their culture through literature (Bieger, 1995, - 1996), and be able to connect text to self in order to promote greater meaning (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1978).

As Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) state in the opening for their article,; *African American Children's Literature that Helps Students Find Themselves: Selection guidelines for Grades K-3*, "Literature is a powerful medium. Through it, children construct messages about their cultures and roles in society. Literature offers them personal stories, a view of their cultural surroundings and insight on

themselves. When children read books that are interesting and meaningful to them, they can find support for the process of defining themselves as individuals and understanding their developing roles within their families and communities.”

When selecting mentor texts to read aloud in class for the purpose of promoting student thinking and engagement specifically in students’ responses through writing, we need to make sure that books include characters who are well developed and portrayed in authentic, realistic events. Also, the books should use language that is authentic and realistic, particularly dialogue that correctly portrays African American dialect appropriate to the character. The books should also incorporate illustrations that portray African American and other characters and settings authentically and realistically as well as presenting accurate information (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

Kathryn Au (2011) recognizes that when educators endorse the use of multicultural texts by authors of diverse backgrounds that represent cultures in an authentic manner, these experiences may improve the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds by increasing their motivation to read (Spears-Bunton, 1990), their appreciation and understanding of their own language and cultural heritage (Jordan, 1988), and their valuing of their own life experience as

a topic for writing. Carol Lee (1991) found that African American students, who were considered below-average readers, could write insightful interpretations of the significance of the multicultural literature they read.

While you can find *some* research backing up the claim that using authentic high-quality multicultural literature in the classroom supports student writing, the need is there for continued studies and research to ultimately convince all areas of the academic world. In addition to African American cultures, Donna Norton (2013) confirms in *Multicultural Children's Literature: Through the Eyes of Many Children*, changes in today's school population make it extremely important to incorporate literature to also include other cultures such as Middle Eastern, Native American, Latino, Asian, and Jewish. The ability to understand the rich cultural heritage that defines our American culture begins with representing and including everyone in the literature that our students are reading.

This research is of importance in adequately preparing all of our students to use multiple lenses through which to accept and comprehend the world in which they live and are a part of. Perhaps using multicultural literature as mentor texts for read alouds will not only help students generate ideas for

narrative writing, but ultimately give them valuable insight to communicating effectively in a diverse nation such as the one we currently live in.

Statement of Research Question

My research study focuses on the question, “What happens when you use multicultural mentor texts as read alouds to generate ideas for writing personal narratives?” This question became an apparent need and concern when witnessing first-hand how it is difficult for students to write about cultures that they do not have background knowledge on. I intend to demonstrate through reading multicultural mentor texts as read alouds that when students have background knowledge, can make connections to what is read, and have awareness of many cultures, they are then able to write about the experiences with greater depth, understanding, and description.

Story of the Question

Our country is going through tumultuous times in the education world. Not only are teachers and their teaching practices under scrutiny, but so is the very fabric of the educational system itself. From the Core Curriculum State Standards (CCSS) to the overall difference of opinions on how to test the students for consistency of learning objectives across the curriculum in the form of state testing, there is the need to look closely at our teaching pedagogies. We

cannot continue to follow the old path but instead must blaze a trail of our own off the beaten path into new literacies, technologies, and diverse cultures that will enable students of all cultures to be successful.

I feel the common link to uniting and not further dividing our country and our education system is through literacy. My eyes were opened during my student teaching in an inner city classroom and then even further during the graduate class titled, *Using Multicultural Literature in the K-12 Reading and Writing Classroom*. During this class, I realized that most of the literature presented in our text about Middle Eastern, African American, and other minority cultures, I had never heard of! How can I expect my students to understand and appreciate differences if I don't offer them literature that reflects this? As I was learning about the many different minority cultures that are not represented in most of the mainstream literature in our classrooms, I realized that in order to get along, understand, and accept our rich cultural differences, we need to learn about each other first. It starts with students of all ages, including myself, reading multicultural literature.

As soon as I realized we would have to pick a topic to research for our thesis topic, I knew right away it would be based on multicultural literature just from what I had already experienced in the classroom. This topic could have

taken me in several directions but then I had another revelation of sorts while I was asking students to respond to a text that we read about Europeans who immigrated here back in the 1800's. These immigrants and their experiences were told from the perspective of a white European child. Even though I believe history is extremely important to the fabric of our education system, there is a time and place for it. Using read aloud mentor texts that most if not all of my students could not relate to offered little hope of having them connect to the story and further writing a descriptive narrative essay based on it! This is where I realized that if I want their writing to improve, I would need to use multicultural mentor texts as read alouds to help them generate ideas for writing personal narratives...and thus my topic question was born.

Teaching in an inner city school has made me realize that our education system can no longer be looked at as a one-size-fits-all. Students and their diverse cultures need to be represented in our teaching and what better way than to implement it through literacy? Literacy offers my students many ways to experience the world in which they live and share their own unique experiences through writing. Multicultural literacy is the glue in my classroom that will bond all students in my classroom family and enable them to represent their uniqueness with pride and honor.

My research will include using multicultural literature that reflects all of the students in an authentic manner. I plan to use texts that will offer them the ability to make connections to their own lives and be able to write with enthusiasm and greater depth of excitement. Students will come to accept and appreciate their similarities and differences through reading and writing. Their response and discussions will help me decide and plan on how to approach my lesson planning and what multicultural mentor texts I need to add to my growing collection!

Organization of the Paper

Chapter two will take a more in depth look at the literature and studies that have already been completed on multicultural literature, read alouds for all students, using mentor texts, and how reading and writing are connected. In this chapter I will also share the results of studies from teacher researchers and theorists alike, that have proved that multicultural literature should be included in today's curriculum to mirror students' own lives. It will also reflect on how to teach students to see beyond their own culture and appreciate ones that are different.

Chapter three focuses on the methodology and data collection of this qualitative study while chapter four is a careful analysis and interpretation of the

study based on the evidence presented. Chapter five covers the conclusions followed by the implications for further work on this topic.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

“What if we could embrace children of color with mirror texts, provide white children with window books, and teach writer’s craft simultaneously?” (Sims Bishop, 1990, p. ix).

Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) states that, “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (p. ix).

Sims Bishop (1997) sees this dual role for multicultural children's literature; it can serve as a mirror or a window. A child may see his or her own life reflected in a book or may have an opportunity to see into someone else's life. Historically, children's books have given European American middle- and upper-class children the mirror but not the window. They could see themselves

in the stories they read and heard, but they were unlikely to see anyone much different from themselves. Conversely, children outside the mainstream have had few literary mirrors that affirm their identities, although they had plenty of windows on life in the dominant culture of the United States. Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) emphasized that in the primary grades, students rarely “see” African American characters in books. They further asserted that because these students were not exposed to culturally relevant characters, it was difficult for them to affirm their own identity through literature. When readers cannot see themselves represented in characters who are like them, reading is likely to be frustrating rather than pleasurable (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). If children are constantly presented with characters that are not representative of themselves, they may begin to wonder whether they, their families, and their communities fit into the world of reading.

The population of school-age minority children is increasing rapidly and this rapid change makes the understanding of and ability to use multicultural literature even more necessary (Norton, 2013). Sabrina Tavernise (2011) reports that America’s population of white children will be the minority during this decade and states, “The Census Bureau had originally forecast that 2023 would be the tipping point for the minority population under the age of 18. But rapid growth among Latinos, Asians, and people of more than one race has pushed it

earlier to 2019” (p. A14). Now is the time to heighten our sensitivity to the needs of all people, cultures, and religions, and to realize how literature can play a considerable role in developing an understanding across cultures especially in our classrooms.

This chapter defines and reviews current research on the importance and necessity of using multicultural literature in our classrooms today. Included in this is using multicultural literature at all grade levels and content areas as well as the effectiveness of read alouds for classroom instruction. The research completed thus far shows a continued need for further studies, analysis, and understanding of the importance of students seeing themselves reflected in text that they are reading and the ability to accept others who are different, while understanding varying perspectives. Multicultural literature prepares all age level students to better understand, accept, and embrace these differences. It can also contribute to more in-depth character analyses and reflective writing responses. The major themes that I found are: The Power and Possibilities of Using Multicultural Literature; Read Alouds Using Multicultural Literature; Connecting Reading and Writing; and Additional Effects of Using Multicultural Literature to Elicit Response.

The Power and Possibilities of Using Multicultural Literature

Gray (2009) conducted a study in her fifth grade classroom in an urban elementary school in a southern state. She asked students to respond to multicultural literature through journal entries, book ballots, and book battles. Connecting to the characters was the most important criterion used by students to select books. Students related to the main character's feelings and found validation for their own emotions through connections made with the main character in their book selection which represented their own African American culture. The next main criterion was the genre. The students preferred realistic fiction, which unlike other types of fiction includes plots that could happen only in the real world. Realism, characters they could relate to, and realistic plots all were favorable commonalities in student selections of books. Gray (2009) believed that to increase personal connections of her students' to the African American characters they were reading about, they had to be involved in the selection process of the books. They also had to respond to these books in their discussion journals where their peers would be reading their response and felt it would be more authentic since the audience was other students.

Koeller (1996), writes that avid readers believe that literature enriches them. Compelling recent research has suggested that multicultural literature

fosters cultural and personal pride within students and promotes cultural awareness, tolerance, mutual respect, and understanding among students from diverse backgrounds (Olson, 1996). A wide range of literature that offers ideas and stories can promote interest in and greater sensitivity toward problems that have an impact on people's lives (Koeller, 1996). Good literature, including multicultural literature, nudges readers to wonder, survey, invent, and alter relationships they perceive between their readings. Literature can fuel the imagination to show us possibilities instead of boundaries (Brooks, 1992). To respond to literature is to envision alternatives. Literature that evokes sensitivity to social issues, like multicultural literature, can greatly enhance social studies learning by helping students develop the ability to think for themselves.

Research suggests that teachers increase the spirit of inquiry when they share an abundance of culturally diverse literature with their students (Olson 1996). Teachers in Olson's studies shared multicultural works with diverse classrooms of students and concluded that, "The comments of the students and teachers in our studies convince us that increased efforts must be made to infuse multicultural literature into our classrooms, whether those classrooms be language minority or language majority, whether those classrooms be ethnically diverse or ethnically homogeneous (Olson, 1996, 657).

To aid in developing understandings of other cultures, many educators and researchers emphasize the need for high-quality multicultural literature (Norton, 2013). Rochman (1993) states the need for multicultural literature very well when she concludes: "The best books break down borders. They surprise us-whether they are set close to home or abroad. They change our view of ourselves; they extend that phrase 'like me' to include what we thought was foreign and strange" (p. 9). This changing view of ourselves is especially important to researchers who are investigating minority children's responses to literature.

Persiani (2005) stated that the basis for her study, "Multicultural Children's Literature as a Practice to Encourage Interest in Books and Reading With English Language Learners: A Participatory Study" was "*listening to children's voices and analyzing their reflections about stories*" (p. 107). One channel for allowing children to verbally articulate their experiences is through literature that represents their own life situations. Such a practice offers children time not only to develop their conversational skills but also to think critically about their own circumstances. Children's literature is a medium that naturally fosters critical reflection. Quality literature poses problems and challenges the imagination. Through stories, children can relate to characters' circumstances as a mirror of their own lives (Persiani, 2005). The solutions can function as a model

to help work out problems and assist students in making choices and decisions about their future actions and consequences (Bieger, 1996; Rasinski & Padak, 1990).

Using multicultural children's literature as an instructional tool offers valuable exposure to stories representative of the students, beautiful and colorful illustrations, and enriching vocabulary. The stories include issues and topics familiar to the students, thus encouraging them to reflect and respond, practicing their oral language development (Persiani, 2005). Also, through reading response in social contexts, readers build identities within specific cultural worlds (Galda & Beach, 2001). Such contexts can extend and clarify identity and an understanding of the world. It is important to view how students who are commonly marginalized in children's literature respond when they find themselves at the center of a text (Persiani, 2005).

Read Alouds Using Multicultural Literature

Furtado (2008) conducted a study with a diverse ethnic mix of pre-K children that integrated multicultural literature within the story-book choices. The study focused on recognizing and valuing children's home culture, and appreciating the continuity between children's home life and their school literacy experiences (Cai, 2002; Neuman, 1999). Multicultural story books aided the

participants in embracing cultural diversity and understanding. The results of the read-alouds showed tangible and noteworthy benefits to readers and children. Read-alouds promoted growth in textual comprehension by the children as well as critical thinking skills of the readers. Cultural awareness and cross-age communication was also noticed.

Frazier (1997) further notes that when college students conduct read-aloud activities with children both groups benefit from the service. Better and older readers can be taught concepts or strategies for cross-age read-alouds, and they, in turn, can teach others, especially the younger children. He also finds that when the stories emphasize multicultural themes, college students can better appreciate classroom discussions of cultural diversity, and children get the message that reading is fun, important, and can tell them something about themselves. In recent years there has been an increase in the publication of children's books that tell stories of marginalized and diverse cultures through pictures and text (Cai, 2002; Fraizer, 1997; Richardson, 1995). Well-selected multicultural literature is often publicized as a tool that "helps children identify with their own culture, exposes children to other cultures, and opens the dialogue on issues regarding other diversity" (Colby & Lyon, 2004, p. 24). It is hoped that the selection of stories would allow listeners to culturally respond (Conrad, et. Al. 2004) and address the educational goals of read alouds; that is to

inform or explain; to arouse curiosity; and to inspire (Trelease, 1995).

Additionally, (Glazer and Seo, 2005; Landt, 2006) posit that read-alouds facilitate children's awareness of cultural diversity and literacy, especially when both readers and listeners are from a diverse population.

Selecting authentic multicultural texts is very important because it depicts the values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds of various groups (Norton, 2013). Text selection should focus on enabling the listeners to make connection to real-life experiences and the awareness of similarities and differences among people (Perini, 2002). Glazier & Seo (2005) suggest using multicultural literature as a window to different cultures and a mirror reflecting that of the listener and the reader.

Robinson (2013) conducted a qualitative study in her own third grade classroom where she adopted pedagogical practices that reflected sociocultural ideas of constructivist (Freire, 2007), critical theories (Kincheloe, 2008), and critical multicultural perspectives (Banks, 2007; Botelho & Rudman, 2009). This was consistent with Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2009) beliefs, that all teachers regardless of race, ethnicity, and their (presumed) social class, have an obligation to create learning environments where all are supported. Robinson (2013) argued that young people need to experience literature that represents a variety of

human experiences and emotions; these provide opportunities for catharsis and empathy. She used an integrated approach for facilitating curriculum content and adopted a critical approach for students to have the opportunity to be positioned as critical thinkers, who can become emotionally and physically involved with the themes. Robinson also believed that students need to make connections within the different learning situations by using more critical approaches when making text to text, text to self, or text to world references. Multicultural literature is a medium for doing all of this. The approach used for this research assumed a multicultural transformative and critical perspective whose focus was to examine the social practices and structural patterns of oppression.

Connecting Reading and Writing

Readers are often inspired to write about literature they enjoy. This can help develop thinking skills as they relate their personal stories and ideas about who they are to what they are reading (Koeller, 1996). Olson's (1996) research suggests that teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools enrich their students by offering them a wide array of culturally diverse literature, and having them write about what they think. She demonstrates effective ways in which teachers encourage students to write personal responses to text and probe

for universal themes that connect us all. She presents teachers' lessons to promote students' writing about multicultural drama, novels, poetry, short stories, and non-fiction. She also reports indicators of growth: an increase amount of writing; greater use of supporting evidence from texts, including use of quotations; evidence of planning and organization; a stronger sense of personal voice of the writer; and growth in students' reading and thinking ability.

Reading and writing are reciprocal processes (Cairney 1990; Moss 1991). Literature often inspires readers to write. Writing about reading can further maturity, conceptual knowledge, and the ability to be confidently articulate (White, 1993). According to White, it can help to induce intellectualism, which students avoid when they rely on another's words and don't develop their own ideas or heed their own voice in responsible writing (Koeller, 1996).

Why writing and reading together? Corden (2000) believes that the more children read, the more they learn about writing; the more children write, the more they learn about processing text when reading. The relationship between children's reading and writing has long been recognized, and there is substantial evidence to suggest that a mentor relationship can develop between authors and children. Corden (2000) also contends that interactive discourse impacts

children's reading-writing connections. His research suggests that children are able to discuss and critically evaluate texts and to transfer the knowledge and insights gained to their own writing after their attention has been drawn to specific literary strategies.

Another study by McCarthy (2001) titled, "Identity construction in elementary readers and writers," looks closely at the role of literacy perceptions and practices in shaping identity. Her purpose was to provide new perspectives about the relationship between students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers and the perceptions of those who work closely with them, i.e., parents, teachers, peers. Further, she analyzed how involvement in literacy learning contributes to students' perceptions of themselves (Abadiano & Turner, 2002). Among the findings, McCarthy (2001) noted that "students who read and wrote frequently were more successful and saw literacy as increasingly more essential to who they were and the cultural practices in which they engaged" (p. 145). The study has implications for classroom practice that highlight reading-writing connections and McCarthy (2001) recommends to encourage students to read books about people like themselves; to immerse students in multicultural books that provide opportunities to discuss issues of culture and class and to make connections with themselves; to value and legitimize students' attempts to

talk or write about these issues as they arise in context; and to allow students to write about personal experiences and take more activist stances.

There is considerable value in the use of literature discussion groups and response journals (Persiani, 2005). Reading and responding to literature in this way provides effective means through which readers of different ages and backgrounds and in a variety of settings deepen their understanding of literature and of themselves (Comba, 1991; Eeds & Wells, 1989). When readers express their interactions with literature through dialogue and written reflections, beliefs and ideas about their own identities are often brought out (Rosenblatt, 1978). Using multicultural literature allows for diverse voices in the classroom, whatever the racial, gender, or cultural or linguistic background of the students (Persiani, 2005).

Additional Effects of Using Multicultural Literature to Elicit Response

There are numerous scholars who address the need for multicultural perspectives in classroom pedagogy as a process for teaching and for learning (Delpit, 2012; Banks, 2007; Nieto, 2010; and Bothelho and Rudman, 2009). This not only applies to language arts instruction, but to all content and skills areas (Wooten & Cullinan, 2009). Reading and responding to text require active, not passive experiences. This has implications for how students view and

comprehend text, how they engage or interact with text, and how they respond to text through making connections or disconnections. Educating young people in contemporary classrooms requires the educator to cultivate a multicultural context that promotes a critical appreciation for diversity. Multicultural literature then becomes an essential resource for the classroom that challenges the hegemonic constructs that predominates children's literature (Rudman, 1995). It is a powerful way to challenge the dominant mind-set of society; stories can challenge the status quo as well as help build consensus, and create, communal understanding. They can, at once describe what is and what ought to be (Taylor, 2000). Students' perceptions of other cultural groups are often constructed by their socialization experiences. These influences include family and community values, media representations, and the types of printed resources that are available in their homes and at school (Robinson, 2013).

Positive multicultural literature has been used effectively to help readers identify cultural heritages, understand sociological change, respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations, and expand imagination and creativity (Norton, 2013). Norton also believes that multicultural literature and activities related to the literature also improves reading scores and improves attitudes among students from varying cultures. When the literature and literature-related activities are part of the curriculum, and when adults know how to select this

literature and develop strategies to accompany the literature, they encourage students to see commonalities and value in literature different from their own culture (Norton, 1990).

Using multicultural literature can also help instill the love of books and reading in students. The goal of any educator is to get students to read, so they in turn develop their language skills. It is also important that teachers consistently read aloud, make use of the library, and offer time for language experiences after the stories. These activities encourage children to be more independent as learners because classroom routines- such as story time (read alouds), literature dialogue, and sustained silent reading-are predictable and meaning based (Persiani, 2005).

Persiani (2005) adds that according to Ada and Campoy (1997), the theory of transformative literacy recognizes the power of literature as it confirms that “human beings are reflective beings” and provides “children with better insights into their own beings, a better understanding of relationships to others and opens doors to new information” (p. 6). In their theory of transformative literacy, Ada and Campoy (1997) explain that transformation and dialogue take place between a reader and literature. The students need to find interests, as well as experiences from their own lives, that they can use to relate to their reading for it

to have an important effect and ultimately make reading understandable, enjoyable, and meaningful: *“Reading can be more than learning what the text has to say. Reading is a dialogue between the author and the reader. It enriches the author’s text with the reader’s feelings, experiences, and reflections. In doing so it allows the reader to leave the text wiser, stronger, with a greater understanding of herself, of himself, and of others, and able to face life with renewed hope”* (Ada, 2002, p. 5).

Multicultural children’s literature is an effective vehicle for getting students to connect with the text, gain an understanding of it, discuss it, and develop their language skills because the stories make sense to them and they can dialogue fluidly about them. Persiani’s (2005) study with third grade, inner city class, used various multicultural children’s stories as read alouds with the goal of increasing interest in books and reading. Promoting the students oral language development resulted in some unexpected findings in the students’ oral and written responses. She found that the children’s perceptions suggested that they had not been secluded from the realities of their own worlds. They had, from such a young perspective, a clear understanding of how the dynamics of everyday life function and often generated solutions for given situations, revealing a maturity in their thinking and experience which was not expected.

Other findings that appeared were that students could relate to the stories and characters as the books reflected the students' real lives. The student dialogues and written reflections based on the multicultural stories showed that, when given the opportunity to use their voices to share an opinion, these third-graders enthusiastically had a great deal to say (Persiani, 2005). Taking notice of interesting particulars and themes from the text, the children acted as perceptive observers, which indicated a high level of critical thinking and imaginative detail. Persiani (2005) concluded her study by saying that the young children in the study are now learning to become comfortable with the critical-thinking process as it develops into a more natural part of their beings. They are also now learning ways to have an impact on their own lives in becoming strong individuals who appreciate their native language and that of others while progressing in English. The dialogues following multicultural children's stories helped to cultivate this process ((Persiani, 2005). Ada (2002) attributes the ability to reflect as a process appropriate for young children and one in which they should actively participate. These findings confirm that it is never too early to begin the process of reflection in young children and to use literature as a medium toward self-awareness [empowerment] and understanding (Moreno, 1990).

Conclusion

After reviewing the literature on the many benefits and need for using multicultural literature at all grade level and content areas, especially through read alouds, the literature suggests that students will be able to generate a more profound understanding and able to make deeper connections in responding both orally and in writing activities. When students see a mirror image of themselves and their cultures, as well as having the opportunity to look into unfamiliar lives and cultures of others, they can make connections, appreciate differences, and essentially understand the world in which they live in with a greater appreciation and acceptance.

Based on the studies and research completed on the importance and need to incorporate multicultural literature in curriculum and lesson plans, the main understanding is that multicultural literature helps children identify with their own culture, exposes children to other cultures, and opens up spaces to discuss issues such as diversity and race. When students see themselves represented in characters and situations in books they are reading, it helps them to make connections and reflect on their own culture in which they can identify with. When this is done, it helps to also generate ideas for writing responses that are rich in details and full of excitement. All children need to receive affirmation of

themselves and their culture through literature and be able to connect to self in order to promote greater meaning and comprehension.

The next chapter of this thesis will explain the methodology and research design of the study. The particular details will include the process, framework, and context of the study.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Research Design

The research deemed most appropriate for this type of educational forum took the form of *qualitative research*. Qualitative research can be defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building complex holistic pictures and formed with words. Reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in a natural setting contribute to findings collected during fieldwork. The most common qualitative research objectives include description, exploration, and discovery which were all considered vital to complete this study accurately.

Qualitative research includes inductive reasoning which generates new hypotheses and grounded theory from data collected during fieldwork and focuses on a wide-angle and deep-angle lens, examining the breadth and depth of phenomena to learn more about them. Data is coded, cross-referenced, and analyzed for patterns. The forms of qualitative data include interviews, participant observations, field notes, journals, photographs, and open-ended questions and presented through words, images, and categories. Searching for themes, patterns, and holistic features are included in the data analysis. The results from qualitative research include presenting multiple perspectives in the

form of a final narrative report with contextual description and direct quotations from the research participants. Essentially, these are the ingredients that make up my teacher research qualitative study and enabled me to accurately portray my data effectively and efficiently.

Since the nature of my teacher research includes observing and studying children in an actual classroom setting, qualitative research would offer the best forms, procedures, and data analysis to conduct my study and report my findings. Once the study is complete and data analyzed, the research will help support the idea that more inquiry on this topic is needed to fully contribute to the benefits of embedding multicultural literature into instruction for children of all cultures and grade levels.

According to Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2004), the terms *practitioner inquiry* and *practitioner research* are used as conceptual and linguistic umbrellas to refer to a wider array of educational research modes, forms, genres, and purposes. Under this umbrella for practitioner inquiry, there are five major genres one of which includes *teacher research*. Teacher research refers to the inquiries of K-12 teachers and prospective teachers, often in collaboration with university-based colleagues and other educators. Teacher researchers work in inquiry communities to examine their own assumptions, develop local knowledge by

posting questions and gathering data, and in many versions of teacher research, work for equity for social justice by using inquiry to ensure educational opportunity, access, and equity for all students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999b; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Myers, Rust & Paul, n.d.; Stenhouse, 1985).

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) argue that “whether called research, inquiry, action research, or teacher research, the goal is not to produce findings, nor is it simply to analyze the results of standardized tests to identify areas for reteaching. Rather, the goal is to create access for all learners to equitable and stimulating learning opportunities; to identify levers for needed change in people, institutions, and systems; and to act in ways that respect and honor the participation of various constituencies whose lives are implicated in the educational practices and policies under consideration” (p. 142).

Teachers who work from an inquiry stance that involves continual and critical questioning foster the development of students who do the same. Teachers who see themselves as knowers ask questions and pose problems, and so do their students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) also believe that when practitioners work from an inquiry stance, the goal is that their students will have basic knowledge and skills, to be sure, but also

that they will raise questions about knowledge sources and uses and develop the skills of critique, deliberation, and analysis.

From the perspective of a teacher researcher, I was able to intentionally provoke deeper thought into story narratives that would result in greater student awareness and comprehension of the material. Being fully immersed and having the ability to make on-the-spot decisions and changes based on student responses, resulted in more honest and heartfelt connections that students were able to write about. Activating prior knowledge, building background, and raising questions during the read alouds of the multicultural literature gave students varying perspectives to consider which resulted in more questions and personal connections for me to challenge and debate. Instead of just looking through one lens from that of a teacher and assessing their learning, I was able to assess and critique my own. This was valuable in selecting and using multicultural literature that would offer the best thinking and understanding of cultures that reflected their own as well as ones that were unique.

The Study and Instructional Plan

My qualitative research included searching for multicultural literature to read aloud to third grade students that would then generate ideas for writing personal narratives. Colby & Lyon (2004) believe that multicultural literature helps children identify with their own culture, exposes children to other cultures,

and opens the dialogue on issues regarding diversity. When students see themselves represented in characters and situations in the books they are reading, it helps them to make connections and reflect on their own culture with which they can identify. When this is done, then students are able to relate this experience to their own, thus translating and responding with a greater understanding and interest in their narrative writing. Children need to receive affirmation of themselves and their culture through literature [Bieger, 1995, - 1996], and be able to connect to text to self in order to promote greater meaning (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1978).

Kathryn Au (2011) recognizes that when educators endorse the use of multicultural texts by authors of diverse backgrounds that present cultures in an authentic manner, these experiences may improve the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds by increasing their motivation to read (Spears-Bunton, 1990), their appreciation and understanding of their own language and cultural heritage (Jordan, 1988), and their valuing of their own life experience as a topic for writing.

The reason that I chose the multicultural literature was to provoke a greater depth of thinking, awaken their inner spirits, and raise the level of excitement of recognizing oneself in the text and giving children the experience

of feeling like they “belong” and are truly special and unique as well as accepted and validated. When students can relate to the characters, situations, and circumstances in literature with pride and (accurate) portrayals, they can respond with a greater sense of pride and enthusiastically look forward to not only writing about their “connection” but sharing it with their classroom family.

During the course of this (approximate) five week study, students will be introduced to a multicultural mentor text during the Reading and Writing workshop components of daily literacy instruction. These workshops account for two hours of the daily literacy schedule. The texts will be read aloud during several days of the weekly lesson and each time with a different purpose for responding. Day one may include focusing on character traits; the following day may include comparing two different characters. The theme or lesson learned would also be another focus for students to ponder and discuss. Lively and rich discussions will include making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections in their own personal lives and then responding in writing in their writing journals, personal narrative essays, verbal peer-to-peer conferences, and summaries.

The first multicultural text that will be read is titled, “The Other Side” by Jacqueline Woodson. This story is set in the rural South during times of

segregation where white and black children did not play together. The main characters include one black and one white girl who were separated by a fence that divides their town. By the end of the story the two girls gradually became friends by sitting “on” the fence and talking. Students will be asked to focus on the author’s message and why the author chose to use a fence to keep them separated. The question will also be raised as to whether they were ever kept from playing with another child because of their race, religion, or any other difference. Responses will be written in their writing journals and discussed with peers.

The next multicultural text that will be read aloud is, “In My Momma’s Kitchen” by Jerdine Nolen. This heartwarming story describes all of the various ways that the “kitchen” is the center of celebrations, life-events, and family gatherings. Students will be asked to think about their own kitchens and brainstorm a list of activities and events that go on there. After, each one will write a short essay on their favorite “happening” in their kitchen.

Another multicultural text that students will explore is called “Bigmama’s” by Donald Crews. The African American author tells of his own travels each summer when he and his family left the city and visited their grandparents in the country. It was a time without indoor plumbing, electric and

modern conveniences. The story focuses on traditions and fond recollections of family gatherings. Students will write in their journals about connections to their own traditional family gatherings such as family reunions, holiday celebrations, and annual events.

The next story tells of an African American boy who is experiencing going to the barbershop with his dad and getting his hair cut for the first time. The title is "Bippity Bop Barbershop" by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley. The story focuses on the special ritual between the father and son and instead of just going to the barbershop with his dad this one particular Saturday morning, he has to be brave and get his hair cut as well. In conjunction with this story, "Wild, Wild Hair" by Nikki Grimes will be read where the focus is on an African American girl who has to get her hair combed and braided before going to school and she hides because she hates having it done. Students will compare and contrast the experiences and rituals of getting their own hair cut, combed, and braided. Each will discuss with their peer partners and write about it in their journals.

The methodological triangulation of data collection will include qualitative research methods of recording the results of my observations in my teacher journal (in the form of anecdotal notes) during the reading and writing

workshop, conferring and discussions with the students based on the multicultural literature, student writing journals and student work samples.

The teacher journal will be utilized during the reading and writing workshops where anecdotal records of student (peer) discussions take place and I script their conversations after parts of the text and at the end of the text. Specific questions regarding the text will be asked along with students asking questions of their own and then responding. The teacher journal will also include ideas and thoughts about how the lesson is progressing and what did or did not work well with the lesson.

The second form of data collection will be observing the actual verbal conversations of the student-to-student responses and connections that were made. I will be listening for similarities and differences, patterns of thought, repetition of response, and depth of understanding. Energy and excitement in discussing the topics from the text will also be noted.

The third form of data collection will come from their writing journals. Students use their journals on a daily basis and respond to writing prompts and read alouds. Description, details, and connections made will be analyzed and compared to determine what impact the multicultural text had on the written response or if connections were made and discussed with stimulating details.

The fourth form that I will use to collect the data will include essays, summaries, and other responses such as post-it notes. This will shed light on a different form of responding that will offer insight into what the student was feeling, if they connected with the text, or what opinion and thoughts were awakened.

Together these forms of data collection will offer a glimpse into the thoughts, feelings, and ideas that students were able to connect with and help them communicate with others that their lives have meaning, importance, and truly matter. This data will enable me to decide if I need to introduce more multicultural literature on certain topics and cultures.

Data Analysis

To analysis the data, I will review the anecdotal notes taken during the reading and writing workshops from my teacher journal and observations. I will compare responses to content from read alouds to determine if connections were made and ideas generated. I will also listen to discussions between students (peer-to-peer conferencing) and note the depth and understanding of their conversations.

Trends, patterns, and similarities will be noted and analyzed. The survey results will be compiled and coded and student written responses compared and

contrasted. This will include responses from their writing journals, essays, and various class response activities. Coding will consist of students being identified by a number that I will keep in my research journal.

Context

Community. The Salem City School District serves public school students in pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade. Salem Middle School, John Fenwick Academy Elementary School and Salem High School are the three schools with 1,231 students that make up the Salem City School District located in the city of Salem in Salem County, New Jersey. The demographics of the surrounding area according to the 2010 United States Census include a population of 5,146 people, which is a decrease of 711 (-12.1%) from the 5,857 counted in the 2000 Census, which had in turn declined by 1,026 (-14.9%) from the 6,883 counted in the 1990 Census, an overall drop of more than 25% over the two decades.

It is the county seat of Salem and the most rural county in the state. At the 2010 United States Census there were 5,146 people, 2,157 households, and 1,264 families residing in the city. The population density was 2,195.9 per square mile (847.8/km²). There were 2,633 housing units at an average density of 1,123.6 per square mile (433.8/km²). The racial makeup of the city was 31.21% (1,606) White, 62.13% (3,197) Black or African American, 0.41% (21) Native American, 0.39%

(20) Asian, 0.00% (0) Pacific Islander, 1.85% (95) from other races, and 4.02% (207) from two or more races. Hispanics or Latinos of any race were 6.68% (344) of the population.

There were 2,157 households, of which 28.9% had children under the age of 18 living with them, 22.8% were married couples living together, 30.7% had a female householder with no husband present, and 41.4% were non-families. 35.5% of all households were made up of individuals, and 12.7% had someone living alone who was 65 years of age or older. The average household size was 2.36 and the average family size was 3.05.

In the city, 28.2% of the population were under the age of 18, 9.7% from 18 to 24, 22.4% from 25 to 44, 27.1% from 45 to 64, and 12.5% who were 65 years of age or older. The median age was 34.4 years. For every 100 females there were 80.8 males. For every 100 females age 18 and over, there were 73.5 males.

The Census Bureau's 2006-2010 American Community Survey showed that (in 2010 inflation-adjusted dollars) median household income was \$25,682 (with a margin of error of +/- \$5,287) and the median family income was \$38,286 (+/- \$5,682). Males had a median income of \$47,708 (+/- \$9,641) versus \$32,236 (+/- \$5,778) for females. The per capita income for the borough was \$17,733 (+/- \$2,366). About 26.5% of families and 28.4% of the population were below the

poverty line, including 43.4% of those under age 18 and 10.9% of those age 65 or over.

Salem City is covered in the zip code area of 08079 and is bordered by Elsinboro Township, Pennsville Township, Mannington Township, Quinton Township, and Lower Alloways Creek Township. Salem city has a total area of 2.815 square miles (7.291 km²), of which 2.343 square miles (6.070 km²) is land and 0.472 square mile (1.221 km²) (16.75%) is water. Area ranking is 350th of 566 in the state and 12th of 15 in the county.

The Salem City School District is one of 31 former Abbott districts statewide, which are now referred to as "SDA Districts" based on the requirement for the state to cover all costs for school building and renovation projects in these districts under the supervision of the New Jersey Schools Development Authority. The district is classified by the New Jersey Department of Education as being in District Factor Group "A", the lowest of eight groupings. District Factor Groups organize districts statewide to allow comparison by common socioeconomic characteristics of the local districts. From lowest socioeconomic status to highest, the categories are A, B, CD, DE, FG, GH, I and J.

According to statistics from the 2011-2012 State of New Jersey, New Jersey School Performance Report for Salem Middle School, it was considered a *Focus* school with the rationale resulting from being in the lowest subgroup

performance. There were 451 students from grades 3-8 of which 97.4% spoke English. Enrollment by Ethnic/Racial subgroups were 84.7% Black, 8% White, 6.7% Hispanic, and 0.7% Asian. 219 of the students were male and 232 of the student population were female. 94.9% of the students were considered economically disadvantaged, 20% of the students have disabilities, and 1.3% were limited English proficient.

The length of the school day is 6 hours and 40 minutes, student suspension rate 34.4%, and student-teacher ratio is 9.40:1. The third and fourth grade classes are in the traditional self-contained format while the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades each form a loop. All teachers, in all grade levels are highly qualified and are also content certified in the subject matter they teach from grades five to eight. Currently Salem Middle School uses the following assessments to guide classroom instruction: Core Curriculum based quarterly pre and post tests in literacy and math for all grade levels and Lexile Assessments (which evaluates students' reading levels) in grades three to eight. The data from these tests are used to both improve instruction and remediate student deficiencies.

Academic Achievement measures the content knowledge students have in language arts literacy and math. In elementary and middle school, this includes the outcomes of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK).

According to the 2012-2012 data, 69% of the students are partially proficient in language arts literacy, 30% proficient, and 0% advanced proficient. In math, 61% partially proficient, and 34% proficient, with 5% advanced proficient.

Classroom

Mrs. McConathey's self-contained third grade classroom in which the study took place consisted of sixteen 8 to 9 year old students. The make-up of the students consisted of fourteen African American, one Hispanic, and one white student with nine being female and seven male. The students were assessed in reading comprehension using the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) Lexile system. The results showed that scores ranged from Below Basic to Proficient Levels of reading. Four students scored Below Basic which ranged from a Beginner Reader (BR) to 215 Lexiles, seven students in the Basic category with Lexiles from 324 to 459, and five students in the Proficient range with Lexiles from 510 to 755. The normal Lexile range for third grade is from 500 to 800.

Next Chapters

Chapter four will discuss the data results from the classroom study, discussions and writings of the students from their journals and responses, and teacher research. Chapter five completes the study with conclusions and implications for future research exploring the thesis topic.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Chapter four analyzes and discusses the findings of the study to answer the key research question, “What happens when multicultural literature are used as mentor texts to generate ideas for writing personal narratives?” As I sorted and categorized my data four main themes emerged: making connections with multicultural literature themes; recognizing and accepting differences through thoughtful discussions; writing with more depth and description; and excitement and enthusiasm to share “writing connections” through personal narratives with the class.

Revisiting the Study

As was explained in chapter three, I collected data over a five week period for my qualitative research study. The data was collected during Reading and Writing Workshop components of our literacy instruction. Five multicultural texts were read and reread during this time period. Students listened to the multicultural read alouds sitting on the “carpet” area in our third grade classroom. They also responded to the multicultural read alouds through peer discussions, open-ended questions, writing about connections made in personal

writing journals, and adding thoughts to classroom charts where responses were compared and contrasted.

Before I introduced the multicultural read aloud to the students, I showed them the cover and asked them to make predictions on what the text was going to be about. For two of the books we took a picture walk before reading to make predictions based solely on the pictures throughout the story. I wanted the three other stories to unfold while they listened to it being read aloud. Student responses for the picture walks were shared verbally and charted so they could be compared to what unfolded during the read aloud to determine if predictions were correct or needed to be changed along with new predictions made. Making predictions for *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson (based on the picture walk) yielded a rich discussion in how the girls eventually *looked* like they became friends and played together. Before the reading of this text which focuses on racial tension in the segregated South during the civil rights movement, the students initially said (based on looking at the cover) that the girls were separated because one was white and one was black. This type of thinking and discussions with multicultural texts helps students verbalize their opinions and thoughts without the worry of being “wrong” or sounding “racist.” The students do use this term with each other when they think someone is making a choice or decision based on skin color. These texts resulted in rich discussions that take

into account varying perspectives and give a greater opportunity to provoke thinking that will generate writing responses filled with provocative and insightful understandings.

Making predictions before reading a book (and adjusting them during), asking questions, making connections, and monitoring our comprehension are all comprehension strategies that enable the reader to engage in the text to construct meaning which is the overall goal of reading. Pearson and Tierney (1984) say that like writing, reading is an act of composition. When we write, we compose thoughts on paper. When we read, we compose meaning in our minds. Thoughtful, active readers use the text to stimulate their own thinking and to engage with the active mind of the writer. Readers construct and maintain understanding by merging their thinking with the text. They have an ongoing inner conversation with the author as they read, a dialogue of sorts where the reader engages with and talks back to the writer throughout their reading.

The entire third grade class of fifteen students listened to the multicultural read alouds and responded in various ways. Their predictions, understandings, and responses to the read alouds helped them write with a deeper understanding and greater excitement especially when it came time to share with everyone. From the notes in my teacher research journal, I repeatedly wrote

about how excited the students were to write in response to seeing themselves in the stories and share their personal connections. The conversations between students were necessary to listen to because they continually made connections to what was in the text and also took it a step further by debating responses while respecting each other's opinions.

Making Connections with Read Aloud Themes

I began the first week of this study by reading aloud the fictional text *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson. This story tells of the budding friendship between a black and white girl in the South during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950's and 1960's. Based on the picture walk before reading the book, students first saw the girls on opposite sides of the fence then by the end, playing together. It was interesting to note that none of the students made an inference to the fence being used to divide the racially segregated town but only to separate the two yards where their parents owned the property. The question was posed to the students, "Why did the author put a fence in the story?" Each student responded on a post-it note and then the post-it note was added to the question on the classroom chart. Student #8 wrote, "I think the author put a fence in their yard because back in the old days like in the movie *12 Years a Slave*, black and white people didn't get along." She was able to make a text-to-text connection

with another movie based on segregation. She also referenced that it was because it was back in the day and it is different now.

Student #15 responded with, "I think the author put a fence in this story so they could not be together and so they can see the other side and they couldn't be together because it was the law." Student #11 said, "I think the author put the fence in the story so the white and black person don't be rude to each other." She then added that it was also so that they don't go in the road." Another student (#5) responded with, "I think the author put a fence in the story so it would keep white and black people away from each other because in the old days, black and white people could not be friends."

As the students wrote about why they thought the author put a fence in the story, we also discussed why people put fences up in the first place and the significance of using it to separate or show what property belongs to them. The verbal connections that students made included many commenting that they have fences to keep their dogs in their yards or baby brothers and sisters in the yard so that they do not run out into the street and get run over. Not until they realized that this story took place "back in the day" during a time when people of different races had to be separated like Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., did they start making comments about the girls being separated by the

fence because of their race. Their connections were based on what they already knew of race relations in the past and what they were told by their families or seen in movies and read in books. This topic brought up connections and ideas that students were familiar with thus making all of them wanting to share their thoughts because they solved the mystery of why the author put the fence in the story.

Another book that was read during the study in week two was called, *In My Momma's Kitchen* by Jerdine Nolen. This fictional story illustrates an African American family and how their kitchen is the center of their lives. Everything of importance or pertaining to their family that happens in their house happens in their Momma's kitchen. As soon as I showed the cover and read the title to the students during our read aloud session, hands went up and sounds of, "Oooh, oooh, me, me" filled the air. Before we even read a page, every student was ready to share what happens in their Momma's kitchen. Text-to-Self connections were helping students comprehend how the familiar room such as the kitchen, was actually a place where so much more than cooking and eating goes on.

As the story progresses through the year describing various holiday celebrations, every-day celebrations, as well as daily family life, students were able to offer connections that were similar such as playing with their toys, video

games, and each other at the kitchen table. Crafts, getting hair braided, and doing homework were the most popular responses while some added that learning to ride a bike, doing gymnastics, and dancing were normal in their kitchens. Chores from feeding pets to washing dishes and cleaning up after meals were also commonplace. As the story moved away from traditional kitchen occurrences and focused on the special time and bonding that went on between the family in the story, many started realizing how the kitchen is more than just a place to cook and eat. Student #3 even said, "I always tell my mom how I love our kitchen and it is amazing to be in our kitchen a lot!" Student #10 added, "When we have people over, everyone stays in the kitchen together." Student #14 responded with, "Even at night when we can't sleep, we end up down in the kitchen eating cookies and drinking juice."

The next story that created many connections for students as it was read aloud to them was called *Bippity Bop Barbershop* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley. This story tells of a young African American boy who experiences the weekly ritual of going to the barbershop with his father every Saturday morning, but this time is his first experience with getting his own hair cut. There are six boys in the study and nine girls. Some of the girls even made connections in talking about their brothers going to the barbershop in Salem. Student #7 said that all of her cousins go there along with her older brothers. Then the hands went up for all

six boys, waving frantically. While pointing to the lines and designs cut into their hair they all took turns explaining how the barber buzzes their style and how someone else does the braids. Again, each student was able to make connections with a multicultural text read aloud with a familiar theme or topic.

The next story read was called *Wild, Wild Hair* by Nikki Grimes. When I showed the picture on the cover, the class erupted with laughter because if they did not point and say that's me, they named a younger or older sister who they thought of. The picture illustrates a young African American girl holding her hair down at the roots while an older woman combs through it. The look on the young girls' face shows she is in some discomfort and does not like it. Even the boys were saying that it reminded them of their sisters and cousins. The story tells of Tisa Walker and her long, thick, wild hair and how every Monday morning before school her Momma would braid it. Tisa hated this part of Monday mornings and hid to delay the inevitable until she was found. Then the process began with the combing and braiding. After it was done, she loved the outcome; just not the journey getting there. The nine girls in our class each offered an explanation of their own combing and braiding process that they go through to have their hair done. Every girl started with a smile then described step-by-step what, who, and how their own process was complete. My journal notes emphasized the participation of all the girls and most boys and how they

could all also relate to seeing a family member go through being chased around the house to avoid getting their hair combed and braided. The connections they were making were real and authentic. Student # 5 shared that her dad calls her his “wild child” because of her hair just like Tisa in the book because of her “wild hair!”

When I showed the cover for *Coming On Home Soon* by Jacqueline Woodson, I received mixed predictions about what they thought the book would be about. Since it only shows a young African American girl leaning up against a wood door looking outside with the light reflecting in on her, the students came up with predictions that she is saying goodbye to someone, letting someone in her house, and looking at something going on outside. When I started to read the story and they started looking at how she was dressed and that they did not have things like electric and lights like we have, the consensus was this story took place back in the old days. As it unfolds, it tells how Ada Ruth’s mama had to go to work in Chicago to make money for them and that she could not come and would have to stay home with her Grandma. Right away, as noted in my teacher research journal, four boys and five girls shared that their connection to the story was they lived with their Grandma too or that their Grandma lived with them and their Mom. Also, student #3 pointed out that she knew the book would be special because it had the award sticker on it. I

explained that yes, it was a 2005 Caldecott Honor Book and that it means it won an award for its pictures. I then showed them the previous book that we read written by Jacqueline Woodson and illustrated by E. B. Lewis. After this, several students commented about how the pictures look the same and compared how both books have little African American girls as the main characters and even picked up on how their momma' were a part of the stories.

The stories shared were heartfelt and genuine as student #12 told me how she lives with her grandmom and they take care of each other. She said that she doesn't know where her mom is and that her grandmom is "sometimes nice and sometimes mean." Student #1 said that his grandmom lives with him and his mom and when his mom has to go to work, his grandmom is in charge. After that comment was shared, Students #4, 8, 11, and 14 added that they have to listen to their grandmoms when their moms go to work. Students #9 and 15 said that they sleep over at their grandmom's house when mom is working. Most of the students could make connections to having to help out at home because mom is not there, working, or because they live with their grandmom and other brothers and sisters. The connections made to this story were similar to connections made to the previous read alouds in that students were able to sympathize with the character in the read aloud and his or her life experiences and awaken memories or comparisons to their own lives.

As the story unfolded and they found out that the little girl had to keep waiting day after day, students started making connections to not liking having to wait for their moms to come home from work when they work late because they don't get to see them. Some students even said that they have to help with the other kids that grandmom is watching but none could relate to having to do the types of chores that Ada Ruth had to help her grandmom with "back in the day."

Recognizing and Accepting Differences Through Thoughtful Discussions

While reading and discussing *The Other Side* I found out that in terms of segregation, most students -13 out of 15 - thought of it in terms of being done in the past as in the stories they read about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. They did not think that it was still happening today because the "law" changed and said that is could not. Another response that surprised me came from a conversation that we had over a question I asked.

"Why did both the black girl's and white girl's moms not let them play with each other?"

Student #10 replied, "No, it was only the white girl. Her mom said she couldn't play with the black girl because she was black."

Student #3 said, "Yeah, the white girl couldn't because the white people then did not like black people and they couldn't sit near each other, they were racist."

Then I found a teachable moment and said, "First of all, not all white people felt that way, only some not all. This is called a stereotype. When you say that all people feel a certain way because of a few; it is a stereotype and not true for everyone and furthermore, just as some white people did not allow their kids to play with black children, the same was true for some black people. They did not let their kids play with white kids for the same reasons."

Then student #5 said, "I thought only the white moms didn't let their kids play with the black kids."

I said, "Think about Clover and Annie, it was both moms who felt the same; neither were allowed to go beyond the fence, neither mom said why, only that was the way things were, and when they passed by each other in town, both did not speak to each other. But deep down, both moms did not have a problem with their daughters becoming friends and playing together."

Then I asked, "Why did you think it was only the white mom who didn't want their child to play with a black child and not the other way around?"

Student #10 said as he shrugged his shoulders, "I just thought it was always the white people who didn't want their kids to play with black kids."

This led into a discussion about how people of both races as well as other races, sometimes harbor the same feelings about each other but we don't always see it that way because we are looking at it from one perspective only.

Our discussion then led into the question where they had to respond on a post-it note, "Have you ever been told that you could not play with someone because of their race?" The students all responded with only two who said they weren't allowed to play with another kid in their neighborhood because they were white while the rest all acquainted it to the other child being known as a "bad kid" and were told to stay away from him because of that.

Reading a book like *The Other Side* and discussing a sensitive subject like race is important because you can explore and understand why some kids feel the way they do and clarify any misunderstandings as well as clear up misconceptions. Having students talk about a topic like racism and stereotypes and writing about it in their personal writing journals helps them feel comfortable and safe to get out what they are often afraid to ask because they don't know how. This story was a perfect gateway into getting them to connect

to the characters in the story who are about their own age and both like to play and do the same things as most kids like to do.

In My Momma's Kitchen offered a different type of discussion but enabled all of the students to make connections, discuss and share their personal experiences with their classmates. Even though they had a lot of different activities and family events that happened in the kitchen, they experienced them nonetheless in the same important room in the house the kitchen. I noted in my teacher journal all positive things that they have in common and actually say to each other, "Yes, we do that in my kitchen too!" As students turned and talked to their writing partners, they stirred up thoughts and feelings that were remembered and then added to by the other student with excitement.

Listening to students discuss with each other as well as share whole group the stories of going to the barbershop or hair salon to get their hair cut, combed, or braided offered the opportunity to discuss their own experiences good and bad, and have lively debates. They debated the best way to wear their styles and get them done. Students #7, 3, and 11 even have the same lady on Walnut Street do their braids. Even when someone tried to correct the other person in the conversation on who was the best in town to cut hair, they finally agreed that it all depended on what you felt happy with and what looked good on you. The

more they talked the more they seemed to understand each other and listened to each other tell their side.

As students talked about living with their moms and grandmoms, student #14 said that his mom and dad had just recently split up and now he is living with his mom and grandmom and his dad had to leave. Then student # 10 said his dad lives in North Jersey and he and his mom live down here. Student #9 said he only sees his dad when he comes to see him play football but that is all. I did have the students not only talk about the connections they made with *Coming On Home Soon* but to write about it in their writing journals with the intention of sharing with the whole class. As I heard students say, "Yes!" and "Can I share first?" I realized that they really are proud of their writing which represents their own special life experiences. This was also a great opportunity to explain that they need to respect each other and treat each other without teasing and bullying because you never know what other kids are going through at home and that everyone has problems and we need to be mindful of that. Our discussion also touched on how many of them are responsible for adult-like actions because of some of our home lives. Talking and discussing our similarities and differences helps us see that we need to support each other and that we are not alone with our problems.

When each student started taking turns sharing their journal entries in regards to connections to *Coming On Home Soon* while the rest of the class listened, I noticed that the listeners did so with a little more focus. When the reader was done, listeners raised their hands to comment on what they liked about the story and what they wished the reader would have added. The suggestions were taken with pride and care and the readers thanked the listeners when done. I stood back and listened and watched as this back-and-forth exchange took place. No arguing, fighting, or negativity; just generally the same story shared about families broken or torn apart and not totally intact with children helping each other understand and sympathize about circumstances they were already too familiar with but did not comprehend fully. I think that when children see themselves and their circumstances represented in rich literature, it helps them internalize it and make meaning of their own lives. The connections made from this story in particular led into a discussion and writing session where students were experiencing empathy, compassion, and respect for each other and feeling accepted and validated; not rejected and alienated.

Writing with More Depth and Breadth

Students have been listening to mentor texts read aloud to them since the beginning of the year. Some of the book themes they could relate to quickly and

some needed quite a bit of background building and some to the point where they did not comprehend the theme or moral of the story being read at all. The stories where they had to respond to prompts or make connections with and struggled to write about, were all stories about which they had no background knowledge or experience. Students do need to learn more about their cultures and different cultures but if we want them to make connections and write in depth they need to be able to make connections and relate it to their life experiences. In addition to listening to multicultural read alouds that help inspire and plant seed ideas for writing, students are able to write with more depth and breadth. Through these rich and thought-provoking stories, they are able to make sense of their own experiences and express themselves in their writing.

When the students listened to the multicultural mentor text *The Other Side* and responded in their writing journals, they all had their heads down, writing intensely full of inspiration from the read aloud. After discussing the reasons for why they thought the author said that someday somebody's is going to come along and knock that old fence down, they wrote about it differently. The discussion was half and half. Half of the class took the words literally and said that the fence was old and someone could fall off of it and get hurt, and the other half understood the analogy and commented it should come down so the white girl and black girl could play together. As more discussion transpired between

the “two sides of thought” students who didn’t get the analogy at first, started to have that light bulb moment and realize what it meant. That’s when they hit their writing journals with new abandonment. Their responses were filled with deeper meaning and understanding because of the story and most assuredly because of the rich discussion that went on.

The best representation of students writing with greater depth and breadth comes from the multicultural mentor texts *In Momma’s Kitchen*, *Bippity Bop Barbershop*, and *Wild, Wild Hair*. These stories represented common themes that each student could make connections with and had specific personal experiences to share. The conversation struck up between writing partners was filled with excitement. While one person went first and shared, the second person waited and listened sometimes covering their mouth to hold in what they were excited to talk about but had to wait for their turn. When that was done and it was time to journal their thoughts, the heads went down, and the pencils flew across the pages with stories of personal experiences. Instead of anyone asking how much do I have to write, I was actually asked by one student if she could write about two connections, and I said, “Yes you can!” Another asked if he could take his journal home to finish if he did not finish before class was done! Students were not excited to write in some of our previous sessions when it came to responding to mentor texts that they could not relate to or knew nothing

about. One of the books was set in the 1800's in New York City about immigrants coming here and what struggles they dealt with and I could hardly get them to write three sentences; they were distracted playing, and not at all interested. Now, after using these particular mentor texts, they are requesting extra time to write and asking to share first.

Excitement and Enthusiasm to Share Writing

As I analyzed the transformation that was going on in my reading and writing classroom, another trend emerged. I realized that multicultural mentor texts read alouds allow me to inspire and provoke my students to think about topics that matter to them and that they can relate to. It also made me realize that when they can relate to the text, make connections, write about it, and then share what they wrote with their classmates, they write with deeper meaning and more enthusiasm and excitement. To have students ask to go first and are disappointed when they don't and have to wait, is a good problem to have. Writing in my classroom hasn't always been like this. Using multicultural mentor texts has made a difference. Now, since students can relate to stories, see themselves in them, and connect to their lives, they eagerly write. One day during the study our principal walked in and they wanted her to stay and listen

to their “stories” about what goes on in their “Mommas’ kitchens.” She was excited to see the students so inspired and excited to write and wanting to share.

Student #15 wrote a page and a half about his connection to Clover and how she wasn’t allowed to play with Annie. This student usually writes two sentences and declares that he is done. His response told of a detailed version of how he and his brothers were not allowed to play with another child because the other child’s behavior was not good. It told how eventually they did become friends and convinced their moms to give him a chance. The beautiful part of this was that he also volunteered to share his response with his classmates aloud which he never usually wants to do. I feel the text, discussion, and connections helped him become comfortable with discussing his thoughts but also confident as a writer and reader to share with his classmates. This was a springboard for him to jump into writing with more desire and enthusiasm.

Student #5 who is Hispanic wrote in her journal about a time when she asked a brown girl if she could play with her and the other girl said no because she was not the same as her. This student also struggles with writing more than three sentences at a time but not this time. She wrote about how her feelings were hurt and the other girl who lived in her neighborhood eventually started talking to her a little at a time and then they finally became friends just like

Clover and Annie. This story opened up a topic that was hard for her to talk about and write about. She was jumping up and down when it came time to share her story with the rest of the class. Student #5 was excited and thrilled to share because she saw her own story validated and had something in common with the characters in the story that she related to.

When writing journal entries were shared on this particular day, I had to extend writing time to allow for everyone who wanted to share get theirs in. The excitement that students garnered extended into their writing journals. The class discussion and connections made to the stories showed that if we take the time to find authentic texts that represent all of the students and their experiences then they will have the tools to write extensively about their lives. More than that, they wanted to write and were truly excited to do so.

Summary of Data Analysis

Lucy Calkins (1994) believes that if our teaching is to be an art, then we must draw from all we know, feel, and believe in order to create something beautiful. She also thinks that authorship does not begin in the struggle to put something big into print; rather, it begins in living with a sense of awareness. Also, life does not begin with deskwork but with lifework. All of these beliefs were demonstrated by these students as well as me. When I put aside the trials

and tribulations of all that comes with teaching writing to students and how to respond to standardized tests, teaching writing based on what they understand and want to write about becomes fun. It gives all of us who are sharing and interacting in the classroom a new found sense of awareness and how to simply use what we already know and have experienced in our everyday lives as stepping stones to understanding the world around us. It makes us feel accepted and validated. Calkins (1994) also believes that in the writing workshop children write about what is alive and vital and real for them-and other writers in the room listen and extend and guide, laugh and cry and marvel. When my students shared what they wrote in response to listening to rich multicultural mentor texts, they were able to write with excitement and enthusiasm that they had not experienced before.

I felt at the start of this study that the students would most likely benefit from listening to the multicultural mentor texts and perhaps get some ideas to generate narrative writing responses, but what they verbally discussed and debated and what they actually composed, totally surpassed my expectations. The energy was real and I know that they just need the right mentor text to open their minds, provoke thinking, and raise different perspectives to get ideas to write. When they have these ideas, they don't have a problem wanting to write

or deciding what to write; the ideas just flow from their own connections and life experiences.

As I discussed previously, when we read, we compose meaning in our minds. Thoughtful, active readers use the text to stimulate their own thinking and to engage with the active mind of the writer. Readers construct and maintain understanding by merging their thinking with the text.

Chapter Five presents the conclusions and implications of this teacher research study as well as recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings

After reviewing the data sources, I found four recurring themes to be: the ability to make connections with familiar read aloud themes; recognizing and accepting differences through thoughtful discussions; writing with more depth and breadth of a topic or theme; and writing with excitement and enthusiasm to share writing connections with the class.

I determined that using multicultural literature as mentor texts for read alouds to generate ideas for narrative writing enables students to approach writing with a renewed excitement and enthusiasm. Literature that helps students identify with their own culture as well as exposing children to other cultures opens dialogue and perceptions that help provoke ideas for writing responses to the text. When students see themselves represented in characters and situations in the literature, it helps them to make connections and reflect on their own culture with which they can identify. When using multicultural mentor texts to generate ideas for narrative writing, students are able to relate experiences to their own, thus translating and responding with a greater understanding and interest in their narrative writing. Children need to receive

affirmation of themselves and their culture through literature and be able to connect text to self in order to promote greater meaning.

After five weeks of research I found that this study benefited my students in many ways. The exposure to various authentic multicultural text read alouds helped generate ideas to write about in student writing journals. These journal responses were shared with great excitement and enthusiasm between classmates. Responses were composed with more depth and breadth and with a deeper understanding of self and others. Students were able to make connections, receive validation for their own ideas and thoughts, provoke and entertain rich discussions, and awaken the need to accept differences as well as similarities.

Instead of having students complete activities that were not authentic and purposeful, I had them respond to the multicultural read alouds through classroom discussions with partners and in whole group, respond on post-its to add to whole class responses, conferences with me, in their personal writing journals, and in personal narrative essays. These responses were based on their thoughts and ideas presented and represented in multicultural literature where they could see themselves reflected in the text as well as see others that represented a different or opposing view.

Conclusions

Based on my findings and the research of other teacher researchers and theorists, I determined that my study was highly beneficial to my students in many ways. Not only did it help them become better listeners, but also improved and more determined writers. My research proved that Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) were correct in saying, "When African American children encounter literature that offers messages about them, their culture, and their roles in society, they have enhanced opportunities to reflect upon themselves as people and their own development" (p. 818). Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) also suggest that "Literature is a powerful medium. Through it, children construct stories, a view of their cultural surroundings, and insight on themselves. When children read books that are interesting and meaningful to them, they can find support for the process of defining themselves as individuals and understanding their developing roles within their families and communities" (p. 810).

When selecting mentor texts to read aloud in class for the purpose of promoting student thinking and engagement specifically in students' responses through writing, we need to make sure that books include characters who are well developed and portrayed in authentic, realistic, particularly dialogue that correctly portrays African American dialect appropriate to the character. The

books should also incorporate illustrations that portray African American and other characters and settings authentically and realistically as well as presenting accurate information (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Colby & Lyon (2004) believe that when children are not able to find themselves or their lives reflected in classroom literature, they are less engaged and interested in the reading process. Beyond that, the subtle message is that school is for someone else, not people like you.

As my study showed, listening to read alouds where children were able to see themselves and their families represented carried over to sharing their connections in their writing journals. Abadiano & Turner (2002) believe that a literacy environment that is supportive of reading-writing connections is imperative. This can be done through literature-based instruction. Having children responding to authentic multicultural literature was critical in my research to truly understand how important multicultural literature is and most importantly, just how much it affects our students and the outcome of their thinking and writing.

During this study, students were motivated to write about what they listened to in the read alouds. Just as Kathryn Au (2011) recognized how when educators endorse the use of multicultural texts by authors of diverse

backgrounds that present cultures in an authentic manner, these experiences may improve the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds by increasing their motivation to read (Spears-Bunton, 1990), their appreciation and understanding of their own culture and cultural heritage (Jordan, 1988), and their valuing of their own life experience as a topic for writing. Carol Lee (1991) found that African American students, who were considered below-average readers, could write insightful interpretations of the significance of the multicultural literature they read.

For this study I focused on five multicultural mentor texts as read alouds to generate ideas for narrative writing. The texts were rich with characters that my students could make connections with and situations that they could relate to. The texts were read multiple times during the weeks and each time with a different purpose and focus. Students analyzed and discussed the texts with greater appreciation and comprehension as well as excited anticipation to writing about life experiences that they wanted to share. These texts opened their eyes and minds to thoughts and opinions that were similar and different but with a varying perspective to understand and respect each other. This transformation of writers from mostly proclaiming that two or three sentences are enough to asking for extended time to finish their essays suggests that when we use authentic multicultural literature daily in our classrooms, writing will

improve. My writers grew in writing for extended periods of time and also in writing with greater emphasis in details and telling their story based on how it happened for them. They felt a sense of acceptance and validation through their writing and it was brought to the surface by authentic multicultural literature that reflected their lives. Robinson's (2013) research showed that interactive experiences multicultural literature position students to think critically about social phenomenon in relation to themselves and others, and to be socially and emotionally engaged as critical text users, participants, and critics.

Implications

There are many implications for this study that I thought of after concluding my research. The first would be knowing that using multicultural literature as mentor texts in the elementary classroom does indeed generate writing ideas. If this is so, then how can we get more teachers especially ones that do not teach in inner city schools to use multicultural literature? Infusing multicultural literature into literacy instruction is important for students of all races and cultures. Children need to not only see themselves represented just like a reflection in a mirror but to see others that are different by looking through a window and discovering diversity. When students experience authentic multicultural literature whether the culture depicted is similar or different from

their own, they can see that many cultures experience life in a similar manner and understand each other and accept differences more readily.

Another implication for future teacher researchers is to use more and different types of multicultural literature. Comparing and contrasting similar situations but through the eyes of different races and cultures would help children understand that we all have many of the same problems but different ways to cope. Reading about multiple cultures and experiences would help bridge the gap between cultures and create more open dialogue between people.

This study could also be conducted with older students in middle school and high school during literature circles and book clubs. Students could handle more mature themes and topics especially in reference to racism and prejudice. Delving deeper into multicultural literature would enable students to discuss and debate societal issues at large and learn how to communicate and understand each other with greater respect. Cultures that are not discussed as often as mainstream cultures could be brought forward and looked at with a greater sense of appreciation and accord.

The studies that I found concerning the use of multicultural literature focused mainly on reading the texts so that students feel validated, accepted, and a part of the world in which they live. All children need to see themselves and

their cultures represented in literature. But more studies are needed to look at just how much effect these types of texts have on written responses. Writing in response to reading is a large part of what is expected of students in the real world in order to communicate. If multicultural literature was used more often then we would be able to compare the writing responses to that of mainstream literature. This would even help make standardized testing fair and valid for all of the students that are required to take the tests. As it stands now, much of the sample testing, practice materials, and released items do not fairly and accurately represent all races and cultures. Students of varying cultures could possibly perform better on the writing tasks if the stories and prompts represented them. Many times they are asked to write about topics and themes that they know nothing of because of cultural differences. Multicultural literature could help in generating ideas to write about.

Limitations

The limitations of my study included time and materials. This would also be the limitations for most teacher researchers because materials and access to multicultural literature could be costly if you are using it across grade levels. Getting everyone on board, especially other teachers, to look at multicultural literature differently is another factor. Units of study could be taught across

grade levels but not all teachers feel that multicultural literature should be embedded into our curriculum and lesson plans.

In summary, using multicultural literature as mentor texts for read alouds to generate ideas for narrative writing is going to make a difference in our teaching. This is the key to transforming our education system to reaching and teaching all of our students that we are entrusted with and not just the mainstream students. Our 21st century students should not be shortchanged or settle for anything less than having the opportunity to learn how they fit into and are accepted into the world in which they live. If we don't offer all of our students opportunities to learn about different cultures and races through reading and writing, then we have failed our students. It is our duty to represent all cultures and races in the texts they read so that they may have the same opportunity to make connections, see themselves represented, and share in the excitement and enthusiasm that my students shared in writing about their exciting and important lives.

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Appendix
Multicultural Literature

