

Heather A. Barkley. *Breaking Barriers: Analyzing Transitional Books with People of Color as Main and Major Secondary Characters*. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. April, 2009. 38 pages. Advisor: Sandra Hughes-Hassell.

Research shows that a large number of children stop reading for pleasure between the second and fifth grade. This critical period coincides with the time that students are transitioning from reading picture books to reading chapter books. This transition may be problematic for several reasons, including whether the books between these levels are available, interesting, and relatable, and if they allow readers to feel successful. Another disturbing trend is the continued lack of children's literature that reflects the racial make-up of the United States. Researchers have found that when readers encounter texts that feature characters like them and with whom they can connect, they are more likely to be interested in books and to see how reading can play a role in their lives. The purpose of this study is to examine transitional books to determine the percentage of main characters and major secondary characters that feature people of color, as well as the percentage of authors that are people of color.

Headings:

- Multiculturalism/children's literature
- Minorities literature/children's literature
- Children's literature
- Literacy
- Children

BREAKING BARRIERS: ANALYZING TRANSITIONAL BOOKS WITH PEOPLE  
OF COLOR AS MAIN AND MAJOR SECONDARY CHARACTERS

by  
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## Introduction

There are many important issues that educators, parents, and librarians face when it comes to the literacy skills and habits of our students. One of the main problems is the troubling statistics concerning children's attitudes towards reading and the dramatic negative decline in reading for pleasure that is reported to occur between the ages of eight and eleven years old (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995; Scholastic, 2008). This is a period of time when children are typically transitioning from picture books and easy readers to the more difficult chapter books. However, guiding students through this process is not an easy task in that while many know and agree that this is a time of great concern, the lack of discussion, and consistent, agreed upon terminology for this level of books adds to the difficulty of this process.

Another disturbing issue is that while we as a society are aware of the changing racial and ethnic make-up of our country, research maintains that youth literature is not reflecting the faces of our children. According to School Data Direct (2008) the demographics of U.S. students as of 2006 is almost 56% white, 17% black, 21% Hispanic, and 5% Asian or Pacific Islander students (see Table 1). In a study conducted by Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Glimore-Clough (2003), however, only one-sixth of their sample of books for middle-grade readers contained people of color as either main or major secondary characters. Based on the demographic data, around one-third of the books reviewed should have featured people of color as main characters (Agosto et al., 2003). Similarly, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), which has been

tracking the number of books they receive by and about people of color for over a decade, reports that the number of multicultural titles published each year has remained static (Horning et al, 2008). Why does this matter? Because as researchers have found, when readers encounter texts that feature characters like them and with whom they can connect, they are more likely to be interested in books and to see how reading can play a role in their lives (Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

Table 1: U.S. Student Demographics (School Data Direct 2008)

Enrollment of Racial/Ethnic Groups	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002
<b>White (%)</b>	55.9	56.3	58.0	58.4	60.0
<b>Black (%)</b>	16.9	16.8	16.9	17.0	17.1
<b>Hispanic (%)</b>	20.5	19.7	19.5	18.7	18.0
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander (%)</b>	4.5	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.2
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native (%)</b>	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2

In addition to our students lacking literature that is reflective of our diverse culture, people of color are underrepresented as authors and illustrators as well. Research suggests that the illustrations in children's literature need to be meaningful, familiar, and realistic in order to capture the interest of children between the ages of eight to eleven years old (Cianciolo, 1989; Roethler, 1998). Roethler (1998) extends this idea by contending that illustrators also need to be able to provide authentic depictions. In the case of her article, she contends that more African American artists are needed in order for African American children to be able to relate and identify with literature. In the case of African American illustrators, Roethler (1998) argues that the lack of representation is not due to a lack of such illustrators, but to other circumstances such as institutionalized

racism in the publishing field, lack of understanding of minority work on behalf of publishers, and publishers' beliefs that there is a lack of audience (p.103). DeLeón (2002) suggests this is the same case in regards to Mexican-American writers, stating that they are "the best people to tell us the other side of the story" (p.50). DeLeón (2002) also calls attention to the idea that because of this prejudice and ignorance we have probably overlooked and missed out on numerous writers and their works of literature. Whatever the case may be, there is a need for proportional and accurate representation of people of color in children's literature, especially at this crucial stage of literacy development when so many students lose the desire to read.

## Purpose

There are many theories surrounding the issue of race and identity, and a number of studies have been conducted about race and literature. The focus of this study was to determine the number of books with people of color as main characters in books that aid in the “transitional stage of literacy”—the time when students are moving from reading picture books or early readers to reading longer chapter books. The research for this study closely follows the research methodology and terminology as conducted by Agosto et al.’s research for “The All-White World of Middle-School Genre Fiction: Surveying the Field for Multicultural Protagonists” in 2003. The main questions that this research asked were:

1. What percentage of transitional books feature people of color as main characters?
2. Which individual groups of people of color are represented as main characters in transitional books?
3. What percentage of transitional books are written by people of color?

By examining transitional readers that feature people of color, the intent of this research was to determine if students of color reading at the critical transition levels are able to find literature that not only aids in keeping their interest in reading, but also provides them with a sense of identity, both individually and ethnically. Hopefully this research spurs discussion surrounding both transitional books and multicultural books in



general, as well as in conjunction with each other, and their importance in literacy education.

Another purpose of this study was to determine if transitional books written by people of color are being published and if the percentages of books written by people of color is proportional to the percentage of people of color in the U.S. In the instance that the results are not proportional, then a possible outcome may be the discussion and promotion of artists and illustrators who are people of color need to be recognized and sought out by educators, librarians, mainstream publishers, and mainstream review journals.

## **Literature Review**

Several topics will be explored in the literature review. The first topic is the term transitional books. Specifically, what are transitional books and what purpose do they serve? The second topic, and one that is often considered controversial, are the labels used to describe racial and ethnic groups. Which ones will be used in this paper and what is the rationale behind the decision to use them? The connection between reading attitudes and race that has been explored in previous research will also be presented, with a focus on the conclusions reached in these studies, how the conclusions relate to this study, and the conflict and validity issues that surround these previous studies. Finally, a brief overview of racial identity theory will be presented.

### **Transitional Books**

When discussing the stage of reading that comes after picture books and easy readers but before typical chapter books, there is little consensus as to what to call this stage in the fields of education, library science, and publishing. This is unfortunate because of the importance of this transition time period for readers. Sometimes these levels of books are referred to as “easy readers”, “early chapter books” (Lempke, 2008), or as “first chapter books” (Bean, 2004). Publishing companies have perpetuated the inconsistencies with these books by coming up with their own names for them, such as Stepping Stones by Random House, Green Light Readers by Harcourt, Simon &

Schuster's Ready to Read line, and Orca Young Readers by Orca Book Publishers (Bean, 2004). Publishers agree that these transition books are necessary to help with the transition from picture books to chapter books, and that this is an area with which everyone has struggled in the past 20 years (Bean, 2004).

For the purposes of this paper, the term "transitional books" will be used to refer to books that are geared towards the typical eight to eleven year old child's reading levels. Transitional books contain meaningful pictures, chapters that are not as long as those in chapter books for older students, and are typically less than 200 pages in length. These books are typically found to be on second to fifth grade reading levels.

Fountas and Pinnell (2002) have developed a list of leveled books intended to support literacy development in children in kindergarten through grade four. The books range from level A books which are easy for very young children to read to level R books which are intended to support fluent readers. Fountas and Pinnell consider books geared towards the transitional reader to be books in Levels J through M. Some of the books found in these levels are picture books because they contain vocabulary and advanced concepts, but most are chapter books.

The lowest level transitional books are level J books, which are characterized as having easy to understand narratives, short chapters, unchanging but well presented characters, assigned dialogue, and easy to read formats with large fonts, spaces between words and lines, and sentences that begin on the left side of the page (Fountas & Pinnell, 2002). The books also include meaningful illustrations on most pages to provide context clues. The books become gradually more complex up to level M which are characterized as having fewer illustrations that simply add to the reading experience, longer chapters,

smaller print with new sentences that end where the last began, and containing more complex vocabulary (Fountas & Pinnell, 2002).

According to Szymusiak and Sibberson (2001) transitional books often contain a hook to grab the reader's attention whether it be through a summary or review; illustrations on every page or thereabout; short chapters that can be read within a day; and any other tools that help the reader discern what the book is about and aids in keeping their attention. Many transitional books are series books with predictable formats and characters with which the reader is familiar, thus making these books easier to follow than longer chapter books which include more in-depth character and plot development.

The purpose of transitional books is to bridge the difficulties many readers face when going from picture books to more complex chapter books. For children in the U.S., this transition time typically occurs around the second or third grade. This is also the time reading frequency often starts to decline for children (Scholastic, 2008). Cianciolo (1989) states that it is not that students in this transitional stage are not capable of reading independently, nor is it a question of maturity concerning being able to handle lengthier books, but a matter of honing their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. Transitional books can do this by showing aspects of the story through the illustrations and thus providing the comprehension clues that children at the transitional stage require, hence allowing them to maintain their feelings of success in reading and perpetuating their interest in reading (Cianciolo, 1989). These books also gradually increase in difficulty when it comes to vocabulary, formatting, and concepts.

## **Terminology: Multicultural vs. People of Color and Other Minority Labels**

Some may question the choice of terminology used in this paper. For example they may question why the term “multicultural” is not used in place of “people of color.” Conflict has emerged with regards to the term multicultural and which groups rightly fall into this category. Hillard (1995) proposes that multicultural literature is not comprised solely of works of literature concerning ethnic backgrounds, but also of other factors such as religion and geographical regions. Hillard (1995) even criticizes the definition given by Kruse (1992) who defines multicultural literature as “books by and about people of color” as being too narrow.

Peterson (1995), on the other hand, has very strong and opposing opinions of the term multicultural. Peterson (1995) believes that the term multicultural has become too diluted and includes too many other groups such as women, gays, and people with disabilities, which take away from minority groups and their struggles in our society. She purports that using the term in such a sweeping manner allows racial diversity to become oversimplified and reduces racism into a “happy-face discussion of difference” (p. 31) that belittles racial differences and allows institutionalized racism to continue, along with social dominance over minorities, supporting denials of segregation, discrimination, and oppression (Peterson, 1995). Not only because of the controversy surrounding the term “multicultural”, but also to clearly indicate which of the groups typically lumped under this term are the subject of the research, this paper will use the phrase “people of color” instead, to mean Blacks, Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native.

The terminology used to describe each ethnic group individually can also be difficult and the potential to offend is ever present. Agosto et al. (2003) address this issue in their study and decide to use the terminology used by the U.S. Census Bureau. The terminology for this paper will follow suit, unless pulling information from other sources, in which case the source terminology will be used. The ethnic terms will consist of White, Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Asian/Pacific Islander.

### **Reading Attitudes and Race**

According to a study conducted by Scholastic (2008), the children they surveyed who were between the ages of nine to eleven (24%) were three times more likely to be classified as low frequency readers than the children who were five to eight years old (8%). Thirty-four percent of the children ages nine to eleven stated that one of the main reasons they do not read for pleasure is that they are unable to find books that they like (Scholastic, 2008). This is more than twice that reported by children five to eight years of age (Scholastic, 2008). Only 15% of the children overall (ages 5-11) stated that they did not read more books for pleasure simply because they did not like to read (Scholastic, 2008). Many scholars have conducted research on what makes stories enjoyable to children, and being able to identify with the characters seems to be of great importance.

Research suggests that being able to identify with the characters in the story and their experiences increases enjoyment when it comes to reading (Cianciolo, 1989; DeLeón, 2002; & Jose & Brewer, 1984). When children can see themselves in stories, it confirms their existence and aids in their development of self. Cianciolo (1989) reports that eight to eleven year olds frequently read to help answer life's basic questions such as who they are, and why they are the way they are, as well as other questions about the

world around them. They develop a sense of identity not only from the stories, but also from the illustrations, which stay with them throughout their lives (Cianciolo, 1989).

For the most part the research that has been completed on reading motivation or attitudes either does not include race as a variable, or does not support the theory that race is an issue in being able to identify with the story. For example, Jose and Brewer (1984) attempted to discern which character attributes contribute to strong reader identification. This research did not involve race, but instead focused on age, gender, and character valence. Their findings suggest that while age was not necessarily a strong influence on character identification, gender and character valence lead to liking the character, being able to see oneself in the character, and thus likeability of the story (Jose & Brewer, 1984).

Research carried out by Holmes et al. (2007) focused specifically on race, by attempting to determine whether young readers would select books based on the race of the characters, and if there was a difference in the amount of time spent looking at books that contained characters of the same race as the reader versus those in which the characters were of a different race. Their findings suggest that race does not seem important. Another such study conducted by McKenna et al (1995) supports this idea that race is unimportant with reference to young readers and their attitudes towards reading. However consideration of the methodology used in each of these studies may offer insight as to these unpredictable results and why they appeared.

A study performed by Kazelskis et al (2004) focused on the validity of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS), the survey used by McKenna et al (1995), with regards to gender and race. Their research seems to suggest that when looking at

gender and the ERAS results, the two-factor model is a valid measurement. However, they suggest that the ERAS may not be a valid way to measure reading for recreational attitudes *across racial groups*. They specifically state that “European-American and African-American groups differed in the regression weights for parts of the recreational reading attitude factor” (Kazelskis et al, 2004, p.118). From this they concluded that further research is needed, and called into question the ethnicity differences as reported in particularly by McKenna et al (1995), stating that they “may need to be reevaluated in light of the present findings (Kazelskis et al, 2004, p. 119).”

In the research conducted and reported by Holmes et al. (2007), the main focus was race and whether race matters in book selection for third graders. The results as aforementioned indicated that race did not impact book selection. Unfortunately, the methodology contained several flaws. The researchers selected a subset of books that pictured either white or black main characters on the covers. These books were all Level K books and were about comparable topics. Students were asked to select a book to read from this subset of books. Observers recorded the race of the student, the books selected by that student in reference to the race of the main character, and the amount of time spent with each book.

In their pilot study Holmes et al (2007) identified two problems which they attempted to address in the final study. First, not all of the books they selected were part of the AR (Accelerated Reader) program. In order to get children to consider all of the books, they informed students that they would not earn AR points for the AR books during the duration of the study. Second, students were not allowed to share books or recommend books to others. Although they attempted to address these flaws, it is



possible that the children still selected certain books for the chance to earn an AR reward later on, regardless of what they are told by the researchers.

Another point of concern is that the researchers stated that they purposely omitted books with popular themes such as sports and chose “somewhat more bland, topics of family, fantasy, folk tales, and historical figures” (Holmes et al, 2007, p.278). They even went so far as to say that topics of interest should be included in another study. This seems almost counterproductive in that the focus of the research is reader interest. The research reported earlier in this paper shows that interest drives reader selection and can promote or hinder reading. Furthermore, the books selected were Level K which was one grade level below the subjects expected reading level. Although this may eliminate frustration associated with the difficulty of the materials, it could also result in a lack of interest due to boredom, among other things. There is no mention of the race of the observers. This could potentially pose the problem of unintentionally impacting selection. A better idea would have been to have the observer not visible to the students at any point in the research. Lastly, the questions asked in the research do not seem to get to the heart of the matter of why the books were selected. More pertinent research might solicit the thoughts and opinions of the readers about their interest in books featuring same and dissimilar race, main characters.

In “The All-White World of Middle-School Genre Fiction: Surveying the Field for Multicultural Protagonists,” Agosto et al (2003) focused on middle-school genre fiction titles that had been reviewed in mainstream journals to ascertain the number of titles that featured protagonists of color as either the main character or a major secondary character. The study was broken down by genre and ethnic groups, and the

information was obtained through reading reviews in mainstream journals printed within a 10-year period. The researchers acknowledged potential flaws with the study, including that fact that they did not examine or read each of the books, but relied on the reviews. The potential to overlook books was present if the reviewer did not mention the race of the main or major secondary characters. The results of this study showed that there has not been an increase of multicultural publishing in middle-school genre fiction. They state that their results indicate not only a need for more multicultural books for adolescents, but also a need for professionals to look to other sources in order to find multicultural books other than the mainstream journals.

### **Racial Identity Formation and Academic Success**

In discussing Cross's racial identity development theory, Tatum (1997) points out the critical need for people of color be represented in academic settings. While all children struggle with identity development, developing a sense of self is more complicated for children of color because they are also searching for their racial or ethnic identity. According to Cross's theory, racial identity development occurs in five stages. In the pre-encounter stage, children may not be conscious of racial identity, but their attitudes towards self and towards others are being formed. Exposure to stereotypes and omissions concerning people of color, as well as distortions of white superiority, lead children to believe that it is better to be White and can contribute to a negative sense of self.

As children of color enter the next stage, the encounter stage, they often experience many active forms of racism, and thus develop what Fordham and Ogbu define as an oppositional social identity (Tatum, 1997). Oppositional social identity

helps protect them against the damaging psychological effects of racism and manifests itself as anger and resentment at not being fully included in society, thus, resulting in their distancing themselves from the dominant (White) group (Tatum, 1997).

Unfortunately, one result of this distancing is that academic success becomes typically associated with “Whiteness,” and thus looked upon as unfavorable by adolescents of color (particularly Black and Hispanic), as a consequence furthering the educational divide.

## **Conclusion**

Although educators, librarians, and publishers seem to be aware that the books that fall between picture books and chapter books are important, there does not appear to be consistent, intentional discourse about the critical nature of this stage in literacy development, and the support and guidance that readers should be given by these books to help in bridging this gap. There are plenty of resource lists given by public librarians, school librarians, and even publishers of books that fall in this range, but rarely do they discuss the importance behind these lists. This research attempts to define these books, as transitional books, and initiate discussion about their importance through connecting students between the ages of eight and eleven and their progressively declining reading attitudes.

Even though the previous research which is discussed in this literature review frequently states that there is not a connection between race and reading attitudes, this is not the case in terms of the beliefs behind this research. Much of the previous research presented here has had issues with validity and typically looks at this topic through the “White lens.” Beyond that, this researcher feels strongly that it is important that all

students be afforded the opportunity to see themselves in what they read, to enjoy what they are reading, and to be able to identify with the literature, as is so pointedly stated by Peterson (1995).

## Methodology

The chosen methodology for this study is content analysis, with each book as an individual unit of analysis. Babbie (2004) describes content analysis as “the study of recorded human communications” (p. 314) to include books among other sources. This is the most logical type of analysis to examine specific books for racial identities of main characters. The sample of transitional books was determined by using the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book List database which can be found at [www.FountasandPinnellLeveledBooks.com](http://www.FountasandPinnellLeveledBooks.com). This database contains the “most up-to-date” list of books published in the U.S. This is a well known and reputable resource that will provide a fairly comprehensive list of books printed at levels J through M.

All books leveled J through M were located in the database and copied to an Excel spreadsheet. Because this study is not concerned with picture books, non-fiction, or non-trade (guided reading) materials, these sources were eliminated from the sample. Non-fiction materials, easily identified by either a “B” or an “I” in the genre field, were removed from the sample. The remainder of the list was compared against WorldCat, the OCLC catalog of books and other materials that can be found in libraries throughout the world, in order to determine which of the books in the remaining sample were picture books, and thus excluded. Picture books in WorldCat are indicated by an “E” next to the Dewey Classification tag. Once these books were identified they were removed from the sample. Guided readers or non-trade books are books that are published specifically for reading instruction. These books were also not of interest for this study. In order to

identify them, the publisher was typically a good indicator, in that the major publishers for these books are The Wright Group/McGraw Hill, Mondo, and Rigby. These books along were also excluded from the list.

### **Racial Identity of Main and Secondary Major Characters**

The race of main and major secondary characters was determined by using NoveList K-8, Amazon Books, Google Books, and Google Images databases. The race categories were predetermined and the terminology used is consistent with the categories of race as provided by the U.S. census bureau, along with the categories of “other” and “unknown.”

Each book was located in one of the sources discussed above. Using clues provided by the cover, illustrations, summaries, available online content of the books, and subject headings, the race of the main characters and major secondary characters were determined. Books in which the main and major secondary characters were undeterminable were counted as “unknown,” and non-human characters such as animals, real or cartoon, robots, monsters, etc. were counted as “other.” It was possible to have more than one category marked due to the fact that many of the books contained multiple main characters. Appendix A includes a list of books that feature main and major secondary characters of color, grouped by race as a reference guide for professionals in the education field. It is important to note that this determination relied on the researcher’s ability to correctly identify race by using the aforementioned clues.

### **Authors**

The second part of this study looked at the authors for each book or series of books in order to determine the percentage books leveled J through M that were written

by an author of color. In order to do this, the author for each title was researched using web resources, including NoveList K-8, publisher's web pages, and author's personal web pages. The race was determined to the best of the researcher's ability and the results recorded in a spreadsheet, and broken down by percentage of each racial group. A reference list is located in Appendix B of the authors of color by racial group.

### **Methodology Discussion**

This study is not without flaws. There are several disadvantages associated with it. To begin, the racial identity of the main and major secondary characters, and authors, if not specifically stated somewhere, was left up to the researcher to identify. This of course relies on the researcher's ability to correctly identify the racial background of the characters and authors based on the researcher's knowledge of races, as well as any context clues provided by the author, illustrator, publisher, or databases.

Another concern is that of the source database. This research relied on one source, an online database, for the sample of books. It is impossible that all books published between the levels of J through M were included. In addition to this, leveling books is not an exact science and is open to interpretation, thus some books were probably excluded that belonged in the sample, while other books included that should not have been. Finally, this sample does not include picture books, non-fiction, or guided reading materials, which may be topics of possible future research.

Although there are some weaknesses to this study, there are also some strengths associated with it. First, the source database used is updated on a monthly basis. This provided the researcher with a comprehensive and current list of books for the study.

Furthermore, this research included all books that fit the criteria, instead of a percentage

of the books, allowing for a more accurate view of the proportion of books within these levels that feature main characters as people of color. The numbers are slightly skewed because of the inclusion of major secondary characters of people of color. Overall, this research and the methodology used will hopefully provide the most accurate data possible.



## Results

The final sample, with non-fiction, non-trade books, and picture books removed consisted of 534 books. Of these books, 433 (81%) contained white main or major secondary characters, 87 (16%) black characters, 8 (1%) Hispanic, 1 (0%) American Indian/Alaska Native, 27 (5%) Asian/Pacific Islander, 77 (14%) other, and only 18 (3%) were not able to be identified (Table 2). Of the 534 books in the sample, 106 books contained main characters from two races/categories, and 11 contained three different races/categories for main characters. Many of the books with multiple races for main characters were series books that depicted sports or school groups.

**Table 2: Race of Main or Secondary Characters**

<b>Race</b>	<b>Main or Major Secondary Characters</b>
<b>White</b>	433 (81%)
<b>Black</b>	87 (16%)
<b>Hispanic</b>	8 (1%)
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander</b>	27 (5%)
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native</b>	1 (0%)
<b>Other</b>	77 (14%)
<b>Unknown</b>	18 (3%)

Of the 534 books, there were 141 different authors. Of these authors, the breakdown by race is as follows: 106 (75%) white, 6 (4.3%) black, 3 (2.1%) Hispanic, 3 (2.1%) Asian/Pacific Islander, and 23 (16.4%) of the authors could not be identified as a particular race (Table 3). Of the 87 books featuring black characters, only 6 could be identified as written by black authors, while 70 were written by white authors, and for 9 of the authors, race could not be identified. Of the 27 books which featured a character of Asian/ Pacific Islander ethnicity, only 2 were written by an author of the same origin, while 25 were written by white authors. The books featuring Hispanic characters consisted of only 8 books, 2 of which were written by Hispanic authors, while the remaining 6 were written by white authors. Many of these books featuring people of color as main or major secondary characters were part of a series with multiple character races/categories featured, such as *The Kids of Polk Street School*, *Bailey School Kids*, or *Bailey City Monsters* series.

Table 3: Race of Authors

<b>Race</b>	<b>Race of Authors</b>	<b>Main or Major Secondary Characters</b>
<b>White</b>	106 (75%)	433 (81%)
<b>Black</b>	6 (4.3%)	87 (16%)
<b>Hispanic</b>	3 (2.1%)	8 (1%)
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander</b>	3 (2.1%)	27 (5%)
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native</b>	—	1 (0%)
<b>Other</b>	—	77 (14%)
<b>Unknown</b>	23 (16.4%)	18 (3%)

## Discussion

Table 4 shows a comparison between the race of the characters, authors, and U.S. student demographic data. Looking at the results, one can see that the number of transitional books that feature main or major secondary characters of color is quite low when compared to the U.S. student demographics.

Table 4: Comparison Race of Characters and Authors to US Student Demographic Data

<b>Race</b>	<b>US Student Demographic Data 2006</b>	<b>Main or Major Secondary Characters</b>	<b>Race of Authors</b>
<b>White</b>	55.9%	433 (81%)	106 (75%)
<b>Black</b>	16.9%	87 (16%)	6 (4.3%)
<b>Hispanic</b>	20.5%	8 (1%)	3 (2.1%)
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander</b>	4.5%	27 (5%)	3 (2.1%)
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native</b>	1.2%	1 (0%)	—
<b>Other</b>	—	77 (14%)	—
<b>Unknown</b>	—	18 (3%)	23 (16.4%)

While only 55.9% of the students in the U.S. are White, the largest percentage of books in the sample (81%) featured White main or major secondary characters. Only 22% of the books featured people of color—16% black, 1% Hispanic, and 5% Asian/Pacific Islander—as compared to 43.1% of the student population in the U.S. who are people of color. The breakdown by race shows, however, that Black and Asian/Pacific Islander representation in these books is equivalent to the percentage of American students who are Black and Asian/Pacific Islander. The greatest disparity can

be seen in Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native groups. Hispanic representation which equaled only 1% of the characters in this sample makes up 20.5% of the student population. Despite the fact that the number of Hispanic individuals in the U.S. has been rapidly increasing over the past decade, their representation in transition books is minimal. Additionally, there was only one book in the sample that depicted an individual belonging to the American Indian/Alaska Native group. This is extremely unfortunate since we live in their “native land”.

It is important to note that most of books that contained characters of color featured them not as main characters, but as major secondary characters. There were only a handful of books found in the sample, approximately six, which featured a person of color as the main character or featured a particular race as the only race depicted in the story.

Comparing the percentage of books that featured characters of color to the number of books featured “other” is also potentially disturbing. As previously mentioned, the other category was used for main or major secondary characters that were animals, monsters, robots, etc. The use of non-human characters could be seen as a positive. Since the characters do not belong to a particular racial or ethnic group, all children can potentially relate to them. However, it is also troubling since 14% of the transition books fell into this category. This is almost as many books as those which contained Black characters, and almost three times the number that featured Asian/Pacific Islander characters. Again, Hispanics and American Indian/Alaska Natives had almost no representation in the sample, at 1% and 0% respectively.

Although the focus of this research was not to determine how the characters that were people of color were portrayed, there were some apparent, recurring themes discovered while examining the titles which are important to note and which have bearing on this study. The majority of the characters that were people of color could be found in series such as *Bailey School Kids*, *Bailey City Monsters*, or *The Kids of Polk Street School*. Often, the portrayal of people of color in these books was stereotypical, as was the case in *Secondhand Star* by Maryann Macdonald. According to a review in “School Library Journal Review”, Lucinda Snyder Whitehurst (1994) argues that “there is too much reliance on stereotypes.” An African American girl in the story, named Chiffon Brown, “speaks in a colloquial manor” when no one else does, and the smart, “good” girl in the class is White and has blonde hair (p. 85). Another example can be seen in *The Case of the Elevator Duck* by Polly Berrien Berends, which features Gilbert, a Black, eleven year old, private detective, who lives in a housing project.

Matt Christopher, who has several books in his sports fiction series that feature people of color as main or major secondary characters, often deals with the issue of race in a more realistic manner. One of the books in this series, *The Basket Counts*, features Mel Jensen, a Black male on a school basketball team, as the main character and deals specifically with racism. However, again the majority of the characters in his sports series play sports that are stereotypical for each race, such as the Black character that plays basketball, the Hispanic soccer and baseball characters, and the White characters that play all sports, but are frequently featured in sports such as hockey, dirt bike racing, and skateboarding.

One explanation for the stereotypical portrayal of the characters of color might be the small number of authors of color represented in the sample. As Table 4 shows, 75% of the books were written by White authors and only 8.5% by authors of color. The race or ethnicity of 16.4% of the authors could not be identified because of lack of available information. According to Roethler (1998) and DeLeón (2002), people of color are the best people to give an accurate description of specific racial or ethnic groups' experiences. We must also ask why there are not more transitional books written by authors of color and available to our children. Roethler (1998) and DeLeón (2002) suggest that this is not due to a lack of authors of color, but instead to institutionalized racism, lack of understanding, and a feeling of a lack of audience from the publishers.

A related point of concern is the large percentage of authors whose race or ethnicity could not be determined due to a lack of available information. Being able to determine the races of these unknown authors could increase the percentages of authors of color. However, even if, the majority of "unknown" authors are people of color, the overall percentages of authors of color would still be far less than the percentage of White authors. If they are of color, the fact that their race/ethnicity cannot be determined by looking at publisher's websites or author websites raises another interesting question. Why is so little about these authors available? Is the lack of information about them related to the genre, to the race of the authors, or to something else entirely? Is the message that these titles are not important works of literature, that the authors are not significant writers, or is it just a coincidence?

## **Results Conclusions & Implications**

The results of this research show that people of color as a whole and individually by race are underrepresented in the pivotal transitional period of reading between picture and chapter books, a time during which many developmental changes—academic, psychological, and ethnic—are occurring. While little previous research directly shows that racial representation in literature impacts children’s selection of reading material, the research on identity development shows that it is critical to positive ethnic identity development, and perhaps even to future academic success. The lack of representation of people of color in children’s literature can contribute to a negative sense of self, and can cause children of color to feel they do not belong or are intruding into the dominant society (Agosto et al, 2007; DeLeón, 2002; & Roethler, 1998). Equally important, it can lead children of color to disengage from academic learning which they view as White behavior (Tatum, 1997).

By exposing children of color to meaningful and realistic representative transitional books, we can better provide them with a foundational love of reading, positive identity development, and an understanding of the White majority culture. As Tatum (1997) states it is important for children of color to be exposed to images of African American academic achievement in order to remove the stereotypes of academic achievement as something that belongs to the White majority. If children of color are able to read books that help them transition from picture books to chapter books with less reading frustration, and to see themselves in these books, we will have promoted positive self-esteem and racial identity development, and provided them with a feeling of belonging in our society.

There are very easy steps that we can take to increase reading pleasure for children of color, thus improving academic success. One way is to engage in purposeful purchasing. Librarians, other educators, and even parents who are purchasing materials and providing materials to our young people need to be aware of the need for materials that accurately and fairly depict people of color at all reading levels, but especially children within the transitional books stage—the time when children of color begin to struggle not only with literacy, but also with their sense of self and with their ethnic identity. Through purposeful purchasing, consumers can demand these materials from major publishers, forcing them to respond to the need by increasing the publication of transitional books that feature characters of color. We can also purchase from smaller, independent and specialized publishers, supporting those publishers who already recognize the need.

Furthermore, authors of color must to be recognized as a valuable resource for literacy and self-development. By promoting these authors and requesting materials written by these authors of color, we not only support our students' literacy development by improving interest and encouraging reading, but also by showcasing these authors to our students and using them as examples of successful people of color, academically and socially.

Finally, providing transitional books which feature children of color can potentially benefit all children and can help children from the majority White culture develop an understanding of other races in our society, as well compassion. Adults can often be heard explaining to children about life's different perspectives. Providing



children with the opportunities to learn through reading about different perspectives, we can move one step closer to removing all traces of racism from our society.

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## Appendix A: Books with Characters of Color

### Books with Black Characters

*Young Cam Jansen and the Missing Cookie* by David A. Adler  
*Allie's Basketball Dream* by Barbara E. Barber  
*The Case of the Elevator Duck* by Polly Berrien Berends  
*The Truth About the Moon* by Clayton Bess  
*The Basket Counts* by Matt Christopher  
*No Arm in Left Field* by Matt Christopher  
*The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids* series by Debbie Dadey and Marcia T. Jones  
*Pee Wee Scouts* series (some) by Judy Delton  
*Tiger Turcotte Takes on the Know-It-All* by Pansie Hart Flood  
*The New Kids of Polk Street School* series (some) by Patricia Reilly Giff  
*The Kids of Polk Street School* series (some) by Patricia Reilly Giff  
*The Best Worst Day* by Bonnie Graves  
*A Letter to Amy* by Ezra Keats  
*Marvin and the Mean Words* by Suzy Kline  
*The Pet Sitters* series by Tessa Krailing  
*Flower Girls: Daisy* by Kathleen Leverich  
*Real Kid Readers: Lemonade for Sale* by Bettina Ling  
*Miami Jackson Gets it Straight* by Frederick and Pat McKissack  
*Wings* by Christopher Myers  
*Solo Girl* by Andrea Davis Pinkney  
*Real Kid Readers: On With the Show* by Cecilia Venn  
*Ginger Brown: The Nobody Boy* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth  
*Ginger Brown: Too Many Houses* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth

### Books with Hispanic Characters

*Baseball Flyhawk* by Matt Christopher  
*Centerfield Ballhawk* by Matt Christopher  
*Hairs – Pelitos* by Sandra Cisneros  
*Second-Grade Friends* by Miriam Cohen  
*The Ice Dove and Other Stories* by Diane deAnda  
*Soccer Cousins* by Jean Marzollo  
*Soccer Sam* by Jean Marzollo  
*The Outside Dog* by Charlotte Pomerantz

**Books with American Indian/ Native Alaskan Characters**

*Eagle Feather* by Clyde Robert Bulla

**Books with Asian/ Pacific Islander Characters**

*Corey's Christmas Wish – Pony Tail Series* by Bonnie Bryant

*Elaine and the Flying Frog* by Heidi Chang

*The Best Older Sister* by Sook Nyul Choi

*Shortstop from Tokyo* by Matt Christopher

*Bailey City Monsters* series by Debbie Dadey and Marcia T. Jones

*Pee Wee Scouts* series (some) by Judy Delton

*The New Kids of Polk Street School* series (some) by Patricia Reilly Giff

*Horrible Harry* series by Suzy Kline

*Mary Marony and the Chocolate Surprise* by Suzy Kline

*Marvin and the Mean Words* by Suzy Kline

*Song Lee and the Hamster Hunt* by Suzy Kline

*Song Lee and the Leech Man* by Suzy Kline

*Song Lee in Room 2B* by Suzy Kline

*Flower Girls: Violet* by Kathleen Leverich

## **Appendix B: Authors of Color**

### **Black Authors**

Barbara Barber  
Pansie Hart Flood  
Frederick & Patricia McKissack  
Christopher Myers  
Andrea Davis Pinkney  
Sharon Dennis Wyeth

### **Hispanic Authors**

Alma Flor Ada  
Sandra Cisneros  
Diane deAnda

### **American Indian/ Native Alaskan Authors**

None

### **Asian/ Pacific Islander Authors**

Heidi Chang  
Sook Nyul Choi  
Herbert Yee Wong