

Race of Fictional Protagonist and the Reading Comprehension of Urban African-American Middle School Students

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To date, there is little documented data available on whether African-American students would prefer to read fictional material about their own race over material about Caucasians. The present study was conducted to examine whether African-American students read fictional text passages depicting Caucasian characters as carefully as they read passages depicting characters of their own race. Eighty-seven seventh grade students who had been classified as either low or high ability readers read a total of eighteen passages and responded to test items after each reading session. Surprisingly, results indicated that both groups of readers answered more test items correctly after reading passages featuring Caucasian characters than after reading passages featuring African-Americans. Moreover, the results were more pronounced with low ability readers.

Some research has shown that African-American readers produce significantly higher test scores when reading fictional stories that reflect the world as they know it than when reading stories whose protagonists are of a different race and culture. For example, Barrett & Barrett (1966) addressed the question of whether African-American children who are not motivated by Caucasian oriented passages can be motivated by text-material whose protagonists represent their own background. To test their hypothesis, Barrett and Barrett used African-American teenagers as subjects and selected passages involving African-American culture. They concluded that these teenagers scored much higher on this

type of reading material than on passages depicting Caucasians. Such positive results prompted the authors to conclude that: it is possible that one reason [minority groups] are not motivated to read assigned material or to pursue discretionary reading is the failure of the black child to identify with [the white middle class most often] portrayed in school texts as the hero" (p.1164). Similarly, Goodman & Goodman (1978) investigated reading behavior and reading interest among various races of children and found that African-American children produced higher test scores on the retelling of stories that were culturally relevant to them than on Caucasian oriented.

When Palmer & Palmer (1983) investigated the reading interests of African-American and Caucasian middle school students, data revealed a high correlation between cultural background— African-American or Caucasian — and the choice of certain books or reading materials. That is, African-American children selected culturally diverse books as well as books featuring Caucasian protagonists. However, the most

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telling finding was that less than half (45%) of African-American children selected books that depicted their race in a poor or urban setting. Instead, three-fourths (75%) preferred to read books depicting middle class Caucasian culture. To explain their findings, Palmer and Palmer postulated that African-American children are uncritically subjected to Caucasian middle class values, curriculum and teachers without being given any assistance in navigating between majority and minority cultures. Alternatively, the authors proposed that African-Americans may prefer to read stories where the protagonist is not of their culture as a temporary escape from what they see as a "no win" social situation.

While considerable effort has gone into studying the racial attitudes and development of self-esteem of African-American children, little research has explored how African-American respond to literature about their own race. Thus, the essential question of this study was: If presented with reading material depicting their own race and culture, would African-Americans read and comprehend those passages more thoroughly than passages depicting Caucasian protagonists?

To examine the effects of the racial identity of protagonists on the reading comprehension of African-American students, this study asked children to read a total of eighteen stories from standard basals, half depicting African-American protagonists and half depicting Caucasian protagonists. The students' comprehension scores for those stories were then compared. Two groups, low ability and high ability readers, were studied. The intent was to determine whether the possibility of role identification with the protagonists would influence the participants reading preference.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 87 seventh grade students (49 boys and 38 girls) attend-

ing an urban public school district. All subjects were chosen on the basis of stanine scores obtained on two reading subtests of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), level Z, form S (CTBS/McGraw-Hill, 1985). Participants were classified as low ability readers ($n=42$) if scores fell within the third and fourth stanines, and as high ability readers ($n=45$) if scores fell within the sixth and seventh stanines. In addition, reading teachers were asked to assist in the selection of students. The ages of the low ability readers ranged from 12 years, 4 months to 13 years, 11 months; the ages of the high ability readers ranged from 11 years, 1 month to 13 years, 2 months. All participants were from lower socio-economical backgrounds.

Materials

Eighteen content passages were selected: nine passages depicting African-American protagonists only and nine passages featuring Caucasian protagonists. Passages were clearly illustrated by race from beginning to end of each passage. All passages were designed for the intermediate-age (11-14 years) level. Passages were selected for this study according to interest level and appropriate length (1200-1400 words). Passages were taken from the *Houghton Mifflin Reading Series* and the *McGraw-Hill Reading Series*.

Procedure and Design

The purpose of this study was to assess the effect of passage content in terms of the race of the protagonists on the reading comprehension of urban African-American students.

To examine potential effects on overall reading comprehension, two groups of students were observed: low and high ability readers. Students were instructed to read eighteen text passages under two treatment conditions, "A" and "B". Nine passages depicting African-American protagonists

constituted treatment condition "A", while treatment condition "B" consisted of nine passages featuring Caucasian protagonists. The reading of the eighteen passages was to be done silently, and the reading sessions alternated between the two treatment conditions. After each passage had been read, students were presented with a set (20 questions) of multiple-choice test items supplied by the publisher that asked for specific information about the passage.

This procedure was conducted in a regular reading classroom setting. Each group of participants was monitored by two staff teachers to answer student questions and to minimize the possibility of cheating. The reading and testing took place during regular school sessions Monday through Thursday. A time span of four months was necessary to complete the entire investigation.

The two independent variables examined in this study were performance and passage type. The performance variable had two levels: low and high ability. The passage type variable also had two levels: African-American and Caucasian protagonists.

Results

Of major interest in this study were the effects of passage content on the number of test questions scored correctly on each of the eighteen passages. The group means and standard deviations of performance level resulted as follows. For the low ability group ($n = 42$) after reading condition "A", $SD = 7.70$; after reading condition "B", $M = 74.34$, $SD = 6.29$. For the high ability group ($n = 45$) after reading condition "A", $M = 80.12$, $SD = 9.10$; after reading condition "B", $M = 86.69$, $SD = 6.51$. For both groups, there were significant differences between the means for passage type. That is, all participants' test scores were higher after reading Caucasian passages than after reading African-American passages. Moreover, for the low ability group, the score differ-

ence by passage type was more pronounced. Low ability readers' test scores were significantly higher after reading Caucasian passages than after reading passages with African-American characters.

The ANOVA performed on the mean score of total passages read yields a significant main effect for performance level, $F(1, 69) = 61.65$, $p < .01$, and passage type, $F(1, 69) = 84.09$, $p < .01$; $MSe = 42,081$. This latter finding indicates that all participants regardless of ability level read passages with Caucasian characters more carefully than those depicting characters of their own race.

In addition, a summary of t -tests for correlated samples of the mean scores for the two groups was performed to assess separately the significance of the differences in test scores over the two passage types. The mean difference in test scores was calculated as total test average of items correct on passages about Caucasian protagonists, minus total test average of items correct on passages about African-Americans. Results show there was statistically significant difference between the means of the low ability group after reading passage types, $M = 8.50$, $SD = 10.78$, $t = 15.32$, $p = .05$ and of the high ability group $M = 6.57$, $SD = 10.52$, $t = 12.57$, $p = .05$. The test for variance of passage type was significant among both groups. That is, once again, the entire sample performed significantly better on reading tests about Caucasian passages than on reading tests about African-American passages.

Of the 45 students in the high ability group, 29 students scored higher on the test items about Caucasian passages than on those about African-Americans. For the low ability group, 34 out of 42 students scored higher on test items about Caucasian passages.

Some supplementary data is worthy of consideration: *Student responses to passage types*. An informal interview was conducted after the completion of the study to

elicit responses and feelings of students toward passage types.

Students were asked questions about the content of each passage. For example, "Tell me what you liked or didn't like about this story? Did you have pre-thoughts about the story, good or bad?" Some responses were: "Most stories try to make fun of blacks people [characters]", "They [the stories] are always putting people down," "They [the protagonists] have too many problems", "They [The protagonists] didn't do [anything] exciting like come up with a good solution to the problem."

When the stories were selected for the present study, nothing was detected that would support the many negative responses of the participants.

General Discussion

The data of the present study demonstrated that when passages are read by urban African-American middle school students, there is a significant measurable difference in reading comprehension based on the race of the fictional protagonist. In the present study, the significant main effect for passage type indicates that African-American students' reading comprehension test scores on fictional stories about Caucasians is significantly higher than scores on stories depicting characters of their own race. Noteworthy, is the fact that the result is more pronounced with low ability readers. Though the data is most telling, no hard evidence can be theorized as to why low ability readers had better test scores after reading African-American passages than high ability readers. Obviously, this is an empirical question that has not yet been fully answered.

A cautious but possible explanation for these results could be that African-American children when reading seem to dissociate themselves from passages depicting their race because of society's stereotyping (Casteel & Rider, 1994; Palmer & Palmer, 1983). These students seem to be fully aware

of the implications of some text-book stories that portray vividly illustrated African-American characters as being in situations of poverty, drug use, gang membership and hopelessness. Thus, they are more likely to associate themselves with Caucasian fictional protagonists, whom students accurately perceive as more often portrayed in a positive manner. If this general assumption is valid, its effect may be even more pronounced in economically deprived students (such as students participating in the present study). It should be emphasized that this effect may have occurred even though there was no evidence of stereotyping of African-American protagonists in the nine passages selected.

Another possible generalization about students' lower test scores after reading African-American passages centers on the possibility that pictures depicting the races of the protagonists could have affected the results. For example, research (Child et al., 1968; Cross & Cross, 1971; LePage & Mills, 1990; Litcher & Johnson, 1969; Samuel, 1970) has highlighted the fact that illustrations of characters do indeed influence the reader's perceptions of and attitude about a story even before he/she commences with the reading. In the present study, four of the nine African-American passages featured the protagonists in urban settings, while passages depicting Caucasian protagonists were set in a suburban setting. However, examiners of the passages used in this study detected no differences in the interest level or readability levels.

Further studies need to be conducted to assess additional factors that may affect findings, such as sample size, number of passages, the socio- economical status and the self-esteem of the participants.

Finally, it would appear that editors of textbooks must devise guidelines that will enable them to publish materials that are racially balanced. They must also examine texts carefully for racial biases, especially in

illustrations of the protagonist and story settings. Nonetheless, we can not yet draw conclusions as to why the participants scored higher on passages depicting protagonists of a race other than their own. Therefore, any generalizations from the present study must be extended only to the groups from which the samples was drawn.

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