PEER-REVIEWED

Understanding the Benefits and Challenges of School Integration

Contributions from Children's Literature

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As a nation, we are currently experiencing a moment of racial reckoning, where issues of racial injustice, diversity, and educational inequality are debated. Literature offers a documentary source of evidence that informs the historical record. Children's literature reveals our conceptions of social class, race, and the role of education in a given historical period. Scholars like Amanda Gailey at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln study changes in how Blacks are represented in children's literature. Historically, children's literature has avoided or neglected representations of Blacks, except as literary stereotypes.[1]

Recent novels by Vince Vawter, Matt de la Peña, Jerry Craft, and Colson Whitehead present issues and preoccupations of Black protagonists. Vawter's *Paperboy* was a Newbery Honor winner in 2014.[2] De la Peña's *The Last Stop on Market Street* and Craft's *New Kid* won the Newbery Medal in 2016 and 2020, respectively.[3] And although Whitehead's 2009 novel *Sag Harbor*—part memoir— is an adult book, it is included to show how a Black protagonist in his early teenage years comes to view the contradictions of race in our society.[4]

Vawter's novel *Paperboy*, set in Memphis, Tennessee in 1959, shows the harsh social realities that faced Blacks in a segregated society. The protagonist is an 11-year-old boy named Victor Vollmer who, like the author, speaks with a stutter. Known also as Little Man, Victor has a warm and trusting relationship with Mam, the Vollmer's Black housekeeper. Victor takes over his friend Arthur's paper route for the summer, where he is forced to speak to strangers.

That summer, Victor becomes acutely aware that Memphis has rules that apply only to Blacks. Why does Mam sit at the back of the bus, when they take public transportation? When they visited the Overton Park Zoo, Victor wonders why Mam is allowed free admission only one afternoon a week. And why will she probably not be allowed to have her photograph taken with him at the zoo? He asks Mam what she thinks about this unfair treatment.

"Rules is rules. Don't mean they don't need changing but best to abide by them till they is."[5]

Mam is more than a housekeeper who follows the social conventions of the day. Mam is a forceful character in her own right. She is sustained by her Christian belief, which is reinforced by her love of gospel music. When she saw an older boy at the zoo taunting a giraffe, one of God's creatures, she intervenes. The boy calls her the N-word.

"He said it under his breath but we both heard it. I don't know if I could ever say the word because it started with a hard N sound.

S-s-s-s-Sorry he said that.

Names is all it is. Don't mean nothing."[6]

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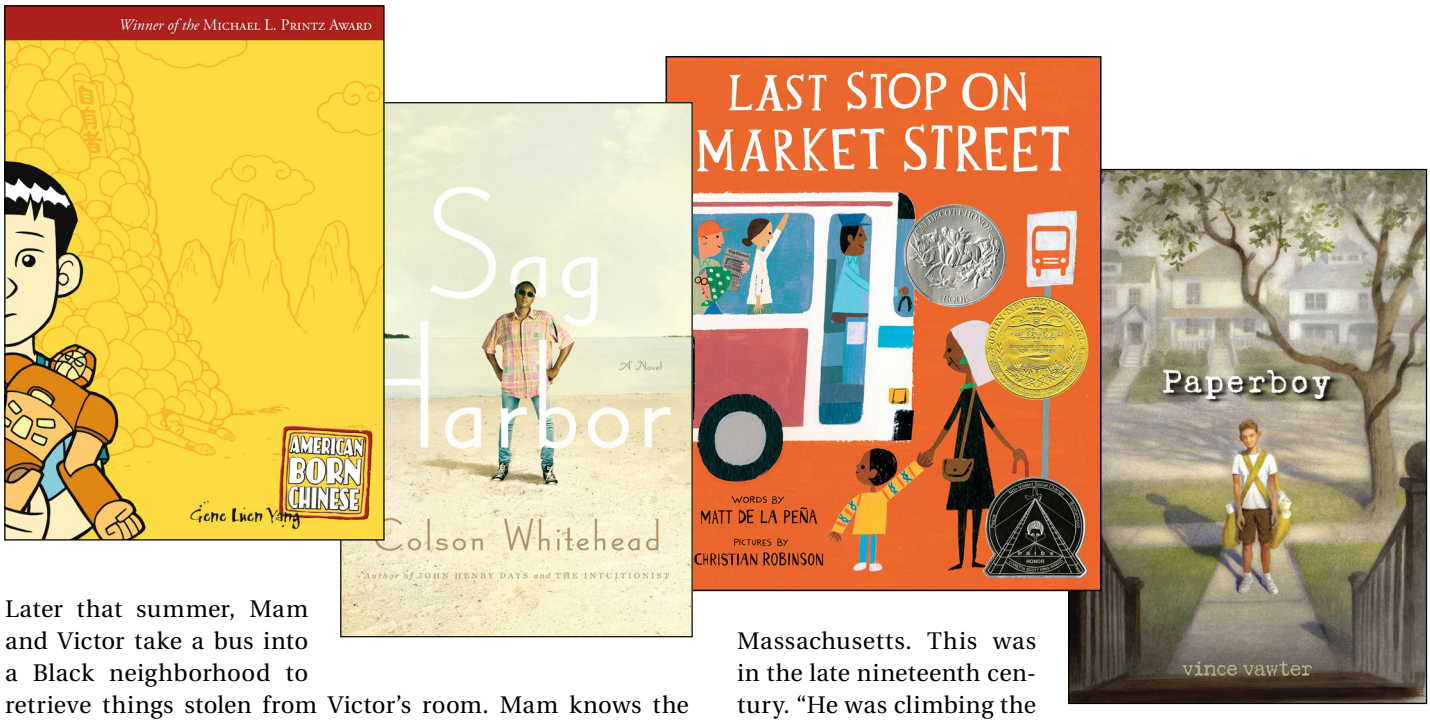

Later that summer, Mam and Victor take a bus into a Black neighborhood to retrieve things stolen from Victor's room. Mam knows the thief, a junk dealer she remembers from her childhood in Mississippi. There is a fight in a juke joint not far from Beale Street, where the thief is hit in the head with a bottle and stabbed with a knife. Wounds are stitched up, and no one calls the police. "Mam explained how her people cleaned up their own messes and didn't depend on white people and their police."[7]

In *Paperboy* we see the contrasting realities of the Black and the White cultural experience. Mam must learn and adhere to a set of rules when she works as a housekeeper for the Vollmer family. She has acquired a different set of rules that apply when she is with her people. The idea of a dual focus —which characterizes the Black experience—is evident in *Paperboy* and in other works we shall consider. It is important to know that early in the twentieth century W. E. B. DuBois, the Black sociologist, referred to a similar phenomenon as double consciousness (see below).

By contrast, young Victor, nurtured by Mam and with the benefit of an array of cultural resources, achieves—from his intense experience handling the paper route— a moment of personal growth. There is no dual focus. Rather, Victor comes to see the world through a larger lens. He is in tune with American culture, which includes his love of baseball, America's pastime. He plays catch with his father. Victor is a Little League pitcher respected for his hard fastball. He admires Ryne Duran, the Yankee pitcher, and he has his baseball card.

This essay explores the idea that Black and white children benefit in different ways from an integrated school experience. An early example of successful racial integration in the classroom comes from W E B DuBois, who would become a respected Black sociologist. As a boy DuBois had been the only Black student in his small, integrated public school in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. This was in the late nineteenth century. "He was climbing the educational ladder, and the promise was that it would be his way out: here he could succeed based not on color or wealth but on an objective measure of his talents."[8]

DuBois wrote about what he called double consciousness, which refers to the African American experience of an inner conflict associated with feelings of uncertainty about one's status in a society with economic and racial inequalities. Social scientists study this inner conflict in research on stereotype threat, a psychological construct which describes feelings of uncertainty that one is perceived as worthy.

In our view both Black and white students benefit from an integrated school setting. However, at the outset the Black student has the added challenge of overcoming a sense of stereotype threat, which is a sensitivity to being judged in terms of a stereotype or preconception, rather than as an individual.[9]

Early Awareness of Racial Inequality

Sensitivity to racial inequality is a powerful theme in literature for children. Consider, for example, *Last Stop on Market Street,* a picture book by Matt de la Peña, that places the reader in the midst of urban poverty. In this 2016 Newbery Medal winner, a young African American boy and his grandmother take a bus to a soup kitchen, where they will serve food to the needy. Along the route the grandmother directs the boy's attention to the beauty in the world. But the perceptive young protagonist asks: "How come it's always so dirty over here?" Attention is drawn to the decay by verse: "Crumbling sidewalks and broken-down doors, graffiti-tagged windows and boarded-up stores."[10]

How aware are African American children of racial differences and stereotypes in our culture? The late Kenneth Clark, a Black social psychologist, conducted an experiment that showed that Black children, when asked to choose, tended to prefer white dolls over Black dolls. This evidence reinforced the legal arguments used to overturn the "separate but equal" doctrine in the 1954 landmark Brown v Board of Education decision by the Supreme Court.[11] However, despite such rulings—and after the academic attainment associated with the almost fifteen years of mandated integration—our public schools are now re-segregated, which some critics liken to a system of apartheid.[12]

In the past, children's literature often neglected people of color or, worse, depicted them in racist stereotypical terms. For example, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920) by Hugh Lofting showed Prince Bumpo, the Africa King's son, with exaggerated lips and nose and naked, reading a book of fairy-stories to himself. "After a while the King's son laid the book down and sighed a weary sigh. 'If I were only a *white prince!'* said he, with a dreamy, faraway look in his eyes."[13] At that point Dolittle's parrot Polynesia is able to trick Bumpo into believing that he could be turned into the whitest prince. *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle,* Lofting's sequel, won the Newbery Medal for best children's literature in 1923.

One hundred years later, we still struggle with racist attitudes in America. However, we are now informed by psychological research that examines processes that shape our self-identity and our sense of belonging. We know that from an early age children are aware of racial differences and racial inequality.[14]

From the perspective of stereotype threat, we read in juxtaposition novels by Gene Luen Yang (2006), Jerry Craft (2019), and Colson Whitehead (2009). Protagonists Jin Wang, Jordan Banks, and Benji Cooper had to cope with racial issues which they encountered in an integrated school environment. *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel by Yang, won the 2007 Michael L. Printz Award. Yang is a former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, representing a program established by the Library of Congress in 2008.

As Yang's novel shows, racial insensitivity extends beyond the Black experience.

In *American Born Chinese* we see teachers consistently mispronouncing names of Asian students, which is an example of race-based stereotype threat. When Jin Wang arrives in his new elementary school the third grade teacher Mrs. Greeder introduces him to his classmates. "Class, I'd like us all to give a warm Mayflower Elementary welcome to your new friend and classmate Jing Jang." Jin quietly corrected her saying his name, Jin Wang.

"He and his family recently moved to our neighborhood all the way from China." Jin again corrected her telling the class he had moved from San Francisco. "The only other Asian in my class was Suzy Nakamura . . . and rumors swirled that Jin and Suzy would have an arranged marriage when she turned thirteen."[15]

In the spring of fifth grade the classroom teacher introduced a new student, an Asian who would become Jin's friend. "Class, I'd like us all to give a big Mayflower Elementary welcome to your new friend and classmate Chei-Chen Chun!"

"Wei-Chen Sun," said the new student.[16]

The graphic novel format allows the author to show the emotional reactions of protagonists—to allow the reader to visualize social interactions. In *New Kid,* also a graphic novel, we find Jordan Banks, an African American twelve-year-old from the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, beginning his first year at Riverdale Academy Day, a private school, which enrolls a mostly wealthy and mostly white student body.

Jordan becomes friends with Andrew Ellis, who goes by the name Drew, an African- American boy who lives in the Bronx with his grandmother. Ms. Rawle, the homeroom teacher, mistakenly calls Drew by the wrong name. Drew has to correct her on two or three different occasions. "I'm sorry, Drew. Deandre is one of my former students. He was a real handful."[17]

Drew becomes the quarterback of the football team. But he confides to Jordan that he feels socially isolated at Riverdale Academy Day. "It's just that I've been here two months and people still don't really talk to me. I get lots of high fives and 'good game, bro' but it doesn't really get past that."[18] Add to this perception the impression that everyone stares at him whenever the class discusses civil rights or slavery or financial aid. Drew adds: "I even get stared at when we talk about minority partnerships in business."[19] His grandmother suggested he accept these realities, "in order to become successful one day."[20] Jordan and Drew wonder why the school seems to make things tough for them: "We don't dress weird. We don't use a lot of slang they can't understand. We're not aggressive."[21]

Jordan makes a conscious effort to fit in. Each morning he has to use public transportation to get to school. His tips for taking the bus include looking tough when riding in Washington Heights, taking off the hood in Inwood, removing his shades and acting relaxed in the Kingsbridge neighborhood, and appearing non-threatening when arriving in Riverdale. "I don't even like to draw 'cause people might think I'm going to use my markers to 'tag the bus.'"[22]

In the course of the school year Jordan, who has benefited from finding new friends both Black and white, is able to move beyond a preoccupation with stereotype threat. He is recognized by Ms. Slate, the visual arts teacher, as an art student of promise. He wants to be an artist but he initially resists her suggestion to explore the world of abstract art. Ms. Slate admires his first attempt at abstract painting, which she

suggested reflected who he was. "It's like beneath this calm exterior lies this storm. It's so you, Jordan!"[23] She saw in the colors a reflection of the inner turmoil that Jordan felt as he coped with the frustration of racial stereotyping and at the same time was seeking acceptance and a way to belong.

Jordan has the support of his parents, who encourage his best effort. After a parent conference the parents have a conversation with Jordan. His mother is quite direct in her endorsement of integrated education for her son. "The point is, in order to be successful in corporate America, you have to know how to play the game."[24]

At some level Jordan is affected by this striver mentality. His favorite class is biology where Mr. Roche, the teacher, had the students sit around a large table. Jordan is impressed. "We all sit around a big conference table. It feels like I'm at an important board meeting. I'm definitely Bruce Wayne."[25] Bruce Wayne, an alias for the Batman comic book character, is a wealthy industrialist.

Responding to Stereotype Threat: Alternative Remedies

What might be the sequel to New Kid? What kind of insights, lessons, and experience does Jordan Banks, age 12, need if he is to thrive going forward. How might his perception of the world evolve?

Consider Colson Whitehead's novel *Sag Harbor* (2009). The novel is set in 1985 in Sag Harbor, a well-to-do Black enclave in the Hamptons, where Benji Cooper, a fifteen-year-old African American and his twin brother, spend the summer. They have attended private schools in Manhattan for their entire educational career. Like Jordan, Benji has a parent who is adamant in his conviction about the benefits of integrated schooling for his children.

Like Jordan, Benji has to cope with racial stereotyping at school. He recalls his experience at a Bar Mitzvah. "I was used to being the only Black kid in the room . . . there was something instructive about being the only Black kid at a bar mitzvah. Every bar or bat mitzvah should have at least one Black kid with a yarmulke hovering on his Afro—it's a nice visual joke, let's just get that out of the way, but more important it trains the kid in question to determine when people in the corner of his eye are talking about him and when they are not, a useful skill in later life when sorting out bona-fide persecution from perceived persecution, the this-is-actually-happening from the mere paranoid manifestation."[26]

Early on, his father instructs Benji how he is to respond to race-based stereotyping. Benji was in fourth grade when one day the other students began discussing their suntans acquired while on vacation. A new student observed to the others that the color of Benji's skin did not come off, referring to his skin color. "The other kids looked at one another, and what do fourth graders know about things, I don't know, but they knew wrongness when it happened right in front of them and Andy Stern who was my friend said, 'Shut up Tony Reece' and shoved his shoulder."[27]

Benji wants to forget the incident, but at home his father would teach him a hard lesson. "Your mother said some boy called you a nigger at school today." The father asked why Benji had not hit the boy, suggesting he was afraid of retaliation. The father strikes his son in the face. "Can he hit you harder than this?' he asked, and he swatted me again, harder."[28] The father expects his son to hit back against racial insults, if he is to achieve justice in a white world. "The world's not going to protect you. That's what I'm trying to teach you."[29]

In 1985 Benji is growing up. He wants to make sense of a complicated world. He wears clothes from Brooks Brothers. He listens to popular music; he hangs out with his friends; and he works at an ice cream shop to earn spending money. His twin brother works at a Burger King. Benji and his friends talk about what parts of white culture they find acceptable. One year Izod polo shirts were in; one year they were out. They are Black kids whose family could afford private schools for their children. How do you reconcile this paradox—privilege with being Black? "It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort."[30]

Benji Cooper is both witty and thoughtful. In early adolescence he considers himself to be a dork—and his immediate wish is to outgrow his awkward adolescent self. He was advised by his older sister to work hard in school and get into a good college, as she had. He looks forward to growing up, which includes becoming attractive to girls.

After close observation of the Black culture, he concludes that growing up presents three possible remedies. He could follow his father as a bootstrapping striver. His father endured prejudice in the 1950s when he attended an Ivy League college. His friends were limited to other Black students, some in nearby colleges. He could be verbally abusive of his wife when drinking, but he was a medical doctor and a proud pillar of the Black community. A second path was to become a militant. Do not capitulate to the white man; be the opposite of the bourgeoise; act hard, appear gangsterish.

Benji endorses a third remedy, which involves what he called embracing the contradiction. Looking back at elementary school, Benji recalled that he had punched a couple of his white classmates in the stomach for what he called "inappropriate 'Fro-touching"— students who claimed they were just curious about his hair. "I punched them according to my father's lessons."[31] But he was not of his father's generation. At age fifteen, he began thinking about other ways of responding, besides an aggressive punch.

Growing Up: Finding Purpose

Benji wants to work out a remedy for his life that would embrace the contradictions of living in a society with racial injustice and segregation on the one hand and the world of opportunities that awaited him and his friends who owned beach houses and were well educated on the other. This was a paradox with no easy answers. "Those inclined to this remedy didn't have many obvious models."[32]

Some parents believe that a racially integrated and rigorous education prepares their children with the knowledge, skills, and outlook needed to succeed in life and to participate in the culture. Jordan and Benji each had the benefit of a school experience that offered rich learning resources, academic challenge, and encouragement.

Jordan and Benji showed in their social interaction at school the positive effects of integrated education in overcoming stereotype threat. Consider two examples of encounters, each poignant in its own way, with white classmates. Jordan became friendly with Alexandra, a girl shunned by many of their classmates. Alexandra wore a puppet on her left hand and talked in a puppet voice. "I know everyone thinks I'm weird," she said.[33]

Toward the end of the school year, Alexandra confides in Jordan that her hand had been burned in an accident and she used the puppet to hide the scar. When she then removes the puppet, she reveals a small scar on her hand. This is a liberating experience for Alexandra. She gives up her reliance on puppets—she no longer looks or feels weird.

Benji is thrilled when Emily Dorfman, a fellow eighth grader, asks him to skate with her at a roller disco party. They spend several minutes holding sweaty hands, which for the inexperienced Benji was "sweet contact" he would remember forever.[34]

The Debate Continues

Evidence from educational research analyzed by Rucker C. Johnson and his colleagues documents the gains that integrated schools achieved in the 1970s and 1980s.[35] However, the debate over integrated education continues. Nikole Hannah-Jones, author of *The 1619 Project*, published a long and impassioned article in 2016 about how she and her husband decided to send their 4-year-old daughter Najda to a segregated public school in Brooklyn.[36] They lived in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood where most middle class parents, Black and white, avoided sending their children to the local segregated public schools. Hannah-Jones, a Black journalist, benefitted from her parents' decision to enroll her in a voluntary desegregation program in her hometown in Iowa.

Her integrated education was transformative and academically stimulating, opening up possibilities, expanding her world. Her husband, who also had the benefit of an integrated public education, initially argued against sending their daughter to a school with low test scores. Out of a sense of fairness, Najda was enrolled in a segregated public school, where she could share what other Black and Latino children her age experienced in the classroom.

Hannah-Jones is dismissive of integrated schooling in the New York City public schools. These scattered attempts are in her view curated integration. In other words, this was integration that included but a few select students of color. There were enough Black students to make the white parents feel that they were open to diversity and inclusion. Hannah-Jones was comfortable with her decision to enroll her daughter in a segregated public school, which was led by a strong and innovative principal. "I also knew that we would be able to make up for Najda anything the schooling was lacking," wrote Hannah-Jones.[37]

Reading the schoolboy novels of Vawter, Craft, and Whitehead, it becomes clear that an integrated educational setting is important—stereotype threat becomes less of a preoccupation as white students and Black students interact and find friendship in an integrated setting. For minority students in particular, it appears that performance improves when it is not compromised by self-doubt and the sense that one does not belong. This is consistent with the contact hypothesis in social psychology wherein racial discrimination is reduced by direct contact between Blacks and whites. &

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