

Perpetuating Whiteness in Transitional Chapter Books

Transitional chapter books (TCB) are a gateway to reading for many young people, since they bridge the gap between easy picture books and more challenging chapter books. However, multiple studies indicate that children of color cannot easily find TCBs featuring characters who resemble them physically or culturally. Due the dearth of TCBs with main characters of color, teachers may believe that they are addressing the needs of their students by providing any and all TCBs featuring diverse characters available to them. However, how are these TCBs representing characters of color? Who are they written and illustrated by? Do they perpetuate whiteness or dismantle it?

This paper details the content analysis of five transitional chapter books featuring Black girls as main characters. Using a Critical Race Theory lens this study seeks to determine if these TCBs depict Black characters in ways that perpetuate or dismantle whiteness. Book covers and illustrations were analyzed and coded for several phenotypical markers as well as how Black characters were drawn in relation to white characters. In addition to the visual analysis of illustrations, the texts were analyzed for explicit mention of race or phenotype. Finally, correlations between the racial identifiers of the author and illustrator with findings from the aforementioned factors were examined.