

Minoritized Male Children and Access to Nonfiction Texts

Holly Reichert

Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

### Abstract

This capstone focuses on the usage of nonfiction texts in the elementary classroom in order to build minoritized male children's scholar identities. Specifically, this capstone focuses on elementary aged male children of African American descent. It is informed by theory surrounding nonfiction texts, racially representative children's literature, and scholar identity (Duke, 2004; Duke, 2010; Tschida, Ticknor, & Ryan, 2014; Whiting, 2006). With the recent Common Core standards, nonfiction texts are gaining more importance in elementary classrooms (Correia, 2011). Because of this, teachers must learn how to adequately integrate nonfiction texts into their elementary classrooms. In order to combat the marginalization of students of minoritized backgrounds in literacy education, the books used in lessons and present in classroom libraries must be diverse and representative of the students who are reading them. *A Negro League Scrapbook*, *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*, *Black Jack*, and *What Color is My World?* are four examples of nonfiction texts that feature African American men in positive ways. These texts meet criteria for high quality multicultural literature as well as nonfiction texts (University of North Carolina, 2017; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). These books are useful for incorporating into lessons in ways that will build positive scholar identities in young, Black male children. There are five research-based strategies to use with these texts in elementary classrooms in ways that help build positive scholar identities and meet Common Core Career and College Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading and Writing. They are: authentic instruction, critical literacy, collaboration, agency, and comprehension. Teachers can use these strategies to better integrate nonfiction texts into their elementary classrooms and best support their young, Black male students in developing positive scholar identities, thereby increasing self-efficacy and academic achievement (Whiting, 2006).

### Introduction

Literacy is an important part of the elementary school experience. However, boys are more likely to struggle with reading than girls, and “at all ages, girls read more than boys” (2001, p 442). For minoritized male children, literacy instruction can marginalize them in the classroom when books used are not representative of their race and experience (Banks & Banks, 2010). I use research to argue for specific types of nonfiction text usage in elementary classrooms to benefit minoritized male children in the development of their scholar identity. In this capstone, I focus on the usage of nonfiction texts in the elementary classroom in order to specifically build minoritized male children’s positive scholar identities.

Throughout my capstone, I refer to various important content-specific words. Nonfiction texts are texts “whose primary purpose is to convey information about the natural or social world” (Duke, 2004, p 40). *Scholar identity* is defined by Whiting as “one in which culturally diverse males view themselves as academicians, as studious...and as intelligent...in school settings” (2006, p 48). My definition of *minoritized* is informed by Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor, who define minoritized as, “any and all [youth] who identify in contextually situated, non-dominant communities such as race, class, sexual orientation, language, dis/ability, religion, and gender. Despite variations and flexibility, [they] use this term to identify youth who...navigate their status as “outside” the norm in a variety of ways (2013, p 243). For my capstone, I focus on youth ages 5-11 who are of a specific minoritized racial background: African American descent. I refer to these children as “young, Black male children” from here onward. I avoid the term “Black boy” because of the oppressive, derogatory nature that “boy” has been used as a name for Black men throughout US history, and I do not want to perpetuate this in any way by referring to my children of focus as “boys.”

### **Relevance**

I am personally invested in the issue of nonfiction texts and minoritized male children because of my background in elementary education. My interest in how male children are treated in school and especially in literacy education stems from watching my two younger brothers' school experiences as male children differ widely from mine, as a girl, even though we attended the same schools and had many of the same teachers. The consideration of the experience of young, Black male children and how it differs even more from that of my White brothers demands further investigation. I am also from, and plan to go back to teach in Houston, the most diverse city in the country. Many of my students will be from minoritized groups, and it is critical that I am able to design and plan literacy education that is relevant and appropriate for them.

Beyond personal relevance, this topic is relevant to educators all over the United States today. With the advent of Common Core, teachers are now responsible for incorporating more nonfiction texts into their literacy instruction. While Common Core is calling for the use of more informational texts in elementary classrooms (Correia, 2011), teachers are uncertain where to find quality, elementary appropriate nonfiction texts (Palmer & Stewart, 2003). The push for including nonfiction texts in the elementary curriculum is encouraged by the Common Core as well as the NAEP. According to Duke (2010) the 2009 NAEP framework mandated that 50% of things read be nonfiction texts by 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

The subject of reading is an important part of the school experience, and in the elementary grades, the emergence of reading skills can set the stage for a student's future scholar identity. Male children with low self-efficacy are "less likely to persist in school [and] less likely to be high achievers" (Whiting, 2006, p 47). Too often, these male children are male

children of color. In order to improve a student's scholar identity (and therefore self-efficacy), teachers must include representative texts and relevant curriculum. As Banks and Banks warn, a teaching approach that only includes "the standard language, the standard American history, and the lives of White men appear in the curriculum" will send a message that students of minoritized backgrounds are not valued, and they will be further marginalized in school (2010, p 46). Overall, this topic is an important one today because as educators, we must incorporate diverse, racially representative nonfiction texts into our classroom libraries and lessons to support minoritized male children in developing their scholar identity and to create a more inclusive curriculum.

### **Theory**

Scholar identity, defined above, is a term coined by Whiting with the important characteristics of academic self-confidence and racial identity and pride. Academic self-efficacy is important because it can lead to academic self-confidence, and racial identity and pride is also critical because race has "high salience" in young, Black male children's lives (Whiting, 2006, p 49). In terms of suggestions for fostering this positive scholar identity, Whiting suggests that "reading the biographies of diverse heroes can help inspire culturally diverse males, as well as develop their sense of social justice" (2006, p 50). This leads us into the topic of racially representative nonfiction texts. Robertson and Haney (2017) share an anecdote about a class of mostly minoritized students engage with representative texts, where the children's eyes "sparkled" when reading and talking about "kids who looked like them" (p 53). There is not a wide body of research about texts that are both racially representative and nonfiction, but there is a substantial body of research about the importance of nonfiction texts. Duke (2004) asserts using nonfiction texts in authentic ways is important for students to learn from these texts. For

example, if students engage with a text that goes beyond just school learning and into a real world, applicable context, students will find worth in what they are learning and remember it in the future. When situated authentically, students maintain interest and are motivated to read from these texts (Wood & Jocius, 2013). This shows that teachers must be aware of the strategies they are using for teaching nonfiction texts to ensure that they are effective. My capstone is also informed by the concept of “windows and mirrors” in children’s literature. Mirrors are books that reflect the children who are reading them, while windows are books that show children what another life or culture is like. Many students from marginalized groups do not see themselves reflected in children’s literature, or the reflections they do see are stereotypical. This sends negative messages to children about their cultural group. Banks and Banks (1995) use the term *hidden curriculum* as the instance when certain messages are being sent to children from the teacher, school, or curriculum that convey subtle things about the worthiness of a topic, of a structure, or of a cultural background. When books in the classroom are not representative, the hidden curriculum is that the students’ cultures are not valued. Children’s literature should be accurate and appropriate windows and mirrors for minoritized children (Tschida, Ticknor, & Ryan, 2014). It is critical that young, Black male children have access to racially representative nonfiction texts that serve as mirrors so they feel valued in literature and literacy education overall. Nonfiction offers the opportunity for these young, Black male children to see people similar to them in real life, relatable contexts.

### **Teachers**

Teachers must know how to best use nonfiction texts in their elementary classrooms to support their minoritized male students in order to effectively build positive scholar identities and make their classroom community inclusive. In order to do this, they must first be able to

evaluate what makes a good nonfiction text, and what makes a good culturally diverse text. First I discuss how teachers can evaluate nonfiction texts, and then I discuss how teachers can evaluate culturally diverse texts.

Nonfiction texts' purpose are "to convey information about the natural or social world," and when young, Black male children's backgrounds and experiences are not represented in these texts, they are further marginalized by literacy instruction (Duke, 2004, p 40). This is why it is important that teachers use quality, racially representative nonfiction texts. Some key aspects of informational texts that teachers should look out for are "linguistic features such as headings, technical vocabulary, generic nouns, and timeless verbs to share information about an entire class of things" (Yopp & Yopp, 2006, p 40); exposure to new, specific vocabulary is a benefit of these nonfiction texts. Surprisingly, Yopp and Yopp (2006) assert that biographies do not count as nonfiction texts because they often have more characteristics similar to narratives than similar to other nonfiction texts. However, I disagree with this aspect of their categorization, because these texts can still effectively introduce technical vocabulary, generic nouns, and timeless verbs through narrative-like stories. There could also be headings and labels in these narratives, which Yopp and Yopp (2006) assert are important aspects to nonfiction texts. When I discuss strategies for incorporating nonfiction texts in the classroom, I provide examples of biographies that have these features. For that reason, I assert that biographies are still strong, beneficial examples of nonfiction texts.

Beyond criteria for quality nonfiction texts, teachers must also look for culturally diverse books that are accurate and respectful so their students of minoritized backgrounds feel appropriately represented and engaged. In order to evaluate culturally diverse texts for children, teachers must look to a list of guidelines to make sure the book is high quality. In my own pre-

service teacher education, I was given a list of seven criteria from the University of North Carolina:

<b>Determine the author's perspective and expertise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is he/she writing from an "insider" perspective?</li> <li>• What source materials/expertise is the author drawing upon?</li> </ul>
<b>Watch out for stereotypes in characters or cultures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the author use condescending tones toward minority characters?</li> <li>• Are traditional costumes and customs depicted in a way that shows respect for culture and not in a way that perpetuates negative stereotypes?</li> </ul>
<b>Assess illustrations for authenticity and accuracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do characters have recognizable features of their culture?</li> <li>• Are ethnic features exaggerated?</li> </ul>
<b>Check that cultural details are accurate and current</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is historical information correct?</li> <li>• Are language specific words spelled correctly?</li> </ul>
<b>Analyze the storyline and characters for tokenism or typecasting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are majority characters dominant while minority characters are submissive?</li> <li>• Do majority characters "save" minority characters?</li> <li>• Is diversity within a cultural group presented?</li> </ul>
<b>Look for multidimensionality and interconnections between characters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the storyline bring together diverse characters in a realistic way?</li> <li>• Does the author encourage noticing similarities and differences between cultures?</li> </ul>
<b>Consider multicultural book awards and honors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coretta Scott King Award</li> <li>• Pura Belpre Award</li> </ul>

Table 1. UNC's criteria for evaluating diverse children's books.

Although these criteria do not cite any research findings, in my experience, they have been used repeatedly. This is the only set of criteria that I have experienced used for evaluating culturally diverse texts, and it has proven useful to me over the years. However, an area for future research in this area would be to create a more research based set of evaluative criteria. Dr. Agosto from Drexel University (2017) has a similar list of evaluative criteria that are split into five categories:



“accuracy, expertise, respect, purpose, and quality.” In order to find culturally diverse texts that do not support biases, stereotypes, or tokenism, teachers must examine texts critically before using them in their classroom.

Beyond culturally diverse books individually, teachers must also make sure their classroom libraries are both culturally responsive and diverse. Lee and Low Publishers, an agency specifically for publishing culturally diverse children’s literature, has created a “classroom library questionnaire” for teachers to evaluate their classroom libraries to make them more appropriately culturally responsive. The questionnaire is included as an appendix. Teachers must consider both the actual books that they are choosing, as well as how they use these books to build a classroom library. Now that teachers may have an understanding of the books that they should include in their classroom library and lessons, based on the above evaluative tools, I discuss examples of quality nonfiction, culturally diverse texts and strategies for how to use them in the classroom. First, however, I situate teachers in the context in which they work.

### **Context**

Teachers are situated in the context of their elementary classroom. While traditionally, it was believed that nonfiction texts were too complex for young children (Palmer & Stewart, 2003), recent research has shown that that is not the case. Mohr (2006) showed that most first graders preferred nonfiction texts to fiction ones when given picture book choices, showing that they enjoyed those text choices. In Correia’s (2011) kindergarten classroom, two thirds of her students chose to write about nonfiction books over fiction texts, and more boys chose nonfiction texts than did girls. Contrary to past opinion, elementary students selectively prefer nonfiction texts, especially boy elementary students. This is important for my capstone topic, as I have

chosen nonfiction texts in part because of their appeal to elementary aged boys, leading to the important aspect of classrooms that teachers should take into consideration: how gender is related to book preference. The boys Williams (2008) studied were more sensitive to gender and race than girls were when choosing books to read. McGeown, Goodwin, Henderson, and Wright (2011) found in their study that in order to foster reading success in boys, the boys must be intrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation, they found, was correlated to gender identity. They conclude that boys should be reading in “masculine orientated environment” in order to increase intrinsic motivation for reading (p 7). However, this study was done on a sample of boys that was not diverse, so the results must be interpreted with caution when considering how it could be applied to a classroom of minoritized male children. Nevertheless, I think that McGwoen et al’s (2011) argument for considering masculinity in reading instruction to increase intrinsic motivation is important. It also relates to scholar identity, because part of having a positive scholar identity is having academic confidence, self-efficacy, and not allowing masculinity to stop young, Black male children from focusing on academics (Whiting, 2006).

Within classrooms that have minoritized male children, teachers must evaluate their own practices and structures in place in order to make sure they are not enacting a hidden curriculum that implicitly harms groups of students. Kane (2016) supports this by saying that teachers must engage in this evaluation in order to think about how what they are doing influences the success of Black children in their classroom. Recently, as teachers are tasked with incorporating more nonfiction texts into the classroom, they must take into consideration the context in which they are situated and the students that they are serving. Because some teachers find it difficult to find quality nonfiction texts (Palmer & Stewart, 2003), in the next section I will detail strategies for teaching racially representative nonfiction texts in the classroom and quality nonfiction texts that

can be utilized to implement those strategies.

## The Texts

### *A Negro League Scrapbook*

This book is written by Claire Boston Weatherford with a foreword by Buck O’Neil. O’Neal is the chairman of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. Each page features a rhyming couplet about the information on the page, and the rest of the page features photos of people, places, and things related to the Negro Leagues. Most images have captions or descriptions about what they depict.

I use this book for multiple reasons. Firstly, it is a nonfiction text with multiple features that are considered important by Yopp and Yopp’s (2006) standards, such as photos, labels, captions, headings, and an index. Sargent, Mwavita, and Smith (2009) found in their study that boys who participated in a newspaper-reading program developed a more positive attitude toward reading than those who did not. *A Negro League Scrapbook* is not a newspaper, but it includes a newspaper clipping on page 35. While this exposure to newspapers does not exactly match the exposure in Sargent et al (2009), it still shows that incorporation of primary sources can help male children develop a positive attitude toward reading.



*Figure 2.* Page from *A Negro League Scrapbook* that features a newspaper page.

Mohr (2006) states that in the genre of nonfiction text, boys prefer texts related to sports, science, and history. This book covers both sports and history by covering the history of the Negro League. The vast majority of the athletes and coaches covered in the book are Black, putting the African American experience during this time at the forefront. This makes *A Negro League Scrapbook* a racially representative text for young, Black male children.

***Before John was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane***

This book is also written by Claire Boston Weatherford and is illustrated by Sean Qualls. The story is simple and repeats the phrase “before John was a jazz giant” throughout the story. The illustrations are composed of acrylic, collage, and pencil. The book follows aspects of John’s childhood, and at the end of the book there is an Author’s Note that gives a more detailed account of John’s life. In addition to the Author’s Note, there is also Selected Listening and Further Reading.

I use this book because of its racially representative character for young, Black male children and its relatable themes. Robertson and Haney (2017) discuss how it is beneficial for children to see their own experiences reflected in text as a type of mirror in children’s literature. Because the story is focused on the life of John Coltrane *before* he was a famous adult, the experiences highlighted in the book are of John going to church, spending time with family, and joining his community band. The activities are child-centered, and the repetitive phrasing would make this a good book for early elementary students to read to themselves as well as for teachers to use in lessons. Heath (1991) discusses how part of being academically literate is being able to relate the texts you are reading to your own personal experience. This book will give young, Black male students the opportunity to relate what happens in the book to their own lives. The

Author's Note at the end gives more detailed information about John Coltrane's life that could allow students to learn more about Coltrane. In sum, *Before John was a Jazz Giant* serves as a relatable, readable text for Black elementary aged male children.

### ***Black Jack: The Ballad of Jack Johnson***

This book is written by Charles R. Smith Jr. and illustrated by Shane W. Evans. The illustrations are drawn, and there are quotes sprinkled throughout the text. The book follows the story of Jack Johnson, the first Black heavyweight champion of the world. At the end of the book, there is an "And then what happened?" section where there are more details about Johnson's life and death, as well as a bibliography.

I use this book because it is a nonfiction text that focuses on a strong, successful Black male role model. By trying to cross the "color line" and box a White person, Johnson broke racial barriers and was a positive role model for Black people at the time. The book rhymes, which would make it easier for students to read to themselves, as it follows a predictable phonics pattern. There are quotes throughout the book and a page of images that are labeled. These nonfiction aspects of text will help students become more familiar with the genre.



Figure 3. *Black Jack* page with labels.

Mohr (2006) stated that boys were shown to prefer nonfiction texts about sports and history. This book is about the sport of boxing in the early 1900s, so it combines sports and history. Tschida et al (2014) in their discussion of windows and mirrors bring up the importance of disrupting the single story. The single story is “the definitive way that we view a particular person, a group of people, or a set of circumstances, reducing that person or thing to a single perspective on who we think “they” are” (p 31). It is critical that we disrupt the single story so children see groups of people as multifaceted and the individuals in these groups as unique beings. *Black Jack* disrupts the single story of civil rights activists only existing in the 1950s and 1960s, and only being Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. This book shows that the fight for equal rights started in the early 1900s and that a Black athlete was a proponent of equal opportunities. *Black Jack* is a quality nonfiction text that could be incorporated into many lessons about civil rights and disrupt the single narrative about what it means to be a civil rights activist.

***What Color is My World?: The Lost History of African-American Inventors***

This book is written by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Raymond Obstfeld and is illustrated by Ben Boos and AJ Ford. The book follows twin children who go on an adventure to learn more about African American inventors. The book flips between the narrative of the twins and nonfiction information about inventors. On various pages, there are flaps that have fast facts and stories on both sides, “written” by one of the twins. The illustrations are drawn. At the end, there are Authors’ Notes and Sources and Further Information.

Like *Black Jack*, the authors are trying to disrupt the single story about the history of African Americans. Toward the beginning of *What Color is My World?*, the authors write, “There’s more to our [African American] history than slavery, jazz, sports, and civil rights

marches” (Abdul-Jabbar & Obstfeld, 2013, p 4). The book focuses on all African American inventors and their accomplishments. The book has a narrative of the twins’ experiences, nonfiction information “written” by one of the twins on flaps, and small reactions to the information also “written” by the twins in the margins. There are also full-page spreads of nonfiction information about some scientists written in a more formal way with headings, labels, and captions. There are also comic strips that convey information about the scientists’ experiences. Blair and Sanford (2004) stated that the boys in their study often chose to read comic books and graphic texts outside of school, but felt that they were inappropriate to read in school. By including this book in lessons, teachers can show students that it is appropriate to read graphic texts in school. As mentioned above, Mohr (2006) states that boys prefer nonfiction texts, and specifically science related texts. This is an example of a science related nonfiction text, so it would be a good book for teachers to include in their lessons and library. Farland (2006) shows the importance of trade books featuring scientists of minoritized racial backgrounds and gender identity through her study of 13 third grade classrooms. Of the students who were read “historical, nonfiction trade books in conjunction with their modular-based science instruction,” more of them represented scientists in “drawings that included a wider variety of people practicing science (e.g., women, minorities)” in places that were not just in the lab (p 41). This shows that the incorporation of trade books featuring diverse scientists can help broaden students’ views on who scientists are and who they can be.

### **Text Evaluation Criteria**

All of the books I have chosen meet most, if not all, of the criteria for evaluating culturally diverse texts mentioned in the previous section (University of North Carolina). All of the authors except Raymond Obstfeld are Black, and Obstfeld has won various NAACP awards,

so he is aware of and educated on the Black experience. The majority of the illustrators are also Black, and many have won Coretta Scott King Awards. As mentioned above, each book combats stereotypes and portrays African Americans in positive, accurate ways both in terms of the information presented and the illustrations used to depict their experiences. Diversity within racial groups is explored, and the minority characters are not submissive. Jack Johnson is especially dominant in *Black Jack*. When diverse characters are brought together in *Black Jack*, *A Negro League Scrapbook*, and *What Color is My World?* the interactions are accurate and realistic. The hardships and racism faced by Black characters is mentioned instead of skipped over. Overall, these books are all high quality examples of culturally diverse children's literature.

### **Text Weaknesses**

Before moving on, it is important to note that these chosen texts, while high quality and useful, have some weaknesses that teachers should be aware of before using in the classroom. First, *Before John was a Jazz Giant* is written in a very narrative way. Yopp and Yopp (2006) would probably not count this as a viable nonfiction text, but I believe that it still has merit and is useful for teachers to use with young, Black male children for reasons detailed above. However, teachers should be aware that it does not have that many nonfiction text features. It does have an Author's Note at the end that tells more information about John Coltrane, so teachers can refer to this if they would like to incorporate more information into their lessons. Second, in the book *Black Jack*, young Jack is bullied and his mother encourages him to hit the bullies back, and that is how he got started in his successful boxing career. This positive view of hitting other people could encourage children to act like Johnson did, but this is not acceptable in most American school systems. The teacher using this book will have to consider how violence is portrayed in



this text and have a conversation with students about school behavior expectations. Finally, *What Color is my World?* uses some language in the narrative portion that may not be appropriate for younger students. The siblings call each other “loser,” “dorkenstein,” and other insults throughout the text. In the time surrounding a read-aloud, the teacher can have a discussion with her students about what we call family at home versus peers at school, and how to be good friends to one another. The authors also use the word “skanky” as a synonym of stinky, so while it is not with the inappropriate connotation, it is still a word that should not be used in elementary classrooms. Teachers will have to consider these language aspects before reading the text aloud to students or allowing students to read the texts on their own.

These weaknesses are small, and do not mean that these books should not be used. It is important that teachers read and review texts before they are used in the classroom, and should then share them, manipulate them, or plan lessons around them accordingly to best support student learning.

### **Strategies**

Duke sums the need for nonfiction texts in classroom very well:

“The evidence is compelling: We should involve students in informational text early in school — not only through such commonly mentioned practices as teaching text structure and vocabulary, but also by enacting the triad of reading real-world informational texts for real world reasons in motivating contexts” (2010, p 70).

We know that texts must be used in authentic ways for students to best learn information from nonfiction texts and that students’ motivation to read these texts is higher when in an authentic context (Duke, 2004; Wood and Jocius, 2013). We know that culturally representative mirror texts and empowering and educational window texts are important for minoritized students,

especially male children, to enjoy literacy education and build positive scholar identities (Tschida et al (2014; Whiting, 2006). Now I share five strategies for teachers to use with nonfiction texts in their classrooms to help minoritized male children build positive scholar identities.

### **Strategy 1: Authentic Instruction**

As I have mentioned throughout this capstone, authentic instruction is critical for student success in literacy instruction that incorporates nonfiction texts (Duke, 2004; Wood and Jocius, 2013). Blair and Sanford found that five common themes came up in “[boys’] comments about their literacy practices, suggesting that boys need to find personal interest, action, success, fun, and purpose in the work they are assigned” (2004, p 454). Of these five themes, personal interest and purpose relate directly to authenticity. If a lesson with a nonfiction text is situated in an authentic context, then boys will be able to see that the activity has a purpose, and this will build personal interest.

Duke discusses how doing activities with nonfiction texts in the “context of a larger purpose” is a way to engage in authentic instruction (2010, p 69). A specific strategy to do this is informed by Duke (2004), where she talks about how students can read to write something, such as read about frogs to make a brochure for a nature center. The students are reading to learn something and to make something for a larger context beyond school. This could be done with *Before John was a Jazz Giant*, where students read the text and learn about John Coltrane’s childhood, and then use a similar format to write their own book about their own childhood. Parents could assist in the retelling of family experiences and family histories, and the mini biographies could be shared with the community or with a class pen pal group to learn more about the children in the class. This activity would be specifically beneficial to minoritized male

children because it will help them build their scholar identity by allowing them to engage in a purposeful activity that will hopefully increase their self-efficacy and academic self-confidence. By centering the writing project on their own personal experiences, the project can offer an opportunity for self-awareness, so young, Black male children can recognize their strengths and weaknesses and seek ways to improve themselves. Finally, this strategy of situating instruction in authentic contexts relates to one of the Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing: “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” (Common Core State Standards, 2018). This shows that the writing activity situated in an authentic context in a way that relates to *Before John was a Jazz Giant* is not only research based, but also can help teachers meet important academic standards.

### **Strategy 2: Critical Literacy**

Wood and Jocius define critical literacy as “students and teachers [working] to “reveal and disrupt such practices in oral, written, and popular culture texts” (Wood and Jocius, 2013, p 663 as informed by Rogers, 2002). This relates to Tschida et al’s (2014) discussion of disrupting the single story through culturally diverse literature. Critical literacy is important for teachers and young, Black male children to “create a learning environment that raises expectations for academic achievement by challenging traditional notions of literacy instruction...and allows students to develop a sense of social justice” (Wood and Jocius, 2013, p 663). Critical literacy will support positive scholar identity by creating a strong need for academic achievement in young, Black male children because the texts and work will be challenging and relatable.

*What Color is my World?*, *Black Jack*, and *A Negro League Scrapbook* can be used as texts in critical literacy instruction. *What Color is my World?* challenges the view of scientists as

only White males (Farland, 2006) and showcases the many African American scientists over time. *Black Jack* discusses crossing “the color line” and fighting for equal rights in boxing. *A Negro League Scrapbook* offers the history of the Negro Leagues and the challenges that the players had to overcome to play professional baseball. All three of these books could be used in a critical literacy lesson, where students and teachers create a chart of the Black experience in these texts and how they challenge what we typically think of as scientists and athletes (in the time the books are set). Each text discusses racism in one form or another, and teachers could use this to talk with young, Black male students about the racism that they have experienced in their own life, and how the people in the books handled racism versus how they handle it themselves. A Common Core Career and College Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading that fits with these examples of critical literacy lessons is, “Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text” (Common Core State Standards, 2018). In order to have conversations about the challenges that people face in the texts and how they handled them, the students must be able to analyze how they interact with others and develop throughout the text. Overall, critical literacy will help young, Black male children develop positive scholar identities and disrupt the single story of African Americans portrayed in the mainstream media and literature.

### **Strategy 3: Collaboration**

An important part of critical literacy that can be separated out into its own strategy is collaboration. Wood and Jocius (2013) discuss how creating a classroom culture that allows young, Black male children to feel supported and work together is important and can even lessen pressures surrounding literacy in schools. Peers can serve as positive reading role models to help one another with reading and discussing what has been read. Whiting (2006) asserts that peer

mentoring (when an older Black male student is paired with a younger Black male student) can help develop positive scholar identities. This could be done in “book buddy” groups during reading time at school. Lopez-Robertson and Haney discuss the importance of a classroom community where students feel a “responsibility...for each other” (2017, p 50) and how this can lead to students building closer relationships and engaging in productive dialogue with one another. This is especially the case when culturally diverse texts are used in the classroom.

*A Negro League Scrapbook* and *Black Jack* can be used to foster collaboration in elementary classrooms. For example, a teacher could use these two texts to organize a collaborative discussion between students. Pairs of students could work together to read one text and then form larger groups with pairs that read the other text and discuss the similarities and differences and how they relate to their own lives. *A Negro League Scrapbook* and *Black Jack* are both about African Americans in sports and both take place in the first half of the 1900s, so they can be easily compared. The sports, text organization, and people focused on are different, so the books can be contrasted as well. This relates to the Common Core Career and College Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading: “Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take” (Common Core State Standards, 2018). Wood and Jocius (2013) share how students from minoritized backgrounds may feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and personal experiences with peers in a safe and well-developed classroom community. It is up to the teacher to create this community, because comfortable collaboration will not happen automatically. However, when classroom community is well developed, young, Black male children can feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings about texts and their personal experiences to further their understanding of nonfiction texts and build relationships with peers.

**Strategy 4: Agency**

Kane defines agency as “the capacity of persons to act purposefully” (2016, p 98). When young, Black male children have agency in the classroom, they feel as though they can effectively influence the structure of the classroom. Kane sums up the relationship of student agency and classroom structures by stating that, “Classroom structures enable or limit student agency, but student agency also transforms classroom structures” (2016, p 99). Classroom structures can send the implicit messages that certain subjects, such as science, are not for students of minoritized backgrounds, but by increasing student agency, these minoritized students can take action and build an identity around science and feel more included in the subject (Kane, 2016). Agency in school is important for young, Black male children so they can increase their self-efficacy, an important component of positive scholar identity.

*What Color is my World?* can be used to help build the agency of young, Black male children in elementary schools. Kane (2016) specifically talks about the science identities of young, Black male children and how traditional science instruction can exclude these children from thinking of themselves as learners of science or scientists. *What Color is my World?* breaks the stereotype of scientists only being White males by including African American men and women as important inventors and scientists in American history. Teachers can use this text in science and literacy instruction for students to learn more about inventors and how things are made. The teacher can read parts of the text to the students or the students can read parts themselves and then write their own “fast facts” or “reactions” to the text, just like the characters do in the book. This exposure to African American scientists will help young, Black male children see themselves as doers of science, thereby increasing self-efficacy in science as well as literacy instruction. This strategy can be implemented in many different ways, so there is not

just one specific standard to which it would relate. Teachers should have the goal of increasing agency in their students to help their students become successful throughout their entire k-12 education.

### **Strategy 5: Comprehension**

My final suggested strategy is that teachers should plan for comprehension when using nonfiction texts. Duke (2004) says that we read nonfiction texts to learn something. If students do not comprehend what they are reading, then they are missing out on the main purpose for reading informational texts. Duke also mentions that “good readers are strategic in their reading” (2004, p 41). It is not enough, however, to just tell students strategies and expect them to use them effectively. Strategies must be explicitly taught so students know “*what* the strategy is, *when* it is used, *how* it is used, and *why* it is worth using” (Duke, 2004, p 42). By sharing why it is helpful, teachers are situating these comprehension strategies in authenticity. Students will have a better understanding of the larger purpose behind these strategies and will be better able to use them in the future. For young, Black male children, this will in turn support positive scholar identity development because the strategies will help to increase their self-efficacy in reading. It can also increase self-awareness as male children see which strategies help them and which they are still struggling to use effectively.

*Black Jack* can be used to teach strategies for comprehension. Duke lists comprehension strategies for nonfiction texts that can be used in elementary classrooms:

“monitoring students’ understanding and making adjustments as needed; activating and applying relevant prior knowledge...generating questions; thinking aloud; attending to an uncovering text structure; drawing inferences; constructing visual representations; and summarizing” (2004, p 41-42).

Teachers can use these strategies while they are reading out loud to students, and students can use these strategies when reading to themselves. Specifically, I will discuss how teachers can use “drawing inferences” to help students better comprehend what they are reading. Teachers will tell students that throughout reading one of the three texts above, they are going to make inferences about what is happening. Students make inferences by using what is said in the text and the illustrations to draw conclusions that go beyond what the text is explicitly saying. For example, teachers can model this by reading aloud *Black Jack* and after reading about how Jack cannot fight the White champion because he is Black (image below), teachers can say something like “Wow, Jack looks angry on this page. I would feel upset too if I could not fight for the championship just because of my race. Jack is probably feeling frustrated and mad! I know this from reading the words on the page and looking at the pictures. This will help me better understand Jack throughout this book.” Here, the teacher modeled the strategy and explained why it was useful, something that Duke (2004) says is important in teaching comprehension strategies.

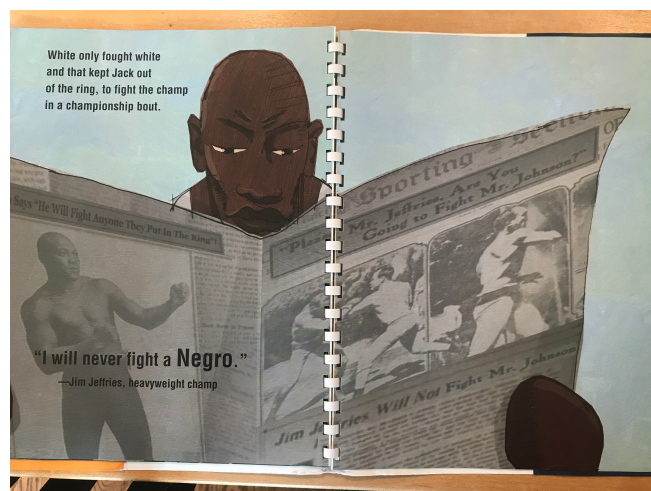


Figure 4. A page from *Black Jack* where Jack appears to be frustrated.

Similar strategies can be used for *A Negro League Scrapbook* and *Before John was a Jazz*



*Giant*. While reading aloud, teachers can model noticing how the people in the books must be feeling at certain times, or how certain events may influence them in the future. It is important that after each strategy modeling teachers also explain how it is useful, so students see the importance. As mentioned above, this will specifically help young, Black male children build positive scholar identities because the effective usage of these strategies will help increase their self-efficacy and self-awareness. Finally, the Common Core Career and College Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading that these strategies would best help students achieve is: “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text” (Common Core State Standards, 2018). Overall, we read nonfiction texts to gain information, and teachers must be able to support their elementary aged Black males in their ability to best comprehend racially representative nonfiction texts.

### **Implications**

#### **Relevance**

It is important to again discuss at the end of this capstone the relevance of this topic to my own life and the field of education today. I have seen young males and young male children of minoritized backgrounds be treated negatively in schools, simply because they are male. These male children are continuing to be marginalized by literacy education, in part because of what is valued as literacy (Blair & Sanford, 2004) and in part because of toxic masculinity. Kimmel and Mahler explain that toxic masculinity is when boys are “different” from other boys and are “culturally [marginalized]” because they are not acting like a man enough under the “codes of masculinity” (2003, p 1445). Young, Black male children with positive scholar identities do not think that being smart or studious is feminine, and they do not let being engaged

in school hurt their sense of being masculine (Whiting, 2006). It is important that young male children minoritized backgrounds have this scholar identity so they do not allow toxic masculinity to further marginalize them in schools. The topic of this capstone is critical for teachers today so they can be able to effectively use racially representative nonfiction texts to increase young, Black male children's scholar identities and help them be successful in literacy education and school in general.

### **What can I do?**

Next year in my elementary classroom, I will be able to implement the five strategies discussed above. I can use the books discussed in this capstone, but also apply these strategies to other racially representative nonfiction texts. I will also stay up to date in children's literature, and be sure to purposefully seek out nonfiction texts, especially those that are racially representative of minoritized students. Because of the push for more nonfiction texts in elementary classrooms, I will make sure that my classroom library is both culturally representative and includes texts from nonfiction genres as well as fiction genres. I can use Lee and Low's classroom library questionnaire (Appendix) to evaluate my own classroom library and then improve it in areas where I do not have adequate representation. Overall, my capstone offers practical recommendations to help my young male children of minoritized backgrounds develop positive scholar identities through use of racially representative nonfiction texts in my classroom.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations on the topic of this capstone. First, it can be challenging to find racially representative nonfiction texts that are also high quality. Second, the general attitude towards nonfiction texts in schools still needs to be improved.

Lee and Low Publishers share the statistics that out of all children's books published in 2016, only 28% of them were written by and/or about people of color. This means that there are less than a third of books published in 2016 that can be considered a racially representative text for students from minoritized backgrounds. This statistic spreads across children's book genres, so less than 28% of children's books published in 2016 are both nonfiction and written by and/or about people of color. Teachers must find these texts and then evaluate them to make sure that they are high quality and would be appropriate to use in their classroom. This means that teachers must have access to this low percentage of texts and then be able to sift through what is available to find the texts that are high quality. This can be a challenge for teachers and take a lot of time and effort in order to find nonfiction, racially representative texts for their classrooms. While the time and effort is worth it for reasons previously mentioned in this capstone, some teachers may not have the time to dedicate to adequately creating their classroom libraries.

While perception of nonfiction texts is improving, they are still thought of as more difficult for elementary aged students than fiction texts. Correia (2011) discusses the many different apprehensions that teachers may have about incorporating nonfiction texts into their elementary school classroom. Teachers could be worried that their students cannot adequately understand the text features and vocabulary that are often present in nonfiction texts, or that there are not high quality nonfiction texts available for elementary aged children, or that their students prefer fiction to nonfiction overall. While Correia (2011) found that elementary aged children can comprehend nonfiction text and that her students did prefer nonfiction to fiction, some teachers may still have these preconceived notions, and those worries, coupled with the small amount of racially representative nonfiction texts available, could limit teachers' ability to successfully integrate racially representative nonfiction texts into their elementary classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

### **Questions and Future Considerations**

To continue to address the issue of racially representative nonfiction texts that are appropriate for elementary aged students, publishing agencies must support authors and illustrators of minoritized backgrounds in order to have more appropriate culturally diverse texts for elementary aged children. The We Need Diverse Books Campaign is a nonprofit that is working to make meaningful changes in the publishing industry in order to make sure that more diverse, representative children's books are published. This campaign is a step in the right direction to getting more diverse books published, but since still only 28% of children's books published in 2016 were by and/or about people of color, there is a long way to go in the publishing agency for books to be truly representative of the children in the US (Lee and Low Publishers, 2017).

The four texts featured in this capstone had men or no humans featured on the cover. Williams (2008) found that boys were more likely to choose books that had boys on the cover than books that featured girls on the cover. This sensitivity to gender can limit boys in their choices of books to read. Overall, in Williams' (2008) study, girls and boys most frequently chose books with boys on the cover. This shows that girls were more likely than boys to choose a book that featured a member of a different gender on the cover. My book choices for this capstone were informed by Williams' research, so I was sure to choose books that featured males or no humans on the cover. I am left wondering how this "limitation" of boys mostly choosing texts that featured people of the same gender and not choosing books with those of a different gender influences how boys view themselves as masculine and how they view the worthiness of texts. For further exploration, researchers should investigate more in how books deemed as "boy

books” or “girl books” harm or privilege children in what they feel as though they “can” or “cannot” read.

### **Directions for Continued Professional Development**

Duke ends her article by asking, “What kinds of professional development and policies can foster [teaching real world nonfiction texts in real world, motivating contexts]?” (2010, p 71). Duke (2010) sums up what is important to create sustained, meaningful, positive change to be more inclusive of nonfiction texts in the elementary curriculum: professional development and policy. Schools should have some sort of professional development in place to help teachers know where to find and how to use nonfiction texts in the elementary school classroom. This would create sustainable ways for teachers to learn more about the benefits of culturally diverse, nonfiction children’s literature while also giving them access to high quality texts, instead of making them find the texts on their own. The Common Core is a national policy that has mandated the use of more nonfiction texts in classrooms (Correia, 2011), so professional development around nonfiction texts would be appropriate under current policy and could help teachers better implement the texts in the classroom in order to support students in meeting current standards. Professional development for elementary teachers around this topic is critical for widespread, long-term positive change to incorporate more racially representative nonfiction texts in the elementary classroom.

### **Concluding Statement**

In this capstone, I focused on the usage of nonfiction texts in the elementary classroom in order to specifically build young, Black male children’s positive scholar identities. The texts used met high quality criteria for both culturally diverse and nonfiction texts, and were easily able to be incorporated into elementary instruction to support students in meeting Common Core

Career and College Readiness Anchor standards. The five strategies discussed, authentic instruction, critical literacy, collaboration, agency, and comprehension, can all be used in elementary classrooms with *A Negro League Scrapbook*, *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*, *Black Jack*, and *What Color is my World?* in order to build positive scholar identities in young, Black male children. Racially representative nonfiction texts are a compelling tool to use in literacy instruction to help young, Black male children develop positive scholar identities and disrupt single story texts and stereotypes, creating a more inclusive and supportive classroom community.

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Appendix

Table A. Lee and Low Questionnaire.

## Classroom Library Questionnaire

**Educators, how culturally responsive and diverse is your classroom library?** Use the following questions as a guide to analyze your classroom library book collections and determine where there are strengths and where there are gaps in diversity.

**To what extent do you agree with the following statements?**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>1. The classroom library contains multiple books that include . . .</b>					
non-human, anthropomorphic main characters (e.g., talking animals, talking trucks, talking vegetables, imaginary or science fiction creatures, etc.)					
<b>2. The classroom library contains numerous books that include . . .</b>					
main characters of color					
main characters who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender					
main characters with disabilities					
<b>3. The classroom library contains numerous books that . . .</b>					
are written or illustrated by a person of color or a Native/Indigenous person					
feature a person of color or a Native/Indigenous person on the front cover					
feature contemporary diverse characters and storylines					
feature a range of family structures and family configurations					
feature characters with different types of gender identity and gender expression					
are set in contemporary Asia					
are set in contemporary Africa					
are set in contemporary Europe					
are set in contemporary Central or South America					
are set in contemporary Oceania					
are set in contemporary Native/First Nations/Indigenous regions					
are set in contemporary North America (outside the United States)					
are reflective of my students’ cultures and heritages					
explore different socioeconomic backgrounds					
explore religious diversity					
are set in different geographic settings (urban, rural, suburban)					
are written in languages meaningful to my students’ backgrounds or the community in which they live (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog)					
teach about immigration to the United States beyond the Ellis Island-narrative					
teach about Black/African American contributions to the United States beyond the Civil Rights Movement					
feature diversity throughout the year, not just in heritage and observance months (e.g. Black History Month, Native American History Month)					

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4. The majority of books featuring people of color or Native/Indigenous people . . .	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
are only about issues of race, prejudice, or discrimination					
are only culturally specific (e.g., flags, foods, festivals)					
are only culturally neutral or contain incidental diversity					

5. The classroom library contains some books that include . . .	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
harmful stereotypes about a group of people					
inaccurate/outdated information about a group of people					
generalizations about a group of people					
misrepresentations of a group of people					
discriminatory content about a group of people					
non-authentic stories about a group of people					

6. The classroom library reflects the diversity of my students and the community in which we live (e.g., gender, race, family structure, language, culture, socioeconomic background, etc.)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

## What Now?

**If your classroom library is not as diverse and culturally responsive as you want it to be for your students . . . you are not alone!**

Learn how others have built diverse library collections and where you can find diverse children’s books here:

<http://blog.leeandlow.com/2014/03/21/where-can-i-find-great-diverse-childrens-books/>

**Contact us for more information on building customized classroom libraries or book collections for your students.**



**Abraham Barretto**  
Vice President of Educational Sales  
[abarretto@leeandlow.com](mailto:abarretto@leeandlow.com)  
(212) 779-4400 x. 23