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Read This Book!: Defending Multicultural Literature from Recent Censorship

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To my mother and father. Thank you for holding my hand and bringing me to the library every week as a little girl. It changed my life.

To my future students. May you always know that the sky is just the limit.
Abstract

The aim of this research is to highlight the importance of multicultural children’s literature in the field of education as it relates to the call for a more multicultural approach to education, as well as through the consideration of the recent uptick in book censorship across the country. Specifically, I will turn my attention towards children’s literature that features Black characters and experiences, which are often featured within the multicultural realm. Despite the fact that research has consistently shown that multicultural children’s literature has benefits for Black children as well as creating an engaging reading experience for all readers, efforts to limit the exposure of this literature in classrooms and libraries has risen greatly within the past several years. Efforts at censorship by those claiming the books advance “Critical Race Theory” in particular have threatened to limit and/or remove these important materials from accessibility. Those censoring books often target multicultural books, and in turn, the possible benefits that come with these materials become limited. Particularly alarming is the fact that many of those who aim to censor these books do not read the text itself, even though they argue that they are potentially “harmful.” Using the methodology of literary analysis to read three multicultural children’s picture books that have faced censorship in multiple school districts in the United States, I will argue that these books are not a cause for concern, and that they instead promote positive values that all children, regardless of their background, can embrace, such as self-confidence, the importance of self-expression, and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: multicultural children’s literature, multicultural education, multicultural, book censorship, elementary education, Critical Race Theory, Black children
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Demographics show that our US school districts are more diverse than ever before. While the white population in K–12 public schools has decreased in the past two decades by as much as ten percent, the Hispanic and Asian American populations are steadily on the rise. The Black population has remained relatively the same in the past fifteen years (“Racial/Ethnic Enrollment,” 2022) (Carrillo & Salhotra, 2022). Because of these trends, and the projection of an increased enrollment of non-white students in schools in the next ten years, organizations and educational reform groups have questioned the role that policymakers and school administrators can play in supporting these ever-more diverse schools (Cordova-Cobo & Wells, 2016). Although these changes require reform on a more complex scale, such as policy implementations, educational researchers have explored ways in which teachers, especially elementary education teachers, can support students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in their classrooms. One way researchers have argued this can be done is through literature that is accessible to students, literature that features characters and experiences reflective of individuals that are non-white; such literature is known as multicultural literature. Specifically, as it pertains to the elementary level component of education, multicultural children’s literature (MCL) will be the focus of this research paper. Despite the fact that the incorporation of MCL into classrooms and libraries has been shown to have a powerful impact on children, its incorporation continues to have its detractors (Blintt, 2020).

In addition to focusing specifically on children’s literature, particular attention will also be on Black children’s picture books, which feature Black characters, a racial group that is commonly featured within the MCL realm. One of the main goals of multicultural
children’s books is for Black children to see themselves in the books that they read, including their culture, their histories, and/or their values. While Black characters have been depicted in children’s literature for over a century, this depiction has been historically limited, as they were often discussed in either history contexts as it pertains to slavery, or in an insensitive manner (King, 2017). It is due to this complex history that the call for a more realistic depiction of Black people in literature has occurred in the first place, first occurring around the time of the Civil Rights Movement. Since this time, scholarly research over the past several decades has overwhelmingly supported the important role that multicultural children’s literature has on Black identity (Husband, 2019; Milner, 2020; Sims Bishop, 1990). Studies have shown that incorporating this literature allows for Black children to see themselves in what they are reading, and therefore, a connection is built between a reader and content, leading to an increase in engagement and to an increase in enthusiasm for reading (Piper, 2019). This thus creates a motive for teachers, as well as librarians, to create an environment in which non-white students feel valued by using these types of books.

While the benefits of multicultural children’s literature have been well-supported, in recent years, primarily increasing during and following Donald Trump’s presidency, there have also been individuals who have aimed to remove these books from being accessible to children. The biggest challenge of incorporating MCL, I argue, is censorship. Censorship is the attempt to remove materials from classrooms and libraries, and the attempt to prohibit the public from accessing these materials. The goal of the individuals and groups, such as school board members and parents, behind censorship is to ban these books entirely, meaning the attempt at censorship is successful and the book is completely removed from accessibility (Banned Book FAQ, 2016). Statistics from 2021 and 2022 show that picture books comprise
of almost 20% of banned books in schools, 40% of banned books in general contain content that feature characters of color, and 21% of banned books incorporate issues of race and racism (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). It can be concluded that books that feature characters of color, including Black characters, are particularly targeted in book censorship. This is further supported through a list of books that have been targeted that is available through American Library Association’s annual list of books that have been targeted for censorship, and by reviewing these lists, there is an apparent trend in the types of books that have been targeted (American Library Association, 2017). Coupled with particular groups and parents who aim to censor these books as well as argue ways in which they supposedly cause harm for children, book censorship has created a threat for the ways in which Black children, as well as all children, may be able to see themselves and shape their identity with the help of stories.

Complicating the dangers of censoring books, many of the parents, educational groups, and others who target these books do not read the books themselves to understand the context of what the books are actually about. They may be influenced by the media who preach the idea that these books are harmful and/or they may disregard the book out of racist motives to begin with. Through reviewing frequently targeted books on a more complex level through literary analysis, a close look at the language and meaning of the texts that censors do not do, I argue that these books that have been targeted are not at all a “threat” to children. In fact, multicultural children’s literature can be beneficial and important to all students, even if their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds are not the ones being reflected in a particular book. Children will still be able to engage with the text in one way or another, and for Black children, they will be able to see how these books uplift their identities, something that they
deserve to see and to be reflected. The content of these types of stories, whether it is characterization, themes that emerge, or other text features, point to literature that can help satisfy young readers’ various needs, especially at a young age in which children begin to develop their sense of self.

In what follows, I first highlight the history of multicultural education, which is where MCL is situated, and the shift towards creating a more representative approach to the children’s literature genre. I will present the research demonstrating the positive effects this literature has on the lives of Black children, evidenced by educational pedagogy. Then, I turn to an examination of the current challenges that MCL faces in classrooms and libraries and how these challenges are fueled by groups and individuals who claim that this incorporation is detrimental to children, fueled by the current fear of Critical Race Theory. In response to these challenges, I will provide a literary analysis of three multicultural picture books that have been targeted: Sulwe (2019) by Lupita Nyong’o, Hair Love (2019) by Matthew A. Cherry, and The Undefeated (2019) by Kwame Alexander. This analysis will show that these targeted books are not harmful in any way and are in fact effective works that support positive identity for all children. In conclusion, I broaden out this work to discuss ways in which classroom teachers can use multicultural literature in the classroom.

**Multicultural Children’s Literature: Its History in Education and Benefits for Identity Development**

The use of multicultural children’s literature is situated under the educational frameworks of *multicultural education*, a set of educational practices that are comprised of several different components to be incorporated into a learning environment. While
multicultural education does not have a single definition, one idea its advocates argue for is equal opportunity for all learners, regardless of race, gender, social class, abilities, among other differences. This equal opportunity, as (Dietz et al. 2015) define in one way, provides the best resources necessary for all learners to be successful, and more importantly, makes educational success fair and attainable. Although I will be advocating indirectly for curriculum changes through the usage of multicultural children’s literature in the elementary education setting, as does Banks (2004, 2009, 2015; as cited by Tamang, 2022), multicultural education does not merely halt at curriculum changes. Rather, in addition, it encompasses “changes in the total school or educational environment” (p. 80). Multicultural education embodies similar principles of the term *multiculturalism*, used to describe some aspect of inclusivity, that is, including a variety of different cultures and identities into educational practices.

Banks and Banks (2001; as cited by Gopalakrishnan, 2010) have traced the four phases of multiculturalism and how it has coincided with the field of education:

1. The initial interest educators had was incorporation of “ethnic studies” into school curriculum, referring to the call for a “fuller” history of the cultures that make up our society.

2. The understanding that merely incorporating reflective curriculum into the classroom is not enough and “not sufficient in changing attitudes towards ethnic minorities” (p. 22). Thus, the call for educational equality became an important issue in the field.
3. Over time, marginalized groups came forward to demand multicultural education, advocating for their histories and cultures to coincide with what they are being taught.

4. The focus on the “development of theory, research and practice that interrelate variables connected to race, class, and gender” are in full force (p. 22).

Multicultural children’s literature is situated in the multicultural approach to education, and as Gopalakrishnan (2011) further explains, it is “literature that is by and about diverse populations and includes different perspectives” (p. 21). Diverse stories, characters, and experiences are at the forefront of MCL, and similarly, a call for a multicultural approach to education simultaneously encompasses a call for multicultural literature, as well.

Scholars, notably Oeur (2021), have argued that many people had already advocated for a presence of multicultural literature by the early 19th century. One of these advocates was prominent Black author, scholar, and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, having done so through the creation and support for *The Brownies’ Book*, a magazine published between 1920 and 1921. With additional contributions from those such as Jessie Fauset, whose writing situated herself as a voice during the Harlem Renaissance, these magazines were “intended ‘to build readers’ pride in black beauty and physical vitality” (Oeur, 2021, p. 330). The magazine included drawings, stories, and was even used to address the violence perpetrated towards Black individuals during this time.

Closer to our own time and more recognizable in the tone and content of the calls, was the Civil Rights Movement (1954 –1968), when justice and equality for African Americans became at the forefront of America’s attention (Oeur, 2021). It was during this time that Dr.
Nancy Larrick, founder of the International Reading Association, published her influential article, “The All-White World of Children’s Books” (1965) in The Saturday Review. In this article, she poses the question a Black child asked her, “‘Why are they always white children [in books]?” (Larrick, 1965, p. 63). Larrick mentions that when Black people are depicted in stories, they are more often than not within a historical context, such as books depicting slavery. She argues these books do not cater to what she refers to during her time as the “contemporary Negro,” and that Black children need accurate representations of much more than their unfair treatment in the past. While also presenting the fact that not even ten percent of books published in the first half of the 1960s depict at least one Black character, she indirectly urges change to occur in these statistics and these trends (Larrick, 1965).

Scholars such as Sonia Nieto (2017) have acknowledged that the definition of multicultural literature has been argued to be an umbrella term for other types of books that do not solely speak about race. Particularly, some argue that sexuality and gender fall under this category since it strays from the “norm,” but others argue that placing these topics under this category may stray away from the original focus on race and ethnicity that multicultural literature embodies. The concept of a multicultural education through the use of multicultural literature, when integrated in the classroom, is argued by Sims Bishop (2007; as cited by Gopalakrishnan, 2010) to be “one of the most hopeful developments in children’s literature” (p. 23). The literature for the purpose of this research will be particularly focused on children’s picturebooks, which are typically used with illustrations and are approximately thirty-two pages long.
The incorporation of multicultural children’s literature has been found to have an enormous impact on Black identity. To begin, many scholars have used Rudine Sims Bishop’s influential 1990 analogy of *mirrors, windows, and sliding doors* to paint the picture as to the purpose multicultural literature (as well as a multicultural approach to education) has on children. Through the use of these books, children can look and learn about themselves (*mirrors*), learn more about the world (*windows*), and put themselves in other people’s shoes that are different from them (*sliding doors*). Bishop powerfully proclaims:

> On the other hand, we are realistic enough to know that literature, no matter how powerful, has its limits. It won’t take the homeless off our streets; it won’t feed the starving of the world; … it won’t stop people from attacking each other because of our racial differences… It could, however, help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes towards differences. (Sims Bishop, 1990, para. 11)

Sims Bishop highlights that multicultural literature will not magically solve all of the important issues regarding social justice or other tensions in our society, but it opens doors for more empathy, understanding, and even change.

Husband (2019) also argues in favor for one of the many approaches that teachers can use in the classroom, the *critical reader’s response*. This approach has students not only interact with reading material dealing with this subject matter but talk about the subject matter using their own personal experiences and emotions. These approaches not only allow students to have more interaction with MCL, but this space for conversation allows for more appreciation and a deeper connection to the literature being read. Milner (2020) has argued that through his time spent over the past several decades of researching students at various
grade levels, that Black individuals become more engaged in books when “introduced, encouraged, and/or allowed to read texts that are meaningful to them, resonate with their experiences and worldview, and get them excited in finding meaning from and through the storylines” (p. S251). Through these texts that are carefully selected to pertain to those students reading the text, Milner argues that readers garner more motivation to want to read the text, engage with the text, and most importantly, to draw meaning from what they are reading.

Further, it is important to note the effects of the integration of multicultural children’s literature on Black identity, something that has been extensively researched by scholars. Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* (Revised 2017 version) argues that at an early age, Black children are already exposed to the idea that White people are the dominant culture in our society, as well as exposed to stereotypes of Black people that are often portrayed through the media (ex: Black men are often depicted as gang members). But Tatum argues that we as teachers and even parents can counteract these harmful messages, arguing that “When the environmental cues change and the world begins to reflect their Blackness back to them more clearly, they begin to develop a new social understanding of their own REC [racial-ethnic-cultural]- group memberships and what that means for them and others” (p. 135). When Black children are given more positive representation and meaningful literature that rings true to them, they make deeper connections regarding their own identity and place in society.
Piper (2019) conducted a study at a suburban elementary school in the southern United States, in which three students of color were given multicultural children’s books that were *culturally responsive*, books that are reflective of their perspectives and experiences. They were evaluated and surveyed on many levels, including how motivated they were to read the texts, how easily they were able to recall events in the text, and how connected they felt to the literature. Piper found that not only did the children overall enjoy the text, but it helped them to reflect on their own Black experience. For example, after hearing a read aloud on a book called *Separate Never Equal*, a nine-year-old male in this case study explains that after hearing this book, he believes that Black people can do anything they put their minds to, no matter what anyone else says. With this positive outlook, one which he admits in the study that he struggles to have confidence, it is well-established that literature can be a driving force to help students develop values important to them, which in turn shapes their identity. This is shaped not only by the characters in these stories, but also by plot, settings, themes, among other story elements.

Piper (2019) and Jones et al. (2009) bring to light the correlations between the success of students of color and the teaching behaviors that occur in a classroom. In a study conducted by Davidson (1996), they found that features of school contexts that contributed to the increase of disengagement and opposition for learning for Black students include academic tracking, negative expectations, racial discrimination, bureaucratized relationships and practices, and barriers to information. (Davidson, 1996, as cited in Jones, et al., 2009). These are barriers that create a lack of engagement and enthusiasm these students have for academics, and additionally stalls the need to build trusting relationships to ensure academic growth. But even more so, this lack of engagement will create a strain in developing a
student’s academic and social identity. Nasir (2011) has identified two characteristics supporting the congruence of learning and identity:

1. Social organization of the practice (in this case, an academic setting):
   consistent feedback, specific roles in a classroom, etc.

2. Opportunity to personally contribute (p. 52)

In the context of multicultural literature, resources such as this type of literature that is found in a classroom that are not only accessible, but informational and even relatable, are keys to supporting student success in identity. When students are given these proper resources, they feel a sense of purpose.

While the positive effects of incorporating multicultural children’s literature have been well-identified, it is also important to recognize teaching strategies that go hand in hand with multicultural literature. In other words, education scholars have done extensive research on how multicultural children’s literature can be used in several effective, beneficial teaching strategies to use in our ever-more diverse classrooms. Different scholars have different approaches to the way they teach with this type of literature. Milner (2020), citing Kirkland (2011), argues that “books are like clothes,” and teachers must find books that children should be able to connect to and to be able to find meaning (p. S251). In turn, teachers need to build the proper foundation in order to create these meaningful connections children have, and teachers must continually adjust their instructional strategies to meet the mold of their students. Further, Iwai (2019) advocates heavily for culturally responsive teaching. This strategy, cited from Gay (2010) is “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters
more relevant and effective for them” (p. 15). Iwai argues that incorporating multicultural literature into the classroom in turn creates a culturally responsive classroom, and this can be done through creating classroom community, having the teacher learn about the diversity and culture of the classroom and students (displaying their own cultural awareness), etc. Husband (2019), argues for several teaching strategies to go along with teaching multicultural children’s literature, such as critical inquiry-based approach (where students research topics presented in books and investigate further why they happen), critical arts-integration (where students use performances, visual art, etc. to explore topics learned about in books). Although scholars may introduce different methods to teach with MCL, what remains consistent across their research is that incorporating multicultural literature in the classroom needs to go beyond just simply having the books accessible to students. There needs to be active discussion, engagement, and conversation regarding the material, and teachers must know how to incorporate it into the classroom.

Social Justice Books, a resource dedicated toward promoting sufficient pieces of MCL, has developed helpful guidelines in choosing the right books for teachers to have in their classroom. Just because a book has a Black character or two does not automatically make it a great book to include in a diverse classroom. This resource brings up several issues seen in some of these books, such as tokenism, harmful stereotypes, invisibility of certain groups, and lack of positive messages. Every book purchased with the intent of using it in the classroom should be evaluated carefully for any content that may be questionable. All teachers should be adept in making these decisions and should seek resources such as this one in order to make these crucial decisions. Some scholars including Lawson (2021) have
developed specific ways in which MCL should be incorporated into the classroom. Not only does Lawson suggest the importance of creating a diverse classroom library, but she also argues that literature circles are one way to talk about these books. Literature circles typically involve “studying” one book in a small group (and sometimes as a whole class); students look at plot, theme, and other story elements. Oftentimes, unique roles and responsibilities are assigned to each student if it is a small group, such as a scribe (to write down information collected), a reporter (to share with the class findings), etc. Further, they discuss their thoughts about the book, as well as connections and questions they have regarding the book. An advantage to this activity is that it can be used with practically any grade level; further, it allows students to build relationships with classmate around them and to find common ground in the literature they read. Other methods of integration include research projects, visual art projects, and writing assignments that involve the MCL being read.

Although incorporating this type of literature has not always been easily embraced, scholars have increasingly begun to emerge in favor of both the educational and identity-related benefits of a multicultural approach to these materials. While books featuring Black characters have been seen in literature over time such as in The Brownies’ Book, creating more room for narratives that go beyond the historical context remains at the forefront of supporting our diverse schools and society. Our school population is changing, and so must the change in focusing on a culturally diverse library. Similar to the push in the accessibility of these materials, there has also been threats that will potentially limit the availability of these important resources.

**Threats to Multicultural Literature**
While the incorporation of multicultural children’s literature in schools is a positive integration, it does not come without its barriers. Scholars such as Iwai (2019) have argued that one barrier in incorporating MCL is that teachers may feel as though they lack the knowledge of different cultures and identities of their students, and thus feel unprepared to teach from a multicultural perspective. In other words, they may (not knowingly) struggle with cultural awareness, meaning that these teachers may lack the understanding of cultures different from theirs. Iwai (2019) argues for culturally responsive teaching, a framework of taking the experiences, perspectives, and cultural knowledge from diverse students and to incorporate it into the classroom to make “learning encounters more relative to and effective for them” (Gay, 2010, as cited by Iwai 2019, p. 15). Not only does Iwai advocate for these approaches in the classroom, but she also acknowledges that these strategies can be effectively taught to teachers, including preservice teachers (teachers in training). Through her case study in which she provided explicit instruction in multicultural literature, culturally responsive teaching, etc., to preservice teachers (in which many of whom had little to no knowledge of these topics prior to instruction), she supports the idea that teachers can effectively teach with multicultural literature, when given the right resources to do so.

Arguably one of the most prevalent threats to the advocacy of more incorporation of multicultural children’s literature in the classroom is the increase in book censorship that has increasingly occurred in our country. There have been books that have been challenged and there have been books that have also been banned, and there is a difference between the two. The American Library Association (ALA), a leader in publishing information on book censorship, defines that when a book is challenged, it is “an attempt to remove or restrict
materials, based upon the objections of a person or a group” (*Banned Book FAQ*, 2019), whereas when a book is banned, the material is actually removed from a location completely. Groups and individuals who challenge a book do not simply say “I don’t like this book”; rather, they want to infringe upon other people’s ability to access the material by having it taken away.

The ALA has identified three of the top reasons books get challenged or banned in the first place:

1. The material was considered to be “sexually explicit”
2. The material “contained ‘offensive language’”
3. The material was “‘unsuited to any age group’” (*Banned Book FAQ*, 2016).

PEN America, an organization dedicated to publishing information regarding book banning and other resources, collects and annually publishes data from the titles and types of books that have been targeted in the United States. According to data collected from July 2021–June 2022, out of the 1,648 titles that have been banned, 659 of these titles (40%) contain characters of color. To zoom in even more, 338 (21%) of the titles contain stories that address the issues of race and racism, 161 (10%) discuss themes of activism, and 141 (9%) are autobiographies. While young adult books are the books that have been targeted the most (making up almost half of the 1,648 titles), 317 titles (19%) of targeted books were picture books (*Friedman & Johnson*, 2022).

While book censorship and banning occurs in both libraries, classrooms, and other places, statistics show that the number of books banned at the classroom-level is much higher than in libraries. Even more shockingly, however, is the fact that books featuring people of color are particularly being targeted. The groups behind advocating for book banning include
local parents, all the way up into national groups, including Moms for Liberty, US Parents Involved in Education, and No Left Turn in Education. Many of these groups have local chapters, with many individual groups dispersed throughout the country.

Through the examination of these statistics, as well as the apparent reasoning behind these attempts of book censorship, it is evident that literature that incorporates elements of multiculturalism is being targeted at an incredibly high rate. Particularly, books that feature Black people, their cultures, and their experiences are especially under fire according to these statistics. With these statistics in mind, and simultaneously considering the ALA’s most common reasons for book censorship, those who censor books, whether it is parents and/or groups, target books that incorporate people of color, especially the Black population.

Fueling the challenge to the inclusion of multicultural literature is the consistent target of material that supposedly promotes critical race theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the idea that the social constructs of race and racism are embedded into our society, and reflected in our legal systems, educational systems, and the foundations of our society. CRT has its origins in the 1970’s, shaped by legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. They noticed that the Civil Rights Movement, and the gains that were achieved during this time, were stalled. They felt the need to find a new approach to explain the racism and racial tensions embedded into our society. CRT draws its inspiration from movements such as the Black Power, Chicano, and radical feminist movements.

There are many different components to Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Delgado and Stefani (1995) acknowledge several of them that encompass the movement. To start, they acknowledge that race is a social construct, and does not exist biologically. Additionally, they
acknowledge that racism is “normal, not aberrant,” (p. xvi) in American society, and while we may likely notice some racism, we may likely fail to acknowledge the more “subtle” inequities Black people face in our society. Finally, there has been a lack of voices in the shaping of our democracy. Because people of color and other marginalized groups have been historically shut out in our society, the country has been shaped without these voices being heard. Although American society has made its advancements in achieving equality in many aspects of life, critical race scholars continue to acknowledge the racism that is still evident in our society. From incarceration statistics to lack of safe and affordable housing, people of color as well as other marginalized groups suffer from higher rates of inequities compared to their white counterparts. The CRT lens aims to help explain why these disparities happen to begin with.

Although the Critical Race Theory lens has been well-established as a profound way of viewing these disparities in academia, to some, it has found new meaning in our contemporary time as a scapegoat and a way to galvanize political opposition. One of these people who has been vocal in his demonization of CRT is journalist Christopher Rufo, who has expressed his concern for the supposed “problematic” ideology that he claims encompasses the theory. Around 2020, Rufo, who was coming off of an unsuccessful run for city council in Seattle, received evidence that anti-bias seminars were being held in various companies throughout the Seattle region. Many of these seminars, increasingly created after the death of George Floyd in May of 2020, were used to educate workers on the dangers of implicit bias, among other ways in which racism can be shown in workplace settings. These seminars were often held over the video conferencing application Zoom, and discreetly, those
with connections to Rufo were able to send him more evidence on the contents of these events. Using this evidence, Rufo began to publicly criticize how harmful these seminars were, boldly arguing that, “the anti-racism seminars did not just represent a progressive view on race but that they were expressions of a distinct ideology—critical race theory—with radical roots” (Wallace-Wells, 2021, para. 5). Rufo not only publicly vocalized the “dangers” of Critical Race Theory, but he also influenced the public to be aware of these supposed dangers, as well.

Although Rufo’s claims can be argued not to be sound based on the work that Critical Race Theory actually does, his villainization of the theory attracted extensive media attention, and he is now on the board of trustees at a public college in Florida, New College. For starters, he is not only active on several social media platforms such as Twitter, but he also has his own website in which he writes handbooks (most notably is The Anti-CRT Parent Guidebook) for followers to be educated in order to combat CRT. In addition, he has also made several television appearances on shows such as Tucker Carlson Tonight from the FoxNews network discussing his protests. Even more notable is Rufo’s invitation to the White House in September of 2020 to help Congress pass an Executive Order that limited the ways in which agencies and places of employment can talk about race, including prohibiting seminars that support anti-racist trainings. This bill, passed during the Trump presidency, although it pertains strictly to these places, has been indirectly used as a basis of dictating K–12 schools on the content that they are able to discuss. Political figures, such as state senators, have translated this bill into the argument that schools should not be talking about race, often in the form of using literature. Whether or not the public supports Rufo’s claims, and despite
the ways in which his ideas can be challenged, he has a powerful platform, and it is this platform that he can reach, and convince, many people to believe in his ideas. This in turn results in conflicting ideas on Critical Race Theory, as Rufo’s lens does not provide justice for the work CRT is doing as a theoretical approach to our society.

Critical Race Theory has always had a link to education. The fight for equality, critical race scholars argue, has always coincided with the fight for equitable education. People of color have had to fight for the abilities to read, write, and to be able to access education in the first place. Dixson (2018) has argued that even today, people of color (especially those in low-income communities) still struggle to access high-quality school resources. Policies and practices implemented in the United States relating to education have been argued to set up people of color for “inequitable educational outcomes” (Dixson, 2018, p. 233). While acknowledging these inequities, the CRT lens helps scholars and theorists to explain the factors as to why this happens in the first place. What CRT also encourages is the implementation of adding new perspectives, or a more inclusive history, to the traditional historical narrative.

Over the past several years, Critical Race Theory has been targeted by many people, especially conservative thinkers, and the right-wing media. They believe Critical Race Theory is ruining the school system, even though scholars agree that there is little to no evidence that the theory itself is taught in K–12 education. Kaplan and Owings (2021) identify some beliefs those who are against the theory use in their arguments:

1. They believe that it is racist to study race in US systems and structures.
2. They believe that the theory is implying that the country is inherently evil and white people should feel guilty. They feel as though they are being blamed and are being called oppressors.

3. They believe that CRT aims to attempt to censor our “true” history, rather than understand that our history has disparities in the way it is represented in education.

Some people and groups, most notably Christopher Rufo especially, have made it their mission to “take down” the teaching of CRT in schools. Not only do these people encompass the beliefs listed above about the theory, but Rufo himself encourages people to actively protest this theory (he wants to “create a brushfire of angry parents,” as he puts it). This is extremely harmful, most notably for teachers, as they must walk on eggshells and fear repercussions for the incorporation of more reflective material. Due to his media presence as well as his written publications, local citizens and groups have been influenced by his ideas to attack these materials, which encompasses books under the multicultural literature realm. As of July 2021, almost 20 states have put into place legislation to prohibit the discussion of “divisive” talks with students, with many of these bills referencing CRT in them (Anti-CRT Handbook, n.d.).

In debunking these false claims made by Rufo among other groups, Ray & Gibbons (2021, as cited in Kaplan & Owings, 2021) summarizes the actual goal of Critical Race Theory:

CRT scholars and activists are not asserting that White people now alive are to blame for what happened in our past. They are saying that White people have a moral
responsibility to help remedy the ways racism still currently impacts all our lives.

They want us as a nation to pursue an equitable democratic republic for us all. (p. 4) Calling for a more accurate representation of our American history as well as fighting for equality does not make white people oppressors or aim to make them feel guilty. Critical race scholars, as well as marginalized groups, want white people to recognize how they have been mistreated in many realms of American life, and acknowledge that there are indeed disparities in this. The goal is to strive for equal treatment among all races; these books are not “taking away” from white people or “threatening” to eliminate all they have achieved.

**Good for All Children: Using Literary Analysis to Counter Censorship**

Individuals like Christopher Rufo are wanting to start an “angry brushfire,”; however by looking at three multicultural picture books that have been censored, I will prove that there is no need for a brushfire, or any sort of uproar about these books. Literary analysis will be my water to this brushfire, as I will take his motive to censor these important materials and instead advocate for their importance in the educational setting and beyond. Those who aim to censor books are influenced by the media, and through literary analysis, I will argue that their claims regarding these three books in particular are not harmful if we look closely at their literary features including language, structure, and themes. Since they did not read these books, many of the censors make baseless judgements towards materials such as these, and I will highlight the truth of what the content of these books are transmitting. Additionally, while it is well-established that these materials can have a profound impact on Black children, there
is a gap in research regarding the effects of these books on white children. Through this analysis, I will argue that there are ways in which all children can have an engaging connection with these stories. More particularly, however, non-Black children will still be able to connect to the characters, stories and messages woven within these stories, even if their race is not depicted. I will conduct a literary analysis of three multicultural children’s picture books: *Sulwe* (2019) by Lupita Nyong’o, *Hair Love* (2019) by Matthew A. Cherry, and *The Undefeated* (2019) by Kwame Alexander. These books fit into the multicultural genre not only because of their incorporation of Black characters, but also because of their subject-matter that relates to various aspects of Black communities. These books were chosen based on two factors: the first being their critical reception, with all three receiving at least one major, prestigious award in the picture book category. The second reason for my selection points to the fact that they have each been the subject to book censorship, with attempts to remove these materials either in the classroom, in a library setting, or both. Responsible literary analysis of these books debunks claims that they should be removed and censored from children, instead pointing to the thematic and aesthetic work that our texts are actually doing through their illustration and language. They create a sense of pride, since they provide positive representation through these stories. But even more so, this discussion will broaden out as to what these books can do for non-Black children, even though they may not explicitly see themselves in these books. While conducting each analysis, I pay particular attention to the language of each text, focusing on word choice and literary elements each author chooses to incorporate. I also construct observations of the illustrations from the story, and how they not only go hand in hand with the text, but how they also deepen our understanding of our
story as a whole. From there, I connect these observations to our real world, and argue further how these books can support children in supporting their identity development.

_Sulwe_ is a children’s picture book written by Academy Award-winning, Mexican-born Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong’o and illustrated by Vashti Harrison. The book follows a young girl named Sulwe, who is described as being “born the color of midnight” (Nyong’o, 2019). She recognizes even at a young age that her skin color is darker than her family and peers around her and often finds herself at the end of taunts and cruel nicknames based off of her skin color at school. Because she wants not to stand out as much, she tries everything in her power to lighten her skin, including “erasing” her skin, taking her mother’s light-colored foundation, and simply praying at night to look brighter. Even with reassurance from her mother that she too is beautiful, Sulwe goes to bed feeling defeated. At night, she receives a visit from a shooting star, who explains to Sulwe that, like we need day and night, we all are special no matter our physical differences. She chooses to embrace her darkness as something that makes her beautiful, much to the happiness of herself and her mother.

Although _Sulwe_ has been well-received, including being the recipient of the prestigious Coretta Scott King honoree medal, the book has been no stranger to the uptick in book censorship that has occurred throughout the United States. One instance of this occurred in Duval County, Florida, in which the school district removed _Sulwe_ as well as over one hundred seventy other children’s books, from their schools’ classrooms. The majority of these books feature characters of color. Supposedly, the books have been placed into storage (where they still remain today) and are under “review” to see whether or not they can be placed back into the classroom (Tolin, 2022). Considering the other books that make up the composition of
this censorship case, it is clear that this target towards censoring multicultural literature is in full effect. Censoring *Sulwe* simultaneously censors the important messages our story attempts to convey, and this censorship leaves dangerous repercussions.

In another case of attempted book censorship, which took place in 2022, one parent claims that books like *Sulwe* “will not help our children” and that “there’s no reason to be segregating the world anymore” (Marshall Library, para. 1). Furthermore, other parents that spoke out claimed that *Sulwe*, as well as other books included in the censorship, supposedly promote critical race theory. This theory believes that race and racism is embedded into the structure and foundation of the United States. Those who are “against” the theory feel as though white people are being labeled as oppressors and are being “blamed” for what has happened throughout this history (Delgado & Stefanic, 1995). Taking these claims into account as they pertain to *Sulwe*, it is important to recognize that Sulwe is feeling excluded in her own family and her own peers, all of whom are depicted in the illustrations as people of color. *Sulwe* takes place within the backdrop of Nyong’o’s experience growing up in both Mexico and Kenya, with much of the story taken from those around her and her experiences. There are no white people in the story and in Sulwe’s world to even speak of, and even more importantly, white people are not the perpetrators of these labels and isolation that Sulwe internalizes.

A major theme of *Sulwe* is that Nyong’o conveys that the path towards self-confidence and seeing the beauty we hold is easier said than done. Sulwe, even at her young age, is navigating a world in which she feels she does not fit, even amongst her family. She sees beauty in others around her, but not herself, and tries everything she can to try to blend in.
Similar to Sulwe, many children struggle with self-confidence and may believe that the differences that make them unique are not something to embrace. Through elaborate storytelling and compelling illustrations, Nyong’o and Harrison use a fantasy sequence in which Sulwe is given a visit by a shooting star. This shooting star tells her the story of two sisters named Day and Night, who are treated differently based on their complexion. Day, who is bright, was labeled by villagers as “lovely” and “nice,” while her sister Night, who was dark, was labeled as “ugly.” Upset with these negative connotations, Night left the earth, leaving just Day. Because there was no more darkness, Day became longer, and villagers became upset because the Day was becoming way too long. Day ends up finding her sister and explains to her that she is needed on the earth so the villagers can rest, and more importantly, Day explains to Dark that she is valued for what she brings to the Earth. In the end, Night is restored on earth, and Sulwe wakes up wanting to embrace her complexion and what makes her special. Throughout the text, and as previously stated, day and night, as well as brightness/light and dark play a prominent role in how our protagonist sees the world. Even more so, the use of these contrasting figures conveys to readers that they are valuable and serve their purpose. Children may struggle to understand a “definition” of self-confidence and what it means to have self-confidence, and therefore, providing this illustration and visual is an effective way of showing this theme.

A recurrence in our story is that Sulwe repeatedly struggles to find the beauty in her own skin. She reflects on the fact that none of her family members or school peers look like her:

She looked nothing like her family. Not even a little, not even at all. Mama was the color of dawn, Baba the color of dusk, and Mich, her sister, the color of high noon.
Hardly anyone at school looked like Sulwe either. People gave her sister, Mich, pet names like “Sunshine” and “Ray” and “Beauty.” People gave Sulwe names like “Blackie” and “Darky” and “Night.” Sulwe felt hurt every time. So she hid away while her sister made lots of friends. (Nyong’o 2019)

Sulwe doesn’t just feel different because of her dark complexion, but even her family and those around her indirectly make her feel different, too. Our illustrations depict her looking at her family members in sadness, as she admires their beauty but feels as though this admiration is not returned back to her. Further, Sulwe is depicted as someone who is isolated on the inside and out, as she does not see the beauty in herself and feels like she does not belong amongst others. While those around her seem to be making friends easily, including her sister Mich, Sulwe stands off to the side feeling defeated. She soon proclaims that “She wants to be the same color as her sister. She wants real friends too” (Nyong’o 2019). Although Sulwe is assured that those around her see her beauty and that she herself is a star (as her mother calls her), she still longs for acceptance throughout our story, from both others and herself. Even though this is eventually achieved at the end of the story, in the depiction of the struggle Sulwe goes through, Nyong’o is implying that while celebrating our differences is ideal, it does not come easily. Even though Sulwe explains that her mother tells her that she is beautiful often, internalizing this feeling is a valid struggle that many children go through. This idea of struggling with self-acceptance, and witnessing Sulwe’s journey towards finding the beauty in her own skin, places Sulwe as a potential tool for children to validating these feelings and potentially grow from them.
Instead of provoking a need to attempt to censor *Sulwe*, Nyong’o and Harrison use effective text and illustrations to convey what the author is saying about Blackness. Nyong’o explains in her author’s note that there are many parallels between her life and Sulwe’s life. She explains that "I got teased and taunted about my night-shaded skin. I prayed to God that I would wake up with paler skin. I tried all sorts of things to lighten my complexion" (Nyong’o, 2019, para. 1). It took her many years, not until adulthood, for her to realize that she was beautiful. She learned during this time that it is important to be able to look in the mirror and feel beautiful; however, she also learned it is just as important for her to recognize the beauty she has within. Nyong’o emphasizes that she wishes that more children will know from birth that they are beautiful, instead of having to learn self-acceptance over time. While this note may seem merely a biographical anecdote, it directs us to the notion of how *Sulwe*, and other books that incorporate themes of self-confidence and acceptance, are able to help children of color see their value and role in society as well. When children of color are given access to books that are culturally responsive, books that celebrate and uplift their cultures and experiences, they in turn are able to understand and connect more with their own group membership (Nasir, 2011) (Tatum, 2017) (Piper, 2019). Using these similar ideas, the character of Sulwe and the experience she goes through in learning self-acceptance and confidence can teach children of color that they too are able to embrace their identities and move towards the path of self-love. While this path may be difficult for some to embrace, it further emphasizes the need for multicultural children’s books, as well as raises the dangers of book censorship. With the target of book censorship often aimed at books featuring predominantly characters of color, this threatens the power books hold to shape readers, their
lives, and their values. *Sulwe* is a book that encourages the shaping of one’s identity and the discovery of one’s place in the world, and while the book emphasizes that these values are not gained overnight, it supports the notion that these values are important to obtain.

While adults who have spoken out against the book have argued that the book makes children “feel bad” and feel as though they are oppressors, the book actually does work for white children in the same way that it does for children of color. The themes and messages portrayed in *Sulwe* of self-love, confidence, and beauty are not limited to just Sulwe, and most children have struggled with embracing their differences before. Because of the themes and messages discussed in the book and how universal they are to many of our experiences, white children are very likely to interpret the story in their own lenses. In fact, whiteness too is captured in a positive light through the allegorical depiction of Day and Night, and Nyong’o emphasizes that we are *all* needed in our world. It is true that the connection non-Black children will make to the story will likely be different from Sulwe’s (because they are white and do not have to think about race as often), a connection will still likely be formed.

The way in which Blackness is represented in these types of books, such as in *Sulwe* with her journey to discover the beauty in her differences, is similar to that in the children’s picture book *Hair Love* (2019). In contrast to Sulwe, the protagonist in *Hair Love* already possesses self-love for her own beauty. Written by former NFL player turned writer and director Matthew A. Cherry and also illustrated by Vashti Harrison, *Hair Love* tells the story of a young girl named Zuri, who wants to have the perfect hairstyle for her mother who is coming home from the hospital. While she is struggling to find the style that works best for her, her dad volunteers to help, even though he, too, struggles. After watching step-by-step
videos of how to do her hair into “puff buns,” and through the father and daughter’s determination and bonding time, Zuri achieves the hairstyle she wants, which she believe is the “perfect hairstyle” for her (Cherry 2019). Through the text’s compelling illustrations and storytelling techniques, *Hair Love* can be seen as an empowering tool that conveys the message of embracing one’s beauty and the power that hair has for one’s identity. Further, these textual elements, specifically the illustrations, convey the importance of hair in the Black community and how this in turn is often a mode of self-expression for people of color.

While *Hair Love* has been widely celebrated for its content and messages, it has also been the target of book censorship in several school districts. *Hair Love* does substantial work in countering the negative stereotypes of the broader culture toward Black people’s hair textures, styles, and techniques. Further, as I will argue, censoring this book leads to not only enforcing these stereotypes, but also shames an important part of self-expression for many people.

Unlike Sulwe, who struggles with the way she looks, Zuri loves her hair in *Hair Love*, and all of the hairstyles that she is able to do with it. She explains how her hair “has a mind of its own,” and whether her hair is in braids, buns, or other styles, she says that she “loves that my hair lets me be me” (Cherry 2019). Through the repeated illustrations of different hairstyles that Zuri sports, *Hair Love* establishes that hair is an important part of who she is. Similar to a pair of new shoes or a favorite shirt, hair to Zuri equates to a feeling of self-confidence and pride. A striking image in the book is Zuri wearing her pink superhero cape, accompanied by the proclamation that when her hair “is in two puffs, I am above the clouds like a superhero” (Cherry 2019). The image of the pink cape is also seen at the end of the story, when Zuri is greeting her mother at the front door, running to show her mother the
hairstyle her father helped her with. This image of a cape, and through Zuri feeling like a superhero herself, carries a sense of power, strength, and invincibility for her just like a superhero may feel. And this is because of the way that she sees the beauty in her hair and how it makes her feel self-confident. Because of this, young readers of Hair Love will likely be encouraged to find ways in which they, too, can express themselves freely and proudly.

Zuri’s own passion for and love of her hair is supported throughout the book by her father. When Zuri wants to create the perfect hairstyle, she tries everything in her power to be able to do it independently through watching videos on the Internet. She claims that since her father does a lot for her, and since her mother is absent much of the day due to chemotherapy treatments, as we find out at the end of the book, she wants to let him rest. But when Zuri accidentally drops her tablet and wakes her father, he insists on helping her come up with the perfect hairstyle. Even though he does struggle to create the best hairstyle for her, her father ensures her that he will help her no matter how long the process may take. Between Zuri, her mother, and her father, it is evident that there is a culture and appreciation for hair and styling that surrounds their family. Zuri enthusiastically proclaims that “my hair is Mommy, Daddy, and me. It’s hair love!” (Cherry 2019). It can be said that hair for Zuri is a mode of self-expression, hair for her father is a way of bonding and supporting his daughter when his wife is away, and hair for her mother is being able to witness how happy Zuri is that she feels beautiful. While Zuri is the only person receiving a new hairstyle, everyone in her family is shown going through this process, and they play just as much of a role as Zuri does. Therefore, it can be concluded that hair is important to their family culture.
Cherry’s depiction of hair in Zuri’s family culture is informed by its central role in Black cultures more broadly. While it is important to discuss the importance of hair as it pertains to Zuri’s family culture, it is also important to discuss some background on hair in the Black community. Clemons et al. (2020) recognize that hairstyles that incorporate braids and other patterns have been linked to African cultural traditions, and these hairstyles were “considered sacred and used in healing rituals” (591). But in the context of slavery and colonialism, these styles became the targets of discrimination, dating back to enslaved people having their heads shaved, often used as a shaming and humiliation tactic. While movements and changes have aimed to change society’s negative opinion on hair (and with progress being achieved through such measurable outcomes as the recent passage of the CROWN Act), research has shown that internalized oppression has led to low self-esteem and poor self-image regarding appearance, and this especially has been a problem among people of color. Specifically concerning is the number of young Black adolescents, who already may struggle with growing up and navigating through our difficult world, who are increasingly targeted for their hair. Henning et al. (2022) conducted a survey with one hundred five African American identifying girls, who ranged from ages ten to fourteen. Eighty-one percent of those surveyed were either victims or witnesses of hair-related teasing (Henning, et al., 2022). This teasing can take on many forms, including using microaggressions, unwanted touching of one’s hair, or simply making unwarranted comments regarding one’s hair. The majority of this percentage of those surveyed point to media that surrounds them, which includes social media networks, magazines, film, and television, among other forms of media. As O’Brien-Richardson (2019, cited in Henning, et al. 2022) argues, these lead to devastating
consequences, with “these experiences impact[ing] their self-image, engagement in physical activity, and emotional well-being” (p. 80).

While these statistics are quite difficult to read, I argue that it is through the power of appropriate media representation in which these negative stereotypes can be not only debunked but brought to society’s attention that they are not simply true. This work can be done through *Hair Love*, and in a powerful way both children and adults can understand.

Black people suffer because of negative and untrue stereotypes that their hair is unclean, not well maintained, or unprofessional. *Hair Love* indirectly but clearly debunks these stereotypes. The process that Zuri and her father go through to achieve the perfect style, is indeed a very intricate process. Many products, such as shampoos, a variety of different combs, and other hair tools are seen being used by Zuri and her father, as well as resting on the counter. Also, Zuri uses videos on her tablet to support her and her father doing her hair. All of these factors combined contribute to the idea that hairstyles such as these are time-consuming, but because they are well done. To simply label this hair as dirty is not only degrading and inaccurate, but it is disrespecting the effort, process, and skill that comes with creating these styles.

*Hair Love* has been a target in various book censorship attempts across the country, often grouped in with other books featuring Black characters. One of these censorship instances took place in one Pennsylvania school district, and included dozens of books, one of them being *Sulwe* as well as *Hair Love*. In response to backlash received from parents, who claimed the book was “divisive,” one individual, who is not identified as either a parent or school board member, stood up against this censorship, explaining that, “just as silence
condones bullying, ignoring differences in our community makes people feel overlooked and pushed away” (Marshall Library, para. 1). Consequently, I add, censoring Hair Love in turn censors the importance of celebrating one’s self-confidence; for Zuri, this confidence is expressed through her hair. Considering the negative stereotypes that have surrounded Black hair, it is important for children, who are in the early stages of developing their identity, to understand that their differences are welcomed and accepted. Further, because research supports that children feel more connected to literature that speaks to them, censoring books that serve this function, thus eliminates this connection, something that young readers desperately need.

In contrast to this aim in censorship, Cherry uses Hair Love as a means of celebrating hair, and the positive feelings that are associated with being able to freely express oneself through the various ways in which one can style it. Further, these negative stereotypes are being countered in a multitude of different ways, whether it’s through Zuri feeling like she’s a superhero, through the process we are brought into when she gets her hair done, or simply the happiness she feels when she feels beautiful. Cherry, even without incorporating any of these issues of bullying or teasing such as that we see in Sulwe, manages to effectively establish the importance and beauty of hair in the Black community. Although many girls may struggle still with their self-esteem when it comes to these issues, beginning with positive media portrayals like Hair Love may likely be a step in the right direction that ensures that hair of any texture or style should be embraced.

While it has been made clear how Hair Love can have a positive effect on children of color, I also argue that it can have a positive effect on non-Black children, as well. It is well
established that a major aspect of our story is one’s self-expression, and one of Zuri’s outlets of self-expression is through her hair. Her hair makes her feel both beautiful and powerful, and this is definitely the case for other children out there. Similarly, children who read *Hair Love* may look at Zuri and the empowerment she feels, and like her, believe that they too feel like they can be superheroes or princesses. Even though non-Black children may not have the same texture of hair that Zuri does, that does not mean that they can’t also express themselves through their hair. But even more broadly put, non-Black children can be encouraged to find their own unique, special mode of self-expression, whether this is through another physical feature of theirs or through something they are passionate about. White characters are not depicted in our story, and contrary to censorship beliefs, there is no anti-white message in our story. This book is just a representation on Zuri’s self-expression, as well as a celebration of the culture of Black hair.

Stories such as *Sulwe* and *Hair Love* not only have a profound effect on Black children but have an effect on non-Black children. While the characters in our stories are predominantly Black characters, non-Black children can still build connections from the text and apply them to their world. Similarly, citizens of the United States all share a national history, and even if this history has not had a direct impact on every person, we all exist in a society that has the same historical narrative. In conversation with multicultural children’s literature, the importance of incorporating texts that reflect Black history is important for our society, allowing us to remember the trials and tribulations Black individuals have had to overcome. One picture book that reflect this history is *The Undefeated*, written by award-winning author Kwame Alexander and illustrated by award-winning painter Kadir Nelson.
Published in 2019, *The Undefeated* is a poem dedicated to Black history, and to the events and figures that have shaped their history in the United States. Through language that encompasses the trials and tribulations Black people have gone through in our history, and through compelling illustrations that capture these events and figures, Alexander conveys the importance of not only remembering Black history but celebrating and understanding Black history. Uniquely, this is a book of poetry, a distinctively different genre than *Sulwe* and *Hair Love*, which are fiction stories. Furthermore, Alexander wrote this poem in 2008, around the time of the presidential election of Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States. *The Undefeated*, therefore, was inspired by and incorporates figures and events related to Black history, both past and present. While *The Undefeated* has received critical acclaim since its publishing, it has also been the target of book censorship. This is particularly concerning, as censoring this material threatens the importance of Black history. By actually reviewing Alexander’s choices of language and structure, *The Undefeated* helps readers to reflect on and celebrate Black history, and to censor this book means to unjustly censor this important history, something that has already been threatened.

Alexander uses allusions, or references, repeatedly to highlight important Black figures and events. An example of this is the illustration of Martin Luther King, Jr., prominent Civil Rights activist, with Alexander writing, “The dreamers and doers who swim across *The Big Sea* of our imagination and show us the majestic shores of the promised land” (Alexander, 2019). While *The Big Sea* refers to the autobiography of poet Langston Hughes, the italicized *the majestic shores of the promised land* alludes to King Jr.’s Nobel Peace Prize speech from 1964. Other important figures depicted include musicians, artists, sportsmen and women, and
other prominent figures that, in one way or another, have made a significant contribution to our society. Going off of this, by choosing figures from these diverse, contribution-related backgrounds, Alexander is implying that Black history has its place in all areas of life. Black history is an integral part of our society, and Alexander implies this through his diverse choices of those depicted and referenced to.

This choice doesn’t only include those who have been known for their success, but also, he chooses to incorporate other figures that are not necessarily well-known throughout history. On one page, a father has his arm on his young son, with the son holding what appears to be a Bible, with our poem reading, “This is for the undeniable. The ones who scored with chains on one hand and faith in the other” (Alexander, 2019). Even though these individuals went through many hardships as Black men in our society, and have been repeatedly mistreated throughout our history, Black individuals have still found ways to emerge from these chains and still have faith that they can persevere in this society. Finally, at several moments in his poem, Alexander acknowledges those who were either victims or those who did not survive in our history. This is often accompanied with a blank page with no illustration, or perhaps with other illustrations such as birds or a memorial site with flowers and candles. The use of allusion, ones that do not just focus on famous figures but rather broader, Black experience, enhances the importance of capturing Black history from a multitude of lenses. Capturing history is not only about focusing on the famous figures that have lived in history but focusing on those who have lived in the experience of it, some of these experiences being painful. By focusing on those outside of the famous, and by even including a blank page in his poem to honor those whose names have been lost to history,
Alexander is allowing readers to view Black history for what it is truly intended to be seen as: a history of struggle and pain, but also a history of strength and perseverance.

Although Alexander’s usage of allusion in *The Undefeated* is the dominant literary device he uses in the poem, there are other devices and techniques he uses to achieve impact. One of these devices is the use of repetition, also called anaphora in poetry, on pages 18 through 22, where he writes, “This is for the unspeakable. This is for the unspeakable. This is for the unspeakable.” These three repetitions are accompanied by three different images: the first is a slave ship, with dozens of enslaved Africans from the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The second image is four picture frames with shattered glass, with pictures of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair, the four young girls who were killed when local Ku Klux Klan members intentionally set off a bomb at their church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. The third image is of a memorial site, adorned with flowers, candles, and protest signs, memorializing victims of racially motivated violence in our own time, such as Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and others. The repetition of these three events, which occurred in various points of our history, emphasizes that these unspeakable tragedies keep occurring in our society, signifying that racially-motivated events and tragedies are still a concerning issue in our time that is not fading away. The use of the word *unspeakable* in this repetitive way contributes to the duality of what unspeakable refers to. It functions to signify how these victims were never able to speak up for themselves in their cruel society, but just as importantly, it signifies just how cruel and despicable their treatment and pain was. While the particular emphasis on words in the poem and the illustrations that accompany these words
often go hand in hand, they also work to provide readers with opportunities to think critically about the text and how the poem functions to contribute to the complexity of Black history.

In most schools across the country, Black History Month has been celebrated in some way during the month of February. This is in thanks due to organizations such as the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (which is now known as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, or ASALH), organizations that strived to establish Black history into school curriculum. As King (2017) points out, Black history prior to this shift included depictions of Black people as “docile, uncivilized, and lazy,” specifically, in the social studies curriculum and in textbooks (King, 2017, p. 15). Through these organizations and this movement for Black culture to be more celebrated and properly acknowledged, the Civil Rights Movement was marked as a shift to incorporate true history into mainstream education. It was this call that encompassed the movement towards a multicultural approach to education. While, as previously mentioned, Black history has made its way into many schools thanks to this movement, some scholars question whether this history is as complex as it should be. King (2017) acknowledges this, arguing that, “The curriculum will need to balance narratives of victimhood, oppression, perseverance, and resistance, but unlike current renditions of the curriculum, it should contextualize issues that connect with the present” (p. 17).

While Black history, whether it is an event or person worth celebrating or worth mourning, is all important and needed to be discussed in its own right, there needs to be a balance of the history that is taught. The enslavement of Black men and women should not be the sole history that is taught, but rather, their contributions to science for example should be
taught as well. There needs to be a balance of what is implemented, and this decision must be thoughtful towards how this history truly unfolded. Putting this need for a more complex approach to Black history in school curriculum into the context of *The Undefeated* may do an injustice to the extended work public school officials must tackle to achieve fulfilling Black history instruction. The work begins with school curriculum, and even including *The Undefeated* and other books that include this history will not be enough to suffice for all of the curriculum changes that must occur. One book will not make up for this lack; however, in a smaller context, it is important to acknowledge how picture books can support this history to be more accurately incorporated into classrooms and libraries. For teachers and students to have access to picture books that amplify the stories that compose Black history can function as a tool for children to understand what makes up their own history. First and foremost, many children learn about history in a social studies unit, but books such as *The Undefeated* teach children that history can be taught through books that are not history books or textbooks. History can be brought to life through illustration and poetry, and teaching students the value of learning history by different means than just the traditional history lesson may create more excitement, especially for visual learners. King (2017) points to a variety of ways in which Black historical study can be conducted in the classroom, and one of these methods is through media such as literature. He uses the example of movies, but picture books can easily fit into this category.

Although *The Undefeated* has achieved critical acclaim and has been the recipient of several awards, including the prestigious Caldecott Medal for best picture book, it has also been the target of several censorship efforts across the country. Many of these censorship
efforts in which *The Undefeated* has been involved have aimed to censor a large group of books; however, there have been instances in which this book has been singled out in particular. In one case in a Louisiana library, a parent claimed that *The Undefeated* promoted Black Lives Matter “propaganda.” Indeed, the phrase “black lives matter” is used in the book, in which Alexander writes, “the righteous marching ones who sang *we shall not be moved* because black lives matter” (Alexander, 2019). Nelson’s illustration that accompanies this text depicts several characters linking arms, in reference to “I [or We] Shall Not Be Moved, which is a song recognized as a hymn and song especially popular during the Civil Rights Movement (Sabatella, 2022). Referring to this parent’s comment, the organization *Black Lives Matter* is not referenced in our book, but the phrase *black lives matter* is. This phrase stands for unity, justice, and solidarity. Black individuals have suffered from oppression in which oppressors have systemically dictated their lives, and this illustration of linking arms supports rallying around these victims.

In response to this attempted censorship, Alexander explained in an interview that, “I wanted [in writing *The Undefeated*] to talk about the tragedy that brought Africans to this country. And to talk about the triumph that allowed us to make it to not only survive but thrive” (Reese, 2022). Importantly, too, Alexander pleads with people, especially those trying to censor books, to “stop trying to handcuff history” (Reese, 2022). This metaphor of “handcuffing history” refers to the censor’s goals themselves: by censoring these books, they are stopping the importance of children learning Black history, which is our history. By censoring *The Undefeated*, Black history, history that is already limitedly discussed in educational settings, unjustly reaches its ceiling. This can have serious repercussions, most
importantly, how would history instruction and one’s sense of our history be accurate when you limit these representations and conversations?

Therefore, with this threat of censorship in mind, it is important to recognize the work *The Undefeated* does in the context of all learners, Black students and non-Black students. The book works in ways in which Black students are able to finally see various sides of their history, rather than the one-dimensional lens they may see in other contexts. While Black history is a history of oppression and struggle, it is also a history of strength, perseverance, and success. Black students deserve to see both sides, and to see both sides in a mindful way, such as with the balance of history *The Undefeated* has to offer. The same can be said for non-Black students, I argue. While Black history focuses on the events and figures of Black individuals, it still has its place within our broader history of all the events and figures that make up this history. Since this broader history and Black history intertwine, it is also considered to be *all* of our history. Because of this, *The Undefeated* works to shine light on a more complete picture of our story, one that all learners, regardless of race and identity, can benefit from learning about.

**Conclusion**

Through the consideration of multicultural children’s literature given the threat of recent book censorship, as well as reviewing these frequently targeted books more closely, it is clear that books within this realm do substantial work in supporting the values and goals of a multicultural approach to education. Instead of “harming” readers or indoctrinating them with particular political agendas, these books instead foster a sense of self-worth, self-confidence,
and pride for Black readers, values that have historically been missing in the education system and beyond. Using literary analysis, and carefully considering the language and illustration choices that authors and illustrators make, readers will find that these stories do not contain any questionable content or unsuitable topics for children. The claims against *Sulwe*, *Hair Love*, and *The Undefeated*, such as that they shame white children, for example, are inaccurate based on the textual evidence of the stories themselves. Instead, even though white children are not central characters in these texts, and they may not directly relate to everything that they read in the text, they can still find ways to connect to characters and experiences in some way. Children will be able to engage in literature through Rudine Sims Bishop’s *mirrors, windows, and sliding doors*, in that they will not only be able to see themselves in these stories, but they will be to better understand those different from them. Those who aim to censor books do not recognize that just because stories may feature non-white characters does not mean that books are perpetrating ideas or implications that go against white people. These books instead uplift and acknowledge the Black experience, Black history, and the importance of Black identity, something, as previously stated, is needed now more than ever. As indicated repeatedly throughout this research, multicultural children’s literature is not the sole way in which a multicultural form of education can be achieved. An entire shift in curriculum, approaches, and ideas about the importance of multicultural representation, is needed. Once this is achieved, we are able to set children up for success.
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