

# Supporting the Literacy Needs of African American Transitional Readers

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## **Abstract**

*Research suggests that reading motivation and achievement are increased when children are exposed to literature that features characters that look like them and whose life stories mirror their own experiences and culture. For African American children who are transitional readers, finding this type of literature can be challenging. In this article we take a closer look at this issue. We begin by discussing the characteristics of books that support transitional readers. We follow this with a summary of the research on reading motivation and achievement, including the potential role of African American authors in supporting the literacy development of Black students. We end with specific strategies teacher-librarians can use to support African American transitional readers.*

## **Introduction**

Among the different groups of readers that elementary teacher-librarians serve, one of the most important to support are transitional readers. These are the students who are “making the transition from early readers to independent, self-regulating readers” (Szymusiak et al., 2008, p. 4). They are typically in grades two through five, and because they have the decoding skills and strategies they need to be successful readers, we tend to underestimate the level of support they need for continued growth as readers (Szymusiak et al., 2008). Research shows, however, that as transitional readers make this daunting move from picture books and early readers to more difficult texts, many of them often begin to read less frequently and to develop decreasing attitudes toward reading as a pastime and as a school-related activity (Lempke, 2008; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995; Scholastic 2008). This is particularly true for African American children whose reading scores are consistently lower than those of white children. In 2007, on the National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP) reading skills test, white children scored an average of 231 points, while African American children scored only 203 points. Additionally, 54 percent of African American fourth grade students scored below basic in reading as compared to 22 percent of white students (NAEP, 2007).

Research suggests that reading motivation and achievement are increased when children are exposed to literature that offers them “personal stories, a view of their cultural surroundings, and insight on themselves” (Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001, p. 810). For African American children who are attempting to make the transition to independent, self-regulating texts, finding this type of literature can be challenging. Gangi (2008) found that “there is an ‘unbearable whiteness’ in literacy instruction in the United States” (p. 12). That is, in general, teachers tend to use resources in their literacy instruction that feature white children, rather than children of color. Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler (2009) noted that only 16.9% of the transitional books (levels J-M) included in the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book List database

([www.FountasandPinnellLeveledBooks.com](http://www.FountasandPinnellLeveledBooks.com)), which is used by many schools across the country as the basis for literacy instruction, included African American children. Thus, while white children can easily find books that feature characters that look like them, assuring that as they transition from easy readers to chapter books they see themselves over and over in the books they read, the same is not true for African American children.

In this article we take a closer look at this issue. We begin by discussing the characteristics of books that support transitional readers. We follow this with a summary of the research on reading motivation and achievement, including the potential role of African American authors in supporting the literacy development of Black students. We end with a discussion of strategies teacher-librarians can employ to support African American transitional readers, including an annotated bibliography of contemporary transitional novels that feature African American children.

### **Characteristics of Books That Support Transitional Readers**

Transitional readers need books that support their development as readers in the same way as the repetitive language and structure of emergent and early readers supported them when they were first learning to read (Taberski, 2000). The level of text support varies from book to book, but often includes:

- Short chapters that can be read in one sitting;
- Short paragraphs with sentences that are usually short and lines that break at the end of a sentence;
- More challenging and unusual vocabulary;
- Illustrations that enhance the text and provide a sense of familiarity to the reader;
- A table of contents that lists the individual chapter titles (Szymusiak et al., 2008; Taberski, 2000)

Many transitional books are series books whose characters, style, and likely story progression is familiar. Well known examples include the Junie B. Jones series by Barbara Park, the Bailey School Kids by Debbie Dadey, and the Cam Jansen series by David A. Adler.

### **Factors That Affect Reading Motivation and Achievement**

Motivation is a key determinant of reading success. Research suggests that children tend to prefer and are more likely to engage with literature if it reflects their personal experiences (Cianciolo 1989; DeLeón 2002; Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; McCollin & O’Shea 2005). According to Heflin & Barksdale, if children of color rarely see books that reflect their own real-life experiences they may become frustrated and elect to disengage from reading altogether. They may even “begin to wonder whether they, their families, and their communities fit into the world of reading” (Heflin & Barksdale, 2001, p. 811). Conversely, if they are continuously exposed to engaging literature with characters that they can recognize and relate to, they are more likely to find reading appealing (Bell & Clark, 1998; Ferdman, 1990; Gangi, 2008; Heflin & Barksdale, 2001).

Increased engagement with texts and amplified motivation to read are not the only benefits of exposing children of color to multicultural literature. Research shows that interactions with culturally relevant texts are linked to increased reading comprehension, recall and even phonological awareness (Bell & Clark, 1998; Conrad et al, 2004; McCollin & Shea, 2005).

Bell & Clarke (1998) examined the effects of racial imagery and cultural themes in reading content on comprehension and recall with more than 100 African American children in grades one through four. After listening to a story and viewing the accompanying illustrated story manuscript, the students were asked a series of questions designed to assess their recall and comprehension. The researchers found that the African American students' reading comprehension and recall were more efficient and accurate when the text and illustrations of the reading materials reflected themes consistent with their own sociocultural experiences than when they depicted White imagery and culturally distant themes. The researchers concluded that a key factor in bridging the reading gap between children of color and White children is to consider cultural factors in the production and selection of reading materials.

Conrad et al. (2004) tested the efficacy of combining culturally responsive teaching, including the use of culturally relevant text, with Text Talk, a technique used with young children during read-alouds to foster oral language and comprehension. The researchers found that combining the two strategies improved the comprehension and oral language skills of all of the second grade students who participated in their study, thus providing "a gateway to successful reading for students who were finding learning to read challenging" (Conrad et al. 2004, p. 189). They concluded that when adults take into consideration children's knowledge, interests, conceptions, and culture during storybook read-alouds, they are able to more effectively promote learning.

In their work with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, McCollin & O'Shea (2005) found that using culturally and linguistically relevant reading material not only fostered reading comprehension, but also helped address phonological awareness gaps and contributed to improved fluency. They argue that using materials that hold meaning to the students is key to supporting their reading acquisition skills and strengthening their reading motivation.

Thus, it appears that cultural knowledge is a significant tool that mediates the comprehension process for African American students. By combining the use of culturally relevant texts with instructional strategies that focus on building on prior knowledge, educators are more likely to attain their goal of promoting high achievement for all students.

### **Importance of Authors/Illustrators to Literacy Development**

Another key function of literacy instruction is providing mentors for children through author and illustrator studies (McNair, 2008c). As McNair (2008c) argues, if we want African American children, especially males, to aspire to careers beyond professional sports or music, then we need to provide them with role models, a function that writers from their own backgrounds can play. But many of the authors who have historically written transitional novels are white.

Data from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison shows that 7.2% of all children's books published in 2008 were created by authors or illustrators of color, but our examination of the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book List database ([www.FountasPinnellLeveledBooks.com](http://www.FountasPinnellLeveledBooks.com)) revealed that only 2.2% of the books listed for transitional readers were created by authors or illustrators of color (Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler, 2009). Thus, it seems that at a time in their lives when it is most critical for them to engage with texts, African American children are not being presented with enough books that are written by people who can provide culturally authentic literature.

## Recommended Strategies

One of the ways teacher-librarians can support African American transitional readers in their quest to become motivated, engaged, successful, independent readers is to provide professional development for teachers and administrators about the role multicultural literature plays in reading motivation and achievement for African American children. Many teachers may be unaware of the negative consequences using literature that features mainly animals and white children potentially has on the literacy development of African American children. Include in this conversation, a discussion of the importance of dispelling the belief among some Black children that doing well in school is an exclusively white domain (Tatum, 1997). It is not too early to provide a counterstory to this misconception, and one way to do that is to provide books created by African American authors and illustrators.

A related, and empowering, strategy is for teacher-librarians to work with students to write letters to the major publishing houses to request that they produce more transitional books that feature children of color. They could also write to their favorite African American authors, asking them to consider publishing in this format. As Tatum (1997) points out, it is important for children to not only recognize inequities, but to know that something can be done about them. She reminds us that with adult guidance children are capable of group activism.

Another strategy to support these readers is to partner with parents. As Szymusiak et al (2008) argue, “the bridge between home and school is crucial for transitional readers” (p. 198), yet many parents do not know how to support their children at this stage of their reading development. Teacher-librarians can help fill this gap in their knowledge in the following ways:

- Provide parents with information on how to help their children choose appropriate books (see Figure 1). This information could be available on the library’s website, as a bookmark, as a flyer, and/or as a regular feature in the library newsletter.
- Develop recommendation lists that include not only book titles but also reasons for each recommendation (Szymusiak et al, 2008). Create these lists for the monthly book order forms that teachers distribute and for the bookfair. Consider developing a “Need a Gift?—Here are Some Great Books!” list for parents. Make these lists available in as many formats as possible.
- Host “Grand Discussions” with transitional readers and their families (Szymusiak et al, 2008). Choose a book, invite families to read the book together and then to gather in the library to discuss the book with other families. Provide copies of the books so that all families can participate, not only those that have the finances to purchase books. As Szymusiak et al (2008) note parents of transitional readers often stop reading with their children. Grand Discussions give families an opportunity to read together, to talk about their responses to the book with each other, and to connect with other readers.

## HELPING YOUR CHILD CHOOSE APPROPRIATE BOOKS

**Reading at home should be a positive experience for both you and your child. Providing time to read and having books available are keys to your child's reading success. Your child can learn to read a great deal about reading from hearing you read aloud as well as from reading to you. You can support your children by providing opportunities to read alone and with others.**

**To help your child choose a book that is just right, encourage him or her to:**

- *read the back of the book and ask, "Does it sound interesting?"*
- *look at the table of contents and ask, "Can I predict what may happen in this book?"*
- *talk to someone who has read the book and ask, "Would you recommend this book?"*
- *flip through the book and look at the print, pictures, and organization and ask, "Does it look like it will keep my interest?"*
- *read the blurb about the author and ask, "Does this tell me anything about the book?"*
- *read the first page and ask, "Is it written in a way that is interesting to me?" and "Are there too many words that I don't understand?"*

**Many readers choose books because**

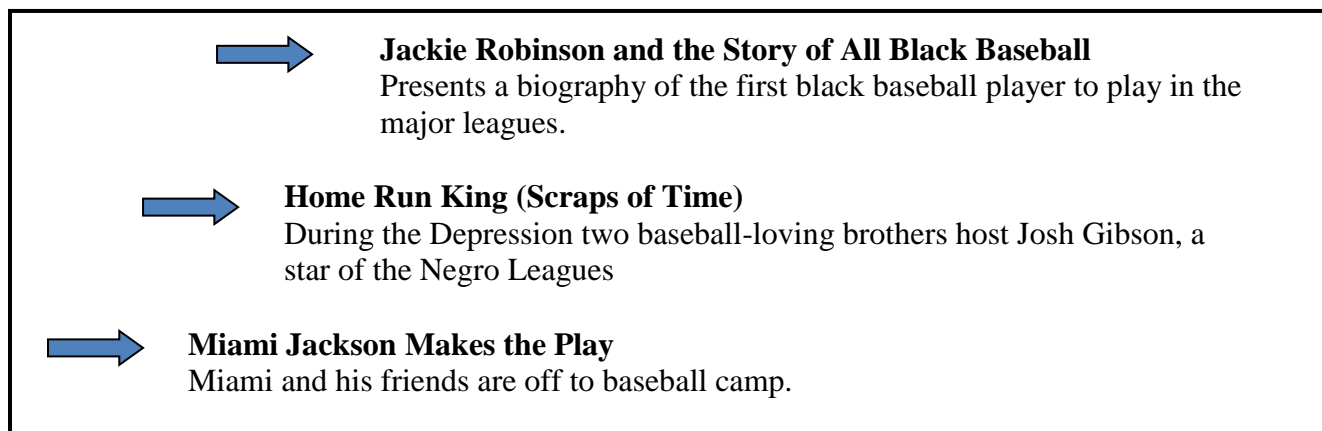
- someone has recommended it;
- they have enjoyed books by this author;
- it is about a topic of interest.

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Stenhouse Publishers. p. 224.

**Figure1: Information for Parents on Helping Their Children Choose Appropriate Books**

Another way teacher-librarians can support African American transitional readers is to employ appropriate teaching techniques. For example, develop mini-lessons that focus on comprehension, understanding new vocabulary words, making predictions, and so forth—the kinds of support that transitional readers need. In their book *Moving Beyond Leveled Books* Szymusiak et al (2008) offer specific strategies. Although designed for the classroom teacher, many of them are appropriate for use by the teacher-librarian. For example, one mini-lesson might focus on making predictions using series books. The teacher-librarian might begin the lesson by reading aloud a series book such as *How to Lose Your Class Pet* by Valerie Wilson Wesley. After the reading, the teacher-librarian would show the other books in the series and explain to the students that after reading one or two books in a series we are better able to predict what might happen in the next book because we know the characters and the author’s style of writing.

Developing reading ladders is another strategy teacher-librarians can use. Lesesne (2010) describes reading ladders as a “series or set of books that are related in some way (e.g. thematically) and that demonstrate a slow, gradual development from simple to more complex” (p. 48). The goal of using reading ladders is to provide the scaffolding that students need to not only satisfy their reading experiences, but to also develop as independent readers. See Figure 2 for an example of a reading ladder focused on baseball that is designed to move transitional readers to more difficult texts and to introduce new genres, in this case historical fiction and nonfiction.



**Figure 2. Baseball Reading Ladder**

Teacher-librarians can also engage students in self-reflection. Ask them to write about their reading—the *process* not just the content. For example, ask them to respond to a prompt such as “What do you do when you come to a word you don’t know?” Also have them keep reading logs in which they record the types of books they are reading (i.e. realistic fiction, fantasy, mystery, information, etc.). Use the reading logs to get them to reflect on questions such as:

- What type of books are you reading?
- Why are you interested in those books?
- How do you decide which books to read?

- Have you chosen anything that was too hard or too easy? (Szymusiak et. al 2008, p. 190)

As Szymusiak and her colleagues (2008) point out, “these questions encourage children to think about different aspects of their growth as readers, rather than just doing daily, piecemeal log entries of what I’ve read” (p. 191).

Finally, provide students with transition books that feature characters that look like them and whose life stories mirror their own experiences and culture. Lead students in discussing the books, making sure to honor their voices (Tatum 2009). As Sharon Flake (2008) reminds us:

Black boys will read. But to get them off to a flying start, we’ve got to give them books that remind them of home—who they are. When this happens, they fly through books—even the most challenged readers. They hunger for the work like a homeless man finally getting a meal that’s weeks overdue. (Flake 2007, p. 14)

To assist in the development of a collection that will engage African American transitional readers, we offer the following list of novels about contemporary African American children, some of whom are mixed race. All are written by African American authors, published in the twenty-first century, and include the text supports that transitional readers need. The books have Lexile ratings between 300 and 700 and are appropriate for readers in grades two through five. All of the books were recommended in either NoveList Plus (<http://www.elsevier.com/locate/Novelists>) and/or reviewed in authoritative journals such as *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Kirkus*, or *Hornbook Guide*.

### **Recommended Transitional Novels By and About African American Children**

**Barnes, Derrick D. *Ruby and the Booker Boys* series. New York: Scholastic.**

- *Brand New School, Brave New Ruby* (2008). 0545017602.
- *Trivia Queen, Third Grade Supreme* (2008). 0545017610.
- *Slumber Party Payback* (2008). 0545017629.
- *Ruby Flips for Attention* (2009). 0545017637.

**Summary:** When Ruby Booker starts third grade at a brand new school, she decides that she won’t be living in the shadow of her popular older brothers. She has big plans, and she aims to make a name for herself in the third grade!

**DeGross, Monalisa. *Donavan’s Double Trouble*. New York, Harper Collins, 2007. 006077293X.**

**Summary:** Donovan is a fourth grader who is sensitive about the difficulty he has understanding math. When his favorite uncle returns home from National Guard duty after losing both of his legs, Donovan becomes even more embarrassed and confused as he struggles to accept his uncle’s disability.

**Draper, Sharon M. *Sassy* series. New York: Scholastic.**

- *Little Sister is Not My Name* (2009). 0545071550.
- *The Birthday Storm* (2009). 0545071526.

- *The Silver Secret* (2010). 0545071534.

**Summary:** Nine-year-old Sassy hates being the youngest and smallest member of her family, a position that has earned her the nickname Little Sister. In this series of books Sassy comes to realize how special she really is, and she recognizes the importance of family.

**English, Karen. *Nikki and Deja* series. New York: Clarion.**

- *Nikki and Deja* (2007). 0547133626.
- *Birthday Blues* (2009). 0547248938.
- *The Newsy News Newsletter* (2009). 0547222475.

**Summary:** This series follows best friends Nikki and Deja through third and fourth grade as they learn important lessons about friendship, fitting in, and responsibility.

**Flake, Sharon G. *The Broken Bike Boy and the Queen of 33<sup>rd</sup> Street*. New York: Hyperion, 2008. 1423100352.**

**Summary:** Ten-year-old Queen is spoiled and arrogant, and all of her classmates dislike her. When a new boy in school claims that he is actually an African prince, Queen becomes determined to prove that he is lying. Along the way, she learns that friends can sometimes be found in the most unexpected places.

**Flood, Pansie Hart. *Tiger Turcotte* series. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books.**

- *It's Test Day, Tiger Turcotte* (2004). 1575056704.
- *Tiger Turcotte Takes on the Know-it-All* (2005). 1575059002.

**Summary:** Tiger Turcotte is African American, Hispanic, and Native American. In this series he struggles to overcome issues like deciding how to fill in his race on the big second-grade test and confronting his arch-enemy in detention.

**Grimes, Nikki. *Dyamonde Daniel* series. New York: Putnam.**

- *Make Way for Dyamonde Daniel* (2009). 0399251758.
- *Rich* (2009). 0399251766.

**Summary:** Forced to move to a new neighborhood and a new school after her parents' divorce, Dyamonde is lonely in her third-grade class until she finds a best friend, another new kid named Free. In *Rich*, Free and Dyamonde learn a lesson from another classmate about what it really means to be rich or poor.

**Johnson, Angela. *Maniac Monkey's on Magnolia Street*. Knopf, 1999. 9780679890539.**

**Summary:** Ten-year-old Charlie moves to a new neighborhood where she meets Billy. The two friends have more than their fair share of adventures, including chasing maniac monkeys.

**Johnson, Angela. *When Mules Flew on Magnolia Street*. Knopf, 2000. 9780679890775.**

**Summary:** It's summer and Charlie is off on a whole new set of adventures, including going fishing with her friends and investigating the disappearance of her neighbors.



**McKissack, Patricia and McKissack, Frederick. *Miami Jackson* series. New York: Golden Books.**

- *Miami Gets it Straight* (1999). 0307265013.
- *Miami Makes the Play* (2001). 0307265056.
- *Miami Sees it Through* (2002). 0307265137.

**Summary:** This series follows Miami Jackson from the end of third grade until the beginning of fourth grade as he says goodbye to one teacher and learns to accept another, deals with his nemesis, Destinee Tate, and participates in a summer baseball camp.

**Richardson, Charisse K. *The Real Slam Dunk*. Atlanta, GA: EnRich Communications, 2001. 0142402125.**

**Summary:** Ten-year-old Marcus rethinks his dream of becoming a professional basketball player after he has the chance to meet a real NBA basketball star.

**Richardson, Charisse K. *The Real Lucky Charm*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers 2005. 0142404314.**

**Summary:** Marcus's twin sister Mia believes that a lucky gold charm, rather than hard work and practice, is the source of her success on the school's co-ed basketball team.

**Wayans, Kim. *Amy Hodgepodge Series*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap.**

- *All Mixed Up* (2008). 0448448548.
- *Happy Birthday to Me* (2008). 0448448556.
- *Lost and Found* (2008). 0448448971
- *Playing Games* (2008). 044844898X.
- *The Secret's Out* (2009). 0448450798.
- *Digging Up Trouble* (2009). 0448450801.

**Summary:** Amy Hodges, a girl of mixed Caucasian, African American, and Asian heritage, has a new nickname: Amy Hodgepodge. This series follows Amy as she starts fourth grade at a new school after being homeschooled all of her life.

**Wesley, Valerie Wilson. *Willimena Rules* series. New York: Hyperion Books.**

- *How to Lose Your Class Pet* (2003). 0786813229.
- *How to Fish for Trouble* (2004). 0756955491.
- *How to Lose Your Cookie Money* (2005). 0786851465.
- *How to (Almost) Ruin Your Class Play* (2005). 0786852593.
- *23 Ways to Mess Up Valentine's Day* (2005). 078685524X.
- *How to Face Up to the Class Bully* (2007). 0786855258.
- *How to Have the Best Kwanzaa Ever* (2007). 1423100379.

**Summary:** Third grader Willimena offers step-by-step instructions for creating trouble and finding ways out of it.

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O’Conner, Jim. *Jackie Robinson and the Story of All Black Baseball*. New York: Random House.

Park, Barbara. *Junie B. Jones series*. New York: Random House.

program for African American readers in grades 3-5. Findings also report on ways the community literacy site was similar to historic African. Ball (1995) argues that community-centric approaches to supporting the language and literacy needs of young African American learners should be considered a form of educational reform given the positive outcomes that can result for children in these spaces.