A Missing Link in Closing Reading Achievement Gaps: Transitional Chapter Book Series with Primary Characters of Color

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Session Agenda

1. Review the research base on the role short chapter book series play in young children's reading development

2. Present the results of research study on diversity in transitional chapter book series

3. Review recommended series with primary characters of color

4. Discuss implications and actions
transitional chapter book series

What do we know?

Brainstorm titles and authors
Who are transitional readers?

- Have decoding skills
- Can read with fluency
- Are beginning to handle longer text
- Are at a crucial time in their reading development
What's so important about short chapter book series?

Transitional chapter books can play a critical “make-or-break” role in reading development of primary grades students

(Graves and Liang, 2004).
Short chapter book series...

Spark students’ interest and motivation for reading
Short chapter book series...

Support vocabulary development
directly predicted by children’s exposure to print

(Stanovich, Anglin, 2003 and others)
Short chapter book series...

Build **fluency** and developing **stamina** for reading longer and more challenging texts
Short chapter book series...

Provide plot and context familiarity that lends itself to focusing comprehension on more subtle details, character motivations, and figurative meanings (Roser, Martinez, Fuhrken, & McDonnold, 2007; Truby, 2003).
Short chapter book series...

Can provide an important source of reading material for struggling readers and English Language Learners (Ivey, 1999; Worthy, 1996; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez Pons, 1992)

Practice Makes Perfect
But are they high quality?

“Light” reading is OK.

Provides motivation for more reading
• Students who read books in series develop reading fluency and the linguistic competence necessary to read higher quality material (Feitelson and Goldstein, 1986).

Becomes a stepping stone to further reading
• Increased reading proficiency and fluency makes it possible for students to read more complex material. Students must take the first step of developing reading fluency before they can take the second step of becoming avid readers.
Importance of culturally relevant literature

Books as a “mirror” and “window”

Inclusion in the conversations of schooling; Reading is about and for me (Sims Bishop, Nieto, Cummins, Shields)
Importance of culturally relevant literature

- Getting beyond curricular segregation (e.g., M. Martin “everyday”)
Importance of culturally relevant literature

Seeing authors and illustrators like me; imagining myself as an author or illustrator
Transitional chapter books defined
(Szymusiak, Sibberson, & Koch, 2008; Hughes-Hassell, Koehler, & Barkley, 2010)

Series that…
* have familiar characters, settings, and plots that support comprehension
* have short chapters that can be read in a single sitting
* contain illustrations that support text
* have certain features that assist readers, such as initial chapter(s) that provide explicit introductions to character and setting
Inclusion Criteria

1. Contemporary Realistic Fiction
2. Transitional chapter book (short, illustrated text)
3. At least 3 books in the series
4. Consistent primary character
5. Rdg level 2nd-4th; F&P J-P
6. Published in past 10 years
Representations of diversity in short chapter book series

Gender
Race and Ethnicity
Family structure
Perceived SES
Gender of Primary Character

- Boys: 41%
- Girls: 54%
- Boys and Girls: 5%
Race and ethnicity
Race of Primary Character

- African American: 17%
- Asian American: 5%
- Latino: 3%
- White: 61%
- Biracial/multiracial: 7%
- Difficult to determine: 7%
Family Structure

- Two parent: 72%
- Single parent: 15%
- Other relative: 5%
- Extended family: 5%
- Family not mentioned: 3%
SES

Definitions from classmatters.org

**Low-income**: Family shows signs of struggling to cover basic needs

**Lower Middle**: While these families are able to pay for necessities, they have little flexibility (ex: shift work) in the workplace and few assets.

**Professional Middle**: Includes professions requiring college or professional school. These families have more control over work hours and are relatively financially secure.

**Upper Class**: Family has enough income and assets that family members do not need to work to pay for basic necessities.
Socioeconomic Status

- Low income: 33%
- Lower middle/working: 17%
- Professional middle: 50%
- Upper: 0%
- Difficult to determine: 0%
Short Chapter Book Series – African American Girls

- **RICH** by Nikki Grimes
  - A Sydmonde Daniel Book

- **Keena Ford and the Second-Grade Mix-Up** by Melissa Thomson
  - Illustrated by Frank Morrison
Short Chapter Book Series – African American Girls
Short Chapter Book Series – African American Girls

- *Sassy*
  - Author: Sharon M. Draper
  - Description: Little Sister is NOT my Name!

- *Sugar Plum Ballerinas*
  - Author: Whoopi Goldberg
  - Description: Plum Fantastic

- *Willsmena Rules!*
  - Author: W. P. Wilson-Warner
  - Description: How to (Almost) Ruin Your School Play
Short Chapter Book Series – African American Boys

- Miami Jackson Makes the Play
- Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs
Short Chapter Book Series – Latino characters
Short Chapter Book Series – Multiracial characters
Equity of Access

- How many books are in these series…
  - Boxcar Children?
  - Amelia Bedelia?
  - Magic School Bus?
  - My Weird School?
  - Junie B. Jones?
  - Willemena Rules?
  - Miami Jackson?
  - Claudia Cristina Cortez?
  - Alvin Ho?
  - Keena Ford?

- What impact might this have?
Overall Trends

- Limited diversity
- Striking absence of Latino, Asian American, Native American characters
- Few books in series with characters of color
- Many titles go out of print quickly
Ideas for Action (generated by the group)

- Share these titles with every elementary teacher you know.
- Provide the recommendation list to parents.
- Insist that your district’s preferred distributor carry these titles.
- Raise heck at your local book stores.
- Produce research summary for publishing industry