

# MY HAIR IS MAGIC: BUILDING IDENTITIES WITH YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH REPRESENTATIONS OF HAIR IN PICTUREBOOKS



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*“There’s really no such thing as hair not acting right—your hair just wants to be a little more fun today. And that’s okay. You don’t have to change a thing. Just be yourself.”*

From *Stella’s Stellar Hair* (Moises, 2021, p. 21)

PICTUREBOOKS HAVE BEEN used by teachers in early childhood classrooms for a variety of purposes, including developing critical thinking skills (Edwards, 2005; Roche, 2014); promoting anti-bias sentiments (Nguyen, 2022); and, building intercultural experiences (Tomé–Fernández et al., 2019). This article explores hair-focused picturebooks as a means for pushing back against hegemonic narratives about the hair of marginalized children. Children’s literature has the potential to function as a tool for building and embracing positive identities in young learners (Fránquiz et al., 2011; Piper, 2019). Three research questions were investigated through a content analysis of nine picturebooks focused on Black and African American hair. The guiding research questions were: (1) How accurate and authentic were the texts regarding hair representation, vocabulary, and care? and, (2) How did the storylines and images support positive identities for young children? For the purposes of this article, African American and Black are not used interchangeably. African American refers to those who are of African descent residing in America. Black refers to dark-skinned people of African descent regardless of location. These terms reflect historical references as well as words used within the picturebooks themselves.

As perspectives about what it means to be human are embraced, engagement in conversations and activities surrounding culturally responsive texts becomes critical. Brooks and McNair (2015) tell us that African American picturebooks play a role in shaping student “values, beliefs, and worldviews” (p. 299). Well-informed book choice selections are needed to move beyond routine read-aloud, focusing on books with animals or mainstream White characters (Teale et al., 2021), opening new types of student-generated narratives about themselves and their identities. The research presented here attends to these issues by examining recently published picturebooks on hair to facilitate family and teachers’ use of these texts.

This research is critical because of the marginalization particular students face as part of their everyday experiences. The implications provide insights for educators interested in building positive identities for Black and African American students through the use of these picturebooks in classrooms. The analyses show affirmations associated with Black hair have the potential to support positive identity development. The careful selection and use of picturebooks can reframe classroom literacy engagements (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2023). Overall, this work extends the conversation about cultural representations in assertions of identity and meets the call for additional studies of Black girls’ hair representation in picturebooks (Barton et al., 2022). The article concludes with recommendations for classroom instructional practices that include critical interactive and multimodal responses to picturebooks.

## Historical Context of African American and Black Hair

Understanding the history of hairstyling and the expression of culture through hairstyles allows for a better understanding of various backgrounds, while also opening up the possibilities of decolonization to build towards a collective future. Many aspects of a person's values, ethics, and priorities to their culture, such as religious affiliation, can be understood by looking at their hair styling (Dabiri, 2020). In one culture, a mark of tradition may be braiding, while in other cultures, special curling and shaping techniques and accessories or headpieces hold significance to the individuals' identities. An ongoing issue for children of color is the racialization of their hair in schools, which plays out in classrooms (Essien & Wood, 2021). The language used when describing or discussing Black hair is partly why non-straightened hair types have become politicized.

The association of words like unruly, defiant, and unmanageable in relation to hair can lead to the individual being associated with negative connotations rather than the hairstyle or type due to feature-trait association (Blair et al., 2002).

Finding inclusive ways to discuss hair-focused picturebooks can provide spaces for affirming ethnic identities. As young children traverse through schooling, it is essential that they do not come away with long-term adverse effects on how they view their worth and belonging as adults based on preconceived judgments of Black hairstyles.

## Building Identities Using Critical Perspectives

Identities are complicated because they are socially constructed, fluid, and heavily influenced by context, among other factors. Specific identities can be assigned to a person, ascribed identities, even though that person does not take up the identity (Sutherland, 2005). Some identities may be enacted through behaviors, words, and gestures. Yet other identities are co-constructed through social interactions. According to Gee (2005), the key to identity is recognition, which includes "language, action, interaction, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places" (p. 27).

From a critical perspective, identities are produced in political and ideological environments where some people

are positioned as privileged and others as racially or culturally marked (Kubota, 2004). Zirkel and Johnson (2016) assert that racial identity is key to the emotional well-being of Black youth. To construct or co-construct identities of strength and perseverance, Black children need to see their assets, community, and families in a positive light. Crafting a strong, healthy identity that counters stereotypes and negativity associated with Black racial identities requires understanding African and African American cultural roots. Equity is intertwined with identity development.

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For students to take up affirming identities, they must learn from teachers using culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, including picturebooks with authentic and accurate cultural representations (Barton et al., 2022; Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014). Muhammad and Mosley (2021) tell us, "Youth who do not know who they are (including the truth of their histories) risk passively believing anything about their identities; they need to have a strong sense of self to navigate their society" (p. 193). In other words, students need to know and understand themselves independently of social stereotypes.

Early childhood is the time of formative identity development. Building an environment that fosters self-love for Black children and their physical attributes is required for students to develop an appreciation of their likeness (Braden et al., 2022; Essien & Wood, 2021; Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020). Using picturebooks is one piece of the puzzle for helping young learners create counter-narratives about themselves.

## Racial Literacy

African Americans have historically used children's books to challenge White supremacy and racism by showing African American children accurate tales of themselves and their history (Bishop, 1990). This includes having positive representations of Black hairstyles and people representing a range of skin tones. Racial literacy is a positive cultural resistance strategy with an ability to handle racial stress in a healthy manner. Stevenson (2014) notes, "Stereotypes affect how individuals see themselves and their potential" (p. 69), which can contribute to internalization of inferiority. Curenton et

al. (2022) proposed that racial literacy can be implemented in developmentally appropriate ways in early childhood by using “racially affirming storybooks coupled with conversations grounded in ethnic-racial socialization” (p. 3). They argue that young children can develop racial literacy skills by using a familiar tool (e.g., storybooks) in a familiar setting (e.g., reading with a trusted adult).

Beliefs like these highlight the need to focus on racial self-esteem and identity to evaluate stories that claim to affirm Black girls’ skin and hair and to take a closer look at how Black children, specifically young girls, are being represented and how their physical attributes are discussed. Bishop (1990) claims that children’s books should act as “windows and mirrors,” meaning that children should be able to see themselves and others as they read or listen to stories. Having positive representations of Black hairstyles through picturebooks is not only a mirror for Black children, but it also acts as a window by exposing children who are not Black to a new cultural context in hopes of bridging differences and building cultural appreciation. Affirmation is essential because of the negative stereotypes and connotations assigned to Black hair due to the civic history in the United States (Brooks & McNair, 2015). It is critical that today’s children do not internalize the negativity associated with Black hair.

According to bell hooks (1993), “The first body issue that affects Black female identity, even more so than color, is hair texture (p.85).” Research suggests that having positive representations of hair, such as in picture books, can be affirming and aid with identity development for young readers (Coyne et al., 2022). Hair styling plays a big part in the daily routine of many African American girls. One of the first things an African American girl learns is that her hair should always be “done” before leaving the home. Typically, this means that one’s hair should be styled to align with the Western world’s Eurocentric beauty standards. The standards and expectations of manipulating kinky or coily hair to appear straight or closer to what is considered Eurocentric beauty cause many young Black girls to scrutinize their hair for its’ texture and appearance (Brooks & McNair, 2015).

## Methods

The guiding research questions in this study were: (1) How accurate and authentic are the texts regarding hair representation, vocabulary, and care?; and, (2) How do the storylines and images support positive identities for young children?

## Book Selection

Nine picturebooks were selected, emphasizing fictional stories where hair was central to the storyline. Table 1 outlines the major components of each picturebook along with hair images and detailed hair descriptions to provide an overview of the selected texts. The selection criteria considered several factors. First, the publication date was used to select the most recent hair books, given that these books are likely to have the fewest reviews or criteria. The chosen texts range from 2018 to 2023. The second criterion focused on hair, specifically Black, African American, or biracial hair. The authors also only selected books published by national publishing companies, not self-published books. The authors felt it was important to critique picturebooks that would be easily accessible to families, students, and teachers. The last criterion examined the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of authors and illustrators. Given the emphasis on Black and African American hair, it was critical to locate picturebooks written by cultural insiders (Cueto & Brooks, 2019).










## Researchers’ Positionality

Sally is a White professor of literacy education with decades of research investigating the use of picturebooks with diverse children in early education settings. As a former teacher, she witnessed how Black children were marginalized in schools. Sondra is an African American graduate student with personal experience and professional interest in Black hair. Her interest in this topic grew after attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) and learning of the negative connotations and judgments commonly associated with Afro hair. This experience caused her to reflect on her conceptions regarding hair and the discrimination that people with kinky hair face socially and professionally. This led to research on the associations between Black hair, identity, and professionalism. Sally and Sondra brought familiarity to the research through their backgrounds and experiences.

## Analysis of Picturebooks

Using a critical lens, the qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) was bimodal, focusing on the images and the written text. The approach wove together two approaches. It drew from multimodal content analysis (Serafini & Reid, 2019) to examine how illustrations work with or against language in other overall stories. Attention was paid to how the pictures created visual narratives (setting and characters) and how this

**Table 1**  
**OVERVIEW OF SELECTED PICTUREBOOKS**

BOOK TITLE / YEAR PUBLISHED	SUMMARY	DESCRIPTION OF HAIR	APPEARANCE OF HAIR	IDENTITY CONNECTIONS: EMPOWERMENT, RESILIENCE, AND RESISTANCE
<i>Bedtime Bonnet</i> (Redd, 2020)	The main character loses her bedtime bonnet and needs it to protect her hair before she can go to sleep.	Corkscrew curls, braided crown, ribbonny-curls		Teaches respect for different hairstyles and routines. Show intergenerational aspects of hairstyle and how one can be unique even in their family. Celebration of family love for the child. Pride for her hair braids.
<i>Don't Touch My Hair</i> (Miller, 2019)	Aria goes on a journey through various fictional settings to hide from people wanting to touch her hair.	Soft, bouncy, big, fluffy		Shows peer pressure and how to say no and respect boundaries. Aria states, "I just want it [hair] to be free," showing the power of hair and how it makes one feel. Empowerment over one's body.
<i>Hair Love</i> (Cherry, 2019)	Zuri wants to get her done to welcome her mom home.	Kinks, coils, funky puff buns		Showcases hairstyling as a part of preparing for a special occasion. Dad confirms how beautiful Zuri's hair is. The ability of dad to make Zuri into a superhero. Family love and support.
<i>Magic Like That</i> (Doyon, 2021)	The main character explains why and how her hair is magic as her mom does her hair at home.	Bantu knots, mischievous, ironed flat, piled high		Empowers and affirms identity through the hair transformation process. Compares the young girl's hair to the natural world describing it as majestic. Theme of I can be anything.
<i>My Fade is Fresh</i> (Grant, 2022)	The main character is going to the barbershop for a new hairstyle.	Biggish, bushy, tangly tousled top, high-top fades		Being empowered in the barber's chair to make a decision about her hairstyle. Importance of a child's voice. Celebration of Black hairstyles. Range of emotions and close community context.
<i>My Hair is Magic</i> (Marroquin, 2020)	The main character describes her hair in imaginative ways in her classroom and town.	Lush, musical, twisty, puffy		The character is empowered to respond to questions about hair and pushes others to change their perspectives about different types of hair. Respect for personal decisions like touching hair. Hair as being free.
<i>Princess Hair</i> (Miller, 2018)	A celebration that princesses, little girls, can have any type of hair.	Afros, twist outs, nappy		Affirms Black hair. A princess crown works well with any kind of hair. Hair style does not define who one is. Different types of hair bring joy to your life. Love for your hair no matter the type.
<i>Stella's Stellar Hair</i> (Moises, 2021)	Stella needs a new hairstyle for the Big Star Little Gala so she travels through outer space for advice from her family.	Curly Q's, graceful, lion's mane		Builds feelings of confidence about hair. There is no such thing as hair not acting right. Hair is beautiful just the way it is. Overcoming worry about what others think. Affirmation statements like "so proud and fierce."
<i>Wanda</i> (Nontshokweni & Tlali, 2023)	Wanda is being bullied for her hair/looks at school and seeks help from her grandmother.	Crown, cloud, bird's nest		Shows the emotional toll on a girl who is bullied because of her hair. Ignoring negative comments. Real struggle of a young Black child. Statements of positivity and learning to be proud.

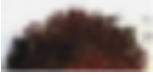
was influenced by design, including salience and background. A critical approach was also applied to the content analysis to supplement multimodal aspects and examine race, inequities, resistance, and resilience (Beach et al., 2009). According to Short (2019), “Language and visual image can impact readers’ perceptions of specific groups of people and influence the power that people within those groups may or may not have within a society” (p. 6). Therefore, the analysis valued the interaction of the visual and text.

The unit of analysis was the entire picturebook, with particular attention to visual representations of hair and words describing Black or African American hair. The storyline or

plot was scrutinized to determine the implicit or explicit messages it gave readers. These were embedded in the research questions. Multiple readings of the picturebooks were used to conduct open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) with the words and images to identify emergent patterns focused on authenticity and accuracy.

The constructs discussed in the findings arose from the connections made through the constant comparison method that yielded consistencies across analytical categories. Google Sheets were used to organize the data collection and synthesize the analysis. The resulting axial categories (Saldaña, 2015) are represented in Table 2. Each element was broken down into

**Table 2**  
**ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES WITH SAMPLE DATA**

CODING CATEGORIES	EXAMPLES OF DATA FROM PICTUREBOOKS
Entirety of Character	Text: Develops over time in a social context where several young people are getting their hair styled. The character is faced with making a decision about her hairstyle and the barber tries to talk her into particular styles. But the character is empowered to keep going until she gets the hair she wants. It is an emotional journey.
	Illustration: Typical American style clothing; Dark-skinned main character and family community support
Physical Characteristics of Hair	Text: Bushy, brownish, biggish hair, perm, press, trim, chop, fro, cornrows, tangly tousled top, puff, waves, high-top fades, taper fades, twists
	Illustration: 
Hair Care	Text: “What’s this goopy, gooey stuff”, greasy-glossed groomed, “grab a pick” Illustration: “What’s this goopy, gooey stuff”, greasy-glossed groomed, “grab a pick”
Contextual Elements	Text: Uses phrases that are common slang like “line me up” Community Support Illustration: Displays a barbershop with a variety of customers with different shades of skin and hairstyles
Stereotypes or Biases	Goes against stereotypes because she wants her hair cut into what is typically considered a boy hairstyle
Plot (Storyline)	The main character is going to the barbershop for a new hairstyle. While she is there, members of the community suggest different hairstyles for her. In the end, the young girl has to make the decision.
Racial/Emotional Development	Speak up for yourself or use your voice. Pride is an element of Black hair. Dealing with a range of emotions including frustration.
Identity (Mirror)	Cultural aspects of going to the barber shop in an African American community. Communal or social experience.
Window	Clearly states and shows a variety of hairstyles. A window into hair diversity. But commonalities with the experiences of selecting a new hairstyle.

written text and visual information presented through the illustrations. Both were analyzed, and this resulted in a group of similar ideas or themes

As data examples were identified and codes refined, there was a reorganization around more prominent themes. For example, the vocabulary and image settings were interrogated for stereotypes and biases by comparing them to existing ones found in the literature and larger society at large. Each picturebook was categorized as perpetuating bias/stereotypes, being neutral, or pushing back against existing ones. In *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022), the main character, a young girl, wants a haircut that is traditionally worn by males. This book does not perpetuate stereotypes but offers a new narrative about gender and hair. Personal biases were checked through ongoing data analysis meetings as the researchers challenged each other's viewpoints and talked through implicit and explicit messages contained in the picturebooks.

### Findings

Themes of empowerment, resilience, and resistance emerged in the findings and addressed the research question on the ways in which the storylines and images support positive identities for young children. Below are examples of these findings as the fictional book characters use their sense of agency in the face of hair-related events in a variety of contexts. Later, the findings address authenticity and accuracy of written and visual vocabulary in terms of hair representation and care. The last section of the findings highlights the characters' affirmations of their own identity leading readers to appreciate and build their own identities.

#### Empowerment of Characters' Actions in the Storylines: Resilience, and Resistance

Strong main characters in the picturebooks yielded a larger theme of empowerment. This relates to exerting control over one's life in ways where the characters built confidence and developed a sense of pride and accomplishment related to their physical appearance. There was a change in beliefs about self that exuded a positive identity as a character of color.

#### Resilience Embedded Within Empowerment

Resilience, the ability to overcome difficulties or challenges, revealed itself as a subtheme within the storylines when the book characters dealt with negative hair situations. The main character in *Wanda* (Nontshokweni & Tlali, 2021) hears her

Mama's words, "Intombi mayizithembe, Wanda. A young girl must always remain confident," as she struggles against bullying by the boys at school. Her Mama's message pushed Wanda to be resilient and stop crying. As the story continues, Wanda faces more adversity. In the end, Wanda's grandmother, Makhulu, empowers Wanda by reminding her that she is a queen, and her hair is her crown. This picturebook rejects Eurocentric values of beauty and instead celebrates a Black girl and empowers the reader to think about how they might resist or negotiate similar situations (Braden et al., 2022).

**Resistance Embedded Within Empowerment** Resistance, or the refusal to comply with negative stereotypes or microaggressions was another theme found across the selected stories. Similar messages are embedded in the text and illustrations of *Don't Touch My Hair* (Miller, 2018). Sharee Miller, author and illustrator, created a cover with the protagonist's hands on her hips and eyes closed with her fluffy hair, acknowledging beautiful curls. This physical stance exudes resistance and resilience to other children who attempt to touch her hair without permission. Young readers are invited to take the main character's perspective when the author asks, "Will Aria be able to escape the curious hands that want to touch her hair?" The book concludes with Aria deciding not to run away. Instead, she claims her hair and confronts the situation. The character offers a verbal solution for little girls. Use your words. Ultimately sending the reader away with an understanding of the power of words to enact change.

Across the picturebooks, the protagonists often confront others about their hair. The main character sometimes faces internal scrutiny of their hair, like in *Stella's Stellar Hair* (Moises, 2021), where Stella says, "My hair's not acting right," and "It's not at all how I want it" throughout the story. Each of her aunts offers her a new hairstyle, but in the end, she states that the style is perfect for them but unsuitable for her. That is until she meets Auntie Solona on the sun. Solona tells Stella that there's no such thing as hair not acting right and just to be yourself. Then, Stella uses a method from each of her aunts to create her unique style. While Wanda's negative perspective of her hair is triggered by teasing and lack of actions from others, the lesson she learns from her mother and grandmother is internal love and acceptance.

Cureton et al. (2022) theorize that learning how to appropriately handle racial stress in a nonproblematic way can also be done through literature for young readers. *My Hair is*

*Magic* (Marroquin, 2020) and *Don't Touch My Hair* (Miller, 2018) open spaces to discuss uncomfortable situations and the feelings that may be sparked from the storylines. In *My Hair is Magic*, the protagonist describes her hair using metaphors and explains what happens when she is approached with questions about her hair. People ask her, “How do you comb all that hair?” she responds wittingly, “with tender love and care.” Aria in *Don't Touch My Hair* is overwhelmed and frustrated by people wanting to touch her hair. She eventually explains that although everyone loves her hair, “just look and don't touch without my permission.” These picturebooks act as a model of responding to racial stress and can inspire young readers to set their boundaries.

### **Authenticity and Accuracy**

The authenticity and accuracy of the selected picturebooks are presented in terms of hair representation, vocabulary, and care. Fox and Short (2003) define cultural authenticity in picturebooks as “the reader's sense of truth in how a specific cultural experience has been represented within a book, particularly when the reader is an insider to the culture portrayed in that book, is probably the most common understanding of cultural authenticity” (p. 5). This was a critical element throughout the findings as African American and Black experiences around hair vary. There was not one story to tell. Accuracy, a truthful depiction of a cultural group, is equally essential (Mikkelsen, 1998).

**Hair Representation** The authors' and illustrators' use of written and visual vocabulary crafted the storylines and depicted Black children and families through rich, colorful illustrations are reported below. This included specific vocabulary, both written and visual, involved in caring for Black hair. Visual vocabulary is the “use of visual details in an image to showcase content and information that a student is not yet able to communicate through language” (Brown & Allmond, 2021, p. 217). The importance of the messages contained in the illustrations is equivalent to the written word for young readers.

### **Written Vocabulary Associated with Hair**

The vocabulary used when describing hair is one tool used to affirm Black girls' identity and appearance. The selected books utilize empowering adjectives and a variety of metaphors and similes to describe the main character's hair. In *My Hair is Magic* (Marroquin, 2020), the protagonist's hair is described as

musical and fierce, as well as “fearless as surfers riding waves.” In the picturebook, *Wanda* (Nontshokweni & Tlali, 2023) describes hair as “tall like Tat' uVuka's peach tree” and “a crown made of thorns.” In this instance, “a crown made of thorns” can be interpreted as a biblical reference referring to beauty in the face of adversity. These descriptions hold positive meanings, reaffirming that Black hair is beautiful and special. The authors also encourage imaginative thinking by comparing how the hair shapes or moves to familiar objects and concepts.

*Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019) and *Don't Touch My Hair* (Miller, 2019) describe the characters' hair by its physical properties. Words like kinky, coily, big, fluffy, and soft are used to paint a picture of the beautiful variations in Black hair. Other authors use this opportunity to introduce and identify Black hairstyles and accessories by name. Of particular note, *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022) utilizes a barber shop setting to name countless Black hairstyles varying from traditional to modern styles. Some hairstyles modeled include cornrows, high-top and taper fades, perms, locs, and spikes. Using the real names of hairstyles allows for a connection to be made to American and Black history (Brooks & McNair, 2015). Knowing the names of the hairstyles that children see or wear, along with the history, may aid in racial identity development for young Black girls.

**Hair Care** Overall, a limited amount of hair care or routine was explained in the text of the picturebooks. For example, in *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019), Daddy “combed, parted, oiled, and twisted” the protagonist's hair, while the illustrations detail the actual process. *Bedtime Bonnet* (Redd, 2020) is the primary picturebook explaining hair care processes or routines. It features each family member, including the main character, taking care of their hair, getting ready for bed, and leaving the house the next day. Some actions describing the family member's routines involve gathering corkscrew curls in a scarf, locs in a durag, braids in a bonnet, and brushing to make waves appear.

### **Visual Vocabulary through Illustrations**

The images shared with children have the power to affect their identity development and self-worth (Koss, 2015), and a part of empowering and affirming Black girls is allowing them to see themselves represented in a positive light. The selected books display stunning images of Black girls proudly showing off their curls. Picturebook covers reveal a theme of protagonists flaunting afros. The illustrations are detailed and drawn

with attention to the volume or thickness of the hair. Even with *Magic Like That* (Doyon, 2021), where they have opted for a straighter style on the cover, the hair appears thick and healthy. While the afros vary in texture, color, and size, there are missed opportunities to showcase other hairstyles and accessories commonly associated with Black culture.

Another theme was the variety of hairstyles shown within the picturebooks. While Aria in *Don't Touch My Hair* (Miller, 2018), rocks one style for the majority of the story, the protagonists in *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022), *Stella's Stellar Hair* (Moises, 2021), *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019), and *Princess Hair* (Miller, 2018) take a journey through an array of hairstyles showcasing just how versatile and fun hair can be. The illustrations also play a crucial role in adding context to the storyline. For example, *Hair Love* shows Zuri preparing for a particular day, which is later revealed as a welcome home party for her mother through the context provided by the illustrations.

Many characters express feelings or emotions that they do not say out loud. For instance, while the protagonist of *Magic Like That* (Doyon, 2021) is waiting for her mom to finish her hair, she is seen scowling to represent the pain of detangling her hair. Wanda, from *Wanda* (Nontshokweni & Tlali, 2023), is shown crying after being bullied, almost smiling after trying on a headband, and then crying again. The illustrations allow us

to travel through Wanda's range of emotions without a written explanation of each change.

**Hair Care** There were powerful illustrations representing hair care. *Bedtime Bonnet* (Redd, 2022) displays the hair care process through illustrations depicting family members in front of mirrors, combing, twisting, and brushing. The different hair care processes culminate in a family photo where everyone's hair is prepared for bedtime in various ways. The endpapers of *Bedtime Bonnet* and *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022) highlight hair care by dedicating pages that illustrate products, accessories, and tools for styling and processing hair (see Figure 1). These items include combs, rollers, creams, bobby pins, razors, and more. Highlighting the prominent products when styling Black hair allows young readers to make connections and comparisons with their own lives.

#### Affirmations of Identity

*Magic Like That* (Doyon, 2021), *Princess Hair* (Miller, 2018), *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019), and *My Hair is Magic* (Marroquin, 2020), contains a loving and celebratory message about Black hair. The protagonist in *Magic Like That* journeys through various hairstyles while her mother does her hair. The authors of *My Hair is Magic* and *Magic Like That* use metaphors to com-

Figure 1

### PAGE SPREAD FROM *MY FADE IS FRESH* (GRANT, 2022)



pare Black hair to a sensation or feeling of something beautiful. For example, *Magic Like That* reads, “bouquet of hydrangea blossoms—my hair is elegant like that.” Zuri in *Hair Love* describes the quirks of her hair growing bigger when it is wet. The storyline emphasizes how her mood or play changes alongside different hairstyles. These books focus on positive representations and affirmations stressing that Black girl hair is beautiful, unique, and inspiring.

*Princess Hair* (Miller, 2018), does not follow the main character throughout the plot. Instead, the book contains a variety of characters across an array of settings and emphasizes that all types of hair are fit for a crown. The message affirms that princesses, little girls, can have any hair. It is worth noting that Sharee Miller takes a chance by using the word “nappy” to describe hair on the last page. She reimagines and reclaims a word with negative connotations and uses it positively, highlighting that nappy does not mean ugly or unworthy. Instead, readers come away with a sense that nappy is an upbeat, confident term.

## Discussion

When protagonists of color are portrayed as fully human, picturebooks can invite readers and viewers into the world of hair, and Black hair can be re-imagined and celebrated (Cueto & Brooks, 2019). The storylines offered opportunities for the protagonists to be agentive and resilient through the various fictional challenges they faced, which mirrored real life. Revisiting the notion of critical perspectives using the featured characters and storylines, pushes thinking about identity development, privilege, and power. If picturebooks featuring empowered characters of color are never read in classrooms, then students are missing role models like Aria and Wanda. Black and African American students may not have the language or confidence to be resilient on their own. In order to construct a self-affirming identity, students need to be able to counter or resist negative Black racial identities (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). These picturebooks have the potential to help students discover who they are as was the case for the main character in *My Fade is Fresh* (Grant, 2022). It is a step in building a counternarrative that is often perpetuated by society and recycled in classroom discourse (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2021).

Therefore, interrogating nuanced or implicit written and illustrative details for stereotypes and biases provided insight into the accuracy and authenticity of the picturebooks. In the case of *Princess Hair* (Miller, 2018), the author transforms the word nappy to dispel a traditional stereotype and move forward in

transforming perspectives in a positive light. This has the power to change how a young girl might feel about her culture and self (Brooks & McNair, 2015). Other written vocabulary provides rich, authentic descriptors for the care and styling of Black hair. This window allows Black students to see kinky, cornrows, oily, and bonnets as a rich tradition to be celebrated while at the same time providing a space for students from other backgrounds to develop respect and an appreciation for differences. The use of metaphors in *My Hair is Magic* (Marroquin, 2020), and *Stella's Stellar Hair* (Moises, 2021), compare the beauty of Black hair to magnificent things in the world. All pushing against the hegemonic practices and selection of read alouds found in classrooms (Coyne et al., 2022). Instead, these picturebooks lead students to avoid internalizing inferiority (Stevenson, 2014).

Equal to the words written on the page are the complex illustrations that affirm identities and evoke positive images of Black hair embedded in a sense of pride. The illustrations convey their own implicit and explicit messages about the physical characteristics of hair and hairstyles within the characters' body language and the facial expressions associated with events. These details add to the authenticity and accuracy of Black hair experiences. For example, Wanda is dismayed when school peers laugh at her hair and yell insults. This can be a common experience for many young students, and the picturebooks' illustrations reveal the emotional toll this takes on her. In other words, it makes her human and provides a window for those who may use derogatory terms with peers to see the impact of their words. In other cases, the illustrations show the pure joy of Black hair, which may help students resist negative feelings about self-worth (Blair et al., 2002). Essien and Wood (2021) note that Black hair is frequently seen as a biased marker of second-class citizenship. The picturebooks offer an avenue for reshaping young girls' perceptions of themselves in an affirming way that sends a counter-message to others and works to counter biases.

Fránquiz and colleagues (2011) state that resilient identities are needed as society attempts to deculturalize marginalized communities by ignoring students' and families' rich cultures and histories. Bringing attention to hair-related issues offers opportunities to acknowledge and praise the rich history of African American hair. This may lead to changes in perceptions of African American girls regarding how they view themselves and their hair and how others may perceive them. Black girls have the right to secure a positive racial identity and resist or reject identities offered by society (Stevenson, 2014).

## Implications

Building from the cultural experiences of Black children provides a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014). Picturebooks about hair can be a tool for critical consciousness, resistance, or problematizing the status quo and have the potential to foster child activism through a platform to condemn unfairness and disrupt colorblindness (Nguyen, 2022). This requires the books to be viewed, read, and discussed appropriately in a critical interactive read-aloud (Kesler et al., 2020; Piper, 2019), requiring a safe dialogic space where stress is low and openness is high (Nguyen, 2022). In this type of practice, students gather closely together as a community to interact with a selected picturebook. However, this recommendation differs from a traditional interactive read-aloud. In this case, there is no set of scripted discussion questions or worksheets.

Instead, the discussion is guided by the students who critically explore the content of the book by asking and answering questions from their peers. The teacher assumes a non-dominant role or facilitator where they are equal to the students and share authority. Teacher responses expand student thinking and encourage a diversity of ideas and perspectives (White, 2016). Ultimately, the goal is to deepen read-aloud interactions in ways that help students understand social justice issues like hair discrimination, fairness, who defines beauty, etc.

A second suggestion is to involve students in a multimodal meaning-making process in response to the picturebooks (Brown, 2021). This allows students to build upon what they understood from the story and integrate it into their own understanding of the topic, which in this case would be hair. Give students art materials like paper, markers, tape, scissors, etc., and ask them to respond to the book using whatever means possible given the resources. Then, offer sharing time where students are given opportunities to talk about their productions, which offers insights into their thinking about this critical issue. It may reveal personal experiences or new revelations. Unexpected ideas may be uncovered and lead to changing stereotyped or biased beliefs.

Implementing literacy practices that encourage students to assume the perspective of others, interrogate texts, and ask questions yields growth in an appreciation of differences and

positive changes in students' identities. Young children should be encouraged to discuss biases and race even though they may be difficult conversations for teachers and other adults.

## Conclusion

Literacy reform must include attention to identity issues, given the ways students of color are positioned and the messages they receive in classrooms. There is so much more to literacy learning than skill development. At its core is who someone is and gets to be. Calhoun and Howard (2021) call for educators

to consider creating judgment-free spaces for Black children at school while reading relevant picturebooks. It is crucial to understand Black hair as a cultural expression that is an essential component of the whole child.

Picturebooks, whether read aloud by the teacher or independently by students, impact students and their perceptions of themselves and others (Muhammad & Mosley, 2021). Cueto and Brooks (2019)

note, "The ongoing denial of Black children's humanity reveals a need for a reinvigorated and in-depth look at issues of representation—one that examines exactly how picturebook illustrations embody the potential to initiate, support, and promote change" (p. 41). Viewing and reading culturally responsive books are critical components for building a community where African-descendent learners thrive (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020). To enact change requires careful consideration of the picturebooks used with young students. •

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