“Multicultural Children’s Literature as an Instrument of Power”

“Multicultural Children’s Literature as an Instrument of Power” sets out to examine the different “layers of… the broad umbrella of multicultural literature” which teachers use in the classroom. The multicultural literature conveys assimilation pluralism, which creates a sense of racial harmony, but neglects the power struggle of the different races. On the contrary, there are children’s literatures, which do convey the power struggle that these races are facing, by placing alternative motives beneath the surface of the story. Stuart H.D. Ching’s article will be helpful for answering the prompt, as it will create an appreciation for other cultures and their languages.

Ching states that there are two main goals that multicultural children’s literature must fulfill, assimilative pluralism and to express the power struggle in society. Assimilation Pluralism is explained as “[the] standards [that different cultures] had no share in making and that they may dislike, even as it presents these requirements as the bedrock of orderly freedom” (Ching 130). Although this creates stereotypes of racial groups and cultures, “these standards are very difficult to criticize because they seem inclusive, neutral and unifying rather than racial and divisive.” (Ching 130) Ching explains that in these certain books the authors tend to focus “on tangible traits [that] overlook deeper ideologies” (Ching 129). The focus on these traits can be seen in the book So Far from the Sea, which is a book based on Internment of Japanese
Americans. Ching explains, “Sympathy for suffering enables readers to affirm a stance of moral correctness while overlooking ethical deliberation of power” (130). He explains that in the story, although the internment case was “solved” and was a “thing that happened long years ago” *So Far from the Sea* thus moving on (130). The power is still with the “white man” because they still did not get reparation. Instead of “seeking reparations for their internment, the discourse of *So Far from the Sea* transforms the discourse of reparation into discourse of racial harmony” which overlooks the struggle of power allowing these people to never become “equal” in society (130). Although in this story ends with a “good ending” by moving on with racial harmony, we can still see which that the there is a dominant ideology for the Americans. Although this is, in a sense negative because White Americans still have the upper hand, assimilation of both cultures is occurring due to racial harmony (Ching 131).

In a sense the “happy ending” of *So Far from the Sea* is negative because White Americans still have the upper hand. Assimilation of both cultures is occurring due to racial harmony and no reparation (Ching 131). For example, *The Tortilla Factory* unintentionally elevates European Americans and subordinate ethnic communities by romanticizing ethnic and factory labor: “in the spring the black earth is worked by brown hands that plant yellow seeds, which become green plants rustling in soft wind”(Ching 131). Another example of assimilative pluralism makes the work of immigrants seem very noble and appealing. Ching explains that the lack of voice by these characters simply highlights “the tangible traits [that] overlook deeper ideologies” (Ching 129). Many multicultural books seem appealing yet there is a loss of equality for the minority being highlighted, but tend to line the culture up in a rank behind Euro-American ideas. The reason society does not mind this is “Discourses of racial harmony are appealing because they celebrate good will and benevolence” (Ching 131). The importance of
this article is that, although there is dominant power in stories, racial harmony, brings out acceptance of all cultures.

Ching explains that the other half of what teachers need to look for in multicultural children’s literature is an alternative motive that expresses the struggle for equality for the minority cultures. Some of the books that expressed the need for appreciation and equality include *Shades of Black* and *Love as Strong as Ginger* which “advocate knowledge of diverse cultural practices… and also express appreciation for cultural differences and instill pride in one’s own culture” (Ching 132). What the book *Shades of Black* accomplishes is that it “celebrates diverse skin tone in the African American community” with the unintended motive, that “affirms the beauty of the African American child against a history of negative representation in public media” (Ching 133). Creating a sense of beauty for African American children also creates a beauty for their language as well. The use of the history in this book allows the unintended political motive to create a deeper appreciation of African Americans on children. However, with *Love as Strong as Ginger* which does have a political motive beneath the story which “[challenges] structures of power that create oppressive labor conditions” (Ching 132). Lenore Look the author of the book gives vivid details of the conditions that her grandmother once worked under and how she longs for the days when her grandmother “served heaven on a spoon” (Ching 132). Look providing the vivid details and challenging the oppressive labor conditions in children’s literature impresses upon students that “citizens [who participate] (even indirectly or passively) in such unfair labor and racial practices” are continuing the struggle in society (Ching 134). The appreciation and the acknowledging of the power struggle in these novels is what teachers need to look for in their multicultural children’s literature. Finding both the Assimilative Pluralism, which romanticizes the culture, and the multicultural
democracy, which appreciates and highlights the other issues these cultures must face is what applies to Goal C.

This article relates to aspects of goal C, “Every student will complete school with an understanding of and appreciation, for the natural variation that occurs in languages across time, social situation, and social group.” Thus the books listed on page 132 contain Pluralism and although “Pluralism manifests power [to a certain group].” (Ching 132) “These books advocate knowledge of diverse cultural practices, experiences and significant people. They also express appreciation for cultural differences and instill pride in one’s own” (Ching 132). This can be used as tool to help student’s complete school with and understanding of and appreciation for social situation, and social groups. Providing these books with Pluralism can give different views on different cultures, thus allowing students to appreciate another’s culture. “Pluralism emphasizes interpersonal openness and a common humanity. In school settings, books operating in these spheres teach children to work collaboratively, to cultivate friendships, and to see each other through eyes of care rather than hate.”(Ching 135) These books allows students of different cultures, to respect and understand each other’s culture which include, language, social situations, and the social groups.