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The University of Southern Mississippi

Depictions of the Middle Class in Magnolia Award Nominees, 2013-2015

by

Anna K. Rawls

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
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in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Abstract

This study's purpose was to research depictions of the middle social class in Magnolia Award nominees from the years 2013-2015. A flexible approach to qualitative content analysis that incorporated both deductive and inductive analysis was utilized to identify new frames, or portrayals, of middle class characters in this set of books. As a result of this analysis, several new frames of middle class characters were identified including young characters facing adult problems, being victims of teasing, and experiencing low levels of self-esteem. Additionally, a frame previously noted by Forest (2014b) that shows characters achieving upward mobility, or "rags-to-riches," was found in this study. Moreover, the research revealed that a majority of protagonists in this set of books were middle class. This study is significant because it investigates how the middle class is depicted in books for young people, a topic that has been unstudied in children's literature scholarship. The results are impactful for teachers because of the potential application of helping students across all social classes cope with issues which they struggle. Some recommendations for future research include the analysis of another popular children's book award (possibly in another region of the country or country-wide), analyzing a different grade category of the Magnolia Award, and researching depictions of the middle class in popular television shows.

Key Words: Middle social class, Magnolia Award, frames, adult problems, victims of teasing, self-esteem, class mobility, teaching

Dedication

To my fiancé, Seth Morrison:

Thank you for never failing to support me in all areas of my life, especially my academic pursuits. I cannot express how thankful I am for your unwavering love and support.

To my parents, Ed and Lisa Rawls:

Thank you for your constant words of encouragement. I am forever grateful for the values you taught me as well as your continuous love.

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1. Introduction

Pace and Townsend (1999), state that “Literature and the ways that we talk about it have the power to define what we perceive as acceptable in our culture” (p. 43). This impact on individuals is significantly magnified in regards to the literature that children read since they are still forming their ideas about the world surrounding them. Therefore, because of the role that children’s literature plays in shaping children’s views, it is important to study the messages about the world that are conveyed to children through children’s literature.

The portrayal of social class is one topic that has been largely neglected in studies of children’s literature. According to Forest, Garrison, and Kimmel (2015), for years scholars have investigated the way that race and gender are portrayed in books for youth; however, there have been significantly fewer studies which have investigated social class. While it may appear that social class is not as visible of an indicator as gender or race, it is a significant part of everyday life in a multitude of ways. Langston (1988) stated, “class is how you think, feel, act, look, dress, talk, move, walk; class is what stores you shop at, what restaurants you eat in...” (p. 398). Someone who is a member of the working class will most likely not have the resources immediately available in order to purchase a meal from a sit down restaurant at a moment’s notice. In contrast, an individual in the upper class would not experience any financial strain to purchase that same meal. This very simplified example provides a glimpse into how the simple act of purchasing a dinner can have such varied meanings and connotations depending on what social class is being discussed. With these ideas surrounding social class in mind, this study seeks to analyze how the middle social class is portrayed in books which have been

nominated for the Magnolia Award, a children's choice award in Mississippi. As previously stated, class is a part of everyday life and class identities merit examination in children's literature just as race and gender identities have merited examination.

Although studies of class in children's literature are relatively scarce, several researchers to date have examined class portrayals. There has been some investigation into class through Glenn's (2008) study about portrayals of the upper class which discusses that class portrayals in children's books do not necessarily present a realistic picture of class to impressionable readers. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Jones (2008) provides insight into the portrayal of the lower class. These examinations of children's literature are significant, but a gap remains in the research of children's literature about the middle class specifically. Additionally, other studies have analyzed award winning children's literature, such as Forest (2014b), but the author of this study is unaware of any research to date regarding the analysis of popular children's literature. It is important to study popular children's literature because popular books are titles that children are purchasing or borrowing and reading. This study seeks to fill these gaps by focusing on portrayals of the middle class and reviewing literature, specifically the Magnolia Award, the winner of which is selected by children.

Additionally, the middle class is worth studying in children's literature because many Americans identify themselves as middle class. According to Morin and Motel (2012), a national survey conducted by the Pew Research Center reports that forty-nine percent of Americans identified themselves as middle class. How this social class is portrayed in the literature that young children are exposed to has an impact on their development, especially pertaining to their views of themselves and others.

Though social class has been rarely explored in children's literature to date, this analysis of the middle class provides insight into class representations, which are an important factor that influences the development and worldviews of young children. The literature selection of this study underwent a two-step process which identified indicators of the middle class and then analyzed how those indicators portray the middle social class. The Magnolia Award was used as the literature selection for this study because of its relevance since the children who select the winners of this award live in the same state as the researcher. This study seeks to answer this question: how is the middle class portrayed in Magnolia Award nominees from the years 2013 to 2015?

2. Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study is to analyze how children's literature, specifically the Magnolia Award from the years 2013 to 2015, portrays the middle social class. One reason that children's literature is noteworthy is because according to Pace and Townsend (1999), "Literature, helps shape our perceptions of people and places in the world" (p. 43). Although this shaping can have a positive effect, it can also have negative repercussions. Glenn's (2008) study about the portrayal of the upper class discussed the fact that literature is valuable for young adults to be exposed to; however, it can sometimes transmit values that negatively change the development of the impressionable readers. Some examples of stereotypes that were found by Glenn which can negatively impact readers include wealth leading to entitlement and that wealth does not guarantee healthy and satisfying relationships but that the wealth is worth it. Additionally, Glenn's (2008) study emphasized the idea that students should not be completely forbidden from reading literature which portrays values that are not ideal. On the contrary, Glenn believed that students should be exposed to a range of literature, but should be prepared before reading so they are informed and can be critical readers with values of equity and social justice. Kohl (2007) also discussed the impact that literature has on shaping children as they develop saying, "It [what is read in childhood] can provide negative images and stereotypes and cut off hopes and limit aspirations" (p. 41). If children are reading stories that show negative images of people they know or people like themselves, the dreams they have of doing amazing things may be stifled. Other scholars like Larrick (1965) have also supported the view that children's literature is influential, and how people are presented in books can shape children's ideas and values. Children's literature

is influential, and what children read matters because it can help shape their ideas about people in the world. Children's literature has the potential power to cut off hopes and aspirations and limit children's imaginations if groups of people are portrayed negatively. In order for literature to have a positive impact on children, it is necessary for adults to teach children to be critical readers and to make children sensitive to how people are portrayed in literature.

Pace and Townsend (1999) provided insight into a topic that was mentioned in Glenn's study: the way that literature is discussed. According to Pace and Townsend (1999), "In discussions of literature we have an opportunity to explore the complexity of human difference and human relations, and the conclusions we reach matter. They matter because they tell us who we are and who we can become" (p. 43). The last sentence is especially poignant because it emphasizes how literature shapes us as individuals. While adults also have the potential to be shaped by the literature to which they are exposed, children have not yet formed their ideals surrounding the many facets of the world. This means that the literature they read will have an even larger impact on "who we are and who we can become" (Pace and Townsend, 1999, p. 43).

Social Class and Children's Literature

While gender and race portrayals are important facets of literature, social class portrayals in children's literature are significantly less explored than both race and gender (Forest, 2014a, 2014b). Yet class is an important part of social identity just like race and gender. Lott (2012) suggests a reason that social class is so significant is that "social class...continues to be the best predictor of adult educational and occupational achievement" (p. 650). With this in mind, social class in children's literature has already

been shown to have an impact on the way that young readers might develop beliefs that contradict those of social justice and equity (Glenn, 2008). Given the power of children's literature to influence children's beliefs, portrayals of social class in children's literature deserve the attention of researchers. Although social class has not been studied as widely as race and gender, several researchers have examined social class. The following paragraphs will describe the research about social class portrayals in children's literature to date and identify existing gaps in the literature.

Kelley, Rosenberger, and Botelho (2005) stated in their study that, "There is a silence in public discourse around issues of class, even as the disparity between the rich and poor in the United States has grown significantly" (p. 25). This study looked specifically at the way that poverty is portrayed in realistic fiction picture books, especially recurring themes like alienation and resiliency. The study by Kelley et al. (2005) also stated, "While race and gender play key roles in constructing class relations, for the purposes of this article, we decided to focus on class because of its centrality in U. S. power relations" (p. 25). This is significant because it brings something that is sometimes pushed aside, social class, into focus not just in the analysis of literature, but even in discussion throughout the public. Not only does this study explore social class, but it specifically focuses on the lower class, or impoverished people.

A study by Glenn (2008) looked at the opposite end of the spectrum of social classes, the upper class, and found that there were four common themes across the three texts that were analyzed. These themes included entitlement, disparity of class and race, empty relationships, and conspicuous consumption. While this study supports the idea that literature can have a profound impact on young students, it was limited in its

analytical scope because it only focused on “a similar cast of primary characters – teenage New Yorkers born into a world of financial privilege and wanting for nothing where money is concerned” (Glenn, 2008, p. 36). This eliminated the possibility of analyzing how fictional teenagers from other parts of the United States, such as the west coast, portray the upper class. However, Glenn did emphasize the importance and impact that literature can have on young minds which are developing their ideas about the world and all the other individuals who inhabit it.

Another study which focuses on social class is Forest (2014a), which stated, “For some time, children’s literature has been regarded as a means of shaping how children perceive the world” (p. 591). This supports the fact that it is imperative to analyze children’s literature in order to determine how it shapes their viewpoints and lives. This study also focused on the portrayals of class mobility in Newbery titles, books that have received a prestigious children’s literature award. The intent of Forest (2014a) is to encourage attention to be drawn to “teaching young people to view children’s literature through a critical literacy lens” (p. 613). The combination of all the aforementioned resources analyzing both the upper (Glenn, 2008) and lower classes (Kelley et al., 2005) creates a gap in the literature that specifically analyzes the middle class.

Defining Social Class

Since the purpose of this study is to analyze portrayals of social class in Magnolia Award nominees, it is important to contextualize what is meant by “social class,” in particular the “middle class.” While there is some disagreement on a definite breakdown of social class in the United States, Lott (2012) believes that an individual is born into a family that falls into the category of either working class, middle class, or wealthy. Lott

specifically described the middle class as individuals with jobs “in the skilled trades or in middle managerial, professional, or white-collar jobs” (p. 653). Due to the financial resources that follow these types of jobs, people in the middle class often have more choices when choosing a career that takes care of expenses but is also something the individual finds interest in or has an aptitude for. Middle class privilege is described by Lott as “the expectation that one will get what one needs and wants, that one will be treated fairly, and the local government services will be available to help maintain one’s neighborhood” (p. 653). Additional descriptions include that while child care centers for the working class and middle class are similar, Lott states that the middle-class centers have a higher focus on language skills in lieu of television and more interaction with both peers and teachers. While the middle class has resources available for exercise, recreation, and vacations, there is still a fear of “falling off” or becoming unable to continue the current lifestyle. Debts incurred from years of college and houses take assets away from the ability to save for emergencies that may come up in life. According to Lott (2012), the middle class is “halfway between dreams of plenty and nightmares of want” (p. 653).

Children’s literature has been proven to have an impact on children’s development and since it is so influential, it is imperative that it is researched. Additionally, the existing research on children and young adult literature has not examined the middle social class specifically. Due to this fact and the fact that is little research regarding social class in children’s literature at all, there is a gap in the literature which this study seeks to fill.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methods used to complete this research will be detailed beginning with the rationale for the sample of books being utilized in this study. Second, the indicators which will be used to identify the middle class in the books in this study will be described. Then, the steps taken in the analysis of references to the middle class in the books will be detailed.

The sample used for this study consists of all Magnolia Award nominees from the years 2013 to 2015 which are also part of the 3rd-5th grade category. This particular award was chosen because the winner is determined by the votes of children and it is likely that children will read these books since they have nominated them or selected them as award winners. The fact that children are reading these books makes this sample worth investigating. This time frame was selected because 2013 was the first year that the Magnolia Award was split into three different categories which are broken down by grade level: Kindergraten-2nd, 3rd-5th, and 6th-8th. The 3rd-5th grade category was chosen due to the interest of the researcher, who is an Elementary Education major interested in teaching these grades in the future and this will help inform future teaching practice. The Magnolia Award was first awarded in 2010 and the winners are determined by the votes of children in Mississippi from grades K-12. The Magnolia Award was selected because it reflects the voting of the children who live in the same state as the researcher. The size of the sample consists of 28 total books: eight nominees from 2013, ten from 2014, and ten from 2015. Following this chapter is Table 1, which provides a list of all the books in the sample.

Identifying Social Class

In order to locate examples of the middle class in Magnolia Award nominees, this study utilized the class indicators, or markers of social class status, created by Forest (2014b). There are nine different indicators which have descriptions for each individual class. These indicators include occupation and type of work, income and money, residence, education, possessions and services, transportation, food, community and neighborhood, and mannerisms. The following descriptions of each indicator are from the research of Forest (2014b) and specifically address the middle class. The occupation and type of work include skilled workers with some autonomy. Money is available to purchase items that are not necessities, but there are some limitations on budget. Members of the middle class sometimes have a university education. Residences are typically freestanding homes that are not luxurious but not shabby, while urban residents may live in apartments. These residences also are situated in quiet, unremarkable neighborhoods. Middle class individuals have possessions beyond necessities which are newer and not shabby. Additionally, adult drivers will have newer cars and teen/college student drivers may drive their own older cars.

Collecting the Data

Following Forest (2014b), the data was collected using a flexible approach to qualitative content analysis that incorporates both deductive and inductive analysis. The process began when the researcher read through each book a first time to gain an overall impression of each book and the way the book portrays middle class characters. After the first read of each book, memos were created to record general impressions of the book and its portrayal of middle class characters. The researcher then read each book a second

time. During the second read, the researcher completed the following steps. First, the researcher recorded references to the middle class from the books in a spreadsheet. References to the middle class consisted of single sentences or entire paragraphs and are the unit of analysis. References to class were identified in the books using the indicators discussed in the preceding paragraph. Next, the researcher decided if the reference conveyed one of the themes (frames) about the middle class identified by Forest (2014b). If so, the researcher labeled the reference according to that frame. This constitutes the deductive part of the analysis. If the reference did not convey a class frame, the researcher decided whether it was merely an indicator like occupation, money, etc. Each reference was labeled according to the type of indicator. Finally, if the reference did not fit a theme identified by Forest (2014b) and was not an indicator the researcher retained the reference for inductive analysis.

The inductive analysis was utilized to uncover new themes about the middle class that other researchers have not identified. The following is a sample from *Dork Diaries: Tales of a NOT-SO Happy Heartbreaker* which provides an example of a section of text that was retained for inductive analysis. “I’m such a TOTAL LOSER! I wouldn’t even want to be FRIENDS with MYSELF :(!” (Russell, 2013, p. 81). When the researcher came across examples like this in the books that did not fit into one of the existing frames and was not an indicator of social class, each was given a label or “code”. The preceding example was coded as “self-esteem” due to the character’s reflection that she does not blame her friends for being underwhelmed at her expression of friendship; instead, she immediately references her perceived low social status of being a loser. At the conclusion

of this stage in the inductive analysis, the researcher grouped text with similar codes together to create new frames about the middle social class.

Recording the Data

A spreadsheet was created to record all of the references of the middle class found through close reading by the researcher. This functioned as a record of the instances of each class representation and an easy reference for developing additional indicators that do not fit into any of the nine indicators developed by Forest (2014b). It also served as a way to organize passages from the books that were analyzed for class frames both deductively and inductively. The researcher also documented significant occurrences of other characters of the upper class, working class and working poor, and the poor, which are the four social classes identified and analyzed by Forest (2014b), even though the main focus of this study is the middle class. The reason for tracking class membership of non-middle class characters is that while the focus of this study is on only the middle class, the other social classes are significant to the development of children since not everyone identifies as middle class. It was also interesting to note class representations across class groups to see whether middle class characters constitute a majority or a minority of the characters in the sample of literature.

Table 1

Books Included in the Sample

Title	Author	Date Published
2013 Nominees		
<i>Charlie Joe Jackson's Guide to Not Reading</i>	Tommy Greenwald	2011
<i>Doodlebug: A Novel in Doodles</i>	Karen Romano Young	2010
<i>Finally</i>	Wendy Mass	2010
<i>The Flint Heart</i>	Katherine & John Paterson	2011
<i>Jim Henson: The Guy Who Played with Puppets</i>	Kathleen Krull	2011
<i>Maggie & Oliver or A Bone of One's Own</i>	Valerie Hobbs	2011
<i>Spaceheadz</i>	Jon Scieszka	2010
<i>Wildfire Run</i>	Dee Garretson	2010
2014 Nominees		
<i>About Average</i>	Andrew Clements	2012
<i>The Art of Miss Chew</i>	Patricia Polacco	2012
<i>The Book of Blood: From Legends and Leeches to Vampires and Veins</i>	HP Newquist	2012
<i>Eight Keys</i>	Suzanne LaFleur	2011
<i>EllRay Jakes Walks the Plank</i>	Sally Warner	2012
<i>The Books of Beginning: The Emerald Atlas</i>	John Stephens	2011
<i>Glory Be</i>	Augusta Scattergood	2011
<i>It's a Dog's Life: How Man's Best Friend Sees, Hears, and Smells the World</i>	Susan E. Goodman	2012

<i>Mousenet</i>	Prudence Breitrose	2011
<i>Pie</i>	Sarah Weeks	2011
2015 Nominees		
<i>Dorko the Magnificent</i>	Andrea Beaty	2013
<i>The Year of the Book</i>	Andrea Chang	2012
<i>Eight Dolphins of Katrina: A True Tale of Survival</i>	Janey Wyman Coleman	2013
<i>Hoop Genius: How a Desperate Teacher and a Rowdy Gym Class Invented Basketball</i>	John Coy	2013
<i>The Waffler</i>	Gail Donovan	2013
<i>The Year of Billy Miller</i>	Kevin Henkes	2013
<i>Charlie Joe Jackson's Guide to Summer Vacation</i>	Tommy Greenwald	2013
<i>The Mouse with the Question Mark Tail</i>	Richard Peck	2013
<i>The Blessing Cup</i>	Patricia Polacco	2013
<i>Dork Diaries: Tales from a NOT-SO Happy Heartbreaker</i>	Rachel Renee Russell	2013

4. Results

After completing the second read through of the literature sample, the researcher noted that social class was not present in all of the books. Four pieces in the selection did not portray social class in any way and all of these were informational books. The topics of these books ranged from describing the origins of the game of basketball to providing detailed information on how blood functions in the human body. In addition to the four books which did not portray any examples of social class, there were seven books in the sample which did not contain any main characters who are members of middle class. Since the focus of this research is on the middle class in particular, the literature provided no examples for the researcher to record. An interesting characteristic of several of the books which contained no examples of the middle class was that they portrayed upward mobility, or instances when a character is initially in one social class and suddenly life circumstances propel them into another class. One example comes from the book *Maggie & Oliver* (Hobbs, 2011) where the main character is raised as an orphan, due to unfortunate circumstances finds herself homeless, and coincidentally discovers that she is actually the long lost granddaughter of the wealthiest woman in the entire town. The examples of upward mobility confirm one of the findings of Forest (2014b), who noted the prevalence of “rags-to-riches” stories in award-winning children’s books. These two categories within the selection of literature, books with no portrayals of social class and books with no middle class characters, were not utilized in any further analysis during the research process due to their lack of examples of the middle social class.

New Frames of the Middle Class

The researcher noted several new themes about the middle class that were discovered during the second read through. These frames include children experiencing adult problems, being victims of teasing, and experiencing struggles with low self-esteem. The first and most prominent of these frames is that of “adult problems.” The young characters in the books are facing emotions and circumstances that are much more normally addressed in literature for adults or dealt with in adult life. For example, the main character in *Doodlebug* (Young, 2010), a twelve year old girl in middle school, is identified by her teachers as having attention problems. She is promptly diagnosed with ADD and prescribed Ritalin. However, she does not want to take the prescription medicine because of the negative physical effects it causes. She attempts to sell her medication to classmates in order to offset her parents’ expense because she knows that “Pills are expensive” (p. 60). While the idea of a child selling her prescription to classmates may sound horrific, in all actuality she gives the students an I.O.U. for twenty-five cents each. The idea behind her action is that if she “got” to take Ritalin, then everyone else should be able to share the privilege. As a result of this action, she is promptly expelled from her school, her family has to move to a new city, and her parents have to find new jobs. While the logic behind the young protagonist’s actions may have been flawed, from a child’s perspective she truly believes that she is doing the right thing. This brings to light one of the major problems which can occur when children are dealing with problems for which they are not developmentally prepared.

Another example of “adult problems” is found in *Dorko the Magnificent* (Beaty, 2013), where Robby’s parents are facing high financial strain. The main character

describes how his mother began taking twenty dollars to the loan company each week because they were behind on their mortgage payments. Seeing his mother vehemently plead on a weekly basis takes a toll on the character's emotional state, and he displays his distress through a multitude of failed attempts to gain attention from others around him. Additionally, Robby's grandmother figure suddenly passes away from a brain tumor, just as they are beginning to bond. There was a struggle between these two characters throughout the majority of the book, but he is devastated when he discovers her passing. This young character experiences many plights which include being mocked and teased at school for his interests, watching his parents struggle financially, and experiencing the tragic and unexpected loss of a loved one.

Another frame noted by the researcher is that the characters in this sample of literature were often "victims of teasing." Characters did not appear to be teased because they were middle class; rather, it just appears they are the brunt of cruel jokes and displays of power by bullies. One example of a character being a victim of teasing comes from *About Average* (Clements, 2012) and the title itself provides insight into the way the main character, Jordan, views herself. A popular girl in the school leaves a note in Jordan's book which says, "I'm working on an article for the school newspaper next year: 'What It's Like to Be a Total Loser.' Can I set up a time to interview you?" (p. 79). This is just one of many examples from this particular book where the main character is ridiculed for no apparent reason, except for not being a part of the popular group of students. An example which depicts a slightly unusual case of being a victim of teasing comes from *Charlie Joe Jackson's Guide to Summer Vacation* (Greenwald, 2013). Charlie Joe attends an academic summer camp even though he is well-known for his

hatred towards reading. While Charlie Joe is fairly popular during the school year, during this camp he becomes the outsider. He makes a joke during a class session only to discover that, “It was like I’d entered some kind of permanent Opposite Day, where the dorks were the cool kids, and the cool kids - or at least the funny kids - were the outsiders” (p. 12). The other campers take it personally that Charlie Joe dislikes everything that they find joy in and many also continuously remind him that he does not belong at camp and should return home. *Dork Diaries* (Russell, 2013) also provides examples of the main character, Nikki, being the victim of teasing when she is asked, “So, Nikki, are you going to the sweetheart dance? Oh, my bad! They don’t admit animals!” (p. 48). The main character is the target of many other instances of teasing but the most significant example is when Nikki thinks she is talking to the boy she has a crush on through text messages, when in reality she is being tricked by the popular girl at school. This particular type of teasing is also known as “catfishing” and plagues Nikki throughout the book, frequently causing her to make a spectacle of herself. All of these previously described scenarios exemplify how the main characters from the sample of literature are “victims of teasing.”

The third and final frame identified by the researcher is “self-esteem.” This frame acknowledges that some of the middle class characters in this sample of literature feel like they are not good enough in a variety of ways. For instance, one book is titled *About Average* (Clements, 2012) and the main character, Jordan, describes herself as

“...a careful observer of all the talented kids at her school - the ones who got the trophies and awards, the ones who were written up in the local newspaper, the

ones who were obviously going to go on and do amazing and wonderful things all the rest of their lives. And she was not one of them” (p. 4).

This self-assessment presents the reality which faces many young girls. That reality is that they are constantly told everything about them is not good enough, by both outside influences and a personal desire to feel better about themselves. Doreen in *Doodlebug* (Young, 2010) also displays low self-esteem when she describes herself as not having the ability to sing in the school choir. Her exact words are, “I certainly don't have any "TALENT"” (p.73). While she is quick to encourage her younger sister to pursue her dreams, Doreen is hardest on herself and blames her family’s plight on her actions. An additional example of low self-esteem comes from the piece *Dork Diaries* (Russell, 2013) when the main character says, “Maybe Brandon was too embarrassed to be seen with a slightly goofy, majorly insecure girl who WASN'T a CCP (Cute, Cool, & Popular) like MaKenzie” (p. 38). All of the examples supporting the frame of “self-esteem” stem from the main characters comparing themselves to other characters in the book and believing that they do not meet the standard which would make them desirable or successful.

Even though the focus of this study is on the middle social class in particular, the researcher was interested in how frequently the other various social classes were portrayed in the literature sample. This was noted by examining the protagonists and determining which of the three social classes the character belonged to. As detailed in *Figure 2* and *Table 1* on the following pages, the majority of the protagonists were identified as being middle class. There were seventeen total middle class protagonists, no upper class, and seven categorized as lower class. However, the researcher designated

two different types of lower class because of the significant presence of class mobility, the frame noted by Forest (2014b). There were two lower class characters who remained that way throughout the entire book and five who had “rags-to-riches” experiences. Again, the four books without any social class were labeled as an “NA” category and did not provide significant contributions to this data.

The research noted three major frames found in the Magnolia Award nominees from the years 2013-2013: adult problems, victims of teasing, and self-esteem. All of these potentially reflect difficulties which young students are experiencing since it appears that they have interest in the books. The findings also relate to Forest (2014b) insomuch that the researcher noted several examples of class mobility present in the literature sample. As far as the researcher is aware, the three frames noted in the findings do not match the findings of other researchers.

Table 2

Social Class Membership of Main Characters

Title	Main Character	Social Class
2013 Nominees		
<i>Charlie Joe Jackson's Guide to Not Reading</i>	Charlie Joe Jackson	Middle
<i>Doodlebug: A Novel in Doodles</i>	Doreen	Middle
<i>Finally</i>	Rory	Middle
<i>The Flint Heart</i>	Charles & Unity	Lower *
<i>Jim Henson: The Guy Who Played with Puppets</i>	Jim Henson	Lower *
<i>Maggie & Oliver or A Bone of One's Own</i>	Maggie	Lower *
<i>Spaceheadz</i>	Michael K.	Middle
<i>Wildfire Run</i>	Callie	Middle
2014 Nominees		
<i>About Average</i>	Jordan	Middle
<i>The Art of Miss Chew</i>	Trisha	Lower
<i>The Book of Blood: From Legends and Leeches to Vampires and Veins</i>	NA	NA
<i>Eight Keys</i>	Elise	Middle
<i>EllRay Jakes Walks the Plank</i>	EllRay	Middle
<i>The Books of Beginning: The Emerald Atlas</i>	Kate, Michael, and Emma	Lower *
<i>Glory Be</i>	Gloriana	Middle
<i>It's a Dog's Life: How Man's Best Friend Sees, Hears, and Smells the World</i>	NA	NA

<i>Mousenet</i>	Megan	Middle
<i>Pie</i>	Alice	Middle
2015 Nominees		
<i>Dorko the Magnificent</i>	Robbie	Middle
<i>The Year of the Book</i>	Anna	Middle
<i>Eight Dolphins of Katrina: A True Tale of Survival</i>	NA	NA
<i>Hoop Genius: How a Desperate Teacher and a Rowdy Gym Class Invented Basketball</i>	NA	NA
<i>The Waffler</i>	Monty	Middle
<i>The Year of Billy Miller</i>	Billy	Middle
<i>Charlie Joe Jackson's Guide to Summer Vacation</i>	Charlie Joe Jackson	Middle
<i>The Mouse with the Question Mark Tail</i>	Ludovic	Lower *
<i>The Blessing Cup</i>	Anna	Lower
<i>Dork Diaries: Tales from a NOT-SO Happy Heartbreaker</i>	Nikki	Middle

*Characters marked with an asterisk began the book in the lower class. However, all of these characters experienced some version of class mobilization and did not end the book in the lower class.

Books marked with NA are informational books which do not have any main characters the researcher could identify as being lower, middle, or upper class.

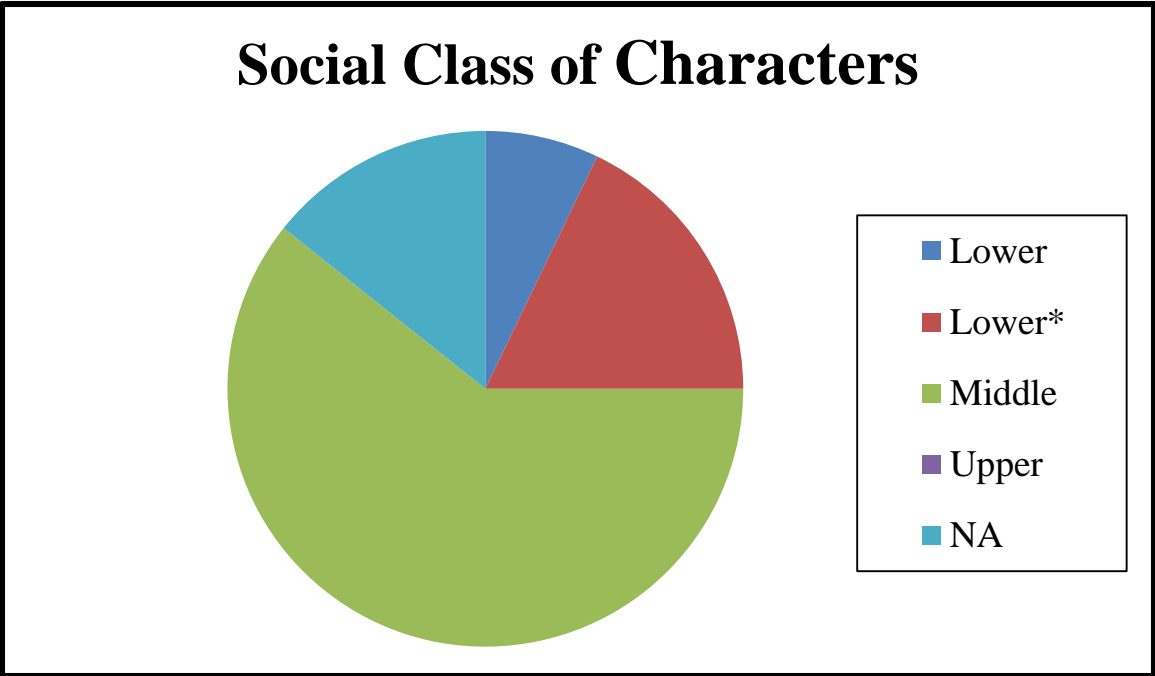


Figure 1. Social Class Membership of Main Characters.

5. Discussion

This research confirmed one of the frames developed by Forest (2014b) and that frame was upward mobility. This frame was found by the researcher in two prominent examples: *The Mouse with the Question Mark Tail* (Peck, 2013) and *Maggie & Oliver* (Hobbs, 2011). Both of these stories portray an orphan who was raised without knowledge of his/her family and they each believed that they had no kin in the world. Each main character finds themselves in circumstances which are at first extremely bleak. However, in the end they discover they do have family, which also happens to be extremely rich and powerful in the area from which they hail. These two books indeed provide additional evidence to support the upward mobility frame developed by Forest (2014b). According to this finding, the researcher believes this may suggest that there is a prevalence and popularity of rags to riches stories in American children's literature.

In this study, the researcher identified three new frames (adult problems, victims of teasing, and self-esteem) which other researchers like Forest (2014b) have not identified. These findings add to the knowledge base of class representations in children's literature through its identification of these new frames.

In addition to the three new frames identified in this research, there was also insight into the number of representatives from each social class found in the main characters of the sample. The largest portion of protagonists was the middle class, which boasted seventeen out of the twenty-eight total books. This seems to suggest that children in Mississippi tend to enjoy books about middle class characters and this related back to the findings of Morin and Motel (2012) which found that over half of the individuals in the United States who were surveyed identified themselves as middle class.

While this is not certain, it may suggest that children tend to be interested in books that depict class identities similar to their own. This finding of middle class representation contradicts Forest (2014b) who found that award-winning books selected by adults featured a majority of working class characters while this study found that popular children's books featured a majority of middle class characters. This contradiction may be the result of several culminating factors; these may include but are not limited to the more broad national scope of Forest (2014b) in comparison to the Magnolia Award which is for a specific state and the judges of each award with one being adults and the other children.

One of the implications of this research comes through the insight into the hearts and minds of young readers that it provides. Maureen Corrigan (2007) said, "We read literature for a number of reasons...to find ourselves by understanding our own life stories more clearly in the context of others" (p. 34). The researcher also believes the idea behind this statement to be true and that the literature which students are exposed to is important because they are developing their ideas about themselves and the world around them. If young students are reading books that portray middle class characters as experiencing adult problems, being victims of teasing, and having low self-esteem then it is possible they are experiencing similar situations. It appears, to the researcher, that there is a rise in the severity with which individuals experience being teased and consequently having self-esteem issues. With this in mind, teachers, librarians, other educators, and parents should all be duly informed so that they can equip themselves to assist these students in dealing with these issues. In other words, this sample of Magnolia Award nominees reflects the realities that real children are facing. If students are indeed

experiencing problems such as those previously described in the findings of this research, then they will need support in dealing with the issues faced on a daily basis. Adults in positions of power in the lives of children must be informed about the struggles facing young people and be willing to empower those children.

One way this can be practically achieved is when teachers are determining what literature to utilize in their lessons and classroom discussions. As described by Glenn's (2008) study, students should be exposed to a variety of literature with the stipulation that they have guidance in their readings in order to become critical readers. Being a future educator, the researcher wholeheartedly believes that teachers not only shape the minds of students, but their development as individuals and members of society as well. This concept is significant in relation to dealing with the difficult situations that are found in life. The universal theme of experiencing struggles no matter one's social class can be a very comforting concept to students who have not yet discovered that everyone has problems, not just lower class individuals who struggle to pay their bills. With the rise of social media, individuals can easily become ensnared in the mindset that the pictures or status updates reflect every facet of a person. Social media can become a dangerous tool because in many instances the information a person chooses to post is the best possible representation of the events. Educators can use their knowledge of books depicting children with real struggles to show students that their peers, their teacher, their parents, people in their community, and everyone they come into contact with experiences difficulties in life at some point; life is not as rosy as it appears in social media, and books like the ones in this sample can help children see this. Providing students with this context will hopefully mold them into more empathetic individuals. Additionally, by

helping guide students to the understanding that there is no one who has their life completely together in the “ideal” way all the time they will hopefully be less critical of themselves and this will lead to higher levels of self-esteem.

Another way that teachers can utilize the results found in this study is by providing suggestions for student reading. For instance, if a teacher knows that a student does not have high levels of self-esteem then he or she could suggest the students read a book in the *Dork Diaries* series. The student could possibly identify with Nikki, observe how she handled her situation, and utilize that knowledge to facilitate change in their own lives, even if it is simply a shift in perspective. This suggestion of books in order to assist students who are experiencing a difficulty has the potential to be an opening to a discussion about student problems. Sometimes students do not like to receive direct advice from a person of influence in their lives if they feel that the advice is unsolicited. However, if the student becomes interested in the suggested book, the teacher has the opportunity to discuss the student’s issue while having the outward appearance of focusing on the character’s problems.

One way that these types of discussions can be interwoven into a teacher’s curriculum is through pairing two or more different texts together in order to round out student understanding. The underlying themes of a selection of literature can sometimes be difficult for students to grasp, especially with students in lower grades. As educators, the researcher believes that utilizing two books with similar themes will increase student comprehension of the themes of the texts. At least one book in the text set should be a book with which many people are familiar. In this example that book could be *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000). The teacher then has creative freedom to find a book

which shares similar themes, but the researcher suggests *Charlie Joe Jackson's Guide to Summer Vacation* (Greenwald, 2013) as a possible pairing. This pairing would allow for the teacher to guide student understanding that popular students like Charlie Joe experience difficulty making friends in similar ways like Opal struggles to find her niche in a new place. This pairing also underscores the similar struggles that people of various social classes face: Both middle-class Charlie Joe and working-class Opal face the same problem about making friends. Other possible book pairings include *Dorko the Magnificent* (Beaty, 2013) and *Charlotte's Web* (White & Williams, 1952) where both main characters experience the unexpected loss of someone whom they love. *About Average* (Clements, 2012) could be paired with *Stuart Little* (White & Williams, 1945) due to the fact that both of those main characters feel they have a characteristic which makes them experience difficulties but makes them stronger in the end. Another suggestion for comparison is to investigate the similarities between *Finally* (Mass, 2010) and *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) in that both main characters express selfish desires which cause difficulties for those they love only to find out in the end that they are happy without all the things they once thought to be necessities.

Directions for Future Research

The researcher recognizes that young children are no longer being influenced solely through the literature which they read. Students gather information and find enjoyment in a variety of ways including but not limited to watching television shows, viewing videos on YouTube, playing video games, and actively participating in social media such as Facebook and Instagram. With this knowledge in mind, the researcher believes that there is potential for future research in regards to social class beyond the

realm of children's literature. Popular television shows could be analyzed in order to determine the social class representation ratio of the characters. While this study found that there appears to be more representation of the middle class, the same findings might not be true in regards to television shows or other media.

While this research delved into the portrayal of the middle class in Magnolia Award nominees, there remains a plethora of opportunities for future research on the topic. For instance, the researcher only looked at the books in the 3rd through 5th grade category of the Magnolia Award nominees. There are three other categories (K-2, 6-8, and 9-12) which warrant exploration into how the middle class is portrayed for those age groups of readers. The researcher believes that while similar frames may be found in the other grade categories, there will inevitably be differences and the potential to discover and create new frames. Another potential avenue for future research would be to analyze another completely separate selection of literature, such as a national children's choice book award. This differentiation from analyzing a selection of literature which specifically piques the interest of children in Mississippi to a national audience would provide a much broader view into potential frames which could impact perceptions of social class formed by children around the nation. Additionally, the Magnolia Award is a popular children's award and the researcher sees the potential for future research regarding the comparison between frames found in award winning literature compared to those found in an award chosen by children. This comparison is significant because it has the potential to uncover the idea that there may be a gap between what adults feel is the best literature for children and what children are identifying with and learning from.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study and the research question it sought to answer was to determine depictions of the middle class in Magnolia Award nominees in the 3rd-5th grade category from the years 2013 to 2015. A combination of inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis was utilized in order to identify the social class of the protagonist in each book. The researcher read through the entirety of each book two separate times, the first to gain a general understanding of the class dynamics present in the book and the second to document frames identified in previous research as well as possible new frames. The three frames found in this analysis include the middle class characters experiencing adult problems, being victims of teasing, and struggling with self-esteem. An additional finding is that the protagonists in approximately 60% (17 books) of the books in the sample were identified as middle class. This study is significant because it explores representations of social class in children's choice award winning literature. The results from this study have the potential to be utilized by classroom teachers in order to assist students with difficulties they may be experiencing in their own lives. Additionally, this study is significant because of its potential use for future researchers through the use of the middle class frames identified to complete their own deductive analyses of social class in children's literature or other forms of children's media.

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