Multicultural literature has been a current, and highly discussed topic in education and literacy over the past few years. It is at the forefront of many academic discussions that question and argue how to provide the best culturally relevant yet still academically rigorous material to our students, ensuring that they experience unfamiliar cultural and social information and ideas. In Violet Harris’ article, “Continuing Dilemmas, Debates, and Delights in Multicultural Literature”, she highlights what I find the very ‘soul’ of multicultural literature. She states, “Children have a right to read stories depicting their lives and experiences” (108). As classrooms throughout the United States become more culturally diverse, children must have opportunities to see themselves in literature; they need characters that look like them, have beliefs like them, and honor traditions as they do. Students need to hear their story, or similar stories being told, which allow them to create connections and validate their own life experiences.

Also, as more Americans are interacting in school, jobs, and life, with people from cultures other than their own, it is imperative that we learn to be able to recognize, respect, and appreciate those qualities that make us different and unique. We also need to recognize perspectives and beliefs other than our own, and come to an understanding of how different individuals’ beliefs are shaped based on their cultural identifies. In “Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum”, the author, Rudine Sims Bishop states, “All students need to recognize the diversity that defines this society, learn to respect it, and see it in a positive light” (3). Multicultural literature
exposes readers to elements of literature that does just this. It sets a great foundation for a world of understanding and empathy in our youth.

Although the benefits and importance of multicultural literature is not debated, the definition of this term is. Generally speaking, there are three definitions that constitute multicultural literature. In Mingshui’s Cai’s article, “Multiple Definitions of Multicultural Literature: Is the Debate Really Just Ivory Tower Bickering”, three definitions of multicultural literature are discussed, analyzed, and debated. The first definition that Cai explores relates best to what I view multicultural literature as being. It simply describes it as "literature of multiple cultures" (313). What idea resonated with me the most was when Cai described the goal of multicultural literature. The explanation she gave, and the points she highlights truly made be look at multicultural literature in a deeper, much more meaningful way. She states, "… but ultimately [the goal is to] transform the existing social order to ensure greater voice and authority to the marginalized cultures, and to achieve social equality and justice among all cultures so that people of different cultural backgrounds can live happy together in a truly democratic world" (313). Not only should multicultural literature teach students about different cultures, it should empower students to be an active thinker and doer of social change.

I would argue that the other definitions Cai proposes do not entirely reflect the true meaning of multicultural literature. The second view describes that multicultural should “focus on people of color” (315). Although I do see accuracies in this view point, such as the need to give those who have been underrepresented a voice (315), I think limiting the term to only people of color sets harmful constraint on the definition of
multicultural literature. For example, would an Irish family’s experience being immigrants in the United States not constitute as multicultural literature because the family is white? I would argue that it would be literature that allows readers to experience other cultures. The final definition that Cai offers to her readers takes the viewpoint that “all literature is multicultural literature” (316). The reasoning behind this definition is that if multicultural literature is its own separate category, than other literature is the norm, while multicultural literature is the “other” (316). Like the author, I would argue that multicultural literature is different than mainstream literature for young readers because it focuses on the perspective of different cultures, and how their story and experiences are told. Along the same lines, I would also argue that multicultural literature be used in the classroom, not just as a separate unit or focus, but instead, continuously and purposefully used and integrated throughout the year. As responsible educators, if we did not integrate multicultural literature throughout the curriculum, we would marginalize those students who do not as commonly have a “voice” or presence in literature.

After reading this article, and analyzing the definitions, it did make me wonder where other literature fit in, or how it would be defined. I once took a class called Diversity in Children’s Literature through Michigan State University in my undergraduate studies, and we read texts about individuals with disabilities, those who were transgendered, and those who were part of blended families. I began to question and wonder what type of category would this literature fall in? Diverse literature? I do not think it would fall under multicultural literature, but then where would it fall?
Continuing to reflect on the importance of the perspective from which multicultural literature is told, I have learned that accuracy and authenticity is an element that but be analyzed and evaluated thoroughly. In Debbie Reese’s article, “Native Americans in Children’s Literature”, she discusses the need for literature to be told be told from the perspective of an individual in that culture. She uses a quote in her article that I feel exemplifies the significance of this. In the text it states, “We can only draw with authenticity upon emotions we’ve known and tasted” (159). If we have not experienced something firsthand – then how can we share it? If we have not felt the emotions of a character in a novel – then how can we share it? If we have not felt the struggles of a character in a novel – then how can we share it? It is imperative that multicultural literature is authentic; we do not want stereotypes to transpire – we want truths to be told. Joseph Bruchac is of Native American decent and has written a variety of genres such as historical fiction, folktale, autobiography, and fantasy, integrating in each piece of literature the Native American experience and perspective.

In Bruchac’s autobiography, *Bowman’s Store: A Journey to Myself*, Bruchac describes his life growing up with his Grandpa, who was Native American. Readers are able to see how Bruchac develops and claims his Native American heritage, while also seeing his trials, misunderstandings, and the beauty he finds in doing so. As a reader of his other texts, I have learned how his experiences in life have shaped his novels exploring the Native American culture. I have learned how essential it is for writing to be both authentic and accurate.

In the very beginning of Bruchac’s memoir, he describes the cultural climate of the town he lived in, specifically focusing on views of the people. He describes them as
people “who desperately wanted their children to be real Americans. A town where full another third were of American Indian ancestry – real Americans, though few of them would admit it openly. And one of them was my mother” (3). Bruchac used this event and feelings and emotions he experienced first-hand in his historical fiction novel, *Hidden Roots*. In this story, there is an unspoken tension between Sonny, his mother, and “Uncle” with his father. Throughout the text we view Sonny’s father in a negative light, due to how he treats Sonny and his mother. We later learn he is carrying what he feels is a “heavy burden.” Without Sonny ever realizing this, he finally learns towards the end of the story that his father is part Native American. The reader finally understands why his father felt such shame and anger throughout his life – he was made to feel shameful for being Native American. This was something Bruchac experienced first hand – his mother felt a similar feeling of shame for being Native American. It is obvious this had a great impact on Bruchac’s life, just as greatly as it has affected Sonny’s.

At a different point in the *Hidden Roots*, Uncle Louis and Sonny are talking about men who used to live in their community. Sonny asks, “Were they Indians?” and his Uncle replies, “Some of them used to be” (55). Sonny is unclear about what his Uncle is referring to. I can imagine Bruchac felt this exact same way when learning of his own culture and history. For example, in *Bowman’s Store* Bruchac describes a point in his life where her grandmother did not allow his grandfather’s family to come over to visit and socialize with their family. He states, “She never said why, but I later understood that part of it was because they were connected to the Indian past my grandfather tried to hide” (50). Bruchac’s grandfather experienced firsthand what it felt like to want to
assimilate to the mainstream culture completely, and wanting to lose your old cultural identify to fit in and life safely. Bruchac saw someone extremely close to him experience this; his perspective is authentic.

When literature is about the Native American cultural experience, and authors are not Native American, the question of accuracy of perspective comes up. Bethany Kranell’s *The Darkness Under the Water* is an example of this. Because the genre of the text is historical fiction, it is extremely important that the history the sets the context of the story is accurate. In this text, something of equal significance is the cultural history of the Abenaki Indians, which relates the many historical events Kranell discusses. There are many questions about whether Kranell depicted medical scenes accurately in her book and more cultural inaccuracies arise from there. One critic, Debbie Reese, states on her blog “Kanell shows an appalling lack of respect for her own Indian characters.” From this blog, and from the many articles read debating the authenticity of the characters and events, I have learned how important it is to keep a critical eye when choosing multicultural literature. As a reader, one can easily get lost in a story, almost forgetting the need for an accurate portrayal, especially when it involves depicting those of different cultures in a certain light. As an educator, however, it’s vital that I research and look into the history of the piece of text if I have questions, and research the author as well. If not, stereotypes and generalizations will continue to be present, and the goal of understanding and appreciating different cultures will be pushed further away.

Throughout many of the texts read, individuals coping with their cultural identify is a common theme found throughout Native American literature, and unfortunately Native
American life. Stereotypes that have been perpetuated specifically by the media are quite damaging to a Native American’s cultural identity. In Bruchac’s memoir, he states the impact images of “stereotypical Native Americans” had on him. After watching a movie called the *Northwest Passage*, the movie concluded with the line, “Sir, I have the honor to report that the Abenakis are destroyed (43). This movie greatly affected him; he was afraid, and began to become afraid of many things – in the movie the Indians portrayed fearful characters. Bruchac began connecting the concepts of fear and Indians together. In the historical fiction novel *Hidden Roots*, a similar event occurs when Sonny is speaking of Indians. Sonny says, “I didn’t know much about Indians, except what I heard in school or saw in the movies. I know they were mostly all gone, dead, or had run off to the West” (32). Sonny’s only knowledge of Indians came from the media, just like Bruchac’s. And, the images that were displayed in both portrayals were not accurate. The stereotypical image of an Indian is also prevalent in *The Dark Pond*, also by Bruchac. When Armie has his first run-in with Devo, Devo calls him chief in which Armie replies, “Please don’t call me chief” (9). From this you can infer that Armie does not like, nor appreciate, being called chief because of the stereotype of Native Americans as chiefs in sporting events. In Reese’s article she defends this argument when she states how “this generic Indian motif includes feathered headdresses, fringed buckskin clothing, tipis, war dances, pipes, and buffalo hunting” (159). When individuals view Indians this light, their perspective of them is very distorted; they are only viewing them as a group of people from the past, which inaccuracies of how they actually lived.
Because of this, I’ve learned that it’s extremely important for Native Americans to be portrayed accurately, and be present in contemporary realistic fiction. In her article, Reese focuses on the Native American perspective and role in literature. She states, “The greatest need at this point in time is for more books that provide a contemporary perspective of Native American people, particularly Native American children” (27). Native Americans should be present so readers learn more about the culture, eliminating stereotypes they have. *The Dark Pond*, by Joseph Bruchac is a great example of this, although I would consider the text to be more of a contemporary realistic fiction/fantasy hybrid. In it, we are able to learn about the main character Armie who is half Indian and half Armenian. Throughout the story we learn how Armie’s culture creates and shapes who he is as a character. Armie’s extremely in tune with nature – on page 14 in the text he writes “Birds like me” in his journal. Throughout the rest of the text we learn about his strong relationships with other birds and foxes too. Many questions readers may have about this culture are also answered. I often picture Native Americans having longer hair, and was never sure if this was a stereotype or not. For the character Armie, we learn that his hair is part of his culture. At one point in the text his mother states, “It is part of our tradition that a young man be allowed to grow his hair long” (30). This answered something I previously wondered about the culture, as I’m sure it did for many who were wondering the same thing. Bruchac does a beautiful job exposing the reader to the cultural characteristics of Armie – which ultimately connects to the solution of the story where Armie and Mitch defeat the “pond monster.” Because both men were intuitive to nature, patient, and were aware of stories and the history of their past, they were able to work together to kill the giant slug.
Something that was apparent throughout all of the multicultural texts was the prevalence of universal events and themes. I believe this is needed in multicultural literature so that readers of a different culture can still see themselves in the text and connect with it. In Harris' article, there is part of an interview included by an African American author of picture books. When asked if she considers herself a black writer, she responds by saying that she is a writer who is a woman, a writer who is American, and also one who is black (115). When describing her writing, she states, "My themes are universal" (115). This is a powerful message because the author makes sure that the literature comes first, ultimately ensuring that all children, no matter what culture can relate and connect.

Many of the texts read in class this week have universal events or themes. In *The Dark Pond*, Armie’s parents are often too busy for him. At one point in the text he states, “Though I wanted to, I couldn’t see my parents this weekend because they were both out of town” (43). He was struggling with something that he wanted to talk to with his parents about, but didn’t have the opportunity to speak with them because they were gone for work. Many kids can relate to this feeling and quickly connect to the character Armie. In the very beginning of *Hidden Roots*, Sonny is in a situation where all of the boys wanted to fight him, and after much teasing kids begin chanting “Howard’s a coward, Howard’s a coward” (7). Teasing and problems with friendships is a very common experience for young kids. Readers are given the opportunity to relate to Sonny and feel a connection with him. They are able to see that he is just like they are, which helps create more understanding and empathy.
After this week’s readings I have truly looked at multicultural literature in a different way, and truly feel a deeper need to integrate more multicultural literature throughout the curriculum. I also feel that I have developed a more critical eye of such literature; I feel a stronger responsibility to continue to develop this. I also feel much more excited about the school year to come, thinking about how I will use authentic and rich multicultural literature, and how this will help forever change my students’ thinking.