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**CHANGING THE NARRATIVE: THE EFFECT OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT
TEACHING TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION AND
ENGAGEMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN MIDDLE
SCHOOL**

By

Portia J. Wood

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education
College of Education
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Reading Education
at
Rowan University
December 23, 2020

Thesis Advisor: Valarie Lee, Ed.D.

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Dedications

I dedicate this thesis to my son, Bijan, a young, black man who grew up loving books and writing stories. He taught me how to love unconditionally and that being educated was necessary for our survival. This research was inspired by your perspective of literacy. Thank you for being supportive and understanding when I asked you to be quiet while I typed paper after paper. You have been such a big help and every time I wanted to give up, I thought about you and decided to keep going because every race has a finish line. I hope going through this process with me shows you that hard work pays off. I love you to the moon and back.

I also dedicate this to my mom. You prayed for me and asked God to give me strength to get through this program. You listened to me as I shared my frustrations with everything and always kept me encouraged. For my entire life, you have been my rock and I am blessed that God made you my mother. I hope I continue to make you proud of me. I love you so much.

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My cohort...you are the greatest! We helped each other get through this and kept each other afloat. If one person looked like they were going to sink, one of us caught them and pulled them back onto the raft. I am extremely grateful for each one of you and your support.

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Abstract

Portia Wood

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE: THE EFFECT OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION AND ENGAGEMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

2020-2021

Valarie Lee, Ed.D.

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine the effects of using culturally relevant texts to motivate and engage African American adolescent boys who read below grade level to read while also improving their current reading levels. The participants for this study were two twelve-year-old African-American adolescent males in the seventh grade. The study was conducted during a 30-minute independent reading segment and after school. The participants read a book for 15-20 minutes a day followed by a ten minute response to reading assignment about their book. The participants in this study were assigned culturally relevant texts to read during independent reading and engaged in conversation with the researcher about each book. Data collected included a teacher's research journal, an anecdotal notes notebook, students' written responses to reading documents, benchmark assessments, surveys, questionnaires, and audio recordings. The data collected from the study was analyzed using a coding method and themes were triangulated across the data sets. The boys were assessed on their current reading levels and their perspectives after reading culturally relevant material. Based on the data, the use of culturally relevant texts kept the participants engaged in the text and motivated them to read similar texts during independent reading. This study was proven to be effective and educators who use this pedagogy will notice positive results in their African American adolescent male students.

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Chapter I

Introduction

We need to take an honest position with regard to the literacy development of African American adolescent males. Neither effective reading strategies nor comprehensive literacy reform efforts will close the achievement gap in a race- and class-based society unless meaningful texts are at the core of the curriculum. (Alfred Tatum, 2008)

“So...what did you think of the story?” I asked after our shared reading. Three of my students, all seventh-grade African American males, started talking at the same time. “Okay...what a minute...let’s talk one at a time,” I said in a stern voice. I could tell the students were engaged in the story the way some of their eyes raised when the lady snatched the boy up off of the ground for attempting to steal her purse. One student was taking notes during certain parts of the story. Another student was sitting straight up on their couch with their eyes wide open as he listened to the story. I put the story on the screen in presentation mode for the entire class to read as the audio played for them to follow the words. This is helpful for my classes because a lot of them are reading below grade level and my inclusion students benefit from the audio support for our shared reading stories.

A brown-skinned, chubby boy with a low fade started talking first. “I think the story was great because it had action in it and it taught a lesson,” he stated with a grin. As I proceeded to ask him in detail what “action” he was referring to in the story and the lesson he said it taught, another boy jumped in and added to the discussion. “Yeah, when she gripped him up for trying to take her purse was good because I thought she was

gonna call the cops and have him arrested.” He saw the look on my face and said quickly, “I’m sorry Ms. Wood.” I told him it was okay and the other boy finished answering the question by stating how the lesson the story taught him was not to steal from people. He continued to say although the boy still got the money he needed, the plot could have been different and the lady could have called the cops on him. The story lead to a discussion about stealing and how it is the wrong thing to do. On the other hand, some students said people steal when they are in a bad place and need things they are unable to get without money. The students talked about stealing among other things about the story. I added another question to contribute to the discussion but the students had a lot to say about the story and it was great to see them so engaged in a discussion about a story we read together. Toward the end of the discussion I asked, “What race are the characters in the story?” I was curious if they noticed because of the dialect used in the dialogue of the story. One student, without raising his hand replied, “They’re Black, Ms. Wood.”

I said, “How do you know?”

He responded, “Because she sounds like Big Momma or like Madea and those people are Black.” He also added, “Plus the way Roger talked. He said things like no m'am and yes'm.” I shook my head in agreement.

After the discussion, the students asked, “Ms. Wood, what’s the next story we’re gonna read? I wanna read more stories like that.”

I replied, “I don’t know yet; you’re just going to have to wait and see, but I’m glad you liked it.”

At this point, I realized culturally relevant stories are very interesting to the students. They are very engaged in the stories and can relate to the characters or situations involving the characters in the story.

Story of the Question

When I taught sixth grade, one of my African American adolescent male students asked me for help with a passage he was trying to read for a computerized assessment. I was a novice teacher at the time and I was not as knowledgeable about IEPs, 504s, and intervention strategies as I am today, so I really did not understand why he could not read the 3-4 sentences. I asked him to read some of the passage to me. As he was reading, I noticed he struggled decoding the words. He read two sentences that way. As soon as he started reading the third sentence, he stopped at a word and just could not pronounce it no matter how hard he tried. I helped him sound it out and he realized the word was “dolphin”. I was shocked he could not pronounce such an easy word (a word a sixth grader would typically know). As he continued working on the assessment, I wondered why he had such a hard time saying that word. After that moment, I started to reflect on how other African American adolescent males in my class also struggled with decoding words and comprehending text. Every year I encountered African American adolescent males who did this, I became more curious as to why this was happening. I realized I wanted to pursue this issue further and I began to study this issue among them.

During my eleven years of teaching, I noticed that students who are reading below their current grade level get frustrated easily when they are required to read literature. Although there are many factors, as I stated above, for why African American boys are not engaged in reading texts, there are other reasons that contribute to this issue. Many

boys who face this dilemma tend to lack reading and comprehension skills to understand a text on their standard grade level. According to Tatum (2008), “The vital signs of *reading* provide the necessary working tools (e.g., decoding, self-questioning, and comprehension-monitoring techniques, summarizing, and other strategies) that students need to handle text independently, and they constitute a necessary minimum set of tools for literacy efforts” (p. 159). In certain cases, students in general lack these skills for reading which affects how they learn literacy, especially African American males. When they are required to read certain novels and stories in class, they become resistant by trying to distract other students while they are reading (either talking to them or making them laugh). Sometimes they will try to do things to get kicked out of class and sent to the principal’s office or they will put their head down and fall asleep instead of reading. These are the actions I noticed when they are required to read and they are unable to read. Also, there is the data from daily assessments (response to reading, class discussions, reading benchmarks, quizzes, and tests) that indicates how well they comprehend a text and/or determine their reading level.

A couple of times a year in my class, we would read a novel, passage, or story involving African Americans with issues that are relevant to them. I noticed how the boys would become more interested in the text when it involved a male character that faced similar issues as them such as interactions with the White people, their elders (older African Americans who they are taught to respect), fighting with their parents and/or peers, or having to be brave when they are faced with adversity. They participate in class discussions about the text without being asked, their written responses are more involved because they have a lot to say about a topic relatable to them, and their comprehension of

the text shows on assessments (quizzes and tests). The boys demonstrated the most engagement when reading culturally relevant text and the least engagement when they were reading text about other races unless it made them laugh or it contained a universal theme.

Three years ago, I started giving out reading surveys to my students. It served as a way for me to get to know how much they like to read and things they struggle with in reading. When I read each of their surveys, most of my African American adolescent boys stated they do not have a favorite author nor a book series they like to read. However, they did state they struggle with reading for a long period of time, rereading a text for clarity, and connecting the reading to their life. I decided to collect a particular book series that involved minority teens and issues they face titled *The Bluford Series*. This series consists of over twenty books that involve Black and Hispanic people. The teenagers face common issues like depression, bullying, not getting along with their peers or parents, and hiding abuse. When I shared information about these books to my classes, they immediately read at least one of the books. Then as the school year progressed, they started reading more of the books from this series. The boys would start reading them with other boys in the class and they would share the details of the book with each other. By June, when I asked them about which books changed the way they viewed reading or they enjoyed reading the most, they would always refer to the Bluford books. That is when it hit me! I said to myself, what would happen if I had more books like this in my library, would it encourage them to read more? How can I incorporate more books like this in our shared class readings that would teach the same skills as the curriculum required texts? What activities can I do with them that will keep them engaged in the

texts? Will the reading of these texts improve their current reading Lexile levels? All of these thoughts ran through my head by the end of the school year; however, when the next school year came, I had to let it go because my district always incorporated something new I had to learn and I could never act on my inquiry.

When I decided to pursue a graduate degree in reading education, I knew I wanted to research this phenomenon involving African American adolescent males reading below their current grade level. I wanted to know what factors contributed to this issue and how it can change. I also wanted to know why they are disengaged in reading and what would motivate them to read and keep them engaged in reading. The more I observed my seventh grade African American boys struggle with reading chapter books and not participating in class discussions after reading different texts, I wanted to figure out a way to motivate them to read, stay engaged in reading, and help improve their reading levels in the process.

This study is important to me because I have been teaching African American children for years and I have noticed how more than half of my students are reading below grade level. The boys tend to struggle in reading more than girls and students of other races. It is disheartening to see African American adolescent males become frustrated while trying to read grade level text because they cannot pronounce the words which makes the context difficult to comprehend. When they are unable to read texts, they start to become disengaged in the lesson or activities that involve reading. They become disruptive in class or put their head down and go to sleep. As a result, I started wondering how I could help them to become better readers and perhaps improve their reading levels.

According to The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in 2017, White students scored 25 points higher than African Americans on reading assessments nationally making the reading achievement gap wider among the two races. In my district, the most recent reading assessment scores came from a district assessment called iReady. This reading assessment test scores students in various areas of reading such as comprehension, vocabulary, and phonics. For the most recent assessment we have 52 students total who took iReady Diagnostic Assessment for reading. Out of 52 students, 16 African American adolescent boys took the assessment and 11 of 16 are reading below reading level and scored below expectations making 68% of them reading below grade level. These are students who are expected to know and master grade level reading standards by the end of seventh grade. This seems impossible and unfair to the students who came to seventh grade functioning on two grade levels below or more to keep up with their peers who are at or above grade level. Although the reading gap is evident in these statistics, this can be an opportunity for me to implement different interventions by stitching strategies and skills to help decrease the reading achievement gap among the African American seventh grade males I teach.

Purpose Statement

As an English Language Arts teacher, I have been committed over the years to find ways to help these students in reading so they will become better readers. Since I teach more African American male adolescent students who do not read on grade level every year, it made me curious as to why this continued to happen and why it seemed like it was getting worse. This is the reason why I chose to research African American adolescent males, what motivates them to read, skills they need to know to be successful

in reading, and strategies that will help them comprehend texts. I believe Gloria Ladson-Billings' theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy/Culturally Relevant Teaching (1995) is the key to helping motivate African American adolescent boys in reading. The purpose of this research is to study the effects of culturally relevant teaching to African American males in seventh grade who read below grade level to determine if this will help them improve in reading comprehension.

Ladson-Billings' theoretical framework is used by many to study the impact of culturally relevant teaching on the reading lives of African American adolescent male students. Researchers such as Alfred Tatum, David Kirkland, Tara Yosso, Jacqueline Leonard, Marc Lamont Hill, and many others believe that these boys will become motivated, engaged in reading, and become better readers by using culturally relevant texts and pedagogy in classrooms across the country. Tatum (2008) states "According to many standardized assessments, educators in the U.S. continually fail to advance the literacy development and academic achievement of African American male adolescents, particularly the ones who live and go to schools in high-poverty communities" (p. 155). Tatum also states that "to reverse trends of poor reading outcomes among this group, the multiple in-school and out-of-school contexts that African American adolescents males have to negotiate are often ignored when developing or adopting instructional plans, selecting curricula, or examining students' placement in low-level or remedial courses" (p. 156). According to test scores, African American adolescent males are continually showing major deficits in reading. Studies show this has been an issue for decades and research continues to show a trend of Black male adolescents reading levels far below their white counterparts. This is often referred to as a reading achievement gap; however,

inequities in education may contribute to the reasons why African American adolescent males are not successful in reading. According to culturally relevant theory, these boys can persevere with access to culturally relevant books, teachers using a culturally relevant pedagogy to educate them, and learning strategies to help them understand complex texts. Systematic racism is evident in school-based curriculums because students are expected to master required standards by the end of a school year with the expectation of already being on grade level. The required texts that are associated with the standards are books that are too difficult for them to understand or unrelatable to them.

In his case study research, Tatum (2008) argues that there are four major barriers to African American adolescent males engagement to read were the fear of being publicly embarrassed if they failed in front of their peers, their limited vocabulary knowledge, the lack of attention their former teachers placed on reading books and engaging with texts, and their perceptions that teachers expected them to fail. These factors along with others such as disciplinary actions that result in students being removed from classrooms during reading instruction and educators not being adequately equipped to engage African American adolescent males contribute to their lack of reading and comprehension of texts. Educators play a key role in motivating and engaging students in reading. Ladson-Billings (1995) states “the dilemma for African American students becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence. Thus, culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (p. 476).

Statement of Research Problem and Question

My study will look at how students interact with culturally relevant text and investigate how this impacts their reading levels and engagement. Students will be observed in class reading texts about black characters or nonfiction text about people who contributed to history. Students will also be encouraged to share their perspective on different texts they read throughout the study. The boys will occasionally write their responses about the text they read and share it with me. Since we are in a virtual world at the moment, students will discuss with me via video meetings and phone calls about the books they read and how they perceived the texts and connections they made to the texts. Their discussions with me any response to reading I collect, and reading assessments they take during this study will show me culturally relevant texts help them become motivated to read, continue to be engaged in reading, and improve their reading levels. My research seeks to discover answers to the following questions: How can culturally relevant teaching engage African American boys in reading? How does the reading of culturally relevant texts impact their current reading level? How do these texts help them to make real connections and think critically about issues in today's society?

Organization of Thesis

The following chapters outline the organization of the thesis. Chapter Two focuses on the literature supporting using culturally relevant texts to improve motivation and engagement among African American adolescent males. The topics discussed in the chapter include, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, motivation and engagement, and skills and strategies needed to help improve their reading levels. Chapter Three will discuss the context of this study, the material used for research, how data was collected, and sources

of data. Chapter Four will include an explanation of the data collected during the study and significant findings from the data. Chapter Five will conclude with a summary of the findings, conclusions drawn from the study, and future research recommendations.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

“By selecting appropriate reading materials, teachers can engage African American adolescent males with text, particularly those students who have not mastered the skills, strategies, and knowledge that will lead to positive life outcomes. This productive shift in literacy takes into account students’ four literacy needs –academic, cultural, emotional, and social –and relies on instructional practices that have proven effective with African American males.”
(Tatum, 2006)

Many African American adolescent males in middle school are reading below their current grade level and are not motivated to read nor engaged in the text they are required to read. Reading levels and literacy test scores for African American adolescent males are commonly compared to that of their White adolescent male counterparts. African American adolescent males who score low on standardized tests are often put in remedial or low-level reading classes; they’re also placed in Special Education and given an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Whether this is referred to as an “achievement gap” or an “opportunity gap”, it is still an issue that needs to be resolved. Chapter two presents a review of the literature and theories about reading and culturally relevant pedagogy, factors that contribute to why African American adolescent males are not motivated to read, methods to increase engagement, and changes that need to occur for them to become motivated to read. The first section will outline theories about reading and the factors that contribute to why African American students do not do as well in literacy as their white counterparts. The next section will cover methods

previously done by researchers and educators to help motivate and engage African American adolescent males to read. The third section will discuss what needs to take place to sustain African American males' motivation and engagement in reading. The chapter will end summarizing the literature and how this study will contribute to understanding why African American adolescent males are not engaged in reading required texts and how to help change this narrative.

Theoretical Framework: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

According to Ladson-Billings (1995b), "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). Teachers who decided to adopt CRP incorporated ideas that were a part of the students' cultural identity to comprehend a text, respond to literature, and write essays. For instance, teachers may have a student respond to reading a text by writing it in rap lyrics. When students are able to express themselves in literacy in ways that are normal and comfortable to them, they will demonstrate their understanding of text by writing a detailed response to the literature or contributing more to class and/or small group discussions. Utilizing a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy led to using culturally relevant texts to motivate African American adolescent males to read and it kept them engaged in books.

Culturally relevant texts have been proven to help African American males become more motivated to read and become engaged in the text. For example, some

teachers practice using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) to reach their African American students because they realized traditional literature and methods were not effective in helping them become better in literacy. In Ladson-Billings' book, *The Dreamkeepers* (2009), she shares how different teachers throughout the country started to adapt a new way of teaching to reach their African American students. Teachers still taught the curriculum they were assigned, but they used a different approach to reach students of color that maintained their cultural identity and ensured academic success. An example of using CRP to help a student make a text-to-self connection with a book the teacher, Ann Lewis, drew a picture of a Venn Diagram on the board and put the student's name on one side (an African American boy named Calvin) and the name of the main character on the other side to represent similarities and differences between them.

Achievement Gap vs. Opportunity Gap

Over the years, standardized test and other formative reading assessments show African American adolescent males reading at lower levels than white adolescent males. In a quantitative study conducted by Fantuzzo et al. (2012), African American adolescent males were found to have scored ten percent lower on state assessments than their white counterparts. Researchers have conducted various studies throughout the years to indicate the contributing factors to this issue. Theorists such as Gloria Ladson-Billings and Alfred Tatum have dedicated years to studying this phenomenon among African Americans in the public school system, especially students who attend public schools in urban areas. Ladson-Billings (1995a) states, "while some might argue that poor children, regardless of race, do worse in school, and that the high proportion of African-American poor contributes to their dismal school performance, we argue that the cause of poverty in

conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism” (p. 55). Ladson-Billings believes racism, or opportunity gaps, plays a role in why children of color are not succeeding in school. For instance, urban schools do not have the funding needed to get proper materials needed for children to use (textbook, technology equipment, etc.). They lack highly qualified teachers in classrooms to teach content areas properly, and most buildings are without up-to-date materials to keep up with most suburban schools. African American students, especially adolescent boys, lack essential materials and texts needed for them to be successful in school.

Paris (2012) states that in order to close the achievement gap among students of color, culturally sustaining pedagogy needs to be exercised in the classroom. Students should be able to bring their Funds of Knowledge into the classroom because their background and basic knowledge they have acquired at home and within their community was replaced with “what were viewed as superior practices” (p. 93). African American adolescent males and other students of color have been taught with a curriculum that uses “White, middle-class norms” as the literature to teach children, because this is not their “norm” they are unable to relate to it. Fantuzzo et al. (2012) states another factor that contributes to the achievement gap between African American adolescent males is academic engagement. Over time, if they become disengaged in school in early years, it affects them academically in upper grades such as middle school and high school. “Engagement behaviors, on the other hand, serve to promote continued participation in educational activities and the pursuit of achievement outcomes” (p. 561). African American adolescent males who demonstrate engagement in their academics most likely will narrow the achievement gap and succeed in school. Also, most English teachers are

women and many of the texts they assign students to read are fiction and of high interest to female students. Since these types of texts are not of high interest to boys, they might read it because they are required to read it, but it will not hold their interest; oftentimes, this leads to non-participation of the class discussions of the text, lack of demonstrating comprehension of the text, and a possibly a low test score because they did not pay attention to significant information about the text.

Researchers cite reasons why African American adolescent males are not achieving in school. Tatum (2006) states “internal factors include self-concept and identity issues” and “external factors include structural racism, community patterns, parents’ educational attainment, and socioeconomic status” serves as barriers to achievement within school resulting in them “retreating from violence, avoiding self-disclosure, and dissociating from school” (p. 45). In today’s society, African American men are losing their lives at an alarming rate. They have to be mindful of things like wearing a hoodie outside because they do not want to be mistaken for a thug or should they question why they are being stopped by the police with the fear of being shot. Young black males are being exposed to racism in society but in schools as well. The problems they face outside of school, makes it harder for them to succeed in school.

Text Selection

English classes require students to read certain texts to ensure they are learning grade level state standards and to expose them to traditional, classic literature. In order to be successful in literacy, a student needs to comprehend the text. Black adolescent males who are not on grade level are usually resistant to reading these texts. However, theorists and researchers suggest using texts that are culturally relevant and cater to their interests

to motivate and engage them in reading. According to Ladson-Billings (1995b), “the dilemma for African American students becomes one of negotiating the academic demands of school while demonstrating cultural competence. Thus, culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (p. 476). African American students can benefit from reading texts with characters that look and have similar character traits as them, share similar experiences, and face decisions they face as Blacks in society. Students become more engaged in the texts when they can make a connection to it.

Educators have to observe the reading climate in their classroom as well. They should be mindful of the texts they assign their students to read. Kirkland (2011) states, “it would be helpful for educators to think of reading as extension of self” (p. 206). Student will demonstrate disinterest in a text directly or indirectly. If a student is not interested in text, they will say they don’t want to read it or will pretend they are reading it. The result of their disinterest is nonparticipation in class discussions. On the other hand, some researchers believe African American adolescent males do not necessarily need culturally relevant texts to motivate them to read. Scieurba (2014) noticed when “boys distinguished between useful/important books and books that reflected their identities, and that race and gender were not exclusive determinants of an individual’s ability to see himself in a text” (p. 312). In some cases, African American adolescent boys like to read literature they can relate to in other ways besides race and gender. A book with a male protagonist of another race dealing with issues of bullying can be interesting to an adolescent male who is going through the same issue. Since bullying can

happen to anyone, it does not matter your race or gender, a student may want to read the text to see how the character deals with it and the outcome of the situation.

Leonard and Hill (2008) conducted a qualitative study using culturally relevant text to teach cross content. They observed, interviewed, audio recorded and videotaped African American boys in a class setting listening to the Underground Railroad read by their teacher during a shared reading lesson. The lesson infused science into the literacy lesson. The science portion of the lesson involved how the difference between the lighting of a full moon and a half moon affected the slaves trying to escape. The students were able to make connections, learn about the moon, and understand the plot. The goal was for the students to improve on a science assessment they were given before they read the book. The teacher used a culturally relevant text to help the students with comprehension and science. The students discussed the book during the shared reading and after the reading. The students' scores improved on the science post assessment.

Hubert (2013) conducted a study that used CRP to help African American students improve in math. The study involved 37 at-risk high school students (mostly Black and Hispanic) who were ages 16-22. The purpose of the study was to see if the students (mainly African Americans) who understand math instruction better using CRP as opposed to traditional instruction. One of the students described traditional math instruction as "grandma fashion" teaching (p. 329). The data used for the study was interviews, actual classroom lessons, and presenting the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. The lesson taught was on the topic of quadratic and exponential functions. The lesson topics included "(1) teen pregnancy lesson (two lessons); (2) perinatal HIV; (3) teen smoking; (4) football and soccer; and (5) saving money" (p. 327). After a 10-day

period of the study, the students improved in math. According to Hubert (2013), “The mathematics performance of students who participated in culturally relevant intervention, on average, increased by one letter grade” (p. 327). Using culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms enhances students’ growth academically because they are learning ways to understand literacy, numeracy, politics, and science by things related to their community and culture.

Motivation and Engagement

There are two approaches that could permanently change the way African American adolescent males look at literature and reading required texts in the future. First, the curricula for language arts need to change. Although standards may vary by state, there is not an issue with the requirements students must know by the end of each grade level per year. However, the required texts or teacher selected text to teach the curriculum must change to reflect our multicultural society, especially ones where Black adolescent boys are required to read text and expected to identify skills and analyze the text. Tatum (2008) stated, “To reverse trends of poor reading outcomes among this group, the multiple school and out-of-school contexts that African American male adolescents have to negotiate are often ignored when developing or adopting instructional plans, selecting curricula, or examining students’ placement in low-level or remedial courses” (p. 156). When school districts assemble task forces to create curricula for teachers to use, there should be male educators of color who are knowledgeable about culturally relevant texts as a part of the team to make decisions that will benefit African American adolescent boys. Males know what books interest them; they can advocate for these texts to be part of the curriculum as required texts to read. Carefully selecting materials (texts,

passages, stories, etc.) that are culturally relevant and of high interest can ensure the students will be more engaged in the text, participate in small group or whole group discussions, and respond to literature using information from the text and make a connection to the text by adding their own experiences to the response because they find the text relatable.

Traditional School Curriculum

The current curriculum for schools is not made for people of color to succeed, especially not African American adolescent males. The current curriculum was created with various texts to show the majority (whites) as superior, the savior to other races, the people who are just the heroes, and victors in all situations. According to Yosso (2002), “Traditional schools curricula prepare white and upper/middle class students to make decisions and problem solve so that they can become leaders in the workplace” (p. 96). The current curriculum in most districts does not have materials for Black students to read that will help them become successful business owners or CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. The curriculum does not allow African American adolescent males living below the poverty line and/or reading below grade level to think bigger than becoming the best helper or the following behind a leader. African American adolescent males need a curriculum that reflects positive images of people who look like them, act like them, and go through the same problems in society they face so they can learn how to become a culturally competent member of society who can make conscious decisions about what is happening in the world around them.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum

Ladson-Billings (1995b) argues that children need to learn from a curriculum that is “culturally relevant” that will ensure the success of African American students. The components to ensuring success within the curriculum are focusing on student achievement in literacy and numeracy, cultural competence, and social consciousness. Students who can achieve academically will demonstrate it on standardized tests which is something that educators are evaluated on a district and state level. The second component, cultural competence, is something that African American students need to maintain their cultural identity, thus being able to succeed in academics as well as not being considered “acting white” for doing so. They also need to learn how to be socially conscious as well. They need to be able to identify and critique social inequities. Nieto (2010) believes that all schools need to “promote the education and achievement of all students, but particularly of students who too often are dismissed as incapable of learning and who consequently end up as dismal statistics of school failure” (p. 25). Schools must have a multicultural diverse curriculum for students of color from diverse backgrounds with educators using a pedagogy that will utilize what they learned from home and their own culture. Delpit (1988) states students of color need to have their voices heard in order to succeed in schools run by the majority. Minority educators voices need to be heard to help educators who are considered the majority that are unable to reach students of color find a way to help them become successful in school. If these changes are made within schools, especially schools with a large urban population, a multicultural curriculum and instruction will help African American adolescent males succeed academically.

Another approach would consist of how instruction of a lesson is presented to African American adolescent males. Kirkland (2011), conducted a study with an African American male in high school and found that the student was disengaged in a text because it did not grab his attention. The student had to read a novel on Beowulf and he thought it was so boring that he could not get into it. The teacher had him read the novel accompanied by worksheets, whole group discussions, and a movie about the book. When it was time for the student to take the test, he failed it. The teacher decided to use a different approach for the next novel (Illiad) to motivate him. He immersed the class in comic books for them to be able to make a connection with the novel. Afterward, the teacher had the students discuss themes to help anticipate the novel. When it was time to read the novel, the students were divided up into groups and created a comic book strip to explain the chapter they were responsible to present to the class. The delivery of instruction motivated the student to read the book and kept him engaged during each activity.

Skills and Strategies

Another approach that will help sustain African American adolescent males is teaching them skills and strategies to help them better comprehend various texts. Tatum (2000) argues that African American adolescent boys are reluctant to speak and participate in class discussions about text because they have “limited vocabularies, deficient decoding skills, and poor comprehension strategies” (p. 55). Whether the text is simple or complex, reading skills and strategies must be taught in order for them to be successful as readers. Skills such as decoding words, repeated reading to help with fluency, using context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words, drawing

inferences, making predictions, activating prior knowledge, and identifying cause and effect can put them in a position to spend more time with analyzing the text for a deeper understanding of the characters, plot, or setting. According to Anderson and Sadler (2009), “Contrarily, only one letter-word identification, one subtest of fluency, and comprehension demonstrated significant relationships to future reading achievement for African American males” (p. 338). Tatum (2000) noticed, “Students were taught decoding by analogy (‘Attacking the small puppies to get to the big dogs’) through direct instruction and by incorporating the strategy into purposeful reading and writing” (p. 57). Delpit (1988) mentions that skills should be taught according to a child’s level of understanding. She states that children who did not acquire certain reading skills and strategies at home will benefit from program-based lessons (Distar) that teachers at a slower pace to help students learn phonics and decoding skills than a faster paced program that could teach the same skill in a few lessons.

African American males have to be able to see books as something that value increases as they get older by learning skills that will guarantee they will comprehend texts easier which will make them skilled readers. It is necessary for African American adolescent boys to know how to read and understand the importance of knowing how to read. Rosenblatt (1982) states, “Reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (p. 268). In order for this transaction to work, certain things need to be in place for the reader. First, the reader needs to have the appropriate skills and strategies to comprehend a text. Another idea that would help is getting the reader motivated to read the text. Creating an anticipatory setting to give a reader some background information about a text can make them

interested in the material. It's also helpful to have the text based on their interest whether it ties into their Funds of Knowledge, hobbies, cultural identity, or something that involves current events in society. African American adolescent males tend to be more engaged in texts that cater to their interests or they can identify with culturally.

Conclusion

The next chapter will discuss the methods used for research duration of the study. It will also identify and describe the two boys who participated in the study. The chapter also provides a description of the context for the study.

Chapter III

Methodology

It's about the students. And it's about all of the people who will continue asking what is right with Black children instead of what is wrong. (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2019)

Method of Research

The research methodology for this study is a typical case using a qualitative approach to collect data about reading engagement with respect to larger beliefs about reading itself (Kirkland, 2011). Using qualitative research helps examine how choosing the right texts is central to advancing the literacy development of African American male adolescents (Tatum, 2008). Qualitative studies such as this study the use of culturally relevant texts and observe their interactions through discussions of the different texts they read. Shagoury and Miller (2012) state that observing students closely, analyzing their needs, and adjusting the curriculum to fit the needs of all students have always been important skills demonstrated by fine teachers. Qualitative research was best suited for this study to observe the boys in a classroom environment during class discussion to monitor their participation and responses after shared readings. Their written responses to reading were observed and assessed for understanding of comprehension skills and critical thinking about the text.

Procedure of the Study

The study was conducted from beginning of October to the end of November 2020 for approximately eight weeks. Data was collected after shared readings in class, through students' written responses to reading and their conversations after school. The

discussions for shared readings usually lasted 5-10 minutes. The conversations after school varied from 10-20 minutes once or twice a week depending where the student was half way through the text or finished. The procedure of the study is outlined below:

- Week 1: The Parental and Audiovisual Consent forms were signed by the parents. The details about the study were discussed with the parents and the students. The students were given surveys and questionnaires.
- Week 2: Students were administered the CRI pre-assessment to verify their current reading level. They read the first culturally relevant story, *Thank You, M'am*, with the class and shared their perspective of the story in the group discussion and during a one-one-conversation with the researcher. Notes were taken as the students spoke in the group discussion and one-on-one conversation with the researcher via audio recording.
- Week 3: Students read another culturally relevant book, *Trombone Shorty*, for independent reading and completed a written response to reading assignment for the book. Each student had an individual conversation about the book with the researcher. Notes were taken from the conversation via an audio recording.
- Week 4: Students began reading the book *Magic Trash: The Story of Tyree Guyton and His Art* during independent reading and discussed sections of the book one-on-one with the researcher.
- Week 5: Students finished reading the book *Magic Trash: The Story of Tyree Guyton and His Art* independently. The students completed a response to reading

assignment about the book. The students had a one-on-one conversation about the book with the researcher, captured in anecdotal notes.

- Week 6: Students read the poem *Mother to Son* with the researcher and shared their perspective of it in a one-on-one conversation with the researcher, captured in the researcher's anecdotal notebook.
- Week 7: Students read the story, *The Treasure of Lemon Brown* independently, and had a discussion about the story with the researcher sharing their perspectives and identifying different elements of fiction during the one-on-conversation with the researcher.
- Week 8: Students were assessed with the Critical Reading Inventory (CRI) at the end of the study to analyze the impact on their reading levels. Notes of findings were recorded in the researcher's journal.

Context

District. The Avandale Public Schools (pseudonym) is a district located in a southern New Jersey town in Atlantic County. The district has nine Pre K-8 schools, one pre-K-3 and pre K-4 school, and one high school. There are over 6,000 students who attend school in the district and over 400 teachers employed by the district. Avandale is a Title 1 school district that receives funding from the state for programs such as morning enrichment, after school tutoring, visual performing arts, S.T.E.M. and Saturday School. Due to Covid-19, many of these programs have been suspended since March 2020 because students are going to school remotely.

School. The New Hope School (pseudonym) is located in Atlantic County, New Jersey and serves students ages 4-14. The school has a total of 573 students in attendance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, they are all being taught virtually. A regular school day begins at 8:15 a.m. and ends 2:45 p.m. Since the students are learning remotely, the current school day begins at 8:15 a.m. and ends 12:45 p.m. The school is located in an urban area with the majority of the population is Black and Hispanic. Only two percent of the population is white and one percent of other ethnic backgrounds (Pakistani, Asian, etc.). The school is surrounded by housing projects and some row homes. Most of the people in the community are considered to be people whose self-reported income were in the lowest income bracket. After school programs are offered for grades Pre K-8 for language arts and math. The school offers other programs/clubs such as STEM, Visual Performing Arts (VPA), Chess Club, Art Club, Chorus, National Junior Honor Society, Man to Man, and Women of Distinction.

The average attendance is 50-60% and the school has begun initiatives this school year to increase the attendance rate by 10% in not just the building, but also in the district. Although the students are participating in remote learning, this plan is still in place for when the students come back to school for in-person learning. The students' state test scores for the reading and writing Spring 2018 PARCC assessment were low, with most of the students' scores ranging in Level 2 which is 700-724 (partially met expectations) or between 725-749 which is Level 3 (approached expectations). The demographics of the students are African American, Hispanic, Caucasian, and Asian. The gender percentage is 60% female and 40% male. About 15% of the students with disabilities are bused to school. About 30% of the students at the school have IEPs and

most of them are in an inclusion setting. Ninety percent of students receive free lunch, 5% are receiving reduced lunch, and 5% pay full price for their lunch.

The age range of the staff is between 27-52 where 50% are white, 40% are African American, and 10% are of other races. Most of the staff lives in or close to Atlantic County. Some of the staff lives at least 20 minutes away or further (Camden, Cumberland or Gloucester County). Most teachers have a Standard Certificate that allows them to teach in Grades PreK-3, K-5, K-6, or K-8. The teachers that work with Grades 6-8 have a specialized certification in their discipline such as Middle School English Language Arts, Middle School Mathematics, Middle School Social Studies, or Middle School Science. About half of the teachers in the building are new and other teachers have been in the building at least five years or more.

Participants

Students. The participants for this study are three African American male adolescent boys currently in the seventh grade. The boys just turned twelve-years old over the summer. Each participant is reading one or more grades below their current grade level. Before the selection of the text, the participants were given different reading assessments and surveys to assess how they felt about reading, what motivated them to read, and what skills/strategies they used to help them with reading. The following data was used to select the participants: the district's *iReady Reading Diagnostic Assessment*, *Reading Placement Test*, *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile reading survey*, *Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory survey*, and *Metacomprehension Strategy Index survey*. *The Critical Reading Inventory* passages were used to assess their comprehension levels as well.

The selection of the students for this study was based on electronic reading scores (iReady), reading placement assessment, and reading benchmarks from the previous school year. All seventh graders' scores were assessed; however, the focus for this study was on the African American adolescent males. The scores were analyzed based on their comprehension levels determined by grading rubrics for each assessment. If their scores fell below the standards for seventh grade, they were considered for the study. The students were also chosen based on their views about reading.

Three students whose data showed were not currently reading on grade level were selected for the study. Their behaviors in class when we read stories together, their participation, and their responses to reading were observed as well. The selection was also based on a few assessments they took during the first two weeks of school. The three students were asked one-on-one if they were interested in participating in the study that would help them improve in reading. They were eager to participate because they all said they needed help with reading and they wanted to learn how to become better readers.

After the students verbally agreed to participate in the study, each parent of the boys were called and asked if their son could participate in the study. The details of the study were explained to them and they were excited to have their son be part of the study. Due to the virtual nature of school, the researcher met with the parents in person to sign the Parental Consent Forms and answer any other questions they had about the study involving their child. Once all signed consent forms from the parents were received, the boys were given surveys and the CRI.

Unfortunately, during the course of this study, one of the boys decided to no longer participate. He completed the surveys, questionnaire, benchmarks, a culturally

relevant story and short book. While he started off eager to participate in the study, it became harder to meet with him and discuss the texts. He eventually stopped answering phone calls. When he was finally reached, he admitted he no longer wanted to participate in the study and his parents were notified of his decision. Ultimately, two African American adolescent males decided to complete the study.

Aaron (pseudonym) is a twelve-year-old African American adolescent male currently in the seventh grade; he just turned twelve in the summer. He loves football and hanging out with his family and friends. Due to COVID-19, he has been learning remotely since September. He logs into the school district's GoGuardian platform and interacts with the teacher and peers virtually. All communication with him has been through GoGuardian or the telephone. According to his responses on the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile* at the beginning of the study, Aaron categorizes himself as a person who reads okay but can use some help with reading strategies because sometimes he struggles with understanding the plot in a story. When he reads, these are a few of the genres he likes: realistic fiction, humor, and comic books. Out of all of his classes, he feels like reading a science textbook is the most difficult because it talks about certain things that are unfamiliar to him such as cells. He currently does not have a favorite book series, but he likes reading books about African American people who are relatable. In class, he can be observed reading a book he finds interesting on the computer screen. He will also participate in class to share his thoughts about a story. Sometimes he will blurt out an answer no matter whether it is correct or incorrect. Overall, he is a good student who puts forth effort to get his work done and get good grades.

James (pseudonym) is also a twelve-year-old African American adolescent male currently in the seventh grade and he enjoys reading books. He does not play sports and alternates visits between his mom and dad's house. He spends most of his time in the house playing video games. Due to COVID-19, he has been going to school virtually since September. He too logs into the school district's GoGuardian platform. All interactions with him have been through GoGuardian or the telephone. His favorite book series is *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and he has books at home. James' mother takes him to the library to borrow books and to a local bookstore to purchase books that he finds interesting. He also likes to read comic books. He understands that it is important to know how to read and views himself as a person who reads very well (*Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile*, 10/7/2020). One of the last books he read before the study was called *Minecraft* and he felt like the book was amazing to read. James prefers to stay in the house and play video games, but he will read for pleasure. In class, he was eager to answer questions about a text. He participated in class discussions often and shared personal experiences about a book to demonstrate how he connected to a book.

Types of Assessments Used for the Study

iReady Diagnostic Assessment. The iReady Diagnostic Assessment is a reading assessment the district requires to use for reading placement. It is a computerized assessment that determines a child's reading level based on these five domains: comprehension (literature and informational text), phonics, vocabulary, high frequency words, phonological awareness. It gives children grade level passages to read and answer questions based on how they scored on the initial diagnostic exam they take in

September. The initial exam reports their average Lexile level after combining how they did on these five domains.

Reading Placement Test. The Reading Placement Test is a general reading test I give each of my students at the beginning of the school year to determine their reading grade level as well. It is used to get an accurate assessment of the reading level and I use it to compare the score they received on the iReady assessment. Most of the time, the score they receive on this test coincides with the score on iReady. This assessment is composed of 56 multiple choice comprehension questions on informational and literature passages. The questions are divided into eight passages with seven comprehension questions and the passages cover content areas such as science, social studies, and language arts. James and Aaron's average score on this test ranged from 10-30, indicating their levels are between third and fourth grade.

Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Reading Survey. The Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile Reading Survey consist of 20 questions such as how does the subject feel about reading and how would they categorize themselves as a reader. The survey also consists of questions about specific books they recently read and share something about the book that made them like it so much. It also asks them about how much they read and how often they read by themselves or with other people.

Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory Survey. The Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory survey assesses what people do when they read academic text books or library books. It consists of 30 short statements that can be answered by a numeric choice from 1-5 with 1 being the least or something you never do and 5 being the highest which is something you always do. The questions

are grouped into categories such as Global Reading Strategies, Problem-Solving Strategies, and Support Reading Strategies. The purpose of this survey is to see what strategies the participants use and how often they use it when reading academic materials.

Metacomprehension Strategy Index Survey. The Metacomprehension Strategy Index Survey assesses things a reader does before they read a story, while they are reading a story, and after they read a story. The survey is broken into three sections with a total of 25 questions that focus on how you think when it is time to read a story. It asks questions like what is a good idea to do before you begin reading a story and what is a good idea to do after you read a story.

Critical Reading Inventory (CRI). The Critical Reading Inventory (CRI) was used to assess comprehension skills (critical responses, explicit, and implicit questions), recalling details, and fluency. They read narrative and informational passages based on their reading level scores from the iReady Diagnostic and Reading Placement Test. This assessment helped me determine what skills they already knew, what they did not, and what skills and strategies they need to learn to become better readers. These skills and strategies will help improve their reading levels.

Text Selection

I selected a few books they were on their grade level as well as books that were a grade level or two above their current grade level. The purpose of changing the reading level of books throughout the study was to determine if they could comprehend the text, but identify if their interest for reading culturally relevant texts motivated them to want to read it and keep them engaged while reading the text. I started with the story *Thank You, M'am* by Langston Hughes. This story was about a Black boy who tries to steal a Black

woman's purse but instead he learns a valuable lesson from the woman. The story was a shared reading I did with the entire class. The books I chose for them to read are *Trombone Shorty* and *Magic Trash: The Story of Tyree Guyton*. Each book Lexile level was between 500-600 which was their Lexile level based on iReady Diagnostic. I also chose these books because they were about and written by African American men. I wanted to share with them literature by men who looked like them and grew up in places similar to them. I also selected the poem *Mother to Son* by Langston Hughes and one story on seventh grade reading level *The Treasure of Lemon Brown* by Walter Dean Myers.

All of these selected texts were chosen because I believed after surveying the boys, they both would enjoy stories that they could culturally identify with and identify that African American men write books that can teach a lesson and inspire them to express themselves in various ways. Tatum's (2000) method of selecting texts, observing, and discussing books with the boys in his research was the format used to conduct the research. His choice of text differed because the boys he studied were older than the ones being observed for this research. Tatum's research with one African American teenage male allowed him to become more comfortable with reading text and become critically conscious.

Data Analysis

Data for the study was collected and coded using an inductive analysis (Creswell, 2002) to identify recurring categories. Over the eight week period, a coding method was used to analyze the frequency of the participants' motivation and engagement of the selected text. According to Shagoury and Miller (2012), coding is used to analyze data to

identify students' patterns in reading for participation or written response to reading. It can start with a simple plus and minus system that can lead to a tally chart for behaviors and patterns that can be identified by observing a student or analyzing their work. Categories were then triangulated across multiple data sources: A teacher's journal, anecdotal notebook, and audio recordings.

For this study, a coding sheet was used to log how many times the boys identified elements of fiction and nonfiction after reading during in their written responses to reading assignments. Common patterns identified were the use of retelling information such as recalling details, personal connections, opinions. Patterns that were identified often were recalling details about the books, stories, and the poem. The boys were able to verbally share themes the author of the different text tried to convey to them. The coding sheet consisted of a chart of tally marks with a line for every time they had mentioned different elements in their response to reading. For that week they received a tally mark in each column for retelling, personal connections, feelings, opinions, past experiences, and asked questions. If they were able to recall details about the story they received a check. The same analysis was used for personal connections; if they stated how they personally connected to the text and explained how it related to them, they received a tally mark. When they stated how the book, story, or poem made them feel, they received a tally mark for it. The same thing was recorded every time they made a connection with the book or story read to another text, they made a prediction about something that happened in the book or story, and stated a detail about the plot, setting, and characters. During the week they had multiple tally marks for everything they discussed in their response to readings for the texts.

Audio recordings were used as another source of data to analyze how frequently the boys comprehend and share their perspectives about the different texts they had to read during the study. Categories and themes emerged from the boys' discussions of their understanding of the text and information that stood out to them in the text. For instance, they may have discussed how the book reminded them of someone they knew or one of the characters reacted a certain way in a situation and they would have reacted the same way. If they share how they noticed different conflicts the characters faced, that information was written down in an anecdotal notebook. Since students were home during each of these conversations, they were listened to after the actual conversation and transcribed for key information that pertained to the study.

The researcher's journal and anecdotal notes were used to track progress of the students' participation during shared readings with their class and one-on-one discussions with the researcher. I wrote notes that reflected how the students were able to share their thoughts and feelings about the text. They were observed answering explicit (questions directly stated in text) and implicit (questions not directly stated in the text). A pattern of how they recalled details and connected to the text was identified with the information in the journal and cross analyzed with the data from the coding sheets and audio recordings. All of the data was used to analyze patterns of participation, how they understood the text, and identify reading skills in their response to readings and discussions with the group and the researcher.

Conclusion

The findings discovered over the course of this study are further explained in Chapter Four. Following this analysis, information on the limitations of the study as well as implications for future research are outlined in Chapter Five.

Chapter IV

Findings of the Study

Teachers who use a culturally responsive approach with their black male students understand their own culture in relationship to that of their students. They recognize that the failure of black boys in school does not truly represent who they are; instead, these teachers view failure or low levels of achievement as obstacles to overcome with committed, quality teaching.

(Alfred Tatum, 2005)

This chapter focuses on data collection that assisted in finding the impact of using culturally relevant texts to not only motivate and engage African American adolescent boys to read, but to improve their current reading levels. I began by surveying the boys to see what motivates them to read and strategies they use before, during, and after reading. Next, I administered a reading benchmark as a pre-assessment to indicate the boys' current reading levels. Then I selected different text that was culturally relevant (primarily text that was written by and about Black men). Then I assigned the texts to the boys to read. After they read the text, they completed a response to reading assignment for independent reading and had conversations with me about the text. Finally, I administered a post assessment to determine if reading culturally relevant text along with learning some reading skills and strategies helped improve their reading levels. The results are noted within each topic throughout this chapter.

Pre-Assessment of African American Male Students

Over the years, African American male students in my school read required texts that were part of the seventh grade curriculum such as *No More Dead Dogs* by Gordon

Korman and *The Lottery Rose* by Irene Hunt. In many cases, they read the text because they had to read it, not because they were interested in reading it. This often caused a lack of understanding, nonparticipation in our class discussions, and led to incomplete written assignments pertaining to the text.

Since the pandemic began in March, students have not been in school. However, before the pandemic, I had students in my class for ninety minutes every day. The students were able to read every day for 15-20 minutes and write about their reading in their Reader's Notebook for 10-15 minutes after reading. Students would share their responses to their reading with the class. Often I would give each student who completed the assignment (whether they did or did not share with the class) a participation grade for the day.

The purpose of trying to get African American Adolescent males to read is the recurring issue of a reading achievement gap between them and their white adolescent male counterparts. The statistics cited in Chapter 1 and 2 on the performance of African American males in middle and high school classrooms (Tatum, 2006) raised questions as I observed my own students during reading:

Why is this happening among African American middle school boys? What can be done to change this narrative? Why are they struggling to read grade-appropriate text? Why are they not able to infer? Is this something I should teach first and teach often? Are the texts just too complex for them to read? I noticed they had an issue with answering implicit questions on a passage I gave them from *Readworks*. (Research Journal 9/15/20)

I continued to notice these patterns in the students' responses during oral discussions and written responses to different texts within the first few weeks of school. Although these were skills the boys struggled with in class, it was clear they needed to learn strategies to help them understand these skills with motivating and engaging text on their current grade level. First, they needed to be assessed on the particular skills that contribute to their current reading levels and identify what types of literature interested them. A pre-assessment was conducted to aid me in selecting texts for them. As a result of the pre-assessments, the boys completed a *Critical Reading Inventory* (CRI) assessment to identify which skills they struggled with in reading and determine a reading level. As a result of these assessments, three boys were selected for the study. Although one boy dropped from study, two boys participated fully. In this chapter, I will provide a case study of both boys, Aaron and James (pseudonyms).

The focus of this study is not on these particular skills; however, I wanted to see if their reading levels would increase by the end of the study using culturally relevant texts with these skills within them. I tried to find culturally relevant books that were between both of their Lexile levels, interesting, and reinforce skills that they learned in class. I selected two books, a poem, and two stories. The titles of the selections were *Thank You, M'am* and *Mother to Son* by Langston Hughes, *Trombone Shorty* by Troy Andrews, *Magic Trash: The Story of Tyree Guyton and His Art* by J. H. Shapiro, and *The Treasure of Lemon Brown* by Walter Dean Myers. Each text was selected based on the boys' interest and main characters/real people that were African American. The boys were first introduced to a class shared reading of the story *Thank You, M'am* which they verbally

expressed they enjoyed reading; it showed during the class discussion and our one-on-one conversations about the story.

Participants

Aaron: a new perspective about reading. At the beginning of the study, Aaron (pseudonym) was reading on a third grade level. The CRI I administered to them, showed that Aaron scored an 80% on the Third Grade Narrative Passage and 70% on the Informational Passage. For the Narrative Passage, he scored a 3 out of 3 on the critical response questions, a 1 out of 3 for inference questions, and a 4 out of 4 on the text-based questions. On the recalling details section, he scored a 4 and for fluency a 100%. For the Informational Passage he was administered, he scored a 2 out of 4 on the inference questions, a 1 out of 2 for the critical response questions, and a 4 out of 4 on the text-based questions. Although his score was high in the text-based questions areas for both passages, Aaron could still benefit from inferring and thinking critically. Because he is in the seventh grade, he is required to read more complicated texts. He believes he is an okay reader who reads sometimes. In the reading survey I gave Aaron, he stated that he does not have a favorite book series nor does he like to read on his own often; however, he mentioned that he likes to read realistic fiction and comic books. He also shared in the survey that he has difficulty remembering details and reading for a long time.

I noticed in September that he did not really participate in class discussions and when he did, he blurted out incorrect answers. I have a block of time dedicated for independent reading each day where students are allowed to read a book of their choice silently for fifteen minutes and when time is up, they are required to complete an assignment based on a skill and identifying grammar from their book. On most days, I

allow the students to respond to their reading by recalling details about their book or just write how they feel about their book in terms of characters, conflict, or plot. I give this assignment every day except when we are doing a shared reading as a class. After reading, Aaron was responsible to read independently for fifteen minutes and write about his book afterward.

In September, he never completed a response about his book. He barely read books and the ones I saw him reading on the screen were books with simple sentences and appropriate for his instructional grade level. Since he was in class from home, I could not observe him reading and notice what strategies he used while reading in the way I would if he was sitting in the classroom with me.

In October, I began assigning culturally relevant books and stories for him to read. The first story we read was a shared reading with my class called *Thank You, M'am* by Langston Hughes. After reading this story, we had a class discussion recalling details about the text, inferring the character's thoughts and feelings, and theme of the text. He was so eager to share his perspective of the story and answer questions that I had to tell him to give other students a chance to respond. During the discussion, he blurted out, "The struggle over the purse was an external conflict because it was between two people, Mrs. Jones and Roger" interrupting one of the girls in the class who was going to answer. I had to inform him that he cut the other student off as soon as she began to speak, but this was an important moment because he knew what he was talking about and he was confident in his answer.

After this story, I assigned him a book to read titled, *Trombone Shorty* by Troy Andrews. He read it virtually during independent reading. This is a book about a young

black male who loves to play the trombone and he grew up and became a well-known trombone player in New Orleans. I picked it because it was a positive story of an African American man who loved doing something so much that he made his dreams into a reality. It is an inspiring story for African American adolescent males to read.

Afterwards, we had a discussion about this book one-on-one on our virtual platform, GoGuardian. He talked about how he enjoyed the book and it reminded him about how much he loves playing football. He also recalled details about the narrator's life from when he followed his brother around watching him play in a band with his friends to the narrator growing up to play in a band with Bo Diddley. For his Response-to-Reading Assignment he wrote:

So trombone shorty brother james had he's on band he was the leader he played the trumpet so loud you could hear him halfway across town and my friends and i would pretend to be in the band too. I loved the brass band with their own trumpets, trombones trumpets trombones saxophones, and the biggest brass instrument of them all. (Response to Reading 10/20/20)

Aaron is a struggling writer who makes a lot of grammatical errors; however, his reading response shows that he is reading the book and able to recall details stating how Trombone Shorty looked up to his brother James. He not only recalled details from the story, but he also connected to the character's experience. From this response, it is clear he noticed how the narrator had someone positive to admire. The image of a young, black male having a big brother to look up to symbolizes the importance of having a role model. Trombone Shorty does not mention how he looks up to a rapper, athlete, or a police officer. However, he looks up to his older brother who is doing something positive

and aspires to be just like him. Aaron did not write a lot of details about the book, but this is progress because he wrote something; in September, he was not writing responses in his journal at all.

He continued to complete assignments for independent reading and write about the same amount of information for his responses. After reading from a book titled, *Head Over Heels #1: First Dance* Aaron responded in writing:

So this girl named lola was so scared to go so her friend kizzie forced her to go in she tried to say that she had a drum lesson but she decide to go and she went and she seen some boy name cj that always smiles at her he came up to her and asked did she wanna dance she said yes then after there all she regretted going to the dance. (Independent Reading Assignment 10/26/20)

In this response, he recalled a few more details about the text than he did with the previous response to reading. He noticed how the girl is not interested in going to the school dance until a boy she has a crush on asks her to the dance. His inference shows how a boy can do something small like smile at you and it can have an affect on the character. This may help him infer why a girl that likes him acts a certain way when he is around her. It was great to see him writing responses for independent reading as opposed to not writing anything and getting zeros for classwork because he was only participating in class discussions.

The more he read the culturally relevant texts and had one-on-one discussions with me, the more his confidence grew in his writing. Aaron's confidence showed how he could articulate himself when he answered questions; he knew the answers. The tone of his voice was not sheepish or uncertain; he spoke with confidence. He was also engaged

in sharing during class discussions and no longer blurted out wrong answers. This showed me how engaged he was in the shared readings with the class. He talked over other students sometimes to get his answers out or he would say something at the same time as another student. I would often have to say to him, “Wait...let him speak first then you can respond.” He was so excited to know the answers and comprehend the stories that he could have a discussion about the text with me all by himself.

Other areas where I noticed he was progressing in reading was his personal connections he made with the text. In the discussion we had after reading *Trombone Shorty*, he shared with me how he was able to connect to the text because the love the author had for playing the trombone made him think about the love he has for playing football. In my journal, I wrote about this moment because it stood out to me.

During a brief conversation with Aaron, he had a lot to say about the book, *Trombone Shorty*. He talked about the author and how playing the trombone was something he enjoyed doing. He connected it to how he loves playing football. He also discussed how the author’s life changed once he went on tour with Bo Diddley. (Research Journal 10/22/20)

He continued to talk about how he never been to New Orleans but he knows that people play music in streets out there. He rated the book a 10 because he liked how the author loved music and playing the trombone. He also liked that it was about a successful, young African American man.

We also read Langston Hughes’ poem *Mother to Son*. After reading the material, he was able to recall details better, state the theme, and have engaging conversations

about each text. One conversation that demonstrated his understanding of the text and engagement was the poem, *Mother to Son*.

- Ms. Wood: Who's talking to who in this poem.
- Aaron: The mother is talking to the son.
- Ms. Wood: Right...right. And when you hear "I've been climbin'...I've reachin' and landin' and goin' honey, what race do you think they are...the mother and son?"
- Aaron: Black
- Ms. Wood: Why do you say that?
- Aaron: By the way they talking and stuff. It's like she said to him...she's been climbing to get where she is and she ain't done climbing until she get where she is to reach her goal and stuff.
- Ms. Wood: What do you think the message of this poem is from the mother to her son?
- Aaron: She's teaching to never give up...sometimes she had to go in the dark where you get no light so boy you don't turn back and stuff. Like that what she was saying.
- Ms. Wood: Ummm hmmm...yes.
(Audio Recording One-on-One Conversation 11/18/20)

In this exchange, he was able to state how life has been hard for her, she encourages her son to be strong and never give up no matter how hard life can be at times. Aaron shared how this poem is relevant today because it can help somebody to be encouraged and to keep moving in life even when things get hard.

Aaron's more frequent responses to his reading were evident in his digital reader's notebook. Looking at the frequency of his responses supports further Aaron's increasing interest

in reading while focused on culturally relevant texts (Table 1).

Table 1

Tally of How Many Times Aaron Responded to Reading

Aaron's Reading Journal Response Information (Digital Reader's Notebook)

| Name | Week of 10/5/20 | Week of 10/12/20 | Week of 10/19/20 | Week of 10/26/20 | Week of 11/2/20 | Week of 11/9/20 | Week of 11/16/20 |
|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Retelling Only | II | II | II | I | | I | I |
| -Personal Connection | | I | | | | I | I |
| -Feelings | | | I | | | I | |
| -Opinion | I | I | I | I | | | |
| -Past Experience | | I | | | | I | |
| -Asked questions | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Text Connections | II | II | II | I | | I | I |
| -Another Text | | I | I | | | | I |
| -Predictions | | I | | | | | |
| -Setting | I | I | I | | | | I |
| -Plot | | I | I | | | | I |
| -Characters | II | II | II | I | | I | I |
| -Conflict | | I | I | I | | I | I |
| -Theme | | I | | | | | I |
| -Connect to Self | | I | | | | | I |

During each week he completed at least one or two responses to reading in his digital notebook. Each time he wrote a response for retelling the text, he recalled details, made a personal connection to the text, shared his feelings and opinions about something

that he read from the text. He also made connections to the text by connecting it to another text, making predictions, mentioned information about the plot and setting of his book, discussed conflict, and stated the theme of a text. Our conversations about different text is when he shared a lot of information that demonstrated his understanding of each book he read. There was a week where did not complete a response to reading; however during the study, he remained consistent with writing something in a notebook that allowed me to know he was engaged in the text and he had something to share about it as opposed to writing nothing at all.

Throughout the study, Aaron became more motivated to read books about African American people for independent reading. He truly enjoyed the selections and he wanted to continue reading more books about African Americans because he felt they were more interesting and relatable such as *Zeely* by Virginia Hamilton, *Scorpions and Slam* by Walter Dean Mosley, and *One the Come Up* by Angie Thomas. Every time he finished a book, he sent me a message saying, “Ms. Wood, can you find me another book to read?” Hopefully, he will find more culturally relevant books to read on his own in and out of school. I also hope he will continue to be engaged in class discussions and share his responses to reading in written form as well as verbally. His reading level did improve from third to fourth grade by the end of the study based on the CRI assessments which is explained further in the section about both of the boys.

James: leave the details to me. James (pseudonym) is an eager young African American adolescent male who enjoys reading. He started the study reading on a fourth grade level. James scored a 50% on the Fourth Grade Level Narrative Passage and 40% on the Informational Passage. For the narrative passage, he scored a 1 out of 3 on the

critical response questions, a zero for the inference questions, and a 4 out of 4 on the text-based questions. For the recalling details section, he scored a 1 and for fluency a 100%. On the Informational Passage, he scored a 1 out of 4 on the inference questions, a 1 out of 2 for the critical response questions, and a 2 out of 4 on the text-based questions. He would definitely benefit from books that involve him to think critically and infer. He struggled mostly with critical thinking and inferring questions. Although his pre-assessment scores were low, he stated that he likes to read often. He shared that his mother takes him to the library to borrow books and she takes him to the bookstore to buy books so he reads in school and at home. He also shared with me on a reading survey that his favorite book series is *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. He also shared in the survey that he has difficulty remembering details.

During our independent reading block, he selected chapter books to read. *Bluford Audio* and *Epic Books* are the two sites he uses the most to read books on since he is one of my fully remote students. When I asked James would he like to participate in the study, he was excited because he said he likes to read different books and reading books about people who look like him sounds interesting. In class, he is one of the few people that raises his hand to answer questions and shares his perspective about the text. Sometimes during whole group discussions, I have to ask him to give other students a chance to answer the question because he is so eager to share everything he learned about the text after reading. Throughout the duration of the study, he read culturally relevant texts that consisted of a mix of books, short stories, and a poem.

The first story we read was *Thank You, M'am* and it was a shared reading with the class. He was able to recall details but he had trouble determining the race of the

characters. James was able to comprehend the plot and share a lesson he felt the author was trying to convey to readers. During our one-on-one conversation, I revisited the conversation about the characters' race and went in depth about his response. We also discussed the reading skills in the story for plot and conflict.

Ms. Wood: When we started talking about ethnic backgrounds, you said they're possibly white. Why did you think they were white?

James: I was going off of what you said.

Ms. Wood: Ok. So honestly what did you think their race was?

James: Honestly, I thought they were Black.

Ms. Wood: Why do you say that?

James: Cause a White person would never do that. A White person would have just take the person to the police station without any hesitation.

Ms. Wood: Really? Was there any other indicators that made you believe this was a story about Black people, involving Black people?

James: Sometimes Black kids are homeless. I realize some not all kids can be homeless. Mostly the White kids...no the Black kids are homeless. That's what I got off of that too.

Ms. Wood: Was there anything else in the text that indicate whether this had to be a Black woman or this had to be Black boy in the story?

James: The way that Ms. Jones stated her name. No one else in the world would state their full name like that.

Ms. Wood: Really? Because the way she stated her name made you think that?

James: The way she said her whole name out of nowhere.

Ms. Wood: Well she didn't say her name out of nowhere.

She said it like you're going remember me because
You bumped into me. You came in my world and
I was minding my own business--

James: Yeah and then you messed up!

Ms. Wood: Yeah. Was there anything else about the
story you may have liked or disliked?

James: I was very...the one conflict that was really exciting was
when he had to debate whether he was going to run away or
stay and wash his face and like clean up. I think that was
one of the good parts cause in a situation like that...that's a
hard situation right there. If the story could have play out
differently he could have ran and have got the cops called
on him. He decided to play it smart and follow what she
said so he wouldn't get the cops called on him.

Ms. Wood: Ok that's true, he could have done that. Remember you
said it was a lot of conflicts in there too. Like the one
you said about whether he had the choice
to decide whether to run or stay.
What type of conflict is that? Would it be internal or
external?

James: That would be internal because he had to make
that decision himself.

Ms. Wood: How do you feel about stories that involving
Black people where they are the main characters
or the only characters?

James: I like it a whole lot!
(Audio Recording One-on-One conversation 10/15/20)

James had a lot to share about the story and how African American
characters are interesting to him. He also was able to explain the difference
between internal and external conflict and follow the plot of the story. He
understood moments in the story where Mrs. Jones and Roger had struggled over
her purse which was an external conflict and when Roger was trying to decide

whether to stay with Mrs. Jones' or run as an internal conflict. He also gave a critical response to Mrs. Jones's decision to keep the police out of the situation and changed the outcome of the story. In an entry after this story, I reflected on the changes I was already noticing in my students, including Aaron and James:

Today was a beautiful day! My lesson went way better than expected in terms of engagement! Today I did a shared reading of a culturally relevant text with my students titled, "Thank You, M'am" by Langston Hughes. Majority of my students are African American and their engagement with the story was astounding! Although the story takes place in 1950s Harlem, New York, they were able to connect with the characters (Roger and Mrs. Jones).

My boys (especially the ones that are a part of my research study) couldn't wait to answer questions about the story, share perspectives, and analyze the text for internal and external conflicts. The girls were engaged and participating as well, but my boys (especially my Black boys) were all into it. I can't wait to see how he responds to the other culturally relevant texts I have lined up for him to read. (Research Journal 10/15/20)

Next, James read *Trombone Shorty* and recalled similar information about the book as Aaron. He made more of a personal connection with the book and shared how he knew somebody from his neighborhood that was in a band when he was younger living in Delaware. He also mentioned how the narrator looked up to his brother by wanting to be in a band just like him when he became older. In James's response to reading about the book he stated:

In my book Trombone shorty the story is about a boy name Troy Andrews by singing a trombone and he starts singing, and he tells us that they have their own way living in New Orleans and then Troy tells us James his brother loved music as much as he did. Then Troy explained to us he loves brass band music as well, and when he eats gumbo he wanted his music to sound like musical gumbo. Then Troy and his friends then when he went to school he was called tomboy shorty then one day Troy got to perform in front of a crowd of people and he was happy to do it and he did perfect singing and he loved it as well and the good part was Troy got to play with Bo Diddly. (Independent Reading Assignment 10/20/20).

James' response is more detailed and descriptive about Troy and his love for instruments. He also mentioned how Troy was able to perform in front of a crowd and was excited to do something he enjoyed. James stated how these parts of the book stood out to him. Something he could take away from the book is you can grow up being happy by doing something you love. In this particular book, the narrator started having a love for instruments and wanting to play in a band like his older brother to be recognized by a famous musician. Troy toured around the world with Bo Diddley and he was so happy to do something he loved since he was a kid. He became a famous musician himself and continued to support his hometown of New Orleans by hosting concerts for the local residents. James shared in a conversation about the book that you can get paid and be happy by doing something you enjoy.

James' response to reading *The Chosen* reveal his increasing ability to recall details:

In my book The Choosen [sic] chapter 4, Darcy is on her way to meet up with Hakeem at the park because Hakeem wanted to talk to her about something. Then Darcy remembered how last year Tarah Cooper and Hakeem joined a group of blueford students to clean up the park they had to remove trash repaint the seesaws sweeping up broken bottles and washing away graffiti. Hakeem is being sweet to Darcy and Darcy is being sweet to Hakeem, but then Hakeem tells Darcy that Cooper is acting differently and Darcy now realizes that as well. Hakeem is trying to tell darcy something but its hard for him so he plays a video for her, after Hakeem gave Darcy her gift she felt so excited. (Response to Reading 10/16/20)

Clearly, James articulated details about his book despite the grammatical errors.

Throughout the study, he wrote his responses with more details about the characters and plot. Later that month, he responded to reading and recalls details by discussing the character, plot, and setting. He wrote more information in this response that showed he understands and was very engaged in his book:

In my book The chosen chapter 5, Darcy is about to go to collage and she feels kinda nervous, and her Aunt Chorrlate told her that these students got chosen because they were the top students. While Aunt Chorrlate is driving Darcy to the place she has to go to collage and she keeps talking about the successful about this school and about the world,then Darcy realizes that her Aunt Chorrlate is going to be with her when she walks into that collage today.Once Darcy walked in she was curious about everything in that place so she reads all the signs to find what happens in this school.Once Darcy found out what everything was here she thought it was cool and decided to walk around here,after they all sit down they

start listening to Mr's Davis, and now they are gonna be in different groups. Then Darcy and a few other students state their names and what they love and are afraid of, after they got their phone numbers and plan to meet up in 2 weeks Darcy still has questions she wants answers to. (Response to Reading 10/19/20)

James' responses progressed as he read more books in class and during the study. He was able to have detailed conversations with me about his books and the more he shared, the more he wrote in class about his books. He may have many grammar errors, but it did not take away from his context. There were moments during the study where he shared his interest in the Bluford Series books and how those were the only books he wanted to read because he liked the characters and the events that happened to them in the text because he said those are things that could really happen to a person.

Throughout the study, James continued to read culturally relevant text via *The Bluford Series* books. Some days when I wanted him to read the books I assigned to him for the study, he asked me if he read it after he finished reading his chapter book which surprisingly is on a middle school level. However, the books are on audio and he is able to listen to them so that helps a lot with making it easier to follow and understand.

Looking at the frequency of James responses, it is clear that unlike Aaron, he wrote responses to reading daily (Figure 2). He did not have a problem with writing his responses and he liked to discuss everything he read as well.

Table 2

Tally of How Many Times James Responded to Reading

James' Reading Journal Response Information (Digital Reader's Notebook)

| Name | Week of 10/5/20 | Week of 10/12/20 | Week of 10/19/20 | Week of 10/26/20 | Week of 11/2/20 | Week of 11/9/20 | Week of 11/16/20 |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Retelling Only | III | III | III | IIII | I | III | III |
| -Personal Connection | II | II | II | III | | I | II |
| -Feelings | | I | I | | | I | |
| -Opinion | II | II | I | II | | I | |
| -Past Experience | | I | | | | | |
| -Asked questions | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Text Connections | II | III | III | III | I | II | III |
| -Another Text | | I | II | I | | I | |
| -Predictions | II | II | I | | | I | I |
| -Setting | II | I | I | I | | II | II |
| -Plot | I | I | | II | | I | I |
| -Characters | III | III | III | III | II | | |
| -Conflict | | I | II | I | | I | II |
| -Theme | | I | | | | | |
| -Connect to Self | I | I | II | | | I | II |

James always writes details about his books. He will share how he made a connection to his book, how he feels about it, and share his opinion of his book. Under the Text Connections section, he frequently talks about the characters in most of his responses, the plot, settings, and conflict.

Post-Assessment: Aaron and James

Toward the end of the study, the boys took a post assessment for the word list and their reading levels. Each one showed growth and their scores increased on the levels of comprehension and inferring. These are skills that were taught immensely in class through close readings. They had to recall details daily to show they comprehended different text. For the post-assessment, I gave them a narrative and informational passage on a grade level higher than the pre-assessment. They also were given the CRI Word List; the scores stayed the same for the word list assessment. Aaron was still instructional on a 5th grade level and James was instructional on a 6th grade level. Aaron scored a 90% on the Fourth Grade Narrative Passage, but a 60% on the Informational Passage. For the narrative passage, he scored a 3 out of 3 on the critical response questions, a 2 out of 3 for inference questions, and a 4 out 4 on the text-based questions. On the recalling details section, he scored a 3 and for fluency a 99%. For the Informational Passage, he scored a 2 out 4 on the inference questions, a 2 out of 2 for the critical response questions, and a 2 out of 4 on the text-based questions. From the pre-assessment to the post assessment, he showed growth with the narrative passage and inferring on a fourth grade level. He scored lower on the informational passage, but he was tested on a higher grade level. Some growth was still evident in certain areas from one assessment to the other assessment.

James scored a 100% on the Fifth Grade Level Narrative Passage and 80% on the Informational Passage. For the narrative passage, he scored a 3 out of 3 on the critical response questions, a 3 out of 3 for inference questions, and a 4 out 4 on the text-based questions. For the recalling details section, he scored a 3.5 and for fluency a 98%. On the

Informational Passage, he scored a 3 out of 4 on the inference questions, a 2 out of 2 for the critical response questions, and a 3 out of 4 on the text-based questions. He showed tremendous growth on both assessments indicating he can read on a fifth grade level after being exposed and taught with culturally relevant texts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both boys showed progress after being exposed to culturally relevant text and being taught different reading skills using them. The next chapter will outline conclusions and implications from the study. In addition, it will also discuss suggestions for further research.

Chapter V

Conclusions

Aaron was so engaged in the lesson today. He was calling out answers without waiting to be called on and talking over students because he knew the answers. I had to correct him twice because his answers were incorrect. However, that did not stop him from answering more questions and participating in the class discussion. His confidence has grown immensely from September. I am amazed that he has completed more assignments now than he did two months ago and he feels more comfortable to ask questions when he does not understand the assignment. I am so proud of him! James has been consistent with the exception of his response to reading. He has become a more detailed writer with his response to reading assignments and it pleases me that he has made progress with it and I know this will help him become a better writer. Overall, these past two months have taught me so much about teaching literacy to middle school boys. That is how I feel! It has taught me to have more individual discussions with my boys to see how they interpret a text. It also taught me how to motivate them to read; catering to their interest or helping them make connections to a text is essential to understand the material. I believe we all learned from each other during this study and I am looking forward to seeing how they grow as readers this school year. (Research Journal, 11/24/20)

This chapter contains the findings of the study and conclusions that can be made based on the findings of this research. Also, the chapter will discuss implications and

suggestions future researchers should consider for this topic. The chapter will conclude with final thoughts about the study.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify if using culturally relevant books would help motivate and engage African American adolescent males who read below grade in the seventh grade to read and improve their reading levels. The culturally relevant text used to motivate and engage the boys helped them become better readers, more detailed writers when they had to respond to their reading, and more eager to participate and/or lead group discussions about the text after reading. The boys became better readers over the duration of the study when we had one-on-one conversations, as seen in the way they recalled details about the books, poem, and stories. Before the study, Aaron never turned in his response to reading assignments. By the end of the study, he started completing the assignments. James started writing more details about the characters and conflicts he read in his book. After each book, the students participated in the class discussions by raising their hands to answer questions. Sometimes they would lead the class discussion by summarizing the story they read with the class. Their reading levels increased at least by one grade level based on the *Critical Reading Inventory* assessments. While the purpose of this study was not to present a causal link, the progress made by the boys in these areas was due in large part to the reading of culturally relevant books, discussing the books one-on-one, identifying reading skills, and using reading strategies to help them better understand texts.

Conclusions of the Study

Ultimately, the goal of this study was to see if books with African American characters or people that faced the same issues they face at home, in their community, or society would motivate them to read, keep them engaged, and help them better comprehend texts. In order to determine if this would be possible, I researched particular texts and ways to see how to motivate them to read and keep them engaged in the various types of culturally relevant texts. The methodological approaches to collecting and analyzing data as well as the instructional plans were influenced by past and current research on adolescent male literacy.

The research conducted revealed the effectiveness of culturally relevant texts to motivate and engage African American adolescent males to read. The study also showed how the boys increased their reading strategies and skills. Tatum (2006) suggests teachers can engage African American adolescent males by selecting appropriate reading materials to students who have not mastered the skills, strategies, and knowledge that would lead to positive outcomes. The boys in this study had different perspectives on reading. James liked to read because he was exposed to books in and out of school. In his household, his parents emphasized that reading is important so he would take trips with his mom to the library to borrow books. Sometimes she would take him to the bookstore to purchase books to read. On the other hand, Aaron did not favor reading in school nor did he read books at home. He read books at school when it was required, but he said they were often difficult to understand. The boys enjoyed the texts selected for the study, however, and continued to pick similar books to read during independent reading in class. Clearly, reading books about their own experience increased their engagement in

continuing to read. For the pre and post CRI, they both increased by one grade level above their current reading level. For the pretest, Aaron was instructionally reading on a third grade level and James was instructionally reading on a fourth grade level. At the end of the study, the boys took a post-test inventory benchmark. Aaron was instructional on a fourth grade level and James was instructional on a fifth grade level. While these gains cannot be attributed solely to the instructional approaches and culturally relevant texts, the boys made clear gains I have not witnessed when teaching the traditional curriculum.

In addition, the boys became more engaged in class discussions after shared readings. During the study, the boys were assigned different texts to read followed by a discussion about the text. Each time the boys answered questions or shared their perspectives about the texts, they became more confident in their responses. This was exhibited in class and it showed how they progressed over the course of two months. Tatum (2008) states that text African American boys often read texts that are above their reading level and the way they are structured can interrupt meaning engagement with the texts. If the texts are too difficult to read, they will become frustrated while reading, lack comprehension, and result in not being able to make a connection. Conversing after reading a text was essential to assess their understanding and build their confidence to articulate their responses about the texts they were required to read for the study and in class.

Another conclusion is that both boys were able to transfer the skills and strategies they were taught throughout the study in their written responses to reading. The boys recalled details about the text, they made personal connections to the text, connected it to another text, or to the world. They shared their opinions and different elements of fiction

(character, plot, setting, and conflict). Tatum (2000) stated students that develop strategies to assist them with writing responses to reading it will reduce embarrassment and build their confidence. Once they can identify and explain the skills they are taught, using the skills to write a response to reading will become less intimidating. Tatum (2008) also states that vital signs of reading provide necessary tools such as comprehension monitoring and summarizing techniques are needed for students to be able to handle text independently. Aaron demonstrated this skill in his writing. He started in September not responding to his readings at all to writing about what he read using multiple skills he learned in class and during our one-on-one discussions about the culturally relevant texts. The progress of the boys over a two month period resulted from integrating literacy skill instruction in culturally relevant texts. One-on-one instruction in this study played a factor in their success. The skills Aaron and James learned during their individual sessions helped them a lot during class. As a result, Aaron and James grew in the areas of motivation, engagement, and reading levels.

Implications

Clearly, books and other texts that are culturally relevant for African American adolescent males need to be included in a school's curriculum. Yosso (2002) stated a Critical Race Curriculum would involve five tenants that include challenging racism and other forms of subordination, providing students with language to oppose unjust issues in society, empower the community to combat racism, sexism, and homophobia in education, lead a movement toward being critically conscious in and out of the classroom, and use the strengths of different critical frameworks to work toward social justice. According to Tatum (2006), a school's curriculum plays a significant part in

improving the outcome for African American males in literacy, the “specific texts and text characteristics that should inform the curriculum selection are strikingly absent” (p. 45). Changing the curriculum can help students become connected with books and multimodal media because they can relate to it culturally. Students can learn about social injustices by reading material that discusses issues within their community or in the country.

During the study, one of my participants decided that he no longer wanted to be part of the study. He was frustrated about having to read the text and he did not want help from me anymore. He stated that he knew how to do everything I was showing him. However, this attitude projected onto his classwork. He stopped completing his assignments in all of his classes. He became disengaged in class lessons and when I tried to talk to him about his behavior, he refused to speak with me. It is unfortunate that he decided to not participate in the study anymore because he could have benefited from many of the strategies the assessments he did take showed he did not know. For instance, on the CRI, his retelling score of a narrative and informational passage on a third grade level was a 2. His comprehension scores were 60% on the narrative passage and 50% on the information passage. He was unable to answer the inferring and text-based questions on narrative assessment. On the informational passage, he answered all of the inference questions incorrectly. This was a skill I worked on with the boys in class and during the study. This boy’s experience has implications for the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy being integrated into the middle school curricula. He would have benefitted from intense one-on-one instruction on inferring with the different texts I selected because this skill was in each one. Conversely, the other two boys completed the study

and thrived in the process. If educators are truly interested in decreasing the reading achievement gaps of African-American boys, then the opportunity gaps must be addressed as well.

This study has shown the effectiveness of integrating culturally relevant texts in the curriculum and could benefit other educators and anyone in the field of education inquiring about how to decrease the reading achievement gap among African American adolescent males. Using culturally relevant teaching and texts helped the boys in the study become more motivated to read books and engaged in class. The reading skills and strategies they learned helped improve their reading levels by one grade. Although this would be a great way to help African American adolescent males who struggle in reading succeed, many educators in urban districts with a high population of African American male students may be unaware or will not take into consideration when selecting text materials.

There are a few reasons why many educators do not utilize this method of instruction to teach African American adolescent males. For instance, they may not know how to incorporate these texts into the classroom instruction and need professional development. Tatum (2008) suggests that educators seek professional development in order to provide literacy instruction to African American male students by shaping educational context characterized by caring, commitment, competence, and culpability will benefit adolescents. Educators that gain knowledge of how to African American adolescent males will help them become motivated to read and engage in their selected text. Culturally relevant teaching is essential to ensuring the success of African American students, especially African American adolescent males. Ladson-Billings (1995c) states,

“that culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students’ academic needs, not merely make them feel good” (p. 160). Educators have to adapt a mindset to approach teaching them in a way that will keep their cultural identity and maintain academic excellence.

Another reason why using culturally relevant teaching and texts to educate African American adolescent males is not being incorporated in the classroom is because most teachers follow the curriculum given by their school district. Some may argue that it takes a lot of time to find material to substitute the text already provided in the curriculum. Most educators shy away from teaching outside of the curriculum in fear of being reprimanded by administrators. It is easier for them to play it safe and follow the guide given to them at the beginning of the school year. Yosso (2002) states that current curricula are designed to teach students a “traditional, Eurocentric version of history” and does not have texts that allow students access to text that does not put White people experiences as the norm (p. 94). However, if educators can break away from the normal curriculum and find material that will be culturally relevant and develop a pedagogy that supports teaching culturally relevant texts, it can change African American adolescent males reluctance to read.

Some may still argue that using culturally relevant texts will not determine whether an African American adolescent male will be more motivated to read and become engaged in texts. Some educators believe if you teach reading skills and strategies, it does not matter what they read their reading levels will improve automatically. Scieurba (2014) stated African American children’s success in reading does not depend on reading culturally relevant texts but text that solely interests them will

contribute to their reading success. She mentions how assuming boys of color “gravitate exclusively toward text that mirror them does not sufficiently honor the complexities of racial/ethnic or gender identities, nor does it consider the complexities of the very act of reading and responding to text” (p. 309). However, in her qualitative study, she had two African American adolescent males in the seventh grade. Both boys had different perspectives of reading relevant texts. One boy stated he was able to identify with culturally relevant text by seeing himself in the Black male protagonist while the other boy could not see himself in the Black male protagonist, but liked reading about how he persevered through his tough situation. Although her argument was to prove African American adolescent boys do not necessarily need to read books about characters who look or face similar issues as themselves, they still benefit from reading a culturally relevant text because it motivate the boys to read more and kept them engage in the text to have an in-depth conversation about the book after reading it. The two boys in this study are certainly examples of this.

Limitations

Throughout the study, there were some limitations that could have impacted the study’s results. In March 2020, all schools in southern New Jersey closed down due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Schools shut down from March through November because of the danger of COVID-19, a contagious respiratory disease. The school where the study was conducted was fully remote for the students in September but the teachers had to report to the building Monday through Thursday and work remotely on Fridays for the custodial staff to perform a deep cleaning of the building. Teachers use a technology platform called GoGuardian to call students and talk to them for live instruction. The

students were not allowed in the school building for any reason. The public library was only open for limited hours, mostly during school. Teachers had to stay in the building until 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday and logged into their computer until 3 p.m. on Fridays. All of these changes made it difficult to meet with the participants of the study in person. Meeting in person could have provided more authentic and rich conversations about the stories and books.

Another change that occurred during the course of this study was one of the boys decided they no longer wanted to participate in the study. Anthony (pseudonym), a seventh grade African American adolescent male, initially agreed to participate in the study when asked and his mom was excited for him to be a part of it. He started out okay the first two weeks of the study. Then he began to not read the selected text when asked. He stopped doing his classwork and when it was time to have a discussion about one of the texts, he admitted he no longer wanted to participate in the study. He stated he does not like reading or writing. It is not for certain, but it is possible that the remote nature of school impacted his decision not to continue. As a result, his unique perspective and benefits from the study were lost.

Last, the one-on-one approach in this study may have impacted the gains the boys made. I recognize that not all middle schools make room for this type of instruction in their school schedules.

Suggestions for Future Research

More longitudinal studies are needed to show the impact of engaging African-American boys in culturally relevant texts. The current study could have been expanded over a course of eight months. The purpose of conducting the study for eight months

instead of two months could help with research by understanding various texts to select to keep African American boys motivated and engaged to read. More skills the boys needed to learn would have been identified and taught if there was more time to conduct the study. Tatum (2000) suggests that “using culturally relevant literature is key to a culturally relevant approach” (p. 53). Culturally relevant texts are essential when you use a culturally relevant pedagogy to teach African American children in general because it is easier for them to connect with the literature and use their Funds of Knowledge to comprehend the different texts.

Another suggestion for future research would be to focus on all middle school African American adolescents who struggle in reading. This study can be applied to African American female and male students by selecting texts that they are able to identify with culturally. Use a pedagogy relatable to them and teach them strategies to comprehend the text. Ladson-Billings (1995c) stated “culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161). There are African American female and male students who struggle in reading and choose not to read required classroom texts for various reasons. A few reasons may include: the book is too complex for them because they are reading on a lower level, they do not know reading strategies to help them understand the text, or it’s just not interesting to them and they can not connect to it. If research is conducted on African American female adolescent students who struggle in reading using this method, it can motivate them to read and keep them engaged.

A final suggestion would be to change the text selections required to teach certain state standards and strands in a school’s curriculum to culturally relevant texts that would cover the same standards and strands. This way the strands would be taught with a text or

material that would keep African American adolescent males' interest. As a result, keeping them motivated and engaged will have them participate in class discussions because they will have something to contribute to the conversation and written responses to reading.

Final Thoughts

In summary, using culturally relevant texts to motivate and engage African American adolescent males in reading was successful because the boys enjoyed reading the text selected that resulted in them wanting to read more books about people who look and faced similar experiences like them. The reading skills and strategies they were taught along with reading the texts helped them gain confidence because they were able to articulate their responses with details and evidence from the text during one-on-one discussions. It also helps them with contributing to the whole group discussions in class after shared readings of different literature. The boys were able to articulate their responses and perspectives about texts in their written work for responses to reading as well. Their reading levels improved by one grade level as a result of reading culturally relevant texts. After conducting this study, I realized how beneficial it is to introduce students to culturally relevant texts. I will request for more books like the ones I used in the study to be added to my classroom library and use some of them for novel studies to my students in the future. I hope my research will inspire educators to move outside of their comfort zone and incorporate reading and suggesting culturally texts that will motivate African American adolescent males in their class to read more often. Exposing them to culturally relevant texts will help change the narrative and possibly decrease the reading achievement gap among African American adolescent males and remove some of

the opportunity gaps these students experience in the curriculum. Educators must start using a culturally diverse selection of texts and schools districts need to change their curriculum to help motivate and engage African American adolescent males.

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