

Culturally responsive literacy motivation through diverse children's literature

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Abstract

This paper describes the implementation of a high-intensity reading tutoring intervention program using culturally responsive literacy practices centered on diverse children's literature intended to uplift the needs and priorities of primary grade students experiencing literacy learning challenges. First, we present a critical review of the research on student literacy motivation and student identity. Next, we propose a culturally responsive literacy motivation model that reconceptualizes student literacy motivation through culturally responsive literacy practices and literacy identity dimensions. We provide qualitative findings from tutor and student participants that reflect interconnections between dimensions of student literacy identity and literacy motivation through culturally responsive literacy practices. We provide implications and recommendations for literacy educators, researchers, and policymakers, along with a resource section for literacy educators.

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Abstract

This paper describes the implementation of a high-intensity reading tutoring intervention program using culturally responsive literacy practices centered on diverse children's literature intended to uplift the needs and priorities of primary grade students experiencing literacy learning challenges. First, we present a critical review of the research on student literacy motivation and student identity. Next, we propose a culturally responsive literacy motivation model that reconceptualizes student literacy motivation through culturally responsive literacy practices and literacy identity dimensions. We provide qualitative findings from tutor and student participants that reflect interconnections between dimensions of student literacy identity and literacy motivation through culturally responsive literacy practices. We provide implications and recommendations for literacy educators, researchers, and policymakers, along with a resource section for literacy educators.

I read a book with Reed called, Mae Goes to the Stars. The book was about Mae Jemison the astronaut, and how her teacher told her that she couldn't be an astronaut. With that book, Reed realized that as a Black woman, a lot of people say, 'you should be this and not that'. Reed said, 'I should be able to do whatever I want to do as a person when I grow up.' (Literacy tutor Yana's reflection on the importance of identity-affirmation with her student, Reed in their read-aloud activity).

Introduction

The connection between students' literacy identity and literacy motivation in reading acquisition is a crucial area to interrogate through culturally responsive pedagogy. While literacy skills are an essential component of reading intervention, researchers and practitioners seldom consider students' literacy identity and literacy motivation (Hebbeker et al., 2019).

Conceptualizing motivation dimensions as fixed or relative to a cultural or social norm hegemonizes students' backgrounds and experiences (Kumar et al., 2018). The assumption that students' literacy identity and motivation factors are the same across students runs counter to what we know about representing and honoring our students' multiple identities and lived experiences. This has been a significant limitation of motivational research that, until the past decade, has only run in tandem with culturally responsive research and education (see Kumar et al., 2018; Usher, 2018 for reviews).

This paper focuses on supporting students' literacy identity and literacy motivation through the integration of culturally responsive literacy practices in an elementary-grade tutoring program specifically intended to support kindergarten through third-grade students who experienced literacy learning challenges. We contend students' literacy identity and literacy motivation are necessary ingredients of literacy learning that all students should access equitably.

Skills are essential to students' literacy identity, yet they represent only one of multiple dimensions. Addressing students' literacy identity dimensions through culturally responsive literacy practices nurtures and sustains students' literacy motivation and is an integral aspect of accessible and equitable literacy practices for students of Color from racialized backgrounds (Muhammad, 2020; Muhammad & Mosley, 2021).

Centering students' literacy identity dimensions through texts reflecting diverse identity groups (e.g., Latinx, Black, LGBTQIA+, beliefs/faiths, dis/ability) supports an inclusive model for literacy learning by uplifting students' identities and providing spaces to address power, privilege, equity, and oppression (Muhammad, 2020). We offer a model for culturally responsive literacy motivation that reframes motivation dimensions of *relatedness*, *meaningfulness*, *autonomy*, and *competence* through the lens of culturally responsive literacy and students' literacy identity (Kumar et al., 2018). We include examples of how culturally responsive literacy practices using diverse children's literature support educators and their students to co-create literacy learning experiences that honor and uplift students' literacy identity dimensions and foster literacy motivation.

Integrating Culturally Responsive Literacy and Reading Intervention Practices

Our central tenet is the necessity of a multi-pronged approach to integrating culturally responsive literacy practices with evidence-based reading practices to address students' literacy motivation through literacy identity. Tutors engaged in ongoing professional development and training to interrogate their identities in support of their work with their students from minoritized backgrounds. Our second tenet explores specific literacy practices that centered on students' literacy identity dimensions and supported their literacy motivation. Culturally responsive literacy activities include *connecting activities* between literacy tutors and students,

read-alouds with enabling and identity-centered texts, and reflection dialogues. These activities directly addressed dimensions of students' literacy identity and fostered their literacy motivation through relatedness, meaningfulness, autonomy, and competence. Our third tenet is sharing reflections on the possibilities and challenges of integrating culturally responsive literacy practices with an evidence-based reading intervention to support students from minoritized backgrounds. Actionable steps and resources are included for educators to engage in self-interrogation related to their literacy identities to support their work with students through diverse children's literature.

In this paper, we seek to answer the following questions:

1. How does student literacy identity connect to literacy motivation?
2. How do culturally responsive literacy practices support students' literacy motivation and literacy identity?
3. How does a culturally responsive literacy motivation model foster equity in literacy learning spaces for students from minoritized backgrounds?

Project Background

Our project focused on supporting students in two urban elementary schools through a high-intensity tutoring program using diverse children's literature within culturally responsive literacy practices to address literacy learning needs and priorities of students and their families.

Participating Students and Schools. Students were eligible for the program if they had some awareness of letters and letter sounds and performed below grade-level expectations as measured by a standardized assessment at the beginning of the tutoring program. Participating schools were in a mid-sized, metropolitan urban region in the United States. The school populations were similar in terms of size (<400 students), students' ethnicity/race (>90% Black),

and proportion of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals (>50%). School A is a traditional public school serving PreK3-5th-grade students. In 2022, 71% of students scored below basic levels of proficiency on the state ELA assessment. School A was identified by its district as experiencing severe equity challenges in serving the students and communities most impacted by past and present systemic bias. School B is a public charter school serving PK3-8th grade students, with 54% of students achieving scores below basic proficiency levels on the 2022 state ELA assessment.

Tutor Training. Literacy tutors with varying experiences ranging from very little to some teaching participated in the program. They completed weekly training sessions in a community-of-practice model led by a university instructor throughout their work with their students in the program. Weekly sessions focused on specific topics to support tutors' work implementing culturally responsive literacy activities with their students. For example, the initial tutor training session focused on building asset-framed relationships with students by honoring their identities, learning their existing literacy and language practices, and tutors' understanding their own identities. These activities helped the tutors to identify personal characteristics and roles they felt confident in claiming and sharing (Ahmed, 2018). Tutors used identity web activities with their students during *connecting activities* to learn about and connect with them. Tutors engaged in reading and learning about topics (see Appendix) covered in weekly sessions, including asset-based literacy approaches (Hammond, 2014), "stereotype threat" (Steele & Aronson, 1995), "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), "community cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005), "textual lineage" (Tatum, 2008, 2014) and literacy identity (Muhammad, 2020; Muhammad & Mosely, 2021).

Centering Literacy Identity for Students from Minoritized Backgrounds through Diverse Literature

There is a longstanding and significant need for culturally relevant and asset-centered literacy approaches representing students and their families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Banks & Gibson, 2019; Muhammad & Mosley, 2021; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). Literacy teachers need support to connect evidence-based reading activities with their students' and families' lived experiences (McLean & Alexander, 2020). Evidence-based reading interventions typically focus on students' literacy skills development, omitting key dimensions of students' literacy identity that directly influence their literacy motivation. Students' feelings of *relatedness*, *belongingness*, *autonomy*, and *competence* in literacy learning environments are nurtured through *collaboration* with their teacher or tutor, their *choice* of texts and topics, and their access to *challenging* goals. Motivation researchers identify the dimensions of challenge, choice, and collaboration as principles of literacy motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Guthrie et al., 2004).

Culturally responsive literacy practices nurture students' identification with and motivation for literacy learning through identity dimensions (e.g., values, beliefs, culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, intellectual personality, engagement with critical perspectives, joyful experiences, and skills development, Muhammad & Mosley, 2021). The emphasis on skills-only focused reading practices can truncate opportunities for students engaging in the literacy learning environment, severing students' access to literacy experiences that uplift and celebrate dimensions of the human experience, including *criticality*, *identity*, *intellect*, and *joy* (Muhammad, 2020; Muhammad & Mosley, 2021). Diverse children's literature powerfully

facilitates students' voices and contributions to their learning environments, creating opportunities to foster students' literacy motivation.

Reconceptualizing Literacy Motivation Through Culturally Responsive Literacy Practices

Our model of culturally responsive literacy motivation draws on the connections between students' literacy identity and culturally responsive literacy practices. This reconceptualization of literacy motivation through culturally responsive literacy practices and literacy identity provides a vital action step to addressing persistent disproportionality of culturally and linguistically minoritized students who are identified as at-risk for reading difficulties (Milner, 2011; Robinson, 2013). One of many factors identified as a reason why reading interventions have not benefited Black children and children of Color is the lack of centering on contextual factors (e.g., physical, physiological, psychological, cultural spaces and places) that are interrelated with students as learners (Milner, 2020; Robinson, 2013; Terry, 2021; Terry et al., 2022).

Critical motivation researchers interrogate assumptions of motivation research that perpetuate racism and privilege in the United States, highlighting the need to explore how teachers' and learners' cultural contexts and identities influence student motivation (Kumar et al., 2018; Usher, 2018). Kumar and colleagues (2018) have shown how motivational principles of *autonomy*, *competence*, *meaningfulness*, and *relatedness* align with culturally responsive learning environments and teaching practices. Very little research connects culturally responsive literacy practices with literacy motivation. Rigorous interrogation of literacy practices and interventions asks whether texts, materials, and practices are relevant and meaningful to students whom they are intended to benefit.

Culturally Responsive Literacy Practices. Educators can provide diverse and identity-centering texts to support students in making connections between textual information and students' funds of knowledge, conceptualized as artifacts from students' home cultures that reflect students' identity dimensions (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Pahl & Roswell, 2017; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). Another critical aspect of providing literature that honors and uplifts students' identity dimensions is the literacy teacher's supporting students to create their textual lineages, reflecting the impact of text and reading on one's identities and life (Tatum, 2008, 2014). Emergent readers may not have had experience with texts because they have not had access to enriching reading experiences that thriving readers tend to have. The importance of reading diverse books and genres aloud provides striving readers access to texts to create their own lineage. Literacy tutors explored their textual lineages to support their students in creating their textual lineages. Tutors identified and read literature on topics students expressed interest or care about and decided whether to include them in their lineage. We also drew upon Hammond's (2014) teacher-student actionable practices and asset-based instructional principles in developing culturally responsive literacy practices of connecting activities, read-alouds, and reflection dialogues.

Culturally Responsive Literacy Practices Centering Literacy Identity and Literacy Motivation

Our conceptualization of a culturally responsive literacy motivation model centers student identity through motivational factors of *relatedness* (belongingness, relationships), *meaningfulness* (value, connection), *autonomy* (agency), and *competence* (skills) as keys of student literacy motivation (Cartledge et al., 2015, 2016; Kumar et al., 2018). Very few studies focus on motivation as related to the identity experiences of students of Color (see Kumar et al.,

2018, for a review). In the recent decade, researchers have explored how identity aspects of culture and ethnicity impact motivational processes (Zusho et al., 2016); however, there is little focus on critical topics of racism and injustice and even less research related to literacy motivation in school-age classroom learning contexts (see DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014). To our knowledge, no research exists on the relationship between student literacy motivation through culturally responsive practices and literacy identity. Researchers have examined the influence of students' reading of culturally responsive vs. non-culturally responsive passages on reading fluency, reporting benefits to students' reading fluency with culturally responsive passages over non-responsive passages (Cartledge et al., 2015, 2016).

We offer an expansion to the conventional model of literacy motivation, uplifting students' literacy identity dimensions as crucial factors of literacy motivation, which are reflected in culturally responsive literacy practices (Authors, 2023a, Authors, 2023b). Our model draws upon Muhammad' (2020) Historically Responsive Literacy dimensions, of which *identity* is one of the five dimensions (the other four are *criticality*, *intellect*, *joy*, and *skills*).

What is Literacy Motivation and how is it Connected to Literacy Identity?

Researchers have conceptualized literacy motivation through dimensions of *challenge*, *choice*, and *collaboration* (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Students are more motivated by texts that provide challenge, or as Hammond (2014) describes, high expectations provided by a teacher persona of the 'warm demander.' Students are more motivated by their chosen texts, and collaboration with peers, teachers, and caregivers influences students' literacy motivation. The past two decades of research tracing back from Concept Oriented Reading Instruction, or CORI (Guthrie et al., 2004), forms the basis for student literacy motivation; CORI was conducted with students of Color in systematically disenfranchised urban schools. It has important connections

to a culturally responsive literacy motivation model. Reading motivation tends to be conceptualized by factors that are extrinsic (e.g., rewards, recognition, grades) and intrinsic (e.g., enjoyment, curiosity) to the student (Hebbecke et al., 2019; Schiefele et al., 2012).

Literacy motivation components of choice, collaboration, and challenge are reflected in culturally responsive literacy practices that also reflect literacy identity dimensions. Our culturally responsive literacy motivation model seeks to interrogate conventional motivational theories that conceptualize learning motivation as only related to the individual or their environment (Kumar et al., 2018). A limitation of these theories of motivation, both extrinsic and intrinsic, is that they make assumptions about the relationship between the learner and their environment as well as student and family, in leaving out important connections between the individual and their environment, which is at the core of culturally responsive practices (Kumar et al., 2018; Usher, 2018).

Reconceptualizing Literacy Motivation through Culturally Responsive Literacy

Practices. Culturally responsive literacy practices (e.g., asset-based pedagogies, funds of knowledge, textual lineage) center dimensions of students' literacy identity and address literacy motivation. Table 1 shows how motivation principles are defined through the lens of culturally responsive practices to support students' literacy identity dimensions.

Table 1. Motivation Principles, Culturally Responsive Literacy Motivation, and Literacy Identity

Motivation Principles	Culturally Responsive Literacy Motivation Definitions	Literacy Identity Dimensions
Meaningfulness	Culturally relevant literacy materials; literacy learning process legitimizes students' cultural background and supports students' cultural modes of learning and individual choice, challenge, and collaboration.	➤ Criticality

Competence	Awareness and sensitivity to one's own and others' cultural identities. Students' academic competence through challenging expectations and teachers' professional efficacy are interrelated with cultural competency.	➤ Identity ➤ Intellect
Autonomy	Personal and collective agency achieved through critical reflection on self and society. Emphasis is on developing autonomy to accept choice and challenge in responsibility to take actions that lead to individual growth and societal change.	➤ Joy
Relatedness	Collaboration between teacher-student, student-student, and student-caregiver is marked by authenticity, care, and cultural sensitivity. Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy counters feelings of alienation and is essential for relationship building in school among teachers and students.	➤ Skills

Adapted from Kumar et al. (2018), Muhammad (2020), Muhammad & Mosely (2021)

Asset-based pedagogies focus on the strengths that students bring to the classroom and directly respond to deficit-based models to education (Mirra & Garcia, 2021; Noguerón-Liu, 2020). Identity-affirming approaches supporting intersectionality have been explored through visual and performing arts (Author, 2020, 2021; Hatton, 2019), specifically in uplifting identity dimensions of students with exceptionalities. This longstanding need in dis/ability education has been highlighted as transformative in moving educational policy, research, and practice from deficit to asset basis (Bal, 2016). Educators are called to understand and utilize the history and cultural contexts of students' lives to develop fully inclusive classroom learning spaces, activities, and curricula. Hammond's (2014) culturally responsive teaching framework details asset basis and student-teacher actionable practices as primary means of uplifting students'

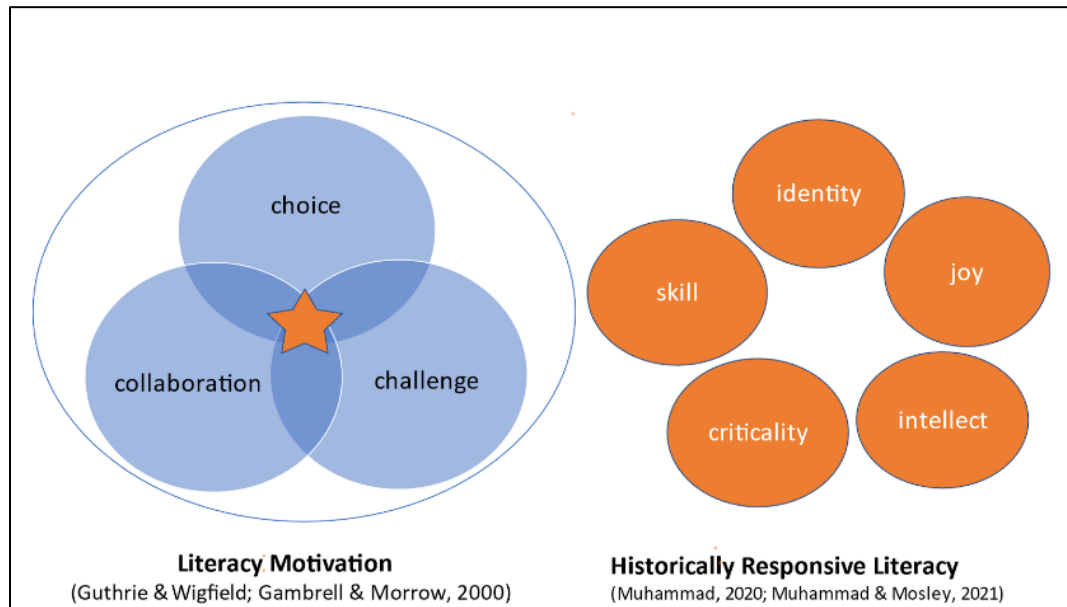
identities and experiences. The processes teachers can enact with students to set the stage for learning highlight the importance of *Teacher-Student Actionable practices*, including *affirmation, validation, instructional conversation, and wise feedback* (Hammond, 2014), which foster relatedness, meaningfulness, autonomy, and competence. Muhammad's (2020) Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy Model names five dimensions that support students' literacy identity and literacy motivation through diverse literature:

- **Identity:** How literature/texts support students to learn something about themselves and/or others; centering anti-racist approaches and contributions of marginalized communities.
- **Skills:** How literature/texts support students' skills in literacy and language arts.
- **Intellect:** How literature/texts support students' knowledge and intelligence/s.
- **Criticality:** How literature/texts support students to think about power, privilege, equity, and disrupting oppression.
- **Joy:** How literature/texts address beauty, truth, and happiness in humanity.

(adapted from Muhammad, 2020; Muhammad & Mosley, 2021)

Students' literacy identity dimensions relate to literacy motivation in important ways. We offer an expansion to existing literacy motivation theory by exploring how students' literacy identity dimensions of *intellect, joy, skills, criticality, and identity* (Muhammad, 2020; Muhammad & Mosley, 2021) support literacy motivation through activities using diverse literature. Figure 1 shows how in this model of culturally responsive literacy motivation, literacy identity dimensions of *intellect, joy, skills, criticality, and identity* are central to students' literacy motivation.

Figure 1. Culturally Responsive Literacy Motivation and Literacy Identity Dimensions



(Adapted from Author, 2023a)

Culturally Responsive Literacy Activities that Foster Literacy Motivation Through Literacy Identity

In the following sections, we describe how four culturally responsive literacy practices with diverse literature including connecting activities, read-alouds with enabling and identity-centered texts, and reflection dialogue fostered inclusive and critically literate experiences in the tutoring program by centering students' literacy identity and reflecting literacy motivation.

1: **Connecting activities** (identity webs and relationship building) were intended to support tutors in building a foundation for engaging in practices that supported students' literacy identity. First, tutors built their identity webs and then engaged in developing these webs with their students (Ahmed, 2018). Identity webs, or maps allowed individuals to illustrate their

defining characteristics (see Appendix). Tutors and students explored their identity dimensions through these reflective activities and built relationships through identifying connections and honoring each other's backgrounds (Tatum, 2000). Creating identity webs was the focus of the tutors' first session with the students. Ongoing reflections on the webs and tutors' self-interrogations and translations of their experiences and funds of knowledge were fostered in the weekly tutor training sessions, equipping tutors with terminology to engage in conversations with their students about their textual lineages and how their backgrounds were related to the enabling texts read during tutoring sessions. In subsequent sessions, tutors engaged in connecting activities of students' choices (e.g., conversations on a topic of interest, games, collaborative drawing, writing, storytelling). These collaborative activities helped tutors and students to build mutual trust, understanding, and empathy (Ahmed, 2018).

2. Read-alouds with enabling texts centering on identity dimensions: Each tutoring session began with students selecting books to read or have read to them. Tutors identified books based on characters or topics related to the students' interests and backgrounds and included vocabulary, language structures, and inferences that supported students' lexicons. These diverse selections enabled tutors and students to tackle challenging or unknown words, sentences, and ideas together. These *enabling texts* offered students and tutors opportunities to talk about their emotions and lived experiences, while experiencing the excitement and joy of learning about new ideas and connections (see Children's Book List).

3) Reading practice with decodable books: Each session gave students opportunities to build their word reading skills through practice with sounds, letters, word mapping, and sentence reading, culminating in daily practice reading words in the context of decodable books. These books included words the student successfully decoded independently while tutors provided

positive, targeted, and immediate feedback. Daily practice with decodable texts systematically built students' word-reading skills and gave students practice with independent reading, affirming their competence and autonomy as skilled readers.

4) **Reflection activities:** At the start and end of each session, tutors and students reflected on their literacy practices. For example, after read-aloud activities with enabling texts, tutors asked students, "What is one thing you noticed about the book?" Student responses included observations related to their identity dimensions such as, "Their skin color is the same as mine, and they are really pretty," "I liked the story and the sparkles," "I'm sad he won't say, 'I love you'" and "I like how they play together". Reflection dialogues allowed students to identify with characters, themes, and/or ideas, experiencing the joy, intellect, and criticality of learning from books and relating to their experiences and identity dimensions. At the end of each session, tutors supported students' criticality by asking thoughtful and relevant reflection questions about what the students liked or did not like about the books. These questions helped students build connections or understand differences between the characters and their own lives. Finally, at the end of each session, tutors asked students to reflect on their experiences as literacy learners through questions including, "What do you think went well today and why?". These reflection dialogues gave students routine opportunities to reflect on and describe their learning processes and experiences within each lesson. Students' responses included affirmations such as, "I am so smart," and "I did great today," which reflected their feelings of joy, competence, and autonomy related to reading and their collaborative relationship with tutors in literacy learning.

Tutor Reflections

Reflections from literacy tutors highlight the role of culturally responsive literacy practices using diverse literature in nurturing their students' literacy identity and literacy

motivation. Themes of choice, character identification, affirmation, and confidence in students' literacy learning experiences were emphasized by these tutors and their students (all names have been anonymized). The vignettes below reflect integral relationships between culturally responsive literacy practices with diverse children's literature and aspects of students' literacy identity and literacy motivation.

These vignettes also reflect the importance of access and opportunities that diverse children's literature provides to students engaged in literacy learning, especially students who experience marginalization due to race, ethnicity, language, gender, and dis/ability. Unfortunately, these experiences are an exception than a rule of early literacy interventions intended to support children identified as at-risk for literacy failure, who also face marginalization due to minoritized background status.

Student Literacy Identity and Motivation: Choice, Character Identification, Affirmation, and Confidence. Ana explained the relevance of the read-aloud books to her students' literacy identity, literacy motivation, and reading progress: *Students loved the relevant books and were more **confident and comfortable** with me as a tutor and in their reading abilities. They often came into class feeling stressed out, like, 'This is tutoring, and that means I'm not good at something'. So when they felt **validated and accepted**, they were more comfortable with learning to read.*

Nali explained the power of seeing oneself in the literature and its connections to literacy motivation: *There were a lot of kids who would latch on to one book and read it multiple times and it seemed to stem from **identification with the characters** because they were People of Color, people who looked like them. I think because they could identify with the book so heavily, it served as a reward or treat to work for.*

Kate explained the importance of children's literature to **her own understanding and awareness** of her students' identities and their confidence: *I didn't realize how much kids this age could comprehend and how much they take in before even entering first grade, also how much they put themselves down. One of my students was very shy and then started being a lot more talkative, telling me more about his life and things that his family does. It became easy to incorporate that in and it helped him grow. He picked out a book with a tennis player on the front. It was that book with famous Black men throughout the years and it really resonated with him. We read about Arthur Ashe and the impact that he made. I got a deeper understanding of who this kid was and where he came from, and the book helped me connect with him more and I knew what he wanted to gain.*

Izze reflected on the importance of **choice and access to diverse topics, themes, and characters**: *I would ask the kids, what are you interested in? When they said science, we picked stars or engineering or robots books. After we went through all the books that were science-related, someone who liked science, all of a sudden was looking at a book about clothes. It was amazing that the table of books wasn't just oriented to one thing, it was a mix of everything. So someone who could have an interest in sports and could also look at hair stuff because that's actually what happened. One kid loved football but there was this book about this girl who had curly hair, Hair Love, and he said, Oh, I like this book.*

Yana expressed the importance of **identity-affirmation** in her read-aloud activity with her student, Mikey: *I read The King of Kindergarten with Mikey as an incoming kindergartener. I asked him, 'are you going to be the king of kindergarten?' Mikey is a young Black boy, and the book was about a young Black boy going into kindergarten. The book showed Mikey that **he'll be the king of kindergarten himself using his own mind**. Mikey when we first started, didn't know*

any words but had all his sounds. Over a few weeks, he was reading words and could put sounds together to make a word, which really was a big increase.

Literacy tutors Sira and Ali reflected on the critical role of **identity-affirming literature in supporting their students with reading exceptionalities**, Cora and Layla. The tutors shared how their literacy experiences with these students through the texts challenged their previously held expectations for these students. Sira explained how identity-affirmation and literacy motivation were connected for her student Cora: *There was a child, Cora [with exceptionalities] and she wanted to read that Mae Jemison book, Mae Among the Stars almost every day. It had a really affirming story, if you can dream it, if you can work hard for it, you can achieve it. She really, really loved that book.*

Ali reflected on the connection between identity-affirming literature and literacy motivation in her work with Layla: *Layla loved Stacy's Extraordinary Words. It's about a girl who's in a spelling contest and has to spell difficult words. I would read the word and then Layla pointed to each letter and read it out loud, like she was in the spelling bee, a strong connection with that character. She **identified with that character**, and it provided a way to explore more difficult words because Layla is struggling with reading and going into fourth grade. She had fun with the opportunity to read and spell really interesting words she hadn't heard of before.*

Conclusion

Culturally responsive literacy practices centering student identity dimensions through diverse literature offer much promise in addressing the priorities of students from historically resilient backgrounds who participate in literacy interventions. Honoring diversity of student and family identities through diverse children's literature provides access to learning that reflects students' identities and experiences. With relevant and meaningful texts in students' hands,

school environments are incubators of belongingness and inclusion rather than institutions of marginalization and disenfranchisement. Students who are restricted to ‘leveled texts’ are prevented from opportunities to learn rich vocabulary or complex sentence types. When students experience belongingness and inclusion through seeing and hearing themselves in literature, central issues of equity are addressed through agency and choice in learning, as well as the opportunities for co-creation through reflection and collaboration. Inclusion is facilitated both environmentally and conceptually (Author, 2019) through culturally responsive literacy practices centered on literacy identity dimensions to address systems-level, classroom-level, and educator-level conceptual barriers (e.g., racist and ableist ideologies) as well as physical barriers (e.g., restrictive learning environments and materials).

We experienced challenges of using identity centered texts including how to support tutors with trauma-informed approaches and mental health issues. Students reflected their feelings of connectedness with their tutors and shared deeply personal information related to violence, death, homelessness, and hunger. Resources of time, space, and personnel became apparent when students would return to their tutoring sessions after they had ended seeking out these valued connections. Although teacher and administrator attitudes reflected transformation and support for culturally responsive literacy practices and texts, tutors reported school climate challenges towards students who were struggling in literacy, facing deficit-based, exclusionary attitudes towards students with reading difficulties.

Actions for Literacy Practitioners and Policymakers

We offer our culturally responsive literacy motivation model to re-center reading intervention practice by focusing on literacy identity dimensions, addressing students’ agency and belongingness through honoring assets, priorities, and backgrounds of students and their

families. This model can be used to interrogate texts for damaging racist messages (Thomas & Dyches, 2019) and practices (Milner, 2020). Thomas and Dyches (2019) analyzed ELA curriculum text, reporting most fiction and 20% of nonfiction books presented “People of Color as inferior, deviant, and helpless; while 30% of fiction and 100% of nonfiction texts presented Whites as heroic, determined, innovative, and successful” (p. 601). Researchers’ interrogation of ELA curriculum identified racist messages, implicit and explicit biases that not only advantage White majority students but explicitly undermine literacy identity among students of Color. Interrogating ELA curriculum and instructional practices for harm and bias is essential to the field of reading and literacy, as students from minoritized backgrounds persistently face barriers in accessing literacy interventions and making improvements (Lensmire et al., 2013).

We join the call to educators, researchers, and policymakers to transform literacy practices and systems to support students identified as at-risk for reading difficulties by valuing their assets and promoting their experiences in literacy interventions, schools, and societies (Bal, 2016). Literacy educators are positioned to promote diverse aspects of students' experiences to systemically transform classroom spaces and curricula to become wholly representative and accessible (Levenson et al., 2019; Waitoller & King, 2016). Actionable practices contribute to addressing barriers to ELA instruction for students from minoritized backgrounds through culturally responsive literacy practices that center on students’ literacy identity to nurture and sustain literacy motivation.

Actions for Literacy Researchers

Few evidence-based reading interventions address students’ literacy identity dimensions using culturally responsive practices, and even fewer interrogate influences on student literacy motivation. Literacy intervention research and practice must address multiple and diverse

dimensions of students' literacy identity to nurture and sustain students' literacy motivation. We cannot accept and perpetuate the myth that literacy interventions are culture-fair or culture-free, as this perspective advantages White majority students over students from minoritized backgrounds, thereby promoting inequitable opportunities for literacy motivation and belonging, and thus student agency. A wide-angle view on how to intervene for students from historically resilient communities must attend to the whole experience of learning to become a skilled reader.

Authors' Positionality Statement

As equity-driven researchers and scholars, we consider how our identities affect this study's design, implementation, and analysis. Authors 1, 2, and 4 identify as cisgender, economically advantaged, white women in the Northeast region of the United States with biases that may result in the enactment of white dominant thinking. Author 3 identifies as an African American antiracist scholar committed to racial justice and equity. As a scholar of color, she consistently advances asset framed approaches and pedagogies and pushes back against deficit narratives and frameworks that marginalize minoritized students.

We purposely set out to examine the structures and systems that create a vicious cycle of unsatisfactory educational, specifically literacy, outcomes for generations of students and families of nondominant communities in urban areas (Coburn, 2003). When we encounter injustices at the expense of a vulnerable population, we are vocal activists driven by a deep sense of purpose and fulfillment, with the intention of dismantling systems of oppression that perpetuate low reading attainment.

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Appendix

Articles and resources developed by Author (2022)

Articles

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Websites

- [Identity Web/Chart](#) (Facing History and Ourselves)
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