

Building Literacy Environments to Motivate African American Boys to Read

Katina L. Thomas

Providing opportunities for African American boys to see reflections of themselves in print during early literacy motivates them to explore reading beyond their instructional boundaries.

"Oh, but let me tell you what that M stands for, boy!" Sid (all names are pseudonyms) exclaimed. He was sitting behind Ty in the bus line in my classroom one afternoon and was dying to reveal the answer to the mysterious letter in a book from the Magic Tree House series that Ty had open in his lap. "I bet I already know!" Ty replied. Frowning, I whispered to Sid, "Don't go telling him what happens. That'll ruin it for him." But as I turned back to finish passing out folders, I smiled, not because it was the end of another harrowing school day full of second-grade shenanigans but because Sid and Ty were dispelling a myth that has plagued boys, particularly African American boys, for years: that they are not motivated to read.

Literacy instruction extends beyond reading a script from the textbook or following a scope and sequence. It involves connecting with students in hopes of having them connect with literature. By the time I had reached my 11th year in the classroom, my school experienced a cultural shift that resulted in my second-grade classroom shifting from culturally and ethnically diverse to predominantly African American and male. Consequently, I had to transform my reading classroom into a space that culturally correlated with my learners if I intended to remain effective.

Although black students are underachieving in reading by fourth grade when compared with white students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017) and boys are underachieving when compared with girls (McFarland et al., 2018), this gap becomes much wider for students who identify as African American and male. Fewer boys being placed into the highest reading groups, fewer boys indulging in leisurely

reading in the primary grades, and more boys performing lower than girls on standardized reading tests (Catsambis, Mulkey, Buttaro, Steelman, & Kock, 2012; Griva, Alevriadou, & Semoglou, 2012; Ma, 2008; Stoet & Geary, 2013) are common occurrences in literacy classrooms.

Research has recommended culturally responsive approaches to create learning environments for ethnically and culturally diverse students to thrive (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994); however, African American boys are continuing to be left behind. Engaging African American adolescent boys in appropriate literacy texts that address their academic, cultural, emotional, and social needs will lead to positive outcomes (Tatum, 2006). Upper elementary literacy programs that are integrated into culturally relevant teaching legitimize students' real-life experiences by making them a part of the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Despite these findings, by third grade, African American boys' parents have lower academic expectations than African American girls' parents, and this decrease continues throughout elementary school (Graves, 2010). However, instituting culturally relevant literacy practices during the early literacy stages positively validates students' identities and serves as a foundation for later success.

The average black child arrives in kindergarten with fewer academic skills than the average white

Katina L. Thomas is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Prairie View A&M University, TX, USA; email klthomas@pvamu.edu.

child. Schools may then simply push students along in ways that sustain or add to racial disparities, validating the expectation that black-white differences in achievement are normal or perhaps even inevitable (Ferguson, 2003). Despite reports of differences in the reading performance of African American boys throughout elementary school, literature and training that offers recommendations for classroom practices that prevent the widening of the reading gap for these students during early literacy is sparse. Just as there is no uniform approach that yields literacy success for every student, there is no uniform way to deliver effective reading instruction to all African American boys. However, regardless of which literacy approach a classroom teacher uses, one must acknowledge that culture influences all learning outcomes if one desires inclusive student success. In that 11th year of teaching, for the first time in my career, my second-grade class consisted of over 40% African American boys. To ensure that these students would experience an equal amount of support as their peers, I combined my knowledge of Ladson-Billings's (1994) culturally relevant recommendations for upper elementary learners with Tatum's (2006) practice of introducing necessary texts to cultivate an elevated level of engagement and a positive perception toward reading at an early age.

Daily Classroom Practices ***Include Developmentally and Age-Appropriate Reading Series in Which People of Color Are Positively Portrayed, Void of Traditional Gender Roles, and Relatable***

As I collaborated with the school librarian to find developmentally appropriate books, I also analyzed the content of the books we found for portrayals of female characters and characters of color in roles that challenged stereotypes. The objective was to provide my students with books that promoted ethnically diverse characters and both genders engaging in similar activities. The books that I strategically placed in the classroom library and on tables included scenarios that were either completely realistic or a combination of reality and fantasy.

I also began exposing my students to more specific genres such as historical fiction and mystery. These texts had elements of the plots that seemed attainable. My African American second graders were first introduced to texts that had

characters with whom they had something in common (Husband, 2012), but they also showed interest in reading stories from other cultures (McCullough, 2013). Although they were immediately captivated by series that were visual reflections of themselves, these students also gravitated toward books that positively profiled children from other ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic groups. My classroom library and baskets included selections from the Miami Jackson series by Patricia McKissack and Fredrick L. McKissack, the Magic Tree House series by Mary Pope Osborne, and the Horrible Harry series by Suzy Kline. Through literature, I wanted the boys to discover that children who resembled them, their female classmates, and other people of color could experience success in roles undefined by race and gender.

Introduce the First Books in a Series During Read-Aloud or Free Reading and Keep the Sequels in Your Classroom Library

When and how I introduced the books to my boys was crucial. I wanted them to develop a positive attitude toward reading and to internalize that not every book was read for an assignment. To attract them to the series of books that I had chosen, I introduced the first book in a new series outside of literacy instruction. After lunch, after physical education class, or before dismissal, when students were their most active, I would show them the cover of the book in a new series and begin reading the back cover. This often caused them to hurry to the floor to grab a seat and determine if the book would be worth reading. Emotionality, variability, novelty, and active participation are important aspects of the learning styles of students from some ethnic groups and the ways in which they demonstrate what they know (Gay, 2010). This was an opportunity to model fluency and reading for enjoyment. Images that could be visualized as dramatic descriptions were read aloud and characters received distinct voices. Redirecting students' high levels of energy by introducing these new series outside of formal reading instruction resulted in their hunger to continue reading and remain engaged in learning.

To ensure that my students maintained their excitement about the series that I enjoyed reading with them, I made certain that the next book was readily available to them. That involved checking out every book in a series from the school library, as well as purchasing the books online and from

Table 1
Recommended Series/Titles Starter Kit

Series and first books	Author(s)	Grade level(s)	Lexile level(s)
Miami Jackson <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Miami Jackson Gets It Straight</i> (#1) ■ <i>Miami Jackson Makes the Play</i> (#2) ■ <i>Miami Jackson Sees It Through</i> (#3) 	Patricia McKissack and Frederick L. McKissack	1 and 2	400–550
Magic Tree House <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Dinosaurs Before Dark</i> (#1) ■ <i>The Knight at Dawn</i> (#2) ■ <i>Mummies in the Morning</i> (#3) 	Mary Pope Osborne	1–3	380–590
Horrible Harry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Horrible Harry in Room 2B</i> (#1) ■ <i>Horrible Harry and the Green Slime</i> (#2) ■ <i>Horrible Harry and the Ant Invasion</i> (#3) 	Suzy Kline	2 and 3	440–620
Song Lee <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Song Lee in Room 2B</i> (#1) ■ <i>Song Lee and the Hamster Hunt</i> (#2) ■ <i>Song Lee and the Leech Man</i> (#3) 	Suzy Kline	2 and 3	580–670
Julian’s World <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>The Stories Julian Tells</i> (#1) ■ <i>More Stories Julian Tells</i> (#2) ■ <i>Julian, Secret Agent</i> (#3) 	Ann Cameron	2	520
Julian’s World <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>The Stories Huey Tells</i> ■ <i>More Stories Huey Tells</i> 	Ann Cameron	3	570–620

secondhand bookstores. (See Table 1 for a starter kit of recommended series.) Constructing a classroom library with as many books in a series as possible served as extrinsic motivation. My second graders could have a preview of what would happen next without having to wait for the next book. They began trading books and giving one another critiques of what they had read.

Allow Student Commentary to Take Center Stage in All Chapter Discussions

African American boys who read texts critically reported enjoying reading texts that closely corresponded with their personal definitions of the world around them (Husband, 2012). However, academic organization, learning independence, responsibility, and attentiveness should be explicitly taught to these students along with other social and academic skills in the first years of school (Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, & Cortina, 2010). Throughout the reading of these books, I always asked my students what they thought—and they never hesitated to

share their commentary. As I read, I stopped occasionally to model my thoughts about a character or situation or to ask them a higher order thinking question. Our in-depth discussion would always begin with character analysis questions such as these:

- How would you feel if you were [character name]?
- What would you do if you were in this situation?
- Are you anything like [character]? How so?
- Would you do it differently than [character]?

Unbeknownst to them, these students were practicing their comprehension skills, and I often overheard them continuing the discussion after we had finished a chapter from *Miami Jackson Gets It Straight*, *Dinosaurs Before Dark: Magic Tree House #1*, or *Horrible Harry in Room 2B*. They understood that their opinions and perceptions were valued, and this established a connection between their reality and the world within each book. These types of discussions continued as they began reading the books

that followed, and this fed their motivation to discover what happened in every book thereafter.

Put Students in Charge of Organizing and Maintaining the Classroom Library

Catapano, Fleming, and Elias (2009) recommended giving students the responsibility for reshelving books, whether the books are used in the classroom or checked out to go home. As my students were reading these series, I emphasized the importance of having a neat and organized library. We had a discussion about how I organized each series in alphabetical order and according to genre. We also discussed how organizing eased book selection and that the library could only be well kept if students took good care of it. Entrusting them with the maintenance of our classroom library instilled a sense of pride, and each day, two students initiated organizing and taking inventory of the books. They determined which students had books checked out from the classroom library and often informed me if any books were missing or damaged. Enlisting their help demonstrated that I trusted them with something I loved and wanted them to love: books.

Conclusion

My efforts to implement these daily practices were motivated by my commitment to my students' success. These recommendations may not serve as an absolute solution to closing the literacy gap for all African American boys; however, they may serve as the beginning of a shift in the perspectives and approaches that will change the narrative of the African American male reader at an early age.

Acknowledging and addressing these students' cultural, emotional, social, and academic needs during an early stage of literacy development yielded a dynamic impact on their reading attitudes and academic outcomes. Empowering them with texts that portrayed them in positive roles, dispelled racial and gender stereotypes, and fostered engagement in discussions contributed to their social and academic growth. Socially, my students were excited to enter my classroom, participate in independent and partner reading activities, and engage in discussions that were related to selections that reflected parts of their identity.

During reflective moments, when I questioned whether the cultural tenets were affecting my students' reading achievement, one of the African

American boys would approach me and say, "I like reading in your class," or "Can I finish reading this book while I'm in time out?" Because this culture-specific motivation was added to their literacy development, each of my African American second-grade boys, regardless of reading ability, experienced a minimum of one year's growth in reading levels. Having opportunities to develop their comprehension skills in books that reflected them prepared these students for formal and informal reading assessments with texts that traditionally included characters that were not directly relatable to their realities. Building reading appreciation and comprehension with selections that recognized boys of color and other minority groups as multidimensional characters created an inclusive learning environment that valued a subgroup often overlooked in literature. By weaving African American second-grade boys' identities into the tapestry of my literacy environment, I was able to reinforce formally taught reading skills while cultivating their aspiration to grow as readers and writers.

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