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Boys of Color and Literacy in the Elementary Classroom

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Elementary Education.

By

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Under the mentorship of *Dr. Alisa Leckie*

ABSTRACT

It is widely known that there is a gap in literacy scores between boys of color and their white peers. There are many factors such as lack of adequate resources, representation in text, societal and cultural influences, and the school to prison pipeline that create this achievement gap. These factors impact boys of color and their literacy as they navigate in the elementary classroom. A case study was conducted to see what current literacy teachers are doing in elementary classrooms to close this gap. This research will inform both novice and experienced literacy teachers on strategies and methods they can use to increase boys of color literacy scores in their classroom.

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Introduction

Research has reported that African- American students trail behind their white peers in terms of literacy and academic tests (Paige & Witty, 2010). African American boys are placed into two groups that have historically been low performing in reading, which are boys and African Americans (Husband, 2012, p.1). It is not simply children of color in general who appear to be failing in the basics – like literacy; it is Black boys with the highest rates of illiteracy (Lynch, 2018). The purpose of this study will be to describe the relationship between boys of color in the elementary classroom setting and how their literacy and reading skills are affected by teacher relationships.

This study is important to the field of education in the district that I will soon to be teaching in. With a total of 20,667 students in the elementary schools of Savannah Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS), more than half the population (57.4%) are African American students (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). Educators need to be aware and knowledgeable of ways to support boys of color through the text and curriculum that is presented in order to improve their reading and literacy skills. It's important that teachers understand when we do not build strong relationships with boys of color it will affect their learning environment and the way they approach literacy.

This research is important to me because as a future teacher, I plan to teach in schools that are in the inner city and economically disadvantaged where boys of color will be present. I need to know what affects them when it comes to these skills, how I can make some changes, and what to be aware of when developing a curriculum. As a teacher, I want to be able to encourage reading and show boys of color in my

classroom how engaging and important it is to build those strong literacy skills. As stated in the article written by Katina L. Thomas, boys of color need to be provided the opportunities to see themselves in the text they read for it motivates them to explore reading beyond their instructional boundaries (Thomas, 2019, p.761).

The literature presented for the study shows that relationships with teachers, the “school-to-prison” pipeline and a lack of texts that reflect boys of color affects boys of color in the elementary classroom setting. Articles researched for this study include authors who are educators themselves and have taught boys of color or have done studies in the elementary classroom to better describe these effects. This study fits into the current literature because improving literacy outcomes for boys of color is ongoing research to identify how teachers are creating an engaging and supportive classroom for their students' critical literacy skills to develop and flourish. The purpose of this study is to identify what teachers in the elementary classroom setting can do and are doing to build strong interpersonal relationships with their students and ensure that boys of color (BOC) are seeing themselves represented in order to improve literacy outcomes.

Literature Review

Support Through Building Relationships

When discussing how teachers, educators, and other education officials can support boys of color literacy in the classroom, a fundamental step that is overlooked is the building of a strong interpersonal relationship (Kransoff, 2016). More emphasis

is put on the curriculum and resources that should be used to help better their literacy scores (Alber, 2010). When it is time to implement those resources in the classroom it is a struggle because there isn't a relationship between the teacher and student. As teachers they must delve into their own research to help break the reading barriers among boys of color. We need to reach the boys of color through asking ourselves deep questions about our students, ourselves, and what happens at the intersection of us. This is the main way we can diminish the oppressive system that has given boys of color the label of being incompetent. A teacher must not focus so much on standardized assessments but more so on what interests the boys when it comes to what they like to read.

Hosting a mentoring program can help positively influence boys of color when it comes to reading and their achievement (Lewis et al., 2010). Due to the fact that boys of color have high suspension and expulsion rates (Camera, 2020) there are limited opportunities in their adult life when it comes to the workforce because of the record that is built from their elementary schooling that led them to youth detention centers or jail. Having a mentoring program in the K-12 setting will help increase student academic engagement and self-perception in school, especially for African American and Latino boys.

Building literacy in the classroom starts with a strong relationship between the student and teacher. Poor relationships affect the male's educational opportunity, especially their development of literacy. The building of these relationships is often overlooked as one of the key practices when it comes to the learning and development of content and skill delivery. The article, *Cultivating Literacy and Relationships with*

Adolescent Scholars of Color explains that when we establish these strong relationships, we as teachers can take steps towards transforming the classroom into one that is accepting and motivates boys of color to read and eliminate the harmful practices that may have help boys of color from reading.

Cultural and Societal Influences

The narratives painted by society in reference to boys of color negatively impacts their engagement in the classroom and more importantly their literacy skills (Kinloch et al., 2017). Those narratives include the achievement gap between high school graduation rates between White and Black male students, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the drop-out rates. These narratives create a sense of failure that blames Black youth on the inequalities that they face in United States society. The historical fear of African American masculinity among White Americans is felt in the classroom as it negatively impacts the interactions teachers have with these students (Okilwa, et al., 2016, p. 4). One way we see this negative impact is through the act of the school to prison pipeline. This pipeline funnels students in and out of public schools into juvenile centers based on zero tolerance policies. This pipeline targets students of color as they are the ones who receive numerous fractions based on small behaviors that lead to them being expelled.

The continuous funneling through the school to prison pipeline can often lead to students of color dropping out but there are other risk factors such as the student's life in terms of them as an individual, their family, community, and school. For example, when discussing the risk factors of schools it has to do with boys of color being in underfunded schools that don't have the aquated resources to assist them in

their learning. When these risk factors impact boys of color learning, it results in 5%–7% of them dropping out compared to their White peers which are around 2% (Addis & Withington, 2016, p.2).

These factors result in rates Positive images of Black males in the classroom are important when wanting to promote achievement, especially in the texts they read (Thomas, 2019). Resources can include texts, books and technology tools that will help boost their achievement score. When boys of color are presented with text that represents them in the classroom it helps promote their literacy skills. Boys of color are more involved when they see themselves in the classroom through texts, having Black teachers, and adequate resources tailored to their learning.. In the classroom, a gap is presented between boys of color and their peers of the opposite race and gender in terms of their reading scores. Thomas (2019) states that the gap among reading scores occurs because of how students' culture affects their view of reading and the literacy materials that schools are now using in the classroom. This gap leaves mostly African American boys behind when it comes to their literacy growth and development. Teachers are the ones responsible for creating and implementing strategies to build their student's growth and enjoyment in terms of literacy, especially the boys of color.

There is more than just curriculum, relationships with students, and lack of mentoring programs that are factors that affect boys of color literacy in an elementary classroom. Building relationships with students based on their culture, shared interests, and their needs is an important aspect of filling in the gaps of knowledge when boys of color are trailing behind in their literacy (Golden et al., 2016). When you have factors

such as the “school-to-prison pipeline” , that influences their academic and personal experiences and how teachers approach students who have been incarcerated. Latino boys in the elementary school settings are not supported enough when it comes to an engaging school environment. Due to them not being supported like their peers, their academic literacy skills cannot develop or flourish as they need to be for an elementary student. This lack of the engaging school environment leads them to be a part of what is called the school to prison pipeline (Garcia, 2013).

The school to prison pipeline is a trend where children are “funneled out of public schools into the juvenile and criminal justice system” (ACLU 2022). The “Zero-tolerance” policies are what are put into place that criminalize minor infractions of school rules which lead to students being reprimanded for the behavior outside of school instead of being handled in the school. Students of color are targeted the most resulting in 42% of Black students who have been suspended multiple times versus their White peers (ACLU 2022). When Black students are suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation, they are three times more likely to come in contact with the juvenile system the following year which results in them missing important school content and learning like literacy (ACLU 2022).

Text Relevance

When we discuss addressing the “reading achievement gap” for boys of color the first step that should be taken is to see if the texts we are providing for boys of color represent them in a positive light. Thomas (2019) explains that including developmentally and age-appropriate text that represents other people of color positively is one way to motivate boys of color to read. When they recognize

themselves in the text, it captivates them to read more stories that are similar to those texts and motivates them to explore other ethnic backgrounds. Sciurba (2017) states that when boys of color are provided with text that reflects them and various other ethnic groups, it drives them to discuss the text critically with their peers and motivates them to read more books.

Methodology

The research question investigated from this study was to become more informed about how current third to fifth grade literacy teachers were implementing strategies and differentiating instruction for boys of color.

Design

The study will use a case study research design. A case study is used in research design methods when the researcher wants to gain concrete and in-depth knowledge about a real world situation (Yazan 2015). Case studies about education can be used to gain more insight and understanding on how to conduct lessons and strategies for the learners in a classroom. With the new or readdressed information found from the research can then be used as a pedagogical tool or teaching strategy for novice and experienced teachers.

This research design best fits this study because it too will soon help other educators gain knowledge on how other literacy educators are approaching the deficit in BOC literacy scores. They will gain further insight on how literacy educators are creating and implementing strategies to then create a culture supported classroom to improve their scores.

The teachers were either interviewed in a 30 to 60 minute zoom session or through a survey and asked various questions about their instruction, relationships with boys of color, and literacy in their classroom in order to gain an understanding about their lived experiences as literacy educators. Based on the literature review and research, interviewing is a typical approach in case study research to gain more insight on how teachers are assisting boys of color in the literacy classroom.

Context

Students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade are primarily focused on the development of comprehension strategies that will assist them in manipulating grade-level text of complexity and communicate effectively both in writing and in speaking (GADOE 2022). When looking at literacy achievement across the state of Georgia, about 60% of students are performing at the beginning or developing level. The table below describes the data in terms of the state of Georgia, Savannah-Chatham County District, and the school where the research and case study was conducted .

Table 1

Percentage of students scoring below Proficient in English Language Arts state assessment

| | Total student population tested | Male Students | African-American Students |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| Georgia | 60 % | 64 % | 76% |
| Savannah- Chatham | 74 % | 78 % | 87 % |
| School | 92 % | 92 % | 95 % |

Participants

This study takes place at a Title One School in the heart of the urban downtown area in Savannah. The climate of the school can be described as a collaborative culture of inquiry. All staff are team motivated as there is continuity of collaborative planning for all subjects. The administrators and academic coaches work closely together with each grade level to provide them with the tools and resources to assist in tailoring instruction for the different learners and their needs in the classroom. There are a total of 523 students, 91.8% of the students are African American students, and 182 students are boys of color. At this school, approximately 27% of African American students perform at the Proficient level in English Language Arts.

The participants of this study were three female teachers who taught at least one literacy block during the school day at a Public Title One Elementary School. The participants all attempt to partake in the creation of differentiated instruction to improve the literacy of boys of color in whole class and small group instruction settings. The participants were recruited via email and through conversations/interaction with potential participants due to a field placement at the school site assisted in identifying who would participate in the study. All participants names will remain anonymous and will be addressed as literacy teachers and use the pronoun “they”.

Data Collection

The data was collected through an interview. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions built off of literature relating to the study. The aim was to conduct the interviews with the third to fifth grade teachers who have or do teach a reading/literacy block.

For the zoom session, the questions were asked, and the participant would verbally answer the question. The entire session was recorded for later analysis, the participant was aware, and no transcript was saved since notes were taken of the response while on the call.

For the participants who could not partake in a zoom session, a document was emailed to them with the research questions, and they were then asked to answer thoroughly with their response. The participants who partook in this method had a one-week turnaround.

The questions created were developed for the interview process with teachers at the elementary school draws from the literature review when conducting this study. As the studies were found and read, there were key ideas and questions that helped in the preparation of creating my own questions. The questions are:

1. How do you create strategies and implement those strategies that can build an emerging literacy classroom that motivates BOC to enjoy reading?
2. In what ways do you build strong relationships with the students in your classroom? Are these relationships built upon the cultures these students may share alike with you?
3. In what ways do you create an engaging and supportive classroom for your student's critical literacy skills can develop and flourish? How often do you accommodate your classroom for the various races in the classroom?

4. In what ways do the texts (characters, experiences, settings, etc.) reflect your students and their experiences? How often are black males featured in the texts you use with students?

5. In what ways do you drive your instruction to the needs of your students?

Data Analysis

The interview via zoom was transcribed and added to the responses in the email document that were then analyzed through a thematic analysis. The best method for this study to code the responses is to use the inductive coding approach (McCombes 2019). This involved coding all the responses before identifying and reviewing four themes. With each interviewees' responses typed in a document, similar and common responses were highlighted based on what similar words or phrases were seen and how they related back to what was being asked on the question. Their responses were then grouped into the four themes: Culture, Quotes, Relationships, and Strategies. To create the four themes, key words from the questions were used as a guide to select which responses would go in each. For example, when selecting what responses would go in the Strategies theme, I of course took responses that stated "strategies" in it but also phrases that stated that they did their own research or stated familiar strategies in education like "Interest Inventories".

Each theme was then reviewed to gain an understanding of the participants strategies and ideas to instruct boys of color in a literacy block. For the emailed responses, some were incomplete or too narrow when deciding which theme they would fit into. Therefore, these responses were removed since much information could not be gained.

Findings

Culture

Based on the interviews with these literacy teachers, they are aware of how to connect with their BOC on a cultural level since this is most of their classroom. A classroom that fosters a culture for active learning but also encourages and celebrates diversity in the classroom, empowers students to feel safe and want to read.

They all found it important to build a classroom library that has a diverse selection of books with characters and stories that relate to the students. One of the literacy teachers says she will often, “use a variety of diverse texts to instruct her students. Those texts have similar story lines and real-life experiences, characters, and settings my students can relate to”. This is not just simply having a book about an elementary student or someone going to school but actual text from the Scholastic African American Collection of books placed in their libraries. When reading these books, they agree that it's important for the students to then envision the characters as individuals that are familiar to them and their environment.

Relationships

Positive relationships take a student's literacy and learning in the classroom a long way. Valuing the students over the content is important to remember. One teacher suggests that she makes sure that she knows each student's name and that she ensures that they know their name is known. Rituals can become a part of the daily schedule in the classroom to also build a culture and community between the students and the teachers that can help create strong relationships. As most educators know, students' personal problems can be brought into the classroom affecting their learning and rituals can help

address this. An example is often before instruction starts, the teacher will allow the students to state how they are for the day on a check in sheet and then address those students who aren't well and ask what they may need to get through the day. Another ritual stated was greeting the students everyday with the question "How are you doing?" and then building on each response. One literacy teacher believes that, "their state of mind and mental health will affect instructions so if I know how they feel I know how to tailor my delivery so that learning takes place".

To learn who your students are as people; you will always have to get to know what interests them. When you find what interests the students, you then have a way to engage them into thriller learning because now they're interested are now reflected in the lessons. Having conversations with students about what's interesting to them or even through "Interest Inventory" surveys that have questions prompted to ask students about their hobbies, likes and dislikes is a starting point for building those relationships. It is important to literacy educators and more so educators that the students need to feel and know that they are supported in and outside the classroom.

Strategies

One common way the literacy educators decide on what strategies to use for their students is through continuous research. Starting first with research like this study itself, the teachers will often find practices that have been proven to be effective for their BOC. This research can even start in the classroom from the main resources, the students. A strategy used among the teachers to first test the students to then collect and analyze the data to plan effectively then follow through with an intensive instruction with the support of researched methods tailored to the student's needs. As one literacy teacher states, "as

a teacher I mix my teaching methods and consider methods of delivery when planning my lessons”. Using student data as the main component of how instructional strategies are created is a continuous action of monitoring students’ data to check for growth and gaps to ensure that there is focused learning (personalized instruction, guided practice and remediation). The idea that students are given a choice in how they learn, and practice is a common strategy that the teachers choose to implement to boost their students' engagement in literacy.

Limitations

Based on the literature review and research, the more ideal approach for this type of study would be to conduct interviews or gather surveys from literacy teachers to gain insight on their strategies and ideas. While the data collected will only include responses and testimonies, statistical data about literacy achievement of boys of color in these classrooms will not be represented. The student achievement data would provide evidence that the strategies being implemented are working.

From my interviews, it is evident that teachers are aware of the issue in the literacy comprehension and scores of BOC and they are finding ways and strategies to implement to improve this rather through relationships, instruction, and text. This matters to this study because it shows a similarity between what was found in the literature review and that was is being said in the literature is true for how teachers are finding ways to However, the results will only tell us so much about how Black female teachers are creating these environments but it won't tell us how this is true for male teachers who are Black or other races along with female teachers who are not just Black.

To further this research in its next steps, more teachers could be interviewed to build more knowledge on the topic and research question along with pulling real data and assessments to see how students may grow from the beginning of the school year to the end based on the strategies and instruction that is tailored towards their learning.

Conclusion

The research found from the conduction of interviews addresses the research question of “How do educators create and implement strategies that build a literacy classroom that motivates BOC to enjoy reading?”. Overall, teachers are finding ways to build connections with the students through strong relationships, sharing of \cultural backgrounds, and differentiating and creating literacy instruction/strategies.

Based on the literature, the literacy teachers interviewed responses that support the literature and how relationships are the foundation to starting a path to improving BOC of literacy scores. Students need to be included in a culture appropriate environment that supports them for who they are and includes text related to their “experiences, stories, background, & culture” as one of the interviewees stated. Like the literature states, teachers are responsible for creating and implementing strategies to build their student’s growth and enjoyment in terms of literacy, especially the boys of color (Thomas, 2019). The interviewees and the literature both agree that receiving input from the males of the classroom to see what interests them is an important tool to see what they'd be interested in reading and can then be used to make sure boys like them are included in the text and books used in the classroom.

Currently, elementary teachers who interact with boys of color are creating literacy instruction tailored to their learning needs and creating a welcoming environment

for each learner. Throughout this research process, it is evident that elementary teachers are aware that there are resources and strategies that can be used to engage and improve the literacy of young boys. One common idea that the teachers all deemed as important was the building of relationships and rapport. In the literature it states that we see this gap in literacy scores among BOC and their reading scores because the students' culture isn't often reflected in the literacy that they read along with them not being in a culturally appropriate classroom environment. This can be built off the common culture that the student and the teacher share, through conversations, or through interest surveys that give an overview of the student and their learning. Similar to what Golden and Womack (2016) suggest, A teacher must understand the culture of their students is a key part to the creation of relationships with their students to then assist in later filling in the gaps of knowledge, like literacy, that the student can be lacking.

In future work on this topic, it will be beneficial to see how male teachers play a role in implementing these strategies as well as how virtual learning changes the way a teacher approaches boys of color and their literacy.

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