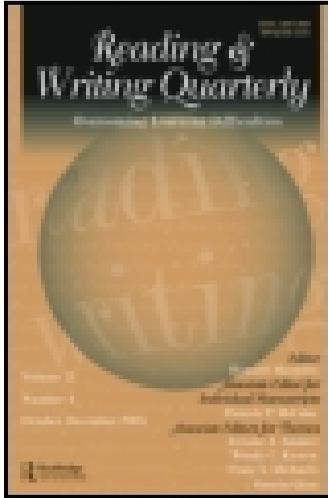


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### Culturally Relevant Literature: What Matters Most to Primary-Age Urban Learners

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# **Culturally Relevant Literature: What Matters Most to Primary-Age Urban Learners**

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*The ratings and rationales primary-age urban learners gave culturally relevant reading passages was the focus of this descriptive study. First- and second-grade students each read 30 researcher-developed passages reflecting the students' immediate and historical backgrounds. The students rated the passages and gave a reason for their ratings. A descriptive analysis of these data showed that the students overwhelmingly rated the passages positively and preferred most the stories that they personally identified with, followed by those considered to be altruistic and/or fun. Passages that helped them to learn something also received positive ratings. We discuss these findings in terms of their implications for literacy development.*

In general, children who are at risk for reading failure, and therefore special education, tend to have large and resistant achievement gaps compared with same-age peers (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2013). Specifically, males and certain minority youngsters (i.e., African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans) disproportionately lag in reading achievement

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and show the greatest special education risk (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). This phenomenon is particularly prominent in urban settings (NAEP, 2009).

Achievement scores from the NAEP (2013), for example, indicate that only 35% of fourth graders rated at proficient or better and that these scores more or less have been stagnant since 1992. Even more alarming is that only 11% of students with disabilities, 20% of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, 18% of Black students, 20% of Hispanic students, and 7% of English learners rated at proficient or better. The statistics appear even more discrepant as children get older. For example, only 17% of Black students in eighth grade had reading percentages at or above the proficient level in comparison to 46% of White students (NAEP, 2013). These data are consistent with the notion of the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986), whereby young poor readers become even poorer older readers, likely impairing long-term possibilities for social mobility and economic success (Henry, Lagos, & Berndt, 2012; Torgesen, 2002; Wamba, 2010).

These marginalized outcomes clearly demonstrate the need for early and effective intervention so at-risk readers can become proficient readers. The extant literature emphasizes the early identification of students who are at risk, documenting that if students are poor readers in third grade, advancing beyond the bottom third of all readers is doubtful (Moats & Foorman, 2008), thereby increasing the likelihood of special education. The connection between reading and special education risk can be seen in studies with diverse populations, including African Americans, in which reductions in special education placements corresponded with increases in reading interventions and improvement (Torgesen, 2009; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2011), or in which five out of eight African American first graders were no longer classified as at risk following intensive reading intervention (Gibson, Cartledge, Keyes, & Yawn, 2014).

Children at risk need explicit instruction to become capable readers (Finn & Davis, 2007), and much of the scientifically based reading research emphasizes systematic instruction in all reading skills (Carnine & Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2000; Carnine, Silbert, Kame'enui, & Tarver, 2010; Moats, 2007; National Reading Panel, 2000). For racially/ethnically diverse learners, the literature also emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant (CR) instructional materials.

## THE ROLE OF CR MATERIAL

The concept of CR teaching was first introduced by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1990a, 1990b, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). According to Ladson-Billings, CR teaching incorporates student culture “as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions,

and conceptualize knowledge” (1992, p. 314). She also asserted that the African American culture must be recognized as an important strength in which students construct their schooling experiences, with a goal to “empower students to examine critically the society in which they live and work for social change” (1992, p. 314).

Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (1995a) offered that the use of CR reading material may foster academic success by providing meaningful content to students. Other authorities agree that meaningful content will facilitate literacy learning/comprehension and that when teachers incorporate “culturally relevant reading materials in their literacy lessons, they can engage the learner in the concepts being taught on a more meaningful and personal level” (Purnell, Ali, Begum, & Carter, 2007, p. 421). Although advocates contend that some evidence exists of improved interest and performance (e.g., Gay, 2004; Husband, 2012; McIntyre & Hulan, 2013), limited empirical research supports this claim.

In addition to improving performance, authorities also advise that CR materials may provide valuable models of academic success (e.g., Landt, 2013) and instill a sense of cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). For the purposes of this article, *culturally relevant* is used to describe material used for minority students, with the explicit intentions laid out by Ladson-Billings, and the term *multicultural* refers to teaching all students about diverse groups and decentralizing the focus on the majority White population (Banks, 2008).

### Why Use CR Material?

One rationale for using CR reading material is to reduce stereotype threat. *Stereotype threat* is a psychological construct conceptualized and empirically tested by Claude Steele and colleagues to explain the poorer performance of intellectually able stereotyped students (e.g., African Americans and Latinos) compared to similarly able White peers (Steele, 2003, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995). According to Steele, stereotypes embedded from a very early age psychologically block the affected students’ performance when the students are in an evaluative situation, but performance improves considerably when the threat is removed. Although the threat articulated by Steele and colleagues functions largely under testing conditions, we offer to expand this concept to the acquisition stage as well, suggesting that stereotyped groups may be inhibited by negative self-perceptions.

### IDENTITY SAFETY

Stereotyped groups, according to Steele (2010), need *identity safety*, which essentially provides positive, nonthreatening environments for learning. Steele reported that with identity safety learners are affirmed, high expectations are

set, and learners are assured that they can reach these standards. Similarly, in her analysis of Hilliard's work, Lee (2008) wrote that culturally and linguistically diverse children needed to be affirmed and that cultural resources could serve as buffers against external forces that communicate directly/indirectly that these children cannot learn. Students learn that experiences outside the classroom can provide for valuable learning in the classroom and that teachers can create an atmosphere assuring students that they can be successful (Wood & Jocius, 2013). By creating literature that is deemed to be CR, we intended to address identity safety through affirming passages (Bishop, 2007; Cronin, 2001; De Leon, 2002; Kelley, 2008; St. Amour, 2003) that communicated positive images and high expectations.

#### BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Poor young children often lack the language development (Hart & Risley, 1995) and sufficient background knowledge on which to build requisite reading skills (McGuinness, 2005; Neuman, 2008). Therefore, early reading instruction needs to begin with the child's existing knowledge and prime background knowledge (Ebe, 2011, 2012). As emphasized in the professional literature (e.g., Bishop, 2007; De Leon, 2002), we stressed connecting the content of the passages to the specific background of the learners and made the stories affirming. In other research with these passages we found that researcher-made CR passages had a significant effect on fluency (i.e., decreased errors and therefore increased correct words per minute [CWPM]; Cartledge, Keesey, Bennett, Gallant, & Ramnath, in press). Bell and Clark (1998) provided supporting research showing that African American children comprehended best stories that represented African American rather than Euro-American cultural themes.

#### POPULAR CULTURE

Our goal was to have passages that depicted urban students in a variety of natural environments, especially school, being successful and enjoying learning. Popular urban culture (e.g., Morrell, 2002) was used to increase self-identity through references to popular urban personalities, activities, music, and so forth. Although there is some support (e.g., Gay, 2004; Lee, 2008) for infusing popular culture into instructional materials, the research is limited and not clearly defined. Findings from this project may advance these positions and provide directions for future research.

Despite the obvious wisdom of the positions for CR materials and the potential benefit for diverse learners in urban settings, the empirical research on CR literature is extremely limited. Furthermore, much of the existing discussions of CR literature focus on older learners (i.e., in the intermediate grades and above). Therefore, the focus of our research was to find out

the following: What do we know about CR literature and the young reader? This is especially important for the beginning struggling reader because this is a critical time to make reading extremely attractive to get the learner engaged and to persist with reading activities even if more time and practice are required. Even though students might be naturally attracted to text that reflects their culture, it would be beneficial to learn what story features are most enticing to the young African American urban learner and why.

The purpose of this study was to assess student preferences of a set of passages written specifically to reflect the students' racial and cultural backgrounds. We questioned whether there would be distinct preferences according to the passage content, what rationales students would give for liking/not liking a passage, and whether there would be developmental differences by grade. We also questioned whether the information gained from these assessments might have implications for developing beginning reading programs for young culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly those who show the greatest reading/special education risk.

## METHODS

### Participants and Setting

A total of 50 students participated in the study: 26 first-grade students (13 boys and 13 girls) and 24 second-grade students (13 boys and 11 girls). All of the students were Black and were considered of low socioeconomic status based on eligibility for free and reduced lunch. Three of the students came from families with a Somali background, and the remaining 47 students were from native-born African American families. This study took place in a large urban midwestern city.

### SELECTION CRITERIA

The students were selected from two elementary (kindergarten through Grade 5) schools. School 1 was an inner-city public African American school, and School 2 was an inner-city charter elementary school with approximately 50% of its school population from a Somali background and the remaining native-born African American. A total of 45 participants was selected from School 1, and five students came from School 2 (three of the five of Somali background). These particular schools were chosen based on their demographics (i.e., a large representation of African American students, along with school-wide reading scores below the state and national averages). However, the students selected from both schools were those identified as the strongest readers in their grades. As part of a larger project, we determined that grade-level readers who did not struggle with reading the passages would be best for assessing passage equivalencies and attractiveness. Furthermore,

the performance of the selected students would serve as the grade-level standard for their lower performing same-grade peers. In a smaller study with second-grade students showing reading risk, the researchers observed that these less skilled students similarly gave the CR passages favorable ratings (Cartledge et al., *in press*).

For School 1, pupil selection was based on Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; Good & Kaminski, 2002) oral reading fluency assessments. DIBELS was the progress monitoring system used by the school, and the most recent data available at the time of the study were utilized (i.e., midyear benchmark scores for the first-grade students and the beginning year benchmark scores for second-grade students). The median CWPM was 36 for first grade (range = 21–87) and 57 for second grade (range = 40–109). Teacher recommendations were the basis for selecting the five students in School 2 because standardized tests were not given in this school. Parental permission was obtained for all participants in both schools.

#### SETTING

In both schools the study was conducted in two adjacent unused classrooms equipped with several pupil desks and chairs and a teacher desk and chair. Students sat at a desk with the data collectors sitting across from them and a computer on top of the desk. The stations were arranged with no more than two students concurrently reading in one classroom.

#### Materials

Over the 8-day period of the study, each student read 30 researcher-generated passages printed on 8½ × 11-in paper using 18- and 16-point Times New Roman font for the first- and second-grade students, respectively. A Macintosh laptop using Audacity software and a Logitech headset with microphone were used to record student read-alouds. Data were recorded on researcher-created data sheets.

#### CR PASSAGES

This study was part of a larger study in which the first- and second-grade students read researcher-generated passages to validate the passages through a passage equivalency procedure (Cummings, Park, & Bauer Schaper, 2012). This process defined specific parameters regarding passage length, difficulty of text, and decodability. The first-grade passages varied in length from 90 to 120 words and had a Spache Readability Index of 2.0–2.3. The second-grade passages varied from 240 to 270 words with a range on the Spache Readability Index of 2.4–2.7. All of the passages had a minimum of 70% of the words following decodability rules.

To make the passages CR, the researchers generated plots, themes, characters, settings, and so on with information gathered from the students and their parents and teachers. Parents and classroom teachers completed questionnaires pertaining to the students' interests and activities. Additional information was gleaned through 10- to 15-min individual and small-group (i.e., two to four students) interviews with the students asking them questions about their favorites, such as food, television shows, video games, sports activities, as well as questions about their plans for adulthood. The researchers also observed the students in school situations, such as playing at recess, eating lunch, walking through the halls, and in the classroom. In addition, the writing team studied African American children's literature and consulted with a children's literacy authority to define what constitutes CR literature. Recommendations included providing familiar everyday experiences, making certain students saw themselves reflected in the literature, focusing on positive self-image, and including selections on cultural heroes (Bishop, 2007).

Using all of these sources of information, the researchers created 30 passages for each grade level. Of the passages, 24 were fictional and six were expository (see Appendices A and B for story listings). The researchers emphasized that the passages focus on the background of the learner (i.e., include information the students said was important and relevant in their lives) and be affirming to the learner (i.e., represent African American life in a positive light, include themes of individual effort leading to personal success, etc.).

The research for this particular study evolved from the passage equivalency process, which also included pupil ratings for likeability. The passages would be used for a fluency reading intervention, and the researchers reasoned that children would be more inclined to read stories they found to reflect their backgrounds and interests. Therefore, we assessed passage likeability and pupil rationales for favorable/nonfavorable ratings.

### Dependent Variable

The two dependent variables measured during this study were (a) CWPM and (b) student ratings of how well the story was liked. CWPM was calculated by dividing the total number of words read correctly by the number of seconds required to read the passages and multiplying this by 60.

Student ratings were determined by the responses students gave to each passage. After the completion of each of the 30 stories, the researcher prompted the student: "Tell me how you liked the story. Was it not good, good, or very good?" The order of presentation was varied to avoid skewing the responses. The researcher then transferred the response into a score (not good = 1, good = 2, and very good = 3). After the student rated the story, the researcher probed the student further by saying, "Tell me what you liked or

did not like about the story.” The researcher then wrote the student response on the data sheet. Once data collection was complete, the stories were further categorized by the most frequent student responses.

### Experimental Design and Conditions

This was a descriptive study involving qualitative analyses; however, it also included quantitative statistics to investigate the relationship between CWPM and the students’ ratings of the passages. The stories developed for this study were displayed in a format mirroring the AIMSweb Oral Reading Fluency stories ([www.aimsweb.com](http://www.aimsweb.com)). The order of presentation of the stories was randomized on [www.random.com](http://www.random.com) for each student in an attempt to guard against inflated scores due to practice effects and/or lowered scores resulting from student fatigue.

### Data Collection/Procedures

The participants met individually with the researchers in the unused classroom. The data collectors were pairs of undergraduate seniors trained in the procedures of this study; one person functioned as the primary data collector while the other completed the procedural integrity checklist and served as a secondary data collector. The participant sat facing the data collectors at one of the pupil desks. Prior to reading the first passage of the day, students were asked to put on the headphone/microphone headset. Each participant read four passages a day for 7 days and two passages on the final day. Passages were administered and scored following the AIMSweb Oral Reading Fluency guidelines. The one exception to the AIMSweb guidelines was that the students read the story to completion rather than stopping at the end of a 1-min timing. Prior to beginning the study, the data collectors welcomed the student to the project, thanked the student for participating, and explained the procedures. Each subsequent session began with the following script:

Thank you for joining us today. I have four new stories for you to read. Remember to do your best reading. If you cannot figure out a word, I will help you. After you finish reading the passage, I will ask you some questions about what you read. Ready? Put your finger under the first word and let’s read.

Following passage completion, the data collector asked the student to rate the passage and give a reason for the rating. The data collector then praised the student for participating and continued on to the next passages. After the passages were completed for the day, the student was praised for working hard and received a small reward (e.g., a sticker, temporary tattoo,

pencil). This procedure lasted approximately 20 min and was repeated for each student for 8 days.

All of the data were then tabulated and entered onto spreadsheets by the primary researchers to include the students' ratings and comments made for the different stories. This information was separated by story and then categorized based on the most common student responses.

## Reliability and Validity

### INTEROBSERVER AGREEMENT (IOA)

IOA data were collected during the recording of the student responses for a minimum of 30% of the sessions for each student. The responses were also recorded to clarify any disagreements; however, these recordings were not needed because IOA was 100%. IOA data were also collected to categorize student ratings. The first author read all of the student comments and organized the comments into categories. The second author independently read the student comments and verified the categories. The first, second, and third authors independently organized student comments into the agreed-on categories. The authors then calculated IOA using point-by-point agreement. IOA was calculated using the following formula:  $\text{Agreement Frequency} / (\text{Agreement Frequency} + \text{Disagreement Frequency}) \times 100$ . IOA was 96.5% for the first-grade data and 96.8% for the second-grade data.

### PROCEDURAL INTEGRITY

Procedural integrity data were collected for at least 30% of all sessions for each student through the use of a procedural checklist containing all of the prescribed steps. A secondary data collector sat next to the primary data collector and used the checklist to record each step performed correctly. The total percentage of correct steps averaged 99.8% for both the first- and second-grade data.

## RESULTS

A total of 26 first graders and 24 second graders each read and rated 30 CR passages for fluency and likeability. Correlational analyses were conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant association between the mean CWPM and the mean likeability ratings. For the second-grade passages the passage *Macaroni and Cheese* was removed prior to running the analysis because it was an outlier. No significant association was found between the mean CWPM and the mean likeability ratings for the 29 remaining passages ( $r = .020$ ,  $p = .917$ , two-tailed). Similarly, for the first-grade data Pearson correlations between CWPM and the rating score within each of the

30 story cases were calculated. After the Bonferroni correction was applied for missing data, the results did not show significant correlations between CWPM and passage ratings.

The students rated all of the passages, for a total of 1,500 ratings, but gave rationales for only 885 (58.3%) of these ratings. Of the total ratings, 865 (58%) were for Level 3 (very good), 529 (35%) for Level 2 (good), and 106 (7%) for Level 1 (not good). When Levels 2 and 3 were combined, 93% of the ratings were positive, with most of the positives receiving the higher (Level 3) evaluation. Student rationales for these ratings were analyzed according to positives and negatives. Tables 1 and 2 give a breakdown of student responses according to grade, rating, and category.

### Positive Rating Comments

Comments for the Level 2 and 3 positive ratings were organized into the four categories of (a) self-identity, (b) altruism/social skills, (c) excitement/liked/fun, and (d) learn (see Table 1).

#### SELF-IDENTITY

This category was used if students identified with the passage. That is, they said they did or wanted to do similar things as in the story, or they knew someone who was like the characters in the story. As seen in Table 1, self-identity or the tendency to identify with the passage was the number one category for both first and second graders for liking a passage. Altruism emerged as the second category for each grade level; however, the relative percentages for each grade showed more pronounced differences among the top three categories for second graders compared to the first graders. For first graders, excitement or fun was an equally important reason as altruism/social skills for liking a passage. Both groups gave the opportunity to learn something as the fourth reason for liking a passage.

Self-identity was often evident while the students read the stories. Even though the researchers instructed them to do their best reading, many of the students could not resist saying things such as “I like to race with my cousins” while reading the story on the bike race or “I like to dance” for the story about characters who danced. In the expository passages about major personalities or instructions on common events the students often related them to their personal experiences. For example, in the passage on Fannie Lou Hamer, one student commented, “I like watching the news and voting.” For the passage *How to Grow a Garden*, two students indicated liking it because “taking care of plants is like parents taking care of us” and “Grandma has a bunch of flowers all over her yard.” Other examples of identity statements in expository passages were given in *Peace Blanket*, when one student commented, “I know someone that is very peace [*sic*],” and in a

**TABLE 1** Frequencies and Percentages of First- and Second-Grade Level 3 (Very Good) and Level 2 (Good) Responses to Passages by Category

Category	First-grade responses						Second-grade responses							
	Level 3		Level 2		Total <sup>a</sup>		Level 3		Level 2		Total <sup>a</sup>			
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
Identity	128	37	67	33	195	35	79	42	29	58	108	45	303	36
Altruism	99	28	68	34	167	30	63	34	6	11	69	29	236	30
Excitement	110	34	55	27	165	30	30	16	15	28	45	19	210	27
Learn	12	3	10	5	22	4	13	7	3	6	16	7	38	5
Total	349	102	200	98	549	98	185	99	53	99	238	100	787	98

<sup>a</sup>Sum of Level 2 and Level 3 ratings for each grade.

**TABLE 2** Frequencies and Percentages of First- and Second-Grade Level 1 (Not Good) Responses to Passages by Category

Category	First-grade responses		Second-grade responses	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Injury	25	44	9	27
Not understood	2	4	5	15
Did not like	29	52	18	54
Total	56	100	33	99

passage about a local football player, when the student stated, “because it tells you about football and my cousins like football and I really wish I could bring this book home and read it to them.”

Identity statements were overwhelmingly simply students saying that they liked the passage because they liked the product, event, or person depicted in the passage. In stories on peanuts, dancing, fishing, athletes, food, reading, and so forth, students simply stated, “I like peanuts,” “I like Hot Cheetos,” “I go fishing with my grandpa,” “I like to dance,” “I like football,” “I love books,” “He liked to cook hoppin’ john and I do too with my mom.” Students did not always like a story because they were attracted to the main theme in the passage; sometimes it was a minor aspect of the story that was most attractive. For example, Hot Cheetos was mentioned briefly in the story about going fishing, but that was a very popular snack for the children in this neighborhood.

Identity was also the number one reason for the relatively few times a passage was rejected. Dislikes for both first and second graders tended to center on personal issues such as not liking football, soccer, peanuts, plants, mac and cheese, or a particular entertainer. Students also rejected stories that involved things they did not know how to do, such as dance or pronounce hard words (e.g., *ambulance*, *hijab*). In *How to Grow a Garden*, for example, one student stated, “I don’t like plants because they make me itch,” and another said, “It reminds me of poison ivy.”

#### ALTRUISM/SOCIAL SKILLS

Students indicated that they liked the passage when something good happened to a character or when a character helped someone or shared something. This category was also used if somebody did the right thing, such as went to school or completed work.

Within the category of altruism/social skills, the word *help* occurred repeatedly. In the story *Grandpa’s Hands*, for example, characteristic student responses were statements like “He helps everyday” or “He’s going to help people when he grows up and that’s what I want to do, too.” The latter statement could possibly be rated both identity and altruism, but because the

emphasis was on helping, the rationale was attributed to the altruism category. Another example of using the word *help* involved a story in which students got to dance during recess. Although most of the students rated the story highly because they liked to dance, several students responded positively because a student helped another student learn the dance (e.g., “Jamia helped Tamera how to dance,” “Her friend was helping,” and “They practiced together and helped each other”).

Some stories of major personalities such as George Washington Carver and Ben Carson naturally generated a lot of altruistic/social competence comments because of the professions of the main character. Children often made statements such as “People are helping other people,” “Because he helped the farmers,” “Doctors help children feel better,” “Because he wants to help little sister feel better.” But it was interesting to note that even in contemporary stories simply intended to reflect the students’ experiences or to be entertaining, some students were drawn to the more prosocial aspects of the passage. For example, in a story about playing football in the park, several students commented that they liked it because “the boys got home safe; reminds people to be safe” and “they listened to their mother and they got back before dark.” In another story about making pancakes with Grandma, one student gave the story the highest rating because “the little boy told the truth to Grandma.”

The importance of altruism/social competence can also be seen in the ratings of disliked passages. It is noteworthy that more than a third of the rejections were based on the students’ perceptions of someone being physically, socially, or psychologically injured, which might be viewed as the dichotomy of being appropriate, doing something good, or helping someone. This was quite evident in comparing the two stories *Grandma’s House* and *Grandma’s Pancakes*. Our prestudy interviews with the children revealed that grandmothers played a prominent positive role in their lives. Yet *Grandma’s House* received the most rejections ( $n = 10$ ) and got one of the lowest overall ratings because the story told of a grandmother being hurt. Eight of the 10 rejections were because Grandma was hurt. In contrast, *Grandma’s Pancakes* was one of the few stories that received no rejections, and the students reported liking it because it had a happy ending, Grandma was not mad that the character made a mess, and they got to eat the pancakes. In terms of conflict, at least four students rejected *Caring Friends* because it involved two boys fighting. A sensitivity toward injustice possibly led two students to dislike the passage on *Chit’lins*, stating, “There was slaves in it.” And one student rated the George Washington Carver story low because “farmers had nothing to eat.” A similar sense of compassion may have prompted two students to reject *Hopscotch Game* because “her sister broke her leg” and “she couldn’t play hopscotch.” Along the same lines, two students were unhappy with the *New Student* passage, reasoning that “they were making fun of LeRoy” and “everyone was making fun of him.”

## EXCITEMENT/LIKED/FUN

This category was used if students said that they liked the whole story or said that they liked certain events in the story because the events were exciting/fun due to something the characters did, such as “got to eat the pancakes,” but did not relate it to themselves, such as, “I’m glad it was about pancakes because I like pancakes.” A statement such as the latter would have been categorized as self-identity.

First graders were more likely than the second graders to give the higher positive rating to a passage because they either enjoyed the passage or felt it was good for a story character. Often in response to why they liked the passage the students would simply say that they just liked the whole story or they liked the way that it ended. More often, however, they would specify something good that the main character could do. For example, in the story about the football player, at least six first graders said they liked the story because the main character was “smart and good at football” or “he knows how to play football.” In the story about making shoes, at least 10 students rated it positively with statements about the main character’s skill (e.g., “He was good at making shoes,” “He got his dream job,” or “He knew how to make shoes and boots”). Another type of enjoyment response more typical of second graders was that the passage was funny or that they liked a particular character, such as Rosa Parks. In *Rosa Parks*, students responded, “I like Rosa Parks; it is about long ago,” “I just liked reading it,” and “Fantastic!” Additional examples for positive excitement ratings were “because it’s tennis and Serena Williams is in the Olympics” or, in *The First Dog*, “I know about the President. One of his daughter’s named Malia.” In stories not about personalities, the second graders would register their excitement with general comments, such as for the passage located in the local science museum “really liked reading it.” Or they would specify something in the story that really resonated with them, such as “she tricked her little brother into going to the park.”

## LEARN

This category was used if students said they learned something from the story or about a topic from the story. Both groups placed relatively less emphasis on whether they learned something from the story as the basis of its positive rating. This may have been largely due to the fact that they more often responded to the expository passages as learning something, and there were only six expository passages compared to 24 story line passages. For the positive ratings within this category, first-grade students often gave a reason by simply giving a fact from the reading. For the passage on peanuts, for example, they gave statements such as “learned about the peanuts inside the ground,” “plants can grow underground,” “peanuts are good for you,”

and “peanuts keep you healthy.” Second graders were more likely to state that they learned something from the passage. For example, on the *djembe* drum they stated, “It taught me about *djembe*,” “I heard about a *djembe* before,” or “Because I never heard of a *djembe* before.” On the passage about Fannie Lou Hamer, they stated, “It was long ago and it teaches you something,” and “Excellent because it is a true story and I learned a long time ago they didn’t let people vote.”

### Negative Rating Comments

Comments for the negative ratings (Level 1) fell into three categories: (a) did not like, (b) injury/unkind, and (c) not understanding (See Table 2).

#### DID NOT LIKE AND INJURY/UNKIND

The number one reason for rejecting a passage was due to disliking a specific feature within the story, which varied among the students. The second most common reason was due to not liking the fact that a passage character experienced some physical/social/psychological harm. These two categories accounted for the majority of negative ratings. Examples of student responses that fall into these categories were given previously in the discussions of self-identity and altruism/social skills, noting how the same factor came into play for accepting or rejecting a passage. The remaining Level 1 or negative category was not understanding.

#### NOT UNDERSTANDING

This designation was used if students said the story was confusing, they did not understand it, or it did not make sense. Seven of the 50 students rejected six passages because they did not understand them. In the passage about *Isk*, a Somali dish, one first grader gave it a negative rating because it “doesn’t make sense.” Second graders had a few more items fall into this category, indicating for the *Djembe* passage, “I don’t understand it.” The passage on the COSI (Center of Science and Industry) space room yielded two negative statements: “It was confusing because the stars were the only thing moving, not Deon” and “Don’t know what they are talking about—what is a COSI?” For *Water Park Part 4: The Pow*, one student said, “I got confused”; another stated, “I didn’t get the story,” for the passage on playing tennis.

### DISCUSSION

The first- and second-grade Black urban students in this study overwhelmingly rated the CR passages positively because of, respectively, personal identity, altruism, story enjoyment, and whether they learned something.

Although at a much lower rate, the students rejected passages for some of the same reasons (i.e., self-identity and altruism), with a few exceptions when they reported not understanding.

## Student Responses

### STUDENT PREFERENCES

A primary purpose of this study was to assess students' preferences for literature content. It is not surprising that self-identity was a major factor and in some ways may be viewed as the essence of cultural relevance. As noted previously, text is most meaningful to students if it reflects the words and experiences of students (St. Amour, 2003). The ability to identify with an event, object, or experience certainly increases its attractiveness in literature for young children as with other individuals. Given the rather limited life experiences and culturally different backgrounds of many of these beginning readers, concerted efforts to provide initial relevant and interesting texts would be well advised.

A pleasant observation is the major role altruism/social competence played in passage likeability. Although some of the stories, such as *Grandma's House* or *Caring Friends*, were intended to show prosocial behaviors, such as resolving conflict or responding appropriately to someone in need of help, some of the children were more impacted by the unsavory and probably missed some of the most important understandings and themes. Even though these unpleasant situations were authentic, taken from the student interviews, they were not universally valued. This is not uncommon and points to the need to process stories/literature with children, especially if the stories have content that might be troubling or easily misunderstood.

In some ways excitement responses were akin to the altruism/social skills responses but were distinguished by the fact that the story brought the reader enjoyment or that the reader related to some pleasant outcome for the story character. In contrast, the altruism/social skills category focus was on the story character doing something good for others or just doing the right or appropriate thing, such as going to school.

### RATIONALES

In addition to student preferences, we wanted to know why the students responded as they did. The findings of this study underscore the importance of background information for making reading material meaningful and comprehensible. Although much of this has been addressed in the preceding discussion, some students' negative responses are especially instructive for this purpose. This is most noted in the few stories that went beyond the

students' immediate experience or culture. The science museum, for example, was popular and in fairly close proximity to the students' schools/homes, but not all of the students had visited it and some had trouble understanding the concepts relating to moving about the room and the ceiling depicting the stars within the galaxy. Likewise, students expressed confusion over expository passages describing the ways to build a *djembe* drum and the contents of a popular Somali food called *Isk*. Although most of the students responded to the *Isk* story according to one student sharing his culturally different lunch with a classmate, at least one student was more concerned with the nature of this foreign sounding food. The *Isk* story and two other stories (*Hijab* and *Omar the Helper*) about the Somali culture received some of the lowest ratings of all of the passages. *Snow Angels* and *New Student* also dealt with being a Somali or international student, but the language and concepts were less challenging and thus the stories obtained higher likeability rankings. Only three students with a Somali background participated in these ratings, so the majority of the students were native-born African Americans, and their comments on the passages suggested that they did not know much of the Somali culture. Students with Somali backgrounds rated the stories positively (mostly 2s and 3s) with no discernable pattern except for passages that were not compatible with their culture. One vivid example is a student from a Somali background who gave the passage *The First Dog* a negative rating and proceeded to lecture the researcher on the fact that Somalis do not like dogs. The researchers subsequently determined that this student's position had considerable support in his community. This same student consistently had the highest fluency scores (range = 120–183 CWPM) of all of the second-grade participants. Similar to their native-born peers, for the most part, Somali students rated highly the things they liked to do (e.g., biking, tennis, water parks) and rater lower things they did not like or understand (dogs, gardening, the *djembe* drum). The responses of the students in this study reflect some of the research observations of Dressel (2005), who pointed out that personal involvement and cultural knowledge increase understanding and that students often dislike texts they do not understand. Teachers would be wise to capitalize on opportunities to share cultural knowledge, especially among students who share the same classrooms or communities. This certainly could contribute to helping the students read widely and with greater understanding.

#### DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES

We observed some differences between the first- and second-grade respondents in this study. Second graders made a greater distinction between the second and third categories compared to the first graders. For first graders altruism seemed equally important as excitement, which was whether the story was funny or had a happy ending. The second graders showed an

increased sense of social consciousness/justice, rejecting stories about national heroes such as Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer because of some of the mistreatment they endured. One student rejected *Omar the Helper* because he did not like the idea of a family having to be separated because of living in different countries, and another student objected to the idea that animal skin was used to make a drum. This difference for the two grades may have been a function of maturation, in which older students begin to place more emphasis on content rather than simply emotional reactions. Characteristic of both groups, the students resisted passages that involved students being teased or isolated in any way. The empathy and caring attitudes expressed by these students are noteworthy and perhaps support a position taken by Louie (2005), who offered that empathy may result when readers connect to culturally specific literature. This also suggests that teachers and other significant adults in children's lives should take advantage of these teachable moments and emphasize further the importance of caring/helping behaviors toward others.

Although both groups gave relatively fewer positive ratings because they learned something, it is noteworthy that young primary-age children appreciated learning about their history/culture, suggesting that such literature should be emphasized and increased in their curriculum (Gay, 2004). In more than a few cases the children responded enthusiastically to expository passages, especially if they had previous information on the topic or personality.

Overall, the children in this study specified events typical of most 7- and 8-year-olds (e.g., playing, friends, relatives, and school). The thoughtful, varied responses from these primary urban Black learners tell us that literacy content needs to reflect their experiences, history, and values, not just their images (Bell & Clark, 1998). The students in this study wanted to read about their history, their community, their family, and friends. Although the literature needed to be credible, they especially wanted it to be positive and affirming. This is true for all children and is critical for the disengaged, low-performing learner. Although unpleasant experiences may be commonplace in the young lives of impoverished urban children, our findings suggest that such realities might be minimized rather than emphasized in early literacy activities for this population.

Even though it may be legitimately questioned what is meant by students truly *liking* the passages and not being unduly influenced by factors such as the researchers, student personal experiences, or the ease of the passages, there are statistical and descriptive data to counter these concerns. The correlational analyses showing no relationship between students' ratings and reading fluency suggest that students were not rating passages highly simply because they were easy to read. Furthermore, descriptive evidence given in the appendices shows that for first graders only two of the stories that fell in the top 10 for fluency (*Marcus Runs* and *Ben Carson*) fell among

the top 10 for most positive ratings (see Appendix A). For second graders, three of the most easily read stories (*Macaroni and Cheese*, *Beauty Shop*, and *Water Park Part 5: Finding Uncle*) received the lowest ratings. Similarly, three at the bottom for fluency (*The First Dog*, *Bike Race*, and *COSI Space Museum*) were among the top 10 positive ratings.

Furthermore, there is no indication that students responded positively to please the researchers. Rather, the students consistently showed that they were responding to the text. Indeed, often there was a visceral physical and verbal reaction when a student would get excited about a passage and expound extensively about the topic until interrupted by the researcher. The students appeared to be most animated over passages that reflected their background experiences, which the researchers deliberately attempted to capture to be culturally responsive.

### Implications for Practice

Much has been written about engaging racially/ethnically diverse urban learners in literacy activities as a means of increasing reading and overall achievement. The use of authentic, CR literature has been advocated for this purpose and appears to be warranted. This literature needs to be positive and affirming, but even the troubling aspects should be thoroughly discussed, empowering children and helping children to understand ways that they and others in their environment could problem-solve to make things better. Issues of fairness and justice may need to become an explicit part of the reading instruction, especially for text with relationship and social justice overlays, as supported by Ladson-Billings's (1995b) goal of instilling "critical consciousness" through the use of CR material.

To increase CR, practitioners might conduct brief informal assessments/interviews of their students to determine the congruence between student background and the classroom reading materials and the degree to which students identify with the texts. Individual, small-group, and large-group interviews/discussions might be conducted to get information about students' backgrounds and interests. A wide variety of books may be read aloud in the classroom to assess students' interests and motivation.

In our study we asked children to tell us about their favorite games, television shows, books, food, activities, people, and so forth. We also asked them to tell us about their fantasies and what they would do if they could do/have whatever they wanted. A review of the main ideas for the stories listed in the appendices will give the reader the types of story themes that emerged. The culturally diverse literature does include books written for and about ethnic and racially minority students. Some of these stories are highly popular series that effectively tap the interest and sustained reading of young children (Fleming, 2014). In either culturally/racially diverse or homogeneous classrooms, teachers need to closely attend and listen to

children's voices. J. Fleming (personal communication, April 28, 2014), for example, reported that urban second-grade Black males in her affiliated schools loved the *EllRay Jakes* series by Sally Warner. Unfortunately, as Fleming noted, many of the books for African Americans have a very short shelf life. Educators and other responsible persons need to find ways to make these attractive materials available to the struggling reader during and beyond the school day. In addition, students might be encouraged to tell/write their own stories as a way to motivate literacy activities and augment the existing curriculum. Reading materials and activities should never be limited to the child's background, but such literature may need to be stressed initially to obtain and retain the attention of the resistant and struggling beginning reader. The ultimate goal is to get all children to read widely regardless of the setting and cultural heritage. However, to achieve that performance level, students need to be fluid, unintimidated readers. CR literature may be useful toward that end.

### Limitations

One obvious difference and perhaps limitation is that there were many more pupil responses from the first graders than from the second graders. This is not because first graders were more forthcoming than second graders but because the undergraduate data collectors learned to better elicit responses about why the students liked the passage as they became more familiar with the children. Although the data collectors completed training and followed protocol, it was after initially collecting data with some of the second graders that the researchers realized the need to prompt the students a bit more for their rationales. This was the sequence subsequently used for the majority of second graders and all of the first graders. Our analyses attended to the difference between the two groups, but the main focus was on the students' overall reaction to the passages rather than a comparison of the two groups.

Another related limitation concerns the generalizability of these findings. Although there are commonalities among low-income, urban, Black primary-age children, there certainly would be differences based on geography, level of poverty, safety, and so forth. As with any other racial/cultural group, we cannot stereotype or assume there is a monolith for this population. These findings also could not be readily generalized to other racial/ethnic/cultural groups. It is likely, however, that major concepts such as self-identity would be consistent across groups, even if the objects of identification varied.

Along the same lines, it is important for us to acknowledge that three of the student participants were from families with parents born in Somalia with a distinct language and culture. Although the included children were fluent English speakers and were being socialized with African American students in school, there is little doubt that their reactions varied somewhat from those

of their non-Somali peers. Given their small number ( $n = 3$ ), their effects on the overall findings are questionable. It would be of interest in future research, however, to study the relative responses of these two groups given comparable group sizes. Another related difficulty and perhaps limitation concerns the definition of culture, especially for African Americans, who make up one of the oldest groups of Americans living in this country. Although there are distinctive patterns in language, music, food, and lifestyle, there remains considerable variance and overlap with the dominant culture. We certainly could label the ways of perceiving and acting observed in these children as culture, but whether these observations can be extended to their peer group in other schools, states, or regions is unclear.

### Research Recommendations and Conclusions

The questions raised in “Limitations” (i.e., replication in other settings and with other groups) are appropriate points for future research. We especially wonder about the effects of high-interest, CR materials on the reading performance of struggling beginning readers.

This research adds to a small, sorely needed, but growing body of empirical work on CR instruction. We know that children respond well to materials that reflect their interests and that their learning is enhanced if they are provided with sufficient background knowledge. We know that children enjoy text that reflects their positive experiences and that motivation is a key factor in promoting literacy, especially for the reluctant reader. It is also valuable for us as researchers to know that children will respond differentially to authentic CR materials. Findings such as these challenge us to use these materials and understandings to systematically channel and teach the disengaged, resistant beginner into becoming a proficient learner.

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## APPENDIX A

First-Grade Stories Ordered by Most Likeable With Title, Main Idea, and Fluency Ranking

Likeability ranking	Story title	Main idea	Fluency ranking
1	<i>Jolita's Birthday</i>	Jolita's family throws her a surprise birthday party, and she is especially happy that her dad comes.	21
2	<i>George Washington Carver<sup>a</sup></i>	George taught many people how to grow and use the peanut plant.	19
3	<i>Marcus Runs</i>	Marcus dreams of playing football for Ohio State, so he will have to work hard in school (background for <i>Archie</i> ).	4
4	<i>Sam the Superhero</i>	Sam recovers a lost ball by being brave and friendly.	17
5	<i>Snow Angels<sup>b</sup></i>	The child has never seen snow before and learns how to make snow angels.	13
6	<i>Top Readers</i>	To become a top reader you have to work hard.	12
7	<i>Peanuts<sup>a</sup></i>	All about how peanuts grow, what the parts are called, and how to eat them (background for <i>George Washington Carver</i> ).	24
8	<i>Ben Carson</i>	Ray wants to work hard in school to become a doctor so he can help kids like Ben Carson does.	6
9	<i>Grandma's Pancakes</i>	Kai'won takes a risk by helping Grandma cook pancakes and makes a big funny mess.	16
10	<i>Archie<sup>a</sup></i>	Archie was a good football player and very smart; he works for Ohio State.	10
11	<i>Dad's Hoppin' John</i>	Dad teaches his child about the history of the hoppin' john.	26
12	<i>New Student<sup>b</sup></i>	LeRoy does not speak English very well, but his soccer skills help him make friends.	15
13	<i>Sweet Potato<sup>a</sup></i>	All about how sweet potatoes grow, the different varieties of sweet potatoes, and how to cook them (background for <i>Grandpa's Sweet Potato Pie</i> ).	1
14	<i>Artist Laquita</i>	Laquita is a wonderful artist, but to go to art school she must also work hard at math (background for <i>Charles Turner</i> ).	8
15	<i>Football in the Park</i>	Jaden had to use his brain and speed to trick his brothers into going home before dark.	5
16	<i>Mama Works</i>	Mama works two jobs and goes to college; she is a good role model for her sons.	3
17	<i>My Sister</i>	Macon's big sister sticks up for him and doesn't let bullies take his ball.	7
18	<i>Hopscotch Game</i>	Jayana is not physically able to participate in hopscotch, but her friends find a way to include her because she is such a math whiz.	22
19	<i>Party for Sister</i>	This mixed family comes together to celebrate Sister's birthday, and the kids are happy to all be together.	2
20	<i>Isk<sup>b</sup></i>	Omar teaches his friend Marcus about this traditional Somali dish at school.	29

(Continued)

Continued

Likeability ranking	Story title	Main idea	Fluency ranking
21	<i>Grandpa's Sweet Potato Pie</i>	It is a special time when Grandpa spends time teaching the child how to make this traditional dish.	20
22	<i>Hide and Go Seek</i>	You can't always win, but there is always a lesson to be learned when you lose.	11
23	<i>Soul Food</i>	Grandma teaches the child all about soul food.	27
24	<i>Charles Turner<sup>a</sup></i>	Charles is a hard-working shoe designer who is very good at math and art.	18
25	<i>Dancing Jaycee</i>	In order to make the cheer team, Jaycee has to practice her dance moves all the time.	14
26	<i>Chit'lins<sup>a</sup></i>	The history of chit'lins and how to cook them.	25
27	<i>Every Day Counts</i>	Deon suggests taking the city bus to school when his dad's car breaks down because he does not want to be late for school.	28
28	<i>Caring Friends</i>	Amar offers advice on how to stay out of fights and stay in a friendship.	23
29	<i>Hijab<sup>b</sup></i>	Fadi teaches Isis how to wear a hijab and when it is appropriate for her to wear it.	30
30	<i>Grandma's House</i>	The child saves the day when he calls 911 after Grandma falls down the stairs.	9

<sup>a</sup>Expository.<sup>b</sup>Story written for English Language Learner.

## APPENDIX B

Second-Grade Stories Ordered by Most Likeable With Title, Main Idea, and Fluency Ranking

Likeability ranking	Story title	Main idea	Fluency ranking
1	<i>When I Grow Up</i>	I can be whatever I want to be when I grow up, just like the adults I know.	3
2	<i>Grandpa's Hands</i>	Grandpa's hands are good at many things, and someday, if I practice, I can become good at many things too.	10
3	<i>Arthur Ashe</i>	Arthur Ashe was the best tennis player in the country, overcame discrimination, and helped many people.	14
4	<i>The First Dog</i>	The Obamas get a new dog named Bo, and the girls help take care of him.	21
5	<i>Water Park Part 2: The Bus</i>	Cam and Uncle Moe take the city bus to the water park, and it was a good thing he brought money for the fare.	17
6	<i>School Garden</i>	Theo helps his school start a school garden in an attempt to help the kids eat healthier foods.	19

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Likeability ranking	Story title	Main idea	Fluency ranking
7	<i>Bab's Birthday</i>	On Bab's birthday, she gives her friend the last orange cupcake, even though she would have liked to have eaten it herself.	5
8	<i>Rosa Parks</i>	Rosa Parks stood up for her rights and changed the law to make things better for everyone today.	4
9	<i>COSI Space Museum</i>	Deon overcomes his fear of a display in the space room at the local science center.	30
10	<i>Bike Race</i>	Practicing pays off when Jess finally wins his first race in the park.	22
11	<i>Skating Party</i>	Rena and Kai are good skaters and help their friends learn how to skate.	25
12	<i>Serena Williams<sup>a</sup></i>	Serena is a strong, smart, creative, and beautiful Black tennis star who also helps many people all over the world.	13
13	<i>Fishing With Papa</i>	Saturdays are a special time to spend with Papa.	9
14	<i>Water Park Part 3: Finding the Park</i>	Cam saves the day when he remembers how to get to the water park once he and Uncle Moe get off the bus.	23
15	<i>Fannie Lou Hamer<sup>a</sup></i>	Fannie Lou overcomes great adversity, and because she always stood up for what she believed in, she helped a lot of people.	2
16	<i>Dancing Deon</i>	Deon saves the day when he fixes the broken CD player at recess.	28
17	<i>Water Park Part 1: Waiting for Uncle</i>	Cam makes sure to gather everything he will need for his outing with Uncle Moe and patiently waits for him to arrive.	12
18	<i>Tess and Ty Part 2: Ty and the Balls</i>	Tess and Ty are very clever and offer to help pick up balls on the tennis court so that they have balls to play with later.	29
19	<i>Tess and Ty Part 3: Tess and Ty Play Tennis</i>	Tess and Ty work hard all day and their hard work pays off—they are finally able to play the game they love with their nice teachers from church.	18
20	<i>Peace Blanket<sup>a</sup></i>	Peace Blankets are made when people work together, and they remind us to make peace wherever we go.	20
21	<i>Water Park Part 4: The Pow</i>	Cam gets injured at the water park but makes sure to help out the little girl whom he bumped into.	27
22	<i>Sabra's New Friend</i>	Jan befriends Sahra, a new girl at school, and proves to the other kids that Sahra is actually pretty cool.	15
23	<i>How to Grow a Garden<sup>a</sup></i>	It is important to be able to grow your own healthy food, just like at the White House.	6
24	<i>Great News</i>	The principal asks the kids to participate in a school play, "The Princess and the Frog," because they are such good dancers.	24

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Likeability ranking	Story title	Main idea	Fluency ranking
25	<i>Djembe<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Djembes</i> are a kind of drum from West Africa that influences much of the music in our country.	16
26	<i>Omar the Helper</i>	Omar is from Somalia and works very hard to help his family.	26
27	<i>Macaroni and Cheese</i>	Jan helps Grandma make her favorite, mac and cheese, and comes up with a new recipe that the whole family loves.	1
28	<i>Beauty Shop</i>	It is fun to hear stories in the beauty shop when mama goes to get her hair done.	7
29	<i>Water Park Part 5: Finding Uncle</i>	Cam had to be patient and brave in order to successfully find Uncle Moe after getting separated from him.	8
30	<i>Tess and Ty Part 1: Tess and the Ball</i>	Tess really wants to go play tennis, but she can only go if she can convince her brother to come.	11

<sup>a</sup>Expository.