"I Can't Find No Black Books": Helping African American Males Find Books They Want to Read

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Abstract

Among the many factors contributing to the historical lack of reading gains of our Black male students is the absence of texts accurately and authentically representing African American characters in today's schools. In addition, well-meaning educators are not adept in identifying and selecting these types of texts in order to provide African American male students with books that mirror their lived experiences. The purpose of this article is to provide educators with a tool to aid in the selection of potentially culturally relevant literature for their adolescent African American male students. Based on a larger study, the researcher explored what eight African American eighth grade students valued when reading group-selected texts. The findings indicate that the participants displayed strong preferences toward the character's race, personal characteristics, age, and "real world" events and experiences featured in the texts. This article privileges those voices to provide a rubric for educators to use, explore, and reflect upon as they incorporate potential culturally relevant texts into their day-to-day instruction and classroom libraries.

Keywords: Culturally relevant literature, African American males, Relevant text selection

The selection of texts to use with African American male youth matters. They want to know if the text is legitimate. Teachers have to tap into the voices of young boys; if they try to do it alone, they're always going to miss the mark.

-Alfred Tatum (as cited in Hawkins, 2016, para. 8)

Kids need to see themselves in the books they read (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). "Mirror" books (Bishop, 1990, ix) do just this as they provide the reader with a place to see themselves and their lived experiences within the pages of a book. Mirror books also reflect and expand upon the culture of the child reading the book, thus reinforcing the culture of that reader. Mirror books are often referred to as culturally relevant literature (CRL) and can be a powerful tool in our

nation's schools, especially for students of color, as these types of books have been found to support students' reading engagement and proficiency (Keis, 2006; Stuart & Volk, 2002), motivation and reading outcomes (Bell & Clark, 1998; Christ & Sharma, 2018; Garth-McCullough, 2008; Tatum &Muhammad, 2012), while they also validate the reader's identity (Sims, 1983), and provides a context where readers can better activate their schema and increase their comprehension (Bell & Clark,1998).

We also know that culturally relevant texts can sustain students' cultures and identities (Alim & Paris, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sims, 1983), help readers construct meaning from (Freeman & Freeman, 2004), broaden their social consciousness (Tatum, 2000), and promote reading engagement and a love of reading (Feger, 2006; Freeman & Freeman, 2004). Taking this into consideration, it is not surprising that many scholars have called for a culturally relevant focus on literacy within our nation's schools to help African American males flourish and excel (James, 2010; Tatum, 2006; Slaughter-Defoe & Richards, 1995) as the ever-widening achievement gaps between African American males and other student subgroups continue to persist (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). In fact, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) reported that the reading achievement of eighth grade African American male students nationwide continues to remain stagnant. Referring to Table 1, little to no reading gains were made at the At or Above Proficient and At Advanced reading achievement levels by Black male eighth-grade students between the 2011-2019 reporting years while students in the Below Basic reading achievement level have increased (NCES, 2019).

Table 1

Black Male Eighth-grade Reading Achievement Levels (2011-2019 Reporting Years)

	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient	At Advanced
2019	52	37	11	(rounds to zero)
2017	47	40	13	1
2015	48	40	11	(rounds to zero)
2013	45	42	12	(rounds to zero)
2011	47	42	11	(rounds to zero)

Note. Table represents the nationwide discrete reading achievement at the below basic, at or above basic, at or above proficient, and at advanced levels for Black male eighth-grade students using 2011 school-reported guidelines.

Consequently, the seemingly simple statement from the beginning of this article, *Kids need to see themselves in the books they read*, may prove more difficult to implement than it seems when considering the scarcity of texts with Black male characters. Among the many factors contributing to the ongoing inadequacy of literacy advancement of our Black male students is the dearth of texts featuring nonwhite characters has been the historical norm (Currie, 2013; Gangi & Furgeson, 2006) within and throughout our nation's school libraries and classrooms. One reason for this is the scarcity of books published that represent African American characters in an authentic and realistic context. For example, of the 4,775 children's books published between 1973 and 1975, only 14.4% (689) included even one Black character in either text or illustrations, and when a Black child was featured in a text, the "near invisibility of the Black child was compounded by the issue of negative images" (Sims, 1982, p. 3). Even the most recent analysis conducted by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (2018) shows a decrease in the percentage of books featuring African or African American characters. Between the years 2016 and 2018, only 10.3% or 1,047 books out of the 10,753 children's books published, included African or African American characters (Table 2).

Table 2

Summary of History of Children's Books with at Least One Black Character

Publication Years	Total Number of Children's Books Published	Percentage of Books Including at Least One Black Character
2016, 2017, 2018	10,753	10.3% (1,047)
1973, 1974, 1975	4,775	14.4% (689)

Adding to this problem is the inability of well-meaning middle-level teachers to recognize texts that have the potential to be culturally relevant and incorporate them into their day-to-day instruction. Understanding how teachers select texts to use in their middle-level classrooms remains under-researched (Friese et al., 2008; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015) and even more so when referring to culturally relevant text selection. In most past studies, middle grades educators rated a text holistically as either culturally relevant or not for a group of readers who potentially shared a cultural background (McCullough, 2013). However, this type of rating has to potential to be "overdeterministic in our linkages of language and other cultural practices to certain racial and ethnic groups" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Moreover, a recent study (Christ et al., 2018) found that lead teachers over-estimated the cultural relevance of texts when compared to how students rated the same text. Even at the elementary level, Brinson (2012) found that only 39% of teachers were able

to identify even two children's books that reflect any person of color. Over a decade ago, Bandre (2005) found that teachers seldom selected texts that represented African Americans for classroom read alouds. The limited research on teachers' culturally relevant text selection suggests that few culturally relevant books are being selected by middle grades teachers for inclusion in classroom libraries or instruction (Currie, 2013; Gray, 2009).

Knowing that culturally relevant literature enhances the reading engagement and reading motivation of African American students (Bell & Clark, 1998; Gangi, 2008; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Sims, 1983; Taylor, 1997), the question becomes: How do educators, the majority of whom are White females from middle-class backgrounds (de Brey et al., 2019), intentionally provide African American male students with books that mirror their lived experiences on a consistent basis? The aim of this research is to help answer this question by incorporating the voices of eight African American eighth-grade students.

This article continues with a review of the literature explaining the essential components of identifying culturally relevant texts followed with an overview of the study. The findings are then presented, which include *in vivo* excerpts from interviews with eight African American male adolescent students in which they explained what is important to them when they read a book. Following this, guidelines in the form of a rubric are suggested for educators selecting African American literature for middle-level African American males. The suggested guidelines and texts serve as examples of how to incorporate student voice into the decision-making process, a critical element of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tatum, 2009).

Characteristics of Culturally Relevant Literature

Culturally relevant literature provides students with opportunities to engage with authentic books relative to their own experiences. In reviewing the literature pertaining to CRL, several overarching themes arose: authenticity of the text; realistic portrayal of characters, events, and storyline; and a culturally conscious ideology, all of which are essential to consider when selecting and identifying pieces of culturally relevant literature for African American male students.

Authenticity

Culturally relevant texts utilized within the classroom setting should be authentic (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Inglebret et al., 2008; McNair, 2010; Yoon et al., 2010), meaning the text should feature true information, such as correct representations of the culture's use of language and familiar experiences within the plot. Authentic information relates to accurate words and illustrations or pictures in the text (Guevara, 2003; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Inglebret et al., 2008). For realistic and historical fiction genres, authentic information encompasses the words and

images that embody the culture they are portraying, while historical fiction texts depict authentic periods, dates, and settings for the past event they represent.

Another element to consider is authentic language usage which contributes to the accurate representation of a culture's dialect (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Thomas, 2019). The language that is employed throughout the text not only adheres to the language patterns of that particular culture, but also incorporates accurate dialogue among the characters. For example, a piece of literature that includes African American culture may incorporate a familiar use of Black English vernacular, which might consist of double negatives or dropping the final sounds on some words (McNair, 2010). Another essential feature to consider when identifying authentic language used in a text is whether the student will be able to recognize it and respond to it according to the intended purpose of the author (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

Authentic common experiences portrayed in a text should be written according to the context of that culture (McNair, 2010, Thomas, 2019). McNair emphasizes that if the basis of a story is the everyday experience of survival, then the story should be narrated from the perspective of an African American to assert cultural uniqueness to be considered a culturally relevant African American text.

ACCURACY

Culturally relevant literature that is accurate includes literature that embodies real-life illustrations or pictures and contains a relatable plot in order to provide students of that particular culture the opportunity to connect with realistic characters (Gray, 2009; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). For example, book covers should be accurate and realistically portray the student's reality. The culture is accurately characterized through the physical features and color of the individual characters, as well as the setting's physical appearance.

To ensure accuracy, characters should encounter events and experiences that possibly will occur or have actually occurred to someone in real life and be naturally incorporated into the literature. It is also essential that the author depicts events in the texts that remain accurate to that culture's experiences within the nation's mainstream society.

The accurate portrayal of characters within the literature allows students to make connections with their own lives (Harris, 1997; Gray, 2009). Gray (2009) determined that "the connection readers felt or thought they would feel to the main character" (p. 476) was the most crucial element when students were choosing books. The characters in the text are depicted in an affirmative light, and the race, gender, and personal characteristics of the characters are significant. For instance, if the main character's race or gender can be switched with scarcely any change to the story, then their

culture is not legitimized (Harris, 1997). Sims (1982) criticized the picture book, *The Snowy Day,* by Ezra Jack Keats (1962/2011), as all cultural attributes were disregarded other than the color of the characters' skin. The characters should be able to identify themselves within the portrayed culture as well as participate in and exhibit the ideologies of that particular culture.

Culturally Conscious Ideology

Culturally relevant literature expresses culturally conscious ideologies (Harris, 1997; Inglebret et al., 2008; McNair, 2010; Yoon et al., 2010). To do this, culturally relevant texts contain conclusions that accurately reflect the culture they are representing. This type of literature needs to be cognizant of each culture's values and traditions without inferring or explicitly maintaining examples of assimilation (Yoon et al., 2010).

The culturally conscious ideologies maintained by the characters should remain grounded in the culture until the end of the text (Inglebret et al., 2008; Yoon et al., 2010). However, the main characters may recognize and acknowledge the reality that their culture has many similarities and discrepancies with the mainstream culture. The characters should continue to preserve their primary culture at the book's conclusion, even if the characters accept the reality that they need to learn about the dominant culture, thus also allowing the student to substantiate their personal cultural identity (Inglebret et al., 2008).

Texts that portray characters assenting to the dominant culture as their own often also neglect to point out that the supporting characters rarely take a vested interest in the main characters' personal culture (Yoon et al., 2010). Culturally relevant texts should not undertake the principles of mainstream culture through the messages they convey, as "It is through literature that students learn those values prized by our society" (Yoon et al., 2010, p. 115). The message culturally relevant literature conveys should instead ensure the identity of the main character and pride for their culture. Many culturally relevant texts might not have all of these ideological components within them. However, the more the text is conscious of the culture it is representing, the greater the likelihood the students will have a positive response (Gay, 2010; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

Methodology

The findings presented in this article are derived from a more extensive qualitative study that explored how eight African American adolescent male students participate in a culturally relevant literature-based curriculum. A holistic case study approach (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002) was used to explore students' perceptions of the culturally relevant literature utilized within the curriculum.

Participants

All eight participants were in eighth grade at the time of data collection and self-identified as African American males. They were enrolled in a middle school located in an urban community which Ward and Robinson (2019) define as a neighborhood pervaded with poverty, broken families, high unemployment rates, and educational inequality. The middle school also served as the research site, located in the northeastern part of the United States. The students' ages ranged from 13 to 15, and seven of the eight students received special education support services. All the participants qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Data Collection and Analysis

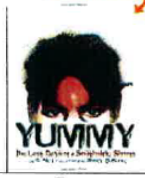
The larger study was conducted over a period of approximately 17 weeks. The first three weeks were dedicated to daily classroom observations and interviewing participants. This time was needed not only for the researcher to build rapport with the participants but also to obtain a better understanding of their perspectives of how they currently participate in their English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) classroom with the required course literature. Permission was gained from the school's principal and the participants' ELAR teacher for the researcher to meet with the eight students during their regularly scheduled ELAR class time. The participants and the researcher met for 50 minutes two to three times each week for the remaining 13 weeks of the study to conduct a book club to discuss the texts they had chosen to read.

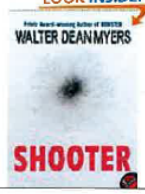
Data collection methods included student semi-structured interviews at the beginning and end of the study, book club audio transcriptions, participant reflection journals, and a researcher observation (field notes) and reflection journal. The participants also completed a culturally relevant book analysis form created by the researcher (Figure 1). The design of this form is based on the culturally situated reader response theory (Brooks & Browne, 2012) which explores the ways readers culturally position themselves when engaging with texts.

Figure 1

Culturally Relevant Book Analysis Form

Name:

Book	What did you like about the book?	Please give an example from the book.	Page Number
12 Rounds of Glory 	That he did not let people get to his headand make him made	When the white People called him Uncle Tom he did not get mad	38
Yummy LOOK INSIDE! 	That the book was just like us.	like there is alot of people geting killed	44
Bang LOOK INSIDE! 	That his dad was try to make him a man	When his dad left the boys in the woods	135

Book	What did you like about the book?	Please give an example from the book.	Page Number
Shooter (If you read it) 	I do not like it	it campare to us (wasn't like us)	
Testing the Ice 	When he had to sure the kids was going to be Safe	that made sure that the ice Was Safe for the kids to play on the Ice	24
You Don't Even Know Me 	like when you see people they act like the do not know u (just walk by you)	when the girl see him in school she do not talk to him	4

Note: The Culturally Relevant Book Analysis form was completed by Devante (pseudonym). The purple text, recorded by the researcher, represents the additional comments made by the participant once asked to further explain his statement.

HyperRESEARCH was used to manage all data. Initial data analysis began by using descriptive coding in the margins of the transcribed data (in HyperRESEARCH) to organize chunks of raw data. Then descriptive coding was used to categorize the chunks of raw data and identify frequencies within the case (Stake, 1995). The codes were then manually compared (without using HyperRESEARCH) to determine potential significant themes, categories, and subcategories. Using constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998), the researcher continuously went back-and-forth through all the collected data to compare the initial coding and began to determine the major themes and categories by analyzing emerging patterns and relationships. Coded data were assembled and reassembled to develop preliminary themes and categories to compare the data within and among categories (Maxwell, 1996).

Finally, to ensure trustworthiness, a member check was conducted. All final categories and subcategories were reworded as statements in order to provide the participants with the opportunity to either agree or disagree with each statement. Highlighters and a copy of the statements were passed out to each student. The students then either highlighted the statement if

they agreed or left it alone if they disagreed. The students had the opportunity to ask questions about any confusion they had after the researcher read each statement aloud. In order to preserve their voice in the data analysis process, any categories where two or more members disagreed with a statement were deleted from the findings.

How Participants Selected Books to Read

Because the researcher is a White female and cannot justify collecting a sample of culturally relevant books for African American middle school males alone, several resources were utilized in an effort to make purposeful text selections. Two African American male doctoral students who were public school teachers emailed suggestions of book titles and additional websites detailing quality texts where African Americans served as lead characters with a wide array of genres and readability levels. They based their choices on what they have personally read and what their children and students have read and are reading. A proposed book list was created using the resources provided to me by these two helpful individuals.

Using these book recommendations, the researcher created two ballot forms, one for picture books and another for novels and graphic novels (Appendix A and B). The researcher conducted a brief "book talk" (Kittle, 2013, p. 59) on each book to provide students with a short synopsis to think about while they considered their selections. The students had the opportunity to peruse through the books and select their first four book choices on each ballot. The students' choices were tallied, and the researcher provided each participant with the chosen books to read in preparation for our book club meetings.

I want to note here that six out of the nine picture books listed on the picture book ballot form (Appendix A) include either characters who are athletes or slavery which is problematic. We want our students to see themselves in the literature they read, however what happens if the majority of books published represent African Americans primarily as athletes or slaves? Unfortunately, the publishing industry, which typically is not composed of people of African American decent (Young, 2006), act as, "…gatekeepers of the kinds of stories and images representative of African Americans" (Henderson, 2005, p.269). In the books that are published, the "Black" experience is typically represented portraying "blackness" in a manner that appeals to a white audience (Young, 2006). This evidence highlights the ongoing dire need for publishers to provide our African American students with literature that is culturally authentic and accurate in order to provide students with opportunities to engage with texts relative to their own everyday experiences.

Book Club Discussion

During book clubs, small groups of students gather together on a regular basis to discuss a piece of literature in depth. For our book club, we developed a routine of dedicating the first 10-15 minutes

to "open discussion" which varied from the participants talking about their frustrations regarding a class they were taking together, to last night's basketball game, or something that happened in their neighborhood. The next 20-25 minutes were spent on book discussions, while the remaining ten minutes were dedicated to the students writing in their reflection journals and deciding as a group how much to read to prepare for our next meeting.

During the first week of our book club sessions, I noted how the participants often had difficulty talking about what they had read. I returned to my initial interview notes, I noticed a pattern when I asked the question, "Do you talk about the books you read with others?" Every student answered in the negative. Reflecting on how I should have prepared for this dilemma before our first meeting, I decided to introduce and model several strategies with the group throughout the study to encourage conversations about the books we were reading. After I demonstrated a strategy, I required everyone to "try it out" for the next book club meeting. However, after the initial requirement, I did not compel students to use the approach; but encouraged them to continue using the strategy if they thought it was helpful during our meetings. Some strategies were embraced, meaning students continued to use them throughout the study, while others were abandoned (Appendix C).

As the study progressed, students became more and more inclined to come to the book club with something they *wanted* to discuss indicating a proactive engagement with the text. As they utilized the strategies previously mentioned, the majority of our discussions grew from what the participants thought were important in the texts, however, they rarely explained why these discussion points were so significant to them. In an effort to preserve their voice and intended meaning of their discussion, I began simply asking, "Why?" or "Why do you think this is important for us to talk about today?" This consistent non-invasive prompting perpetuated the participants to begin explaining the significance and relevance of these discussion points, therefore providing insight into what textual characteristics played an important role in their reading preferences.

FINDINGS

Having established the book club protocols explained above, students were better able to discern what they did and did not appreciate about the books, along with disclosing explanations into why certain aspects of the texts were favored and appreciated by the participants. The students valued specific characteristics within the texts and displayed strong preferences towards the character's race, personal characteristics, age, and "real world" events and experiences showcased in the texts.

RACE

The race of the characters in the books mattered to this group of students. All of the participants commented on the significance of the character being Black or African American. For example, Isaac (all names are pseudonyms) stated, "I like it [the book *Bang!*] cuz the story is about a Black kid," while Garrett explained, "I like it. It's about a famous Black person named Muhammad." Devonte showed his appreciation of African American characters in the books as he explained that he was able to "see them (characters) in my head when I read, and they're Black. I'm not used to that. I've always seen White people before."

In another instance, the group discussed why they thought their ELAR teacher never read books with Black characters.

Donald: Why doesn't she ever read books [aloud to the class] with Black people in them?
Group: (agreeing) Yeah! I know!
Researcher: Well, have you ever asked her why? Maybe she doesn't realize it?
Isaac: Nah, she don't care about that.
Donald: She does NOT care what we like, what we want.
(group agreeing)
Researcher: Maybe you should talk to her about it?
Deshawn: She won't listen.
Isaac: What's the big deal about reading books with Black people? It's always about white people and there's only like five, six white kids in our class.

Incidentally, the participants came to the realization that they preferred books with Black characters and, rightfully so, wanted their ELAR teacher to read "Black books" aloud during class. Their resistance to discuss this aspect with their ELAR teacher demonstrates their frustration with not having a voice when it comes to materials used during the school day. While race was a noteworthy feature, the students also respected the character's personal characteristics.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Many of the students indicated they appreciated strong African American male characters who hold true to their convictions. This commitment to conviction was especially prominent in the nonfiction texts, such as *12 Rounds of Glory* (Smith, 2010) featuring Muhammad Ali and *Testing the Ice* (Robinson, 2009) detailing an important event in Jackie Robinson's life. Kareem wrote the following comment in his reflection journal:

> I think that it is a great book and I think it's really taught us a lot about how everything is
> not just there for you, you have to earn it and work for it. Muhammad Ali is a great person and he was a little bit cocky. He stayed true to his religion and he was a

champion. I know what it feels like to be at the top and lose it all.

In addition, Deshawn disclosed to the group, "He [Muhammad Ali] did not let people get to his head and make him mad," while Isaac stated, "He [Jackie Robinson] didn't let people talk him out of it. He did what he wanted to do." Furthermore, these comments indicate the students' appreciation of the Black male character's ability to persevere and commit to their beliefs.

AGE

The character's age was also important to the students as readers. Donald explained that he liked *Bang!* (Flake, 2004) because "The dude is our age," while Deshawn chimed in with, "He's about 14, so I come from him." Isaac wrote in his reflection journal that he liked *12 Rounds of Glory* (Smith, 2010) because "He's a young Black man that wants to change the world." Also, the students explained they liked the book *You Don't Even Know Me* (Flake, 2011) because "It's about a whole bunch of kids our age." In addition, Devante remarked, "Yummy and Bang, they was around the same age, and I'm around the same age with them, so I understand what they're talking about and where they're coming from." Consequently, the students recognized that the characters were of a similar age and identified this characteristic as important, possibly because they were able to identify with the character's thoughts and feelings from a similar age group.

THE "REAL WORLD"

One characteristic that the students overwhelmingly appreciated relates to the events and experiences showcased in the texts, as Devonte stated, "It [*Yummy*] talks about the real world." They articulated that the books represent the "real world" that they live in. In one instance, Deshawn expressed, "It [*Bang!*] tells how they in the book is how WE live out in the world," as he made a gesture to include everyone in our group. Kareem added, "The book we are reading [*Bang!*] actually fits my life story and these books I actually enjoy." Isaac also revealed to the group that, "The book we are reading [*You Don't Even Know Me*] is connecting with the real world and what happens in it. It's the struggle. It's how my life is."

Several weeks into the study, the group was discussing the character, Yummy, and if the decisions he was forced to make to survive.

Researcher: They had like 20 kids in his grandma's house at any time.
Devante: But someone didn't know that he did ... it was so much kids and didn't keep count so they didn't know who left and who came back.
Kareem: So he would leave for like three or four days, and maybe a week.
Devante: And then come back.
Deshawn: See, he ain't got nobody.
Group: (agreeing) No. Nope.
Donald: He had to get his own food.

Researcher:	He had to get his own food didn't he? He had to steal it. When I was reading this before, I was asking myself if what Yummy was doing [stealing food] was really wrong? I mean he was starving. Was it wrong?
Group:	No. Not really.
Kareem:	I ain't going to front, I used to steal.
Researcher:	Why?
Kareem:	I needed to eat. As I look back on my life, I think it was wrong.
Researcher:	So, is what Yummy doing wrong?
Deshawn:	Yeah, but he had to do it. I know my sister had to steal food when she was on the street. She was a pole [skinny].
Isaac:	Sometimes you just got to do what you got to do.
Deshawn:	She got to survive.
Isaac:	That's what's good about this [book]. It talks about things we do sometimes. Like the way we have to live.

Here, the students are showing appreciation for the way the book is representing events they or someone they know has experienced. Consequently, the participants were able to identify and empathize with this "real world" experience as the navigated the ethics of the choice the character made.

Additional Finding: Books Promoting Books but Nowhere to Find Them

While the students found certain aspects of the books to be substantial, another important finding was that the students wanted to read more "Black books" but struggled to access other potentially culturally relevant texts. After the book club group read *Yummy* (Geri, 2010) and *Bang!* (Flake, 2005), the students began asking for additional "Black books," a term they coined, where African American males were featured as the main character. I suggested they look in their school library and ask the media specialist to help them locate these types of books to read on their own.

When I returned the following week, Donald showed his frustration and stated "I can't find no Black books" in their school's library. The students explained that they attempted to find more "Black books" to read on their own, but could not locate any even with help from the media specialist as Devante stated, "They [the library] only have books about Asian and White people, nothing about us. Why do they do that?"

Because of this lack of access, I decided to bring several more "Black books" from my own collection to the next book club meeting, but also explained these would need to be additional readings, meaning the students were still expected to read the books they initially agreed upon. I gathered additional books from my personal book collection for the students to peruse after one book club

session: *Black Boy, White School* (Walker, 2010); *March: Book One* (Lewis, 2013); *Muhammad Ali: The King of the Ring* (Helfand, 2011); *Day of Tears* (Lester, 2005); *The Silence of our Friends* (Long & Demonakos, 2012); and *Somewhere in the Darkness* (Myers, 1992). Deshawn, Edwin, Donald, and Devante each chose an additional book to read, while Isaac explained that Deshawn picked the book he wanted to read, so he would read the book when Deshawn was finished. After the students returned from their two-week holiday break, Deshawn and Donald returned their books the following week and asked for additional books. When I asked why they wanted to read more of these books, Deshawn explained, "I think Black books is way more interesting, and I just want to read them," while Donald nodded his head in agreement and said, "We need more books like this."

DISCUSSION

As mentioned previously, the participants struggled at first with identifying specific appealing aspects of the texts they had chosen to read. As the study continued, students became more and more apt to speak about textual preferences possibly because the study was conducted in a book club setting. Studies of various student populations have shown that all children, when given the opportunity and appropriate guidance and support, are capable of participating in meaningful conversations about texts. The book club context provides a space for open discussion where students construct meaning of what they are reading, make connections between the text and their own experiences, and evaluate the text and their understanding of it (Goatley et al, 1995; Paley, 1997). Nevertheless, the participants identified four specific characteristics that they valued in the culturally relevant books we read: the age, race, and personal characteristics of the characters and the authors' representation of the "real world."

STUDENTS VALUED SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS

While research suggests that African American students (Gray, 2009; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; McNair, 2010) and males specifically (Tatum 2006, 2009) value culturally relevant texts, the findings from this study voice what specific characteristics the African American male participants appreciated and valued as readers.

The participants valued strong, young African American male characters who engaged in "real world" experiences similar to their lives. However, several of the books chosen and enjoyed by the students did not contain every one of these characteristics. For example, while the participants indicated that they valued young characters, the book *Testing the Ice* (Robinson, 2009) featured Jackie Robinson as a middle-aged man. Nonetheless, they still enjoyed the text. Another example is from the book *Bang!* (Flake, 2004). The main character, Mann, is a middle school student who is shocked and still facing the reality of his young brother's death. In contrast to the strong characters that the participants recognized as being valued, Mann demonstrates many emotional weaknesses

throughout the book and identifies as an artist, who are often stereotypically identified as isolated and eccentric.

Books deemed culturally relevant by the participants do not need to include all four criteria for the book to be embraced. As demonstrated above, the act of reading is complex and compounded by the readers unique individual experiences that doesn't necessarily follow a predictable path. Some scholars have challenged stereotypical masculine reading preferences (Dutro, 2002; Martino & Kehler, 2007) which have pervaded literature geared towards young male readers. In addition, researchers have demonstrated that males read for various reasons which are typically connected to the individual reader's interests, ambitions, and identity (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Wilhelm, 2008). Taking this into consideration, it should be no surprise that even though the participants frequently expressed their preference toward strong, Black male characters, they also appreciated and connected to Mann's character who demonstrates emotional weaknesses throughout the novel. Therefore, as educators, we must become knowledgeable about the lives of our students while incorporating their voices into discussion or we "risk missing the mark completely, or worse yet, perpetuating stereotypes" (Sciurba, 2015, p. 315) about who our African American male students are as individual readers.

Culturally relevant texts may not have all these authentic components within them; however, the more authentic the text is, the greater the possibility students will choose to read it (Gay, 2010; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001), as this study confirms. However, the four criteria that the participants acknowledged—the age, race, and personal characteristics of the characters and the representation of the "real world"—should be taken into consideration when suggesting or purchasing books for African American adolescent males.

The literature details what characterizes a culturally relevant character, such as race, gender, believable personality traits, the ability to grow naturally. Culturally relevant characters are also represented in an affirmative light. However, Tatum (2009) surmised that African American males want to read books that have strong enabling characters. While this study does not suggest that one characteristic is more important than another, Tatum's notion coincides with the findings from this study in that the participants appreciated strong African American male characters who remain true to their convictions.

Implications and Recommendations

There is a scarcity of texts for students of color (Currie, 2013, Gangi & Ferguson, 2006) which translates into a lack of accessibility to culturally diverse literature in today's schools. This alarming inequality privileges White students and marginalizes students of color. The participants in the study had a difficult time locating culturally relevant literature in their school's library. The students explained that they attempted to find more "Black books" to read on their own to no avail. Unfortunately, the participants of the study are not alone as the majority of African American male

students do not have access to texts that are consistent with their reading interests (Tatum, 2006); therefore, literacy educators need to make culturally relevant literature available to the students they have in their classrooms, which is no easy feat.

Complexities Within Assumptions of Cultural Relevance

Based on these findings, the student reading the text should be the one to determine whether a text is culturally relevant or not. Noting here that African American males are not homogeneous is crucial. Tatum (2000) argues that traditional conceptions of race are not valid given our understanding of multiple and various social and cultural factors that influence an individual's identity. Assuming readers gravitate only toward mirror texts does not consider the complexities of racial or gender identities, nor does it distinguish the multiplicities of the very act of reading and responding to texts (Sciurba, 2014). All students, no matter from what racial, ethnic, or religious background, bring separate strengths, interests, and life experiences to the classroom and thus, to their reading experiences. Because of these complex factors, boldly stating what texts are culturally relevant for students of any culture would be presumptuous of educators. Cultures have differing values, opinions, and points of view (Aronson, 2003). In addition, Mo and Shen (2003) also make the statement that in picture books,

> Some cultural facts and practices may be realistically reflected in the story but may not be considered authentic because members of the culture do not agree with each other on the interpretation of their values. Moreover, within a culture, different values are constantly in conflict. New values, beliefs, and attitudes are fighting to take hold, while old ones, though dying, are still valid for a minority. (p. 201)

Therefore, using the guidelines provided by other researchers and the findings from this study, we can begin to suggest texts that potentially may be culturally relevant to African American male students, but ultimately, the power to determine the cultural relevance of a piece of literature is fundamentally in the hands of the individual reader.

Bringing in Student Voice When Selecting Potentially CRL

Often the leading obstacle to selecting and purchasing books aimed at strengthening the reading engagement of African American adolescent males is the resistance by school boards, administrators, teachers, and parents who do not understand why particular books have to be specifically selected for this population (Friese et al., 2008; Rush et al., 2011; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). As Tatum (2009) explains, "The literacy development of the collective cannot be addressed without addressing the literacy development of the individual" (p. 61). As such, we cannot ignore the importance of providing relevant books for African American male students. Teachers should not fear or circumvent these types of texts but rather welcome the possible benefits of engagement with culturally relevant literature. Thus, not only literacy educators, but school administrators as

well, need to advocate for the purchase of texts that respond to the needs of many African American males.

Rubric: Identifying Potential Cultural Authenticity, Accuracy, and Consciousness in Literature

As discussed above, there is limited research on culturally relevant text selection among teachers, which suggests that few culturally relevant books are being selected by teachers for inclusion in classroom libraries or instruction (Currie, 2013; Gray, 2009). Using the characteristics identified by the previously mentioned and recently located resources (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Fox & Short, 2003; Glasgow & Rice, 2007; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Sims, 1982; Wilfong, 2007), a rubric was developed that also incorporates student voice from the results of this study to assist teachers in identifying potential culturally relevant literature for African American male students (Figure 2, next page). The rubric has three essential elements to consider when assessing a book's criteria for cultural relevance: authenticity, accuracy, and cultural consciousness. Next to the criteria listed on the rubric are "student friendly" questions for students to consider when given the opportunity to aid in determining the cultural relevance of a text. The researcher often asked these questions during the book club meetings to help determine what the participants felt was important and relevant in the books they read. Rather than perpetuating the problematic tradition of silencing boys of color by excluding their views on what literacy aspects are most significant to them (Kirkland, 2013), these questions were added to help African American male students support their teachers in determining what is relevant.

Figure 2

Rubric: Identifying Potential Cultural Authenticity, Accuracy, and Consciousness in Literature

Criteria	**Student Self-Questions**	**1**	**0**
Language & Dialect	*Do the characters in the text communicate like me, my friends, and my family?*	• Accurate usage and representation of language conventions and dialect. • Well-crafted language that is appropriate to the culture portrayed. • Accurate dialogue between characters should also adhere to the language patterns of the culture.	• Inaccurate usage and representation of language conventions and dialect. • Language used is not appropriate to the culture portrayed. • Dialogue between characters is inaccurate and does not adhere to the language patterns of the culture.
Characterization	*Do the characters in the text look and act like me?*	• Characters are represented in an affirmative light. • Main character is very close to the age of the reader. • Race, gender, and personal characteristics are significant to the story. • Characters are believable, grow naturally, and show depth.	• Characters are not represented in an affirmative light. • Main character is not close to the age of the reader. • Race, gender, and personal characteristics are not important to the story. • Characters are unbelievable, do not grow naturally, and show little depth.
Illustrations & Pictures	*Do the characters and places in the text look like the people and places I know?*	• The culture is accurately characterized through the physical features and color of the individual characters. • Accurate representation of time frames, dates, and settings for the historical event(s) they signify. • Book cover is accurate and realistic by reflecting reality.	• The culture is not accurately characterized through the physical features and color of the individual characters. • Inaccurate representation of time frames, dates, and settings for the historical event they signify. • Book cover is not accurate or realistic and does not reflect reality.
Setting	*Have I lived near or visited places just like those in the story?*	• The culture is accurately characterized through the location's physical appearance.	• The culture is not characterized through the location's physical appearance.

		• Setting is natural in relation to the content and characters of the book.	• Setting is unnatural in relation to the content and characters of the book.
Relationships	*Have I had or know of relationships like the one in the story?*	• Relationships between characters are typical of that culture.	• Relationships between characters are not typical of that culture.
Events & Experiences	*Have I had experiences like the one(s) described in the story?*	• Experienced events represent the "real world" and could possibly happen or have actually happened to someone in real life and are naturally incorporated into the literature.	• Few or none of the experienced events represent the "real world" and not could possibly happen or have actually happened to someone in real life and are not naturally incorporated into the literature.
Message & Conclusions	*Does the message of the text represent what I know about myself, my family, and my community?*	• Conclusions hold true to the culture they are representing. • Characters still retain their primary culture at the conclusion. • The message conveyed ensures the identity of the main character and pride for their culture.	• Conclusions do not hold true to the culture they are representing. • Characters do not retain their primary culture at the conclusion. • The message conveyed does nothing to ensure the identity of the main character and pride for their culture.

Conclusion

It is imperative that all educational stakeholders do their part to provide African American males access to texts they want to read. If students are continuously exposed to books that do not represent their lived experiences or cultural backgrounds, they may disengage from reading altogether (Ferdman, 1990). Guthrie, Rueda, Gambrell, and Morrison (2009) stated that when "African American students avoid reading their achievement drops quickly, and when they devote themselves to reading their achievement rises quickly" (p. 213). Hopefully, educators will utilize, explore, and reflect upon this rubric as they incorporate potential culturally relevant texts into their day-to-day instruction and classroom libraries. Embracing the diverse perspectives of young Black boys in the texts we incorporate in our schools, we can begin to include books where this historically marginalized group of students finally see themselves in books they want to read.

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APPENDIX A

Culturally Relevant Book Ballot: Picture Books

This ballot was used by the participants to document their first four picture book choices. The numbers listed in the right-hand column represent the total number of votes each text received. The highlighted rows indicate the texts provided to each student based on the total number of votes.

Book Title:	**Put a checkmark next to your first FOUR book choices:**
Yummy (Neri, 2010)	**8**
Shooter (Myers, 2004)	**6**
Somewhere in the Darkness (Myers, 1992)	**1**
What is Goodbye? (Grimes, 2004)	**0**
Locomotion (Woodson, 2010)	**3**
Amiri & Odette (Myers, 2009)	**1**
A Strong Right Arm (Green, 2004)	**0**
You Don't Even Know Me (Flake, 2011)	**6**
Bang! (Flake, 2004)	**6**
Day of Tears (Lester, 2007)	**1**

APPENDIX B

Culturally Relevant Book Ballot: Novels & Graphic Novels

This ballot was used by the participants to document their first four novel and graphic novel choices. The numbers listed in the right-hand column represent the total number of votes each text received. The highlighted rows indicate the provided to each student based on the total number of votes.

Book Title:	**Put a checkmark next to your first FOUR book choices:**
Michael's Golden Rules **(Jordan& Jordan, 2007)**	**4**
Brothers of the Knight **(Allen, 2001)**	**2**
Big Jabe **(Nolan, 2003)**	**3**
Wee Winnie Witch's Skinny **(Hamilton, 2004)**	**3**
12 Rounds to Glory: The Story of Muhammad Ali **(Smith, 2010)**	**8**
A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis **(de la Pena, 2013)**	**4**
Testing the Ice: A True Story About Jackie Robinson **(Robinson, 2009)**	**7**
Hewitt Anderson's Great Big Life **(Nolen, 2013)**	**0**
Many Thousands Gone: African Americans from Slavery to Freedom **(Hamilton, 1995)**	**1**

APPENDIX C

Strategies Embraced or Abandoned by the Group

Strategy	Explanation	Embraced	Abandoned
Underlining as We Read	Underline what is important, interesting, and/or confusing parts when reading.	X	
Sticky Notes	Writing thoughts and/or questions down while we read.		X
Venn Diagram	Comparing and contrasting story elements.		X
Stalking Sentences	Circle one phrase, sentence, or paragraph that "follows you around" after you read it.	X	
Questioning the Character	Students ask themselves: If I could ask the character one question right now, what would it be?	X	

About the Author

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