

Motivation and its Relationship to Reading Achievement for Two Middle School African American Males

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This multi-case study is grounded in a critical literacy theoretical framework that identified motivation as an essential tool for reading achievement. It is critical that educational researchers and practitioners investigate, observe, and examine what motivates African American male students to desire reading proficiency, particularly those who struggle with decoding and comprehension. Several scholars have found direct correlations between engagement, motivation, and reading achievement. The in-depth qualitative data in this study reinforces the notion that motivation and engagement play an integral role in students' interest in learning and underpins their achievement.

Keywords: African American Males, Student Achievement, Motivation

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Too often Black males' learning styles are not considered, which often leads to misplacement in special education programs, truancy, suspension, and expulsion (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). This in-depth multi-case study is grounded in the critical literacy framework while identifying motivation as an essential tool for reading achievement (Miller & Faircloth, 2009), and in Wood and Harris III's (2016) research on effective strategies for teaching boys and young men of color. Hermosa (2002) defined reading motivation as "the interest or desire to read for a different purpose" (p. 56). Other researchers contend that cognitive and motivation variables affect students' reading comprehension (Graham, 1994; Ottley & Ellis, 2019; Pressley & Harris, 2006). Several scholars have investigated the importance and urgency of motivation, culturally relevant teaching, and learning practices for African American males (Harper, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Robinson et al., 2016; Wright & Ford, 2016), as opposed to the sedentary teaching style that is normally utilized in primary school settings.

In their research on motivation and effective strategies for teaching boys and young men of color, Wood and Harris III (2016) described eight teaching and learning strategies for African American males. These strategies included the following: (a) culturally relevant content—connecting the curriculum to the lived socio-cultural realities and experiences of students; (b)

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addressing racism and stereotypes—intentionally confronting and deconstructing messages that perpetuate racism, stereotypes, and misnomers about boys and young men of color; (c) mastery learning principles—ensuring that course content is acquired prior to engaging new content; (d) fostering critical reflection—providing learning and development activities that engage students in reflection and introspection into their actions, morals, and assumptions; (e) cooperative and collaborative learning—using guided learning in small group settings to engage learning and to explore the nuances of course content; (f) problem (project)-based learning—engaging inquiry-based learning modalities that allow students to problem solve and learn through guided or independent investigation; (g) healthy competition—increasing student interest in course learning through competitive activities that engage socialized competitive ethos among boys and young men; (h) leadership opportunities—re-centering males of color as leaders in in-class and out-of-class learning opportunities. This article will consider factors that motivate African American males to academically achieve in reading. It is critical that educational researchers and practitioners investigate, observe, and examine what motivates students to desire reading proficiency.

While efforts are constantly being made to reform literacy education and standards (e.g., Common Core Curriculum Standards), the reforms have not considered how Black boys live and learn (Kirkland, 2011). Several scholars have found direct correlations between engagement and reading achievement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Robinson, 2013). Motivation and engagement play an integral role in students' interest in learning and underpin their achievement (Alvermann & Wilson, 2011; Martin et al., 2003; Miller & Faircloth, 2009; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010;). Regarding reading, students are most engaged when the classroom environment and pedagogic delivery are culturally relevant (Compton-Lilly, 2015). To this extent, cultural relevance is not limited to race or ethnically friendly classroom settings; rather, it is also connected to real-world instruction.

In language arts courses, it is imperative that assignments and field projects be authentic, meaningful, and interwoven into students' daily lives (Guthrie, 2004). Gaining an understanding of students' motivation does not necessarily require artifacts. It can also be acquired through student focus groups to facilitate open discussions, which value each member's voice and perspective. Information gathered within focus groups can help teachers better understand the culture, learning styles, and academic needs within the classroom context (Moley et al., 2011). Parsons and Ward (2011) contend that a teacher's role is to "(a) send a message that content and literacy are important and relevant to [students'] lives, (b) enhance students' motivation, and (c) build their academic vocabularies" (p. 464). Unfortunately, due to federal mandates such as teacher accountability and standardized testing, most teachers focus primarily on meeting one-size-fits-all standards, as opposed to building a rapport with their student population (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Talbert-Johnson, 2006). Pearson et al. (2007) argued that "too many school tasks are inauthentic, unrealistic, and, by implication, not useful for engaging in real world literacy activities; that is, instead of teaching kids how to do school, we should be teaching them how to do life" (p. 36).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this multi-case study was to highlight critical literacy as a motivational tool for two African American males with reading dysfluency, while seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of their motivation from a first-person perspective. This study is divided into three parts. First, I provide an overview of critical literacy as an essential tool for reading achievement. Second, I provide an overview of literature on effective strategies for teaching African American

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males. Third, I share first person accounts from participants in this study. Findings illuminate how African American males in this study described instructional strategies that motivated them to overcome their reading challenges. The following research question guided this study: What are the motivational factors of two African American males who significantly improved in reading fluency during their last year in middle school and first year of high school?

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is grounded in the sociocultural perspective and way of thinking about curriculum, literacies, and honoring students' lived experiences (Brooks, 2006). Reading instruction must be pedagogically sound as well as culturally relevant to strengthen the reader's identity and capacity for critical thinking (Flowers, 2007). Critical literacy is having the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner to better understand power and inequity (Yosso, 2005). Moreover, critical literacy encourages readers to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between reader(s) and author(s) (Bradford & Harris, 2003). Tatum (2008) argued that texts that are largely of interest to Black males are often absent from the curriculum; teachers often lack skills, interest, and strategies that are aimed towards increasing Black males' engagement with texts; and "educators often find it difficult to use texts to counter in-school and out-of-school context-related issues that heighten the vulnerability level of African American males" (p. 163).

Critical literacy represents all forms of communication that not only share a message but can also be used to influence people's perspectives and lead to social change (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, scholars have noted "critical literacy views text meaning-making as a process of social construction with a particularly critical eye towards elements of the various historical, social and political contexts involved" (Norris et al., 2012, p. 59). Overall, critical literacy examines readers' thought processes as they assess, reflect, and critique "issues of power, enabling them to see the ways that texts, contexts, and institutions inform, shape and circumscribe meaning-making, or how reading is shaped by structural forces, constraints, and contingencies" (Damico et al., 2009, p. 177). In addition, critical literacy also considers the author's views, perspectives, and inferences he or she is trying to communicate to the reader. Black boys, through reading and listening, need to be exposed to stories about individuals who share similar lived experiences (Robinson, 2013). Critical literacies allow students to make connections with an author and, in turn, bring their rich, lived experiences into the classroom (Orellana et al., 2011).

A Case Study on Two African American Males

In a high school African American history classroom, a lesson related to Emmett Till transitioned into a conversation about Michael Brown. Both African American males were shot to death by White men. At the age of 14, Emmett Till was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi, on August 24, 1955, when he was accused of whistling at Carolyn Bryant, a White woman who was a cashier at a grocery store. Four days later, Till was kidnapped, beaten, and shot several times in the head. In a more recent case with some of the same tragic and lethal parallels, on August 9, 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot to death by Darren Wilson, a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, after being accused of robbing a convenience store. For Todd (all participants and school names are pseudonyms), a ninth-grade African American student, this lesson and class discussion led to feelings of sadness, anger, and a series of questions about racism and police brutality, while concurrently piquing his interest to do further research on police brutality within the American context. Over the course of the semester, he

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expressed his curiosity by raising questions about both Emmett Till and Michael Brown. Todd also spent a significant amount of time using the Google search engine to research additional race-based cases that share similarities to the aforementioned victims.

Meanwhile, Jason, another African American male ninth-grader, in a separate classroom at the same school, aspires to become a bestselling author. Based on his life experiences, he's interested in writing about the overrepresentation of African American males placed in special education classrooms. Considering Jason's desire to become a skillful author, he often researches Black males who've written bestselling books. A few of those authors include Christopher Emdin, Michael Eric Dyson, Marc Lamont Hill, and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., among several others. He constantly reminds himself that he must improve his literacy skills in order to achieve his goal of publishing books that will gain popularity.

Even though Todd and Jason have different interests, they share quite a few similarities. First, both students are African American males with a diagnosed learning disability. Second, they struggled with reading throughout elementary and middle school, earning low grades as well as low standardized test scores. Third, they are resilient ninth graders who are self-motivated to achieve academically. However, another critical similarity between these students is the fact that their literacy skills radically improved during their first year in high school. Success patterns of Black males with disabilities are generally absent for disability studies literature (Anderson, 2015).

Traditionally, research on African American males with disabilities are written using a deficit approach, as opposed to highlighting successful stories and outcomes (Aud et al., 2012; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012; National Center of Education Statistics, 2012). Given that reality, this article aims to shed light on the educational and motivational journeys of two African American males with reading disabilities who demonstrated significant gains in their reading skills during their ninth-grade year. These two students' stories were randomly pulled from a larger study with ten participants using a multiple-case-study framework (Barone, 2011) and a motivational theory lens (Guthrie, 2004). This study utilizes interview data from the students, their parents, school administrators, and instructors, in addition to a series of classroom observations.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research design to examine the educational experiences of two African American males with reading disabilities. A multi-case study approach was employed to understand and explain the participants' educational, cultural, and social experiences (Barone, 2011). By using this design, the author was able to explore literacy learning and instruction in school settings without overtly manipulating the classroom context (Huber et al., 2004). Qualitative inquiry is a research paradigm that is suited for exploratory studies and is geared towards understanding rather than quantifying phenomena (Fontana & Frey, 1994). In addition, qualitative methods are increasingly being employed to investigate reading disabilities and their treatment (Cheek et al., 2004; Finn & Felsenfeld, 2004; Huber et al., 2004).

Data Collection

The researcher used a purposeful sampling technique in selecting participants for the study. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling relies on the researcher's judgement when making a unit selection to be studied (e.g., people, cases, organizations, events, or pieces of data). The researcher must identify and select individuals or groups that are knowledgeable about

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or have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). Prior to identifying and selecting, the researcher must understand participants' willingness to participate and their ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate and reflective way (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Several one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, as well as one interview with both their current English teacher, and at least one parent. This research followed the requisite elements of a sound case study as laid out by Barone (2011): multiple interviews, observations, and artifact analysis. This was a "collective case study," one that forgoes the detail of a singularly focused methodology in favor of "building a stronger understanding and more compelling argument for the significance of the work using multiple cases" (Barone, 2011, p. 9).

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in three stages throughout this project, using Merriam's (2009) constant comparative method of case study analysis. I uploaded interview transcripts to NVIVO 10, a software program that I use to code and manage all of my data. I first engaged in multiple reads and comparative examinations of the data (Creswell, 2008). Through this process I initially developed a set of inductive codes primarily relating to how students described their motivation to read, their learning styles, and their postsecondary goals. While a deductive approach was used, an inductive approach was also adopted, which allowed me to remain open to new and emerging themes throughout the course of the analysis (Merriam, 2009). Thus, some codes were developed from the literature and others were developed in-vivo from comments made by participants.

The researcher engaged in member checking to increase the trustworthiness of the initial coding scheme (Krefting, 1999). Member checking involves testing the interpretations of the data that I developed with the research participants (Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I conducted formal member checking with the students as a follow up to their interviews. During the coding process, I provided students with their individual coded transcripts as well as my initial coding scheme to gain their feedback. The participants were asked to read through the documents and comment upon my codes and preliminary findings. I used their reactions and suggestions to refine my coding system before moving into further analysis.

Both during my initial coding process and after initial codes were developed, I engaged in comparing and connecting emerging codes and categories (Merriam, 2009). I used NVIVO 10 to group together data by code in order to reassemble the data and view patterns and themes within and across the narratives. Through this process of comparing across the different narratives, I refined my coding system, reduced the number of original codes, and connected the remaining to larger categories. Lastly, I began to pull together themes and develop a storyline (Merriam, 2009). During this process, the primary themes that emerged across the data were (a) the impact of critical literacy and cultural responsiveness on student motivation as an essential tool for reading achievement; (b) awareness and disclosure of their learning styles; (c) the link between students' primary academic achievements and their postsecondary goals.

In addition to member checking, I used reflexivity to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Reflexivity served a variety of purposes in this study. It aligns with my epistemological position and methodological approach (social constructivism), which requires the researcher's "self" to be present in the study (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, reflexivity provides another form of credibility and trustworthiness to research data because it allows researchers to be conscious of how their background can influence how they collect and

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interpret data (Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher primarily engaged in reflexivity through memo writing, in which I would include my own personal reflections. I processed reflexivity by reflecting on my researcher identity, considering the researcher/participant relationship, and reflecting on my social positioning (Krefting, 1999). My insider/outsider identity shaped my research design and interpretations; thus, I sought assistance through member checking to reflect on these factors and remain aware of how they might influence my work.

Findings

Findings illustrate how African American males in this study described what instructional strategies helped them overcome their reading challenges. As noted earlier, three primary themes emerged across students' narratives: (a) the impact of critical literacy and cultural responsiveness on student motivation as an essential tool for reading achievement; (b) awareness and disclosure of their learning styles; and (c) the link between students' primary academic achievements and their postsecondary goals.

Todd

At the time of this study, Todd, an African American male, was in the ninth grade at Burke High School. Todd communicated with excitement about his involvement on the football team. He also enjoyed playing the saxophone in the school's concert band. Ms. Williamson, Todd's ninth grade teacher, described him as being a very energetic, charismatic, and curious student. In addition, she indicated that "he is extremely thoughtful and caring."

Educational Background and Indicator of Reading Improvement

Todd attended a public school in Charleston, South Carolina, and according to his father, Mr. Goodson, experienced challenges with oral and written comprehension. When he transferred to the Charleston School District in the third grade, he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) along with a reading disability and was given an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). IEP records indicate that Todd had academic goals in the areas of science, written expression, and reading comprehension. Todd recalled his third-grade academic year as being a time of fun and enjoyment, but in the fourth grade, he said, "I was assigned to a learning support group and from there remained stagnant. I passed my classes but wasn't a high-ranking student."

According to Mr. Goodson, while elementary school played a vital role in helping Todd become a more proficient reader, additional factors related to his journey to middle school helped catapult his reading proficiency. Todd's statewide standardized reading scores from the fourth through eighth grade are indicative of improvement:

Table 1. Todd's Statewide Standardized Reading Scores from 4th to 8th Grade

Grade	Proficiency
4 th Grade	Below Basic
5 th Grade	Basic
6 th Grade	Basic
7 th Grade	Proficient
8 th Grade	Proficient

Source: CCD Public school data 2015-2016, 2017-2018 school years

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During Todd’s eighth grade year, he received the following scores on a college-prep assessment on reading and English:

Table 2. Todd’s Reading and English Scores on a College-Prep Assessment

8 th grade Reading	78%
8 th grade English	84%

Source: CCD Public school data 2015-2016, 2017-2018 school years

In contrast, academic records from grades 2 to 6 show that Todd’s reading scores on curriculum-based assessments typically ranged from 35% to 69%. When asked what being a strong reader meant, Todd said that good readers can identify with what they are reading, in addition to being able to comprehend the information. He stated:

Most people may be able to pick up a book and call out words, but a proficient reader would be able to remember what they read and engage the text critically. If you are able to relate to what you are reading then it makes reading more fun and enjoyable . . . When I read, I like to be able to see myself in what I’m reading.

From Todd’s perspective, being a proficient reader is directly linked to the notion of real-world connections to the literature.

Todd’s Motivational Journey

For Todd, it is highly preferred that literature have a component of real-world application and be culturally relevant. This preference was true for both personal and school-based required readings. Todd’s description of his favorite book outside of school, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood, And the Rest of Y’all Too* (Emdin, 2016), illustrates this point:

It is important for teachers to consider each student when teaching. In urban schools, the hip-hop culture is a part of most students’ community life. Teachers should take that into account when teaching different subjects.

Because Todd was able to identify with the content in Emdin’s book, he was highly engaged and excited about reading each chapter: “[A]t the end of each chapter, I was excited to get to the next chapter. Within each chapter, I saw aspects of teaching and classroom spaces that I wish I had as a student.” Based on these observations, Ms. Williamson also shared Todd’s account of how real-world experiences impacted his learning experience. In summary, she noticed that Todd related to both Emmett Till and Michael Brown due to the race and gender elements.

In addition, Todd grew up in a neighborhood with militarized police and heightened expressions of classism and racism. Therefore, because of much deeper social class and racial connections, Todd was compelled to investigate each of these cases in a personal way. Ms. Williams also described Todd’s response to watching Michael Brown being brutally shot to death on national news stations. According to her memory, Todd appeared fearful, paranoid, and uncomfortable around his non-Black peers. These feelings fueled frequent conversations about racism in America and about the Black Lives Matter movement. Ms. Williams stated that “per his own research, Todd went as far as connecting the Black Lives Matter movement to the Black Panthers movement.” She added, “Todd cares about nearly anything that allows him to make real-world connections, and world events that impact him directly.”

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While Todd identified multiple books, articles, and websites that he enjoyed reading, researching, and engaging with, none of those items, unfortunately, were required readings given by his teacher. Todd said, “I like reading stuff I like, but the readings that teachers make us read are boring.” In fact, Todd enjoyed social studies after doing his own research on police brutality and racism. Due to his personal readings, he was able to fully engage in class discussions by connecting current happenings to historical events. Todd used his interest in current social events as a way to help him better understand social studies content. In addition to *For White Folks who Teach in the Hood, And the Rest of Y’all Too*, Todd noted other texts he found personally engaging, such as *Nobody: Casualties of America’s War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (Hill, 2016). He stated:

I like the *Nobody’s* book because the author seems cool when I see him on TV, and I can tell he is a smart guy. He makes me want to be like him when I get older. I can see myself on news stations and writing a book like him. That book opened my eyes to a lot of stuff that goes on in Black communities everywhere. I mean, I was shocked by most of what I read in Dr. Hill’s book. I knew about some of the things, but I also learned a lot of new information during my reading time. For example, his breakdown about Michael Brown really touched me.

Todd felt that school-based readings with real-world implications were primarily shared during Black History Month. For him, he connected most with the literature during that month, while linking those lessons to content that is taught throughout the school year. Todd stated:

The only time I really learn a lot in school is during Black History Month. It’s always enlightening to hear and read stories about the civil rights movements. I like hearing about Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, President Barack Obama, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and many others. I enjoy reading about Black history so much that I forget that I have a reading disability sometimes.

Keeping in mind Moley et al.’s (2011) advice to carefully scaffold instruction around a given text to build interest and meaning, Ms. Williamson helped her ninth-grade social studies students relate required readings to their local communities, hip-hop music, culture, and home life. After building relationships with her students, she found that each of them liked similar music and had specific cultural codes:

I have very intelligent students and high expectations for each of them. Nevertheless, I’m aware that most of the approved readings aren’t of interest to the majority of my students; therefore, I am creative with content delivery. We use hip-hop music as a way to teach and learn. In addition, we find ways to apply content knowledge to our local communities. My students tend to learn content at a more rapid pace when it’s connected to parts of their daily lives. Overall, those connections make learning enjoyable, fun, and memorable.

Todd’s mother further elaborated on his learning style, to highlight the importance of real-world connections to course content:

He must see himself as a part of the literature. I think that his ability to read may be connected to his excitement about the topic. It seems as if Todd is easily distracted when the reading assignments are not something that does not capture his interest. In fact, I’ve seen this trend with several of his peers with reading disabilities.

In order to increase students’ interest in school-based readings, Todd’s teachers implemented several instructional strategies. Todd expounded upon one in which he felt his reading teacher most improved with teaching literature courses:

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During the school year, I liked several things about my reading class. As the year progressed, I liked how the teacher allowed us to compare our life events with what we read in textbooks. She asked questions like, “If you were in this situation, what would you do?”, or she would say, “Name a time that something similar has happened in your life. What was your reaction?” My classmates and I liked this aspect of the reading class. Personally, it helped me to remember what we read about.

Todd’s mother felt that teachers in his earlier grades should have created ways to make reading fun for Todd and his classmates with reading disabilities. She indicated that she thinks “motivation is a key factor towards aiding students who struggle with reading”:

Todd has a desire to excel academically and earn excellent grades. After high school, he desires to attend college and become a teacher. He is resilient and has tenacity. His ninth-grade teachers taught him differently than how he was taught before. His past teachers and his current teachers are like night and day – two totally different ways of teaching. It seems like Todd’s lightbulb was turned on as a first-year high school student. Before high school, he was reluctant to talk about his reading courses.

In addition, Todd’s mother mentioned that he’s developed a keen interest in his teachers’ life histories. Todd often inquires about his teachers’ educational backgrounds, colleges attended, and favorite books. Todd was “extremely excited at the end of the school year, when his teachers lightened up and started talking more about themselves and their life experiences.” The real-world connection reading assignments motivated Todd; however, so did the insights regarding how reading skills played a vital role in the professional and personal lives of his teachers.

Jason

Jason, an African American male, was also a ninth-grade student at Burke High School during the time of this study. Jason constantly communicated about his passion for both soccer and lacrosse. He is known for his athletic ability and aspirations inside and outside of the school building. His local community members believe that he will become a nationally recognized athlete after exiting high school. Jason aspires to become a mechanical engineer or mathematician. His mother indicated that he has enjoyed observing auto mechanics and helping to repair cars since he was in elementary school. In addition, Jason is extremely social and enjoys traveling with friends and family. He is also active in the Black Male Student Success (BLMS) organization, which offers mentorship and academic support. Mr. Griswold, his ninth-grade teacher, described Jason as “an outgoing personality who is known by nearly everyone in the school building. Teachers admire Jason’s drive and tenacity, while his classmates seem to look up to him in positive ways. The entire ninth grade team of teachers are anticipating seeing Jason successfully complete high school and enter the college of his choice.”

Educational Background and Indicator of Reading Improvement

Prior to high school, Jason attended private charter schools in the inner city of Charleston, South Carolina. Before entering K-12 education, he received his foundational education at a local pre-school in the same district. According to Ms. Goodson, Jason’s mother, her son experienced extreme difficulties with reading since kindergarten and first grade. Given that she didn’t realize that there could possibly be a learning disability as a barrier, Ms. Goodson advocated for stronger reading interventions to his classroom teachers and school building administrators. Later Jason was diagnosed with a reading disability and was given an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). As a part of his IEP academic interventions, he was placed into the Reading Eggs Program, which makes reading fun, interactive, and highly

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rewarding for children ages 2-13. Jason gained from the phonics portion of the program. When he transitioned to middle school as a sixth grader, Jason continued receiving reading intervention support in the special education setting, while receiving additional support in his general education inclusion setting. As a result of multi-layered instructional and remedial supports, Jason made considerable progress between the sixth and eighth grades.

The Reading Eggs program measures students' Lexile level, which matches a student's reading level to the corresponding grade level. Proficiency at the eighth-grade level ranges from 900 to 1150. The following data lists Jason's Lexile levels at the beginning and end of his seventh and eighth grade years:

Table 3. Jason's Lexile Levels from the Beginning of 7th to the End of 8th Grade

Date and Grade	Lexile
August, 7 th Grade	495
May, 7 th Grade	759
September, 8 th Grade	829
May, 8 th Grade	1120

Source: CCD Public school data 2015-2016, 2017-2018 school years

Data from national standardized reading assessments showed similar growth in Jason's reading pattern:

Table 4. Jason's Reading and English Scores on a College-Prep Assessment

Grade	Proficiency
5 th Grade	Below Basic
6 th Grade	Proficient
7 th Grade	Proficient
8 th Grade	Proficient

Source: CCD Public school data 2015-2016, 2017-2018 school years

Jason's explanation of his improvement in reading aligns with notable improvement throughout his middle school years:

Reading is no longer a big challenge for me, after all the effort my teachers and I have put into improving my reading skills. I worked hard throughout middle school. Receiving specialized instruction while enrolled in general education courses helped me a lot. I performed well in the general education class because of the extra special education support I received. After I qualified to receive specialized instruction, I got proficient on the statewide test for the first time. I understood everything. I was proud of myself and felt normal for the first time.

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Jason's Motivational Journey

Jason provided a pathway for further understanding his motivation for reading, when he described what intrigued him most about his middle school classroom reading content experiences:

As a middle school student, I felt like my teachers had reading assignments that I could relate to. Those assignments helped me to understand what the characters were saying, feeling, and thinking. In some cases, I imagined the body language of the characters. I prefer reading books that remind me of my neighborhood, family, and friends.

Jason described one reading assignment that his teacher provided to bring closure to a unit on the novel *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1992). He indicated that this book and the questions posed by his teacher helped him to see real world connections.

In my reading class this year, my teacher connected *The Color Purple* book to music that I heard of in the past. It was a mixture of blues and gospel music that told stories of human emotions and abuse, just like it was portrayed in the book. The experiences of the characters in the book reminded me of situations in my own life ... and made me kind of understand my own feelings. In most cases, I use hip hop music to help me through days when I'm feeling down.

It was not accidental that Jason drew connections between the stories he read, music, and his own life experiences. Rather, these connections most likely stemmed from his teacher's observation of what motivated Jason, followed by carefully robust lesson planning to ensure that all students' learning needs are met through scaffolding. Mr. Griswold stated that if "you said 'just read chapters 1, 2, and 3,' of a culturally irrelevant book with no real-life connections, he wouldn't have found the text enjoyable, which would have caused him not to fully engage the content. However, I knew that using selected genres of music would help to illuminate what the book was conveying." Jason further confirmed that Mr. Griswold's assessment was accurate, and elaborated on what he enjoys about using reading assignments to draw connections to real-world experiences:

During the warm-up time of each class, Mr. Griswold provided open questions to help students recall where we left off with stories, and ensure that his questions are cross-cutting between the readings and real life. In addition, although he tells us his perspective of each story, he always pushes us to share our own perspective based on what we've experienced in life. Mr. Griswold reminds us that we all have different perspectives because we have different life experiences. One of his favorite comments is "I don't want you to think what I think. I just want to make sure that you are thinking."

While elaborating on the importance of real-world connections with texts, Mr. Griswold highlighted that with Jason, "Learning is much more fluid when it's personal." Fortunately, in Mr. Griswold's assessment, Jason didn't have any challenges with classroom participation, which provided a clear and definitive way for increased connectivity to required readings. He noted that while reading *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982), Jason connected with multiple themes of the story:

The Color Purple book explores the dynamics of abusive relationships, and how people cope with abuse and other forms of social emotional trauma. ... I think Jason made connections between the themes of perseverance through adversities, and how he's had to remain tenacious throughout his personal experiences. As a person with a disability, he's mentioned having to overcome barriers and emotional abuse from family and friends. As

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a result, Jason is sensitive and protective of persons with disabilities. He stands up for his peers when they are teased or bullied.

Jason's self-esteem heightens when he performs well academically. He is intrinsically proud of his achievements. In addition, he is motivated by the immediate gratification of scoring above average on assessments, particularly as he links his primary schooling performance to the postsecondary career possibilities combined with the salary he will need to make to maintain his style of dressing:

I have a lot of clothes at home. My favorite brands are Adidas, Jordan, and Nike. When my mother takes me shopping, [the sneakers] that I want usually cost around one hundred dollars. Also, the pants and shirts I like are typically expensive as well. I will need to continue pursuing a career as an engineer so that I can afford what I like to wear. My mother always says, "You will need a good paying job or you will not be able to afford expensive brands of clothing."

When asked if Jason's motivation to read was intrinsic, Mr. Griswold responded:

No, Jason does not have a deeply rooted intrinsic motivation to read. ... At first, he didn't appear to be motivated at all. I presumed that his lack of motivation was a result of past experiences in reading classroom settings. I believe his motivation to read occurred when he noticed his Lexile level scores improving. His work ethic increased along with his notable progress.

Jason's lack of motivation for reading did not hinder his ability to make connections between the content provided in the novel and his life experiences. He could decipher stories in ways that personalized the encounters of characters. Jason also developed the ability to imagine and predict the outcomes of stories based on the replication of outcomes he personally witnessed internally or externally. His constant aim was to continue earning high grades and ensure that his Lexile levels soared. Furthermore, Jason's relentless pursuit of academic excellence was indicative that he drew connections between his literacy improvement and the possibilities of obtaining his goal to become an engineer. Mr. Griswold discovered that to maintain Jason's focus and involvement in traditional texts, it required careful and intentional lesson planning, which included supplementary activities to capture his interest. Jason and his mother indicated that outside of school, Jason never selected traditional books as reading choices; instead, he engaged with books that had connectivity to topics he enjoyed, such as hip-hop music. Jason specifically mentioned that he "like[s] reading stories that talk about the same things Jay-Z and Lil Wayne rap about."

How are Real-life Connections Beneficial in Reading Classrooms?

Todd and Jason's desire for culturally relevant and responsive reading curricula was clearly communicated. Todd specifically expressed that he preferred to read content that drew connections to the current experiences of African Americans, such as the assassination of Michael Brown by police officers in Ferguson, Missouri. In order to make sense of the current experiences of African Americans, he also had an affinity for reading about the historical experiences of African Americans, such as the story of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old African-American, who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after a White woman said she was offended by him in her family's grocery store. Ms. Williamson's statement that "Todd cares about nearly anything that allows him to make real-world connections, and world events that impact him directly" further contextualized the content he enjoyed reading. Similarly, Jason specifically mentioned that reading became less challenging after his teacher employed the Reading Eggs Intervention Program, which aimed to make reading fun, interactive, and highly rewarding.

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Jason and Todd repeatedly conveyed that their required readings during their middle school years were relevant to their lives. Douglass and Guthrie (2008) define relevance as “the extent to which the content of instruction is linked to students’ direct or recalled experience” (p. 22). Most books selected at Burke High School showcased a teenage protagonist, which enhanced relatability for children in the same age group. School administrators and reading specialists were intentional about not selecting books that pre-dated World War II. The selected contemporary books included relatable language, environments, characters, fashion, and topics that were familiar to teens.

This study’s classroom-based reading instruction findings debunk previous findings by Pitcher et al. (2007), which concluded that texts are available to motivate teenagers. To the contrary, this study found that those texts are rarely used in middle school classrooms; rather, complicated classical literature and adult-oriented books frequently saturate middle school reading lists. Todd and Jason, however, expressed an overwhelming interest in the texts they engaged with in middle school, in which young adults were primarily the protagonists, as opposed to classical books they read in elementary school.

Discussion

Although the central focus of this study draws attention to the impact of real-world instruction on African American males’ motivation to achieve academically, it would be negligent not to mention the Charleston County Public Schools’ (CCPS) instructional decisions, which served as the impetus for radically improving Todd and Jason’s school-based academic experiences and achievements. From some teachers’ perspective, culturally relevant and responsive literature will have an insufficient impact if students lack fundamental reading comprehension and critical literacy skills. For example, while the use of technology and music are supplementary tools towards learning, they do not replace teaching foundational skills. Delpit (1995) found that there are instances where African American students are not taught basic critical literacy skills necessary to succeed beyond primary school. Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2010) also noted that some teachers assume some students have skills that they do not, which in turn leads to frustration for the student. To this extent, when students are frustrated with schooling, it can lead to truancy and, in worst cases, withdrawal from school (Ellis et al., 2016; Ellis & Hartlep, 2017; Toldson et al., 2009).

Fortunately, participants in this study were not privy to that experience while enrolled in CCPS. Todd enrolled in CCPS in the first grade and was immediately identified and began receiving reading intervention supports, which included an adaptive curriculum at his instructional level. In addition, Todd received language and processing services. Concurrently, as his progress was monitored, Todd was included in general education settings where he received grade level instruction.

In Jason’s case, the school responded to his reading gaps beginning in kindergarten. Jason’s mother strongly advocated for intensified reading intervention supports, given that she inherently believed that intervening early would alleviate the need for a continuation of services throughout his academic matriculation.

Both students recognized a teacher whose culturally responsive pedagogical practices motivated them to gain fluency in reading. For Todd, it was his ninth-grade teacher, Ms. Williamson, who described him as being a “very energetic, charismatic, and curious student.” Todd said, “Ms. Williamson motivated me by making me believe that I was smart and capable of learning.” Due to Ms. Williamson’s encouragement, Todd took greater risks and increased his

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commitment to improving his reading skills. Similarly, Jason raved about Mr. Griswold, his ninth-grade teacher. He viewed Mr. Griswold as a teacher who made reading enjoyable, due to his commitment to ensuring that classroom literature connected to students' lives beyond the classroom setting. Jason indicated that "because of the effort Mr. Griswold put into making reading relatable, I was afraid of disappointing him by not being successful in his class."

Towards Connecting Middle School Literature to Real-World Experiences

Jason and Todd's real-world connections to critical literacy were not singularly limited to readings that the school district approved or that the teachers selected. Instead, it was motivated by a desire to become literate individuals. As previously mentioned, Jason did not naturally develop a passion for reading like Todd; nevertheless, he mentioned that he cared deeply about earning passing grades, pleasing his teachers and parents, and ultimately pursuing a career in engineering so that he could afford expensive clothing. Both African American student participants in this study linked their primary academic achievements to their postsecondary goals. Todd's father acknowledged his son's fond interest in his teacher's education levels. Todd was described as one who spent significant time with books, as he genuinely enjoyed reading as a hobby.

Tatum (2006) suggests that text choices for African American male adolescents should (1) be enabling; (2) provide students with a roadmap to success; (3) help forge a positive identity. Based on the data captured from these two case studies, I recommend that teachers consider real-world connections to literature as a viable lesson planning strategy. While this study is centered on reading as a topic of discussion, I argue that real-life connections should be considered when lesson planning for math, science, social studies, and English as well. These two African American students benefited from a conscious decision to connect the need to master middle school reading skills with postsecondary social rewards, including desired careers and higher education pedigree attainment. It is important to note that neither of the admired teachers (Mr. Griswold and Ms. Williamson) embedded or utilized fear as a factor to motivate Todd and Jason to improve their reading skills. Instead, each teacher implemented non-traditional motivating factors by listening to each student and their families. Thereafter, each teacher framed their lessons around what their students deemed as enjoyable, real-life content.

Implications for Classroom Teaching

To academically support and motivate African American males who have challenges with literacy, the use of real-world instructional content and supplementary materials as described by Guthrie (2004) is necessary but insufficient towards improving reading outcomes. While the findings in this study cannot be generalizable to all middle-school-aged students, the cases of Todd and Jason showcase the complex thinking, student and family engagement, and intentional planning necessary to build instructional capacity that maximizes growth in literacy for middle school Black males. These two African American males were not only motivated by factors of real-world connections, family engagement, careful and intentional lesson planning, and content delivery, but by other important factors as well. I found that these other factors related to a personal drive and an awareness that achieving success with literacy could catapult them into post-secondary education and careers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For Jason, the value placed on literacy started at home and was further cultivated by several teachers who cared about his academic success. Jason's mother informed him during his

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early childhood of the importance of learning to read and comprehend content. Moreover, she was extremely candid with Jason regarding the reading skills required for him to pursue a higher education degree and career in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM), while linking those careers to his desire to wear expensive name brand clothing. Mr. Griswold recognized Jason's lack of motivation for literacy; therefore, he became laser focused on his motivation for social rewards. Mr. Griswold astutely perceived this as a meaningful and effective instructional approach.

Todd's passion for improving his literacy skills was driven by the traditional definition of real-world instruction. He possessed an innate desire for non-fiction stories, relatable texts, and culturally relevant content, which deepened his engagement with literature. Yet Todd was also highly motivated by his understanding that his professional aspirations are directly linked to becoming a proficient reader. In light of the complex ways in which these two middle school African American males engaged with literature, middle school language arts teachers should consider the following:

- Be intentional about connecting literacy to postsecondary goals of students. Students who do not possess an intrinsic motivation to read may view academic achievement in literacy as a pathway to their educational and professional goals.
- Assign classroom and homework assignments that provide students with opportunities to bring their outside interests into the classroom. Incorporating social media, music, poetry, dance, and other forms of art helps students to draw real-world connections to reading content.
- Build partnerships with families to further understand what motivates students to learn. In most cases, parents and legal guardians have information on the child that can help the teacher better capture and address the student's needs.
- Although curricular freedom across school districts and settings may vary, it is critical to create ways to ensure that literature remains culturally relevant.

Todd and Jason's academic successes were not limited to just these instructional strategies. I conclude that their success is a result of the entire educational team, which includes families, teachers, students, and administrators. Middle school language arts teachers do not have the ability to instantly cancel the reading deficiencies of any student. Teachers can, however, partner with the school community to discover their students' motivations with the aim of producing a literate individual.

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