

12-2019

## "They Almost Become the Teacher": Pre-K to Third Grade Teachers' Experiences Reading and Discussing Culturally Relevant Texts with their Students

Amy Clark  
DePaul University, [aclark70@depaul.edu](mailto:aclark70@depaul.edu)

Jane Fleming  
Chicago Public Schools

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)



Part of the Language and Literacy Education Commons

### Recommended Citation

Clark, A., & Fleming, J. (2019). "They Almost Become the Teacher": Pre-K to Third Grade Teachers' Experiences Reading and Discussing Culturally Relevant Texts with their Students. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 58 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol58/iss3/3](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol58/iss3/3)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



## “They Almost Become the Teacher”: Pre-K to Third-Grade Teachers’ Experiences Reading and Discussing Culturally Relevant Texts with their Students

Amy Clark, *DePaul University*

Jane Fleming, *Chicago Public Schools*

---

### Abstract

---

This qualitative research study examined 13 preschool to third-grade teachers’ experiences reading and discussing culturally relevant texts (CRTs) with their students. Teachers worked at four schools in a large urban school district and with child populations from different sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds. We employed provisional and open-coding to analyze teacher interview data. Three salient themes emerged from the data: children’s identity investment in reading and discussing CRTs, children’s interest in CRTs, and children’s depth of comprehension when discussing CRTs. Findings from teacher observations suggest that reading and discussing CRTs with children from nondominant social backgrounds can tap into children’s capacities and experiential knowledge in ways that can promote reading engagement and comprehension development. When students have opportunities to share expertise on the topic of a text, teachers may be better able to understand and tap into the diverse range of knowledge and experiences that their students bring to the reading comprehension task.

**Keywords:** culturally relevant texts, early childhood and elementary, literacy instruction

---

*“[The students] almost become the teacher. [They] have this story that is very relevant to what we read, and they want to share, and they’re so excited...They want to hear from each other...most of the time more than [from] me. I should be the facilitator and they should be the guides.”*

—Ms. Delgado, a third-grade teacher talking about reading and discussing culturally relevant texts with her students.

All children arrive at school with a diverse range of experiences and knowledge about their families, communities, and daily life. Yet the array of cultural-experiential knowledge that many children from nondominant sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds bring to the classroom often goes unidentified, ignored, and/or devalued (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Orellana & Gutiérrez, 2006; Alim & Paris, 2014). In contrast, when children see themselves as part of the school curriculum and can draw on their cultural and experiential knowledge to make meaning, they invest personally and engage cognitively

in their learning (Cummins, 2001; Cummins, Chow, & Schecter, 2006; Christ et al., 2018; Lohfink & Loya, 2010; McCullough, 2013). Additionally, integrating diverse cultures, experiences, languages, and dialects into the official curriculum provides children from dominant sociocultural backgrounds opportunities to meet and explore a multicultural world in which a range of viewpoints, daily practices and experiences, and ways of communicating exist, thrive, and intersect.

In this article we draw on 13 preschool to third-grade teachers' experiences reading and discussing culturally relevant texts (CRTs) with their students, and on empirical research and seminal theory to examine how CRTs may serve as catalysts for engagement and meaning-making during literature discussions. Our study investigated the following questions: (1) How do teachers experience reading and discussing CRTs with their students? and (2) What differences do teachers notice about student responses to these texts? To address these questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers and identified salient themes across a majority of teachers' responses. Study findings suggest that reading and facilitating discussions of texts that tap into specific aspects of children's cultural-experiential knowledge can promote participation and facilitate ways of thinking and talking about texts that are essential for reading comprehension development. All names of teachers and schools are pseudonyms.

### **Culturally Relevant Children's Literature**

CRTs are theoretically and historically grounded in culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy and teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992; 1995; Gay, 2000), multicultural education (e.g., Nieto, 1995; Banks, 1993), and multicultural literature (e.g., Yokota, 1993; Bishop, 1990). CRTs, however, differ fundamentally from multicultural literature, such as folktales. Multicultural texts reflect the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and class diversity present throughout both the student and general populations in the United States and beyond (Author et al., date). Folktales provide all children invaluable opportunities to investigate a genre of literature that is grounded in particular histories and instrumental in passing on cultural values and customs (Author, et al., 2015). Such texts may reflect key aspects of a child's ethnicity and religion, for example, and children familiar with folktales, myths, and legends from their cultures can make meaningful connections with texts that recount these unique stories and histories. In order to increase the cultural relevance of a text for a child, however, it is critical to consider contemporary events, situations, and settings that reflect and tap into children's daily experiences. CRTs offer multiple opportunities for children to connect aspects of their everyday lives with facets of the text in order to enhance comprehension.

CRTs are texts with which children can make deep personal connections; the primary characters remind children of themselves and their families and neighborhoods. The experiences, relationships, and themes depicted in the text resonate with a reader from the cultural group portrayed (Author, et al., 2015; Sharma & Christ, 2018; & Ebe, 2010). Bishop (1990) refers to these texts as "mirrors," texts that afford children whose ethnicities and experiences have traditionally been devalued or ignored in children's literature opportunities to see themselves and their lived experiences as part of the formal literacy curriculum (Bishop, 1990, p. i).

Mirror texts speak directly to the everyday experiences of a particular child or groups of children, and can afford them opportunities for success when reading. Jones and Clarke (2007) point out an important caveat in teaching the comprehension strategy of making personal connections with a text:

Given that the majority of early reading texts are written from perspectives that represent a “normal” life as one where (White) mothers, fathers, and children live comfortable existences in middle-class homes and neighborhoods... (e.g., Baker & Freebody, 1989; Jordan, 2005),... readers who live different lives may find themselves in the quandary of wanting to perform as a “good reader” who makes connections without having substantive autobiographical connections to make. (p. 101)

When children can relate to and talk with some authority about situations in a text, they see their local knowledge and experiences as useful resources for making meaningful connections with texts. Their cultural and linguistic resources become essential for comprehension. Moreover, the children themselves, as well as their teachers, recognize these resources as powerful tools for learning that need to be actively affirmed and sustained.

### **CRTs in Classrooms and Teacher Preparation Programs**

Wanless and Crawford (2016) recommend reading and discussing mirror texts in early childhood educational settings in order to affirm children’s diverse racial, ethnic, and sociocultural identities. A text that serves as a mirror for a group of children may serve as a window for others, resulting in opportunities to have authentic conversations with young children about race and diversity, for example. Yet findings indicate a lack of knowledge about diverse children’s literature among early childhood teachers (e.g., Brinson, 2012), which may suggest that CRTs are not an essential component of the literacy curriculum in young children’s classrooms.

Studies suggest that CRTs used in elementary and middle school classrooms and literacy programs can affirm personal identities and increase reading engagement among marginalized children, such as Latinx students categorized as English learners (ELs) (e.g., Freeman & Freeman, 2015; Lohfink & Loya, 2010), and African American children (e.g., Hughes-Hassell, Koehler, & Barkley, 2010). Sharma and Christ (2017) provide guidance for teachers on how to identify CRTs that tap into individual children’s experiences and how to identify within the texts “critical and personal response opportunities for instruction” (p. 295). Teachers generate questions that elicit higher-order thinking and provide children opportunities to make deep connections to key themes in texts that in turn facilitate meaning-making for peers who do share the same personal connections with the text. Citing the limited contemporary and culturally diverse text selections in the Common Core State Standards exemplars, Boyd, Causey, and Gauda (2015) describe ways that teachers can identify and use authentic diverse children’s literature to meet Common Core State Standards.

Teacher preparation programs have responded to these findings. Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor’s (2014) work with preservice teachers explores the use of mirror and window texts to disrupt dominant narratives that marginalize the experiences, stories, and histories of many children and to promote the power of inclusion and multiple perspectives across the curriculum. Likewise, Christ and Sharma (2018) support preservice teachers in understanding the value of culturally relevant pedagogy and of selecting and effectively integrating CRTs into the curriculum. Teacher preparation programs have also focused on preparing teachers to use culturally responsive literature with emergent bi(multi)lingual children categorized as ELs (e.g., Escamilla & Nathenson-Mejía, 2003; Heineke, 2014). When discussing children’s diverse literacy practices, the term bi(multi)lingual is employed to describe children growing up with exposure to more than one language,

including children from the Latinx diaspora in the United States whose first language is an indigenous one, who speak Spanish as a second language, and are learning English (see Herrera, 2018).

### **CRTs and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

A Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) “explicitly calls for schooling to be a site for sustaining the cultural ways of being of communities of color” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 5). CSP embodies teaching and learning in which children are seen accurately as “whole” and remain whole throughout schooling, rather than being “framed as broken” and deficient (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Reading and discussing intentionally selected CRTs as part of the literacy curriculum can help cultivate classroom spaces in which the diverse range of marginalized cultural-experiential resources that many children bring to school are intentionally explored, supported, and nurtured. Moreover, classrooms can become spaces in which children from nondominant social groups are welcomed upon arrival as competent and at capacity rather than “at risk.”

Machado (2017) identifies culturally sustaining pedagogy, translanguaging, and biliteracy development as key means for sustaining young children’s diverse literacy practices in the classroom. Translanguaging theory proposes that bi(multi)lingual children and youths draw flexibly and strategically from a single fluid linguistic repertoire to negotiate daily experiences across diverse contexts (García, 2009). For example, emergent bi(multi)lingual children interpret across languages, engage in cross-linguistic analysis, and code-switch for a variety of purposes in response to different language partners, situations, and contexts (García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging theory is culturally sustaining as it actively disrupts sociocultural and linguistic inequalities and reframes bi(pluri)lingual practices as normative and as social and cognitive resources (e.g., Gort, 2012; Sayer, 2013; Worthy, Durán, Hikida, Pruitt, & Peterson, 2013; Palmer, Martínez, Mateus, & Henderson, 2014). Reading and discussing CRTs that integrate authentic bi(multi)lingual practices, including code-mixing or code-switching, and that tap into children’s specific linguistic and cultural knowledge can promote dynamic discussion spaces in which children can draw on their full linguistic and cultural repertoires to make meaning.

### **How CRTs Can Support Comprehension Development and Facilitate Reading Engagement**

Findings from empirical research have long indicated a positive association between prior knowledge for the topic of a text and reading comprehension and recall (e.g., Adams, Bell, & Perfetti, 1995; Lipson, 1983; Schneider, Korkel, & Weinert, 1989). Prior knowledge includes “the kind of knowledge that learners acquire because of their social roles, such as those connected with race, class, gender, and their culture and ethnic affiliations” (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2009, pp. 72–73). Children’s daily practices and experiences embedded in home and community cultures, languages, and dialects are part of this knowledge base (Rueda, 2011; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). More recently, researchers have examined the link between prior knowledge and reading comprehension and engagement using CRTs. The use of CRTs has been associated with improved aspects of comprehension, including critical evaluation, distinguishing the main idea, and understanding explicit and implicit textual information, with African American students in the primary and middle grades (Bell & Clark, 1998; Christ et al., 2018; Garth-McCullough, 2008; McCulloch, 2013).

Reading and talking about CRTs has also been shown to have positive effects on aspects of reading comprehension and engagement with primary-grade Spanish-English

emergent bi(multi)lingual children (those categorized as ELs) (Ebe, 2010, 2012; López-Robertson & Schramm-Pate, 2013; Martínez-Roldán & Sayer, 2006). When reading and discussing texts in English, emergent bi(multi)linguals must often rise to the twin tasks of comprehending unfamiliar concepts and cultural experiences while simultaneously processing novel and specialized English vocabulary (Agosto, 2007). When contexts, themes, terms, characters, and/or relationships in CRTs are familiar, emergent bi(multi)linguals can allocate their attention toward processing unfamiliar language and making deeper meaning (Hadaway, 2009).

Author et al. (date) suggest that teachers begin locally when determining the cultural relevance of a text. Teachers observe what children in their classrooms *do* outside of school and the kinds of daily experiences that shape their lives and their thinking. Sharma and Christ (2017) document how teachers can begin locally by conducting individual interviews with their young readers. The interview is designed to capture multiple dynamic dimensions of cultural relevance; it includes key questions about children's family members, family arrangements and activities, and several questions about children's perceptions of reading and of the cultural relevance of texts (Sharma & Christ, 2017).

### **Cultural, Cognitive, and Motivational Processes in Reading Engagement and Comprehension**

We draw significantly on the concept of funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992), on Robert Rueda's facilitative encoding hypothesis (2011) and on Cummins' (2001) theoretical work on identity to analyze the teacher data. Funds of knowledge describe the "historically-accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" developed through daily lived experiences and practices among families and communities (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Children develop cognitive and sociocultural skills and resources through participation in daily family and community activities. Using a funds of knowledge approach to teaching and learning, educators identify, investigate, and value the daily practices and ways of making meaning and communicating in children's homes and communities as vital educational resources. This results in the integration and affirmation of the child's identity within the school and classroom (González, et al., 2005; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). Teaching practices intentionally connect the school curriculum to children's knowledge and experiences acquired through their participation in home and community activities (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014).

Robert Rueda's "Cultural Perspectives in Reading," (2011) discusses the question, "What ties cultural factors to reading and literacy outcomes?" (p. 91), and suggests that children's cultural knowledge can impact cognitive processes in ways that yield positive learning outcomes (p. 93). He draws on schema theory and cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1994) to describe this interaction, suggesting that cultural factors interact with cognitive processes in ways that can affect comprehension positively or adversely. For example, cultural factors can influence the cues that children attend to, and how readily their prior knowledge and experiences "map onto" new knowledge and skills when reading (p. 92). Hence, when children's cultural-experiential knowledge maps readily onto the themes, vocabulary, relationships, and situations in a text, reading comprehension is enhanced. Rueda (2011) calls this process *facilitative encoding*: a robust cultural schema for a text can facilitate comprehension.

Schema theory, considered an individual "in-the-head phenomenon," fails to account for the sociocultural and shared negotiation of meaning that underpins reading comprehension development (McVee, Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2005, p. 532). McVee et al.,

(2005) reconcile schema theory with a sociocultural perspective of reading comprehension development; “[S]chemas are cultural historical constructions that emerge only within the individual through transactions with others” (McVee et al., 2005, p. 541). Hence, across time and through participation and interactions with family and others within the home and community, children’s prior knowledge and experiences become organized within emerging schemas that children bring to the classroom. Furthermore, sociocultural theory explains how purposeful classroom discourse around texts is essential for comprehension development; children’s schemas continue to develop as children listen to and build on each other’s ideas and interact with teachers.

Cognitive load theory proposes that consolidating multiple pieces of information into a single schema frees up some of the limited cognitive resources available in one’s working memory. Thus the activation of a robust schema, or as Rueda (2011) poses, of one’s “funds of knowledge” (Moll & González, 2004), can reduce the cognitive demand of an activity, allowing for more efficient processing (p. 94). This means that a novice reader with a strong schema for a text may be able to devote more cognitive resources toward resolving complex aspects of comprehending, such as making inferences and determining themes during literature discussions. In contrast, when reading and discussing a text with unfamiliar vocabulary, situations, and cultural references, a novice reader may have to recruit all of her cognitive resources to make sense of the multiple novel features. Several unfamiliar features can complicate deep comprehension of a seemingly simple text

Rueda also suggests that cultural-experiential knowledge can influence motivation in ways that may facilitate participation and meaning-making. Drawing on theoretical work from Eccles and Midgley, 1989, Wigfield and Eccles, 2000, and their colleagues, Rueda proposes that readers may be more interested in a text and may feel more likely to succeed while reading it when they can draw on their cultural and background knowledge to comprehend it (2011).

Cummins’ (2001) framework for the development of academic expertise provides a complementary lens with which to examine cultural-linguistic, cognitive, and motivational processes in learning. The framework is grounded in a multilingual and multiliteracies approach to educating linguistically diverse students. It proposes that children’s maximum identity investment occurs in classrooms in which teacher-student interactions simultaneously maximize children’s cognitive engagement and explore and promote children’s “cultural, linguistic, and personal identities” (Cummins et al., 2006, p. 305). Teachers are tasked with crafting instructional opportunities in which their students draw on their cultural-experiential and cognitive resources to actively participate and generate new ideas, and in which teachers “learn from their students about [their] cultures, backgrounds, and experiences” (p. 306). Facilitated discussions of CRTs can mediate teacher-student interaction and contribute to classroom conditions in which young children can explore and invest in their identities as they engage cognitively with complex texts.

In the following section, we outline the study methodology, including the data analysis procedures employed to identify key themes across interview transcripts. We then report on findings from teacher data and employ four themes that emerged from data analysis to discuss findings and their implications. We conclude with a discussion of key study limitations and of future research.

## **Methodology**

### **Teacher-Participants and School Contexts**

Thirteen pre-K- to third-grade teachers were purposefully sampled (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) from a larger group of teachers who had participated in a yearlong professional development series focused on the facilitation of literature discussions and the use of culturally relevant children's literature as a component of the literacy curriculum. All teachers who participated in the series worked at one of the four schools featured in the study. The second author facilitated the professional development series, meeting with preschool to third-grade teachers at the study schools approximately six times across the academic year. After the series ended, the second author recruited teachers for the study who had participated in a majority of the workshops and who had reported facilitating multiple discussions of CRTs in their classrooms across the year. The second author determined that these teachers would likely provide information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) and demonstrate a willingness to participate—two essential pieces in the identification of participants. Teachers were not informed that they might be interviewed about their experiences using CRTs during the professional development series. The first author, who conducted all teacher interviews, was not involved in the professional development series and had not met any of the teachers prior to data collection.

Across the professional development series, teachers received guidance and worked on: generating levels of questions to support children's text recall and inferential thinking about texts; developing collaborative conversation norms, including the use of language frames to facilitate discussions, such as, "I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ and would like to add \_\_\_\_\_" and making text selections based on their knowledge and understanding of the daily experiences and cultural and linguistic knowledge of the individual children in their classrooms. Many of the teachers in the study were not familiar with and had not knowingly used CRTs before participating in the series. The second author selected and brought to the workshops a range of CRTs that teachers could explore and use in their classrooms. All teacher-participants in the study independently or in collaboration with colleagues selected texts that they considered culturally relevant for the students in their classrooms., and teachers were encouraged to identify and use CRTs that were not included in the series.

Teachers worked in one of four public elementary schools in a large, urban Midwestern school district (see Table 1 for demographics of participants). They had an average of seven years of teaching experience, and six of 13 teachers held masters degrees. Five teachers identified as African American (AA), three as Hispanic (H), and five as white (W). Twelve of 13 teachers were female. Each teacher participated in a single semistructured interview about her experiences using CRTs with her students (see Appendix A). The first author conducted all interviews, and interviews ranged in length from 14 to 68 minutes ( $M = 27$ ) and resulted in 5 hours of recorded data. The interview guide included questions such as

- Did you notice that the students had some favorite CRTs? Can you tell me about them?
- Did you notice an impact, if any, that reading and discussing CRTs had on your students' engagement during discussions or during the read aloud?
- Did you notice an impact, if any, that reading and discussing CRTs had on the amount of language that children used during discussions? Can you think of an example?

Table 1

*Demographic Information for Teacher-Participants*

Teachers	Grade	School	Sex	Race	Highest Degree	Endorsements	Years Teaching
Ms. Logan	PreK	Neighborhood Elementary	F	European-American White	M.A.		2
Ms. Howard	K	Community Elementary	F	European-American White	B.A.		2
Ms. Skinner	K	Neighborhood Elementary	F	European-American White	M.A.	Special Education	8
Mr. Anders	K	Neighborhood Elementary	M	European-American White	M.A.	ESL	4
Ms. Tate	K	Companion Elementary	F	African American	B.A.		6
Ms. Nava	1st	Park Elementary	F	Hispanic	B.A.		7
Ms. Orlando	1st	Companion Elementary	F	European-American White	M.A.		6
Ms. James	2nd	Companion Elementary	F	Hispanic	B.A.	Reading	8
Ms. Carter	2nd	Companion Elementary	F	African American	B.A.		12
Ms. Delgado	3rd	Neighborhood Elementary	F	Hispanic	B.A.	Science, Language Arts	5
Ms. Kelly	3rd	Community Elementary	F	African American	M.A.		15
Ms. Pérez	3rd	Neighborhood Elementary	F	Hispanic	B.A.	Bilingual	10
Ms. Lee	3rd	Community Elementary	F	African American	M.A.		12

Students in teachers' classrooms came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and school demographics indicated that the majority of students in each school came from low SES backgrounds. (See Table 2.) Seven of 13 classrooms included Spanish-English emergent children categorized as ELs. All classroom instruction occurred in English with the exception of one Spanish-English dual language classroom.

Table 2

*Demographic Information for Study Schools*

Variables %	Neighborhood Elementary	Community Elementary	Companion Elementary	Park Elementary
Asian	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.2
Black	4.2	96.5	95.9	12.6
Hispanic	73.8	2.4	3.0	83.3
White	17.2	0.0	0.2	1.5
Two or More Races	4.2	0.8	0.8	2.4
Low Income	73.8	92.4	97.5	86.9
English Learners	19.6	0	1.1	43.2

**Teachers' Text Selections**

Two texts used frequently by teachers of Spanish-English bi(multi)lingual students categorized as ELs in the study were *My Abuelita* (Johnston, 2009) and *Niño Wrestles the World* (Morales, 2013). In *My Abuelita*, a boy recounts a typical morning with his *abuelita* [grandmother], as she prepares for her work as a storyteller. Several cultural features were particularly relevant for many of the Mexican-American children in the teachers' classrooms, including key vocabulary in Spanish, intergenerational (grandmother-grandson) relationships, various Mexican cultural artifacts, and oral storytelling as a means of passing on wisdom. *Niño Wrestles the World* (Morales, 2013) features familiar characters from Mexican history, folklore, and popular culture, as well as authentic code-switching between Spanish and English, reflecting the children's and their community's flexible plurilingual practices.

Several teachers who worked with predominately African American students who were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds identified *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998) as particularly culturally relevant for their students. In the story, a young African American girl encounters a littered alley and graffiti, among other features of many urban settings, as she searches her low-income neighborhood in the city for something beautiful. Along the way, different people in her community help her discover beauty among the city blocks and a sense of personal agency. This text does not diminish the serious challenges associated with poverty, yet importantly it portrays "poor people in positive and realistic ways as caring about the communities in which they live" (McNair, 2016, p. 378). Morris (2011) points out that "narratives can also be region or location-specific, such as the narratives of street lit that reflect the daily lives of poor city communities..." (p. 21). Texts set in authentic urban and under-resourced communities can afford children who live in similar communities, many of whom are experiencing poverty, additional opportunities to draw on their knowledge and experiences grounded in daily city life to develop comprehension skills (Author et al., 2015).

Other texts that teachers of bi(multi)lingual students categorized as ELs identified as culturally relevant for their students were *Little Mama Forgets* (Cruise, 2006), *Tía Isa Wants a Car* (Medina, 2011), and *Marisol MacDonald Doesn't Match* (Brown, 2011). Additional texts that teachers working with primarily African American students identified and read were, *My Steps*, (Derby, 1999), *My Best Friend* (Rodman, 2005), *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991), *We Had a Picnic This Sunday Past* (Woodson, 1997), and *The Candy Shop* (Wahl, 2005).

### Data Coding and Analysis

We employed qualitative coding methods to analyze the 13 transcribed interviews (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) and used qualitative software to manage our data. We coded each manuscript independently across three rounds of coding. Before first round coding began, we developed a list of provisional descriptive codes based on our literature review and on the interview questions (Miles et al., 2014). For example, the codes *funds of knowledge and identity affirmation* derived from the literature, and the codes *language productivity and level of discussion* derived from the interview protocol.

During the first round, we also employed open coding to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data. For example, the code *increasing independence* emerged from interview data segments such as: “I was able to actually step back, and [the students] were able to do [the literature circles] basically on their own” (Ms. Lee, third grade); and, “I didn’t have to facilitate as much...[the children] would...just kind of feed off each other; whereas when I didn’t choose texts that were as culturally relevant... I’d have to kind of force feed [the discussion] to them” (Ms. Howard, Kindergarten). The code *belonging* emerged from segments of data, such as the following from third-grade teacher Ms. Delgado when discussing the text *Marisol MacDonald Doesn't Match* (Brown, 2011). “It was about a girl whose first name is Spanish and her last name is [English]... the students really liked that because some of them consider, ‘we’re Hispanic but we’re [U.S.] American.’” We met weekly throughout the first round of coding to clarify code definitions, discuss emerging themes, and come to consensus on any coding discrepancies.

After first-round coding, we clustered codes into several preliminary categories, including, *belonging/identity, funds of knowledge, invitations, “unlocking” capabilities, engagement, mirrors and windows, connections, level of discussion, comprehension, and impact on teacher*. For example, the category *funds of knowledge* included the codes *drawing on experience, drawing on strengths, and expertise*—“I know this”, and the category *invitations* included the codes *new voices, authority/expert, and new topics*.

We met frequently throughout second-round coding as well to discuss each individually coded manuscript. At the end of the second round of coding, we used visual case display strategies (Miles et al., 2014) to interpret categories of codes and to organize categories into salient themes. For example, we consolidated some codes within the categories of *belonging/identity, funds of knowledge, and invitations* and placed these categories within a broader theme of *identity investment*. We organized the categories *unlocking potential, increasing independence, level of discussion, and comprehension* into the theme *depth of comprehension*. Four salient themes emerged from this process: *identity investment, depth of comprehension, reading engagement, and teacher change and growth*.

We developed a codebook to employ during the final coding cycle (See Table 3). We recruited a graduate assistant as a third reviewer to use our codebook to code a subset of transcripts (one-fifth of responses) before final-round coding began. We used feedback from the third reviewer to clarify our code definitions and to verify the trustworthiness of

the final categories and their codes. We coded each manuscript a third time, and then used the qualitative software to merge the coded data.

We drew on Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, and Pedersen's (2012) work with coding semistructured interviews to establish our intercoder reliability. We used Miles and Huberman's (1984) formula of dividing the total number of coding agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements, even though this calculation does not take into account the possibility that coders may at times agree by chance. In our case, all codes did not have an equal probability of being used. For example, the code *beyond the book*, which emerged from the data, was not as likely to be used as codes associated more closely with the interview questions. In addition, we employed negotiated agreement throughout the coding process, meeting frequently to compare coded transcripts and reach consensus on any coding discrepancies. Miles et al. (2014) suggest that intercoder agreement fall within the range of 85% to 90% (p. 85). There were 390 coding agreements and 45 disagreements; hence our intercoder reliability calculation was 89.65 percent.

To identify themes that were representative of a majority of teacher's observations, we calculated the mean and standard deviation for the final 19 codes ( $M = 21.75$ ,  $SD = 15$ ). We then identified those codes whose counts were one or more standard deviations greater than the mean. We narrowed this subset of high frequency codes to those that appeared in at least 11 of the 13 interviews. Table 3 displays these data.

Table 3

*Excerpts from Codebook*

Category	Code	Definition and Literature	Examples from Transcripts
Identity Investment	Funds of Knowledge	Community- and neighborhood-based experiences, knowledge, and resources—the “cultural and cognitive resources” present in children’s households and communities (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992, p. 134).	<i>“They had a lot of prior knowledge of a lot of things that were going on in the books...I specifically remember - They were playing role board Double Dutch [in the story], and one of the kids was, like, ‘oh, I play that with my sister all time.’”</i>
	Invitations	Occurrences in which the teacher or book creates an opportunity for participation or a new discussion topic that would not have happened otherwise	<i>“I had a little girl that was bi-racial...the text was about Jackie Robinson...I learned...how she felt being here because she was, like, ‘The kids always call me white. I’m not white; I’m just like you. I’m no different than you.’ And it opened up for her to let the kids see, okay, we didn’t mean to do that.”</i>
Reading Comprehension	Depth of Comprehension	Evidence that children are engaged in interpretation, connection to past experiences, and critical thinking about a text or aspects of a texts	<i>“[T]hey were able to make connections... and discuss things that the higher groups were discussing; they were comprehending some of the same things even at one point even more.”</i>
Reading Engagement	Motivation—Interest	Interest, enjoyment, and/or personal investment in reading	<i>“And most of the time when I was done reading [CRTs] out loud, they wanted to take the books and read them independently.”</i>

## Findings and Discussion

Analysis and interpretation of teacher data is organized around the four most salient codes: *funds of knowledge*, *invitations*, *depth of comprehension*, and *motivation-interest*. *Funds of knowledge* and *invitations* are two of three codes that comprise the most prominent theme, *identity investment*; thus, we use this theme in our organization and analysis, as well.

Table 4  
*High-Frequency Codes Identified in 11 or More Interviews*

Category	Code	Number of interviews in which code occurred	Number and % out of 435 total coded segments
Identity Investment	Funds of Knowledge	12	60 / 13.79%
	Invitations	12	37 / 8.50%
Reading Comprehension	Depth of Comprehension	13	37 / 8.50%
Reading Engagement	Motivation-Interest	11	42 / 9.66%
Total			176 / 40.45

### Identity Investment

*Identity investment* describes incidents in which a teacher reports that a child connects to and draws on an aspect of her or his identity, such as cultural-experiential knowledge, as a resource for meaning-making during literature discussions. These are incidences in which the children draw on their cultural-experiential knowledge to “become active partners in the learning process” (Cummins et al., 2006, p. 306). Within the theme of *identity investment*, the code *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al., 1992) describes interview segments in which a teacher references children’s specific home- and community-based knowledge and experiences as they relate to a text. The code *invitations* indicates when a teacher observes that a text invited a new voice or topic into the discussion that may not have happened otherwise.

Ms. Carter and all of the second-grade students in her classroom at Companion Elementary School are African American. She selected, read, and facilitated discussions of *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998) with her students. Ms. Carter described her students’ neighborhood and their walk to school as similar to those depicted in the text. She reported that the neighborhood in which her school was located was “not aesthetically the most beautiful place, and that’s where my kids that I work with everyday—that’s where they live. So they have to walk by buildings that are boarded up or gutted [to get to school].”

We coded the following interview segments from Ms. Carter as funds of knowledge:

*[The story] mentions about a homeless lady. And the kids are like, "Yeah, there're homeless people that live on our block." And we were brainstorming ideas [about] how do you think people become homeless, and I'm not saying a word. The kids came up with all these ideas that were right on. "Well maybe somebody lost their job. Maybe somebody got sick and couldn't go to work. Maybe somebody's house caught on fire...they even said—told me, "Did you know that children could be homeless?"*

*The text-to-self connections were outstanding. My kids could really relate especially to all of the things that were physical—the building, the neighborhood, how it looks...it didn't seem like a very bright place to want to live. But then my kids were also self-reflecting on how their relationships with their families are beautiful...I have a grandma who lives with me... Even though I might look out my front door and there's trash, I know my grandma's in the next room, and she's gonna read a book to me, and that's something beautiful.*

*Ms. Carter, Second grade*

Ms. Carter's observations suggest that her children connected their "lived sociocultural realities" to the text in ways that enhanced their comprehension (Gay, 200, p. 32). The text and the teacher's facilitation provided an opportunity for children to use their daily experiences living in an under-resourced neighborhood to participate and make meaning in the book discussion. Ms. Carter's perceptions also suggest that the text and discussion affirmed the children's lived experiences and engaged them cognitively in drawing inferences and making personal connections to a key theme of the text. These are features of classrooms in which children experience maximum identity investment in the learning process (Cummins et al., 2006). The children drew on their related experiences to infer several reasons for why a person may be experiencing homelessness and to support their interpretation of what makes something beautiful.

Ms. Delgado teaches third grade at Neighborhood Elementary School. The school is located in a diverse neighborhood with a significant Latinx population, and several of her students were Mexican-American. She observed that features in *My Abuelita* (Johnston, 2009) and *Niño Wrestles the World* (Morales, 2013), invited many of her students to report on specific aspects of their cultural knowledge in discussions. We coded the following segment as funds of knowledge and invitation:.

*I had one little girl that actually did not pass the third grade...she hated speaking, writing, reading because she struggled so much...I remember her raising her hand and telling a very long, detailed story about La Llorona [The Crying Woman]...because she knew it from her previous background...[S]he raised her hand and said, "I know it. I know what [La] Llorona is. My mom told me the story." The kids all seemed confused. So I said, "Why don't you come and explain it?" She stood up in front of the class and explained the story in detail.*

Both the text and teacher invited the child into the conversation as an expert on *La Llorona*, a mythological character featured in the text *Niño Wrestles the World*. The child drew on her cultural-experiential and cognitive resources to actively participate and teach her peers, reflecting maximum identity investment (Cummins, 2001; Cummins et al., 2006) in the discussion task. Through this process both the child's teacher and her peers learned from

and about her as a result of her cultural-linguistic knowledge.

Ms. Delgado also recounted when a child clarified an unfamiliar Spanish term, *pantuflas* [slippers], that was featured in *My Abuelita* (Johnston, 2009), a text that weaves key Spanish terms into the English text. We coded this segment as *funds of knowledge* and invitations:

*I had one boy who never spoke, or he would speak and everything was always very irrelevant...he was the one that knew what "pantuflas" [slippers] was. He was able to describe what they were, what their uses were....*

Often the experiences of children from nondominant social backgrounds are encoded in dialects and/or languages other than dominant American English (DAE) (Paris, 2009). Ms. Delgado's observations suggest that these texts provided opportunities for reluctant speakers and participants to share their cultural and linguistic expertise related to key vocabulary to make relevant and new contributions to group understanding. The texts tapped into and affirmed aspects of these children's "cultural, linguistic, and personal identities," and the discussions provided opportunities for them to engage cognitively in the discussion by teaching their peers about key terms (Cummins et al., 2006, p. 305). Ms. Delgado also explained that her "[students were] coming prepared without knowing that they [were] coming prepared." Their daily linguistic experiences and family stories prepared them for meaningful interactions with peers about intentionally selected CRTs.

Ms. Skinner teaches kindergarten at Neighborhood Elementary School. Her students were participating in a think-pair-share about *My Abuelita* (Johnston, 2009) when she noticed that one pair of emergent bi(multi)lingual children started speaking in Spanish:

*[I said,] 'I haven't heard you speak in Spanish at all the whole year' ...They just felt at home with the story because it was something they could relate to... [I said,] 'That's awesome. You are talking so much more than you do, ever,...there is a conversation happening' ... I think that with teachers bringing more of these sorts of texts and home language to the classroom, then everyone will realize it's important to retain your home language...I want them to feel that it's okay to [speak Spanish] here. It's not just something you do at home. And I might not always understand what you're saying, but someone else in my class can understand and will translate it for me as well so that I feel like I'm not missing out when they do have these kind of engaged moments together.*

Ms. Skinner's response to the children's use of Spanish and her comments about the use of languages other than English in the classroom affirm bilingualism as a social and cognitive asset (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014). In addition, the text and teacher affirmed the two bi(multi)lingual kindergartners "cultural and linguistic identities," creating "conditions for maximum identity investment" in the discussion (p. 305). The children drew strategically on their dynamic bilingual skills, providing an example of translanguaging to participate and make meaning in the classroom; they listened to a text read aloud in English with some key Spanish terms interspersed and drew on their bilingual repertoire to discuss the text in Spanish. Fostering translanguaging practices and spaces in the classroom is grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy as it validates and promotes children's dynamic linguistic practices (Machado, 2017).

Ms. Howard teaches kindergarten at Community Elementary School. She

selected, read, and facilitated discussions of *Something Beautiful* with her African American kindergartners. The text invited children's experiences into the discussion in a way that afforded Ms. Howard an opportunity to learn more about her students, a hallmark of identity investment (Cummins, 2001). "There's a part in *Something Beautiful* where they write something like 'die' or 'kill' [on the side of a building]...and the kids would be like, 'so and so in my life died. They got shot.'" Ms. Howard noticed that in response to the text, the children "were talking about things that they might not have noticed it was okay to talk about...at school...I was learning things about them as the year went on..."

The intentional integration of CRTs into the literacy curriculum can foster children's identity investment (Cummins, 2001) in discussions and contribute to the development and sustenance of "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling" (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Rather than checking aspects of their identities and experiences at the school door, using CRTs can provide children with opportunities for learning and teachers with opportunities to learn about, from, and with their students.

### Depth of Comprehension

We assigned *depth of comprehension* to segments in which teachers explicitly mentioned that children connected a related experience to a facet of a text or when a child interpreted or engaged in thinking critically about an aspect of a text. Below, Ms. Nava and Mr. Anders describe how their students' connections to relationships and families featured in the texts seemed to have facilitated their students' comprehension. Ms. Nava teaches first grade in a Spanish-English dual language strand at Park Elementary School. All literature discussions in the classrooms were conducted primarily in Spanish. She noticed that her emergent bi(multi)lingual first graders enjoyed reading and discussing *My Abuelita* (Johnston, 2009). "They liked talking about storytelling, and really had a connection... [They said,] 'My grandpa does that, or my grandma does that.'" Ms. Nava recounted a discussion in which she asked the children why they thought the young protagonist in the story wanted to be a storyteller like his *Abuelita* when he grew up, a question that explores the theme of the text:

*[T]o hear [the child] say... "The boy wanted to be a storyteller because he wants to make sure that [his] grandma's tradition of storytelling is passed on, too,"—...really made me stop and think. Oh my goodness... [T]hese kids are just having wonderful and deep thoughts because of what they got to hear from the book... I was brought to tears, I think, multiple times in a lot of the conversations that we would have because they were so deep, and I would like record them and take them home, and be like, "Mom, look! Look at what they're talking about." This is just really exciting to see these ideas, and [the children] would make me think differently about the book.*

Ms. Nava observed that the children were able to connect aspects of their identities, in particular their relationships and experiences with their grandparents, to a key theme of the text.

Mr. Anders teaches kindergarten at Neighborhood Elementary. He selected, read and discussed with his students the texts, *My Abuelita* (Johnston, 2009) and *Little Mama Forgets* (Cruise, 2006), two texts that feature Latinx grandmothers who are forgetful. When describing his text selection process, Mr. Anders explained that both books "revolved around Hispanic families, [and] we're a major Hispanic community," and that most of his

students were young enough to have grandparents at home. He observed that his students found strong personal connections with the texts:

*[T]he kids really wrapped their heads around [the forgetfulness of both grandmothers]...[T]hey got deep about how, “My grandparents started forgetting things before they died.” I was like, “Wow.”...It was pretty cool for kindergarten, for that to happen.*

Ms. Nava’s and Mr. Anders’ perceptions of their children’s discussion responses suggest that the children had a strong schema for the intergenerational relationships that characterized the Latinx families in the texts. Children’s experiences seemed to have mapped onto the vocabulary, relationships, and themes of the texts. As Rueda’s facilitative encoding hypothesis (2011) proposes, the children’s strong schema for the text may have allowed them to allocate more cognitive resources toward inferring the theme of the text during literature discussions.

The personal connections that Ms. Howard’s kindergartners made to the text *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998) also stood out to her. She found the low-income neighborhood featured in the text very similar to her students’ neighborhood and noted that the children’s “level of discussion went way up”:

*[T]here are a lot of more complex things going on in [Something Beautiful]...But the connections that [the children] were able to make, and how they responded to what was happening in that story was just baffling to me... [I]t was really cool for me to see how...even these five year olds can make pretty profound connections with a text like that... One of the kids was like “Oh there’s a park by my house, dirty, and me and my mom want to clean that up”... [A] nother kid kind of piggy- backed off that and was like “Yeah, our street was dirty so we went out and cleaned it up.”...[I]t was really cool for them to see their neighborhood in a book because that’s, you know, growing up in...[this] neighborhood, you don’t see that represented... It was very real to them.*

Children’s connections to CRTs stood out to other teachers, as well. Ms. James and her students found multiple connections to the text *My Best Friend* (Rodman, 2005), a story about friendship that unfolds at the neighborhood swimming pool, featuring Lily and Tamika, two African American girls:

*[T]he kids [were] like “Aw, she’s only playing with [the protagonist] because the other girls didn’t come”... [The students] were making connections left and right... and then their comments from it were just—some of them blew my mind. And these are second graders...while the setting is similar, I feel like they made a greater connection because those characters look just like them. They were two little black girls at the pool, they’re black girls and black boys at the pool, and that’s just a very familiar thing for them to do.*

—Ms. James, Second grade

*[O]nce I started using [CRTs], [students] opened up more, and they could relate more to the text, and the conversations were more in-depth... [T]he conversations were about, ... “That happens in my family,” and they would give examples and cross examples of text of how things connected.*

—Ms. Kelly, Third grade

The teachers' perceptions of their students' responses during the discussions suggest that the intentional use of CRTs can provide emergent readers with critical opportunities to practice activating their schema for a text and integrating new information into their knowledge base to comprehend. Reading and discussing CRTs can support children in making meaningful connections that facilitate comprehension. These findings align with those from Lohfink and Loya (2010) in which children's connections to and interpretations of aspects of texts were influenced by their sociocultural backgrounds. In addition, teachers' observations of their students' oral contributions are in line with findings from research conducted with African American children and youths (e.g., Bell & Clark, 1998; Christ et al., 2018; McCulloch, 2016) and with Latinx children (e.g., Ebe, 2010; 2012). When students can draw on their cultural-experiential knowledge and understandings to make sense of texts, aspects of reading comprehension improve.

### Reading Engagement and Motivation—Interest

Reading engagement comprises a dynamic set of interacting characteristics, including motivation, interest, and social interactions (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001). Seminal research has documented the robust relationship among interest in a text, reading frequency, and reading skill development (e.g., Baker & Wigfield, 1999). Teachers noticed that their students enjoyed listening to, reading, and talking about CRTs. We assigned the code motivation-interest to these segments.

*I love it because...when I'm reading [CRTs] you can tell, like their faces are lighting up... It's like, "I have this connection." When it comes to their having a conversation, they have more to say.*

—Ms. Pérez, Third grade

*[T]hey kept on wanting me to read the "Luchador" [Wrestler] excerpt, like the history of the Luchadores [Wrestlers]. That was at the back of the [book]... that's not even a part of the story. [The students were] like, "Read it again!" ... [T]hey were super excited about that... They really had a connection with those characters and hearing about...these mythological characters and things they had also heard about from home.*

—Ms. Vargas, Second grade

*I would have to oftentimes cut off the discussion, and they weren't too happy about that. So, that's how I know that they were really enjoying [talking about the CRTs].*

—Ms. Lee Third grade

*I have a good mix of Hispanic and you know Caucasian kids...my Hispanic kids didn't—don't—always share like the Caucasian kids do, but they were when we were [discussing My Abuelita and Little Mama Forgets]. Everyone really was getting into it.*

—Mr. Anders, Kindergarten

Ms. Logan, a preschool teacher at Neighborhood Elementary, called *My Abuelita* (Johnston, 2009) "a phenomenal book". She noted that "having some familiar concepts

in there, some Spanish words—it just seems to draw a lot of [emergent bi(multi)lingual children] into the text in a different kind of way.” She also noticed positive differences in her students’ behaviors when she read English texts interspersed with some Spanish terms: “It’s just been... interesting to notice a different part of my classroom wakes up and would be more alert to the story.”

In Ms. Nava’s classroom, high interest in *Niño Wrestles the World* (Morales, 2013) inspired children to research characters from the text:

*It’s a different kind of connection. With Niño [Wrestles the World] they really were fascinated by some of the characters they had heard about before. One little girl went home and asked mom and dad about El Cucuy [a mythical monster in the text] and brought me an article about it, and wanted to talk [with the class] about it. It did really light a fire... No one went home to research mice when I read Chrysanthemum, but they did go home and research some of the characters that were in the Niño book.*

Teacher perceptions are in line with Rueda’s (2011) theoretical position that young readers may be more interested in a text when they can draw on their cultural-experiential knowledge to make meaning. Ms. Skinner reported that her kindergartners, “love *My Abuelita*... they race to get it” during independent reading time. Ms. James described what happens when she reads a text that her second graders can “really relate to,” a text that “really piques[s] their interest.”

*[O]nce I read [a CRT], they’re gonna grab that book again. And then they’re gonna read it by themselves, and then they’re gonna read it with their buddy... [I]t’s constantly being read over and over again which increases comprehension, builds fluency and accuracy, and helps develop their vocabulary...*

The range of teachers’ experiences and perceptions regarding their children’s interest in reading and discussing CRTs suggest that CRTs can spark a variety of behaviors that promote reading engagement and skills acquisition.

### **Additional and Unanticipated Findings**

Even though our study focuses on the use of CRTs as mirror texts, two teachers from Neighborhood Elementary, the school with the most ethnically diverse student population, mentioned that CRTs provided some of their students from dominant sociocultural backgrounds with opportunities to expand their understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity. The teachers described examples of how CRTs can serve as windows.

Ms. Skinner noticed that her monolingual English-speaking kindergartners enjoyed learning from texts that included some Spanish vocabulary. “[T]hey are learning too. It’s not just benefitting my Latino population,” she noted. My other kids think it’s cool, and they didn’t know you could call grandma *abuela*. They are just as into it... unfortunately it’s not a typical read in primary grades.” Mirrors and windows can facilitate cross-cultural understanding and help young children explore shared experiences and connections with peers from different sociocultural backgrounds (Bishop, 1990).

Ms. Pérez also described how reading and discussing CRTs provided her monolingual English-speaking students with opportunities to expand their understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity:

*[S]ometimes the students might not have that background knowledge... [It's] something new that they're learning, and then the other students can pitch in and, say, "Okay, well, this is what we do at my house..." ... I have students who only speak English, and when we say a word [in Spanish]...they're listening to it. I don't think it's part of their vocabulary yet, but they're hearing it. [S]ometimes I try to use [a Spanish vocabulary word] in the classroom as well... and some of [the monolingual English-speaking students] are able to catch it.*

CRTs that are both mirrors and windows for children in diverse classrooms can foster cross-cultural learning and understanding among children from different backgrounds and position cultural and linguistic diversity as normative.

When we asked teachers about any surprises or challenges that occurred when using CRTs with their students, two unanticipated patterns emerged. First, 10 of 13 teachers expressed surprise at their students' capabilities. We coded these responses as *changing expectations* within the theme *Teacher Change and Growth*.

*Some of my lower students...I guess I wasn't expecting them to comprehend as much as they did...but they were able to make connections and discuss things that the higher groups were discussing. And the inferences they made were really amazing.*

—Ms. Kelly, Third grade

*It's kind of been eye opening to realize—I try not to but I think that sometimes... [I place] some kinds of limitations on the kids...it's easy to say, "oh they're five, they can't do that."... [I]t made me realize that when given the opportunity, they really rise to the challenge...*

—Ms. Howard, Kindergarten

*I think I was really kind of surprised by what my kids could do and the level that the discussion got to... I didn't really know that my kids could do that.*

—Ms. Orlando, First grade

*What was surprising was the amount of discussion they were able to have... I was able to actually step back, and they were able to do it basically on their own... I never looked at them as being able to be that independent.*

—Ms. Lee, Third grade

Teacher beliefs about students' capabilities can limit opportunities for student participation or yield new opportunities for involvement, demonstration of expertise, and meaning making (Good & Nichols, 2001; Rubie-Davies, 2007). When students have opportunities to share expertise on the topic of a text, teachers are better able to understand and build on the range of diverse knowledge and experiences that their students bring to the reading comprehension task. In addition, when emergent readers draw on cultural-experiential knowledge to express complex ideas related to a text, teachers' understanding of children's capabilities and potential may shift.

Several teachers also identified common challenges when using CRTs, such as a lack of access to and knowledge of texts that are culturally relevant for their student populations and a lack of shared experiences with their students and with characters in the

texts. Mr. Anders stated

*I think the tough part is getting culturally relevant texts that are engaging enough like My Abuelita and Little Mama Forgets... I don't know how I would have ever seen Little Mama Forgets if it weren't for [the professional development series]. [It's] just not a book I would look for, just see on the shelf of a bookstore if I'm walking around or in a "Scholastic" magazine or in a reading curriculum.*

Ms. Orlando echoed this perception:

*I don't think that I even knew [about CRTs] just because...when you go to a bookstore, there's not a ton of books that you would think are culturally relevant... [It's] kind of sad that it took me that long [to start using CRTs]...and I think about how a lot of teachers might not be...taught [about CRTs] in teaching classes...and how beneficial that could be for literacy development.*

This finding is in line with research suggesting that teachers may lack sufficient knowledge about CRTs (Brinson, 2012), and that they may either have inadequate access to CRTs or have insufficient numbers of high quality “mirror” texts in their classroom libraries (Esposito, Davis, & Swain, 2012; Ebe, 2011).

In addition, a few teachers reported a lack of shared experiences with their students and with situations portrayed in CRTs. For example, Ms. Howard shared that “Sometimes...I didn't relate to what we were reading. I grew up in a much different environment... [The children] have been exposed to more things than I have so sometimes for me to relate to them, it's hard.”

The challenges reported in our study point to the potential of teacher preparation programs that provide preservice teachers, the majority of whom come from dominant sociocultural backgrounds, with facilitated opportunities to explore and analyze a range of CRTs and to plan for meaningful integration of CRTs into instruction (e.g., Christ & Sharma, 2018; Tschida et al., 2014; Heineke, 2014).

A final unanticipated trend we noticed in the data was that teachers frequently expressed enthusiasm when reflecting on their experiences using CRTs with their students. Ms. Carter spoke to the value of having mirror texts as part of the literacy curriculum, an experience that she did not have as a child:

*[F]or me when I see my kids pick up [a CRT that I have read aloud], I really feel warm all over... It does my heart a whole world of good to know that here I opened up a world that might not have been open to a kid before.... [G]rowing up...—outside of Black History Month—I didn't read books that had African American characters. I didn't even know that they existed.*

Ms. Skinner added, “I think that my [kindergartners] are getting a better education by me reading [CRTs]...I see it in their faces...it's just been a really awesome experience.”

Ms. Nava reflected on her own learning that unfolded when reading and facilitating discussions of CRTs with her first graders:

*I've learned so much from [my students] during the year... partly because of*

*these culturally relevant texts and partly because of the amount of dialogue... And seeing how they talk to one another [during literature discussions] was really amazing. I loved it.*

Findings suggest that together, teachers, CRTs, and children can create spaces in which children's home- and community-based knowledge, languages, and dialects are welcomed and fostered in the classroom. Reading and discussing CRTs can afford children opportunities to draw on their funds of knowledge as a foundation for literacy learning. Moreover, when teachers and texts invite children to bring their range of cultural-experiential knowledge into the classroom, joyful learning and teaching can thrive.

### **Summary and Implications**

Findings from our study make two original contributions to current knowledge in the field. First, the data sources and school contexts in our study were unique. Teachers' perceptions of their children's participation and discussion are positioned as valid sources of information regarding their students' reading engagement and comprehension. Additionally, rather than collecting data from a single classroom or single school and about a group of children from the same sociocultural or linguistic background, data were collected from teachers from diverse backgrounds who worked at four different schools. Teachers worked with child populations of different ages and from different racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

Second, the findings provide qualitative evidence derived from teachers' perceptions of their children's discussion responses that CRTs can have a positive impact on children's reading engagement and comprehension in the context of literature discussions. The teachers' interpretations of their students' responses align with and further confirm findings from qualitative and/or quantitative studies that have examined child data in response to CRTs (e.g., Ebe, 2010; 2012; Lohfink & Loya, 2010; Christ et al., 2018). Rueda (2011) suggests

...while culturally compatible instruction and classroom settings may make students feel better about being there, which is not a trivial consideration, these approaches may also make tasks more comprehensible and amenable to connections with existing prior knowledge. (p. 94)

Hence, an important implication of the research, theory, and findings examined in this study is that integrating discussions of CRTs into the literacy curriculum may simultaneously promote identity affirmation and facilitate ways of thinking and talking about texts that can support reading comprehension development.

In addition, findings build on Sharma and Christ's (2018) study of preservice teachers' development of culturally relevant pedagogy and text selection. The authors make a strong case for actively engaging teacher candidates in the iterative selection of and reflection on CRTs as a means to fostering a meaningful pedagogical shift toward culturally relevant pedagogy. They identified five characteristics "related to the selection of culturally relevant texts and pedagogy" that preservice teachers needed to develop. The first was "[pre-service teachers] need to believe in the value of using culturally relevant texts and pedagogy" (Sharma & Christ, 2018, p. 69). Our findings suggest that practicing teachers,

as well, can benefit from selecting and facilitating discussions of CRTs with their children, and that having an opportunity to reflect on their children's responses to the texts can foster and enhance a teachers' understanding of the value of using CRTs with their students.

In conclusion, teachers reported a range of positive experiences, as well as some specific challenges, when reading and discussing CRTs with their students. Teachers' responses indicated that they learned more about their students' range of sociocultural and linguistic assets and how children used these assets as tools for meaning-making during literature discussions.

### Limitations and Future Research

There are important limitations in the study, however. Findings are based on teacher perceptions of children's oral contributions and engagement during literature discussions rather than derived directly from child data during discussions. Moreover, the small sample size ( $n=13$ ) and single interviews are limitations that a more robust research design could minimize. Conducting multiple interviews with the same teachers before, during, and after reading and facilitating discussions of various CRTs could more thoroughly surface teachers' perceptions of their students' experiences. Additionally, coupling data collected from multiple teacher interviews with transcribed child discussion data could corroborate and lend reliability to teacher perceptions. Likewise, recruiting a greater number of teacher participants from more schools could further contribute to the growing body of research that documents the impact that CRTs can have on reading comprehension and engagement. Incorporating individual child assessments into the research design, such as Ebe's (2010) miscue analysis and holistic retellings of texts read independently, may provide further evidence to support teacher interpretations.

Additionally, in discussing culturally sustaining pedagogy, Paris and Alim (2014) critique the "overdeterministic links between race and language, literacy and cultural practice" and point to the imperative of developing new pedagogies that relate to youths' flexible and "dynamic enactments" of language, race, ethnicity, literacy, and cultural practices (pp. 90–91). Some of the texts discussed in this study may reflect more static and "overdeterministic" connections among race, language, and cultural-experiential knowledge. Texts that employ bilingual practices, including authentic code-switching, and that feature bidialectal characters and authentic use of dialects of English other than DAE (Paris, 2009) can play a role in putting new pedagogies into practice. For example, Ruth Forman's *Young Cornrows Callin' Out the Moon* (Forman, 2007) employs Black English or African American Language (AAL), and Matt de la Peña's *Last Stop on Market Street* (2015) features a young bidialectal character, C. J. Additionally, texts that depict authentic transcultural experiences, such as Afro-Latinx experiences featured in *Grandma's Records* and *Grandma's Gifts* by Eric Velasquez (2001; 2010), the *Trickster Tale* books by Yuyi Morales (2003; 2008), and Edwidge Danticat's *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti* (2010), for example, can tap into the more fluid, dynamic, and authentic representations, practices, and experiences of a growing number of children. Empirical studies that examine how teachers select and use texts that authentically reflect and draw on children's cognitively complex and dynamic ways of communicating and making meaning, and that examine how children interact with these texts, can contribute to the development of new pedagogies. \

### About the Authors

Dr. Amy Clark is visiting faculty in Early Childhood Education at DePaul University. Previously she worked for 13 years as a primary grade dual language public school teacher in Chicago. Her research interests are bilingual and biliteracy development in young children and culturally sustaining pedagogy in early childhood education.

Dr. Jane Fleming is the Director of Literacy for Chicago Public Schools. She is a reading specialist with 25 years' experience working in urban public schools. Previously, she was on the faculty at Erikson Institute, conducting research on teachers' use of culturally relevant literature in literacy instruction and its impact on student engagement and achievement. She is lead author of the book, *More Mirrors in the Classroom: Using Urban Children's Literature to Increase Literacy*.

### References

- Adams, B., Bell, L., & Perfetti, C. (1995). A trading relationship between reading skill and domain knowledge in children's text comprehension. *Discourse Processes*, 20(3), 307–323.
- Agosto, D. E., (2007). Building a multicultural school library: Issues and challenges. *Teacher Librarian*, 34(3), 27–31.
- Alim, S., & Paris, D. (2017). What is culturally sustaining pedagogy and why does it matter? In D. Paris & S. Alim (Eds.), *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (1–24). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Anderson, R., & Pearson, P. D. (1984). A schema-theoretic view of basic processes in reading comprehension. In P. D. Pearson (Ed.), *Handbook of reading research* (pp. 255–291). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Baker, L., & Wigfield, A. (1999). Dimensions of children's motivation for reading and their relations to reading activity and reading achievement. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 34(4), 452–477.
- Banks, J. (1993). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. *Review of Education in Research*, 19, 3–49.
- Bell, Y., & Clark, T. (1998). Culturally relevant reading material as related to comprehension and recall in African American children. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 24(4), 455–75.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 6(3), ix–xi.
- Boyd, F. B., Causey, L. L., & Gauda, L. (2015). Enriching variety in an era of Common Core Standards. *The Reading Teacher*, 68(5), 378–387.
- Brinson, S. A. (2012). Knowledge of multicultural literature among early childhood educators. *Multicultural Education*, 19(2), 30–33.
- Brown, M. (2011). *Marisol McDonald doesn't match*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.
- Campbell, J. L., Quincy, C., Osserman, J., & Pedersen, O. K. (2013). Coding in-depth semistructured interviews: Problems of unitization and intercoder

- reliability and agreement. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 42(3), 294–320.  
doi: 10.1177/0049124113500475
- Christ, T., Chiu, M. M., Rider, S., Kitson, D., Hanser, E., McConnell, E., Dipzinski, R., & Mayernik, H. (2018). Cultural relevance and informal reading inventory performance: African-American primary and middle school students. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 57(2), 117–134
- Christ, T. & Sharma, S. A. (2018). Searching for more mirrors: Preservice teachers' journey toward more culturally relevant pedagogy. *Reading Horizons*, 57(1), 55–73.
- Cruise, R. (2006). *Little mamá forgets*. New York, NY: Melanie Kroupa/Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Cummins, J. (2001) Negotiating identities: *Education for empowerment in a diverse society* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: CACE.
- Cummins, J., Chow, P., & Schecter, S. R. (2006). Community as curriculum. *Language Arts*, 83(4), 297–307.
- Danticat, E. (2010). *Eight days: a story of Haiti*. New York, NY: Orchard Books/Scholastic.
- Derby, S. (1999). *My steps*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.
- Duke, N., & Carlisle, J. (2011). The development of comprehension. In M. Kamil, P. Pearson, E. Moje, and P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research volume IV* (pp. 199–228). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ebe, A. E. (2010). Culturally relevant texts and reading assessment for English language learners. *Reading Horizons*, 50(3), 193–210.
- Ebe., A. E. (2012). Supporting the reading development of middle school English language learners through culturally relevant texts. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 28(2) 179–198.
- Eccles, J. S., & Midgley, C. (1989). Stage/environment fit: Developmentally appropriate classrooms for early adolescents. In R. Ames & C. Ames (Eds.), *Research on motivation in education*, vol. 3 (pp. 139–181). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Escamilla, K., & Nathenson-Mejía, S. (2003). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Using Latino children's literature in teacher education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 36(3), 238–248.
- Esposito, J., Davis, C. L., & Swain, A. N. (2012). Urban educators' perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and school reform mandates. *Journal of Educational Change*, 13(2), 235–258.
- Esteban-Guitart, M., & Moll, L. C. (2014). Funds of identity: A new concept based on the funds of knowledge approach. *Culture & Psychology*, 21(1), 31–48.
- Forman, R. (2007). *Young cornrows callin out the moon*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.
- Freeman, Y. S., & Freeman, D. E. (2015). *Research on preparing inservice teachers to work effectively with emergent bilinguals*. Bingley, England: Emerald Group Publishing.

- García, O. (2009). Emergent bilinguals and TESOL: What's in a name? *TESOL Quarterly*, 43(2), 322–326.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism, and education*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Garth-McCullough, R. (2008). Untapped cultural support: The influence of culturally bound prior knowledge on comprehension performance. *Reading Horizons*, 49(1), 1–30.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2007). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Good, T., & Nichols, S. (2001). Expectancy effects in the classroom: A special focus on improving the reading performance of minority students in first-grade classrooms. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(2), 113–126.
- Gort, M. (2012). Code-switching patterns in the writing-related talk of young emergent bilinguals. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 44(1), 45–75.
- Guthrie, J. T., & Anderson, E. (1999). Engagement in reading: Processes of motivated, strategic, knowledgeable, social readers. In J. T. Guthrie & D. E. Alvermann (Eds.), *Engaged reading: Processes, practices, and policy implications* (pp. 17–45). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Guthrie, J. T., Schafer, W., & Huang, C. W. (2001). Benefits of opportunities to read and balanced instruction on the NAEP. *Journal of Educational Research*, 94(3), 145–162.
- Gutiérrez, K., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. *Educational Researcher*, 32(5), 19–25.
- Hadaway, N. L. (2009). A narrow bridge to academic reading. *Educational Leadership*, 66(7), 38–41.
- Heineke, A. J. (2014). Dialoging about English learners: Preparing teachers through culturally relevant children's literature. *Action in Teacher Education*, 36(2), 117–140.
- Hoffman, M. (1991). *Amazing grace*. New York, NY: Dial Books.
- Hughes-Hassell, S., Koehler, E., & Barkley, H. (2010). Supporting the literacy needs of African American transitional readers. *Teacher Librarian*, 37(5), 18–23.
- Johnston, T. (2009). *My abuelita*. Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin.
- Jones, S., & Clarke, L. W. (2007). Disconnections: Pushing readers beyond connections and toward the critical. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 2(2), 95–115.
- Kendeou, P., van den Broek, P., White, M., & Lynch, J. (2009). Predicting reading comprehension in early elementary school: The independent contributions of oral language and decoding skills. *Journal of Education Psychology*, 101(4), 765–778.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159–165.

- Ladson-Billings, G. (1992). Reading between the lines and beyond the pages: A culturally relevant approach to literacy teaching. *Theory into Practice*, 31(4), 312–320.
- Lipson, M. (1983). The influence of religious affiliation on children's memory for text information. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 18(4), 448–457.
- Lohfink, G., & Loya, J. (2010). The nature of Mexican American third graders' engagement with culturally relevant picture books. *Bilingual Research Journal: The Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education*, 33(3), 346–363.
- López-Robertson, J., & Schramm-Pate, S. (2013). (Un)official knowledge and identity: An emerging bilingual's journey into hybridity. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 7(1), 40–56.
- Martínez-Roldán, C. M., & Sayer, P. (2006). Reading through linguistic borderlands: Latino students' transactions with narrative texts. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 6(3), 293–322.
- McCullough, R. G. (2013). The relationship between reader response and prior knowledge on African American students' reading comprehension performance using multicultural literature. *Reading Psychology*, 34, 397–435.
- McNair, J. C. (2016). #WeNeedMirrorsAndWindows: Diverse classroom libraries for K–6 students. *The Reading Teacher*, 70(3), 375–381.
- McVee, M., Dunsmore, K., & Gavelek, J. (2005). Schema theory revisited. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(4), 531–566.
- Medina, M. (2011). *Tía Isa wants a car*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2015). *Qualitative Research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M., Huberman, A., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. Washington, D.C.: Sage Publications.
- Miller, D. (2013). *Reading with meaning: Teaching comprehension in the primary grades* (2nd ed.). Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141.
- Morales, Y. (2008). *Just in case: a trickster tale and Spanish alphabet book*. New York, NY: Roaring Brook Press.
- Morales, Y. (2003). *Just a minute: A trickster tale and counting book*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.
- Morales, Y. (2013). *Niño wrestles the world*. New York, NY: Roaring Brook Press.
- Morris, V. (2011). The street lit author and the inner-city teen reader. *Young Adult Library Services*, 10(1), 21–24.
- Murphy, K., Wilkinson, I., Soter, A., Hennessey, M., & Alexander, J. (2009). Examining the effects of classroom discussion on students' comprehension of text: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(3), 740–764.

- Muter, V., Hulme, C. Snowling, M., & Stevenson, J. (2004). Phonemes, rimes, vocabulary, and grammatical skills as foundations of early reading development: Evidence from a longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(5), 665–681.
- Nieto, S. (1995). *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Allyn & Bacon.
- Orellana, M. F., & Gutiérrez, K. D. (2006). What's the problem? Constructing different genres for the study of English learners. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(1), 118–123.
- Palmer, D. K., Martínez, R. A., Mateus, S. G., & Henderson, K. (2014). Reframing the debate on language separation: Toward a vision for translanguaging pedagogies in the dual language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 98(3), 757–772.
- Paris, D. (2009). “They’re in my culture, they speak the same way”: African American language in multiethnic high schools. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 428–447.
- Paris, D., & Alim, S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–137.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Peña, M. d. I. (2015). *Last stop on Market Street*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam’s Sons.
- Rodman, M. (2005). *My best friend*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.
- Rubie-Davies, C.M. (2007). Classroom interactions: Exploring the practices of high- and low-expectation teachers. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77(2), 289–306.
- Rueda, R. (2011). Cultural perspectives in reading. In M. Kamil, P. Pearson, E. Moje, & P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research volume IV* (pp. 84–103). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Schneider, W., Korkel, J., & Weinert, F. (1989). Domain-specific knowledge and memory performance: A comparison of high- and low-aptitude children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81(3), 306–312.
- Sharma, S. A., & Christ, T. (2017). Five steps toward selection and integration of culturally relevant texts. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(3), 295–307.
- Storch, S., & Whitehurst, G. (2002). Oral language and code-related precursors to reading: Evidence from a longitudinal structural model. *Developmental Psychology*, 38(6), 934–947.
- Sweller, J. (1994). Cognitive load theory, learning difficulty, and instructional design. *Learning and Instruction*, 4(4), 295–312.
- Velasquez, E. (2010). *Grandma’s gift*. New York, NY: Walker & Co.
- Velásquez, E. (2001). *Grandma’s records*. New York, NY: Walker & Co.
- Verhoeven, L., & Van Leeuwe, J. (2008). Prediction of the development of reading comprehension: a longitudinal study. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 22, 407–423.

- Vygotsky, L. (1978). In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, & S. S. Scribner (Eds.), *Mind in society* (14th ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wahl, J. (2004). *Candy shop*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.
- Wanless, S. B., & Crawford, P. A. (2016). Reading your way to a culturally responsive classroom. *Young Children*, 71(2), 8–15.
- Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2000). Expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 68–81.
- Woodson, J. (1997). *We had a picnic this Sunday past*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children.
- Worthy, J., Durán, L., Hikida, H., Pruitt, A., & Peterson, K. (2013). Spaces for dynamic bilingualism in read-aloud discussions: Developing and strengthening bilingual and academic skills. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 36, 311–328.
- Wyeth, S. D. (1998). *Something beautiful*. New York, NY: Dragonfly.
- Yokota, J. (1993). Issues in selecting multicultural children's literature. *Language Arts*, 70, 156–167.

## **Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Guide**

1. What are some of your favorite culturally relevant texts that you have used with your students?
  2. Did you notice that the students had some favorite culturally relevant texts? Can you tell me about them?
  3. Did you notice an impact, if any, that reading and discussing culturally relevant texts had on your students' participation during discussions or during the read aloud?
  4. Did you notice an impact, if any, that reading and discussing culturally relevant texts had on your students' engagement during discussions or during the read aloud?
  5. Did you notice an impact, if any, that reading and discussing culturally relevant texts had on the amount of language that children used during discussions?
  6. Did you notice an impact, if any, that reading and discussing culturally relevant texts had on the quality of the book discussions?
  7. Did you notice any differences in children's confidence when reading and discussing culturally relevant texts?
  8. What was it like for you as a teacher? Were there any surprises or challenges?
  9. Have any children's family members or other colleagues commented to you about the use of culturally relevant texts?
  10. How has reading and discussing culturally relevant texts with your students impacted your approach to text selection?
  11. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences?
- Prompts: Can you tell me more about that? Can you think of an example?