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Exploring Culturally Relevant Literature's Relationship to Students' Ability to Determine a Theme in a Literary Text

by

JOSHUA C. BENNETT

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Educational Leadership

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2024

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Joshua C. Bennett

March 2024

Educational Leadership

Exploring Culturally Relevant Literature's Relationship to Students' Ability to Determine a Theme in a Literary Text

ABSTRACT

Extant research indicates culturally relevant literature (CRL) is linked to increased reading comprehension and interest in reading for Latinx students as well as other student groups. Current research also shows CRL can support home literacy instruction, facilitate writing instruction, foster sociopolitical awareness, underpin behavior interventions, and promote disciplinary literacy. However, despite this growing body of research, gaps in the literature addressing CRL remain. For example, far too few studies have incorporated participants' views on the cultural relevance of the literature they are asked to read. There is also little research that explores CRL's relationship to outcomes on typical daily classroom assignments.

My mixed-methods study addresses these limitations and provides a deeper understanding of how researchers, teachers, administrators, and policymakers can capture student readers' perspectives on the literature they are asked to read as part of our studies and our classes. Specifically, my study offers an updated version of Paulson and Freeman's cultural relevance rubric, which has been employed by other studies. My updated version of the rubric allows students who identify as nonbinary to more easily respond to a question meant to capture

the gender facet of cultural relevance. Additionally, my study features an interview protocol that is tied to the rubric and allows for the collection of qualitative data from student–readers to augment the quantitative data the rubric provides. Regarding classroom assignments, my study features quantitative analysis of a theme paragraph assignment from my English language arts curriculum for the seventh grade, and I provide context for these assignment scores with qualitative data from semistructured interviews with the students.

First, my quantitative analysis of the data generated from the cultural relevance rubric revealed that students did find the intervention story I selected from my study, "Sol Painting, Inc." by Meg Medina (2017), more culturally relevant than the control story I selected, "A Sound of Thunder" by Ray Bradbury (originally published in 1953). Next, my measure of reading comprehension, the theme paragraph assignment, revealed higher average scores for students working with the intervention story as compared to the scores of students working with the control story, though independent *t* tests did not reveal statistically significant differences in these scores. In my quantitative analysis, I also explored outcomes on the theme paragraph for the following student subgroups: female students, male students, students who are designated as English learners, and students who receive special education services. Findings for these student subgroups mirrored the overall analytic sample.

Second, qualitative data from my study's semistructured interviews showed students most strongly identified with the character and plot facets of cultural relevance. That is, students were able to draw connections between the characters in the story and people from their own lives while determining a theme in the text and making meaning with the text. Qualitative interview data also showed students applied their own lived experiences in similar ways when using plot of the story to determine its themes. In other words, the experiences facet of cultural relevance was

also an important element for making meaning with the text for the students who participated in my study. Finally, qualitative interview data showed all five students in the purposive sample indicated they found the intervention story both an enjoyable read and a meaningful part of the curriculum.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Defining the Culturally Relevant Literature Construct

A significant number of researchers publishing in the culturally relevant literature (CRL) domain utilize Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990a, 1990b) analogy of literature as a mirror to define the CRL construct. Bishop (1990a, pp. 5–7) explained that for a text to serve as a mirror the reader typically sees at least three elements of their culture within its pages: (1) their own contemporary, "real" language, (2) their own histories and traditions, and (3) their own values and attitudes. Bishop (1990a, pp. 4–5) also explains that Asian Americans, Black Americans, and Latinx Americans do not often find their own cultures reflected in literature, though Black Americans seems to fare better than others. Among recent studies that deploy Bishop's work to help define the CRL construct, Clark and Fleming (2019, p. 24) asserted that a text is culturally relevant when readers can make deep personal connections with the text, when the primary characters remind readers of themselves and their loved ones, when the settings resemble their neighborhoods, and when the experiences, relationships, and themes depicted in the text resonate with the reader. Delgado (2021, p. 36) described CRL as texts that permit readers to make personal connections to the reading and help them explore their cultural identities. Delgado (p. 36) goes on to say CRL features characters and places that are likely familiar to readers. Koss and Daniel (2017, p. 431) contended that CRL gives readers an "entry point" to see themselves in the books they read. Tovar-Hilbert (2017, p. 21) suggested that CRL positions the reader's culture as a part of the "transactions" the reader is making with the text. In short, the term CRL refers to texts in which the reader can see authentic representations of their own lived experiences.

When the events and setting portrayed in a text are not contemporaneous to the reader, it is less likely the reader will see their lived experiences within that text; therefore, timeliness is an especially important facet to consider when defining the CRL construct. For example, Delgado (2021, p. 36) explained that a folktale set in Mexico during the 1500s is likely not culturally relevant to Mexican American students of today because the setting is temporally distant from the readers' own lives, and daily experiences, language, beliefs, and traditions have all changed a great deal across the intervening years. In order to capture the timeliness facet of CRL, Paulson and Freeman (2003, pp. 27–29) created a rubric that helps readers rate the cultural relevance of a text. The rubric features eight questions, and five of these questions address the timeliness of a text. Question three directly addresses timeliness: "Could this story take place this year?" The other four questions address timeliness more indirectly: "Are the characters in the story like you and your family?"; "Have you ever lived in or visited places like those in the story?"; "Do the characters talk like you and your family?"; and "Have you ever had experiences like one described in the story?" The degree to which these questions address timeliness depends on how one interprets phrases such as, "like you and your family," but it is clear that readers are less likely to see a character from a distant time as similar to themselves and their family than a character living in their own time. The timeliness facet of CRL demonstrates that ethnicity alone cannot render a text culturally relevant.

It is also important to distinguish CRL from multicultural literature. Multicultural literature is perhaps more closely related to Bishop's (1990a, pp. 7–10) texts as windows analogy, or perhaps the interplay between both: windows *and* mirrors. That is, multicultural literature may include mirror texts, but it also includes window texts. Bishop (1990a, pp. 7–10) described window texts as those that allow readers to see into a culture that is not their own, that

is different than their own, and she (Bishop, 1997, pp. 2–3) explains that multicultural literature features characters, events, and settings that are drawn from the diversity of the society and cultures that produced it. Multicultural literature is pluralistic, and it depicts a great variety of ethnicities, genders, ages, abilities, classes, religions, and regional identities (Bishop, 1997, p. 2). Bishop argued that no literature is rightly excluded from multicultural literature, not even that produced by majority groups. In this author's view, the value of multicultural literature is obvious; it is clearly an important vehicle of compassion. It is, however, distinct from CRL and not the focus of this study.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that only the reader can determine the cultural relevance of a text. As described above, Paulson and Freeman (2003, pp. 27–29) devised a cultural relevance rubric that allowed study participants to quantify and express their own findings as to the culture relevance of the texts featured in the study. Scullin (2020) also stressed this point. Scullin (p. 98) noted that no group is monolithic or truly homogenous, and as such it is not possible for anyone other than an individual reader to determine the cultural relevance of a text. Unfortunately, few studies in the CRL literature utilize this approach. In many studies cited in the literature review below, especially those of the earliest dates, the researchers assume cultural relevance from their own analysis of the texts featured in their studies and their knowledge of demographic data for their study's participants.

Precursors to the CRL Construct

Well over a century ago, John Dewey (1898, pp. 318, 323–325) suggested that reading comprehension is tied to lived experiences. Although current scholarship has moved considerably beyond Dewey, he made at least two points that remain relevant to current discussions regarding how CRL accesses students' lived experiences. First, Dewey (p. 323)

argued that without any connection to lived experiences, reading is reduced to a rote, passionless practice. Second, Dewey (pp. 318, 324, 325) also argues that this detached, mechanical reading thwarts true comprehension. More recently, Goodman (1967) argued that a reader "brings to his reading the sum total of his experiences" (p. 130) and that readers use "graphic cues," i.e., letters and other textual signals, to "draw on their experiences" as they "develop reading ability" (p. 134). Similarly, Kolers (1969) argued that reading is not a simple, rote process of "translating familiar visual graphemes into phonemes" (p. 13) but is instead a "constructive" process by which a reader's comprehension is based upon "an experienced object" (p. 11).

Yet more recently, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) offered perhaps one the most influential explications of how lived experiences can be a vehicle of academic success, as expressed through reading comprehension or any other educational outcome. According to Ladson-Billings (1995, pp. 477, 483), the nexus that links students' lived experiences and their academic success is the construct "official knowledge." For Ladson-Billings (1995, p. 477), official knowledge begins with the work of Michael W. Apple. Apple (1993, p. 1) argued that knowledge is never neutral but is instead "produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people" and is legitimized, that is, made official, by those who are empowered to organize it, teach it, and evaluate the learning of it. Building on Apple's assertions, Ladson-Billings (1995, pp. 477, 483) explained that teachers who utilize culturally relevant pedagogies use their position and the power that comes with it to situate students' lived experiences and community knowledge, that is, cultural knowledge, as official knowledge (Apple, 1993, p. 1; Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467). Ladson-Billings (1995, p. 469) specifically defines culturally relevant pedagogy as "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity

while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate." Subsequent research has supported Ladson-Billings's positions and shown that CRL can be an important constituent element of culturally relevant pedagogy. Through CRL, teachers can incorporate students' lived experiences as official knowledge (Apple, 1993, p. 1; Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467) within their classrooms with meaningful results.

For example, Cartledge et al. (2016) found that CRL had a positive relationship with students' reading persistence. Cartledge et al. (p. 408) demonstrated that African American and Black immigrant students in the first and second grade preferred texts that reflected their own identities, but, perhaps more importantly, Cartledge et al. (pp. 416–417) also showed that these students preferred such texts even when they were more difficult to read, that is, even when the students exhibited lower rates of reading fluency. Conversely, students indicated that they enjoyed stories less when they were not culturally relevant, even when they exhibited higher rates of reading fluency with these texts (Cartledge et al., pp. 416–417). These findings suggest that CRL facilitates reading persistence when students need it most—when they are struggling with more challenging readings.

Ebe found that CRL increased reading comprehension for both elementary (2010) and middle school (2012) Latinx emergent bilingual students (typically referenced as English language learners, ELLs, or English learners, ELs). Ebe (2010, pp. 203–207) showed that third-grade emergent bilingual students exhibited fewer miscues when reading aloud a text they themselves identified as culturally relevant when compared to a text they identified as less culturally relevant. Ebe (2010, pp. 207–208) also demonstrated students were able to provide longer, more detailed retellings of the story they had identified as more culturally relevant. In a later study, Ebe (2012) found similar results for a sample of seventh-grade emergent bilingual

students. The older students also exhibited fewer miscues when reading a text they considered culturally relevant than when reading a less culturally relevant control text (Ebe, 2012, pp. 189–193), and they, too, were able to provide more extensive retellings of the text they found more culturally relevant (Ebe, 2012, pp. 188–189). These findings suggest CRL aids decoding, retention, and interpretation, that is, comprehension.

Similarly, McCullough (2013, pp. 412–413) found that African American eighth-grade students' preliminary understanding of culture-based vocabulary and story features built a bank of "culturally relevant prior knowledge" that was associated with higher levels of reading comprehension as measured by an instrument designed for the study. McCullough (pp. 415–416) discovered that students with low- and mid-level reading scores on state standardized tests but high levels of culturally relevant prior knowledge outscored their peers with higher level standardized reading scores but low levels of culturally relevant knowledge. McCullough (pp. 419–420) also established culturally relevant prior knowledge was a better predictor of reading achievement than students' interest. These findings suggest accessing reserves of cultural knowledge more effectively supports reading comprehension than other, more traditional correlates.

However, not all students enjoy the advantages of seeing their own lived experiences reflected in school texts. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 present demographic data pertaining to children's and young adult (YA) books published in the United States compared to similar demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau. While the census data provide context for the publishing demographics, it is important to consider that parity in textual representation in no way ensures every child can see themselves in their schoolbooks. For instance, although Indigenous persons are represented in published texts above their corresponding percentage of the population, a book

that features a Thakiwaki character living in rural central Oklahoma does not necessarily reflect the life of a member of the Coeur d'Alene tribe living in relatively urban Boise, Idaho, yet the publishing data in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 make no such distinctions. Nonetheless, several important conclusions can be drawn from these data. Table 1.2 indicates that Latinx and Hispanic individuals remain markedly underrepresented in American children's and YA books. It follows that without robust representation in published texts overall, it will prove difficult for teachers, administrators, and school boards to adopt culturally relevant texts that can underpin classwork and facilitate learning. Thus, research that may help facilitate meaningful selections from such limited resources is critical

Yet research specifically addressing CRL as an element of daily English language arts (ELA) instruction remains small. Past studies have explored CRL's effects on reading fluency (Council et al., 2019) and miscues (Ebe, 2010, 2012), its effects on state standardized test scores (Tatum, 2000), and there is a growing literature investigating CRL's relationship to reading interest and enjoyment (Cartledge et al., 2016; Jiménez & Gámez, 1996; Marquez & Colby, 2021; Piazza & Duncan, 2012; Scullin, 2020). Extant research has investigated CRL's relationship to reading comprehension as measured by researcher-created instruments (McCullough, 2013) or through methods specific to the research project such as text discussions (Clark & Fleming, 2019) or the ability to accurately recount a story (Ebe, 2010, 2012). Previous studies have also explored other disparate aspects of CRL, such as its effectiveness as an element of math instruction (Colwell, 2019; Iliev & D'Angelo, 2014) and behavioral interventions (Verden & Hickman, 2009). However, action research (Ferrance, 2000) examining CRL's relationship with standards-based ELA classwork—the core role of literature in the K–12.

Table 1.1 *Racial/Ethnic Representation in Children's and Young Adult Literature Published in the United States—Arab, Asian, and Black/African*

Year	Total books received at CCBC	Arab [a]			Asian			Black/African		
		By	About	% of U.S. Pop.	By	About	% of U.S. Pop.	By	About	% of U.S. Pop.
2021	3,190 [b]	21 (0.66%)	21 (0.66%)	NA	464 (14.5%)	337 (10.6%)	5.9%	308 (9.7%)	439 (13.8%)	12.6%
2020	3,265 [b]	17 (0.52%)	22 (0.67%)	NA	387 (11.9%)	310 (9.5%)	5.9%	256 (7.1%)	401 (12.3%)	12.6%
2019	3,751	19 (0.51%)	33 (0.88%)	NA	393 (10.5%)	336 (9.0%)	5.8%	227 (6.1%)	459 (12.2%)	12.5%
2018	3,352	15 (0.45%)	24 (0.72%)	NA	358 (10.7%)	309 (9.2%)	5.7%	205 (6.1%)	389 (11.6%)	12.5%

Note. CCBC = Children's Cooperative Book Collective, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison; NA = not available; Pop. = population. Book data obtained from CCBC. U.S. population data obtained from U.S. Census Bureau via usafacts.org.
[a] There is no category for Arab race/ethnicity in the U.S. Census.
[b] Due to the COVID pandemic, the CCBC received fewer books than had been typical in previous years.

Table 1.2 *Racial/Ethnic Representation in Children's and Young Adult Literature Published in the United States—Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander*

Year	Total books received at CCBC	Indigenous			Latinx			Pacific Islander		
		By	About	% of U.S. Pop.	By	About	% of U.S. Pop.	By	About	% of U.S. Pop.
2021	3,190 [a]	47 (1.5%)	62 (1.9%)	0.7	312 (9.8%)	235 (7.5%)	18.9	8 (0.25%)	6 (0.19%)	0.2
2020	3,265 [a]	27 (0.83%)	41 (1.3%)	0.7	233 (7.1%)	197 (6.0%)	18.7	1 (0.03%)	5 (0.15%)	0.2
2019	3,751	31 (0.82%)	45 (1.2%)	0.7	237 (6.3%)	235 (6.3%)	18.4	5 (0.13%)	5 (0.13%)	0.2
2018	3,352	27 (0.81%)	34 (1.0%)	0.7	208 (8.4%)	243 (7.2%)	18.2	2 (0.06%)	6 (0.18%)	0.2

Note. CCBC = Children's Cooperative Book Collective, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison; Pop. = population. Book data obtained from CCBC. U.S. population data obtained from U.S. Census Bureau via usafacts.org.
[a] Due to the COVID pandemic, the CCBC received fewer books than had been typical in previous years.

sphere—is virtually nonexistent. Feger's (2006) work exploring CRL's relationship to classroom assignments such as reading journals and text-based art projects remains one of the few such studies. Although CRL's relationship to all the varied facets of the learning process is important, so, too, is its relationship to daily assignments in the typical classroom. The present study seeks to address this gap in the extant CRL research literature.

Significance of My Study

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) explained that framing disparities in education outcomes between Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and certain Pacific Islander students and their White peers as achievement gaps is misguided. Instead, it is more accurate to regard these inequities as the natural result of an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). That is, lower rates of achievement on traditional measures of academic success are the predictable consequence of persistently lower levels of investment in students of color, monetarily and otherwise. Ladson-Billings (2006, pp. 5–9) divided the broader education debt into four categories: the historical debt, the economic debt, the sociopolitical debt, and the moral debt. The historical debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006, pp. 5–6) refers to the extensive record of racist educational policies in the United States, such as the prohibition against educating enslaved African Americans, school segregation under Jim Crow systems, and disproportionalities exhibited in the zero-tolerance policies of today. The economic debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006, pp. 6–7) captures the effects of the pervasive underfunding of schools that serve students of color. The sociopolitical debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006, pp. 7–8) alludes to the disenfranchisement of Americans of color that facilitated these policies. The moral debt, Ladson-Billings (2006, pp. 8–9) explained, is the most difficult to define, but it is also most relevant to this study.

Ladson-Billings (2006, p. 8) described the moral debt as "the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do." Ladson-Billings (2006, p. 8) also invoked Thomas Aquinas to help define this particular aspect of the education debt, explaining that the moral component also encompasses the honor that human beings owe each other. This study is underpinned by the core assumption that utilizing cultural knowledge, often described as *funds of knowledge* (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992), as official knowledge (Apple, 1993, p. 1; Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467) within the classroom is a basic honor owed to all students that can have a positive relationship to learning. The funds of knowledge framework counters deficit models that explain disparities in education outcomes for minoritized students by designating these students, their homes, or their cultures as inadequate or otherwise flawed (González et al., 2011, pp. 481–482; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008, p. 45; Moll et al., 1992, p. 134; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 313). Funds of knowledge are bodies of strategic information that households need to sustain themselves and maintain their well-being (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 314). These bodies of strategic information can be readily utilized as official knowledge (Apple, 1993, p. 1; Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467) within the classroom. Thus, utilizing CRL as a foundational element of curriculum may be an important means of redressing the moral debt and the larger education debt. Furthermore, we are unlikely to recompense the larger education debt, and therefore unlikely to impact high-profile indicators of academic success, without repaying the moral debt, and the education debt is still very much reflected in standardized test scores and other markers of academic success across California and across the nation.

On average, Black, Latinx, and lower income students exhibit lower proficiency rates on state tests and national assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP) than their White and upper income peers (Brighouse et al., 2018, pp. 6, 8; Coleman et al., 1966, pp. 20–21, 218–333; Hanushek et al., 2019, p. 11–12; Kurlaender et al., 2018, pp. 8–11; Reardon, 2013, pp. 10–12; Reardon & Galindo, 2009, pp. 865–879; Reardon et al., 2018, pp. 9–11, 13–14; Reardon et al., 2019, p. 1165; Warren, 2018, p. 8–11; Warren & Lafortune, 2019, pp. 12–13, 15–16). An extensive research literature shows that Black, Latinx, and lower income students typically enter kindergarten with lesser developed academic skills in comparison with their White and upper income classmates, and these deficits persist throughout the duration of their schooling (Brighouse et al. 2018, p. 7; Coleman, 1966, pp. 220, 273; Heckman, 2011, pp. 32–33; Reardon, 2013, pp. 12–13; Reardon & Galindo, 2009, pp. 854, 865; Reardon et al., 2019, p. 1165). Moreover, low standardized tests scores are associated with lower grades, lower high school graduation rates, lower rates of college enrollment and completion, and higher rates of incarceration and adverse health outcomes (Heckman, 2011; Heckman et al. 2006; Murnane et al., 2000).

Latinx students are California's largest testing group, representing 55% of test takers for the 2017 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) (Warren, 2018, p. 10). On the math portion of this assessment, 25% of Latinx students scored at or above standard, whereas 53% of White students (24% of test takers), 73% of Asian students (9% of test takers), 20% of the "other" category (7% of test takers), and 19% of African Americans (5% of test takers) achieved the same designation (Warren, 2018, p. 10). In the 2015 administration of the CAASPP, 18% of Latinx test takers met standards in both English and math, whereas 41% of White students, 57% of Asian and Pacific Islander students, and 14% of Black students met both standards (Kurlaender et al., 2018, p. 9). Clearly, any efforts to settle the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) in California will have to direct significant effort toward Latinx students. In

exploring CRL's ability to access students' funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) and thereby impact learning, this study makes just such an effort.

In any discussion of disproportionality in learning outcomes, it is important recognize that such disparities are partially driven by economic discrimination. Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and certain Pacific Islander communities are more likely to experience multidimensional poverty than their White peers (Reeves et al., 2016), and in California, NAEP scores remain below the national average for all but the most affluent students (Brighouse et al., 2018, p. 6). Lower income students in California score nearly a full grade level behind their national peers (Brighouse et al., 2018, p. 6). The 2017 administration of the CAASPP showed that across all tested grade levels approximately 25% of lower income students scored proficient on the math assessment compared to approximately 54% of higher income students (Warren, 2018, p. 8). The education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) was consistent throughout geographic areas across the state (Warren, 2018, p. 9). In 2018, CAASPP results in English showed progressively higher rates of proficiency in higher income districts and progressively lower rates of proficiency in lower income districts (Warren & Lafortune, 2019, p. 13).

It is also important to acknowledge that settling the education debt is about much more than mere bureaucratic data. Researchers have found significant associations between low test scores and important educational, socioeconomic, and health outcomes. For example, standardized test scores have been shown to be positively correlated to wages (Heckman et al., 2006, pp. 437–439, 442–453; Murnane et al., 2000, pp. 555–557), postsecondary attainment (Heckman et al., 2006, pp. 433–434, 441, 465–466), and negatively correlated to high school dropout (Heckman et al., 2006, pp. 440–441, 462), cigarette smoking (Heckman et al., 2006, pp.

441, 468–469), and incarceration (Heckman et al., 2006, pp. 441, 471). Additionally, K–12 standardized test scores exhibit significant effects on income even when controlling for college completion (Murnane et al., 2000, pp. 558–560). There is evidence that those who attain baccalaureate degrees and also obtained higher K–12 standardized test scores earn higher incomes than those with lower K–12 scores (Murnane et al., 2000, pp. 560–561).

With such consequential associations, best practices for redressing the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) are of paramount importance. In California, rectifying the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) for the largest testing group, Latinx students, offers the greatest opportunity for meaningful change. Latinx students typically exhibit sharp gains in both reading and math during kindergarten and first grade (Reardon & Galindo, 2009, pp. 865–867, 877) and minimal gains in math through the fifth grade (Reardon & Galindo, 2009, p. 856). Latinx students typically stagnate in both subjects past the eighth grade (Reardon & Galindo, 2009, p. 856). With Latinx students and other students of color more likely to experience poverty (Reeves et al., 2016), it is also important to note that achievement gaps for socioeconomically disadvantaged students often grow as they progress through the secondary grades (Warren & Lafortune, 2019, p. 12). Therefore, addressing the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) for California's secondary Latinx students is especially important.

This study explores CRL's potential to pay down the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Specifically, this study examines whether and how CRL has a positive relationship with Latinx middle school students' ability to identify themes in literary texts. Although there are growing literatures on both the effects of CRL on standardized test scores and student preferences for CRL, there are relatively few studies exploring the effects of CRL on day-to-day classwork. Although interventions that can improve standardized test scores are important, so,

too, are interventions that can improve classroom performance and thereby GPA, graduation rates, and other important education and life outcomes.

Purpose of My Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to (a) explore CRL as a means of redressing the education debt, (b) determine whether any differences in scores on a classroom theme assignment featuring CRL or control literature are statistically significant for the overall sample and important student subgroups (female students, male students, students designated as English learners, and students who receive special education services), and (c) utilize interviews with student study participants to garner a better understanding of how students experience CRL in the classroom and potentially use their own lived experiences to make meaning with a culturally relevant text. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does CRL have a positive relationship with Latinx middle school students' ability to identify a theme in a literary text?
2. How do Latinx middle school students connect their lived experiences to characters' experiences in order to identify a theme in a culturally relevant text?

Organization of My Study

My study is organized into five additional chapters. Chapter 2 explains how the componential framework for comprehension theory is used as an organizing framework in my study to explore how students' lived experiences and CRL interact to help students make meaning from fictional texts. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the extant research related to CRL. Chapter 4, addressing Research Question 1, explains the research design and presents the findings for the quantitative portion of my study. Chapter 5, addressing Research Question 2, details the research design and findings for the qualitative portion of my study. My study's

findings are examined further in Chapter 6, which also considers the policy, practice, and future research implications resulting from this study.

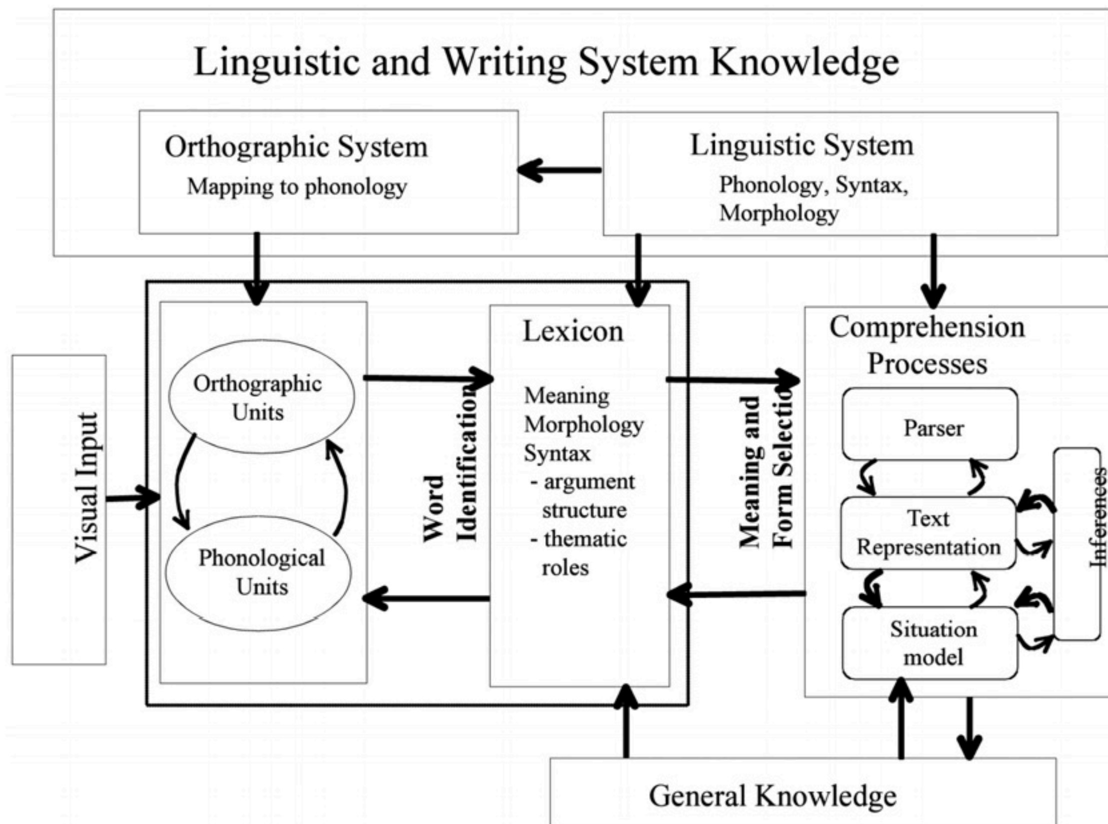
Chapter 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Componential Framework for Comprehension

With the understanding that reading is a complex, dynamic process, I use the componential framework for comprehension (Perfetti & Adlof, 2012) as an organizing framework for exploring how CRL's relationship to Latinx middle school students' ability to identify a theme in a short story. The componential framework for comprehension is a comprehensive model of reading cognition that encompasses elements of basic understanding such as phonemic interpretation, syntactic interpretation, and parsing and higher-level processes such as inference and the use of comprehension strategies. The model also postulates reciprocal relationships between these elements of comprehension. Figure 2.1 depicts the componential framework for comprehension. In the current study, general knowledge, situation models, and inferences are especially important. General knowledge is located in the lower right of Figure 2.2. Situation models and inferences are both located in the center right.

The underlying assumption that drives the current study is that CRL draws on stores of cultural "general knowledge" and thereby facilitates the construction of situation models and aids in inferences in ways that culturally dissonant literature cannot. Additionally, general knowledge meets Perfetti and Adlof's (2012, p. 5) definition of a *pressure point*. Perfetti and Adlof (p. 5) asserted that any inquiry that utilizes their framework should address pressure points in the reading comprehension process. A pressure point (Perfetti & Adlof, p. 5) must meet three criteria: (a) face validity as a fundamental constituent element of comprehension, as opposed to only a correlate, (b) robust variation among individuals, and (c) serviceability as a "malleable" target for reading instruction and interventions. The general knowledge element of the framework meets these requirements in several ways. For example, general knowledge of certain

Figure 2.1 *The Componential Framework for Comprehension*



Note. From Perfetti & Adlof, 2012, p. 4.

cultural practices, say holiday traditions, has face validity as an element of comprehension for any literature that features such holiday rituals because readers can apply that knowledge as a means of interpretation. Moreover, knowledge of and experience with any particular holiday tradition is inherently variable across any group of readers. Finally, schema-building lessons can help build such background knowledge for those who lack it, making background knowledge a malleable target for instruction and curricular interventions. In these ways, general knowledge meets Perfetti and Adlof's (p. 5) requirements as a pressure point that has a clear link to comprehension and can, therefore, also explain how CRL's relationship to comprehension.

Funds of Knowledge

As described above, the funds of knowledge framework refutes deficit paradigms that label minoritized students, their households, and/or their larger cultures as somehow defective and therefore the cause of historical educational "achievement gaps" (González et al., 2011, p. 481–482; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008, p. 45; Moll et al., 1992, p. 134; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 313). Funds of knowledge are reservoirs of essential knowledge that families need to maintain themselves and their welfare (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 314). Working with a sample of Mexican American households, Moll et al. (1992, p. 133) chronicled these examples: ranching and farming, mining, business management, household management, construction, mechanical repair, contemporary medicine, folk medicine, and religion.

In terms of teaching and curriculum, funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) can be deployed as a curricular foundation that allows students to utilize their funds of knowledge as a vehicles of learning while practicing academic skills within traditional disciplines such as mathematics, ELA, social studies and history, and others (González et al., 2011, p. 482; Moll et al., 1992, p. 136; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 330). For example, the teachers working in Moll et al.'s (1992) study noted one particular student's entrepreneurial skills with candy. On family trips to visit relatives in Mexico, this student, Carlos, purchased candies that were popular in Mexico but unavailable in the U.S., brought the candies home, and resold them to friends and neighbors. From organic family activities, the teachers observed in Carlos funds of knowledge pertaining to business management, international trade, and immigration. The teachers also observed that these activities inspired in Carlos a natural desire to add to these funds of knowledge. From this

seed, the teachers created a curricular unit centered on candy. The unit included vocabulary and word categorization, mathematics and graphing, the scientific method, and business practices and advertising posters, among other activities (Moll et al., 1992, pp. 137–139).

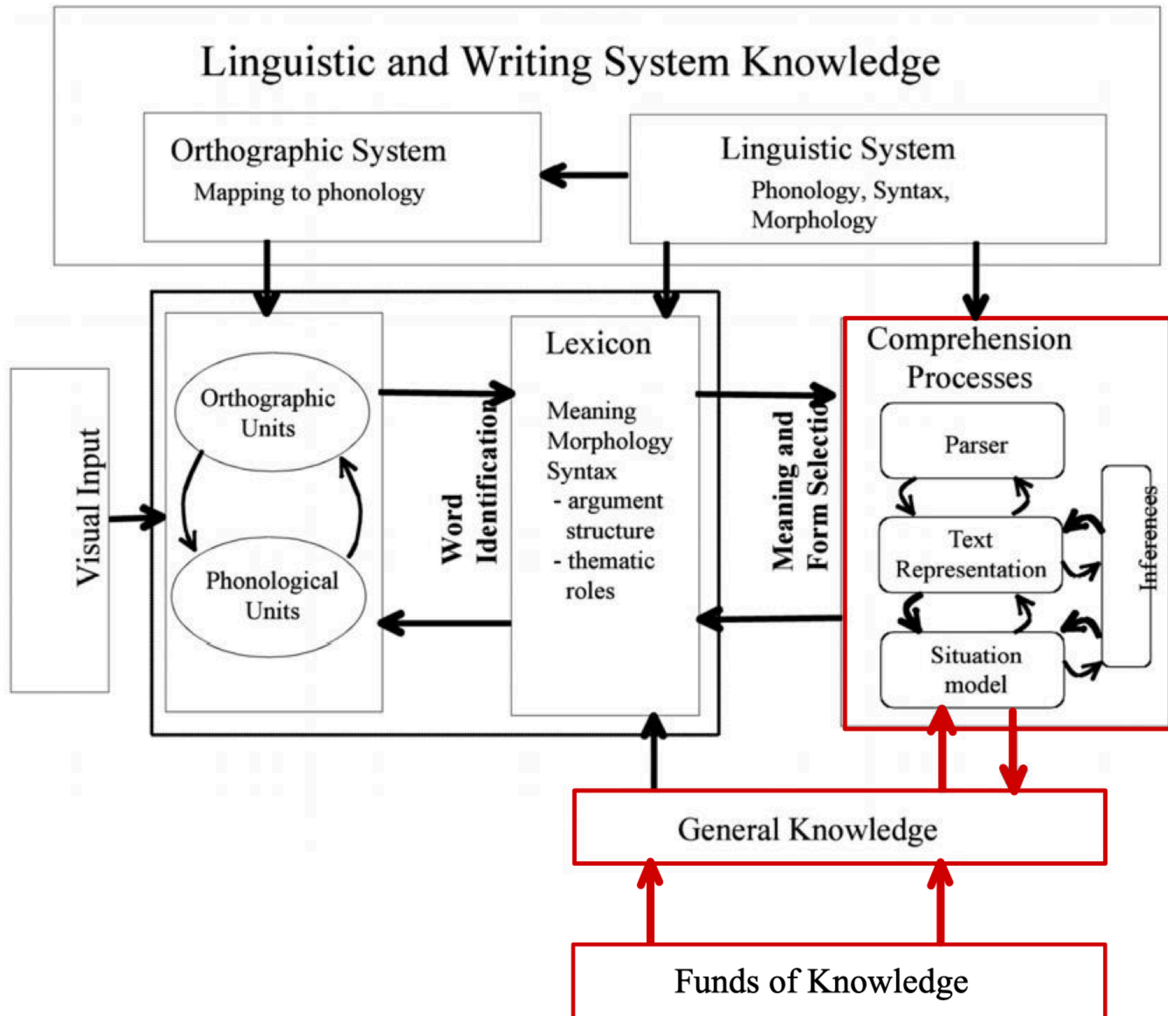
Conceptual Framework

Figure 2.2 illustrates how I combine the concepts in the componential framework for comprehension and funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) and apply these concepts to my study of factors influencing students' ability to determine a theme in a literary text. In this framework, funds of knowledge are a source and constituent element of general knowledge, which has a reciprocal relationship with the comprehension processes. Funds of knowledge build the reader's general knowledge, which in turn fosters the reader's ability to parse sentences into units of meaning, construct mental representations of the text, form a more complete situational model of the extended text, and, finally, make complex inferences about the text's meaning. Though these processes are inextricably linked, the process of making inferences is the most important to this study as determining a theme in a literary text is a complicated process of inferring the text's larger meanings from a constellation of complex text features such as the emotional compulsions that underline characters' actions, the larger plot structure, and metaphor.

Summary

Perfetti and Adlof's (2012) componential framework for comprehension and funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) shaped my thinking about the many factors that influence reading comprehension. Specific to my study, information about complex phenomena such as race relations or class systems derived from personal experiences and mediated through daily cultural

Figure 2.2 *The Componential Framework for Comprehension and Funds of Knowledge*



Note. Adapted from Perfetti & Adlof, 2012, p. 4.

practices potentially impact students' ability to perform complex reading tasks such as interpreting characters' behaviors within specific plot events and combining this complex textual information into a concise theme statement that can be articulated in a paragraph assignment. My study concentrates on the general knowledge and comprehension processes components of Perfetti and Adlof's (2012) componential framework for comprehension and does not address the linguistic and writing system, visual input, and word identification components. However,

Perfetti and Adlof (p. 5) point out that research using the componential framework for comprehension may focus on any “pressure point” within the framework in order for the results to contribute to a better understanding of the factors involved in reading comprehension. As described previously, general knowledge, including information derived from cultural funds of knowledge, is such a pressure point.

Chapter 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

As described above, many researchers have begun with Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990a, 1990b) notion of mirror texts when defining the CRL construct. Bishop (1990a, pp. 5–7) explained that a mirror text reflects the reader's authentic language, histories, traditions, and values. Recent scholarship has added to Bishop's analogy. Clark and Fleming (2019, p. 24) asserted that primary characters in culturally relevant texts remind readers of themselves and their loved ones and the settings resemble their neighborhoods. Delgado (2021, p. 36) suggested that CRL is a tool that can help readers examine their own cultural identities and reiterated that CRL features characters and places that are familiar to readers. Similarly, Koss and Daniel (2017, p. 431) argued that CRL allows readers to see themselves in the books they read. Tovar-Hilbert (2017, p. 21) contended that CRL situates the reader's culture as a conduit through which the reader can make meaning from the text. In sum, in CRL readers can see authentic, contemporaneous representations of their own lives.

Although there is minimal action research (Ferrance, 2000) addressing CRL's relationship to everyday ELA classwork, the extant literature has produced meaningful findings. Investigators are uniting around a stable definition of the CRL construct. Reading comprehension has emerged as an important correlate. A growing number of studies indicate that CRL increases interest in reading. The breadth and scope of CRL research is also proliferating. Recent studies explore a great variety of CRL's relationships and effects—from CRL's ability to facilitate math and science lessons to the emotional impact of writing it yourself. Most relevant to this study, there is also a growing literature exploring CRL's effects for Latinx students.

CRL and Comprehension

Reading Comprehension and Students of Latinx Ancestry

A number of studies have shown a positive relationship between CRL and reading comprehension for elementary students of Latinx ancestry. Marquez and Colby (2021) worked with a sample of fourth-grade, emergent bilingual students who were second- and third-generation immigrants from several Latin countries, predominately Mexico. They found that students were able to utilize their "family values" and their lived experiences to interpret culturally relevant texts (p. 212). For example, students were able to ascertain and express underlying reasons why an elderly character moved in with family. One student explained that because of the character's advanced age she likely needed support in her day-to-day living. Similarly, in another story students were able to articulate the implicit motivations that led a character to consult a *curandera*, a folk healer. In this instance, students explained that *curanderas* are often consulted as an alternative to more expensive doctors and that consulting *curanderas* for medical needs is a common practice in Mexico. A unique aspect of this study was Marquez and Colby's contention that CRL fostered students' empathy for others. Specifically, Marquez and Colby asserted that the CRL featured in the study bridged generational gaps, allowing the second- and third-generation students to connect with the experiences of their first-generation elders (p. 213). Through their work with the culturally relevant texts, the students were also able to access the lives of Latinx individuals whose ancestry and experiences differed from their own (p. 214).

Clark and Fleming (2019) explored the relationship between CRL and comprehension for a sample of predominantly Black and Latinx students ranging from pre-K to third grade. Clark and Fleming (2019, pp. 37–39) cited students' ability to ascertain and meaningfully discuss

themes as an indication of their deeper comprehension. Ms. Nava, a teacher who led an emergent bilingual first-grade classroom in a school with a large majority of Latinx students, noted that students were able to apply cultural knowledge to texts and access themes about family traditions. For example, students were able to discuss how intergenerational storytelling was an important family custom that they shared with the characters in the story (p. 37). A distinctive feature of Clark and Fleming's work was the exceptionally young age at which students were able to meaningfully engage with CRL. Ms. Nava's first-grade students effectuated salient interpretations of the texts, but another teacher, Mr. Anders, was able to demonstrate similar abilities with kindergarten students (pp. 37–38). In this case, students were able to apply their experiences with their own grandparents to the texts as a means of discussing themes about the hardships of aging and the composition of households, namely, the need for older family members to move in with adult children and their families.

Working with a sample of third-grade emergent bilingual Latinx students, Ebe (2010) found students demonstrated higher levels of comprehension when they exhibited fewer miscues, that is, decoding errors, while reading culturally relevant stories aloud and fewer inaccuracies when retelling those stories. An especially interesting facet of this study is that the students rated the cultural relevance of the stories. Other researchers have also argued that only readers themselves can determine cultural relevance (Delgado, 2021, p. 36; Piazza and Duncan, 2012, p. 246; Scullin, 2020, p. 98), yet in the majority of the studies featured in this literature review the cultural relevance of the featured literature was determined either by the researchers or the teachers participating in the study. In order to facilitate the students' assessment of the stories, Paulson and Freeman (2003, pp. 27–29) created a cultural relevance rubric comprised of eight questions with four-point Likert responses. The rubric allows students to evaluate how congruous

a story is to their own lives in terms of characters, setting, timeliness, language, and plot events. Subsequent studies (Ebe, 2010, 2012; Rodríguez, 2009) have utilized this measurement tool. Ebe (2010, pp. 202–208) was able to compare students' miscues and retelling errors with a culturally relevant story against a less relevant story, though the stories matched in terms of reading difficulty. Another significant characteristic of Ebe's (2010, pp. 195–196) study is that she interpreted readers' use of funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) through the well-known framework of schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). In this interpretation, funds of knowledge are the "diverse backgrounds" and "different ideas about the world" that readers bring to the text that are then used to make meaning from the text (Ebe, 2010, p. 195). Ebe (2010, p. 195) posits that this process specifically draws on "culturally acquired knowledge." Although "culturally acquired knowledge" (Ebe, 2010, p. 195) may not align in all respects with Moll's (1992, p. 133) assertion that funds of knowledge sustain the "functioning and well-being" of minoritized individuals and households, the two concepts are closely allied. As Moll (1992) explains, funds of knowledge pertaining to religion, medicinal care, and vocational expertise and opportunities are accumulated and exchanged through social and professional connections—that is, they are "culturally developed" (p. 133).

Rodríguez (2009) explored the role of CRL in an elementary English as a second language (ESL) setting. Working with a sample of preservice ESL teachers, Rodríguez (2009) paired each participant with an emergent bilingual student of Latinx ancestry ranging in age from 4 to 11 (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 17). Each participant selected a culturally relevant text to read and study with their student (Rodríguez, 2009, pp. 17–18). Participants used Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric to select a book, and the students completed the

rubric after reading was finished (Rodríguez, 2009, pp. 17–18). Results showed that students indicated 77% of the selected books were in fact culturally relevant (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 17). In terms of reading comprehension, participants suggested students were better able to apply preexisting background knowledge to the texts, and this facilitated deeper understanding of the texts (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 19). Participants explained that students demonstrated their comprehension in their ability to compare and contrast the characters against themselves, connect plot events to their own lived experiences, make predictions, and apply their own cultural traditions to interpreting the texts (Rodríguez, 2009, pp. 18–19).

Other studies have shown that CRL has a positive relationship to reading comprehension for secondary Latinx students. Ebe (2012) reported similar findings in a later study working with emergent bilingual Latinx seventh-graders. In this study, the students again exhibited fewer decoding errors (pp. 189–195) and could more accurately recount the details and events of the stories (pp. 188–189). Additionally, Ebe again framed the cultural knowledge students brought to a text through the lens of schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983), again linking the well-established framework to CRL and funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). This study also provided further validation for Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric, providing researchers and practitioners a means of allowing readers themselves to rate the cultural relevance of a particular text.

Also working with a sample of seventh-grade Latinx students, Jiménez and Gámez (1996, pp. 89–90) demonstrated students were better able to recognize and articulate the processes of their own reading practice, often referred to as metacognitive ability (Baker & Brown, 1980). In this study, students selected a text from a selection of CRL and worked with the authors to

engage in “think-alouds,” a metacognitive strategy in which readers narrate their thought processes while reading aloud (Wade, 1990). Jiménez and Gámez reported that throughout the duration of their study students exhibited increases in both reading fluency and their ability to perform metacognitive exercises. Jiménez and Gámez also reported that as reading skill increased, students also communicated increases in motivation to read (p. 89, p. 90).

Li and Luo (2017) worked with a sample of 11th- and 12th-grade emergent bilingual Latinx students in a study that utilized CRL to explore translanguaging processes. Translanguaging refers to a dual-language individual’s ability to draw from their “full linguistic repertoire when they encounter comprehension challenges” (p. 146). A translanguaging lens argues that students do not “code-switch” between their first and second languages but instead simultaneously and fluidly draw from all their language resources to meet their speaking, reading, and writing needs (p. 142). In this study, Li and Luo found working with CRL through translanguaging fostered rapport between teacher and students and facilitated two primary reading comprehension practices: collaborative reading and reciprocal teaching (p. 146). With collaborative reading, the students read the text, in this case *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, in both English and Spanish and compared the two versions (p. 149). The student then debated the meaning of what they had read, and, as with the reading, the discussion fluidly revolved from English to Spanish and vice versa (p. 151). The students also frequently discussed cognates they encountered in the texts and relied on their knowledge of Spanish to augment their comprehension in English (p. 152). With reciprocal teaching, students helped both each other and their teachers build comprehension (p. 153). With cognates, students explained the related words to those who had not seen the connection. As the students’ ancestries were linked to different Latin American nations, they shared with each other the nuanced variations of

meaning behind the words and phrases they encountered. The students also instructed their teachers in the same fashion, thereby extending the reciprocal teaching in another direction. Overall, Li and Lou's study provides important insights as to how students work with CRL and the cultural vehicles that complement comprehension when students work with CRL as opposed to culturally distant works.

Reading Comprehension and Other Student Groups

There is also evidence that CRL is associated with higher levels of reading comprehension for student of other ancestries. As previously discussed, Clark and Fleming (2019) explored the relationship between CRL and comprehension for a sample of pre-K to third-grade Latinx students, but their study also included classrooms that served predominantly Black students. Again, Clark and Fleming (pp. 37–39) cited students' ability to discern and articulate themes as an indication of their higher level comprehension. Ms. Carter, a teacher who led a second-grade classroom with all African American students, noted students were able to apply experiential knowledge to interpret settings featured in CRL and then utilize those interpretations to derive themes (pp. 34–35). Ms. Carter referred to this method of comprehension as "text-to-self connections" (p. 35). Clark and Fleming suggested that using "sociocultural" knowledge in this way is an indication of higher comprehension. Another teacher, Ms. Howard, who taught a kindergarten class with African American students, reported similar findings. Ms. Howard indicated her young students were better able to independently discuss the text than what she had experienced previously (pp. 32, 38). Ms. Howard also indicated the issues that students addressed were more complex. For example, through the vehicle of the text, her students explored their thoughts and feelings about dilapidated buildings and parks in the neighborhoods in which they lived. Ms. Howard also suggested that her

students' work with CRL created opportunities for her to learn about her students' personal lives and thereby form meaningful connections with her students (p. 37, p. 42).

Council et al. (2019, p. 167) found that a sample of Black second-grade students working with CRL through lessons administered via a computer software application increased their reading comprehension as measured by reading fluency scores on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills–Next (DIBELS Next) assessment. Council et al.'s study was unique in that students experienced the CRL through the self-regulated computer software application Reading RACES (Relevant and Culturally Engaging Stories). Through the Reading RACES application, students listened to texts read aloud, read independently, read with timing goals, and took fluency assessments (pp. 163–164). Council et al. proctored an initial screener administration of the DIBLS Next and selected five students who scored "below benchmark" or "well below benchmark" on oral reading fluency to participate in the study. Council et al. also proctored interim and summative administrations of the DIBELS Next to measure growth (p. 167–171). The students exhibited oral reading fluency growth ranging from 37.5% to 131.3% throughout the duration of the study, which spanned the school year.

Camangian (2013) conducted a case study with Tatiana, a young African American woman in the 12th grade. Camangian established CRL's ability to promote postsecondary levels of comprehension. In this case study, Camangian utilized what he termed "five levels of analysis to foster critical thinking and academic writing" (pp. 6–7): the *explicit* level, the *implicit* level, the *theoretical* level, the *interpretive* level, and the *applicable* level. At the explicit level readers glean facts and direct information; at the implicit level inferences are made; at the theoretical level philosophical or conceptual frameworks are applied to the text; at the interpretive level emotional responses to the text are explored; and at the applicable level readers explore how

knowledge taken from the text can be transformed into action. Through the five levels of analysis, Tatiana was able to critically read and interrogate *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. She also wrote an essay synthesizing her work with these texts. The current study also explores CRL's relationship to higher level comprehension, namely its role in students' ability to determine a theme in a literary text, and Tatiana's work with these complex texts speaks to CRL's potential in advanced academics.

Finally, Tatum (2000) asserted that combining CRL with familiar literacy strategies led to increased state test scores for a group of African American eighth-grade students enrolled in a Chicago public school. Tatum's inquiry is noteworthy for its focus on state tests. Tatum's study involved rigorous comprehension activities such as syllabication analysis (pp. 57–59), dictation and spelling (p. 59), vocabulary development (pp. 59–60), cooperative reading (pp. 61–62), and writing instruction (p. 62), and this work was implemented through CRL (pp. 60–61). Tatum explained that CRL "was incorporated into the instructional framework to strengthen cultural competence, nurture students' identities, and increase their reading achievement" (p. 60). Tatum went on to say that culturally relevant texts, including nonfiction texts, "were selected to give students the opportunity to use their explicit skill development in meaningful ways" (p. 60). As is the object of the current study, CRL played a double role in Tatum's work: it validated students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences as "official knowledge" (Apple, 1993, p. 1; Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467), but it also served as a vehicle of explicit ELA instruction. At the conclusion of this intensive work, 25 of the 29 students who participated in the study earned a "minimum grade-level equivalent of 7.0 on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills," a requirement for promotion to high school in Chicago public schools as the time of the study (Tatum, 2000, p. 63).

Several students scored "well beyond this minimum," whereas all students had scored "several years below grade level" at the beginning of the study (Tatum, 2000, p. 63).

CRL and Interest in Reading

Reading Interest and Students of Latinx Ancestry

Several studies have found that CRL increases interest in reading for both elementary and secondary students. At the elementary level, Marquez and Colby (2021) found that a sample of emergent bilingual Latinx fourth-grade students were able to utilize their cultural knowledge to interpret CRL, as previously discussed, but Marquez and Colby also found that CRL influenced students' motivation to read and promoted their engagement with the texts (pp. 212, 215–216). Marquez and Colby argued that CRL can foster a "sense of belonging" for students (p. 212) and that the students' work with the texts accessed their personal connections to the stories and characters (p. 210). It is perhaps these factors that promote engagement with the texts and enthusiasm for reading in general, as these factors may countervail "the challenges of ethnocentric mono-culturalism" that often pervade curricula (p. 216).

Rodríguez's (2009) findings regarding CRL and comprehension for elementary students of Latinx ancestry are discussed above as well, and, similarly, Rodríguez reported that CRL also increased students' interest in reading. In this study, Rodríguez asked preservice teachers to write essays reflecting on their work with students and CRL. From these essays, Rodríguez derived five codes regarding the benefits of culturally relevant texts: connections, communication, engagement, empowerment, and motivation (p. 18). Of these, engagement and motivation addressed students' interest in reading. Participants explained that students demonstrated their interest in the texts through increased attention and focus, by asking questions, by sharing their

own experiences that mirrored the those of the characters, by producing quality work on accompanying assignments, and by directly stating that they wanted to read more (p. 19).

Previously, I reviewed Clark and Fleming's (2019) work for its insights into the relationship between CRL and reading comprehension for both Latinx and Black students, but their study also addressed CRL's relationship to reading interest. Again, Clark and Fleming worked with a group of teachers leading classrooms ranging from pre-K to the third grade in schools with large majority populations of Black and Latinx students. Respecting their findings in Latinx-majority classrooms, teachers reported that increased levels of interest when reading CRL manifested in several ways. During class discussions, students shared more frequently and offered more detailed commentary on culturally relevant texts (p. 39), and students also expressed disappointment when discussions were concluded in order to move on to other lessons. During read-alouds, students often asked teachers to reread the culturally relevant texts. Teachers also suggested students were more attentive during lessons that featured CRL (p. 40) and that they showed their heightened interest by researching characters and other aspects of the texts, unprompted and on their own time. For example, with the help of her parents, one student found an article on a mythical monster featured in a story and brought it to school to share with her classmates.

At the secondary level, Feger (2006) worked with a class of ninth- and 10th-grade emergent bilingual Latinx students with ancestries linked to several Caribbean, Central American, and South American nations. In this article, Feger detailed a collection of culturally relevant texts utilized in her classroom and the academic exercises paired with them, as well as her students' reactions to the lessons. Feger argued that CRL increased her students' enthusiasm for reading (pp. 18, 19) and contributed to their success with curricular activities such as reading

journals (p. 18), written critical reflections (p. 19), and text-based art projects (p. 19). Feger also suggested that the grammar-intensive ESL textbooks she had previously utilized in her teaching were useful only to newcomer students and that the culturally relevant literary and nonfiction texts allowed students to push past these rudimentary lessons and access higher level learning (p. 18). Feger's inquiry is also noteworthy in its focus on culturally relevant nonfiction texts. Although research exploring culturally relevant nonfiction does exist, the overwhelming majority of research featured in this literature review, as well as the object of the current study, is fictional texts. Considering the Common Core State Standards' focus on informational and argumentative texts, future research should address this imbalance.

Reading Interest and Other Student Groups

Regarding elementary students, Cartledge et al. (2016, pp. 408–410) reported a sample of Black first- and second-grade students assigned higher likability ratings to fictional texts with plot events and characters that reflected their own lived experiences and the people they knew and also to expository texts that paralleled their lives in similar ways. A particularly notable aspect of this study was the method of ensuring the cultural relevance of the featured texts. The students, their parents, and their teachers completed questionnaires that were designed to capture students' interests and activities, and the students were also interviewed to learn about their favorite foods, TV shows, video games, and sports (p. 405). Researchers then generated fictional and expository passages that utilized these attributes of students' identities, which were deployed as the intervention texts, and another set of passages that were culturally dissonant, which were deployed as the control texts. Although Cartledge et al. did not find that cultural relevance was linked to correct words read per minutes, a comprehension measure (407–408), they did find that students rated the culturally relevant texts as more likable (pp. 408–410). Students rated passages

that featured familiar activities, characters, or historical figures most highly (pp. 408–410). Another distinct facet of Cartledge et al.'s study was that students also indicated they especially enjoyed passages that featured altruism or helped them to learn something new (p. 408–412). Students tended to highly rate passages that featured characters helping one another, such as one character teaching another to dance (p. 411), or sharing, such as one character sharing food with another (p. 415). Students also expressed a preference for passages that exposed them to something interesting and unfamiliar, for example, how peanuts are grown or how djembe drums are used (pp. 412–413).

Regarding secondary students and CRL, Piazza and Duncan (2012, p. 242) conducted qualitative case studies in which they found two 14-year-old African American boys were able to authentically engage with texts beyond pragmatic academic tasks when they found the texts culturally and personal relevant. This study is distinctive in its focus on students with incarcerated parents. Piazza and Duncan argued that students with an incarcerated parent often exhibit substandard educational outcomes and are more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system themselves (p. 230). Piazza and Duncan also explained that reading achievement is a strong predictor of academic success and future incarceration (p. 230). Thus, their study explored CRL's potential as a mitigating force that can raise reading success and curb these risk factors. One of these case studies, a young man identified by the pseudonym Sam, is particularly helpful in understanding CRL's relationship to reading interest. Sam shared that he sometimes had a "hard time" with reading and that he also felt targeted for disciplinary actions (p. 241). Consequently, Sam stated that he did not enjoy school. However, when researchers provided Sam with a personally relevant nonfiction text, a newspaper article about a shooting in which his brother was involved, Sam "automatically assumed a critical stance with the text" (pp. 242–243).

Sam read carefully and slowly. He “questioned the content and the presentation of ideas” (p. 242). He interrogated the evidence and the accuracy of the article. That is, Sam became highly engaged and interested in the reading.

Scullin (2020, pp. 92–95) found that a sample of eight African American boys in the eighth grade articulated a greater interest in reading when literature featured characters with whom they shared ethnicity, age, personality characteristics, and experiences. In an especially poignant disclosure, one participant shared how he enjoyed seeing Black people in his “mind’s eye” as he read the literature featured in the study, whereas he had previously always seen White people as he read (p. 93). In another revealing exchange, the participants discussed the mismatch between the characters’ race in the books they typically read in school and the racial composition of their class (p. 93). The participants observed that a large majority of their class was Black, but that they had never read any books with Black characters and that their teacher seemed indifferent to their preferences. Participants also indicated that characters with strong moral convictions (p. 93), ages similar to their own (p. 94), and plots that featured “real world” experiences (pp. 94–95) were important aspects that increased their interest in reading. Another important finding was that the participants wanted to read more books that featured Black males as the main character, but they were unable to find any at their school library (p. 95). After reading the literature featured in the study, several participants took initiative and asked their school’s library staff to help them find similar texts they could read on their own, but they were unable to find any. One participant explained, “They only have books about Asian and White people, nothing about us. Why do they do that?”

McCullough (2013) explored whether interest or prior knowledge was a stronger indicator of comprehension for 117 eighth-grade African American students. As previously

discussed, McCullough argued that students' preexisting stores of culture-based vocabulary and knowledge constituted a cache of "culturally relevant prior knowledge" that was associated with higher levels of comprehension when reading culturally relevant texts. However, although interest was not a strong predictor of comprehension, students in this study did assign higher interest ratings to the stories they found most culturally relevant (p. 417). Students used Likert scales to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "I enjoyed reading this story"; "I liked the main character in the story"; and "I would like to read this story in my spare time." The African American participants consistently rated the stories that featured African American characters and culturally familiar storylines as more enjoyable than the stories that featured Chinese American and European American characters and storylines.

Other Facets of CRL

Other Facets of CRL and Students of Latinx Ancestry

Additional studies in the CRL literature have addressed various other aspects of the CRL construct. Huerta and Riojas-Cortez (2011) demonstrated how working with CRL supports literacy practices that are an organic part of parenting for many Mexican American and Mexican immigrant families. In this study, parents created journals (notebooks featuring pictures, key vocabulary, explanations of uses, etc.) about medicinal herbs commonly used in their households (p. 40). While working with their children to create these journals, parents regularly engaged in literacy practices such as scaffolding and modeling (pp. 41–42), content-specific vocabulary development (p. 42), phonemic awareness (p. 42), and interactive writing (pp. 42–43). Huerta and Riojas-Cortez noted that these literacy processes are both developmentally appropriate and commonly practiced in early childhood classrooms (p. 42). Additionally, Huerta and Riojas-Cortez observed that the focus on medicinal herbs commonly used by the participants made the

literacy work authentic (pp. 41, 43). While Huerta and Riojas-Cortez illustrated how CRL accesses existing funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) and fosters reading comprehension and literacy, which is a key focus of the current study, they also showed that CRL can validate parents' intrinsic literacy practices with their children.

Newman (2012) explained how funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) and culturally relevant model texts can serve as the basis of writing instruction. Conducted in south Texas, this methodological study details a unit of writing lessons that utilized CRL as model texts for the student authors. René Saldaña's *The Jumping Tree* and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, both of which feature Mexican American protagonists, facilitated the students' creative writing processes. In the initial reading lessons, students analyzed a selection of Saldaña's (2001) short stories and Cisneros's (1984) vignettes in order to discern each writer's "writing territories" (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007, pp. 48–49). Writing territories are stores of important, heartfelt memories and knowledge from which writers build their texts (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007, p. 48). As Newman (2012, p. 26) explained, "writing territories are writers' funds of knowledge transformed into story." After exploring the writing territories of the various CRL mentor texts, students then used graphic organizers to access their own funds of knowledge and develop their own writing territories. As the lesson cycle concluded, students shared and discussed the CRL they had authored. Additionally, students wrote reflective essays explicating their thoughts and experiences of composing creative texts. In this way, both the model CRL and the student-authored CRL facilitated students' expository writing. Although the current study and the

majority of CRL literature focuses on reading comprehension, Newman's work illustrates CRL's role in developing diverse writing skills.

As previously described, Marquez and Colby (2021) reported that a sample of fourth-grade emergent bilingual of Latinx ancestry CRL increased comprehension (pp. 211–212), primarily through their ability to utilize their cultural knowledge and experiences to interpret stories. However, Marquez and Colby also detailed CRL's ability to foster sociopolitical awareness (pp. 212–214). The students demonstrated expanded sociopolitical awareness through their ability to connect characters and plot events to their own lives as well as contemporary politics (pp. 212–214). For example, while reading a fictional story of immigrant life on the Texas border, *Friends From the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado* by Gloria Anzaldúa, students were able to draw parallels between the story and their own lived experiences. They were also able to move beyond the story and its connections to themselves and discuss immigration issues more broadly. Students commented on the motivations that generally underlie immigration and on current immigration policies such as the Trump administration's efforts to build a wall along the U.S.–Mexico border.

Verden and Hickman (2009) illustrated how CRL can play a purposeful role in behavior interventions for a variety of students, including students of Latinx ancestry. In this action research study, middle school students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders participated in a 16-week read-aloud behavioral intervention centered around "experientially relevant literature," that is, CRL that featured "topics and themes similar to those…students encounter on a daily basis in their personal and school lives, as well as in their community" (p. 3). As the teacher read aloud, students drew pictures of the characters, took notes on significant plot events, or simply listened (p. 8). They then engaged in group discussions and individual

journaling activities centered on the text (p. 9). As the texts featured characters and events similar to the students and their lived experiences, students were able to use the characters as positive role models (pp. 9–10), reflect on the emotions and other contributing factors behind their own behavioral choices (pp. 10–11), and develop self-awareness and share these insights with others (pp. 11–13). The current study explores students' ability to determine a theme in a culturally relevant text. In the lessons that underpin the current study, I have defined a theme as an idea, lesson, or message about the world and how the world works. Themes in literary works are typically focused on how human beings experience the world and make their way in it. Verden and Hickman's study speaks to the personal utility of such literary, academic work.

Regarding culturally relevant nonfiction texts, Colwell (2019) argued that adopting diverse, intentionally selected readings for history, science, and mathematics instruction facilitates culturally responsive learning, places value on minority perspectives, and fosters better disciplinary literacy. In this methodological article, Colwell presented and explicated the use of the Disciplinary Text Selection Table (p. 633), a tool to help teachers, administrators, and other practitioners select CRL for a variety of students. The table features examples of different text types and questions to consider when selecting culturally relevant readings for history, science, mathematics, and ELA instruction. Colwell (pp. 632, 635–636) also contended that working with culturally relevant texts aided students in creating culturally relevant nonfiction texts of their own . As students utilized assigned readings, they completed assignments that explored issues that are important to their communities and relevant to their own lives. Colwell offers an interesting contrast to the current study as my focus is on culturally relevant fictional texts, and, indeed, Colwell pointed out that the majority of CRL research is in fact focused on literary texts (p. 632). Cowell's study highlights the depth and potential of the CRL construct.

Summary

Extant research has indicated that CRL increases comprehension and interest in reading for Latinx students as well as other student groups. Additionally, current research has demonstrated that CRL can support home literacy practices, facilitate writing instruction, foster sociopolitical awareness, underpin behavior interventions, and promote disciplinary literacy. However, despite this growing body of literature, conspicuous gaps in CRL research remain. Few studies have addressed how socioeconomic status might change CRL's relationships to the various education outcomes that have been studied. A greater variety of education outcomes need to be explored. A robust collection of confirmation studies has not yet materialized. Perhaps most importantly, as recounted above, far too few studies have incorporated participants' views on the cultural relevance of the literature they are asked to read.

Chapter 4: RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Introduction

The purpose of the quantitative section of my mixed-methods study is to analyze data from a paragraph assignment in order to determine if CRL, that is, literature that reflects readers' lived experiences and verbal expression, has a positive relationship to Latinx middle school students' ability to identify a theme in a literary text. This quantitative phase of my study also sets the stage and provides context for the qualitative phase, in which I conducted semistructured (Lichtman, 2013, p. 191) individual interviews (Lichtman, 2013, p. 189–190). This chapter, addressing Research Question 1, tests for statistically significant differences between the scores of students working with CRL and those working with a more "canonical" control literature, in this case a text written by a White author featuring presumably White characters living in geographically and temporally distant settings. I present my study's quantitative methodology and the results of the quantitative data analysis in this chapter, which includes the following sections: dataset and sample, measures, materials, data analytic plan and results, and summary.

Datasets and Sample

To investigate Research Question 1, I created a dataset from student scores on a theme paragraph assignment. The scores were generated from a grading rubric I created based on the California Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts 6–12 standard RL.7.2, that is, reading literature, seventh grade, standard 2 (California Department of Education [CDE], 2013, p. 47). The standard reads, "Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text." The grading rubric captures students' proficiency with the first element of this standard, the ability to determine a theme and track its development. I used this grading rubric to evaluate the

paragraphs that students wrote and in which they explained the theme they saw in the respective stories, either the invention story or the control story. Their scores on this assignment yielded the dataset I needed to compare students' ability to determine a theme in a culturally relevant text versus their ability to do so with a text that is culturally dissonant.

My investigation of Research Question 1 also features a dataset designed to capture participants' self-identified ancestral backgrounds. As a first step toward ensuring the cultural relevance of the intervention story and the lack thereof of the control story, I had to first ascertain the participants' cultural heritage. To this end, I created a survey through which students could indicate their cultural identity. However, determining cultural relevance is not a simple matter of matching readers' ethnicity to that of the characters. Individual readers must determine the cultural relevance of any particular literary work themselves (Delgado, 2021, p. 36; Piazza and Duncan, 2012, p. 246; Scullin, 2020, p. 98). As such, this preliminary step toward determining the cultural relevance of the literature featured in this study required an additional dataset through which students could more directly share their perceptions of the intervention and control stories.

In order to confirm that participants did in fact find the intervention story culturally relevant and the control story culturally dissonant, my investigation of Research Question 1 features a third and final dataset designed to capture students' interpretation of the literature featured in this study. This dataset provides context for the scores on the theme paragraph assignment and confirms whether or not students found the intervention story culturally relevant and the control story culturally dissonant. Participants completed a modified version of Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric (Ebe, 2010, pp. 197–198; Ebe, 2012, pp. 182–184; Rodríguez, 2009, pp. 16–17, 25). My modified version of the rubric consists of

seven questions with responses recorded on 4-point Likert scales. The rubric is designed to capture readers' assessment of each story's congruity to their own lives in terms of their identity, the people they know, the places they have lived or visited, speech patterns, and lived experiences. Like Rodríguez (2009, p. 17), I used a cut score of 20 to determine the respective texts' cultural relevance. If a student scored a text at 20 or higher, I concluded that the student found the text culturally relevant, and, conversely, if a student scored a text at 19 or lower, I concluded that the student did not find the text culturally relevant. This cultural relevance rubric furnished the dataset I needed to validate the cultural relevance of the intervention story and the cultural dissonance of the control story.

The sample under study comprised four ELA classes of seventh-grade students who self-identified as Mexican American or with other terms indicating Mexican ancestry, mixed Mexican ancestry, or, in a very few cases, ancestries connected to other Central American nationalities. All students in this sample attended Fairview Middle School[1] (FMS) in Fairview, California. FMS enrolls seventh- and eighth-grade students, is a Title I school, and serves a majority Latinx population. In total, the analytic sample, *N*, consisted of 79 participants. As this study is action research (Ferrance, 2000), the four classes from which I built the sample are those I was assigned during master scheduling, excluding a single elective class that did not utilize ELA 7 curriculum. Two of the four classes, first and third periods, completed the intervention curriculum, $n_1 = 37$, and two, fourth and sixth periods, completed the control curriculum, $n_2 = 42$. Importantly, students who did not indicate Mexican ancestry were excluded from the sample. As this study

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[1] Fairview, Fairview Middle School, and Fairview Unified School District are pseudonyms.

explores the effects of cultural relevance on reading comprehension, the intervention story had to reflect the cultural identities of the students in the sample, whereas the control story had to contrast with their cultural identities.

Measures

Measure of Reading Comprehension

The purpose of my study was to determine if and how CRL has a positive relationship to Latinx middle school students' reading comprehension as reflected in their ability to identify a theme in a literary text, and, as described above, I used a conventional grading rubric to measure students' aptitude with this skill. Again, I designed the grading rubric to primarily evaluate students' mastery of California Common Core State Standard RL.7.2 (reading literature, seventh grade, standard 2), as this standard details the grade-level benchmark for determining a theme in a literary text. The grading rubric reflects five proficiency levels: "advanced," "proficient+," "proficient," "below standard," and "F." The grading rubric also features an additional designation: "no score," for students who did not make a valid attempt at determining a theme. I typically utilize the no score designation for students who do not turn in the assignment or turn it in blank. Occasionally, students will transcribe a passage of the source text in what appears to be an attempt to mask their difficulty with the assignment, and I utilize the no score designation for these cases as well. Very rarely students copy work from a neighbor or plagiarize an internet source, and I give these students a traditional zero on the assignment; that is, they receive no points for the assignment. As this type of cheating is exceptionally rare (most assignments for my courses are completed in class without computers), the zero designation is not featured on the rubric. In these cases, I typically write "0 - plagiarized" across the rubric. Although students who attained a no score did not genuinely attempt to find a theme in the respective texts, I included

this designation in this measure and the resulting dataset because it may capture CRL's ability to hold students' interest and their consequent motivation to complete assignments based on CRL.

The grading rubric also measures students' proficiency with selecting a quotation from the text to illustrate the theme they have identified and their ability to use a standardized citation system for their chosen quotation. I designed the quotation element of the grading rubric to evaluate students' mastery of California Common Core State Standard W.7.2.b (writing, seventh grade, standard 2b). This grading criterion helps to measure the depth of students' grasp of the theme they have identified. If students are able to select a quotation from the text that is authentically illustrative of the theme, they have thereby demonstrated their understanding of the relationship between the characters, the action of the story, and the theme. I designed the citation element of the grading rubric to evaluate students' mastery of California Common Core State Standard W.7.8 (writing, seventh grade, standard 8). The formatting system utilized at FMS is the Modern Language Association's citation system.

Lastly, in the dataset that this measure produced, I reported the percentage scores and not the point scores indicated on the grading rubric. This simplifies the data that this measure captures and has the added benefit of presenting the results in percentages that readers are used to associating with traditional A, B, C, D, and F grades. As constructed, this measure yields scores ranging from 100 to 40. Figure 4.1 presents the measure used to capture students' reading comprehension as reflected in their ability to determine a theme in a literary text.

Survey of Students' Ancestry

In order to assess participants' potential cultural connections with the intervention literature and their lack thereof with the control literature, I designed a survey through which students could self-identify and share their ancestral heritage. To design this measure, I began

Figure 4.1 *Measure of Participants' Ability to Determine a Theme in a Literary Text*

Grading Rubric:
Writing about Theme in a Literary Text

Learning Goal: Determine a theme in a literary text (RL.7.2).					
• All "proficient+" criteria are met, *and* • when explaining the quotation the student selected to illustrate the theme, student related the theme to a real-world example.	• All "proficient" criteria are met, *and* • the theme is carefully stated and free of all spelling and grammar errors.	• Student stated a theme, *and* • it is related to the characters and the action of the story.	• Student stated a theme, *but* • it is vague and only somewhat related to the characters and the action of the story.	• Student attempted to determine a theme, *but* • did not actually do so (statement was not universal and/or it did not represent a lesson or a bit of knowledge about the world that could be drawn from the characters and the action of the story).	• Student did not turn in the assignment *or* • turned it in blank *or* • copied from the source text in what appears to be an attempt to mask difficulties with the assignment.
A / Advanced	**B / Proficient+**	**C / Proficient**	**D / Below Standard**	**F**	**No Score**
100% **(125/125pts)**	**85%** **(106.25/125pts)**	**75%** **(93.75/125pts)**	**65%** **(81.25/125pts)**	**55%** **(68.75/125pts)**	**40%** **(50/125pts)**
Learning Goal: Develop a topic with relevant details, quotations, or other information and examples (W.7.2.b).					
• All "proficient+" criteria are met, *and* • student used a second quotation that is equally related to the theme.	• All "proficient" criteria are met, *and* • it includes a quotation introduction and all punctuation and quotation marks are used correctly.	• Student selected a quotation from the text to illustrate the theme, *and* • it is related to the theme.	• Student selected a quotation from the text to illustrate the theme, *but* • it is only somewhat related to the theme.	• Student attempted to select a quotation selected from the text to illustrate the theme, *but* • it is random and unrelated to the theme.	• Student did not turn in the assignment *or* • turned it in blank *or* • copied from the source text in what appears to be an attempt to mask difficulties with the assignment.
A / Advanced	**B / Proficient+**	**C / Proficient**	**D / Below Standard**	**F**	**No Score**
100% **(125/125pts)**	**85%** **(106.25/125pts)**	**75%** **(93.75/125pts)**	**65%** **(81.25/125pts)**	**55%** **(68.75/125pts)**	**40%** **(50/125pts)**
Learning Goal: Follow a standard format system for citations (W.7.8).					
• All "proficient+" criteria are met, *and* • there are also no mistakes with author's name, page # and/or punctuation for the second quotation.	• Work includes an MLA parenthetical citation, *and* • there are no mistakes with author's name, page # and/or punctuation.	• Work includes an MLA parenthetical citation, *but* • there are 1-2 mistakes with author's name, page # and/or punctuation.	• Work includes an MLA parenthetical citation, *but* • there are more than two mistakes with author's name, page # and/or punctuation.	• Work **does not include an MLA parenthetical citation**.	• Student did not turn in the assignment *or* • turned it in blank *or* • copied from the source text in what appears to be an attempt to mask difficulties with the assignment.
A / Advanced	**B / Proficient+**	**C / Proficient**	**D / Below Standard**	**F**	**No Score**
100% **(50/50pts)**	**85%** **(42.5/50pts)**	**75%** **(37.5/50pts)**	**65%** **(32.5/50pts)**	**55%** **(27.5/50pts)**	**40%** **(50/125pts)**

with the diversity statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin, Madison School of Education. From these larger, overarching cultural identities, I added examples and more finite options. For instance, under "Black," I included clarifying language and examples: "ancestors from Africa, Haiti, Jamaica." I provided clarifying language and examples for all options, and to indicate that the ancestries enumerated were not exhaustive, I concluded each list with an ellipsis. Beneath each such prompt, I created discrete options that are commonly associated with the corresponding larger cultural identity. I also included a write-in option for each prompt so as to allow for individuality and because I of course could not anticipate all possible responses.

For Latinx cultural identities, I was careful to include language with which I knew my students were familiar. For example, I knew most of my students referred to themselves as "Mexican," so I was careful to include this as an option. I also knew participants were familiar with the term "Hispanic," as it is featured on many of our school forms, so I included this term as well. I have also heard a smaller number of my students use the term "Latino," so I included both this term and "Latina." During my time in collegiate settings, I became familiar with the term "Latinx," and although I have never heard a student use this term, in order to make the survey as comprehensive as possible, I also included it. Since many of my students think of ancestry in terms of nationality, I listed several related nationalities with most options. Appendix A presents the ancestry survey utilized in this study.

Measure of Cultural Relevance

In order to validate the intervention story's cultural relevance and the control story's lack thereof, a measure of students' perceptions of cultural relevance was necessary. To address this aspect of the study, I designed a measure based on Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric. In terms of modifications from Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) original rubric, I altered Question 1 to include both family and friends instead of family alone; I altered Question 5 to include nonbinary gender identities; and, like Rodríguez (2009, p. 17), I removed the question asking readers how frequently they read stories like the one they are rating. As Ebe (2010, pp. 197–198) explained, this frequency question was based in Goodman's (1982, pp. 303–304) contention that readers' lack of experience with culturally relevant texts interferes with comprehension. Essentially, Goodman (1982, pp. 303–304) argues that the texts that minoritized readers most frequently encounter are not culturally relevant, so when a reader does encounter a culturally relevant text, it is likely a novel, confusing experience. However,

participants in this study regularly read texts that they are likely to find culturally relevant. For example, the novels *Mexican WhiteBoy* by Matt de la Peña and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican* Daughter by Erika L. Sanchez were a part of the curriculum the year I conducted this study. Thus, the frequency question featured on Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) original rubric was excluded from this measure.

This measure yields scores ranging from 7 to 28, and, as described previously, I used a cut score of 20 to determine the respective texts' cultural relevance (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 17). Scores of 20 or higher indicated the student found the text culturally relevant, and scores of 19 or lower indicated the student did not find the text culturally relevant. Appendix B presents the measure of students' perceptions of the featured texts' cultural relevance.

Materials

Intervention Literature

I chose "Sol Painting, Inc." by Meg Medina (2017) as the intervention story for this study. As noted above, students themselves must determine the cultural relevance of a text (Sciurba, 2014; Stewart et al., 2018). However, with significant demographic information for the students who participated in this study and foreknowledge of Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric, I attempted to anticipate cultural relevance as much as I could. For example, in terms of character, Paulson and Freeman's (pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric asks if the characters are "like" the readers' family and friends, and the characters in "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) go to school and do homework, help with household chores and the family business, care for younger siblings, plan for their futures, and navigate complex family dynamics—all common characteristics of life for many young people of today or any time period. Similarly, Paulson and Freeman's (pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric asks readers if the

characters are near their own age, and Medina's (2017) main character is in the same grade as the participants in the study, the seventh grade. Paulson and Freeman's (pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric also asks readers to consider gender. Although Medina's (2017) main character is a girl, the story also features an older brother who plays a prominent role in the action. The final element of character that Paulson and Freeman's (pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric asks readers to evaluate is language, that is, whether or not the characters talk like the reader and the people the reader knows. Although "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) does not feature any of the prevalent slang that I currently hear in my classroom ("lowkey," "cap," "bruh," "rizz," etc.), the characters do use a casual dialogue that is consistently sprinkled with Spanish, as is generally consistent with what I hear around the school site where I conducted this study.

Paulson and Freeman's cultural relevance rubric (2003, pp. 27–29) also addresses setting. The rubric asks readers whether they have "lived or visited" places like those described in the story. "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) unfolds in the family apartment, at the characters' school, and in the family car—all run-of-the-mill backdrops of daily living. Of course, not all participants in this study lived in an apartment, but many did, and those who did not were certainly familiar with apartments. As this study was conducted at a school site, all participants were familiar with that setting, and from what I have experienced working at this school over the past several years, virtually all participants had a family car, and many had one that was rather dilapidated, such as the van featured in the story. Paulson and Freeman's (pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric also asks readers to consider the temporality aspect of setting, and although Medina's (2017) story does not explicitly disclose a time period, references to objects that are still sold today, such as Hasbro's game "Operation," indicate the setting is clearly contemporaneous or nearly so.

The final narrative element that Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric asks readers to consider is plot. The rubric asks readers to compare the experiences that the characters live through in the story to the events of their own lives. During the central plot event of "Sol Painting, Inc.," the main character, her brother, and her father endure the racist behavior of a group of teenage girls. It is a somewhat passive-aggressive form of racism, and while working on this story with other students in the recent past, many have shared, in their writing or during class discussions, that they too have had such experiences. The other plot events of the story are also likely to be familiar to many of the participants in this study. There are simple events such as grabbing a meal on the go and swimming in the apartment pool to more complex experiences such as feeling anxious about starting classes at a new school. Although it is clearly impossible to match characters' experiences to those of all readers, my familiarity with many of these students and my previous work with this story and their peers suggested the plot events of "Sol Painting, Inc." would be familiar to most of the participants in this study.

Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric does not ask about ethnicity directly. However, the participants in this study and the characters did share a Latinx ancestry, though with at least one significant difference. Although the participants in the study all self-identified with Central American ancestries (most as Mexican or Mexican American and small number from other Central American cultures or multiracial backgrounds), the characters in "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) trace their roots to Cuba. Although this is clearly an important distinction, there are no references to Cuba in the story nor to any specifically Cuban customs, traditions, or foods, so this difference is not accentuated. In my work with this story in the past, students have typically connected with the characters' family dynamics and the

discrimination they face as Spanish speakers and manual laborers and largely overlooked the characters' national origin, as it is not mentioned or referenced in the story.

Control Literature

I chose "A Sound of Thunder" by Ray Bradbury (1953/2001) as the control story for this study. In choosing this story, I again used my knowledge of the participants and Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric to anticipate cultural relevance as much as possible, or, in this case, the lack of cultural relevance. In this story, a group of men use time travel to go on a big game hunting safari for a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. In terms of character, all characters featured in "A Sound of Thunder" are adult men who are presumably White. As adults, the characters are considerably older than the participants, and although the characters may share gender with approximately half of the participants, the age and ethnicity differences limit this commonality. In terms of language, the characters do not use slang or idiosyncratic language of any type and there is no intermixing of Spanish or any other language. The characters' families, their friends, and their home lives are not mentioned in any way. At least in comparison to "Sol Painting, Inc." Medina, 2017), I expected that "A Sound of Thunder" (Bradbury, 1953/2001) would not resonate culturally with the participants in this study, though they may find it interesting.

Regarding setting, "A Sound of Thunder" (Bradbury, 1953/2001) takes place inside the retail space of a time travel company, inside a time machine, and in a prehistoric jungle as the men hunt *T. rex*. Needless to say, the participants in this study had never visited a time travel company or traveled inside a time machine. Although most had likely visited natural wooded areas, it is exceptionally unlikely that many had visited a dense, tropical jungle, and certainly none had visited a jungle populated with dinosaurs and other prehistoric fauna. As for the

temporality of the setting, the initial setting takes place in the future, an imagined version of 2055 where time travel is common, and the primary setting is in the very distant past, the time when dinosaurs dominated the earth.

Regarding plot, the primary events that make up the storyline revolve around traveling back in time and hunting *T. rex*. Undoubtedly, none of the participants in this study had engaged in these activities. A few participants may have gone hunting, but the number who had is likely very small, and obviously none of the participants had hunted a *T. rex*. The presidential election of 2054 also figures prominently in the plot of “A Sound of Thunder” (Bradbury, 1953/2001), and, as middle school students, none of the participants had ever voted. Also, although I cannot say for certain that the participants in this study did not follow politics, in both my own youth and my observations as a teacher, I have never known politics to be a common avocation for 13-year-olds.

Regarding ethnicity, again, Paulson and Freeman’s (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric does not directly address this aspect of identity. However, as I noted previously, participants in this study all self-identified with Latinx ancestries, and the characters in “A Sound of Thunder” are all White. There is no cultural congruity between the participants in this study, that is, the readers, and the ethnicity aspect of the control story. Clearly, participants were likely to assign lower ratings on Paulson and Freeman’s (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric for all aspects of “A Sound of Thunder” (Bradbury, 1953/2001). Clearly, relative to the control story, “Sol Painting, Inc.” (Medina, 2017) should be the more culturally relevant story for most participants in this study.

Table 4.1 presents the results from the cultural relevance rubric (Paulson & Freeman, 2003, pp. 27–29). The mean cultural relevance score for the intervention group was 16.73, and

the mean score for the control group was 10.60. The mean score for female students in the intervention group was 16.86, and the mean score for those in the control group was 9.68. The mean cultural relevance score for male students in the intervention group was 16.56, and the mean score for those in the control group was 11.65. The mean cultural relevance score for students designated as English learners in the intervention group was 16.00, and the mean score for the control group was 9.93. The mean cultural relevance score for students who receive special education services in the intervention group was 15.71, and the mean score for the control group was 9.71. Although the scores for the control group and all subgroups fell well below the cut score of 20 (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 17), the scores for the intervention group and all subgroups also fell below this standard. This indicates that, by the benchmark set forth by Rodríguez (2009, p. 17), neither students in the intervention group nor those in the control group found their respective stories culturally relevant, though there was a sizable difference between the scores of the two groups. Results for all student subgroups demonstrated similar results.

Table 4.1 *Cultural Relevance Scores for Intervention and Control Groups, Overall and by Subgroup*

Students	Intervention group			Control group		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Overall	16.73	4.46	37	10.60	2.70	42
Subgroup						
Female	16.86	4.61	21	9.68	2.15	22
Male	16.56	4.41	16	11.65	2.92	20
English learners	16.00	3.58	16	9.93	2.91	15
Students receiving special education services	15.17	4.22	6	9.71	2.36	7

Data Analytic Plan and Quantitative Results

In this section, I first describe key compositional characteristics of the intervention group featured in this study, that is, students who completed the intervention curriculum featuring CRL. Next, I describe the same characteristics of the control group, that is, students who completed a parallel curriculum anchored with a work of literature they were likely to find culturally dissonant. Then, I test for statistically significant differences between each group's scores on a theme paragraph assignment using independent *t* tests. Independent *t* tests allow me to determine whether the mean of the dependent variable, the scores on the theme paragraph assignment, statistically differed between the independent groups. I used a level of significance of .05 to determine whether differences between the intervention and control groups were statistically significant.

Analytic Sample Overall

The composition of the intervention and control groups featured in this study was largely determined by the master scheduling process at FMS. For the 2022–2023 school year, I was assigned four classes of seventh-grade English language arts, and I assigned two of these classes to the intervention group and two to the control group. The bargaining agreement between the Fairview Unified School District and the local teachers' union stipulates that all classes at FMS average 29 students, so the intervention and control groups were roughly equal at the outset of this study. From these classes, students who indicated an ancestry other than a Latinx heritage were pared from both groups. Students who declined participation were also excluded.

Next, I assigned one morning class and one afternoon class to the intervention group and one morning class and one afternoon class to the control group. I assigned one morning class and

Table 4.2 *Descriptive Statistics for Intervention and Control Groups by Ancestry*

Students	Intervention group		Control group	
	n	% of group	*n*	% of group
Overall	37		42	
Ancestry				
Mexican	14	38	13	31
Hispanic (from Mexican ancestry)	12	32	11	26
Latina (from Mexican ancestry)	6	16	7	14
Other Latinx and multiracial Latinx identities	5	14	11	26
Gender				
Female	21	57	22	52
Male	16	43	20	48
English learner	16	43	15	36
Receives special education services	7	19	6	14

one afternoon class to each group due to the effects staffing dynamics has on how students designated as English learners and students who receive special education services are distributed across the school day. Because the school employs a limited number of instructional aides, these students tend to be concentrated in the afternoon classes. This allows our instructional aides to serve these students across fewer class periods. Thus, distributing the morning and afternoon classes equally across the intervention and control groups facilitated parity for the intervention and control groups in terms of students with these designations and services. Table 4.2 presents descriptive statistics for the students who participated.

Latinx Identities Within the Intervention and Control Groups

As described above, students who indicated a lineage other than Latinx on the ancestry survey were excluded from both the intervention and control groups. School demographics at

FMS largely dictated this choice. As previously described, FMS serves a majority Latinx population, and as such this was the focal group of my study. Consequently, it was necessary to exclude the small numbers of other identities from both the intervention and control groups. Additionally, working with a single, overarching cultural identity allowed me to maximize the potential of the intervention literature's cultural relevance and the control literature's cultural dissonance. Table 4.2 presents students' self-identified ethnic/cultural identities. "Mexican," "Hispanic (from Mexican ancestry)," and "Latina (from Mexican ancestry)" were the most commonly selected ethnic/cultural identities for both the intervention and control groups. Other than these three most common identities, students indicated an assortment of Latinx and multiracial Latinx identities, all with totals of one or two students. In order to protect confidentiality, I included these students under the "Other Latinx and multiracial Latinx identities" label in Table 4.2.

An independent *t* test comparing mean scores on the theme paragraph assignment for the

Table 4.3 Theme Paragraph Scores t-Test Results

Students	Intervention group			Control group			*t*	*p*
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*		
Overall	75.27	15.36	37	71.19	18.37	42	0.15	.44
Females	75.48	14.82	21	72.50	18.18	22	0.28	.39
Males	75.00	16.53	16	69.75	18.95	20	0.19	.42
English learners	66.56	14.23	16	61.33	12.17	15	0.14	.44
Receiving special education services	68.33	19.41	6	65.00	0.00	7	0.33	.37

overall intervention and control groups revealed no statistically significant differences between the two independent groups. Table 4.3 presents *t*-test results for the intervention and control groups. Results demonstrated a *p* value of .44, above the .05 threshold for statistical significance, and consequently the null hypothesis that there is no statistical difference between the high mean score on the theme paragraph assignment for students in the intervention group, that is, for students who worked with CRL, according to these results, CRL does not appear to have a positive relationship to reading comprehension as exhibited in Latinx students' ability to determine a theme in a literary text.

Intervention and Control Groups by Gender

In the intervention group, 21 students identified as female and 16 as male. No students in the intervention group identified as nonbinary. In the control group, 22 students identified as female and 20 as male. As with the intervention group, no students in the control group identified as nonbinary. This equates to 57% female and 43% male participants in the intervention group and 52% female and 48% male participants in the control group. As would be expected, female and male samples from the intervention and control groups represented the largest subgroups in my study. Table 4.2 presents descriptive statistics for the intervention and control groups by gender.

As with the overall sample, an independent *t* test comparing mean scores on the theme paragraph assignment for female students in the intervention group to scores for female students in the control revealed no statistically significant differences between the two independent groups. Table 4.3 presents *t*-test results for female students in the intervention and control groups. Results demonstrated a *p* value of .39, as with the overall sample, which exceeds the .05 threshold for statistical significance, and consequently the null hypothesis for the female

subgroup cannot be rejected. According to these results, CRL does not appear to have a positive relationship to reading comprehension as exhibited in students' ability to determine a theme in a literary text for female Latinx students.

Results for male students mirrored those of their female peers. An independent *t* test comparing mean scores on the theme paragraph assignment for male students in the intervention group to scores for male students in the control group showed no statistically significant differences between these two independent groups. Table 4.3 presents the *t*-test results for male students in the intervention and control groups. Results demonstrate a *p* value of .42, again well above the .05 threshold for statistical significance, and consequently, as with the female subgroup, the null hypothesis for the male subgroup cannot be rejected. According to these results, CRL does not appear to have a positive relationship to reading comprehension as exhibited in students' ability to determine a theme in a literary text for male Latinx students.

Intervention and Control Groups by English Learner Designation

In the intervention group, 16 students were designated as English learners on FMS internal paperwork. In the control group, 15 students were designated as English learners. This equates to 41% of students with an English learner designation in the intervention group and 38% in the control group. After gender, English learner designation constituted the second largest student subgroup within the overall sample, slightly above the approximately 32% of the overall student body at FMS (CDE, 2017). Table 4.2 presents descriptive statistics for the intervention and control groups by English learner status.

An independent *t* test comparing mean scores on the theme paragraph assignment for students designated as English learners in the intervention group to scores for students designated as English learners in the control group revealed no statistically significant

differences between the two independent groups. Table 4.3 presents *t*-test results for students designated as English learners in the intervention and control groups. Results demonstrated a *p* value of .44, and again the null hypothesis is not rejected. According to these results, CRL does not appear to have a positive relationship to reading comprehension as exhibited in students' ability to determine a theme in a literary text for Latinx students designated English learners.

Intervention and Control Groups by Special Education Services

In the intervention group, seven students received special education services. In the control, six students received special education services. This equates to 19% of students receiving special education services in the intervention group and 14% in the control group. Students who receive special education services made up the smallest subgroup in my study. Table 4.2 presents descriptive statistics for the intervention and control groups by special education services.

An independent *t*-test comparing mean scores on the theme paragraph assignment for students who received special education services in the intervention group to scores for students who receive special education services in the control group revealed no statistically significant differences between the two independent groups. Table 4.3 presents *t*-test results for students who receive special education services in the intervention and control groups. Results demonstrated a *p* value of .33, and, as with all other groups, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. According to these results, CRL does not appear to have a positive relationship to reading comprehension as exhibited in students' ability to determine a theme in a literary text for Latinx students who receive special education services.

Summary

Research Question 1 asked whether cultural relevance has a positive relationship to Latinx middle school students' ability to identify a theme in a literary text, and independent *t* tests showed no statistically significant differences in mean scores on the theme paragraph assignment that underpins this study. I found no statistically significant differences in theme paragraph scores for the overall analytic sample nor for student subgroups organized by gender, English learner designation, and receipt of special education services. As such, the quantitative phase of this study indicates that cultural relevance does not to have a positive relationship to Latinx middle school students' ability to identify a theme in a literary text. In the next chapter, in order to capture the effects of CRL that are not expressed in the quantitative data, I will utilize qualitative semistructured (Lichtman, 2013, p. 191) individual interviews (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 189–190) to explore students' experience and engagement with the CRL featured in this study.

Chapter 5: RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Introduction

The purpose of the qualitative phase of my study is to address Research Question 2 by discovering how the students themselves experienced the intervention literature, that is, the CRL, featured in this study and the academic work that was paired with it. This qualitative work also provides context for the quantitative data presented in Chapter 4. In order to produce the qualitative data necessary to this task, I conducted semistructured (Lichtman, 2013, p. 191) individual interviews (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 189–190) to identify elements of the intervention literature that students found relevant and engaging as well as those elements that they found culturally dissonant or inert. My study's qualitative methodology and results are presented in this chapter, which includes the following sections: data collection, sample, data analytic plan, results, and summary.

Data Collection

I conducted the five semistructured (Lichtman, 2013, p. 191) individual interviews (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 189–190) in the spring of 2023. I conducted the interviews in my classroom during the students' lunch period, and each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes. I designed the interview questions to correspond to the cultural relevance rubric (Paulson & Freeman, 2003, pp. 27–29) that I utilized in the quantitative phase of my study while investigating Research Question 1. As I designed these elements of the study to correspond to each other, these interviews were particularly useful in interpreting the scores produced through the cultural relevance rubric (Paulson & Freeman, 2003, pp. 27–29). Interviewees provided deeper insights into how the characters, setting, and plot of the intervention story, Meg Medina's "Sol Painting, Inc." (2017), did or did not reflect their own lives. These data also yielded

information as to whether or not students simply enjoyed the intervention literature, an element of the curricular experience that this study has thus far not addressed.

The interview guide I created, available in Appendix C, is divided into four sections. Section 1 is comprised of biographical starter questions (Lichtman, 2013, p. 203). The intent of these opening questions was to ease into the interview process and relax participants. Section 2 is comprised of grand tour starter questions (Lichtman, 2013, p. 197). The intent of these questions was to allow participants an opportunity to comment on the intervention literature free of any influence that the later question might exert upon their thought processes. Section 3 features concrete example questions (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 197–198) and comparison and contrast questions (Lichtman, 2013, p. 199). These questions were meant to help students discuss similarities or dissimilarities between the intervention literature and their own lives. These questions are the most numerous and represent the heart of the interview. Section 4 is composed of closing questions (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 199–200). As the name implies, these questions were meant to wind down the interview and provide space for participants to say anything about the intervention story that might fall outside the scope of my questions.

Sample

I included five students in my purposive sample for the qualitative interviews. In order to ensure a representative sample, I invited both girls and boys to participate as well students who were designated as English learners and students who received special education services. Though there were only two in the larger analytic sample, one student who had an individual education plan (IEP) also participated. As was true of the larger analytic sample, all participants self-identified with a Latinx ancestry, and all were seventh-grade students at the time of their interview. The purposive sample featured two boys, four girls, one student designated as an

English learner only, one student designated as English learner who also received special education services, one student designated as an English learner and who also had an IEP, and two students with no special designations. Table 5.1 presents summary information for all participants in the convenience sample.

Table 5.1 *Interview Participant Information*

Alias	Interview no.	Gender	English learner designation	Special education services	Individual education plan
Nataly	1	Female	Yes	Yes	No
Isaiah	2	Male	Yes	No	Yes
Damien	3	Male	No	No	No
Anarely	4	Female	Yes	No	No
Danae	5	Female	No	No	No

Note. All names are pseudonyms.

Data Analytic Plan

Primarily at the conclusion of each school day, I created and added to an analytic memo (Saldaña, 2016, pp. 44–45) to capture my initial impressions of each day's interview. As described above, in order to make it easy for students to participate, I conducted interviews during students' lunch period, and although this was the most convenient option for participants, it often meant there was little time remaining after an interview for working on memos. Although this is less than ideal, it was more important to offer students an easy and convenient way to complete the interviews. Thus, after dismissing my final class on each day that I conducted an interview, I recorded my thoughts and began to determine emergent themes in the students' responses. Each day that I conducted an interview, I added a new section to my memo for each interview. As I used Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric as a

blueprint for my interview guide, large portions of the interview data naturally coalesced around themes pertaining to the intervention story's characters, setting, and plot. Although no unexpected codes manifested from the open-ended questions, codes relating to students' views on the likability of the intervention story and its usefulness as the foundation of my theme curriculum did emerge.

After the data from each interview were transcribed, I used descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016, pp. 101–104) to analyze the interview data in the first cycle of coding. In this method, the researcher summarizes or labels the contents of short passages of the qualitative data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 101). In the second cycle of coding, I used focused coding (Saldaña, 2016, pp. 238–244) to further refine the interview data. In this method, the researcher arranges "the most frequent or significant codes" into categories. For example, in the first coding cycle, I created the codes "plot: similarities" and "plot: dissimilarities," and in the second cycle of coding I placed both codes under the category of "reader-plot factors." During this second cycle of coding, I also redrafted certain code titles and folded redundant codes into the resultant larger headings. For example, in the first cycle, I created codes for how well the characters' speech and gender reflected the readers', but in the second cycle, following what I had already done with plot, I collapsed these codes under the more inclusive "characters: similarities" and "characters: dissimilarities." It should also be noted that I included codes for which I found no corresponding interview data. This approach allowed me to create a code for positive perspectives and a corresponding code for negative perspectives under each category and to compare the frequency with which students indicated they found the intervention story culturally relevant to the frequency with which they indicated found it culturally dissonant.

Qualitative Results

As discussed previously, I fashioned my interview guide after Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric, and thus utilized their work as a framework to organize interview participant feedback. On their rubric, available for reference in Appendix B, Questions 1, 4, 5, and 6 address how well the characters in a particular story resemble the reader as well as other persons in the reader's life. These questions from the cultural relevance rubric formed the basis of the concrete example questions (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 197–198) and comparison and contrast questions (Lichtman, 2013, p. 199) that I included on my interview guide. When coding the data these questions generated, I typically used the characters: similarities" and "characters: dissimilarities" codes, both of which I then placed in the "reader-character factors" category. Question 2 on Paulson and Freeman's (pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric addresses the "places" facet of setting, Question 3 addresses the "temporality" facet of setting, and Question 7 addresses plot events. I adopted a parallel approach for the interview questions that I based on these elements of Paulson and Freeman's (pp. 27–29) rubric and for the

Table 5.2 *Qualitative Codes, Categories, and Frequencies*

Category	Code	Frequency
Reader–character factors	Characters: similarities	14
	Characters: dissimilarities	1
Reader–setting factors: temporality	Setting—temporality: similarities	3
	Setting—temporality: dissimilarities	0
Reader–setting factors: places	Setting—places: similarities	2
	Setting—places: dissimilarities	0
Reader–plot factors	Plot: similarities	11
	Plot: dissimilarities	2
Perspectives on likability	Likability: positive	6
	Likability: negative	0
Perspectives on curricular value	Curricular value: positive	7
	Curricular value: negative	0

data that these interview questions produced. Table 5.2 presents descriptive codes, the categories, and the data count for each code.

Interview Themes Related to Reader–Character Factors

I labeled 14 instances of interviewee commentary with the "characters: similarities" code. These passages represent remarks in which interviewees described connections between the characters, that is, the Suarez family, featured in "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) and themselves, their family, their friends, and/or other individuals known to them. As I designed my interview guide to mirror Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric, interviewees' remarks addressed the characters' age, speech, and other attributes such as behaviors or experiences.

Regarding connections in terms of age between the characters, the reader, and persons the reader knows, in this exchange Nataly correctly identifies the main character as closest to her own age:

> Mr. Bennett: Which character do you think was closest to your own age?
> Nataly: What's her name?
> Mr. Bennett: The girl?
> Nataly: The girl.
> Mr. Bennett: Merci.
> Nataly: Merci, yeah.

Damien also correctly identified Merci's age as very close to his own: "I'm going to assume 14, 15 because she wanted to get into high school." Although Damien is a bit off in terms of Merci's age—Merci is about to enter the seventh grade at a school that serves both middle school students and high school students—his assessment is largely correct. This exchange shows Anarely came to a similar conclusion:

> Mr. Bennett: Which one of the characters out of all of them do you think was closest to you in age?
>
> Anarely: I feel like Merci.

Danae was very accurate in her estimation of Merci's age: "I think the age was maybe, I don't want to say 10. I think 11 to 13, in that range." These excerpts illustrate that interviewees were able to recognize the main character's age as very close to their own. In the story, Merci is about to enter the seventh grade, and at the time of these interviews, participants were in the midst of their seventh-grade year.

In terms of speech, several participants commented on the connections between the story's dialogue and their own speech patterns or those of people they know. Damien stated, "In 'Sol Painting' they talk how my family would talk to each other." Similarly, Danae saw similarities between the verbal expression of the characters and herself: "In 'Sol Painting' I'd say I feel that I talk like some of the characters." Anarely, with some prompting, noted the characters' use of specific individual words that are also common in her household:

> Mr. Bennett: What about even small things, like "Mami" and "Papi," any of those small words, is that similar to the way that you call your mom and dad?
>
> Anarely: Yeah.

Other participants found parallels in the substance of the characters' words, if not the specific diction. For instance, Damien explained how his own father, like Merci's, values hard work and expects it from his children: "One of the sayings [my dad] has is nothing less than the best. He tells me, it doesn't matter how long it takes, always do it with quality work."

Participants also noted for connections between the characters' behaviors and emotional experiences and episodes of their own lives. In the intervention story, "Sol Painting, Inc." by Meg Medina (2017), the main character, Merci, her older brother, Roli, and their father, Papi, are painting the gymnasium at a private high school that Roli attends and that Merci will attend.

Their father has arranged to complete this work in exchange for Merci's tuition for the coming school year (Medina, 2017, p. 48). Although Merci has placed signs outside the door to direct traffic away from the work site, a group of girls from the school soccer team enter anyway and ruin the fresh paint (Medina, 2017, p. 53). During this interaction, the girls speak in exaggerated accents and fail to recognize Roli as a peer from their school (Medina, 2017, p. 55). Merci expects her father to yell at the girls, but he holds his tongue instead, and Merci is left feeling angry and degraded (Medina, 2017, p. 55). Anarely explained that there had been times in her own life when she felt the same sense of anger and injustice:

> Merci, she's like me and my friends, because what's it called? When they do something to her, she doesn't like to be quiet about it. …That's how we are. We don't like to be quiet about things that they do to us.

In this exchange, it was my impression that Anarely was speaking generally of her reaction when someone spoke poorly of her friends or herself, and she was not referencing a specific incident, but nonetheless, Anarely had found common ground with Merci. Reflecting on the same passage from the intervention story, Danae expressed a similar sentiment: "I'm mostly like Merci because if somebody told my grandma, or my grandpa, or my mom, or my dad something, I'd want to lash out." Nataly saw a connection between Papi, the main character's father, and her own father. She explained, "Papi in the story, he owns a painting shop…and my dad, he owns this car wash."

Participants commented much less frequently on the differences between the characters and themselves and the persons they know. I labeled only one instance of interviewee commentary with the "characters: dissimilarities" code. Damien offered these remarks when comparing Merci's age to his own:

> I think she is a little younger. I think she also said it. Oh no, her dad said it. I think her dad said it in the story one time. He said she was like 9 or 10, around there.

It is worth noting that Damien is slightly off in his estimation of Merci's age. As she is about to enter the seventh grade, she is probably 11 and is likely within a few months of Damien's age. However, in his estimation, he saw Merci as younger than himself.

Interview Themes Related to Reader–Plot Factors

Participants also offered abundant remarks on the connections between the plot of "Sol Painting, Inc" (Medina, 2017) and their own lived experiences. I labeled 11 instances of interviewee commentary with the "plot: similarities" code. Discussing Merci's feelings of discomfort and rejection at her new, upscale school, Damien said, "There is one thing. It was like not being allowed to do something with other people. They don't really accept you here, I'd say." Damien explained further: "Sometimes at school, I'll be wanted to do something, and they won't allow me to do it with them. …Maybe like working in their group. ...Maybe they don't feel comfortable working with me." Damien saw one very specific connection between one of the story's main plot events and things he had done in his own life: "So, I go to work a lot with my dad, too." Isaiah, referencing the passage explained above in which the soccer girls spoke to Merci and her family in racist, belittling accents, spoke in more general terms about the similarities he saw between "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) and his own life: "'Sol Painting' talks about like Mexican families and what they go through and stuff." Danae saw parallels between the same racist encounter and her own discriminatory experiences around her sexuality: "I'd say it's more with my sexuality, but not more so my ethnicity. …Mainly it's name calling. It's just dealing with that." Danae goes on to say:

> I don't know the word. …It's at the back of my head. I know it's, oh, derogatory names that come out of it. It's just the way they use their words and the slurs that come with it in some of them.

As these comments demonstrate, participants found also found the less fraught aspects of the intervention story, such as helping a parent with work, relevant to their own lives, as well as more complicated elements, such as dealing with bigotry.

As with reader–character factors, participants spoke much less frequently on the differences between the plot of “Sol Painting, Inc” (Medina, 2017) and their own experiences. I labeled two instances of interviewee commentary with the “plot: dissimilarities” code. Nataly commented on one small difference between Merci, her brother, and their father visiting the school to complete a painting job and her own experiences with schools: “Well, I guess they’re different because they went to the school to paint it, and I come to school every day.” It is worth noting that Merci and her brother Roli also attend school regularly, but the story is set during summer break. In this exchange, Isaiah explains that he has never experienced a racist encounter like that which Merci, her brother, and her father experience:

> Well, again with the three girls, they probably saw that she was Mexican. They were like imitating her, like talking bad about her because she was like Mexican.
>
> Mr. Bennett: …When you think of the three girls from the school soccer team that were bullying in a racist way, like you said, have you ever experienced or seen something like that happen to you, a friend, a family member? Do you have a real-life incident that is kind of similar?
>
> Isaiah: I don’t think so. I don’t think I ever seen it.

In discussing the incongruities between the plot of “Sol Painting, Inc.” (Medina, 2017) and their own lives, as with the connections, students found differences that were prosaic as well as differences that were more consequential.

Interview Themes Related to Reader–Setting Factors: Temporality

Commentary on the remaining code categories was much more limited. I labeled only three instances of interviewee commentary with the “setting—temporality: similarities” code. These passages represent remarks interviewees made regarding the connections between the time

element of the setting of “Sol Painting, Inc.” (Medina, 2017) and the time period of their own lives. Damien offered the most precise estimation of the time frame in which he believed “Sol Painting, Inc.” (Medina, 2017) occurred:

> Mr. Bennett: Okay, so what about year? …What year do you think [the story] took place?
>
> Damien: Well, I think ‘Sol Painting’ was probably like around 2010, 2012, around there.

This exchange continued:

> Mr. Bennett: Was there something that happened in the story that made you think of those years?
>
> Damien: …I don’t think so. I guess I probably just made an estimate.
>
> Mr. Bennett: Okay. But still those estimates are fairly recent, reasonably recent.
>
> Damien: Yeah.

Damien offered a similar but more imprecise estimation:

> Mr. Bennett: So how about the time? Do you think [the story] could have taken place this year?
>
> Damien: …I can’t really say.
>
> Mr. Bennett: Do you think—
>
> Damien: That’s a tough question.
>
> Mr. Bennett: Okay. Do you think they were far in the past?
>
> Damien: No, I don’t think so.
>
> Mr. Bennett: Okay. How can you tell?
>
> Damien: Just the way they’re acting in there is just like modern. …kind of a slang they have.

Nataly seemed to agree that “Sol Painting, Inc.” (Medina, 2017) was roughly contemporaneous:

> Mr. Bennett: ‘Sol Painting,’ do you think it could happen this year? Or does it seem like it’s from the past or does it seem like it’s from the future?
>
> Nataly: It seems like maybe around this year. Not too far back.

Although “Sol Painting, Inc.” (Medina, 2017) does not disclose a specific year for the setting, there are clues. The Milton Bradley game Operation is referenced, as well as a compact

disc player. Using these indicators, I think it is likely the story is set in the late 1990s. Thus, participants were reasonably accurate in their estimations, though most did seem to set the story in a slightly later time period.

I did not label any instances of interviewee commentary with the "setting—temporality: dissimilarities" code. This may indicate interviewees did not note any incongruities between the time element of the setting of "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) and the time period of their own lives—at least not beyond the approximately 10–12 years of difference that was reflected in their responses. However, it is worth noting that in comparison to their comments on other elements of the story, interviewees did express a greater degree of uncertainty as to the time facet of setting.

Interview Themes Related to Reader–Setting Factors: Places

Regarding the other facet of setting, places, I labeled two instances of interviewee commentary with the "setting—places: similarities" code. These passages represent remarks in which interviewees described connections between the places featured in "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) and the places the interviewees themselves had lived or visited. Danae thought the Floridian setting of the story was reminiscent of Southern California:

> In the part where they're driving to go to school in 'Sol Painting.' I feel that would be somewhere that I have been. When I picture that with the trees and everything, I think of L.A. or a beach or something like that.

Damien saw a more everyday connection: "Well, they've been to school and I'm in school right now, so that's one place." Interviewees did not comment on the family's apartment complex or the inside of the father's painting van, the other prominent locations featured in the story.

I did not label any instances of interviewee commentary with the "setting—places: dissimilarities" code. However, when one considers the small amount of commentary on their

connections to the places featured in the story, this does not necessarily indicate that interviewees found the locations featured in the story evocative of the places of their own lives.

Interview Themes Related to Perspectives on Likability

As I moved each interview to its conclusion, I offered closing questions that allowed interviewees to share their thoughts on both the likability of "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) and its usefulness as the foundation of ELA curriculum. I labeled six instances of interviewee commentary with the "likability: positive" code, one from each of the five interviews I conducted. As the code title suggests, these passages represent remarks interviewees made that indicate they found the story an enjoyable read. Several interviewees made simple, direct statements about their positive view of the story. For example, Nataly said, "I think I like the 'Sol Painting' one the best of the stories we've read so far." When I asked Nataly to expand on why she favored "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017), she explained that the story we had read beforehand focused too heavily on sports for her taste. Isaiah also picked the intervention story as one of his favorites: "Well, 'Sol Painting,' it was a pretty good art story. Yeah. And I think it like teaches a good lesson about bullying, too. About those three girls that are bullying Merci." Danae also provided similar reasoning as to why she liked the story:

> I thought it was really interesting because it showed me in 'Sol Painting,' the theme I thought about was racism. It showed how different people go through racism, how they deal with it. Because you could be that one person who just lets everything gets to you, and you just lash out on people, and just go at it. But then on the other hand you could be like Merci's dad, and just calm down and be like, "Okay. Well, that's what you think. I think otherwise." But let them say what they want to say. They're not really important.

The theme that Danae is articulating here closely mirrors the life lesson that Merci comes to understand with the help of her older brother. At the end of the story, Merci sits alone at the edge of the swimming pool at her apartment complex, and she is indignant with her father and

what she saw as his meek reaction to the soccer girls' demeaning insults or, as Danae put it, his decision to let the insults stand and not "go at it" in defense of his daughter. However, Merci's older brother, Roli, comes down to the pool and explains to her that her father reacted the way he did out of concern for Merci's future. He wanted to ensure she kept her access to the private high school, or, in Danae's words, Merci's father chose to "calm down" and remember that the girls' insults were "not really important" in the larger context of securing the quality education that he wanted for his daughter. As she explained above, Danae did not find common ground with Merci through her own experiences with racism. Instead, she made meaning with the text through her own lived experiences with parallel bigotry based on her sexuality. Danae clearly explains that she found the intervention story "really interesting" because it had complicated, meaningful themes that she could relate to her own life.

Damien took issue with the amount of reading but also expressed similar approval for the intervention story and its consequential themes: "I think it was a lot to read, but I do think it was a good thing to read about, too, about race and stuff like that." When I asked Damien if he could reference a specific part of the text that he both enjoyed and addressed the theme of dealing with racism, he explained that he was not referencing a particular part of the text but instead his holistic impression of the story. However, Damien's commentary does demonstrate a commonality with Danae: both students found the intervention story likable because it dealt with important issues of bigotry that either reflected experiences in their own lives or was simply good information to have at one's disposal.

I did not label any instances of interviewee commentary with the "likability: negative" code. This indicates that no interviewees made remarks that suggested they found "Sol Painting,

Inc." (Medina, 2017) disagreeable. I posed this question to each interviewee, and everyone indicated a fondness for the story.

Interview Themes Related to Perspectives on Curricular Value

Interviewees demonstrated a similar consensus as to the value of "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) as a vehicle of ELA instruction. In this closing question, I asked interviewees if they thought I should keep "Sol Painting, Inc." as part of next year's coursework. I labeled seven instances of interviewee commentary on this question with the "curricular value: positive" code. As with the "likability: positive" code, this represents at least one positive remark regarding the curricular value of the story for each interviewee. Also similar to their responses for the "likability: positive" code, several interviewees responded to my inquiries on this topic with short, direct affirmative answers. Several answered simply, "Yeah," or "Yes." Providing a bit more context for his answer, Damien explained, "I do think it'd be good for [next year's students] to learn about like hard work and quality work as well." Isaiah stated, "I think that you should because it teaches valuable lessons about like racism and bullying and working hard and to never give up." Danae offered a strong endorsement:

> It would be amazing for the next year's seventh graders because I feel like, if they're thinking to themselves about this struggle, they could actually relate to someone who actually has the same struggle as them. That way they think they're not alone.

As these remarks suggest, most interviewees thought it was the relatability, in other words the cultural relevance, that made "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) a meaningful part of the work we did in the class.

I found the similarity between the commentary the students offered regarding the likability of the intervention story and its curricular value particularly revelatory. In both instances, students' remarks frequently centered on three themes from the intervention story that

they found particular relevant to their own lived experiences: the importance of putting forth your best effort, family roles and responsibilities, and finding ways to constructively deal with racism or other forms of bigotry and bullying. When offering these remarks, students were also drawn to the same passages of the intervention story. Primarily, they based their comments on Papi's lessons about the value of hard work, Roli's role in helping Merci understand Papi's reaction to the soccer girls, and the interaction with the soccer girls itself. The consistency and the differing ways in which the students found these aspects of the story valuable speak to just how relevant they found the text to be.

I did not label any instances of interviewee commentary with the "curricular value: negative" code. This indicates that interviewees made no remarks that suggest participants found "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) to be without value as the basis of ELA curriculum. As with the "likability: positive" code, I posed this closing question to each interviewee, and everyone indicated that they thought the story was a meaningful vehicle of ELA instruction.

Summary

I interviewed five participants from the larger sample of students who completed the intervention curriculum that underpins this study. I designed the interview questions to echo the questions featured on the modified version of Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric featured in Chapter 5. As I analyzed the interview data, several themes providing context and insights into the quantitative data discussed in Chapter 5 emerged. Themes captured interviewees' views on how well the characters, setting, and plot events of "Sol Painting, Inc" (Medina, 2017) reflected their own lives. Interviewee commentary labeled with codes that suggest participants thought "Sol Painting, Inc" (Medina, 2017) reflected the people they know, the places they have lived or visited, their speech patterns, and their lived

experiences, that is, remarks that suggest participants found the story culturally relevant, were significantly more numerous than commentary labeled with codes that suggest participants found "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) culturally dissonant.

Overall, interviewees offered valuable insights as to how participants experienced the intervention curriculum that underpins this study. In Chapter 6, I discuss these qualitative findings further and also explore their connections to the quantitative finding presented in Chapter 5. In this final chapter, I also address implications for policy and practice and recommendations for the implementation of CRL in other classrooms.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

Introduction

My study utilized a mixed-methods research design to investigate the effects of CRL on Latinx middle school students' reading comprehension, as measured by their ability to determine a theme in a literary text. Previous studies have explored CRL's effects on reading fluency (Council et al., 2019; Ebe, 2010, 2012), standardized test scores (Tatum, 2000), and reading interest (Cartledge et al., 2016; Jiménez & Gámez, 1996; Marquez & Colby, 2021; Piazza & Duncan, 2012; Scullin, 2020). Extant research has also examined CRL's relationship to reading comprehension as measured by researcher-created instruments (McCullough, 2013) and other project-specific exercises such as text discussions (Clark & Fleming, 2019) and retellings (Ebe, 2010, 2012). However, research analyzing CRL's relationship to standards-based, day-to-day ELA classwork is minimal. My study addresses this limitation in the current literature. At the heart of my study are a writing assignment and corresponding grading rubric that are based on Common Core State Standards. These standards set grade-level benchmarks for determining a theme in a literary text, using textual evidence, and formatting citations. Across my 16 years of experience teaching in California's public schools, coursework of this type has been typical. The previous five chapters presented my study's research questions, theoretical framework, literature review, quantitative and qualitative research designs, data analytic plans, and results. Chapter 6, the culminating chapter, includes the following sections: key findings for Research Question 1, key findings for Research Question 2, discussion, limitations, implications for policy and practice, recommendations for future research, and conclusion.

Key Findings for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked whether CRL has a positive relationship to Latinx middle school students' ability to identify a theme in a literary text, and my first step in addressing this question was to determine participants' perceptions of the cultural relevance of both the intervention and control literature that comprised the foundation of this study. As previously described, to address this element of my study I used a modified version of Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric. Again, I modified Question 5 to include nonbinary gender identities, and I removed the question that asked evaluators how frequently they read literature like that they were assessing. The rest of the rubric I deployed unaltered. Although mean scores for the intervention story did not meet the cut score of 20 as stipulated in Rodríguez (2009, p. 17), the most important revelation from the data generated from the cultural relevance rubric (Paulson & Freeman, 2003, pp. 27–29) was that participants assigned the intervention story a considerably higher cultural relevance score than the control story. Overall, participants scored the intervention story at 16.73 and the control story at 10.60. For student subgroups, female participants scored the intervention story at 16.86 and the control story at 9.68; male students scored the intervention story at 16.56 and the control story at 11.65; students designated as English learners scored the intervention story at 16.00 and the control story at 9.93; and students who receive special education services score the intervention story at 15.17 and the control story at 9.71. From these data, it is reasonable to conclude that participants found the intervention story to be culturally relevant relative to the control story.

Another valuable finding for Research Question 1 was that mean scores from the theme paragraph assignment for the overall sample and for all student subgroups were higher for students working with the more culturally relevant intervention story. Overall, participants

working with the intervention story earned an average score of 75.27% on the theme paragraph assignment whereas participants working with the control story earned an average of 71.19%. For student subgroups, female participants in the intervention group averaged 75.48%, and female participants in the control group averaged 72.50%; male participants in the intervention group averaged 75.00%, and male participants in the control group averaged 69.75%; participants designated as English learners in the intervention group averaged 66.56%, and participants designated as English learners in the control group averaged 61.33%; and participants who received special education services in the intervention group averaged 68.33%, and participants who received special education services in the control story averaged 65.00%. These initial descriptive findings suggest cultural relevance does in fact have a positive relationship to reading comprehension for Latinx middle school students as expressed by their ability to determine a theme in a literary text.

However, another key finding from my exploration of Research Question 1 was the lack of any evidence of a relationship between theme paragraph scores for the intervention and control groups when I applied tests of statistical significance to these quantitative data. An independent *t* test comparing mean scores on the theme paragraph assignment for the aggregate intervention and control groups revealed a *p* value of .44, indicating that the difference was not distinguishable from zero, and I could not reject the null hypothesis that there was no difference between the theme paragraph scores for in invention group and the control group. All student subgroups revealed the same finding. I found *p* values of .39 for female students, .42 for male students, .44 for students designated as English learners, and .33 for students who received special education services. From these results, I cannot with any degree of reasonable confidence

infer cultural relevance is associated with Latinx middle school students' reading comprehension as reflected in their ability to identify a theme in a literary text.

These findings, both the descriptive scores and the results from the test of statistical significance, largely confirm the findings of other studies surveyed in my study's literature review. Both Ebe (2012, 2012) and McCullough (2013) found evidence that cultural relevance is associated with increased reading comprehension at the descriptive level. As in my study, participants in Ebe's (2010, 2012) studies used Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27 29) rubric to evaluate the cultural relevance of the intervention and control literature. Ebe (2010, 2012) then used miscue analysis and retelling accuracy as measures of reading comprehension and found miscue rates were lower and retelling accuracy was higher when participants read stories that they had rated as more culturally relevant. These finds were consistent for both Ebe's 2010 study, in which she worked with third-grade students designated as English learners, and her 2012 study, in which she worked with seventh-grade students designated as English learners. McCullough (2013) designed both a cultural relevance measure and a reading comprehension measure that were specific to her study. With these instruments, McCullough (2013), working with a sample of African American eighth graders, also found that descriptive statistics indicated higher reading comprehension for CRL, but McCullough's study is also one of the few in the extant literature to analyze these data further with tests of statistical significance. McCullough (2013) performed a one-way analysis of variance, and no effect was demonstrated. Thus, perhaps the most meaningful insight from my exploration of Research Question 1 is this consistency with these previous studies: when readers engage with culturally relevant texts, they tend to score higher on measures of reading comprehension; however, tests of statistical significance remain

inconclusive. My findings from Research Question 2 also largely confirm findings in previous CRL studies.

The lack of a significant effect in the quantitative phase of this study may be explained by other factors that motivate Latinx students' academic success, regardless of the cultural relevance, or lack thereof, of the texts that facilitate the curricula they encounter. For example, Guzmán et al. (2021, p. 81) conducted a study with 22 Latinx parents who had recently emigrated to the United States, most from Mexico. Using Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, Guzmán et al. found that the parents who participated in their study exhibited high levels of aspirational capital (p. 83) for their children, which "involves parents' ability to inspire their children to do better and achieve more than they have in their educational goals" (p. 79). Guzmán et al (p. 84) also found that the parents also wanted high levels of linguistic capital for their children; that is, they wanted their children to maintain their cultural heritage through their home language, but they also wanted them to be highly proficient in English for career and economic reasons. Uriostegui et al. (2021) found that a sample that included Latinx youth was motivated to academic success and post-high school academic aspirations through sociopolitical efficacy. That is, students' perception that their academic work in school was a means of affecting change for structural and social inequalities (Uriostegui et al., 2021, p. 2) was positively associated with mentors' approval of their academic efforts, and "greater engagement in academic and career activities" (p. 13). Clearly, academic motivation for Latinx students is multifaceted and complex. However, the qualitative work in my study demonstrates that although Latinx middle school students are motivated to succeed in school regardless of the curricula they are asked to complete, when culturally relevant texts are included as a part of their schoolwork, they find such texts an enjoyable and meaningful part of their schooling experience.

Thus, despite a lack of statistically significant quantitative findings in this study, there is still evidence that suggests culturally relevant texts should be a part of school curriculum.

Key Findings for Research Question 2

Research Question 1 asked how Latinx middle school students connect their lived experiences to characters' experiences in order to identify a theme in a culturally relevant text, and the first important finding for Research Question 2 was that qualitative codes overwhelmingly indicate that participants did see themselves and their experiences in the intervention story. In other words, interview data suggests participants found the intervention story culturally relevant. Overall, I labeled 30 excerpts from the transcribed interviews with codes that indicated connections between the text and readers, whereas I labeled only three excerpts with codes that suggest dissonance.

Participants provided substantial commentary about their connections to the characters and the plot of the intervention story but struggled to speak expansively about any connections they may have had to the setting. Interviewees commented the most on similarities between themselves and the characters in terms of gender, age, and speech. Participants also spoke regularly about the familiarity of the action of the story, such as accompanying a parent to work or taking care of a younger sibling. Participants also commented on their personal connection with the story's climactic event—the racist interaction with three soccer girls in the school gym. Four out of five interviewees offered discussed this aspect of the story. Both in their interview commentary and in their writing for the theme paragraph assignment, most participants demonstrated that they understood the interaction as racist and derived their theme from how the main characters handled this interaction. Thus, another important finding for Research Question

2 was that students' perceptions of cultural relevance were heavily centered on character and plot.

Perhaps the two most important finding during my exploration of Research Question 2 was that participants indicated they enjoyed the intervention story and that they found it a meaningful academic undertaking. Codes on the intervention story's curricular value and likability were the third and fourth most common codes after "characters: similarities" and "plot: similarities." All five interviewees remarked on the intervention story's likability and their personal affinity for it. Some offered multiple such remarks. When participants explained why they liked the intervention story, they consistently pointed to what they described as the story's valuable lessons about dealing with racism. Participants unvaryingly indicated that these valuable life lessons made the story enjoyable. Conversely, no interviewees indicated that they found the intervention story disagreeable. Similarly, when asked about retaining the intervention story as an element of my curriculum and its overall value in my ELA 7 class, all five interviewees indicated that I should continue to teach with the story. Again, some interviewees commented on the intervention story's curricular value more than once, and no interviewees suggested it be switched out of the curriculum for something different. When they expanded on the story's curricular value, participants again indicated the value of the story's life lessons. However, when speaking on the story's curricular value, participants often cited the story's lessons on the value of hard work, as well as its lessons on dealing with racism and bullying.

As did my quantitative findings, these qualitative results largely confirm much of the previous research featured in my study's literature review. Marquez and Colby (2021, p. 212) found that fourth-grade Latinx students were able to interpret a culturally relevant text featured in their study by comparing the characters' ages to those of their own family members. The

students understood that the grandmother in the story needed to move in with younger family members because they had experienced this themselves as an older family member's physical and cognitive abilities waned. Clark and Fleming (2019, pp. 37–38) found similar results with a different culturally relevant story. In their study, a teacher working with very young students, kindergarteners, also explained how her students had compared the older characters in the story to their own grandparents to discuss the difficulties of aging. Also like my study, both Marquez and Colby and Clark and Fleming found that plot events that were relatable to students' own lived experiences were also an important facet of comprehension. Each study also found that students understood why older characters moved in with younger characters because their grandparents had moved in with them or with other younger generation family members. Clark and Fleming (p. 37) had similar findings for cross-generational storytelling; students understood the importance of this custom for the characters because it was an important tradition and common experience in their own families. Rodriguez (2009, p. 18), working with a sample of preservice teachers on a culturally relevant curriculum project, also found that Latinx students from ages four to 11 regularly compared and contrasted themselves and their families against the characters featured in the study's CRL as a way of making meaning with the texts.

Several studies evaluated in my literature review also confirm my findings pertaining to reading interest and pleasure. In addition to their findings on reader–character and reader–plot connections, Marquez and Colby (2021, pp. 212, 215–216) also found evidence of readers' meaningful emotional connection to CRL. Marquez and Colby argued that CRL fostered reading engagement, pleasure, and even a sense of validation and belonging in the classroom for the students who participated in their study. Rodríguez (2009, pp. 18–19) also found not only a positive relationship between CRL and reading engagement and interest but also that CRL

fostered what Rodríguez called “empowerment.” Clark and Fleming (2019) also addressed both reading engagement and pleasure as well as the connections between character, plot, and comprehension. Clark and Fleming (pp. 39–40) found that teachers reported lengthier and more passionate class discussion when students worked with CRL, that students often wanted to reread CRL, and that students even independently researched CRL outside of the requirements on the class. Finally, Feger (2006, p. 19) reported that her students often expressed their desire to read CRL during class read-alouds and that during independent reading reluctant readers in her class read CRL voraciously.

Whereas my qualitative findings that suggest a positive relationship between reader–character and reader–plot connections and reading comprehension confirm previous findings in several studies in the extant CRL literature, my findings on student perspectives on the curricular value of CRL appear to be unique in the extant research literature. The previous research that I reviewed for this study simply does not address this aspect of CRL. I believe this is due to my interview protocol (Appendix C). My interview protocol featured a closing question that asked interviewees whether they thought studying the CRL featured in my study was a worthy academic undertaking and whether I should use the intervention story in the following year’s curriculum. Although I designed this question as means of accessing students’ thoughts on the story’s effect on engagement and interest, in some ways this question also somewhat falls outside of the primary focus on my research project. As this study was action research (Ferrance, 2000), I also meant this closing question to facilitate my curricular decisions as a teacher. My perspective as a teacher still working in the classroom facilitated the design of this interview question and this unique finding.

Discussion

The purpose of the quantitative phase of my study was to test for statistically significant differences in scores for a grade-level-appropriate reading comprehension assignment when students work with literature that they regard as culturally relevant as opposed to when they work with canonical literature that primarily features culturally dissonant characters, settings, and plots. The purpose of the qualitative phase of my study was to provide context for my quantitative findings and to gain firsthand insights into how the students experienced the CRL featured in this study. The two phases of my study produced both reciprocal and contrasting findings. Regarding reciprocal findings, qualitative interviews provided potential explanations as to why scores on the theme paragraph assignment were higher for students working with CRL. Regarding contrasting findings, qualitative interviews also provided potential explanations as to why scores on the cultural relevance rubric (Paulson & Freeman, 2003, pp. 27–29) did not reach the cut score of 20 (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 17). Below, I first discuss reciprocal findings, and I then discuss contrasting findings. Lastly, I discuss possible explanations for my central contrasting finding: students found the intervention story accessible and meaningful, yet I found no statistically significant effect for CRL.

Reciprocal Findings from Quantitative and Qualitative Data

On average, during the quantitative phase of my study students achieved higher scores on the theme paragraph assignment when they were working with more culturally relevant intervention story, and during the qualitative phase of my study students spoke of their familiarity with several important thematic elements of the intervention story, such as the frustration of dealing with racist stereotypes and living up to family responsibilities. As I explained in the Conceptual Framework section of Chapter 2, it is my contention that funds of

knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992), that is, stores of culture-based knowledge, are important constituents of the general knowledge element of the componential framework for comprehension (Perfetti & Adlof, 2012). Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2 depicts this process. Interview commentary from the qualitative phase of my study does suggest that students were able to draw on funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) within their general knowledge (Perfetti & Adlof, 2012, p. 4) to build "situation models" of the text and to make inferences (Perfetti & Adlof, 2012, p. 4) about the causes of and meaning behind the characters' behaviors. This process was reflected in both the higher average scores on the paragraph assignment featured in the quantitative phase of my study and the commentary these students offered during the qualitative phase of my study.

Funds of Knowledge and Understanding the Soccer Girls' and Papi's Behavior

In the curriculum that underpins this study, I taught students to think of a theme as a life lesson or a bit of knowledge about the world that they work to discover in a literary text. As a way of discovering the themes that the author has woven into the text, I instructed students to track what the characters learn, how the characters grow and change, the motivations behind the characters' behaviors, and what changes for the characters by the end of the story. While reading the intervention story, "Sol Painting, Inc." by Meg Medina (2017), most students followed this process to analyze how the main character, Merci, came to understand the world differently after her older brother, Roli, helped her to see the motivations behind their father's behavior during a racist interaction with three teenaged girls from the school soccer team, as described above.

In this passage, the soccer girls' behavior, though relatively extreme, constitutes what is commonly referred to as a microaggression (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273), an ordinary daily

interaction in which someone communicates ethnic/racial hostility to a person of color or engages in some form of a racial slight, and Roli demonstrates what is describe as a cognitive restructuring coping strategy (Tobin et al., 1984/2001, p. 2). That is, Roli helps Merci reframe this overwhelmingly negative interaction with the soccer girls into something positive. Roli is transmitting what Neri (2020, pp. 749–750) termed “difficult funds of knowledge.” Neri (749–750) defined difficult funds of knowledge as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skill that individuals develop through difficult, or traumatic, lived experiences.” Remarks from participants during my qualitative work for this study suggest students drew on this type of funds of knowledge, whether from their own experiences or from knowledge that was transmitted to them from others, to infer meaning from the interactions between these characters, that is, to determine a theme in this text, and in the quantitative phase of my study, scores on the theme paragraph assignment suggested students were better able to articulate these themes and better able to find quotations that illustrated them.

In terms of quantitative findings, as I previously described, the average score on the theme paragraph assignment for the overall analytical sample for students working with the more culturally relevant intervention story was 75%, and the average score for students working with the less culturally relevant control story was 71%. This trend held for all student subgroups. In terms of qualitative findings, interview commentary does indicate students used difficult funds of knowledge (Neri, 2020, pp. 749–750) to interpret the intervention story to facilitate those higher scores. For example, Anarely framed the connection rather directly: “I feel like it does, it is easier [to determine a theme], because it’s about racism, which I’m really good with racism.” Other students used parallel experiences with bigotry and discrimination to interpret the text in meaningful ways, such as Danae:

> Well, I'd say it's mostly with my sexuality, but not more so my ethnicity. …But mainly it's name calling. It's just dealing with that… It relates because it's the way the, I don't know the word. I can't think of it. …I know it's, oh, derogatory names that come out of it. It's just the way they use their words and the slurs that come with it in some of them.

When it comes to determining a theme and demonstrating reading comprehension with a literary text, both Anarely and Danae were highly successful and earned scores that reflect that success. This was also true of their peers who did similar work, and this is reflected in the higher scores for the intervention story theme paragraph assignment.

Funds of Knowledge and Understanding the Suarez Family Work Ethic

Student work that addressed themes pertaining to the importance of hard work also demonstrated a convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings. Throughout the intervention story, Merci fantasizes about taking over her father's painting business one day (Medina, 2017, pp. 43, 46), and her father, Papi, models a strong work ethic repeatedly as the tale unfolds. Papi's first lines of dialogue are about getting the job to repaint an apartment in which one of the Suarez family's elderly neighbors died (Medina, 2017, p. 41). He is efficient and strong as he carries several heavy paint cans in each hand, negating the need for any time-wasting return trips to his van (Medina, 2017, p. 48). He stresses the importance of getting to work promptly and not wasting time while on a job (Medina, 2017, p. 51). And readers see how Merci has internalized all this when she criticizes her older brother, Roli, for his lack of "quality control," that is, profuse splatter and drips as a result of his rushing (Medina, 2017, p. 52). These are the passages that students most commonly cited while explicating themes pertaining to the importance of hard work.

These passages, and the student work that utilized them, deal with the more traditional sense of the term funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). In one of the earliest works explicating

funds of knowledge, Moll et al. (1992, p. 133) provided six categories of example "household funds of knowledge": agriculture and mining, material and scientific knowledge, economics, medicine, household management, and religion. Of these six, four can be related to work, the importance of hard work, or work ethic, as demonstrated by the Suarez family in "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017). In fact, "painting" is listed as a subcategory under material and scientific knowledge (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Additionally, business appraisal, labor laws, consumer knowledge, accounting, budgets, childcare, cooking, and even automobile repair are all funds of knowledge outlined in Moll et al. (p. 133) that can be reasonably applied to "Sol Painting, Inc." (Medina, 2017) when making meaning with the text.

As with the themes pertaining to the soccer girls' racist behavior and the Suarez family's strategies for dealing with that racism, interview commentary does indicate students used funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992), specifically funds of knowledge pertaining to the importance of hard work, to interpret the intervention story and facilitate the higher scores on the theme paragraph assignment. For example, Isaiah compared Papi's determination to transform his labor into access to a good school for his daughter to his own work ethic at school. Isaiah explained, "Well, I'll use an example in math class. Sometimes it'll be hard to solve a problem or something, but I'll ask a friend and he'll explain it and then I'll eventually get it." Isaih also explained that, like Merci, it was his father who taught him to value hard work. Speaking about his father transmitting this lesson, Isaiah said, "So I go to work a lot with my dad, too. One of the sayings he has is nothing less but the best. He tells me, it doesn't matter how long it takes, always do it with quality work." Damien also compared the work ethic demonstrated by the Suarez family to

how he applied his own work ethic to his academic work, but he also made a comparison to his efforts to excel at his sport, football:

> Yeah, so I'm on the football team, and every day I practice. I always tell myself that I'm going to do good today, and I'm going to work hard. And then during the games and stuff, I tell myself the same thing. But sometimes I do tell myself that I can't do it, because like I don't know, it looks hard. But then when I do it, it's not hard, so... Also in school, if I want to do a test, then I tell myself, "Oh, I have to like work hard for the week and then do the test," you know?

As these qualitative remarks demonstrate, both Isaiah and Damien successfully applied their own funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) as a vehicle of comprehension, and this deeper understanding of the text, like Anarely and Danae, was reflected in the higher quantitative scores for the intervention story theme paragraph assignment.

Limitations

This study carries several limitations associated with its design. First, as this study is action research (Ferrance, 2000) based on curricula implemented by a single teacher, myself, the analytic sample is relatively small. Although working with a single teacher does offer a much higher degree of uniformity in the implementation of both the intervention and control curricula, it places a hard cap on the number of students such a study can reach. In most cases, bargaining agreements and master scheduling practices would prevent any attempts to increase the number of participating students, unless the number of participating teachers were increased. As such, the small sample size does increase the chances of assuming a false premise is true (Faber & Fonseca, 2014, p. 28). Also, because the overall analytic sample was small, the subgroups for students designated as English learners, students who received special education services, and, to a lesser degree, female and male students, were exceptionally small.

The sample under study in this research is also limited to a single grade level. As it is likely that for most individuals funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) continue to grow and develop as one ages, it is likely also true that a student would have more culturally based knowledge to deploy in textual interpretation when they were older. As such, older students may be even more adept at determining themes in CRL or otherwise utilizing funds of knowledge in reading comprehension. Conversely, elementary students, who typically lack certain worldly knowledge, may struggle to do so beyond relatively facile notions of fairness and kindness. As a result, it is difficult to generalize this study's findings to other age groups.

This study is also limited to a single ethnic/racial identity: Latinx youth from California, predominantly of Mexican ancestry. Much like the sample size, the school context determined the ethnic/racial identity of this study's participants. At the time of this study, approximately 90% of FMS students identified as Hispanic (CDE, 2017). As only readers themselves can determine cultural relevance (Delgado, 2021, p. 36; Piazza and Duncan, 2012, p. 246; Scullin, 2020, p. 98), this study's finding cannot easily be applied to students who might find the texts featured in the study culturally dissonant. As a result, it is difficult to generalize this study's findings to other ethnic/racial identities. However, it is also important to note that other studies (Camangian, 2013; Clark & Fleming, 2019; Council et al., 2019; Tatum, 2000) have also found positive associations for CRL and reading comprehension while working with other ethnic/racial identities and literature that their participants found relevant.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Chronic disparities in educational outcomes for students of color or lower socioeconomic status and their White or higher socioeconomic status peers warrant serious attention from all

practitioners and policymakers in the education field. Ample research has documented the persistent discrepancies in standardized test scores for these student groups (Brighouse et al., 2018; Coleman et al., 1966; Hanushek et al., 2019; Kurlaender et al., 2018; Reardon, 2013; Reardon & Galindo, 2009; Reardon et al., 2018, 2019; Warren, 2018; Warren & Lafortune, 2019). More importantly, low standardized tests scores are linked to lower grades, lower high school graduation rates, lower rates of college enrollment and completion, and higher rates of incarceration and adverse health outcomes (Heckman, 2011; Heckman et al. 2006; Murnane et al., 2000).

CRL offers a way to incorporate students' cultural knowledge, that is, funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992), into curricula as "official knowledge" (Apple, 1993, p. 1; Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467), and this may facilitate learning in ways that increases grades and other indicators of academic success, such as those listed above. As English language arts is a text-based discipline, CRL's potential to relationship learning in ELA is readily apparent, but extant research has also indicated CRL can be an effective tool in other academic disciplines and in other aspects of the schooling experience. Colwell (2019, p. 632) argued that using CRL in history, science, and mathematics instruction helps student develop disciplinary literacy. Marquez and Colby (2021, pp. 212–214) have shown that CRL fosters sociopolitical awareness, and Verden and Hickman (2009, pp. 9–13) explored CRL's relationship to prosocial behavior. However, the most important aspect of CRL may be its potential to realign students' relationship with schooling. The validation and simple enjoyment that CRL can offer may be reason enough to incorporate it into diverse curricula. My study added to the growing evidence that CRL can be associated with an increase in average scores on academic assignments, increase engagement

with texts, increase the pleasure of reading, and thereby change how students feel about schooling in general. These findings have several important implications for policy and practice.

Interviewees' Recommendations

As I discussed in Chapter 5, interviewees indicated both that they enjoyed reading the CRL featured in this study and that, because it served well as a basis of our lessons, it should be retained as the foundational element of my ELA curriculum for future students. In Chapter 5, Table 5.2 shows that under the "perspectives on likability" category, I labeled six passages with the "likability: positive" code and no passages with the "likability: negative" code. Each of the five interviewees who participated in this study commented at least once on the likability of the CRL featured in this study. Similarly, under the "perspectives on curricular value" category, I labeled seven passages with the "curricular value: positive" code and no passages with the "curricular value: negative" code. Here again each of the five interviewees commented at least once on the positive curricular value of the CRL featured in this study. From these qualitative data, interviewees explicitly advised that I utilize CRL as a vehicle of learning for my future students. From their recommendation, I propose that other teachers, practitioners, and policymakers do so as well. No doubt many students are able to succeed even when they find their schoolwork dull or inessential to their lives, but it is also self-evident that students are likely to do better and learn more when they find their schoolwork both interesting and valuable.

My Recommendations

My study's findings bolster the position that students must be involved in curricular decisions. As I have described several times in this study, only readers themselves can determine cultural relevance (Delgado, 2021, p. 36; Piazza and Duncan, 2012, p. 246; Scullin, 2020, p. 98). Indeed, though I selected the CRL featured in this study with foreknowledge of Paulson and

Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric and considerable demographic data on the study's participants, I was not as successful as I would have liked to have been in anticipating the cultural relevance of the intervention story. Although students rated the intervention story as much more culturally relevant than the control story, I fell below my aim of an average score above 20 on the cultural relevance rubric (Paulson & Freeman, 2003, 27–29), as stipulated by Rodríguez (2009, p. 17). In order to ensure the cultural relevance of the texts that underpin any curriculum, students must be included in the decision-making process, and as any student body of course changes from year to year, incoming students must be consulted at regular, frequent intervals. It is not safe to assume students from subsequent years will experience texts in the same ways as students from previous years.

I also recommend teachers, other practitioners, and policymakers are especially mindful of the both the "temporality" and "places" aspects of setting when considering the cultural relevance of a potential curricular text. During the qualitative interviews of my study, few students commented on things they shared with the intervention story's time frame or the story's locations of the dramatic action. Qualitative codes indicated only three comments from interviewees suggesting they found common ground with the story in terms of temporality and only two remarks suggesting they found common ground with the places featured in the story. In fact, without questions in my interview protocol that specifically solicited such information, I am unsure that participants would have commented on these elements of the intervention story at all. As such, it is important for practitioners and policymakers to consider the limited "shelf life" of any text that they may incorporate into their curriculum. As temporality is an important facet of cultural relevance, new texts will have to be adopted at regular, frequent intervals, no matter how relevant previous years' students found them to be.

As a result of the above two recommendations, it is essential that district administrators implement expeditious curriculum adoption processes. Traditionally, texts are formally adopted into curricula only after complex, time-consuming approval processes, and, once adopted, they are typically taught for years or even decades to all students indiscriminately. During my 16 years teaching in California's public schools, it has not been uncommon for children to work with the same books that their parents did. With culturally relevant texts, best practice will likely include building a bank of diverse texts that could be utilized for different students at different times, thus providing students and teachers with the curricular adaptability needed to maintain cultural relevance. Moreover, as timeliness is an important facet of cultural relevance, texts must cycle in and out of this reserve bank at regular, frequent intervals. Additionally, teachers must maintain flexibility in lesson planning and build lessons around skill sets that could be applied to a variety of texts rather than the texts themselves or the themes that are found within a particular text. In other words, curricular units must be driven by academic skill sets, such as determining a theme in *any* literary text, rather than teaching a specific theme from a specific text.

Additionally, practitioners and policymakers must be careful to consider other aspects of cultural relevance beyond ethnicity or race. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Delgado (2021, p. 36) contends that race alone cannot determine cultural relevance. Delgado explained that a folktale set in Mexico during the 1500s is likely not culturally relevant to today's students of Mexican ancestry because the daily experiences, language, beliefs, and traditions featured in such a story have changed a great deal and, as such, are likely to be unfamiliar to contemporary students, despite the characters' and readers' shared ethnic or cultural identity. As such, practitioners and policymakers must not reduce cultural relevance to ethnicity or race. I have also taught theme with Matt De La Peña's *How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court into a Place of*

Higher Learning and You at the Podium (2017), and although the characters in the story and many of the students in my class are closely aligned ancestrally, many students determine a theme in this text by drawing on their connections to the main character's commitment to his sport, basketball. For many students, school sports are a very important element of their school experience and the vehicle through which they learn many important life lessons. Compton-Lilly et al. (2017, p. 134) suggested that children's intersectional identities are "rich networks of self" that include language, gender, technological practices, nationality, and race, among other factors and subfactors. As a result, when texts are adopted into the curriculum, these other important aspects of students' identities must be considered, and, as Compton-Lilly et al. (p. 136) recommended, a large and diverse range of texts must be available to students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Perhaps the most important task for future research is to test the effects of CRL with larger sample sizes. Not only were my own samples relatively small, but small samples are also typical in the literature I reviewed for this study. Although working with a single teacher increases the likelihood of consistent implementation of the curriculum, larger samples could bring more statistical power to any quantitative findings and stronger validity and reliability quantitative findings. Future studies should design projects that can be implemented across an entire school, perhaps even across multiple school sites, as opposed to the one classroom of a single teacher. These larger studies, if they confirm findings in the extant literature, would be important validation for current studies working with smaller samples.

Relatedly, future studies should explore the effects of CRL for student subgroups such as students designated as English learners, students who receive special education services, and students who have an IEP. The small overall sample size in my study and, subsequently, the even

smaller sample sizes for these student subgroups make it difficult to draw conclusions from the findings associated with these students. For example, it may prove true that high-achieving general education students earn high marks regardless of factors such as lessons underpinned with texts that they find culturally relevant, simply because they are highly motivated by grades, whereas certain individuals in these common student subgroups, perhaps feeling marginalized because of their special education or English learner designation, may benefit more from the validation that can come with experiencing CRL in the classroom. Studies focusing specifically on these student subgroups would be especially meaningful contributions to the research literature.

One of the more encouraging findings from my study, at least from my point of view, was the consistency with which interviewees indicated they both enjoyed the intervention story and found reading it a meaningful experience. All interviewees commented on both these factors at least once. For this reason, it is important that future studies explore the effects of CRL on the pleasure of reading and students' feelings of validation and not just CRL's relationships to grades and other measures of academic success. There is a small research literature on CRL's relationship to reading engagement, but studies featuring a more direct measure of reading pleasure may also be meaningful. Also, considering that the few studies that have conducted tests of statistical significance (McCullough, 2013) have not found statistically significant results, exploring whether students simply enjoy CRL more than other literature could be of special importance. Although we may not be able to prove conclusively that CRL leads to higher grades, there is still plenty of reason to help students enjoy their schooling experience.

Future research should also be careful to utilize Paulson and Freeman's (2003, pp. 27–29) cultural relevance rubric or a similar measure that is able to capture participants' ability to relate

to the texts featured in the study. Although a handful of studies I reviewed for this project did deploy such measures, it was also common for researchers to assume cultural relevance from demographic and other information on participants. It should go without saying that it is difficult, if not impossible, to anticipate what any one reader will consider relatable, but extant literature demonstrates that such assumptions remain common. When researchers take the necessary step of confirming that participants did indeed find a featured text culturally relevant, or that a control text was not culturally relevant, any findings that may arise from the study carry a legitimacy that they otherwise may not.

Conclusion

My study confirms that Latinx middle school students utilized funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) and difficult funds of knowledge (Neri, 2020) as elements of general knowledge in the componential reading comprehension process (Perfetti & Adlof, 2012). My study also confirms that CRL facilitates students' application of funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005, 2011; Larrotta & Gainer, 2008; Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) and difficult funds of knowledge (Neri, 2020) to the reading process. It is important that teachers, other practitioners, and policymakers adopt culturally relevant texts and other culturally relevant curricular materials to facilitate learning for all students, and it is essential that the students themselves be consulted in the curriculum adoption process. It is also important that practitioners and policymakers consider the timeliness aspect of cultural relevance and that curricular materials are updated at regular, frequent intervals. Additionally, when adopting materials, it is essential to consider factors of cultural relevance beyond ethnicity/race.

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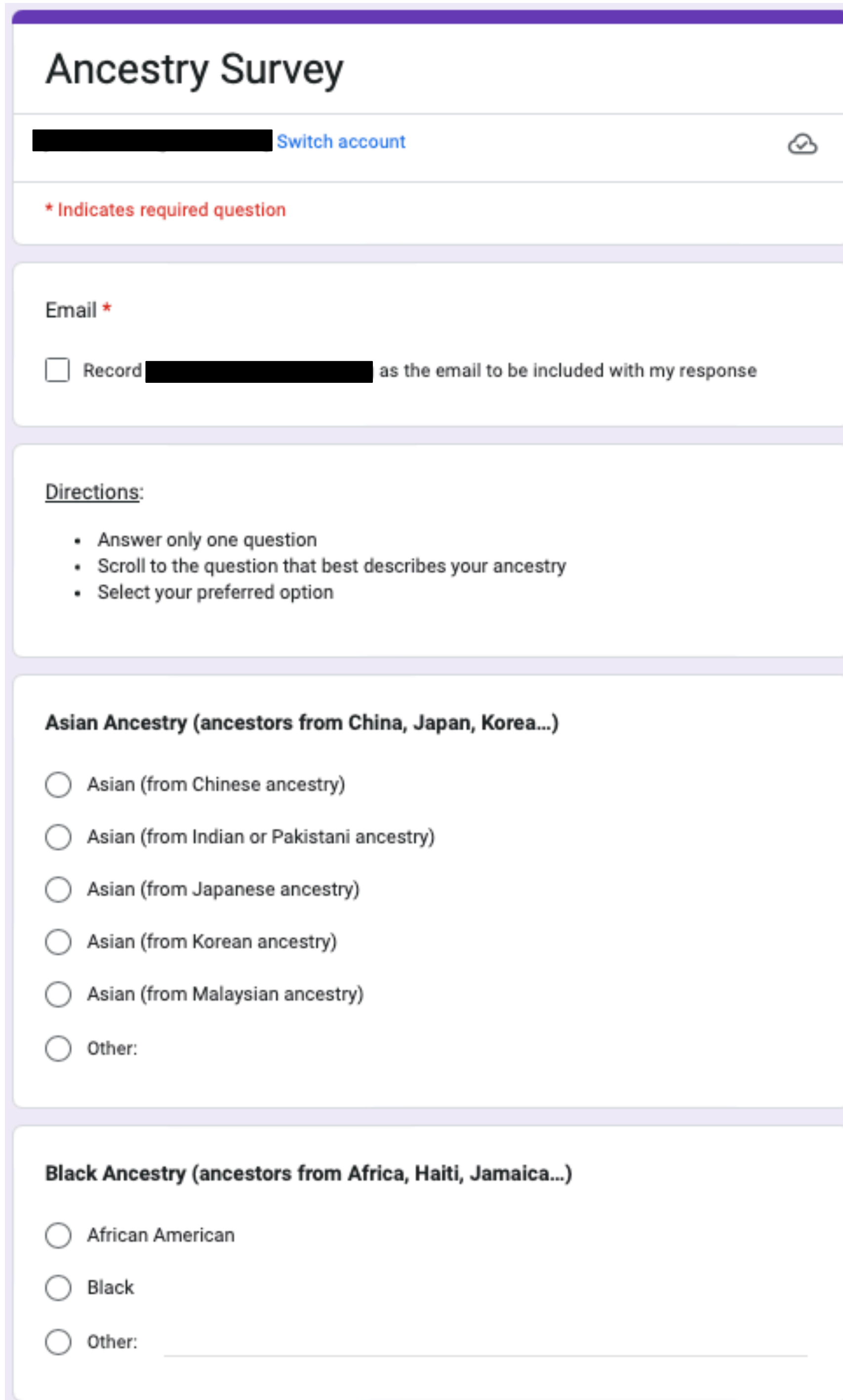
APPENDIX A: Instrument for Survey of Participants' Ancestry



Ancestry Survey

Switch account

* Indicates required question

Email *

☐ Record [redacted] as the email to be included with my response

Directions:

- Answer only one question
- Scroll to the question that best describes your ancestry
- Select your preferred option

Asian Ancestry (ancestors from China, Japan, Korea...)

- ○ Asian (from Chinese ancestry)
- ○ Asian (from Indian or Pakistani ancestry)
- ○ Asian (from Japanese ancestry)
- ○ Asian (from Korean ancestry)
- ○ Asian (from Malaysian ancestry)
- ○ Other:

Black Ancestry (ancestors from Africa, Haiti, Jamaica...)

- ○ African American
- ○ Black
- ○ Other: ______

Latino Ancestry—Central American (ancestors from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras...)

- ◯ Hispanic (from Central America ancestry)
- ◯ Latina (from Central American ancestry)
- ◯ Latino (from Central American ancestry)
- ◯ Latinx (from Central American ancestry)
- ◯ Central American
- ◯ Other: ______

Latino Ancestry—European (ancestors from Italy, Portugal, Spain...)

- ◯ Hispanic (from European ancestry)
- ◯ Latina (from European ancestry)
- ◯ Latino (from European ancestry)
- ◯ Latinx (from European ancestry)
- ◯ European
- ◯ Other: ______

Latino Ancestry—Mexican (ancestors from Mexico)

- ◯ Hispanic (from Mexican ancestry)
- ◯ Latina (from Mexican ancestry)
- ◯ Latino (from Mexican ancestry)
- ◯ Latinx (from Mexican ancestry)
- ◯ Mexican
- ◯ Other:

Latino Ancestry—South American (ancestors from Argentina, Brazil, Chile…)

- ◯ Hispanic (from South American ancestry)
- ◯ Latina (from South American)
- ◯ Latino (from South American ancestry)
- ◯ Latinx (from South American ancestry)
- ◯ South American
- ◯ Other: ______

Middle Eastern Ancestry (ancestors from Egypt, Iraq, Syria…)

- ◯ Arab
- ◯ Middle Eastern
- ◯ Other: ______

Mixed Ancestry

If you are of mixed ancestry, please describe your heritage in the space below. (For example, I have known students who referred to themselves as "Black-xican," "half Black-half white," or "part Asian-part Mexican-part white.")

Your answer

Native American Ancestry (ancestors from Native American nations and tribes)

- ◯ Native
- ◯ Native American
- ◯ Indigenous
- ◯ Indigenous American
- ◯ Other: ______

Other

If none of these options capture your ancestry, please describe your heritage in the space below.

Your answer

White European Ancestry (ancestors from England, France, Germany...)

- ◯ Caucasian
- ◯ European
- ◯ White
- ◯ Other:

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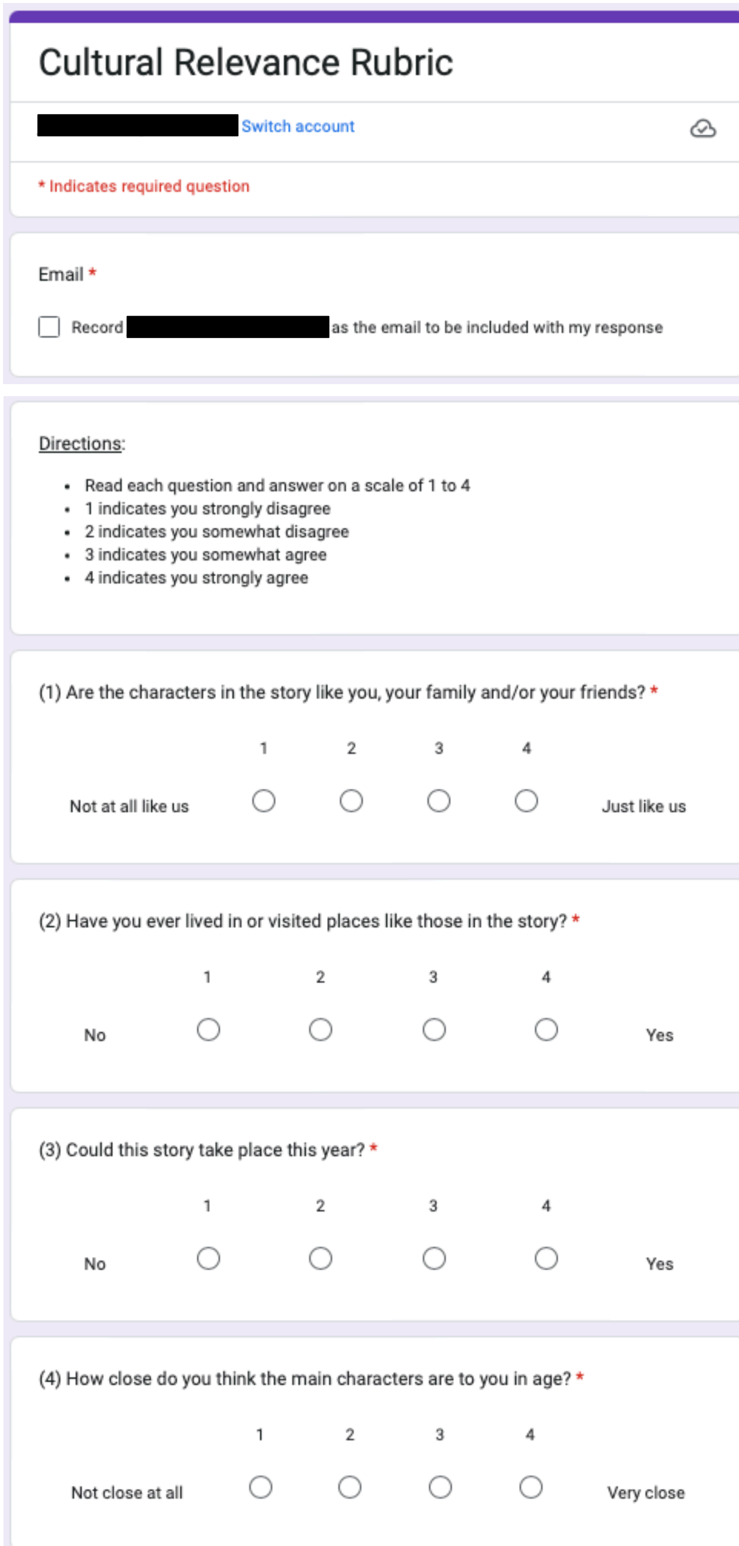
APPENDIX B: Measure of Participants' Perceptions of Cultural Relevance



Cultural Relevance Rubric

[redacted] Switch account

* Indicates required question

Email *

Record [redacted] as the email to be included with my response

Directions:

- Read each question and answer on a scale of 1 to 4
- 1 indicates you strongly disagree
- 2 indicates you somewhat disagree
- 3 indicates you somewhat agree
- 4 indicates you strongly agree

(1) Are the characters in the story like you, your family and/or your friends? *

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all like us	○	○	○	○	Just like us

(2) Have you ever lived in or visited places like those in the story? *

	1	2	3	4	
No	○	○	○	○	Yes

(3) Could this story take place this year? *

	1	2	3	4	
No	○	○	○	○	Yes

(4) How close do you think the main characters are to you in age? *

	1	2	3	4	
Not close at all	○	○	○	○	Very close

(5) If you are a girl, does the story have any main characters who are girls? *

If you are a boy, does the story have any main characters who are boys?

If you are nonbinary, does the story have any main characters who are nonbinary?

	1	2	3	4	
No	○	○	○	○	Yes

(6) Do the characters talk like you, your family and/or your friends? *

	1	2	3	4	
No	○	○	○	○	Yes

(7) Have you ever had experiences like the ones described in this story? *

	1	2	3	4	
No	○	○	○	○	Yes

Submit

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Note. Adapted from Paulson and Freeman (2003, pp. 27–29). *Insight from the eyes: The science of effective reading instruction*. Heinemann.

APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Biographical Starter Questions</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">1. What name would you like to use during this interview?
2. How would you like me to refer to you in terms of gender pronouns, etc.?
3. How old are you?
4. What grade are you in?
5. How long have you been a student in this school district?
6. How do you think of yourself in terms of ethnic identity and heritage?</td></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Grand Tour Starter Questions</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• What did you think of the story “Sol Painting, Inc.?”
• What was one part of the story you especially liked, or, what was one part of the story you especially disliked?</td></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Concrete Example Questions—General Cultural Relevance Questions</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• What was one part of the story you thought accurately captured the Mexican American experience, or what was one part you thought was inaccurate?</td></tr>
<tr><th>Accurate</th><th>Inaccurate</th></tr>
<tr><th>Comparison Questions</th><th>Contrast Questions</th></tr>
<tr><td>• Can you describe one way in which the characters in the story are similar to you and your family?</td><td>• Can you describe one way in which the characters in the story are different from you and your family?</td></tr>
</table>

• Can you describe how places in the story are similar to places you have lived or visited? • Can you describe something from the story that indicated to you that it could have taken place this year? • Which character from the story do you think was closest to your own age? • Can you describe something from the story that indicated to you one of the characters was close to your own age? • Can you describe something that one of the characters said that is similar to the way you, your family, and/ or your friends talk? • Can you describe something that happened in the story that is similar to something that has happened to you in real life?	• Can you describe how places in the story are different from places you have lived or visited? • Can you describe something from the story that indicated to you that it could not have taken place this year? • Can you describe something from the story that indicated to you that one of the characters was not close to your own age? • Can you describe something that one of the characters said that is not similar to the way you, your family, and/ or your friends talk? • Can you describe something that happened in the story that is not similar to something that has happened to you in real life?
Concrete Example Questions—Cultural Relevance & Determining Theme	
• In you theme paragraph for "Sol Painting, Inc.," you explained the theme you identified in the story was [read theme statement from paragraph]. You picked [read	

evidence quotation] as a part of the story that showed that theme. Have you ever experienced something similar in your own life or has a family member or friend told you a similar experience? Without using anyone's name, could you describe that experience?
Closing Questions
• Do you think stories like "Sol Painting, Inc." made it easier to do your schoolwork, for example to figure out a theme in the story? Why or why not? • Do you think I should teach this story to next year's students? Why or why not? • Can you think of anything else you would like to say about working with these stories in class that I have failed to ask? • Is there anything else you would like to add to what you have already said about these stories?