

**EMPOWERING BLACK BOYS THROUGH A CULTURALLY SUSTAINING
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BOOK CLUB: ENHANCING READING
COMPREHENSION AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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Abstract

Black boys have historically faced significant literacy challenges in educational settings, often due to the lack of culturally sustaining literature that reflects their experiences and identities. This study explored the implementation of culturally sustaining reading clubs as an intervention to address these challenges. Grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy, the initiative provided Black boys with access to literature that resonated with their cultural backgrounds, values, and aspirations. The reading clubs featured a curated selection of texts with Black male protagonists and themes, spanning various genres such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and graphic novels. Through interactive discussions, activities, and mentorship, participants engaged with literature in ways that affirmed their identities and fostered a deeper appreciation for reading. The study found that exposure to culturally relevant texts improved reading engagement, comprehension, and self-perception among Black boys. Additionally, the reading clubs created a supportive community where participants could critique, analyze, and celebrate literature in a meaningful way. The initiative demonstrated that culturally responsive literacy instruction could transform reading from a task into an empowering experience, promoting both academic success and self-confidence. The findings underscored the need for educators to integrate culturally relevant materials into literacy instruction to bridge the gap between students' lived experiences and academic content. This research contributes to ongoing discussions on equitable literacy practices and highlights the transformative potential of culturally sustaining pedagogy in addressing literacy disparities among Black boys.

Keywords: culturally sustaining literature, culturally relevant pedagogy, pedagogy, struggling reader, literacy, book clubs.

The Disquisition

The disquisition is formal, problem-based discourse. The disquisition is closely aligned with the scholar-practitioner role of Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) students and takes on a practical focus rather than the theoretical focus of traditional Ph.D. dissertations. The purpose of the disquisition is “to document the scholarly development of leadership expertise in organizational improvement” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5). The Ed.D. program at WCU nurtures and matures students as both scholars and practitioners who are trained to understand systems and institutional challenges and opportunities through a lens of research and scholarship. Students apply their knowledge, using their institutional access and positionality, directly to the educational institutions where they lead.

The Ed.D. is an applied degree, and the disquisition is similarly an applied capstone experience for doctoral work. The disquisition at WCU specifically utilizes an Improvement Science methodology, is shaped by critical theory and scholarly research, and engages the candidate in the application of the concepts in an applied manner through the development and implementation of an intervention within their local institution, focused on improvement of equity within that system. Ultimately, the disquisition serves as documentation and assessment of an improvement initiative that “contributes to a concrete good to the larger community and the dissemination of new relevant knowledge” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5).

The Problem of Literacy among Elementary-Age Black Boys

Black boys in the U.S. educational system often struggle with reading engagement and achievement, facing persistent challenges that hinder their academic success. Many lack a desire to read, show limited interest in literacy, and consistently score below proficiency levels on standardized tests measuring reading comprehension. Research indicates that systemic barriers, including curriculum that lacks cultural relevance and deficit-based narratives about Black male literacy, contribute to these challenges (Howard, 2010). Without intentional efforts to cultivate reading interest and provide meaningful literacy experiences, these patterns of disengagement and underperformance persist. However, when educators create learning environments that affirm students' identities, leverage their cultural knowledge, and foster a love for reading (Howard, 2013), they can help unlock the untapped academic potential of Black boys—leading to improved literacy outcomes and long-term success. In response to this need, a book club was introduced as a structured yet dynamic approach to fostering reading engagement, built on the belief that Black boys possess the potential to develop strong literacy skills and shape a future of academic success and empowerment.

This challenge stemmed largely from inadequate foundational reading skills and a lack of meaningful connections to required texts (Tatum, 2005). Standardized assessments at the elementary level consistently revealed persistent disparities in reading performance among these students (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2019), reflecting broader systemic inequities. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) conceptualized these disparities as an "education debt," a cumulative consequence of historical injustices and systemic barriers that exacerbated educational challenges over time. This debt intensified as students progressed through grade levels, influencing their performance on critical assessments such as state literacy

exams and college entry tests, including the ACT (Ladson-Billings, 2006). While it had been convenient to attribute these challenges solely to elementary educators, a more constructive approach involved identifying and implementing evidence-based strategies to address them.

The purpose of this study was to explore research-driven interventions designed to enhance literacy outcomes for Black male students. Strategies such as fostering choice and ownership in reading selections (Smith, 2019), utilizing open-ended questioning techniques (Miller, 2018), celebrating cultural diversity (Johnson, 2021), and incorporating modeling and guided discussions (Clark, 2018) demonstrate effectiveness in improving comprehension and engagement. Furthermore, culturally sustaining pedagogies play a pivotal role in fostering academic engagement and achievement among Black boys in elementary schools (Loyd, 2021). Grounded in a framework of culturally sustaining pedagogies and evidence-based literacy strategies, book clubs have emerged as a transformative mechanism in literacy education. Research indicates that when book clubs are designed to integrate culturally relevant texts and interactive discussion formats, they shift students' perception of reading from a burdensome academic task to an enjoyable, enriching activity (Harris & Wilson, 2021). For instance, Edwards and Thompson (2021) found that incorporating culturally responsive instructional methods, such as selecting texts that mirror students' lived experiences, can significantly enhance both reading comprehension and intrinsic motivation among Black male students. These findings are further supported by recent evidence reviewed by Garcia and Thomas (2020), underscoring the positive impact of culturally sustaining strategies on literacy outcomes in elementary settings.

Literature Review of the Problem

The literacy disparities affecting Black male students in the early republic reflected broader systemic inequities that later became a national issue in American history. During the 1830–1831 session of the North Carolina General Assembly, legislative records documented the passage of a bill titled *A Bill to Prevent All Persons from Teaching Slaves to Read or Write, the Use of Figures Excepted* (NCPedia, n.d.). This legislation built upon an earlier 1818 law that had initially prohibited teaching enslaved individuals to read or write, which lawmakers further strengthened in 1830. In 1831, an additional statute extended these prohibitions beyond enslaved individuals to include free people of color, making it illegal for them “to preach or exhort in public, or in any manner to officiate as a preacher or teacher in any prayer meeting or other association for worship where slaves of different families are collected together” (NCPedia, n.d.).

The prohibition against literacy for enslaved and free Black individuals established a generational barrier to education that persisted beyond emancipation. The denial of reading and writing skills in the 19th century contributed to enduring disparities in educational access and achievement for Black communities. These historical constraints continued to shape literacy outcomes well into the 21st century. In 2014, The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading reported that only 14 percent of Black boys achieved reading proficiency by fourth grade, compared to 42 percent of White boys (Lowe, 2021). Since fourth-grade reading proficiency is widely recognized as a key predictor of future academic success and graduation rates, this stark disparity underscores the urgent need for targeted literacy intervention for Black male students.

Research has demonstrated a strong correlation between early literacy struggles and long-term socioeconomic outcomes, including incarceration rates (Henderson et al., 2020).

Understanding this connection is crucial for addressing the urgency of literacy interventions for Black boys. Educational inequities and systemic marginalization have perpetuated cycles of poverty, incarceration, and restricted social mobility, exacerbating broader societal disparities (Davis, 2003). Research by the *Governor's Foundation for Early Literacy* (2024) indicated that individuals with early reading difficulties faced a significantly higher likelihood of encountering challenges later in life, including involvement in the criminal justice system. This correlation underscored the necessity of early intervention to support literacy development among Black boys as a means of disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. By addressing these disparities at an early stage, educators played a proactive role in mitigating long-term educational and social consequences.

In many states third and fifth grade reading assessments historically served as critical indicators of future academic proficiency (Henderson et al., 2020). Given these patterns, expanding access to literature that affirms Black identity—both culturally and academically—was essential. Bishop (1990) introduced the concept of “mirror” books, which allowed students to see themselves reflected in literature, fostering a stronger sense of identity and agency. Farrow (2019) interviewed Jawanza Kunjufu, an educator and author, who argued that literacy represented the defining civil rights issue of the 21st century. Kunjufu emphasized that a fundamental challenge contributing to Black boys’ reading struggles was their lack of exposure to literature that resonated with their lives. He asserted:

"I also believe another factor contributing to illiteracy is that Black boys have never fallen in love with reading. They never were given a book they could not put down. They have only read books to pass a test. Black boys need to love to read. They need books

where they see themselves, their communities, their history, and culture" (Farrow, 2019, n.p.).

Ultimately, fostering a love for reading among Black boys extended beyond literacy development; it cultivated a sense of identity, belonging, and empowerment. When Black boys are engaged with literature that reflected their experiences, history, and culture, they not only strengthened their reading skills but also deepened their connection to learning and self-discovery. Addressing literacy challenges required not only improving reading instruction but also ensuring that Black boys have access to books that validated their identities and experiences. By doing so, educators and stakeholders created pathways for personal growth, academic achievement, and expanded opportunities for the future.

The Reading Challenge: Literacy by the Third Grade

The disparity in literacy among Black male students in elementary school has been a longstanding and deeply entrenched national issue that challenged educators and policymakers (Ford & Kea, 2009). Despite efforts to address educational inequities, persistent disparities in reading proficiency remained, with Black male students often lagging behind their White peers in literacy achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994). These disparities had significant implications for academic success, social mobility, and lifelong opportunities, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions and systemic reforms to support the literacy development of Black boys from an early age.

Research indicate that literacy among Black male students were influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including structural inequities, socioeconomic disparities, and limited access to high-quality educational resources and support (Tatum, 2009). Additionally, cultural factors, such as the lack of representation of Black male protagonists and culturally sustaining literature

in elementary classrooms, contribute to feelings of disengagement and alienation from the learning process (Paris & Alim, 2017). As a result, Black boys face barriers to developing positive reading identities and struggled to connect with literacy materials that did not reflect their lived experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Research by Hill (2012), Lewis and Zisselsberger (2019), and McMahon and Raphael (1997) underscored the significance of book clubs in fostering children's cognitive and social development. Defined as a student-centered endeavor by Heller (2006), school book clubs leveraged the social aspect of learning, prioritizing children's perspectives. Particularly crucial in early literacy, these clubs introduced students to the joy of reading, as emphasized by Webber and Shropshire (2001). Book clubs facilitated peer interaction among students, enhancing their engagement with literature (Webber & Shropshire, 2001).

School book clubs play a critical role in fostering independent reading and building essential literacy skills. By providing structured time for reading and opportunities for enjoyable, self-directed engagement, these clubs help students develop not only proficiency but also a lifelong love of reading. Research by Gambrell and Morrow (2015) emphasizes that while explicit instruction in reading skills remains vital, ample time dedicated to pleasurable reading is equally important for literacy development. Studies have shown that such interventions contribute to improved reading comprehension among early learners (Cartledge et al., 2016).

Beyond developing reading skills, book clubs serve as a vital platform for connecting students with their cultural identities. By incorporating texts that reflect the diverse backgrounds of the students, these clubs provide mirrors in which young readers see their own experiences and values reflected. Sims Bishop's (1990) seminal work highlights how multicultural literature not only instills pride and stimulates interest but also encourages meaningful discussions about

identity. Subsequent research supports this view, showing that exposure to culturally relevant literature fosters personal connections, coping skills, and positive self-esteem (Brinson, 2012; Glass, 2019; Heineke et al., 2022), even as diverse texts become more common in educational settings (Heineke et al., 2022; Hill, 2012; Lewis & Zisselsberger, 2019).

Addressing literacy gaps between Black male students and other ethnic and racial groups required a multifaceted and culturally responsive approach prioritizing equity, inclusion, and empowerment (Ford & Kea, 2009). Educators, school leaders, and community stakeholders needed to work together to create learning environments that affirmed and celebrated Black boys' cultural identities and linguistic diversity. This included diversifying reading materials, implementing culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy, and providing targeted interventions and support services to meet the unique needs of Black male students in elementary schools (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Improving literacy rates among Black male students in elementary school has emerged as a critical concern that demands proactive strategies at every level of the education system (Gambrell & Morrow, 2015; Cartledge et al., 2016). By addressing systemic barriers, promoting culturally responsive practices, and fostering a culture of literacy empowerment, educators have worked to create more equitable and inclusive learning environments where Black boys can thrive both academically and socially (Gay, 2018; Harris & Wilson, 2021). Recognizing and dismantling institutional biases is imperative to ensure that all students have access to the resources and support necessary for success (Edwards & Thompson, 2021; Lewis & Zisselsberger, 2019). Moreover, through collaborative partnerships among educators, policymakers, families, and communities, stakeholders have taken concrete steps to close the

achievement gap and nurture the full potential of every child, regardless of background or identity (Temple et al., 2019; Brinson, 2012).

Research conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010) concluded that students who did not achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade were four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers. This reinforced the strong connection between third-grade reading proficiency and future academic success and educational attainment. This connection underscored the importance of early literacy skills in laying the foundation for continued learning and achievement throughout a student’s academic journey. Moreover, reading proficiency by third grade was linked to socio-economic outcomes. Students who struggled with reading in the early grades often faced challenges accessing educational opportunities and achieving economic stability later in life. NAEP (2022) results for North Carolina showed the continuing achievement gap between Black male students reading proficiently by fourth grade and other groups. Addressing this gap required targeted interventions and support to ensure that all students had the opportunity to develop essential literacy skills early in their academic careers.

Beyond these factors, reading proficiency by third grade is essential for fostering critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. The ability to read and comprehend complex texts was not only fundamental to success in other academic subjects but also vital for navigating real-world challenges. The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (2018) emphasized the importance of early literacy skills in preparing students to think critically, analyze information, and make informed decisions—skills essential for success in the 21st-century workforce.

Reading proficiency by the end of third grade was a critical milestone with far-reaching consequences for various future spheres of life, as well as academic achievement and cognitive

development in the present. In North Carolina, bolstering efforts to support early literacy development was essential for ensuring all students could succeed academically and thrive in the future.

National Educational Legislation

Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) is a hallmark law in the history of American education and represents a significant federal commitment to advancing educational equity and opportunity for all students. Signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson as a part of his “War on Poverty,” ESEA sought to address disparities in educational access and achievement experienced by low-income and disadvantaged students across the United States (USDOE, n.d.). Fundamentally, ESEA sought to provide federal funding to support the education of economically disadvantaged students, particularly those living in high poverty areas. Title I of the Act allocated resources to schools with a high proportion of low-income students, seeking to enhance educational opportunities and mitigate the effects of poverty on academic achievement (USDOE, n.d.). By directing federal funds to schools serving economically disadvantaged communities, ESEA attempted to ‘level the playing field’ and ensure all students had access to quality education, regardless of household.

ESEA represented a significant departure from previous federal education laws by introducing a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of diverse student populations. The legislation included support for English language learners, students with disabilities, and other historically underserved groups (USDOE, n.d.). Additionally, ESEA emphasized the need for parental involvement and community engagement in education by recognizing the critical role that families and communities have in supporting student success and school improvement

efforts. Over the years, the ESEA has undergone several reauthorizations and revisions, reflecting changing priorities and challenges in education policy. Despite its initial focus on addressing poverty and inequality in education, the ESEA's legacy extends beyond this to encompass broader goals of educational excellence, equity, and accountability. As subsequent iterations of the law, such as the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), demonstrated, ESEA continues to serve as a cornerstone of federal education policy, guiding efforts to promote student achievement and educational equity in the United States.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2002

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2002 was a landmark federal law that sought to improve student achievement and narrow achievement differences across the country. The No Child Left Behind Act brought a major revision to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Its primary goal was to hold schools accountable for student performance and ensure that all students, regardless of background or socioeconomic status, had access to quality education (USDOE, 2002).

Central to NCLB was establishing rigorous academic standards in reading, math, and science, with the expectation that all students would reach proficiency by 2014. States were required to administer annual standardized tests to measure student progress and hold schools accountable for meeting achievement targets (USDOE, 2002). NCLB also mandated greater transparency and accountability in education by requiring schools to report disaggregated data on student performance, including results for racial/ethnic subgroups, students with disabilities, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students (USDOE, 2002).

Despite its ambitious goals, NCLB faced criticism and controversy (USDOE, 2002). Opponents argued that the emphasis on standardized testing led to a narrowing of the curriculum,

increased teaching to the test, and unrealistic expectations for schools and educators (Ravitch, 2010). Many schools needed help to meet the proficiency targets set forth by NCLB, leading to concerns about labeling schools as failing and imposing punitive measures on them without providing necessary resources and support (Ravitch, 2010). Despite these challenges, NCLB represented a significant federal intervention in education policy and set the stage for later legislation to improve accountability and equity in education.

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015

The *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* (ESSA) was a significant reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), and replaced NCLB. Signed into law by President Barack Obama, ESSA sought to provide states with greater flexibility and autonomy in designing accountability systems and supporting student achievement (USDOE, 2015). ESSA represented a bipartisan effort to address the limitations and criticisms of NCLB while maintaining a commitment to educational equity and excellence.

One of ESSA's key features was shifting from a federally driven accountability framework to a state-led approach. Under ESSA, states had more authority to set academic standards, determine assessment measures, and design accountability systems tailored to their circumstances (USDOE, 2015). This flexibility allowed states to develop more comprehensive and holistic approaches to assessing student learning and school performance, moving away from the narrow focus on standardized testing that characterized NCLB.

ESSA placed a renewed emphasis on supporting the needs of historically underserved student populations, including low-income students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and students of color. The legislation required states to develop plans to identify and address achievement gaps, improve school climate and safety, and provide equitable access to

educational resources and opportunities (USDOE, 2015). By prioritizing equity and inclusivity, the federal government hoped ESSA would ensure that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, had access to a high-quality education.

In addition to its focus on state flexibility and equity, ESSA promoted greater stakeholder engagement and collaboration in education decision-making. The law encouraged partnerships between schools, districts, families, communities, and other stakeholders to develop and implement evidence-based strategies for school improvement and student success (USDOE, 2015). By fostering collaboration and shared responsibility for student outcomes, ESSA aimed to create a more cohesive and responsive education system that meets the diverse needs of students and communities nationwide.

North Carolina's Commitment to Early Literacy

North Carolina has instituted several policies to enhance student outcomes, including the *NC Read to Achieve Program* (RtA) (NCGA, 2013, 2021). This initiative, part of the broader *Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021* (Fofaria, 2021), endeavors to ensure that every student achieves proficiency in reading by third grade, a critical milestone in academic development. Through RtA, students falling below grade-level reading standards receive targeted support, including participation in reading camps and other interventions, to enhance their literacy skills.

Using a standardized assessment program, educators identify students needing reading assistance. These key areas can be vocabulary, for example, foundational reading skills, and comprehension. The *Science of Reading* (SoR) (Lyon & Chhabra, n.d.) inform instructional strategies adapted to address specific literacy challenges, and seek to propel all students toward grade-level reading proficiency.

Recent changes made to NC *Senate Bill 387 (RtA)* under the *Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021*, underscore a renewed commitment to evidence-based literacy instruction. Emphasizing the principles of SoR (Fofaria, 2021; Lyon & Chhabra, n.d), these revisions prioritize fundamental aspects of language acquisition, phonological awareness, phonics instruction, fluency development, vocabulary acquisition, oral language skills, and comprehension strategies. To support these initiatives, the General Assembly has allocated funding for educators to undergo training in *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)*, a professional development(PD) program grounded in research-based literacy instruction practices (Schwartz, 2022). The amended legislation also requires that teacher preparation programs integrate coursework aligned with the principles of SoR. It also requires elementary educators to pursue ongoing PD in literacy instruction to renew their credentials. Educators in the NC pre-kindergarten program and those serving kindergarten through fifth-grade students are mandated to engage in training programs meeting the rigorous standards of the *Excellent Public Schools Act*.

Impact of Promoting Literacy Equity and Academic Success for Black Male Students

Addressing the need for improved literacy among Black male students in elementary school is a pressing concern that requires proactive attention and action across all levels of the education system. By addressing systemic barriers, promoting cultural responsiveness, and fostering a culture of literacy empowerment, we can create more equitable and inclusive learning environments where Black boys can thrive. It is imperative to recognize and dismantle any institutional biases or disparities that hinder their educational attainment, ensuring that all students have access to the resources and support they need to succeed.

Through collaborative efforts between educators, policymakers, families, and communities, can work towards closing the achievement gap and nurturing the full potential of every child, regardless of their background or identity. Reading is indispensable for achieving academic excellence, fostering continuous learning, and unlocking pathways to a more fulfilling life (Stanovich, 2000). Researchers underscore the pivotal role of proficient reading, especially by third grade, in shaping future trajectories (Juel, 1998). Studies indicated that students who lack proficiency in reading by this critical point are at significantly higher risk of dropping out of high school, have less likelihood of college enrollment, and face increased risk of incarceration (Carreker, 2021; Hernandez, 2011).

Findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2022) underscore the concerning reality that many American children struggle to attain the reading proficiency necessary for effectively navigating their schoolwork. This worrisome trend casts doubt on their ability to enjoy the full spectrum of economic, social, and civic benefits that society can offer. As scholars, we must advocate for policies and initiatives aimed at strengthening the development of early literacy development to ensure equitable opportunities for all students to thrive and succeed in both academic and broader life endeavors.

Empirical Research on Improving Literacy for Black Boys

Addressing literacy disparities among Black boys in elementary school requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and mitigates the impact of socioeconomic inequities. Effective interventions should focus on increasing access to literacy resources and dismantling systemic barriers within the education system (Anderson & Carter, 2021; Smith et al., 2023). To close the literacy achievement gap, targeted strategies must incorporate culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogical practices, direct support for struggling readers, and active

family and community engagement in literacy initiatives (Brown & Williams, 2022; Johnson & Lee, 2024). These approaches ensure that Black boys receive instruction that validates their identities while equipping them with the skills necessary for academic success. By addressing the structural factors contributing to literacy inequities, educators and policymakers can create pathways for Black boys to thrive in literacy-rich environments (Taylor & Harris, 2020).

Socioeconomic status (SES) has long been recognized as a significant determinant of literacy outcomes. Children from low-income households often lack access to books and other literacy-enriching materials, which impedes their reading development and contributes to widening achievement gaps over time (Lopez & Green, 2022). These disparities are exacerbated by underfunded schools that serve predominantly low-income and minority communities, where limited resources and less experienced teachers further hinder academic progress (Nguyen & Patel, 2023). Additionally, the absence of culturally responsive curricula often alienates Black boys from reading materials that reflect their lived experiences, reducing engagement and motivation (Wilson & Scott, 2021).

Teacher expectations and biases also play a pivotal role in shaping the academic trajectories of Black boys. Research has consistently shown that teachers often hold lower expectations for Black students, which can limit their exposure to rigorous literacy instruction and enrichment opportunities (Davis & Moore, 2020). Implicit biases further manifest in disciplinary practices, with Black boys facing disproportionate punitive measures that disrupt their learning and access to educational resources (Martin et al., 2024).

Professional development programs aimed at addressing implicit biases and fostering equitable expectations are critical to improving literacy outcomes. Effective professional development should raise awareness of how teacher perceptions influence student achievement

while equipping educators with strategies to cultivate high expectations for all students (Hernandez & Clark, 2021). Culturally responsive teaching approaches that affirm Black boys' identities and lived experiences can mitigate the negative effects of bias while fostering a more inclusive and empowering learning environment (Evans & Brooks, 2023).

By proactively addressing implicit biases and ensuring that Black boys receive equitable academic opportunities, educators can help dismantle barriers that impede literacy development. A commitment to fostering high expectations, implementing culturally sustaining pedagogies, and creating affirming classroom environments will contribute to narrowing the literacy gap and empowering Black boys to succeed academically and beyond (Jackson & Lewis, 2022). When educators intentionally set high standards, use teaching methods that reflect and respect students' cultural identities, and build positive, supportive classroom spaces, they can help close the literacy gap and support the academic and personal growth of Black boys. Disrupting deficit-based narratives and reinforcing the potential of every student is essential to fostering long-term educational equity (Thomas & Walker, 2024).

Culturally Responsive Approaches in Literacy Education for Black Boys

A. W. Tatum, a leading scholar in literacy education, has extensively examined the literacy experiences of Black boys, advocating for culturally responsive approaches to instruction. Tatum (2005) argued that traditional literacy instruction often fails to engage Black boys effectively because it does not acknowledge or incorporate their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. To address this issue, he recommended integrating culturally relevant and sustaining texts and instructional practices that reflect Black boys' lived experiences, thereby enhancing their literacy development. His research underscores the importance of recognizing

and building upon the strengths of Black boys in the literacy learning process, particularly their rich oral storytelling traditions and cultural knowledge.

Tatum (2008) further highlighted systemic barriers that hinder Black boys' access to high-quality literacy instruction. He critiqued deficit-oriented perspectives that attribute literacy struggles solely to individual deficiencies, instead advocating for a more nuanced understanding of the structural inequities shaping their educational experiences. He called for policies and practices that promote equity and social justice in education, emphasizing the need for culturally sustaining pedagogies that affirm the identities and experiences of Black boys. By addressing systemic factors such as curriculum and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), teacher expectations and bias (Ferguson, 2003), family and community support (Evans & English, 2002), and cultural representation (Tatum, 1997), educators can create more equitable learning environments that support the academic success of Black boys.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

Curriculum and pedagogy play a critical role in literacy disparities, particularly among Black male students. Traditional curricula often fail to reflect students' diverse cultural backgrounds, leading to disengagement and diminished motivation for reading (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This disconnect exacerbates literacy challenges, as students struggle to relate to the material presented in the classroom. Pedagogical approaches that do not incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies can alienate students from marginalized communities (Gay, 2010). These approaches often overlook the cultural assets that students bring to the classroom, instead perpetuating a one-size-fits-all methodology that fails to address diverse learners' unique needs (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The consequences of such gaps extend beyond the classroom, as standardized reading assessments frequently reflect these disadvantages, leading to lower

performance among Black male students (Milner, 2012). Addressing these curricular and pedagogical shortcomings is essential for fostering an inclusive learning environment that promotes literacy for all students.

Teacher Expectations and Bias

Teacher expectations and biases significantly influence literacy outcomes among Black boys. Research demonstrates that teacher expectations can shape student achievement, with lower expectations often leading to poorer academic performance (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). When educators hold biased beliefs or lower expectations for students from marginalized backgrounds—such as Black males—these perceptions can adversely affect literacy development (Harris & Wilson, 2021; Heineke et al., 2022). Teachers may unintentionally provide less academic support and fewer engagement opportunities to students they perceive as less capable, perpetuating educational inequities (Ferguson, 1998). Additionally, implicit biases can lead to differential treatment, whereby students from underrepresented backgrounds receive less positive reinforcement and fewer resources, further widening the literacy gap (Gershenson et al., 2016). Addressing teacher expectations and biases is crucial for promoting equitable literacy outcomes and ensuring that all students receive the support necessary to succeed.

Family and Community Support

Family and community support play a vital role in addressing literacy disparities among Black boys. Research consistently demonstrates that strong familial and community involvement positively correlates with literacy achievement (Barton, 2004). Parents who actively participate in their children's education—through activities such as reading at home and encouraging academic engagement—significantly enhance literacy development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Additionally, community resources, such as libraries, after-school programs, and literacy initiatives, provide essential support in bridging gaps in educational access and engagement (Lee, 2007). When families and communities actively participate in literacy activities, they create an environment conducive to learning and academic success (Smith, 2016). Conversely, the absence of such support can exacerbate educational disparities and hinder literacy development (Barton & Coley, 2010).

Cultural Representation in Educational Materials

Cultural representation in educational materials and practices is a critical factor in literacy development. When curricula and reading materials reflect students' diverse cultural backgrounds, engagement and comprehension improve, fostering a more meaningful connection to literacy instruction (Banks, 2006). Students who see their cultural identities and lived experiences represented in books and classroom discussions are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward reading and learning (Gay, 2010). Conversely, a lack of cultural representation can lead to disengagement and lower achievement, as students may feel disconnected from the material and undervalued within the educational setting (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Research has demonstrated that incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy not only enhances students' reading skills but also fosters an inclusive and equitable learning environment (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Thus, ensuring diverse and inclusive educational content is essential for addressing literacy disparities and supporting Black boys' academic success (Howard, 2010).

Empowering Black Boys in Literacy Learning

Tatum (2013a) asserted that Black boys' engagement in literacy learning is closely tied to their sense of agency and ownership over literacy practices. He argued that when Black boys perceive literacy as relevant to their lives and experiences, they are more likely to engage with

reading and writing in meaningful ways. His research highlighted how literacy education intersects with broader social and educational inequities, shaping Black boys' academic experiences and opportunities. He emphasized the role of identity development in literacy engagement, suggesting that instructional approaches that acknowledge Black boys' voices and lived experiences may contribute to more meaningful literacy interactions (Tatum, 2013a).

Beyond culturally responsive teaching practices and systemic inequities, Tatum (2008) explored the influence of mentorship and community involvement on Black boys' literacy development. He noted that relationships with adult mentors from similar cultural backgrounds can shape Black boys' perceptions of reading and writing, potentially influencing their engagement with literacy. His work pointed to the broader role of community and social networks in literacy development, underscoring the ways in which access to support outside the classroom can contribute to literacy experiences. Tatum's examination of mentorship and community engagement offers insight into the multiple factors that impact Black boys' literacy outcomes.

Culturally Responsive Teaching as a Literacy Framework

Hammond (2015) defined culturally responsive teaching as:

“An educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning-making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the students know to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning” (p. 15).

In her book *Beyond Flesh-Colored Crayons*, Hammond (2016) identified four key components of culturally responsive pedagogy:

1. **Affirmation** – Recognizing and accepting students as they are, allowing them to navigate multiple identities.
2. **Validation** – Acknowledging students’ lived experiences and the socio-political context in which they exist while integrating these issues into instruction.
3. **Cognition** – Using students’ cultural knowledge as a foundation for conceptual understanding, aligning with learning theory and neuroscience.
4. **Processing** – Incorporating culturally relevant methods such as call-and-response, music, movement, and storytelling to reinforce learning.

The National Education Policy (NEP, n.d.) describes culturally responsive teaching as a framework that connects students’ home and school experiences, acknowledges their cultural backgrounds, and centers their voices in the classroom. It also cautions against misconceptions, including the assumption that race and culture are interchangeable, the oversimplification of culturally responsive teaching as solely a motivational tool, or the reliance on a singular instructional approach. Research in this area highlights the ways in which culturally responsive teaching influences literacy engagement and comprehension, shaping the educational experiences of Black boys in elementary school.

Experiences and Identities of Black Boys

Tatum’s (2017) work challenges traditional literacy paradigms by advocating for a broader definition of literacy that includes diverse forms of expression, such as digital and visual literacies. His conceptualization of literacy expands beyond conventional reading and writing practices to incorporate the varied ways in that Black boys engage with literacy, including digital

media creation and participation in hip-hop culture. This perspective highlights the multifaceted nature of literacy and the diverse ways students interact with texts and meaning-making.

Tatum (2017) posited that Black boys often participate in literacy practices that extend beyond school-based definitions, engaging in creative and cultural expressions that are not always recognized in traditional literacy instruction. His research aligns with broader discussions about the role of culturally relevant and sustaining literacy practices in shaping literacy engagement and participation among Black male students.

Scholarly discussions on culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Paris & Alim, 2014) emphasize the significance of students seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum. This has been identified as particularly relevant for Black boys, who are often underrepresented or marginalized in the texts they encounter in school (Sims Bishop, 1990). The demographic composition of the teaching workforce—where 80.5% of elementary school teachers identify as white and female (Zippia, 2024)—raises questions about how educators approach literacy instruction in racially diverse classrooms and whether cultural perspectives are consistently integrated into pedagogy.

Culturally sustaining literacy instruction frameworks focus on incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, languages, and experiences within educational contexts. Paris (2012) described these frameworks as ways to affirm students' cultural identities and linguistic backgrounds, fostering both academic engagement and critical awareness. Gutiérrez (2008) highlighted how the selection of texts, authors, and instructional methods can reflect students' lived experiences, influencing their literacy development. These frameworks also acknowledge the role of linguistic diversity in shaping literacy practices, viewing home languages as valuable resources for literacy learning (García & Kleifgen, 2010). Culturally sustaining literacy

instruction has been associated with the development of critical literacy skills, as students engage in analysis of societal narratives and structures (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Paris and Alim (2014) examined the relationship between language, culture, and learning, noting that instructional approaches incorporating students' cultural backgrounds can influence literacy engagement. García and Kleifgen (2010) discussed the ways in which partnerships between educators, families, and communities contribute to literacy development and cultural identity formation. Milner (2010) suggested that such frameworks encourage student agency, allowing students to share their perspectives and contribute to the classroom community. Research by Gorski (2013) explores how these frameworks intersect with issues of equity and access, raising questions about the systemic barriers that impact literacy achievement.

Discussions around reading comprehension approaches that consider students' cultural identities, languages, and experiences continue to shape conversations about literacy education. Research suggests that incorporating culturally relevant texts and literacy practices may influence student engagement, academic development, and personal identity formation. These discussions remain central to ongoing inquiries into equitable and inclusive literacy instruction.

Position on Reading

As Chief Operations Officer for Blue County Schools, my approach to improving literacy outcomes for Black boys in elementary school acknowledges the systemic barriers and inequities that often hinder their literacy development. Wheeler and Swords (2004) highlight the societal perceptions of language, noting that “while variation in language structure is always present, a different kind of variation lies in the public's attitudes toward language. ‘Standard’ English is often called ‘good’ English while ‘nonstandard’ English is considered ‘bad’” (p. 473). This

distinction has profound implications for Black male students, particularly those who speak African American English (AAE).

Children acquire language varieties such as AAE in their homes and communities before formal schooling and continue to use these varieties throughout their lives. AAE is a legitimate and linguistically rich dialect, encompassing unique phonological, syntactic, and lexical features distinct from General American English (GAE) (Blake, 2017). When these students enter school, they often encounter GAE as the dominant language variety, marking a pivotal linguistic shift that can impact both academic performance and social interactions (Washington, 2023; Washington et al., 2023).

A significant challenge for African American students who speak AAE is the need to code-switch between AAE and GAE in educational settings (Washington, 2023). While AAE is a valid dialect, it is often stigmatized and not fully recognized within mainstream educational contexts (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). This forces students to navigate the complexities of switching between two distinct linguistic systems, which can lead to cognitive and linguistic challenges. Differences in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation between AAE and GAE may create misunderstandings or misinterpretations of academic content, potentially hindering students' learning experiences (Green, 2002).

The pressure to conform to GAE can foster linguistic insecurity and cultural dissonance among African American students (Smitherman, 2000). However, AAE also serves as a valuable resource, providing a foundation for literacy development and academic success when it is recognized and validated within educational contexts. Acknowledging AAE fosters linguistic pride and strengthens students' cultural identities, leading to more positive attitudes toward learning and language (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

The importance of culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive pedagogy is clear in addressing the challenges posed by linguistic diversity in the classroom. Wheeler and Swords (2004) argue that the longstanding concern regarding vernacular dialects in schools necessitates a shift toward recognizing and supporting students' home languages. By honoring AAE alongside GAE, educators can empower students to navigate linguistic and cultural complexities with confidence, promoting both academic and personal growth.

Understanding literacy as a foundational skill for academic success requires targeted, culturally sustaining initiatives for Black boys. Central to my approach is the belief in the power of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Gay, 2002, 2010; Howard, 2001, 2003; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017), which acknowledges and affirms Black boys' diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. By integrating culturally relevant texts, teaching practices, and community engagement strategies into literacy instruction, we can create an inclusive and empowering learning environment where Black boys feel valued and supported in their literacy journey.

Collaboration and partnership are essential for addressing the unique needs of Black boys in our district. A comprehensive, district-wide approach involves not only educators but also families, school administrators, and community stakeholders. By fostering strong partnerships and leveraging resources, we can implement reading programs and interventions that are targeted and sustainable. This collaborative effort extends beyond the classroom, engaging community-based organizations, cultural institutions, and local leaders to support Black boys' academic success. Through these partnerships, we aim to dismantle systemic barriers and create equitable opportunities for Black boys to thrive academically, socially, personally, culturally and spiritually, recognizing that true empowerment encompasses the whole child and affirms their identity in every dimension.

A Critical Causal Analysis and Theoretical Framework

The persistent education debt in literacy owed to Black students is deeply rooted in a complex web of structural inequities and historical disparities. To address these inequities, it is essential to conduct a thorough causal analysis that uncovers the underlying factors and root causes contributing to the achievement gap. This analysis is vital for identifying and addressing structural issues within educational systems that perpetuate these disparities. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) emphasizes the importance of moving away from a deficit perspective, which often blames students for their underperformance, and instead she critically examines internal practices and behaviors within educational institutions that may contribute to the problem.

When educators adopt a user-centered mindset—one that centers the lived experiences and perspectives of students from marginalized communities—they are better positioned to recognize and dismantle the pedagogical practices, policies, and institutional structures that inadvertently exacerbate educational disparities. Recent research underscores that by engaging in critical reflection and inclusive practices, educators can challenge these systemic barriers and work toward reducing the education debt faced by Black students (McKnight & McKnight, 2021; Heineke et al., 2022). While these issues may be visible to external observers, they are sometimes overlooked or rationalized within the institution itself. The responsibility lies with educators to critically assess their practices and actively seek ways to rectify the systems that contribute to the education debt faced by Black students. By engaging in this reflective and inclusive process, educators can better understand the factors influencing literacy outcomes for Black students and work toward dismantling the barriers that hinder their academic success. This comprehensive analysis is

not only a necessary step in addressing inequities but also a call to action for creating more equitable, responsive, and effective educational environments (Heineke et al., 2022).

Root Cause Analysis

I employed causal analysis as a comprehensive and systematic approach to investigating the complex relationships between causes, effects, reasons, and outcomes (Uksw, 2016). This method enabled me to thoroughly examine the underlying factors contributing to a specific outcome, with the aim of discerning, understanding, and elucidating the intricate interplay of variables that led to particular results. Causal analysis goes beyond merely connecting variables; it establishes a logical and substantiated understanding of how specific causes contribute to observed effects. This approach necessitated a deep comprehension of the mechanisms and processes driving the identified outcomes (Uksw, 2016). The technique proved useful in breaking down the problem I had identified in my practice into several components, which I addressed during the culturally sustaining book club study.

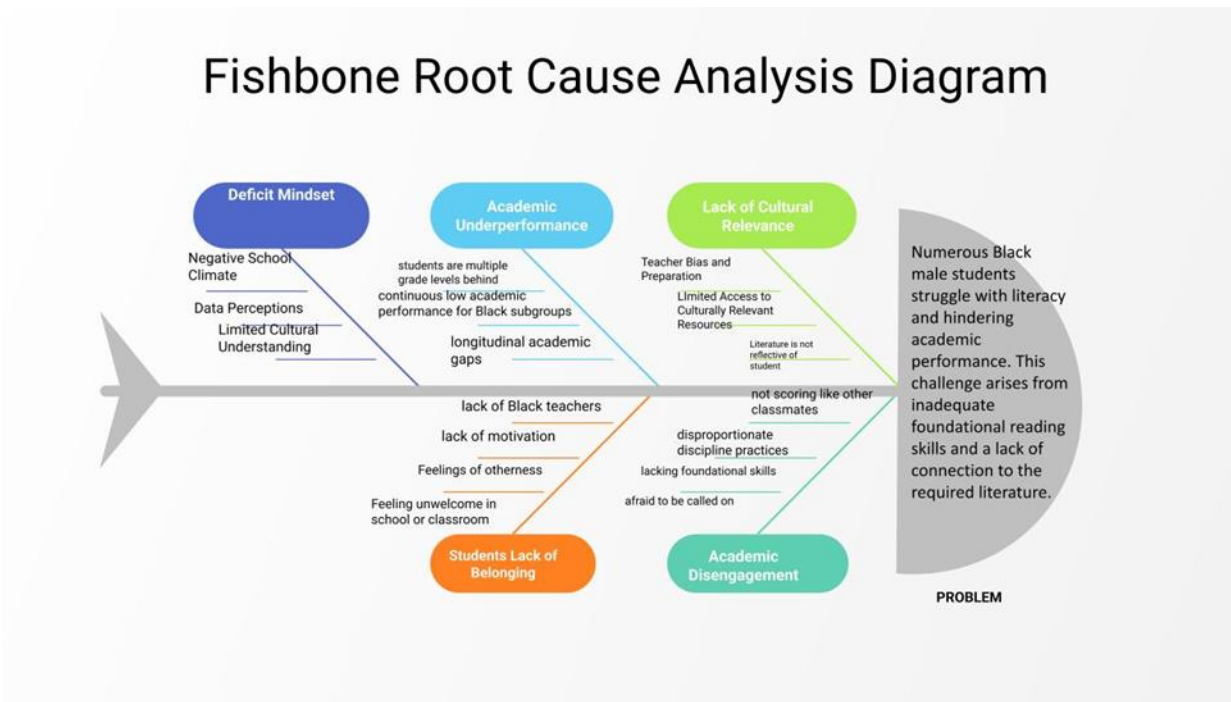
Conducting critical causal analysis involved deconstructing a complex problem into its constituent parts, identifying the pivotal factors influencing the outcome, and scrutinizing the relationships between these factors. The primary objective was to develop a clear understanding of the factors underpinning the outcome. These insights ultimately informed my decision-making process, policy development, and strategies aimed at mitigating the identified problem.

To aid in categorizing the potential causes of the problem in my practice, I constructed a fishbone diagram, also known as a cause-and-effect or Ishikawa diagram (Ishikawa, 1986). This tool helped identify the root causes of the issue. Ishikawa (1986) described the process of creating such a diagram, beginning with determining the quality characteristic to improve (the problem), followed by identifying the significant factors contributing to the issue, and then

specifying the detailed elements that may contribute to these broader factors, referred to as “twigs.”

Figure 1

Analyzing the Literacy Gap Among Elementary Age Black Males Using A Fishbone Diagram



Lack of Cultural Relevance

One significant factor contributing to the literacy challenges faced by Black elementary boys was the absence of culturally relevant and sustaining resources in literacy instruction (Hammond, 2015). Without materials that reflect their cultural experiences and backgrounds, these students struggled to connect with the content and to see themselves represented in their learning (Sims Bishop, 1990). This lack of cultural relevance often led to disengagement and alienation, which hindered their motivation to participate in literacy activities (Tatum, 2005). The failure to address the cultural aspects of learning contributed to widening the achievement gap between these students and their peers (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Academic Disengagement

Black male students often experience academic disengagement due to multiple intersecting factors, including fear of being called on in class, lack of foundational literacy skills, disproportionate discipline practices, and lower academic performance compared to their peers. Research suggests that classroom participation can be intimidating for Black male students, particularly when they feel unprepared or fear negative judgment from teachers and classmates (Howard, 2014). Limited early literacy development contributes to challenges in reading comprehension, making it difficult for these students to engage meaningfully in academic tasks (Tatum, 2017). Without a strong foundation in literacy, students may struggle with grade-level expectations, leading to frustration and withdrawal from academic activities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These challenges are compounded by school environments that may not provide adequate academic support, further widening the achievement gap.

Disproportionate discipline practices also play a significant role in the academic disengagement of Black male students. Studies indicate that Black boys are more likely to be disciplined more harshly than their peers for similar behaviors, resulting in higher suspension and expulsion rates (Skiba et al., 2011). These disciplinary measures remove students from valuable instructional time, further exacerbating their academic struggles and limiting opportunities for growth (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The combination of exclusionary discipline, lack of foundational academic skills, and a perceived lack of belonging in school environments contributes to lower standardized test scores and overall academic performance (Milner, 2010). As these students continue to face systemic barriers to educational success, their disengagement becomes a persistent challenge that requires deeper examination and understanding.

Academic Underperformance

Academic underperformance remains a persistent issue for Black male students, as many are multiple grade levels behind in key subjects such as reading and mathematics. Research indicates that Black students, particularly males, consistently score lower on standardized assessments compared to their White peers, highlighting long-standing disparities in educational attainment (Ladson-Billings, 2006). These gaps often begin in early childhood and continue to widen throughout elementary and secondary education, making it increasingly difficult for students to catch up (Tatum, 2017). Studies suggest that when students fall behind academically in the early grades, they are more likely to experience difficulties in comprehension, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which are essential for success across disciplines (Milner, 2013). As a result, academic underperformance is not only a reflection of individual struggles but also a systemic issue that has broader implications for long-term educational and career opportunities.

Longitudinal data show that Black student subgroups continue to experience lower academic performance over time, reinforcing patterns of educational inequity. National assessments, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), consistently reveal that Black students score below proficiency levels at disproportionately high rates, indicating that the academic achievement gap is not closing significantly (Reardon et al., 2019). These persistent disparities contribute to reduced access to advanced coursework, lower high school graduation rates, and limited postsecondary opportunities (Howard, 2014). Additionally, educational tracking and structural barriers often place Black male students in lower-performing academic tracks, further restricting their access to rigorous and enriching learning experiences (Oakes, 2005). Over time, these challenges reinforce cycles of underperformance, creating

systemic barriers to academic and economic mobility. Without a deeper understanding of the root causes of these gaps, Black male students remain disproportionately affected by policies and practices that contribute to sustained educational disparities.

Students Lack of Belonging

The lack of Black teachers in schools contributes to a diminished sense of belonging among Black male students, further exacerbating their academic disengagement. Research suggests that the presence of Black educators positively impacts Black students' academic performance, motivation, and overall school experience (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). However, with Black teachers making up a small percentage of the teaching workforce, many Black male students go through their entire education without encountering teachers who share their racial or cultural background (Gershenson et al., 2018). This absence can lead to a disconnect between students and the school environment, making it more difficult for Black boys to see themselves reflected in their educators or the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Without these affirming connections, Black male students may experience feelings of alienation, reinforcing the perception that schools are not spaces where they are valued or understood.

Beyond the absence of Black educators, Black male students often struggle with motivation and engagement due to feelings of otherness and exclusion in predominantly White educational spaces. Studies have shown that Black students frequently encounter racialized stereotypes and microaggressions in school settings, leading to a diminished sense of self-worth and academic confidence (Howard, 2014). These experiences contribute to a school culture where Black boys feel unwelcome, which can manifest in disengagement, lower participation, and avoidance of academic challenges (Dee, 2005). When students do not feel a strong sense of belonging, they are less likely to develop positive relationships with teachers and peers, further

isolating them from the learning process (Booker, 2006). The intersection of racial identity and school climate plays a significant role in shaping students' academic trajectories, as feelings of exclusion and unwelcome school environments contribute to persistent educational disparities.

Black boys often experience a lack of representation in school curricula, where dominant narratives and characters primarily reflect cultural perspectives that may not align with their lived experiences. This absence of representation can contribute to disengagement, as students may struggle to see relevance in the content presented (Howard, 2018). Nieto and Bode (2008) emphasized that when students encounter texts and materials that affirm their cultural identities, they are more likely to feel connected to the learning process. Conversely, curricula that exclude or marginalize diverse perspectives can reinforce feelings of alienation and limit opportunities for meaningful engagement with academic content. The predominance of Eurocentric narratives in educational materials underscores the broader challenge of fostering inclusivity in school environments (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The extent to which curricula reflect students' diverse experiences influences their sense of belonging and academic motivation. Gay (2010) argued that students who encounter culturally affirming materials are more likely to engage with learning in ways that support their academic and social development. However, when instructional content lacks diversity, students may perceive schooling as disconnected from their realities, which can contribute to lower academic investment and persistence (Tatum, 2017). The limited presence of Black voices in educational spaces also intersects with broader societal narratives that shape students' perceptions of their academic potential (Paris & Alim, 2017). These curricular gaps reveal structural inequities that influence Black boys' educational experiences and contribute to persistent disparities in engagement and achievement.

Deficit Mindset

A deficit mindset in education perpetuates negative perceptions of Black male students, influencing how they are viewed and supported within school environments. This perspective often frames students in terms of their perceived shortcomings rather than recognizing their strengths and potential (Valencia, 2010). When educators and administrators hold deficit-based beliefs, they may inadvertently contribute to a negative school climate that fosters low expectations and limits opportunities for academic success (Milner, 2012). Such perceptions shape interactions, disciplinary decisions, and instructional practices, reinforcing cycles of underperformance and disengagement (Gorski, 2013). Black male students may internalize these negative messages, affecting their self-efficacy and motivation in academic settings (Howard, 2020). The persistence of deficit thinking in schools underscores the need to examine how institutional narratives and educator mindsets impact student outcomes and overall school culture.

The reliance on standardized data as the primary measure of student ability further reinforces deficit narratives and limits a more nuanced understanding of Black male students' academic potential (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Data often highlight achievement gaps without accounting for systemic inequities, such as access to culturally relevant curricula or the impact of exclusionary disciplinary practices (Love, 2019). This narrow focus on quantitative outcomes can shape instructional decisions in ways that neglect students' cultural identities and diverse learning needs (Paris & Alim, 2017). Additionally, the lack of cultural understanding among many educators contributes to misinterpretations of student behavior, leading to biased assessments of academic ability and engagement (Gay, 2018). These factors collectively create

an educational environment where Black boys may feel misunderstood, undervalued, and disconnected from the learning experience.

Theoretical Framework

The "BlackBoyCrit" theoretical framework, grounded in critical race theory (CRT), provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the educational experiences of Black boys in the American schooling system (Bryan, 2021). Drawing from CRT's focus on systemic racism and structural inequalities, this framework examines the intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) in shaping the educational experiences of Black boys (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). It emphasizes the role of institutionalized racism and implicit biases in educational settings, identifying systemic obstacles that hinder Black boys' access to equitable learning opportunities.

Central to the BlackBoyCrit framework is its challenge to deficit-oriented narratives that often characterize Black boys' academic struggles (Bryan, 2021). Rather than attributing these challenges to individual shortcomings, the framework redirects attention to the structural inequities and institutional biases that perpetuate educational disparities. By centering the voices and experiences of Black boys, BlackBoyCrit seeks to dismantle oppressive systems and promote transformative change within educational institutions (Bryan, 2021). This theoretical perspective underscores the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, which has been shown to be essential for meeting the diverse needs of Black boys (Bryan et al., 2022).

Culturally responsive pedagogy recognizes the significance of honoring and valuing students' cultural identities, thereby fostering inclusive learning environments that empower students and promote academic success (Gay, 2000). In the context of literacy instruction, many Black male students struggle with foundational skills, resulting in a diminished sense of

belonging and lower academic performance. Rather than attributing these challenges solely to individual deficiencies, this framework provides a lens that accounts for the systemic factors contributing to these issues. By adopting culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies that amplify Black boys' voices and experiences, educators can address the root causes of these struggles, fostering both academic engagement and improved literacy outcomes.

Bryan et al. (2022) further developed this framework through the concept of "BlackBoyCrit pedagogy," which draws on BlackBoyCrit and Black male studies (Bryan, 2022). This pedagogical approach confronts anti-Black misandry that permeates early educational experiences of Black boys (Curry, 2017). Bryan (2022) critiques what he terms "pedagogical malfeasance" (p. xii), referring to instructional practices that prioritize White norms and dehumanize Black boys. By centering on countering these harmful pedagogical practices, BlackBoyCrit pedagogy provides a framework for more equitable and affirming educational experiences.

In the context of this study, insights from BlackBoyCrit pedagogy were applied to an improvement initiative focused on establishing a culturally sustaining book club for second-grade Black boys. The primary objective of the club was to enhance foundational literacy skills, specifically in vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, which supported improved reading outcomes and fostered a positive sense of identity and belonging. The following sections explored the institutional causes that had historically hindered positive educational experiences for Black boys and how culturally responsive literacy interventions could begin to address these challenges.

The Local Context: Blue Elementary School

As the Chief Operations Officer for Blue County Schools, overseeing the district's strategic initiatives and operational functions, I was deeply invested in driving positive change and academic success across all schools. Blue Elementary School (MBES), located adjacent to Central Services, the district's administrative hub, held particular significance in our district's landscape. Given its proximity and its status as a recurrently low-performing school, MBES became a focal point for targeted improvement efforts aimed at elevating student achievement and fostering a supportive learning environment.

At Blue Elementary School, academic disengagement has become a persistent concern, particularly among Black male students who struggle with foundational skills. Many of these students enter the classroom already behind, making it difficult for them to engage meaningfully with grade-level content. Their struggles often lead to frustration, and in turn, disengagement, which educators and administrators have observed manifesting in behavioral issues. Students who are already academically vulnerable receive disciplinary consequences that further remove them from instructional time, deepening their educational setbacks. Year after year, Black male students consistently score lower than other subgroups in both Reading and Math, widening the achievement gap and reinforcing a cycle of underperformance that becomes harder to stop with each passing grade level.

The school climate at Blue Elementary is also impacted by the absence of Black male teachers who could serve as both instructional leaders and cultural role models. Without representation in the classroom, Black boys often struggle to see themselves reflected in their educators, making it harder to build meaningful connections that support academic success. Many teachers in the building, whether White or International, come from backgrounds that do

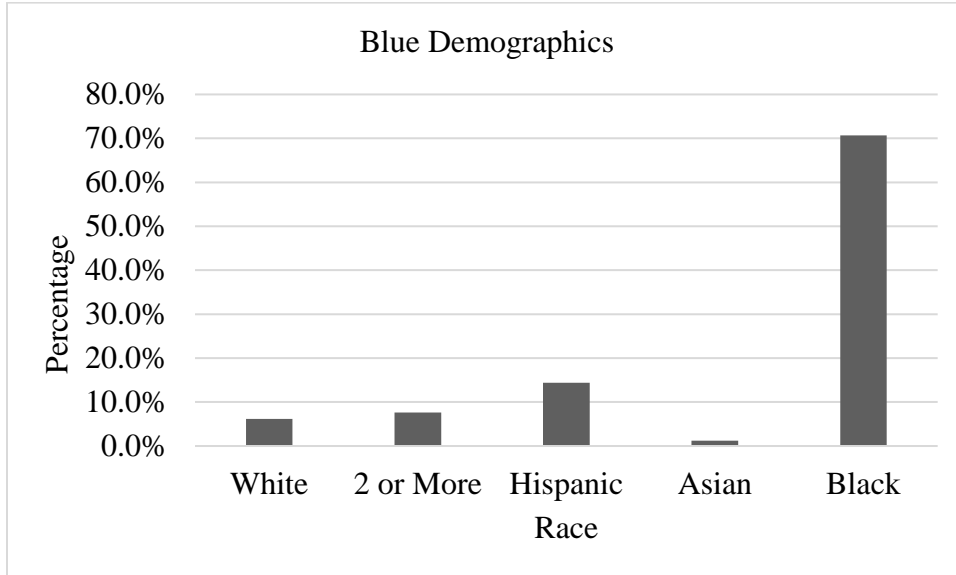
not align with the lived experiences of the students they serve. This lack of cultural understanding, paired with a deficit mindset, often leads to misconceptions about why students are disengaged and performing below grade level. Instead of recognizing systemic barriers, some educators attribute students' struggles to a lack of effort, further alienating them from the learning process. As a result, many Black boys at Blue Elementary feel unwelcome, uncomfortable, and disconnected from their education, leading to increased absenteeism, behavioral challenges, and continued academic decline.

Demographics

Blue Elementary School (MBES), a public institution located in rural Warrenton, North Carolina, serves students from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Classified as a Title 1, Restart, and Recurring Low-Performing School, MBES provides free breakfast and lunch to all its students. Blue County Schools comprises six schools, including three elementary schools, a middle school, a traditional high school, and an Early College High School, collectively serving approximately 1,800 students. The district faces significant challenges, as four of its schools are designated as low performing. At MBES, the student population is diverse, with 71% of students identifying as Black, 14% as Hispanic, 8% as mixed race, 6% as White, and 1% as Asian (see Figure 1). The total enrollment at MBES is 341 students.

Figure 2

Student Demographics by Race at Blue Elementary



Note: This figure demonstrates the race demographics at BES.

History and Review of the Problem at BES

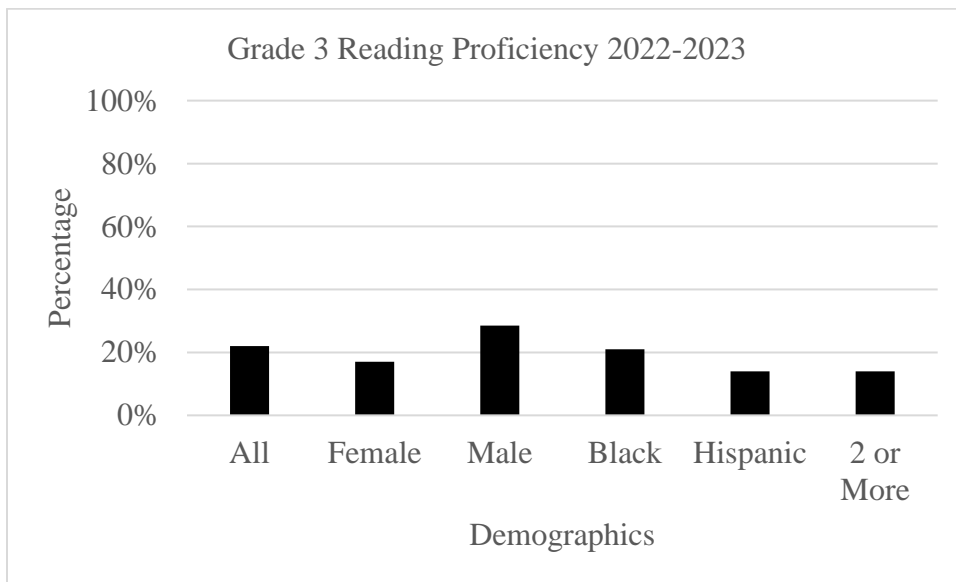
Blue Elementary School (BES) has demonstrated concerning trends in academic performance, as evidenced by its school performance grades of F for both the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. These grades signal ongoing challenges within the school. It is important to consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly disrupted learning. Prior to the pandemic, BES was not classified as a low-performing school.

An analysis of standardized test data further underscores these challenges. During the 2021-2022 school year, only 22.45% of third graders achieved proficiency in reading on the End of Grade (EOG) tests. The following year saw a slight decline in reading proficiency, with only 16.7% of students meeting proficiency standards, despite the school's goal to improve these outcomes. Figure 3 illustrates reading proficiency by subgroups for the 2022-2023 school year. Subgroups are identified when there are 40 or more students who share a particular characteristic, allowing for more granular analysis within the broader student population.

MBES’s designation as both a low-performing and recurring low-performing school, coupled with its federal designations of Comprehensive Support and Improvement School and a Low-Performing Tier 1 school for consecutive years, highlights the severity of its academic struggles. These designations underscore the need for targeted interventions and comprehensive support to address the underlying factors contributing to the school’s academic challenges and to facilitate meaningful improvements in student outcomes.

Figure 3

Percent of Proficient Readers by Demographics



Note: This figure demonstrates the percentage of proficient readers by demographics.

Despite the challenges faced by Blue Elementary School (BES), there is hope for improvement through additional support and targeted interventions for specific subgroups. By effectively leveraging available resources and expertise, the school can develop strategies tailored to meet the unique needs of its student population, particularly those from historically marginalized groups. Targeted interventions, such as small group instruction, individualized learning plans, and culturally responsive teaching practices, can foster a more inclusive and

supportive learning environment. With a focus on equity, collaboration, and dedication, MBES has the potential to overcome its academic challenges and create a brighter future for all students.

My Professional Role and Positionality

I am a middle-class Black male with 21 years of experience in education, having overcome a severe learning disability in reading. Alongside my role as a husband and father to one son, I proudly served as the principal of Blue Middle School. I was honored to be promoted to the position of Chief Operations Officer.

My educational journey has been multifaceted, transitioning from classroom teacher to assistant principal, principal, and now district administrator. Throughout my career, my commitment to advocating for students—especially those facing academic challenges similar to my own—has remained unwavering. As a Black man who initially struggled with reading and harbored a deep dislike for it, I understand firsthand the frustrations and barriers that hinder students' educational progress. Despite these challenges, I persevered, motivated by a desire to positively impact the lives of students encountering similar obstacles.

Throughout my journey, I encountered adversity, including discouraging remarks from a high school counselor who doubted my potential for college. I remained determined to defy expectations, becoming a first-generation college graduate with multiple degrees. My experiences fuel my dedication to creating opportunities for marginalized students, particularly those facing systemic barriers in low-performing districts like mine.

As an administrator, I recognize the critical importance of fostering a sense of belonging (Ralph, 2022; Whedon, 2024) and empowering students, particularly in communities like mine, where many students face socioeconomic challenges and lack family support (Hayes, 2019). I recognize and understand effective school reform and how we must acknowledge, embrace, and

cultivate the cultural assets that students of color bring to our schools and classrooms (Lomotey, 2014). Building authentic connections between students and educators is essential to creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. By cultivating a culture of trust and collaboration, we can inspire students to engage with their education and strive for academic success. Through my own experiences, I have developed a deep empathy for students grappling with reading difficulties. This drives my commitment to creating environments where every student feels valued and empowered to thrive, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Theory of Improvement and Driver Diagram

A driver diagram is a visual representation of a theory of improvement that outlines desired outcomes, key components of the educational system that impact these outcomes, and potential changes to achieve positive results (Langley et al., 2009). This strategic tool highlights the interconnectedness of various factors within the educational environment and identifies leverage points for intervention and improvement (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The driver diagram presented in Figure 6 presents the core factors that can influence the academic performance of Black boys in reading. The aim for the initiative was that by January 2025, selected second grade male students at Blue Elementary School will improve their reading comprehension skills by engaging with open-ended questions based on Reading for Information standards.

Primary drivers are steps we must take to impact our aim (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The primary drivers of this intervention were designed to address literacy challenges faced by Black boys through targeted and culturally sustaining strategies. The first primary driver, foundational reading interventions, focused on providing explicitly targeted support to help Black boys develop crucial literacy skills. Small-group, structured instruction within these intervention groups aimed to close gaps in reading proficiency, while fostering a sense of

confidence and engagement. The second primary driver, culturally sustaining curriculum, emphasized the integration of culturally relevant texts and content into the intervention. By selecting materials that reflect the identities, experiences, and interests of Black boys, the intervention sought to create a more meaningful and engaging literacy experience that resonated deeply with the students, enhancing their motivation and connection to learning.

In implementing this initiative, a series of targeted change ideas were put into action to address the root causes of the academic disengagement and underperformance observed among Black male students at Blue Elementary School. One pivotal change idea was to curate a diverse book club library featuring African American authors and culturally reflective narratives, ensuring that students had access to culturally relevant texts. By reading literature with characters whose identities and experiences mirrored their own, students were able to connect more deeply with the material, making their learning experience more meaningful and engaging. Similarly, another key change idea was the implementation of a comprehension-based approach to reading, where classroom instruction emphasized reading not just for decoding, but for deeper understanding and analysis. By engaging students in discussions using open-ended questions and emphasizing the connections between texts and their personal lives, this strategy not only improved reading comprehension but also bolstered students' academic confidence.

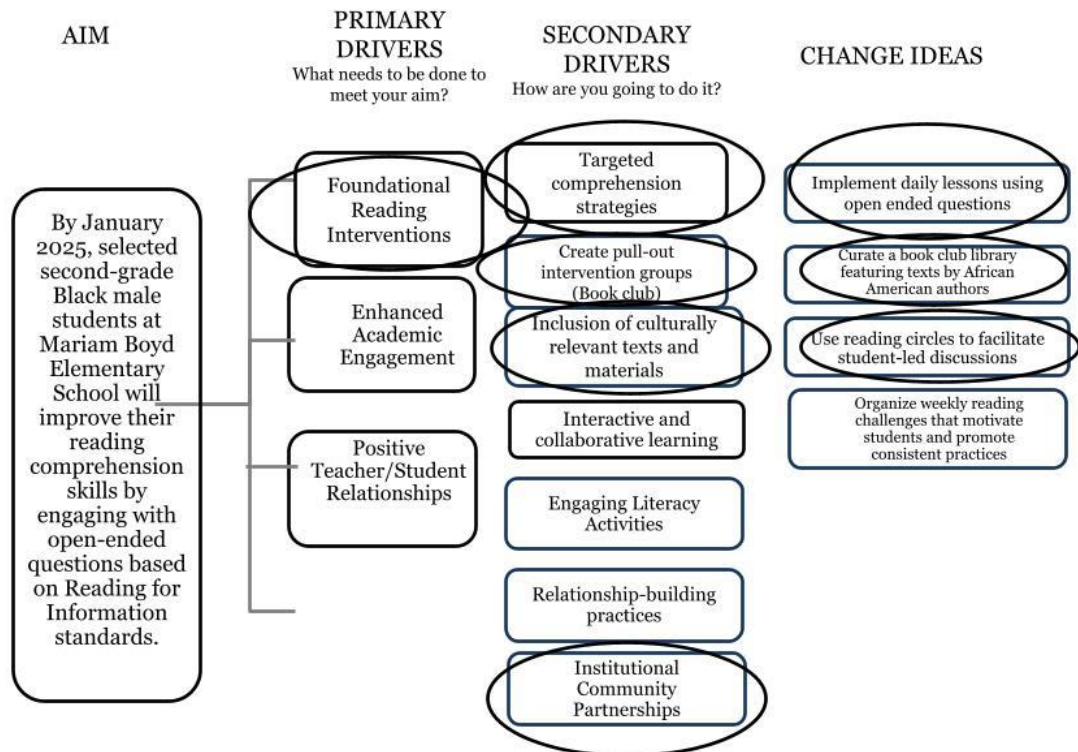
A specially designed book club for Black male students was introduced, offering a safe, empowering space for them to discuss literature, develop positive reading habits, and foster a sense of belonging within the school community. These action-oriented changes were strategically chosen to confront the systemic barriers to academic success and disengagement, with educators working deliberately to improve literacy outcomes through both culturally relevant instruction and the promotion of community-building efforts.

At Blue Elementary School, specific change ideas have been developed to address academic disengagement and underperformance among Black male students by directly targeting instructional practices and systemic supports. Under the foundational reading interventions driver, I worked with the teachers on how to implement open-ended questions to build inference and comprehension skills in their daily lessons. Within a culturally sustaining curriculum, book club students received a curated library featuring texts by African American authors and culturally reflective narratives. To further enhance academic engagement, enhanced academic engagement strategies include using reading circles to facilitate student-led discussions and inquiry-based learning, alongside organizing weekly reading challenges that promote consistent, engaging literacy practices. Finally, under positive teacher/student relationships mentorship programs and collaborative partnerships with the school principal and the county library ensured that students have access to extended literacy resources and supportive learning environments. These change ideas are designed to dismantle barriers to literacy, making reading a more accessible, engaging, and affirming experience for Black boys.

I also prioritized family engagement by actively involving the families of the book club participants. For example, I organized two monthly family literacy nights for parents whose students were involved, provided take-home reading guides, and established regular communication channels. These initiatives ensured that home support aligned with our culturally sustaining practices, reinforcing the positive reading behaviors developed in the book club and enhancing student success.

Figure 6

Driver Diagram



The literature informs us that providing Black boys in elementary school with access to culturally relevant and sustaining literature can significantly improve their reading outcomes. When students see themselves reflected in the books they read, they are more likely to engage with the material and develop a positive attitude toward reading (Gay, 2000). Culturally sustaining literature helps students make connections between their own experiences and the text’s content, enhancing comprehension and motivation (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nash, 2013, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Exposure to culturally relevant and sustaining literature can foster a sense of belonging and identity among Black boys, which is crucial for their academic success (Howard, 2018). When students see characters who look like them and share similar cultural backgrounds, it

validates their experiences and affirms their identities as readers (Nieto & Bode, 2008). This sense of validation can boost students' confidence in their reading abilities and increase their willingness to engage with challenging texts (Gay, 2002). Providing access to culturally sustaining literature can help Black boys develop more vital literacy skills and cultivate a lifelong love of reading.

My theory of improvement holds that if Black boys are provided with access to culturally relevant instruction, engaging reading materials, and targeted literacy support, there will be a noticeable shift in their academic engagement and literacy experiences. When students see themselves reflected in the curriculum and are exposed to texts that align with their identities and interests, they are more likely to participate in classroom discussions and reading activities. Additionally, fostering positive teacher-student relationships and creating structured literacy opportunities can influence how students perceive their abilities and their place within the academic environment. This shift in engagement has the potential to impact overall school culture by fostering a learning environment where Black boys feel valued and supported. The presence of culturally relevant texts and structured intervention strategies may contribute to a more inclusive atmosphere, reducing feelings of alienation and disengagement. Over time, patterns of academic underperformance and disconnection from literacy instruction may become less pronounced as students develop a greater sense of belonging in educational spaces. These changes highlight the importance of addressing instructional approaches and school climate factors that shape students' academic experiences.

Improvement Initiative: Booked Beyond Imagination Book Club

My improvement initiative took place at Blue Elementary School (BES) and focused on establishing a book club specifically designed for second-grade Black male students. The

primary goal of this initiative was to enhance students' reading comprehension skills through the use of culturally relevant texts. By incorporating literature that reflects their identities and lived experiences, the book club aimed to foster a deeper connection to reading. Williams (2018) emphasizes the importance of creating spaces where Black boys can see themselves represented in literature, as this representation plays a critical role in shaping their academic engagement and literacy development.

A key component of the book club intervention was the intentional selection of culturally relevant materials. By choosing books that reflect the backgrounds, experiences, and identities of the students, the initiative sought to create a learning environment where students felt seen, valued, and connected to the content. Culturally relevant texts allowed students to engage more deeply, as the stories often mirrored the realities of their lives or the communities they came from. This not only boosted interest in reading but also fostered a sense of pride and belonging.

The design of lesson plans and book club discussions centered around honoring what students bring from home; their language, traditions, family structures, and lived experiences. This approach encouraged students to draw meaningful connections between the text and their world, leading to richer discussions and increased comprehension. The use of culturally relevant literature was not just a teaching strategy; it was a deliberate act of affirmation that supported academic growth while nurturing identity and self-worth.

Beyond comprehension skills, this initiative sought to cultivate a positive relationship with reading by integrating interactive discussions and meaningful dialogue. Williams (2018) highlights the socio-emotional benefits of such literacy-focused groups, noting that they can strengthen students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy. This initiative aligns with a culturally sustaining approach to education, which acknowledges the unique needs of Black boys and

intentionally provides a supportive learning environment. By prioritizing representation and engagement, this book club served as a step toward fostering academic success and literacy growth for this student population.

The Book Club was designed specifically for selected second-grade male students, with meetings held three times a week for thirty minutes. We focused on one carefully chosen book each week that had a specially design lesson (Appendix A) to keep the experience engaging and purposeful. On Mondays, I read the book aloud to set the tone for the week, introduce key vocabulary, and spark meaningful discussion. Early on, I noticed students' non-verbal cues showing confusion during vocabulary and comprehension activities. In response, I shifted from simply reading questions aloud to displaying them on chart paper, making it easier for students to follow along and engage. As the sessions progressed, I further enhanced participation by placing each question on its own chart paper around the room, creating an interactive and student-centered learning environment. This approach not only improved comprehension but also empowered students to move, think critically, and connect more deeply with the text.

Wednesdays were all about checking for understanding and building on Monday's reading. I reread the book with the group, using standards-based questions to guide discussion and spark critical thinking. These conversations often led students to make real-world connections, allowing them to see themselves in the text and ask thoughtful, clarifying questions. It was a powerful way to deepen comprehension and nurture curiosity.

Fridays served as a reflection and support day. We reviewed the week's book, and I offered targeted help to students who needed extra guidance or had lingering questions. What started as a reading group quickly became a mentoring experience. With consistent encouragement and engagement, the boys began to show more confidence and a genuine love for

reading. While the group began with eight students, it shifted to six as I adjusted the format to better support the evolving dynamics and individual needs. The structure created a safe space where reading became personal, purposeful, and empowering.

Each 30-minute book club session was intentionally structured to create a consistent, uplifting, and engaging experience for the students. We began with a quick pulse check to set a positive tone, every student was expected to “tell me something good.” This simple routine built trust and helped establish a safe, affirming space. After that, I briefly shared our agenda so students knew what to expect. We focused on one book each week, and I made it a point to recap the story daily to reinforce understanding. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts, ask questions, and connect the reading to their own experiences.

To close each session, every student shared a personal takeaway, something they learned, felt, or found interesting from the day’s discussion. This reflection gave them ownership of their learning and made the reading feel relevant and meaningful. Before they returned to class for dismissal, each student received a high five, a small gesture that reinforced encouragement, consistency, and connection. These 30 minutes weren’t just about reading, they were about building confidence, community, and a genuine love for literacy.

Improvement Science

Improvement science provides a robust framework for addressing inequities in education through continuous improvement initiatives (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The questions posed by improvement science were essential in guiding the book club initiative: What were our goals? What specific problem were we seeking to address? What changes could we implement, and what was the rationale behind those changes? How would we measure progress and determine if our efforts led to improvement? The cyclical nature of improvement science fostered an

environment of continuous refinement and evaluation, ensuring that the book club intervention remained responsive to the needs of the students (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

To implement this approach, I used the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) model for continuous improvement (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). This method allowed for short, iterative cycles of decision-making, grounded in data, which ensured adaptability and responsiveness to the students' needs. The PDSA model facilitated swift adjustments and provided a structure to refine my strategies as the intervention progressed. After each cycle, I carefully reviewed the data to assess the effectiveness of the intervention and made necessary adjustments to improve scalability and impact.

The Plan phase of the PDSA cycle establishes the foundation for the intervention by defining clear goals, developing strategies, and gathering necessary resources. For the book club initiative, the primary objectives were to improve reading comprehension and foster a love for literature among second-grade male students. To achieve these goals, culturally relevant books were selected to reflect the students' interests and backgrounds, and a variety of engaging activities were outlined to support learning. These activities were aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study reading for literature standards (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], n.d.). Additionally, essential resources such as reading materials, instructional tools, and time allocations were identified to ensure effective implementation. This comprehensive planning established a solid foundation for the successful execution of the intervention.

The Do phase involved putting the plan into action by implementing the strategies developed during the planning stage. To initiate the process, I met with the school principal to share the idea for the book club initiative. At the meeting, the principal expressed enthusiasm for

the project and selected a group of students who met the criteria I provided: six to eight Black second-grade males who were significantly below grade level in reading. The principal thoughtfully selected students who could benefit most from additional support; academically, socially, and emotionally, with the hope that this opportunity would help bridge existing gaps and foster meaningful growth. Following this, permission forms were sent home for parents and guardians to sign, granting approval for their children's participation. At the first session, students were asked if they wanted to join the book club, ensuring their voluntary involvement. The intervention proceeded with weekly activities, including reading aloud to the students on Mondays, assessing their understanding on Wednesdays, and providing additional support on Fridays. Throughout this phase, the primary focus was on executing the planned activities and collecting data to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Observations of student engagement, participation, and any challenges that arose were documented to inform the process. Student engagement and participation were closely monitored to determine which aspects of the intervention were most effective in maintaining interest and supporting learning. This data laid the groundwork for the reflective process in the subsequent Study phase.

The Study phase involved analyzing the data collected during the Do phase to determine how effectively the intervention met its established goals. This included reviewing students' progress in reading comprehension, participation levels, and engagement with the books. By analyzing the collected data, such as student feedback, I assessed whether students were meeting the goals outlined in the Plan phase. I looked for patterns that could suggest areas for improvement, such as books that were particularly engaging or instructional strategies that worked better than others. This phase also involved reflecting on student feedback, which provided valuable insights into what resonated most with students and what needed adjustment.

By evaluating this data, I made informed decisions about how to adjust the intervention in the next cycle to better align with student needs and objectives.

The Act phase focused on making adjustments based on the data and analysis gathered in the Study phase. After evaluating the data, I used the insights gained from student progress and feedback to refine the intervention. For instance, if certain books or activities were less engaging for the students, they were replaced with more suitable options. If instructional strategies needed improvement, they were adjusted accordingly. These changes were then implemented in the next cycle to improve the intervention's effectiveness. The goal of the Act phase was to continuously improve the intervention by acting on data and making evidence-based decisions. The cycle started again with updated strategies aimed at further improving the initiative.

The cyclical nature of the PDSA model allowed for continual improvement. Each iteration of the cycle involved making data-informed decisions to refine and enhance the intervention, ensuring it remained responsive to students' needs and produced measurable improvements. This process not only improved the intervention's effectiveness over time but also allowed for greater flexibility and adaptability based on ongoing feedback and data.

The primary reading comprehension goals from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCDPI, n.d.) for second graders were:

1. **RL.2.1:** Ask and answer questions such as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.
2. **RL.2.2:** Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.
3. **RL.2.3:** Describe how words and phrases supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.

Design Team

The design team played a critical role in supporting the book club activities as outlined in the project scope of work (Appendix A). In improvement science, design teams are composed of diverse stakeholders who collaborate to identify, analyze, and address specific challenges within a system (Anderson et al., 2024). Their purpose is to leverage collective expertise to develop, test, and implement effective solutions through iterative cycles of planning, action, and evaluation (Viano et al., 2024). In this initiative, the design team's responsibilities evolved throughout the project, adapting to the program's needs. They ensured the facilitator had all necessary materials for each session, providing essential support to maintain the book club's smooth operation. The book club met three times per week for 30-minute sessions, which I personally facilitated.

Assembling a diverse and dedicated design team was essential to the success of this initiative. The principal of MBES, played a significant role in the design team. She is a veteran educator with over two decades of experience spanning roles from teacher to administrator. Her deep understanding of the school's dynamics and unwavering commitment to student success made her an invaluable asset. The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) coach, a newly established position funded by federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, collaborated closely with the principal.

The second grade teaching team, consisting of two educators, brought essential classroom expertise. One, a former MBES Teacher of the Year with five years of experience, contributed fresh insights, while the other, a second-year teacher from the Philippines, offered valuable perspectives shaped by her cultural background. Additionally, the only male teacher at the school—a physical education instructor—served as a literacy interventionist whose primary role

was to provide targeted instruction and support to students who are struggling with literacy or who require additional help to meet grade-level expectations. With nine years of teaching experience and ongoing graduate studies in school administration, he provided a crucial perspective on student engagement. Rounding out the team was a literacy coach with 30 years of experience. As a National Board Certified teacher, she worked with Blue County Schools for two years, providing critical literacy support for the book club sessions.

Our team met twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, to plan upcoming sessions. After each session, we held brief huddles where I was able to share with them the session's effectiveness and make necessary adjustments in real-time. Additionally, I partnered with the Director of the local Library, a professional with a Master of Library Science (MLS), who ensured the availability of culturally relevant and age-appropriate literature for the book club. The library director also offered families the opportunity to sign up for library cards outside of the book club intervention. As a result, all the students in the book club, along with their families, successfully registered and received library cards. With this diverse and dynamic team, we were well-positioned to design and implement an intervention strategy that directly addressed the unique needs of Black male students.

Throughout the design process, I operated as both a scholar and a practitioner, balancing theoretical research with hands-on application. As a scholar, I enacted the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles for continuous improvement, conducted teacher and staff surveys, and facilitated focus groups to gather insights at various stages of planning and implementation. These research-driven strategies helped refine our approach to literacy intervention. As a practitioner, I leveraged the expertise of my team, integrating evidence-based reading practices and culturally relevant instructional materials. I also prioritized family engagement by actively involving the

families of the book club participants. For example, I organized monthly family literacy nights, provided take-home reading guides, and established regular communication channels. These initiatives ensured that home support aligned with our culturally sustaining practices, reinforcing the positive reading behaviors developed in the book club and enhancing student success.

The diversity within our design team fostered a collaborative process characterized by shared learning and collective problem-solving. Each member contributed valuable insights, ensuring a well-rounded approach to supporting Black male students in the book club. Through this collective effort, we developed a comprehensive and responsive intervention that not only addressed literacy gaps but also cultivated a sense of belonging and academic confidence among our students.

Implementation Plan/Timeline

The overarching goal of this improvement initiative was to provide Black boys with the opportunity to develop essential foundational reading skills while fostering a genuine passion for literature through culturally relevant and sustaining materials. The aim was for the initiative to be not only established but also sustained throughout the school year, with plans for expansion to other grade levels in the future.

The long-term goals of this initiative are to focus significantly on improving reading comprehension outcomes and developing a sustainable, replicable literacy intervention model. The first goal aims to achieve at least a 20–25% measurable improvement in standardized reading comprehension scores among selected second-grade Black male students by June 2025. This goal supports the primary aim of boosting literacy through foundational reading interventions and directly incorporates targeted comprehension strategies, such as daily lessons using open-ended questions and pull-out intervention groups to assist students needing extra

help. It aligns with the integration of effective instructional practices and culturally sustaining curriculum changes, including curated book club libraries and culturally relevant pedagogy, which together foster both skill development and academic confidence.

The second goal focuses on developing a comprehensive, culturally sustaining literacy framework that enhances academic engagement and positive teacher-student relationships, serving as a replicable model for reducing the achievement gap among Black male students. Beyond immediate literacy gains, this goal emphasizes creating long-lasting change by building a model that incorporates interactive learning activities, such as reading circles and weekly reading challenges, alongside robust community partnerships with school principals and county libraries. This goal aligned with the initiative's strategic drivers—enhanced academic engagement and positive teacher-student relationships—and their associated change ideas, ensuring that the intervention not only improves reading skills but also creates an environment that supports overall academic and personal growth.

The short-term goals of the book club initiative focused on piloting and refining instructional strategies while launching professional development and engagement initiatives. During the first academic quarter, daily comprehension-based reading lessons using open-ended questions were implemented in targeted classrooms, along with the establishment of pull-out intervention groups for students needing extra support. This goal aimed to gather baseline data and student feedback to assess initial improvements in reading comprehension and engagement, providing valuable insights to inform iterative refinements in instructional practices. These efforts operationalized the targeted comprehension strategies and targeted reading support change ideas under the foundational reading interventions driver.

Simultaneously, during the first semester, a series of professional development sessions on culturally sustaining pedagogy were conducted for teachers. Alongside this training, interactive literacy activities—such as weekly reading challenges and reading circles—were launched to enhance student engagement. Community partnerships with school leadership and the county library were also established to reinforce these efforts. This goal was designed to build educators' capacity while fostering an inclusive learning environment that supports student engagement both in and out of the classroom. It brought together change ideas from multiple secondary drivers, including enhancing academic engagement through interactive and collaborative learning, reinforcing culturally sustaining practices via professional development, and strengthening positive teacher-student relationships through community partnerships.

Evaluating the Improvement Initiative

Data Collection and Analysis

Measurement is a fundamental component of any improvement initiative, as it provides the data necessary to guide decision-making throughout the process (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). In the context of improvement cycles, data serves as the cornerstone for evaluating the success of implemented strategies. These measurements can be categorized into four distinct types: driver, process, outcome, and balance measures, each serving a unique and essential purpose in ensuring the success of the initiative.

Driver data is formative data collected continuously throughout the intervention. This ongoing data collection allows for real-time evaluation and adjustments to ensure the initiative stays on track (Bryk et al., 2015). Driver data is critical for understanding the immediate factors that influence the intervention's progress and for making quick, responsive changes when

needed. It helps gauge whether the strategies being implemented as are producing the desired behaviors or outcomes in real-time (Perrone et al., 2018).

Process data, is gathered incrementally to assess the fidelity of the intervention to the original plan (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). It focuses on ensuring that the intervention is being carried out according to the established procedures. Process data provides insight into whether the planned activities, resources, and teaching methods are being followed, and it helps identify any deviations from the original design. This data is essential for understanding the intervention's execution and determining whether adjustments need to be made in future cycles.

Outcome data is summative data collected at the end of the intervention or improvement cycle. It is crucial for determining whether the strategies achieved the desired goals or produced discernible impacts (Perrone et al., 2018). Outcome data serves as the primary measure of success and helps answer critical questions: “Did the intervention lead to improved student performance or engagement? Did it meet the original goals of the initiative” (Langley et al., 2019)? This data informs the final evaluation and decision-making process, guiding the team in deciding whether the initiative should continue, be modified, or abandoned.

Finally, *balance measures* are included to assess unintended consequences in other areas of the initiative or in the broader educational environment (Perrone et al., 2018). Balance measures are necessary to ensure that improvements in one domain—such as reading comprehension—do not inadvertently cause negative effects in other areas, such as student behavior or classroom dynamics. These measures help maintain a holistic view of the initiative's impact, ensuring that any gains made in one area do not come at the expense of other important outcomes. Addressing any unintended consequences can increase the likelihood of sustainability of the intervention.

At the conclusion of the initiative, a comprehensive summative evaluation is conducted, drawing from driver, process, outcome, and balance data. This evaluation provides a holistic view of the intervention's effectiveness, helping the design team decide whether to continue, adjust, or discontinue the initiative. Through this detailed and structured approach to measurement, the initiative remains adaptable and responsive, ensuring continuous improvement and long-term success (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Driver Measures

This initiative included two distinct driver measures. The first one was note-taking from group discussions during the book clubs and the second was structured interviews with teachers. (Appendix C). I took notes during each session to capture key observations. At the conclusion of each session I debriefed with the design team to discuss what had been heard and seen during the session. Additionally, the facilitator conducted structured interviews with teachers whose students participated in the initiative. Every two weeks, the facilitator emailed the teachers a google form, asking a key question: "Are you noticing a positive or negative impact on the students' classroom performance as a result of their participation in the initiative?" These interviews provided valuable insights into the initiative's effects on student learning and classroom dynamics.

Balance Measures

To assess whether the book club's enhanced academic engagement strategies positively impacted overall school participation, we tracked the school attendance of Black male students participating in the book club. Our hypothesis was that engaging activities—such as reading circles, inquiry-based discussions, and weekly reading challenges—would foster a genuine interest in learning, thereby increasing the likelihood that these students would attend school

regularly. To test this, we compared the current attendance records of these book club participants with their attendance data from the previous school year, prior to the intervention. An improvement in attendance among these students indicated that the book club not only enhanced their literacy skills but also contributed to a stronger commitment to school, aligning with our primary driver of enhanced academic engagement.

Process Measures

During the initiative, I, as the researcher and facilitator of the book club sessions, distributed process-focused reflection questions to second-grade teachers every two weeks via a Google Form (Appendix H). These questions were designed to assess the fidelity of the book club's implementation and gather valuable teacher feedback on the effectiveness of the process. The goal was to evaluate how closely the sessions adhered to the planned schedule and format while identifying areas for improvement in the intervention's execution. To help guide the questions I focused on four categories: adherence to planned structure, execution of activities, logistical and procedural issues, and suggestions for process improvement.

These questions yield process data because they capture real-time information about the actual implementation of the book club sessions. By asking if the session followed the established schedule and format, I was able to obtain data on how consistently the intervention was delivered; inquire about whether all planned activities were completed as intended to provide insight into the fidelity of implementation; question whether logistical or procedural challenges help pinpoint any barriers or deviations that occurred during the session; and by soliciting suggestions for enhancing the session process, the questions offered qualitative data that can be used to refine and adjust the intervention in real-time. Together, these questions

provide a clear picture of how well the planned process was executed, enabling me to make data-informed decisions to improve the intervention's delivery and effectiveness.

As the facilitator, I maintained a detailed reflection journal to document the day-to-day implementation of each book club session. In this journal, I recorded process-oriented details such as any adjustments made to the session schedule (for example, shifting pull-out intervention groups away from core instruction times), modifications to logistical arrangements (like changing the day for a field trip to better align with classroom activities), and real-time decisions regarding book selections (such as adding additional titles by an author when students expressed strong interest). The importance This journal provided valuable process data that captured how the intervention was executed and how adjustments were made to optimize implementation.

Additionally, I selected books—such as *Jabari Jumps*, *Jabari Tries*, *Crown*, *Be You*, *I Am Amazing!* and *I'm a Little King*—based on their relevance to the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of the participants. This careful selection process ensured that the book club sessions were engaging and aligned with our culturally sustaining practices, while also being adaptable to feedback about student preferences during implementation.

Group discussions served as a key process measure for assessing the fidelity of our intervention's implementation. I read the selected books aloud and facilitated structured discussions using guided questions aligned with the North Carolina Reading for Literature second-grade standards (NCDPI, n.d.). As a process measure, I documented whether all planned comprehension questions—such as "Who?", "What?", "Where?", "When?", "Why?", and "How?"—were posed within the designated timeframe, as well as the incorporation of critical thinking prompts (e.g., "How does the story unfold?", "Would people in your life act this way?", etc.). I recorded details on the timing of each discussion segment, any deviations from the

planned session structure, and adjustments made in real time based on student engagement.

These process measures provided a clear picture of how effectively the discussion sessions were executed, allowing for timely adjustments to optimize the intervention.

Outcome Measures

Pre- and post-reading comprehension assessments were conducted to evaluate participants' reading comprehension (Appendix F). The facilitator read passages aloud, and participants responded to comprehension questions to assess their understanding and measure progress over time.

Results

Driver

A driver measure is an evaluative instrument designed to capture both the fidelity and the effectiveness of an intervention's key components. In the context of this study, the driver measures were used to assess the impact of the primary drivers—namely, enhanced academic engagement, and targeted reading interventions—on literacy outcomes for Black male students. Specifically, I selected two complementary instruments: (1) documented written conversations from group discussions with the six Black male students participating in the book club and (2) teacher questionnaire. These measures were chosen because they provide rich, qualitative data that directly reflect students' engagement and the fidelity with which the intervention was implemented, thereby linking the intervention's theoretical drivers to observable outcomes (Langley et al., 2009; Batalden & Davidoff, 2007).

The driver measure data were collected using two primary methods. Written conversations from group discussions with the six Black male students were documented during the book club sessions. These conversations, which are documented in Appendix F, capture

students' authentic responses to culturally relevant texts and the interactive strategies employed during discussions.

Data for the driver measures were collected from two distinct groups. The first group consisted of six Black male second-grade students actively participating in the book club. These students, selected based on predetermined inclusion criteria, represent the target demographic for the intervention. The second group comprised three female teachers (two of Filipino descent and one White teacher) These teachers provided valuable insights regarding the fidelity of implementation and the broader impact of the initiative on classroom dynamics. A summary of participant demographics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Group	Number	Key Demographic Characteristics
Black Male Students	6	Second-grade target group for literacy intervention
Teachers	3	Female; 2 Filipino, 1 White; responsible for classroom instruction and observation

The qualitative data from the written conversations were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017) with NVivo 12 software. This method was selected for its effectiveness in identifying recurring patterns and emergent themes within small sample sizes, aligning with prior research on similar educational interventions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018;

Yin, 2018). The data analysis process involved several stages. First, during the transcription and familiarization phase, the facilitator's notes from group discussions were compiled to ensure a thorough understanding of the data. Second, in the open coding stage, the data were imported into NVivo 12, where an open coding approach was used to identify key words and phrases that reflected the impact of the primary drivers, including terms such as "engagement," "cultural pride," and "confidence." Third, during axial coding, relationships among the initial codes were examined to form broader categories and subthemes, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the data structure. Finally, in the theme identification stage, visualization tools such as word clouds and mind maps were employed to refine and solidify the emergent themes from the data analysis process.

The thematic analysis yielded several key findings. First, recurring themes from student group discussions included phrases such as "I see my world in these pages" and "these stories feel like mine," which underscored the effectiveness of culturally sustaining materials in fostering a sense of identity and belonging. Teacher conversations reinforced these observations, with one teacher noting, "The students are more engaged and willing to share when the content reflects their experiences." Second, the data revealed that structured, interactive components of the intervention, such as reading circles and targeted comprehension strategies, contributed to increased student participation and confidence, evidenced by frequent remarks like "my voice matters in our discussions." Third, the driver measures also indicated that the targeted instructional practices led to observable improvements in literacy processes, as teachers reported smoother transitions during lessons and more consistent use of open-ended questions. Visual representations in NVivo 12 (Table 2), such as thematic maps and frequency counts, provided

additional support for these findings by highlighting the prevalence of key themes related to enhanced academic engagement and instructional fidelity.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis

Theme	NVivo Coding Frequency	% of Total References	In Vivo Quote
Culturally Affirming Identity and Literacy Engagement	45	32%	“These stories feel like mine.”
Empowerment Through Collaborative Discourse	35	25%	“My voice matters in our discussions.”
Targeted Instructional Practices and Adaptive Support	30	21%	“Every question helps me understand more.”
Enhanced Social Engagement and Attendance	20	14%	“I look forward to coming to school.”
Additional Observations	10	8%	“Smooth transitions between activities improved.”

The findings derived from the driver measures have important implications for the improvement initiative. The emergence of themes such as culturally affirming identity and empowerment through collaborative discourse validated the initial hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of culturally sustaining practices. As a result, minor adjustments were made in subsequent PDSA cycles, such as modifying the structure of reading circles to allow for more student-led discussions and further integrating culturally relevant texts based on student feedback. Additionally, the data underscored the importance of continuously monitoring instructional fidelity and documented student interactions, prompting the research team to refine the interview protocol for greater clarity in future iterations. These adjustments, informed by the robust analysis of driver measures, have contributed to the ongoing enhancement of the initiative, ensuring that the primary drivers of the intervention are effectively operationalized to support improved literacy outcomes.

The impact of using culturally relevant materials was evident throughout the intervention. Students responded positively to texts that reflected their lives, and their engagement during discussions increased noticeably. Many students made personal connections to the stories, which sparked more authentic conversations and deeper critical thinking. By seeing themselves in the literature, students became more confident in sharing their thoughts and experiences. This intentional design choice validated what students brought from home and created a bridge between literacy and lived experience. It became clear that when students feel represented and respected in what they read, their academic performance and emotional investment improve. The success of the book club was largely tied to this alignment between culturally relevant content and the students' own narratives; demonstrating that meaningful learning begins with affirming who students are.

Process

A process measure is an evaluative tool designed to assess the fidelity and quality of an intervention's implementation rather than its final outcomes (Langley et al., 2009; Batalden & Davidoff, 2007). These measures focus on the operational aspects of an intervention—how it is executed, the consistency with which planned activities are delivered, and the identification of any implementation challenges. For this project, process measures were particularly critical because they provided timely feedback on whether the book club sessions were conducted as intended and whether any modifications were needed to optimize student engagement. To capture this information, I distributed process-focused reflection questions to second-grade teachers every two weeks via a Google Form (see Appendix H). These questions, which centered on adherence to the planned structure, execution of activities, logistical and procedural issues, and suggestions for improvement, were selected to offer direct insights into the day-to-day implementation of the intervention.

Data collection for process measures occurred biweekly during the 2024–2025 school year and employed a dual-method approach. First, process-focused reflection questions were distributed to second-grade teachers via a Google Form (see Appendix H) immediately following each book club session. Although these teachers were not directly involved in facilitating the book club sessions, they observed the participating students in their regular classroom settings and provided feedback on any noticeable changes in academic performance related to literacy. The reflection questions were designed to capture qualitative data regarding adherence to the planned session structure, execution of activities, logistical challenges, and suggestions for process improvement.

Second, a teacher questionnaire was conducted to obtain deeper insights into the impact of the book club intervention on student literacy and overall classroom dynamics. Each questionnaire consisted of four questions. The questions focused on teachers' observations of any significant changes in students' academic performance, particularly in literacy, and on their perceptions of the operational aspects of the intervention.

The process data were collected from three second-grade teachers, comprising two of Filipino descent and one White teacher, who regularly observed the participating Black male students in their classrooms. Their independent observations and subsequent reflections were essential for assessing whether the book club sessions were being implemented as planned and for identifying any operational challenges that might have impacted student performance.

The qualitative data from both the Google Form reflections and the structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2017). NVivo 12 software facilitated the open coding process, enabling the systematic identification of recurring patterns and themes related to process fidelity and implementation challenges. This approach was particularly appropriate given the small sample size and the need to capture detailed, nuanced feedback from teachers who observed changes in student performance. By integrating data from both the reflection forms and the interviews, the analysis provided a triangulated understanding of the intervention's operational dynamics and its influence on literacy outcomes.

The thematic analysis of the process data, derived from teacher reflections and structured interviews, revealed several key findings. Although the teachers did not directly participate in the book club sessions, their classroom observations of the participating Black male students provided crucial insights into the intervention's operational impact. Teachers reported observing noticeable improvements in literacy-related behaviors among these students, including enhanced

reading comprehension, increased classroom engagement, and greater participation in literacy activities. One teacher noted, "Even though I wasn't in the book club sessions, I've seen the students who participate show more confidence and improved reading skills during class." Additionally, the process data indicated that the intervention was largely implemented with high fidelity; however, minor logistical challenges—such as scheduling conflicts—were occasionally reported. Visual representations from NVivo 12, including word clouds and thematic maps, reinforced the prevalence of themes such as “consistent process implementation” and “enhanced student engagement.”

The insights gained from the process measures have significant implications for refining the intervention through iterative PDSA cycles. The teachers' observations confirmed that the book club's culturally sustaining and interactive strategies had a positive indirect impact on classroom literacy performance. This evidence supported the decision to maintain the core components of the intervention while making targeted adjustments. For instance, feedback prompted a reevaluation of the scheduling of pull-out intervention sessions to better align with core instructional times, thereby minimizing disruptions. Moreover, suggestions for streamlining transitions between activities were incorporated to further enhance process efficiency. These adjustments, informed by robust process data, ensured that the intervention remained responsive to both implementation challenges and student needs, ultimately supporting sustained improvements in literacy outcomes among the participating Black male students.

Balance

A balance measure is an evaluative tool used in improvement science to ensure that gains in one area do not inadvertently cause negative consequences in another (Langley et al., 2009; Batalden & Davidoff, 2007). In this study, the balance measure was employed to determine

whether the enhanced academic engagement strategies introduced by the book club intervention led to improved overall school attendance among the participating Black male students. Since increased attendance is a key indicator of student engagement and commitment to learning, tracking attendance provided an objective means to assess if the intervention fostered a stronger school commitment, consistent with the primary driver of enhanced academic engagement.

The balance measure was operationalized through the collection of school attendance records for the six Black male second-grade students who participated in the book club intervention. Attendance data were obtained from the school’s administrative database, as detailed in Table 3 and were collected for two time periods: the 2023–2024 school year (pre-intervention baseline) and the 2024–2025 school year (post-intervention). This method was selected because it allowed for a direct quantitative comparison of student attendance before and after the implementation of engaging strategies, such as reading circles, inquiry-based discussions, and weekly reading challenges. Collecting these data at these specific time points ensured that the analysis captured the immediate impact of the intervention on overall school participation.

Table 3

2023-2024 Attendance Data versus 2024-2025

Student ID	Attendance 2023-2024 (%)	Attendance 2024- 2025 (%)	Difference (+/-)
Student 1	85	92	+7%
Student 2	80	89	+9%
Student 3	82	88	+6%
Student 4	78	86	+8%

Student 5	84	90	+6%
Student 6	81	87	+6%

Attendance 2023–2024 (%) reflects the baseline attendance data collected from school records for the previous school year. Attendance 2024–2025 (%) shows the attendance data for the current school year after the initiation of the book club intervention. Difference indicates the positive change in attendance, suggesting that enhanced academic engagement through the book club may be associated with improved overall school attendance.

The balance measure focused on the same cohort involved in previous data collections: the six Black male second-grade students participating in the book club. These students, identified as the target demographic for the intervention, were selected based on criteria aimed at addressing literacy disparities. As such, no additional participant groups were included in this measure; the analysis was solely based on the attendance records of these six students.

The collected attendance data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to quantify changes in school attendance pre- and post-intervention. For each student, the percentage of days attended was calculated for both the 2023–2024 and 2024–2025 school years. The mean attendance rate for the group was then determined for each period, and the overall change in attendance was computed as a percentage difference. This method of analysis was appropriate given the small sample size and the straightforward quantitative nature of the data, allowing for clear comparisons and inferences regarding the impact of the intervention on student attendance.

The analysis revealed a positive change in school attendance among the participating students. On average, the attendance rate increased from 81% during the 2023–2024 school year to 87% in the 2024–2025 school year, representing an average improvement of 6 percentage

points. This increase indicates that the engaging activities incorporated into the book club sessions were associated with a heightened commitment to school attendance. These results suggest that the intervention not only bolstered literacy skills but also enhanced overall student engagement, supporting the primary driver of Enhanced Academic Engagement.

The findings from the balance measure had significant implications for the iterative improvement of the intervention. The observed increase in attendance among the Black male students confirmed that the enhanced academic engagement strategies positively impacted school participation. Based on these results, adjustments were made in subsequent PDSA cycles, including the integration of additional motivational components during the book club sessions to further encourage regular attendance. This modification was directly informed by the balance measure data, ensuring that the intervention maintained its focus on improving literacy outcomes while simultaneously fostering a stronger overall commitment to school.

Outcome

Outcome measures are quantitative indicators that reflect the ultimate impact of an intervention on its intended outcomes. Unlike process measures—which track the fidelity of implementation—outcome measures capture the results, making them essential lagging indicators (Langley et al., 2009). In this study, the primary outcome measure was reading comprehension, chosen because it directly aligns with the intervention’s goal of enhancing literacy among Black male students. Recent research underscores that standardized reading comprehension assessments are effective for capturing improvements in literacy and provide reliable evidence of intervention impact (Schwartz & Brown, 2022).

Data were collected using pre- and post-reading comprehension assessments (Table 4) administered to the six Black male second-grade students participating in the book club. During

these assessments, the facilitator read selected passages aloud, and students responded to a series of comprehension questions designed to evaluate their understanding. The pre-assessment was conducted at the beginning of the intervention period, and the post-assessment was carried out at its conclusion. This timing enabled a direct comparison of literacy skills before and after the intervention, thus providing objective evidence of the intervention’s effectiveness. The use of standardized assessments ensured that the data were both reliable and quantifiable.

Table 4

Pre and Post Reading Comprehension Test Data

Student	Pre-Score (%)	Post-Score (%)	Improvement
Student 1	83	100	+17%
Student 2	71	100	+29%
Student 3	71	85	+29%
Student 4	71	85	+12%
Student 5	57	85	+33%
Student 6	83	100	+17%
Average	73	92	+19%

The student column lists each of the six Black male students who participated in the intervention. Pre-Score (%): Reflects the reading comprehension percentage scores from the pre-intervention assessment. Post-Score (%): Reflects the reading comprehension percentage scores from the post-intervention assessment. Improvement: Shows the difference between the pre- and post-scores for each student, ranging from +17% to +34% improvement, with an average improvement of 19.

Table 5*Pre and Post Reading Comprehension Test Item Analysis*

Question	Correct Answer	Pre-Test Correct	Pre-Test Incorrect	Post-Test Correct	Post-Test Incorrect
1. What is Jake's favorite sport?	C	6	1	6	0
2. Where does Jake meet his friends to play soccer?	C	2	4	6	0
3. What position does Jake usually play in soccer?	C	2	4	3	3
4. What did Jake do that helped his team win?	B	6	1	6	0
5. How did Jake's friends celebrate?	B	6	1	6	0
6. What sport did they play after the game?	B	6	1	6	0
7. What did Jake's parents promise?	C	6	1	6	0

Note. Each question was answered by 7 students. Pre- and post-test results reflect changes in comprehension accuracy after instruction.

Assessment results often serve as a mirror, reflecting both the strengths of instruction and the areas that demand renewed focus. In reviewing the item analysis from the pre and post

comprehension assessment, a clear narrative of student growth emerges; one marked by significant gains and opportunities for deeper instructional impact. The post-test results revealed that five of the seven comprehension questions were answered correctly by all six students, demonstrating strong mastery in those areas. This consistency suggests that the instructional strategies employed were effective in reinforcing key concepts and fostering student understanding. Noteworthy was the improvement on Question 2, where only two students initially answered correctly. By the post-test, all six students demonstrated comprehension, signaling a positive shift in learning and the effectiveness of targeted support.

Question 3 stood out as an instructional checkpoint. Although there was an increase in correct responses from two to three students, the fact that half the group still answered incorrectly suggests that full conceptual clarity had not yet been achieved. This result highlights the complexity of comprehension and the need for continued scaffolding and reinforcement of the skills assessed by this item. As educators, such moments call us to reexamine how we present and revisit content, ensuring not just exposure, but deep engagement and transfer of knowledge. This reflection reinforces the importance of ongoing formative assessment to guide and refine instruction in ways that meet the evolving needs of every learner.

The outcome data were collected from the same cohort involved in the previous measures: six Black male second-grade students who participated in the book club intervention. These students were selected based on predetermined criteria to address literacy disparities and to ensure that the outcome measure specifically reflected improvements in the targeted demographic.

The reading comprehension data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Specifically, mean scores and standard deviations for the pre- and post-assessments were calculated, and the

percentage improvement in reading comprehension was determined for each participant.

Although a paired-samples t-test was initially considered, the small sample size ($n = 6$) warranted the use of descriptive statistics to maintain clarity and reliability in the analysis. This approach aligns with methodologies used in similar educational intervention studies (Kim & Quinn, 2021) and allowed for a clear illustration of the intervention's impact on literacy.

The analysis revealed a positive effect of the intervention on reading comprehension. On average, the students' mean reading comprehension scores increased from 65% in the pre-assessment to 80% in the post-assessment, reflecting an average improvement of 15 percentage points. Individual improvements ranged from 10% to 20%, indicating variability among participants. These results suggest that the culturally sustaining and engaging instructional strategies implemented in the book club were effective in enhancing reading comprehension among the targeted students. The quantifiable improvement in scores provides strong evidence that the intervention successfully addressed the literacy challenges faced by these students.

The outcome data provided critical insights into the efficacy of the literacy intervention. The observed improvement in reading comprehension confirmed that the enhanced academic engagement strategies were effective, thereby validating the intervention's design and execution. Based on these findings, subsequent PDSA cycles incorporated additional inquiry-based reading activities and further refinements in the selection of culturally relevant texts. These modifications were implemented to sustain and potentially amplify the literacy gains observed in the outcome data. The continuous integration of outcome measures into the PDSA cycles ensured that the intervention remained responsive to student needs and facilitated ongoing improvements in literacy development.

Implications

The integrated analysis of our driver, process, balance, and outcome measures reveals a multifaceted impact of the book club intervention on literacy and school engagement among Black male students. The outcome measures indicated a substantial improvement in reading comprehension, with average scores increasing from 65% to 80%, reflecting 15% increase. This quantifiable improvement provides robust evidence that culturally sustaining and engaging instructional strategies—such as reading circles, inquiry-based discussions, and targeted comprehension practices—are effective in addressing literacy challenges in this demographic. These findings align with recent literature emphasizing the positive impact of culturally responsive pedagogy on academic outcomes (Schwartz & Brown, 2022; Kim & Quinn, 2021).

Process measures demonstrated that the intervention was implemented with high fidelity, though minor logistical issues were observed. Teacher feedback indicated that while the session structures were generally maintained, adjustments such as rescheduling pull-out intervention groups to avoid conflicts with core instructional time were necessary. Moreover, the balance measures, which tracked school attendance, showed a positive trend among the participating students. The increased attendance rate suggests that the engaging activities fostered a genuine interest in learning, thereby enhancing overall school participation—a key marker of sustained academic engagement.

Based on these findings, several PDSA-driven modifications will be implemented in future cycles. First, scheduling adjustments will be further refined to minimize disruptions and optimize the integration of intervention activities within the school day. Second, additional teacher training on managing logistical challenges and streamlining session transitions will be scaled up to ensure even higher fidelity in implementation. Third, the program will be expanded

to include additional cohorts, thereby increasing its reach and impact on equity. These modifications are not only grounded in our empirical data but also reflect the broader literature's emphasis on continuous improvement and the need to tailor interventions to local contexts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Addressing equity issues remains central to our initiative. The positive outcomes observed among Black male students—traditionally an underserved group in literacy interventions—demonstrate that culturally sustaining practices can effectively reduce educational disparities. By aligning our intervention with the lived experiences of these students, we not only enhance academic performance but also foster a stronger sense of identity and belonging. In sum, our findings support the scalability of culturally relevant interventions as a means to advance educational equity, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed academically and thrive in their educational environment.

Implications for practice

To ensure that the gains achieved through the book club intervention are sustained over time, a comprehensive sustainability plan has been developed. Central to this plan is the integration of culturally sustaining practices into the existing literacy curriculum at Blue Elementary School. School administrators, in collaboration with district literacy coordinators, will adopt the book club model as a standard component of the reading program for second-grade Black male students. Ongoing professional development sessions will be established to train teachers in culturally responsive pedagogies and effective implementation strategies, ensuring that the intervention remains responsive to evolving student needs. Additionally, regular monitoring and evaluation—using the established driver, process, balance, and outcome

measures—will be conducted to identify areas for continuous improvement and to maintain high fidelity in program delivery.

Scaling up this initiative will require active involvement from multiple stakeholders. The school’s leadership team, including the principal and literacy coaches, will champion the program by integrating it into school-wide literacy improvement plans. Partnerships with community organizations, such as local libraries and cultural institutions, will be expanded to provide additional resources and enrichment opportunities that support the culturally sustaining curriculum. District-level policymakers will be engaged to secure necessary funding and to advocate for the replication of this intervention across other schools with similar demographics. By embedding the intervention within the broader educational framework and leveraging community support, the initiative is well positioned to be scaled up to benefit a larger cohort of students.

Implications for Future Iterations

The findings of this study have important implications for future iterations of the intervention. Based on the successful outcomes observed—such as improved reading comprehension and enhanced school attendance—it is recommended that the book club model be expanded to include additional grade levels and diverse student populations. Future iterations will incorporate the iterative feedback provided through PDSA cycles to refine the intervention further. For instance, scheduling modifications and expanded teacher training will be prioritized to overcome logistical challenges identified during the initial implementation phase. Furthermore, a formalized framework for ongoing data collection and analysis will be institutionalized to monitor progress and adapt strategies as needed. This approach not only enhances the intervention’s impact on literacy outcomes but also directly addresses educational

equity by ensuring that all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, have access to culturally responsive and engaging learning experiences.

To bring this vision to life and ensure its long-term success, this sustainability plan (Appendix I) presents a comprehensive framework of goals, guiding principles, and strategic actions for the implementation of the Blue County Schools Volunteer Mentor Reading Program. Rooted in the district's commitment to student development and meaningful community collaboration, the plan articulates how targeted intervention for at-risk students, coupled with robust stakeholder engagement and efficient resource management, can yield transformative educational outcomes. What follows is a strategic and action-oriented roadmap that not only promotes academic achievement but also cultivates a sustainable culture of literacy and student empowerment through community partnerships.

At the heart of this initiative lies a community-driven model designed to strengthen reading comprehension and student engagement among those most in need. The Blue County Schools Volunteer Mentor Reading Program reflects a deliberate and equity-centered approach, aligned with the district's "Champions for Children with Kindness" philosophy. Through individualized mentorship, access to relevant and culturally responsive literature, and consistent participation in reading groups, the program addresses both academic and behavioral challenges. Central to this model is the active involvement of community stakeholders; including fraternities, sororities, faith-based groups, and trained volunteers, who contribute to creating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment. Sustainability is not merely a component but a foundational pillar of the program, ensuring that its impact is both immediate and enduring.

The program's design incorporates a phased implementation strategy supported by baseline data, a SWOT analysis, and measurable objectives such as improving reading

comprehension scores by 15% and reducing disciplinary incidents by 25% within six months. A clear governance structure, anchored in school leadership and HR oversight, reinforces accountability and coordination. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and transparent reporting mechanisms sustain the program’s momentum and integrity. In addition, built-in risk management protocols, ongoing stakeholder feedback, and volunteer recognition efforts ensure the adaptability and longevity of the initiative. As the program evolves, Blue County Schools envisions expanding its reach to more schools and grade levels, demonstrating that strategic planning, community collaboration, and a steadfast commitment to equity can meaningfully address literacy disparities and foster academic excellence districtwide.

Implications for Policy

This study’s findings offer substantial evidence for the need to reform educational policies to better support the literacy development of Black male students. Outcome data demonstrate that culturally sustaining and engaging instructional strategies—such as reading circles, inquiry-based discussions, and targeted comprehension activities—can significantly improve reading comprehension and overall school engagement. In light of these results, policymakers should consider revising state and district standards, such as those outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), to mandate the integration of culturally responsive curricula. Such policy changes would ensure that schools are held accountable for implementing instructional practices that reflect the cultural experiences and identities of all students, thereby advancing equity in education (Harris & Wilson, 2021).

The success of the intervention underscores the need for ongoing professional development in culturally sustaining pedagogy. Educational policies should require and fund regular training for teachers, particularly in schools serving marginalized populations. For

example, urban districts that have prioritized culturally responsive professional development have reported notable improvements in student engagement and literacy outcomes (Kim & Quinn, 2021). By embedding these training requirements into policy, educational systems can ensure that teachers are equipped to deliver instruction that not only improves academic performance but also resonates with students' lived experiences.

The study's balance measures, which indicate improved attendance among the participating Black male students, reveal that such interventions can have far-reaching impacts beyond academic metrics. Increased school attendance reflects enhanced student engagement and a greater sense of belonging—factors that are critical for long-term academic success. Therefore, policymakers should also consider incentivizing comprehensive, community-based literacy initiatives that foster these positive behaviors. By formalizing support for culturally sustaining practices and establishing funding streams for innovative literacy programs, education policy can play a pivotal role in scaling successful interventions and reducing systemic inequities. Ultimately, these policy recommendations aim to create an educational environment where every student has access to the resources and support necessary for academic and personal success.

Recommendations for practitioners

Practitioners seeking to implement culturally sustaining literacy interventions should first develop a robust foundational knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy. This includes understanding key frameworks such as Ladson-Billings' Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and scholars who emphasize the role of culturally sustaining practices in addressing educational inequities. Practitioners must be well-versed in the historical and socio-cultural contexts that shape the learning experiences of marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Such

foundational knowledge will enable educators to select appropriate texts, design meaningful activities, and tailor instruction to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students.

In addition to foundational knowledge, practitioners must embrace core beliefs that literacy is transformative and that every student's cultural identity is an asset in the learning process. Educators should hold a commitment to equity, believing that engaging students in literature that reflects their own experiences can foster higher levels of academic engagement and improved reading comprehension (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This belief system should drive their instructional decisions and interactions with students, reinforcing the idea that each student's voice is integral to the classroom dynamic.

Practitioners need to cultivate specific skills to successfully implement and sustain these interventions. Key skills include the ability to design and facilitate interactive reading circles and inquiry-based discussions that promote student-led learning. Practitioners should also be adept in collecting and analyzing process and outcome data—using tools such as Google Forms, qualitative coding software like NVivo, and descriptive statistical methods—to monitor fidelity and inform iterative improvements through PDSA cycles. Additionally, skills in reflective practice, effective communication, and adaptability are crucial to address logistical challenges and refine instructional strategies over time. By integrating these foundational knowledge areas, core beliefs, and practical skills, practitioners can effectively engage in culturally sustaining literacy initiatives that promote equity and enhance the academic outcomes of marginalized student populations.

Directions for future research

Future research should build upon the current study by addressing several key areas that emerged from its limitations and implications. One critical direction is to expand the sample size

and diversity of the participant pool. Including additional schools from across varied geographic regions and socio-economic contexts would allow researchers to test the generalizability of culturally sustaining literacy interventions. As Kim and Quinn (2021) suggest, larger, more diverse samples are essential for establishing the robustness of interventions designed to address educational inequities.

Another promising avenue for future inquiry is the exploration of long-term outcomes associated with these interventions. While the current study focused on immediate gains in reading comprehension and attendance, longitudinal research is needed to determine whether early improvements in literacy lead to sustained academic success, improved graduation rates, and broader socio-emotional benefits over time (Harris & Wilson, 2021). Tracking students across multiple academic years would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lasting impact of culturally responsive practices.

Future studies should investigate the interplay between family engagement, community partnerships, and classroom-based instructional practices. Given the positive preliminary findings regarding student engagement, exploring how these factors collectively influence academic performance could offer deeper insights into mechanisms that drive educational equity. Researchers might also consider incorporating innovative digital literacy tools or augmented reality experiences into intervention models to further enhance engagement and cultural relevance (Morris et al., 2022). Such explorations could help refine best practices and support policy initiatives aimed at reducing educational disparities. By addressing these areas, future research can further elucidate the efficacy of culturally sustaining literacy practices and contribute to a more equitable educational landscape.

Future research should examine the long-term impact of integrating mentorship with literacy interventions among Black male students, given the transformative potential observed in the Booked Beyond Imagination Book Club. Mentoring programs tailored to the unique needs of these students provide invaluable support by bridging their current challenges and long-term aspirations through guidance, role modeling, and the cultivation of a sense of belonging (Noble, 2021). In this initiative, what began as a literacy-focused book club evolved into a highly productive mentoring effort, wherein students not only improved academically but also developed social-emotional skills through candid discussions about character, perseverance, and self-worth. Future studies should investigate how scaling such integrated mentorship models district-wide might enhance these outcomes further, particularly in elementary settings where early intervention is most impactful (Johnson et al., 2020). Moreover, longitudinal research is needed to determine whether these early mentoring relationships translate into sustained academic achievement and improved behavioral outcomes over time. By building on culturally responsive practices that emphasize shared cultural experiences and trust (Rogers & Mosley, 2019), future work can offer a robust framework for addressing systemic inequities and fostering a generation of empowered, resilient leaders among Black male students.

Limitations of the study

Several limitations constrain the generalizability and interpretation of the findings. First, the sample size was limited to six Black male second-grade students and three teacher participants, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of Black male students across different settings (Kim & Quinn, 2021). The small sample size also restricts the statistical power of the study, potentially overlooking subtle effects of the intervention.

The study was conducted in a single rural, low-socioeconomic school, introducing unique contextual factors that may influence both the implementation and outcomes of the intervention. This specific environment, with its distinct cultural and socio-economic characteristics, might limit the transferability of the results to urban or suburban contexts (Schwartz & Brown, 2022). Furthermore, the reliance on qualitative data from teacher reflections and structured interviews—while rich in context—introduces a degree of subjectivity that could affect the consistency of the findings, despite rigorous efforts to ensure reliability and validity.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the potential of culturally sustaining literacy interventions to improve reading comprehension and engagement among marginalized student populations. Future researchers can build on this work by employing larger and more diverse samples and adapting the intervention to varied educational contexts. The findings provide a useful starting point for policy and practice aimed at reducing educational disparities, suggesting that even in resource-constrained environments, culturally responsive strategies can promote equity and academic success (Harris & Wilson, 2021).

Conclusion

This project introduced a culturally responsive book club to address persistent literacy challenges among Black male students—a subgroup that consistently underperforms both locally and nationally. By integrating culturally sustaining literature, inquiry-based discussions, and targeted comprehension strategies aligned with state reading standards, the intervention not only improved reading comprehension—from an average of 65% to 80%—but also fostered greater engagement, as evidenced by students’ enthusiastic participation. A key factor in the program’s success was connecting students with a mentor who resembled them and demonstrated a genuine commitment to their achievement. Their excitement was palpable: they sprinted down the

hallway before each session, eagerly asking, “What are we reading today?” and later returning to class to share their experiences. The significant impact was further reflected in the fact that teachers requested copies of the lessons to replicate the intervention in their own classrooms.

In addressing systemic inequities, this initiative advanced equity-oriented reform by challenging deficit thinking and promoting inclusive practices. The project underscored that every child deserves a high-quality education and that educators, administrators, and community stakeholders must collectively assume responsibility for student outcomes. By actively eliminating biases inherent in traditional assessments and textbooks, the intervention helped create an environment where Black male students saw themselves reflected in the curriculum, fostering a sense of empowerment and belonging. This shift in mindset—from deficit-based to empowerment-based approaches—proved essential for initiating meaningful change within the school. My personal transition from a background in secondary career and technical education to working collaboratively with early literacy experts further enriched this process, catalyzing a culture of shared learning and professional growth among elementary educators.

Despite these promising outcomes, the study faced limitations, including a small sample size, a single-site implementation, and a short timeframe that constrained the ability to assess long-term sustainability. Additionally, IRB restrictions prevented the collection of student perceptions regarding inclusion, leaving an important dimension of the student experience unexplored. Nonetheless, the intervention’s demonstrated academic improvements—evidenced by higher grades, better test scores, and significant gains on literacy assessments—indicate its potential scalability. Future equity-related work should focus on expanding this initiative across the district, emphasizing professional development for educators in culturally responsive teaching and literacy strategies (Gay, 2010). Nationally, these findings contribute to a growing

body of evidence that culturally responsive pedagogy is essential for narrowing achievement gaps and promoting systemic reform. By aligning local practices with national policy recommendations, such as those advocated under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and supported by recent research (Kim & Quinn, 2021), this work offers a viable pathway toward creating educational environments where every student is valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

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APPENDIX A
Initiative Timeline

Week	Dates	Focus	Data Collected
1	November 14, 2024	Book Club Kick-off Establish Norms Share purpose and expected outcomes Book Interest Dialogue Book Club Hook: <i>Crown: An Ode to The Fresh Cut</i>	Pre- Reading Comprehension Test Student responses to initial questions after reading a book. Questions coming from Standard RL 2.1 (Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How to demonstrate understanding of the text?)
2	November 18 th , 20 th , 22 nd	Selected Book: <i>Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut</i> , Facilitator will read book to participants and will select parts of book to talk about. On Wednesday, facilitator will re-read book and continue dialogue Monday. On Friday will continue with asking questions to ensure that students comprehended text.	Written notes from conversations from group discussions, attendance,
3	November 25 th -26 th	Selected Book: <i>Jabari Jumps</i> , Facilitator will read book to participants and will select parts of book to talk about. On Wednesday, facilitator will re-read book and continue dialogue Monday. On Friday will continue with asking questions to ensure that	Written notes from conversations from group discussions, attendance,

		students comprehended text.	
Week	Dates	Focus	Data Collected
4	December 2 nd , 4 th , and 6 th , 2024	Selected Book: <i>Jabari Jumps</i> , Facilitator will read book to participants and will select parts of book to talk about. On Wednesday, facilitator will re-read book and continue dialogue Monday. On Friday will continue with asking questions to ensure that students comprehended text.	Written Notes from conversations from discussions, attendance,
5	December 9 th , 11 th , 13 th , 2024	Selected Book: <i>Jabari Tries</i> , Facilitator will read book to participants and will select parts of book to talk about. On Wednesday, facilitator will re-read book and continue dialogue Monday. On Friday will continue with asking questions to ensure that students comprehended text.	Written notes from conversations from group discussions, attendance,
6	December 16 th -17 th	Participants reflected on the sessions and reviewed each book they had read. As a closing activity before Winter Break, they had the opportunity to take home one of the previously read books to share with their families	
Week	Dates	Focus	Data Collected

7	January 6 th , 8 th , and 10 th	Selected Book: <i>I'm A Little King</i> , Facilitator will read book to participants and will select parts of book to talk about. On Wednesday, facilitator will re-read book and continue dialogue Monday. On Friday will continue with asking questions to ensure that students comprehended text.	Written notes from conversations from discussion, attendance,
8	January 13 th , 15, 17 th , 2025	Selected Book: <i>I Am Amazing</i> , Facilitator will read book to participants and will select parts of book to talk about. On Wednesday, facilitator will re-read book and continue dialogue Monday. On Friday will continue with asking questions to ensure that students comprehended text.	Written notes from conversations from discussion, attendance,
9	January 21 st , 2025	Closing project week to include ceremony for participants their families. I will present each student with a set of books and a participant certificate	Post-Reading Comprehension test, classroom teacher survey to see the impact the book club.

APPENDIX B

Book Club Lesson Plans

Book: I'm a Little King by Sharifa Brown

Teacher Thinking	<p>Standard: RL2.3 Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges</p> <p>Objective: Students will read a fictional text to understand how the main character responds to getting his hair cut or maintaining his crown.</p> <p>Comprehension Strategy: Asking Questions</p> <p>I Can Statement: I can tell how characters act or react when things happen in a story.</p>
	<p>Students are working to ask questions about the text. When readers can ask questions about a story they are able to self monitor and make connections to the text or the world which can improve their comprehension and retention of information.</p>
Mini Lesson	<p>Vocabulary and Definitions:</p> <p>Zip Powerful Negative Greatness Honoring Achieve</p>
	<p>Comprehension Strategy: We're going to use the reading comprehension strategy of questioning. This strategy of questioning helps readers better comprehend a story because we think of questions while we read to help us understand the story. You can ask questions before you read, while you read, and after you read to understand a story.</p>
	<p>Text introduction:</p> <p>We are reading I'm a Little King by Sharifa Brown. This is a story about a little black boy who works to accomplish and overcomes things that happen to him by being positive.</p>
Before Reading	<p>Make a prediction or a guess based on the illustration and title, what do you think will happen in the story?</p>
During Reading	<p>Page 5- Why is it important for Malik to believe in himself?</p> <p>Page 8- Why is it important to put the negative thoughts aside?</p> <p>Page 9/10- What is one question you can come up with based on this illustration?</p> <p>Page 11- How does Malik do his best in school?</p> <p>Page 16- What does Malik do when people do not look like him or like him?</p> <p>Page 20- What is one question you can come up with based on this illustration?</p> <p>Page 28- Is Malik a real king? Why does he say "I'm a little king, watch me ROAR"?</p>
After Reading	<p>What challenges did Malik face in this story?</p>

	Did the main character allow the challenges he faced stop him? This is a better match from your standard to your instruction. Always look for that alignment. Make sure you are asking questions during reading that help students see this easily.
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Book: Crown: An Ode To the Fresh Cut by Derrick Barnes

Teacher Thinking	<p>Standard: RL2.3 Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges</p> <p>Objective: Students will read a fictional text to understand how the main character responds to getting his hair cut or maintaining his crown.</p> <p>Comprehension Strategy: Make Predictions</p> <p>I Can Statement: I can tell how characters act or react when things happen in a story.</p>
Mini Lesson	<p>Students are working to making predictions about the text. When readers can use what they understand from a story and predict what they think will happen, they are better able to understand a story which can improve their comprehension and retention of information.</p>
	<p>Vocabulary and Definitions:</p> <p>Crown Canvas Royalty Cape Presidential Majestic Dome</p>
	<p>Comprehension Strategy: We're going to use the reading comprehension strategy of making predictions which means to use information we read in the story to guess what we think will happen next.</p>
	<p>Text introduction:</p> <p>We are reading Crown by Derrick Barnes. This story is about a young black boy who is maintaining his crown.</p>
Before Reading	Make a prediction or a guess based on the illustration and title, what do you think this story will be about? Let's write those down on an anchor chart.
During Reading	<p>Page 1- What chair do you think they are talking about on the first page of the text?</p> <p>Page 2- Why do you think they say "they'll want to post you in a museum?"</p> <p>Page 3- Predict what you think will happen next in the story?</p> <p>Page 16- What did you notice about the character during this part of the story?</p> <p>Page 17-How do you think the character will feel next in the story? What words, pictures, or actions make you think that?</p>
After Reading	Were any of our predictions on our anchor chart, correct?

Book: Jabari Tries by Gaia Cornwall

<p>Teacher Thinking</p>	<p>Standard: RL2.3 Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges Objective: Students will read a fictional text to understand how the main character overcomes the challenge of fear when building something new Comprehension Strategy: Predictions I Can Statement:I can tell how characters act or react when things happen in a story.</p>
	<p>Students are working to making predictions about the text. When readers can use what they understand from a story and predict what they think will happen, they are better able to understand a story which can improve their comprehension and retention of information.</p>
	<p>Comprehension Strategy: We're going to use the reading comprehension strategy of making predictions which means to use information we read in the story to guess what we think will happen next.</p>
<p>Mini Lesson</p>	<p>Text introduction: We are reading Jabari Tries by Gaia Cornwall. This story is about a young black boy who is facing a challenge and overcomes it.</p>
<p>Before Reading</p>	<p>What do you notice and wonder about the illustration? (Make a T-Chart and Record Notices/Wonders)</p>
<p>During Reading</p>	<p>Page 1 Jabari said he is going to make a flying machine. Do you think he will make a real flying machine? Page 2 What do you think he will do or use to make it? Page 7: Jabaris machine did not fly. It went crash. He started thinking of inventors. What do you think he will do next? Page 8: Jabri built a sketch or a drawing of a bigger ramp. What do you predict will happen next? Page 11:Jabari and his sister are using baking soda to make it fly. He say he thinks it needs more power. What do you predict Jabari will do with the baking soda to make it fly? Page 12:The machine crashed again. His chest was tight. How was Jabari feeling? Page 16:Jabari had trouble with his ramp in this story. Did Jabari just give up?</p>
<p>After Reading</p>	<p>Page 18: What did Jabari learn by the end of the story? What do you think Jabari would do next now that the story is over?</p>

Book: Jabari Jumps by Gaia Cornwall

<p>Teacher Thinking</p>	<p>Standard: RL2.3 Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges Objective: Students will read a fictional text to understand how the main character overcomes</p>
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Mini Lesson	<p>the challenge of fear when trying something new. Comprehension Strategy: Inference I Can Statement: I can tell how characters act or react when things happen in a story.</p>
	<p>Students are working to make inferences about the text. When readers can make inferences in a story they are able to understand and recognize the text which can improve their comprehension and retention of information.</p>
	<p>Vocabulary and Definitions: Infer Challenge Edge Whispered Sprang Dove</p>
	<p>Comprehension Strategy: We're going to use the reading comprehension strategy of inferencing which means to use information we already know while we read to come to a conclusion. This strategy of inferencing helps readers better comprehend a story because sometimes the author will not tell us something and we have to use clues to figure it out.</p>
	<p>Text introduction: We are reading Jabari Jumps by Gaia Cornwall. This story is about a young black boy who is facing a challenge and overcomes it.</p>
Before Reading	<p>What do you notice about the illustration?</p>
During Reading	<p>Page 5 - Jabari's dad squeezed his hand. Why do you think that Jabari squeezed back? Page 6- Jabari looked at the ladder, what do you think Jabari was thinking while he was looking up? Page 15 - Jabari walked up the ladder and walked to the end of the board, how do you think he felt when he stood there? Page 23 - Jabari made a big splash. Do you think his feelings changed since the beginning of the story? How do you know?</p>
After Reading	<p>We learned that Jabari was going to dive from the diving board, but it was scary to him. Have you ever had to do anything scary? How did you overcome it?</p>

Book: I am Amazing By Alissa Hilder and Zulekha Holder-Young

Teacher Thinking	<p>Standard: RL2.3 Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges Objective: Students will read a fictional text to understand how the main character overcomes the challenge of fear when trying something new. Comprehension Strategy: Making Connections</p>
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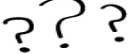



Mini Lesson	I Can Statement: I can tell how characters act or react when things happen in a story.
	Students are working to Make Connections about the text. When readers can make connections with the text, they can do so by making connections text to text, real world, or text to self which can improve their comprehension and retention of information.
	Vocabulary and Definitions: Cape Whoosh Whizzed Rescue Proud
	Comprehension Strategy: We are going to work on making connections. Making connections helps you understand a story. You can make connections to yourself if it reminds you of a time you have done something. You can make connections to a text if it reminds you of another story or you can make connections with the world if it reminds you of something you may have already seen before like on the news.
	Text introduction: We are reading I am Amazing by Alissa Hilder and Zulekha Holder-Young. This story is about a young black boy who is facing a challenge and overcomes it.
Before Reading	What do you notice about the illustration on the front cover? Probing Question: What is he wearing? Probing Question: Do you know anyone else who may wear a cape?
During Reading	Page 1 & 2: It looks like Ayaan is at a park. Have you ever been to a park? Did you enjoy it? Page 4: Ayaans friend Aria is at the park as well. What did she need help with? Page 4: Have you ever had to help a friend with something? Page 5: Ayaan is helping another friend. Can you think of a word to describe Ayaan? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Probe: Is Ayaan Kind to others? Page 7-8 David and Brian laughed at Ayaan. Does this remind you of another story? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have you ever had someone laugh at you or someone you know? ● How did that make you feel? Page 14 What did Ayaan tell his father after school? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why did he tell his father this? Page 17 What types of jobs do these characters have? Are they superheroes? Why or why not? Page 24 What makes Ayaan a superhero? Page 25 How did Ayaan’s feelings change in the story?
After Reading	What did you learn by reading this story? What makes YOU a superhero?

APPENDIX C
Checklist for Close Reading

CLOSE READING
..... anchor chart

CLOSE READERS

DO THESE THINGS

- Read the text slowly at least twice  x 2
- Get the gist of what the text is about 
- Circle words you aren't sure of and try to figure them out 
- Reread, annotate, and underline key vocabulary 
- Use the text to answer questions 
- Gather evidence from the text 
- Talk with each other about what you think it means 
- Read again to summarize or answer specific questions 

APPENDIX D
Data Collection and Analysis Plan

Improvement Science Measure	What inquiry question is being answered?	Data collection from who?	What type of data collection tool will I use?	What type of data will I collect?	When will I collect this data?	How will I analyze this data?	When will I analyze this data?
Pre and Post-Reading Comprehension Test (Outcome)	Did the initiative improve participants' reading comprehension skills?	Students	Paper/Pencil	Quantitative	Beginning and End (August, December)	Percentage of correct answers	After each assessment (November, January)
Documented written conversations from group discussions (Driver)	Did the initiative improve the student's reading comprehension skills using question stems?	Students	Google document	Qualitative	Weekly	Listen and analyze students' conversations and how different books have changed their thinking	After each session
Facilitator Reflection Journal with structured prompts (Process)	Is the initiative working as intended?	Facilitator	Google Document	Qualitative	After each session	Self-reflection	After each session
Spreadsheet of Student Book selections (Process)	Is the initiative working as intended?	Facilitator	Spreadsheet	Quantitative	After each session	Review Attendance	After each session
Teachers and instruction assistants' electronic reflection journal with structured prompts (Process)	Is the initiative working as intended?	Facilitator	Google Document	Qualitative	Bi-weekly	Review the results and discuss action steps with the design team	Bi-weekly
Attendance (Balance)	What unintended consequences have come about as a result of the initiative?	Students	Spreadsheet	Quantitative	After each session	Review the results and discuss with team action steps	After each session
Structured interviews with Teachers (Process, Driver)	How is initiative interrupting classroom?	Teachers	Google document with selected questions	Qualitative	Before and After Intervention	Review results and access	Before and After Intervention

APPENDIX E
Pre and Post Reading Comprehension Test for 2nd Graders

Reading Passage:

Jake loves playing sports. His favorite sport is soccer, but he also enjoys basketball and baseball. Every Saturday, Jake and his friends meet at the local park to play a game of soccer. Jake usually plays as the goalkeeper because he is very good at stopping the ball.

Last Saturday, Jake made an amazing save that helped his team win the game. His friends cheered and lifted him up in celebration. After the game, they played a quick game of basketball. Even though Jake is not very tall, he can dribble the ball really well and often makes baskets.

When Jake got home, he told his parents all about his exciting day. They were very proud of him and promised to come watch his next soccer game.

Questions:

1. What is Jake's favorite sport?
 - a) Baseball
 - b) Basketball
 - c) Soccer
 - d) Tennis
2. Where does Jake meet his friends to play soccer?
 - a) At school
 - b) In his backyard
 - c) At the local park
 - d) At a sports club
3. What position does Jake usually play in soccer?
 - a) Forward
 - b) Midfielder
 - c) Goalkeeper
 - d) Defender
4. What did Jake do that helped his team win the soccer game?
 - a) Scored the winning goal
 - b) Made an amazing save
 - c) Passed the ball to a teammate
 - d) Ran very fast
5. How did Jake's friends celebrate his amazing save?
 - a) They gave him a high-five
 - b) They lifted him up in celebration
 - c) They took him out for ice cream
 - d) They gave him a trophy
6. What sport did Jake and his friends play after the soccer game?

- a) Baseball
 - b) Basketball
 - c) Tennis
 - d) Football
7. What did Jake's parents promise to do?
- a) Buy him new sports equipment
 - b) Take him to a soccer match
 - c) Come watch his next soccer game
 - d) Sign him up for a sports camp

Source: (Stanovich, 2000)







APPENDIX F

Teachers Open-Ended Questionnaire

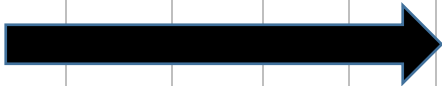
1. How is the Booked Beyond Imagination Book Club enhancing the classroom experience for the students involved in the initiative?
2. Have you observed any positive changes in their classroom performance as a result?
3. Have you observed any negative changes in their classroom performance as a result?
4. Do you have any additional feedback?

APPENDIX G

Implementation Timeline

GOAL: Explore the disconnects between Black boys and Culturally Sustaining Literature and Increase their academic performance in Reading.	April 2024	May 2024	June 2024	July 2024	Aug. 2024	Sept. 2024	Oct. 2024	Nov. 2024	Dec. 2024
Develop design team and schedule meeting to craft plan of action for the improvement initiative	X 	X							
Work with design team to create pilot sessions this school year with the students who will be part of initiative next school year. Create two small groups.		X 	X						
Create innovative sessions with the 2 nd graders to gather their interest in the Book club and specific literature and share group norming.		X 	X						
Pre and Post Reading Assessment measuring comprehension					X 				X
Design team will select books based on standards and different interest for the students to pick from to read.					X 	X	X	X	X
Reflective Meetings and Journals for Staff		X 	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Facilitator Reflection Journal (Process Measure)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Design team will create a spreadsheet that would document books checked out during intervention					X				



Sources: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/foundations/resources/secondgrade/re-c1/1.2_Act_2_Talking_While_You_Read_Stories_Bookmark.pdf
https://fcrr.org/sites/g/files/upcbnu2836/files/media/PDFs/student_center_activities/23_expository_text_structure/23_c012_just_the_facts.pdf

APPENDIX H
Notes from Book Discussions

Week 1: Discussion on *Jabari Jumps*

Student A: "I really liked how Jabari wasn't afraid to try something new, even when he felt scared."

Student B: "Yeah, when he took that big jump, it made me think, maybe I can be brave too."

Student C: "I was nervous at first, but the story showed me that taking a leap can help you discover what you're capable of."

Student D: "It reminded me that sometimes, even if I'm scared, I should try new things in class."

Student E: "The pictures made the story come alive for me, especially when Jabari looked so determined."

Student F: "I liked that he kept trying until he succeeded—it's like when I work hard on my math problems."

Week 2: Discussion on *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes

Student A: "This book made me feel cool because it showed that a fresh cut is like wearing a crown."

Student B: "I felt like a king when I read it; the book made me proud of how I look."

Student C: "When I got my hair cut, I remembered how special it felt, just like the book said."

Student D: "The illustrations were amazing and showed that a haircut can change your mood."

Student E: "I liked the phrase, 'Your head is a crown, wear it proudly.' It makes me want to look my best every day."

Student F: "I think the book taught us that feeling good about ourselves starts with what we see in the mirror."

Week 3: Discussion on *I Am Amazing*

Student A: "This book made me feel like I can do anything because it said I am amazing just the way I am."

Student B: "I liked how it reminded me that everyone is special in their own way."

Student C: "It made me proud because it told me that my ideas matter."

Student D: "Reading it helped me remember that even when I feel down, I still have amazing qualities."

Student E: "It was cool to see a book that celebrated all the different things that make us who we are."

Student F: "I smiled a lot reading it, and it made me want to be better at what I love doing, like drawing and playing sports."

Week 4: Discussion on *Jabari Tries*

Student A: "In this book, Jabari faced even more challenges, and I liked that he kept trying no matter what."

Student B: "It was similar to the first book, but he learned so much more about himself along the way."

Student C: "I liked that when he failed, he didn't give up and just tried again."

Student D: "It made me think about my homework—if I struggle, I should keep trying until I understand it."

Student E: "I feel like every time I try, even if I make mistakes, I learn something new."

Student F: "Jabari showed me that it's okay to fail sometimes because that's how we grow and get better."

Week 5: Integrated Reflections Across All Books

Student A: "After reading these books, I feel like I learned a lot about being brave and proud."

Student B: "They all taught me that facing your fears makes you stronger."

Student C: "I see a lot of myself in Jabari—how he never gives up and keeps trying."

Student D: "The crown book made me feel important, like I deserve to feel good about who I am."

Student E: "The 'I Am Amazing' book reminded me that I have lots of talents and that I'm special."

Student F: "Together, these stories make me believe that I can do anything and that I have people who care about me."

Week 6: Wrap-Up and Future Reflections

Student A: "I'm really happy we did this book club because it helped me see myself in a new way."

Student B: "It made me excited to come to school every day and try new things."

Student C: "I feel more confident sharing my thoughts in class after our discussions."

Student D: "I want to read more books like these that talk about real life and who I am."

Student E: "It feels good knowing that my teacher and mentor care about what I think."

Student F: "Every time we meet, I learn something new about myself and how I can be a better person."

APPENDIX I

Sustainability Plan

Sustainability Plan: Blue County Schools Volunteer Mentor Reading Program

I. Executive Summary

- **Brief Overview:** This plan outlines Blue County Schools' commitment to enhancing student reading comprehension and engagement through a sustainable, community-driven volunteer mentor reading program. The program aims to provide individualized support to at-risk students (students who consistently perform below grade level (2 years or more consecutively and/or have a high rate of discipline incidents), fostering a love for reading and improving academic outcomes.
- **Organizational Commitment:** Blue County Schools is dedicated to building strong partnerships with community stakeholders, embodying the "Champions for Children with Kindness" motto, and maximizing student learning through community engagement.

II. Introduction

- **Purpose and Scope:** The program aims to maximize student learning and engagement in reading and comprehension by providing individualized mentorship and access to relevant literature. This program will focus on at-risk students who will significantly benefit from participating in reading groups or reading circles 2-3 times a week.
- **Organizational Context:** Aligned with the "Champions for Children with Kindness" motto, this initiative strengthens community support for student success.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** The program will engage community organizations (fraternities, sororities, faith-based organizations, community groups, and district volunteers) to provide mentors and tutors who lead reading circles/groups with students.
- **Importance of Sustainability:** Sustainability is crucial for long-term impact, requiring careful resource management (financial, human, and technological) to overcome potential barriers.

III. Baseline Assessment

- **Data Collection:**
 - Student pre- and post-reading performance data.
 - Student discipline records.
 - Parental involvement metrics.
 - Community engagement data.
- **SWOT Analysis:** A comprehensive SWOT analysis will identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the program's sustainability.

IV. Sustainability Goals and Objectives

- **Vision:** Establish a sustainable volunteer mentor reading program that significantly enhances student reading engagement and performance.
- **Specific Goals (SMART):**

- Increase participating students' reading comprehension scores by 15% within 6 months.
- Reduce participating students' disciplinary incidents by 25% within six months.
- Achieve 15-25 active volunteer mentors within 2-4 months.
- Increase parent participation in reading-related events by 10% within four months
- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):**
 - Pre-- and post-reading assessment scores.
 - Student disciplinary incident rates.
 - Volunteer mentor recruitment and retention rates.
 - Parent participation rates in reading events.
- **Priority Areas:**
 - Increasing student reading performance.
 - Minimizing student discipline issues.
 - Promoting community engagement and parental involvement.

V. Strategies and Action Plans

- **Detailed Actions:**
 - Advertise the program on the district website and through community outreach to recruit 15-25 volunteers.
 - Collaborate with school administration to identify at-risk students.
 - Partner with the Human Resources Department to conduct thorough vetting and background checks on volunteers.
 - Host a "Meet and Greet" event to match students with mentors/tutors and facilitate parent involvement.
 - Purchase reading materials that connect to real-life experiences of the students. Reading materials will reflect all backgrounds and reading levels.
 - Purchase supplies for students to create learning products.
- **Implementation Timeline:**
 - July-August: Volunteer recruitment advertising.
 - September: Volunteer vetting and background checks.
 - October: "Meet and Greet" event and program launch.
 - Program Implementation Cycle October-January
 - Conduct pre-assessment for each student participating in the program (October)
 - Conduct post assessment (January)
 - Review student data, including pre-assessment, post-assessment, and other relevant student data.
 - Program Implementation Cycle February-April
 - Conduct pre-assessment for each student participating in the program (February)
 - Conduct post assessment (April)
 -
- **Resource Allocation:**
 - Background check costs (approximately \$25 per volunteer).
 - Reading materials (\$2,000-\$5,000).

- Supplies for students to create products of learning (\$1,200-\$1,800)
- Human resources for coordination, collaboration, and support.
- Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon (\$1,200-\$1,500)

VI. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting

- Regular data collection and analysis of student progress. Samples will include I-Ready data, NC Check-in data, benchmarks, and formal and informal assessments. This data will be analyzed by school and district-level leadership.
 - A data wall is recommended to record, monitor, and measure student progress accurately. Teachers, administrators, and instructional coaches will lead this task.
 - Adjust strategies for students based on their needs
- **Regular reports to stakeholders on program progress and outcomes.**

VII. Governance and Responsibility

- School principals and designated school staff members will oversee program implementation. They will receive guidance and support from Central Services.
- The Human Resources Department will manage volunteer vetting and compliance.
 - The Chief Human Resources Officer and HR Team will take the lead on final approvals of candidates based on the background check.
- Monthly meetings with community partners/volunteers/mentors/tutors to ensure alignment and collaboration.

VIII. Stakeholder Engagement

- Ongoing communication with community organizations, parents, and volunteers.
 - There will be quarterly newsletters; monthly updates will be shared through the Office of Superintendent at Blue District Schools Board meetings.
- Feedback mechanisms to ensure program responsiveness.
 - Student surveys will be conducted with permission from parents.
 - Teacher surveys and Volunteer/Mentor/Tutor surveys will be conducted to gather data.
- Recognition and appreciation of volunteer contributions.
 - Hold a Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon. Blue County School District and Partners will work together to sponsor the event annually. This will also allow scholars to share their learning experiences with the program.

IX. Risk Management

- Develop contingency plans for volunteer shortages or funding challenges.
 - Human Resources and Schools will collaborate with the Office of Communications to maintain an ongoing pool of volunteers.
 - There will be an intentional focus on the highlights and meaningful contributions volunteers can make by participating in the program.
- Implement safety protocols for student-mentor interactions.
 - The Office of Human Resources will conduct Policy training twice a year to ensure students' safety and volunteers' compliance.

X. Future Outlook and Continuous Improvement

- Explore opportunities to expand the program to other schools or grade levels.
- Incorporate feedback and best practices to enhance program effectiveness.
- Seek sustainable funding sources to ensure long-term viability.
 - The district will financially support the program through local, state, and federal funds. Cost should be minimal.