The Story of Me, The Story of We: Urban Teacher Narratives and the Transformative Power of Storytelling for Black and Brown Students

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Abstract

"Exploring Black and Brown Scholars' Identities: The Transformative Potential of Storytelling Through Urban Teacher Narratives"

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This dissertation focused on the possible use of storytelling in teacher practice to understand Black and Brown students and enhance their literacy. This study examined how teachers' narratives create connections with students, which help foster critical literacy and engagement and empower students in urban classrooms. Using narrative analysis and interviews, this research studied how pedagogues' stories bridge linguistic and cultural gaps in order for Black and Brown children to see their identities reflected in academic spaces and to feel valued and validated. When teachers tell stories, they become more aware of the barriers that their students face due to the system, and they can plan better and more culturally responsive literacy practices. This research looked at how storytelling enhances students' power to take control, be tough in circumstances, and feel at home (belonging) through margins of ability stemming from race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and class. Teachers can use stories in the classroom to create equitable learning environments and make critical pedagogical moves. They can do this by using their narratives to shift the dominant discourse over time. This study promotes the idea of storytelling as a useful pedagogical tool to enhance literacy development and foster inclusive and affirming classroom spaces for Black and Brown students by amplifying teacher voices.

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Dedication

To my dear mother, Dr. Lyvie Beauzil, my number one supporter, my father, Dr. Daniel Beauzil and my loving sister, Dr. Dorothy Beauzil, thank you for your unconditional love and support throughout this journey.

To Brown and Black children around the planet,

may your voices be heard, your stories be told, and your identities celebrated.

To all the loved ones I've met throughout this journey,

Each of you has a part in the person I've become, and I thank you for that.

Dedicated to the young me who decided to walk this walk.

To God be the glory.

Introduction

I Saw

I saw hurt,
I saw pain,
I saw anguish,
I saw despair,
I saw frustration,
I saw misunderstanding,
Most importantly, I saw me
(David, 2022)

This poem takes me back to my childhood memories, where I remember being a young Black student in a mostly white school and struggling with my feelings a lot of the time. Similar to the boy in the poem, who was upset with his experience, I recall times when I felt as if people did not hear me or when I was misinterpreted. These moments happened again and again not in isolation but in patterns showing how many students of color get disconnected with the educational system. The school is not the social or emotional space of Black and Brown students, as they are more often forced to adapt to a culture or curriculum that does not value their culture and feelings (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Just like what we see in the poem, many students feel frustrated, lonely, unseen, and unrecognized in classrooms that do not reflect them (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When teachers use storytelling, they can become aware of these realities. Storytelling helps build bridges between student experiences and culturally responsive literacy teaching (Gay, 2018). When teachers know and understand the challenges faced by Black and Brown students, they can create more inclusive, affirming, and engaging learning environments that enhance identity development and literacy (Paris & Alim, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

This poem also made me think of my own memories and how teaching these lessons is vital in solving these issues through literacy and education. When stories are told through

literacy, the ones who normally do not get a chance to speak can now do so, allowing for the release of inner feelings (Cummins, 2001). Storytelling, used for academic learning, allows students to process experiences, connect with others and claim their identities (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

This experience I witnessed as a Black male teacher of a Black male student from the poem reinforced my commitment to finding ways to positively impact the lives of Black and Brown children, not only through teaching academic skills but also by validating their emotions and experiences. As Critical Race Theory (CRT) asserts, education must be a space where the lived experiences of marginalized groups are acknowledged and respected, allowing students to see their stories reflected in the curriculum (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching practices that integrate storytelling serve as a powerful means of connecting students' lived experiences to their academic learning, fostering both engagement and comprehension. Storytelling, a fundamental aspect of many cultures, particularly within Black and Brown communities, allows students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, affirming their identities and validating their perspectives. When students recognize that their voices, histories, and traditions have a place in the classroom, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and investment in their education.

Moreover, culturally relevant pedagogy has been found to improve student motivation as well as critical thinking and literacy skills (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). By infusing stories from students' backgrounds into the teaching objectives and lessons of the day, the home-school gap can be narrowed. This method has questioned the predominantly Eurocentric education system and offered numerous other epistemologies for consideration, thereby ensuring all students (especially those marginalized) have an equal chance of success.

Thus, advocating for storytelling within culturally responsive teaching is not simply about representation; it is about transforming educational spaces into sites of empowerment, where students' cultural wealth is recognized as an asset rather than a deficit. It is in this way that we move beyond performative inclusivity and toward meaningful academic success for all students. This is why it is crucial to continue advocating for culturally responsive teaching practices that incorporate storytelling as a way of bridging the gap between students' home lives and school experiences (Gay, 2010).

Alongside the educator's responsibility, it takes a whole village to ensure that the Black and Brown students, most of whom come from marginalized communities, feel nurtured in a space that recognizes their realities and experiences. We do not just believe in empathizing and supporting these students, but we also believe that this creates many pathways towards academic success. To effectively help them succeed, we must understand that literacy is not a neutral or ahistorical term, it is filled with power, access, and culture. Literacy has throughout time liberated and oppressed groups who have had access to this privilege or have been denied access to the privilege. This understanding allows us to see how ordinary literacy learning often serves to exclude or devalue the voices and lived experiences of Black and Brown communities. Studying the history of how literacy education has been orchestrated can shed light on how various dominant pedagogical practices were constructed. It can also help us challenge the means by which they have been constructed. By investigating the past, we can engage with practices today that endorse literacy through the inclusion of students' narratives and knowledge as well as definition of literacy.

Chapter 1: Voices Unheard:

Empowering Urban Classrooms Through Storytelling

I stand here not just as a researcher, but as a Black male educator and Haitian-American whose own story began at our family's kitchen table—with griot storytelling, hip-hop rhythms, and abuela wisdom flowing through every conversation. Narrative was not just a way to make sense of the world—it was a lifeline. That fire fuels this dissertation.

But this is more than personal—it's urgent. The 2024 NAEP results reveal that only ***31 percent*** *of fourth-graders and* ***30 percent*** *of eighth-graders performed at or above the Proficient reading level—a decline from 2022. Even more alarming, 40 percent of fourth-graders and approximately* ***33 percent*** *of eighth-graders scored below Basic—the largest proportions ever seen in NAEP's 30-plus-year history (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025a; U.S. Department of Education, 2025).*

Interlude: Story as Origin

"The first story I ever knew wasn't written in a book—it was spoken at my family's kitchen table in Brooklyn. My parents, Haitian immigrants, told stories about survival, about struggle, about possibility. Those stories gave me language before I had words on a page. They taught me that literacy begins in community, and that the power of narrative is not just to entertain, but to shape who we are becoming."

1.1 A Brief Look at the Evolution of Inclusive Literacy

English Education teachers have often aligned themselves with ongoing discussions within their communities about how to create and implement inclusive literary practices in

English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. Since the 20th century, continuous involvement by researchers and educators of English Education, such as Rosenblatt (1933), Applebee (1974), and Freire (2000), demonstrates the issues and significance of how cultures and experiences intertwine with these literacy practices that have formed over time. From the 19th century until today, the role of schools has shifted and produced changes necessary for shaping different social classes for various functions in society, based on what has been taught in the English curriculum (Applebee, 1974). Applebee's insights illuminated the disparities between social classes, making these issues more apparent to educators, policymakers, and parents, and prompting a stronger focus on promoting equity within the ELA curriculum. Although the development of diversity, inclusiveness, and equity is complex in pinpointing exact changes in the curriculum, there is evidence that several researchers and educators are pushing for pivotal and continuous changes in how literacy is taught.

Myers (1996) argued that for these changes in literacies to happen, we must first address the foundational constructions of how literacy has been continuously redefined. To dive more deeply into how literacy has been redefined, Myers wrote about recitation literacy, one of the foundational constructions in which "learning new meanings was an act of elocution in which messages were digested and assimilated" (p. 71). In this model, literacy was not about personal interpretation or critical engagement but rather a form of mimicry—students repeated syllables, words, and phrases in a structured manner, focusing primarily on reading comprehension and effective oral communication. This approach privileged rote memorization over critical analysis, reinforcing a rigid structure that often ignored students' lived experiences and cultural knowledge.

Over the years, literacy has become far more active than simply imitation and rote recitation. In current terms, literacy can be defined broadly as the ability of an individual to decipher, absorb, and share new information suitably through a varied combination of problem-solving and working collaboratively and presenting ideas using multimedia (Keefe & Copeland, 2011). People now recognize that culture, identity, and other lived experiences influence how people engage with text and develop meaning. This can take many forms and makes design choices critical.

1.2 Honoring Literacy Traditions While Addressing Opportunity Gaps

While national data show that Black and Brown students lag behind their White peers in reading, the study deliberately departs from deficit-based narratives that consider these students deficient. Instead, it casts Black and Brown scholars as the inheritors of rich literate traditions such as oral storytelling, performative literacies, griot traditions, hip-hop culture, and knowledge sharing that have been historically negated or devalued (Muhammad, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005). As fundamental literacies, they challenge narrow, Eurocentric definitions of 'reading' and 'writing' and center students' cultural assets as foundational to literacy instruction (Gutiérrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Storytelling is a culturally sustaining pedagogy for Black and Brown students whose voices and narratives have gone unheard (Paris & Alim, 2017). It authentically grounds students' experiences in their rich histories and cultures. As per Duncan-Andrade (2009) and Muhammad (2020), storytelling is thus an active process through which students produce and share knowledge that represents their communities—moving literacy from passive repetition to active empowerment.

For Black and Brown students whose voices and narratives have never been the focus of a literacy approach, this evolution suggests the need for storytelling and other pedagogy that takes students' intentions seriously. Storytelling is an activity where students do not just receive static information but, instead, produce and share knowledge that is representative of the cultures of all learners. By redistributing the label of literacy from passive repetition to active empowerment, educators can nurture classrooms wherein Black and Brown students are bringers of knowledge rather than mere receivers.

This commitment to honoring literacy traditions is deeply personal for me. As a student who came from an urban background and did not have the chance to fully experience culturally relevant pedagogy, the help of those in my family, my community, and even myself found a way to ignite my interest in reading. Growing up in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, I faced many challenges that made it difficult to connect with traditional schooling. My community, often referred to as "the hood," was full of vibrant culture but also marked by poverty, limited resources, and systemic inequities (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). At school, I rarely encountered books or lessons that reflected my experiences as a young Black boy. The curriculum felt disconnected from the realities of my life, and opportunities to engage with literature were few (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Nonetheless, I found my love for reading because my family and community fostered it. My mother worked long hours, but she got me a library card, and my grandmother read to me. The moment I found books that had characters that looked like me and told stories set in my world, I found reading to be powerful (Banks, 2006). My inspiration to read today comes from those early moments, combined with the love and perseverance of my family and relatives.

Having that urban background, where experiences of injustices were faced, made it easier to grasp the ideas of culturally responsive education, especially towards teaching literacies as an

English teacher in New York City. As a student, I recall a time when my teacher introduced literature by African American authors, like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, which allowed me to see my own experiences reflected in the texts. This not only made reading more engaging but also empowered me to connect with the material on a deeper level. As a teacher, I have applied similar approaches by incorporating diverse voices into my curriculum, such as Jason Reynolds and Jacqueline Woodson, whose books resonate with the lived experiences of my Black and Brown students. By connecting their personal stories to the literature we read, I have seen a notable increase in student engagement and comprehension, proving that culturally responsive teaching fosters both a love for reading and academic growth (Gay, 2002). Building on those experiences has helped me to create "awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). This understanding has helped me become the educator I am today. This background helps with highlighting the importance of acknowledging, valuing, and understanding that different ethnic groups hold distinct sets of values, or they might manifest shared values in unique ways.

Early on in life, I used to despise reading, but it is ironic how reading is my first love now. Instead of reading, oral storytelling used to be a significant part of my life. Growing up in a Haitian American household and community, I heard many stories and folktales that have taught me great life lessons. My father, in particular, told me a story one day about the importance of reading. An illiterate young man took his sick grandfather to the doctor. The doctor prescribed some medication that should have been taken as prescribed. Since no one in the household knew how to read, the grandfather took the medication three times a day instead of once a day. At the end of the first day, the grandfather was found dead in his bed. Although late in life but not too late to change his trajectory, the young man voluntarily decided to learn how to read.

The story shows how important literacies are for success in the present. Being able to read, write and comprehend is essential. Having the necessary skills and knowledge to perform activities of daily living (ADLs) at home, work and in the community. Through this narrative, we understand how important literacies are to thrive in today's world. Nowadays, the concept of literacy goes beyond reading and writing as it includes a wide variety of skills that are put to use to process, understand in different situations and demands, evaluate and use various information. These skills can be anything like critical thinking, problem-solving, fluency in technology, and more. Functional literacy is "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials, associated with varied contexts" (Montoya, 2018), according to the statement by UNESCO. People can read and write the printed and written materials they see in society and other situations. It is an essential competency for active engagement in economic, social, and political life. As society moves toward information and digital economies, the capacity to control information to understand through experience and apply with success in a real-world context is essential for personal and civic engagement. When we think about the views of teachers, "determining how well ethnically diverse students know and can do, and how much they are capable of knowing and doing is often a function of how well teachers can talk to them" (Gay, 2002). It is our basic right as educators to ensure that our young generations work for their personal growth, social progress, and all-round development. By creating an atmosphere where questioning, caring, and ownership are valued, students are equipped to become change-makers in building a world that is fair and peaceful, not just for themselves but also for generations to come.

Since reflecting on this story, I have attentively read books, articles, signs, subtitles in a movie—anything with words! I recognize that this particular instance marked a turning point, illuminating how storytelling played a pivotal role in igniting my passion for reading. According

to a report conducted by Scholastic and managed by YouGov, in 2014, 37% of children ages 6-17 said they liked reading a little, while 12% said they did not like it at all. Researchers have found a sharp decline in reading enjoyment after age 8. Now, as an educator, specifically in Grades 7-12, my mission is to emphasize the importance of reading to students through enriching and engaging ways and reignite their love and passion found through reading and writing. In summary, literacy is the foundation for reading and writing, while reading and writing are essential skills for compelling storytelling. Together, these elements form a symbiotic relationship that allows us to connect, communicate, and share the richness of human experiences and knowledge. Bringing this all together leads to literacy, "the most fundamental and essential purposes of stories and storytelling—to know we exist" (Morrell, 2023). In the tapestry of narratives, we find validation of our identities and a profound connection that transcends boundaries, fostering empathy and unity among diverse individuals.

In this brief historical background, I explain why this work is so important for me. This reiteration will set down the reason for my choosing to do this research. That is, there is a compelling need for storytelling by urban educators to transform literacy education.

The amount of time that students spend reading, either in school or at home, has dropped lately. National surveys showed that the contemporary generation scored lower in reading comprehension while also doing less voluntary reading. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2024) found that fewer than one-third of students nationwide are reading at proficient levels. Further, 4th graders (40%) and 8th graders (33%) below the NAEP Basic level (i.e. simple, low-level reading tasks)—the highest proportions of students to struggle with reading in 20 years. In addition, a decreased number of students have reported being in touch with a book for fun or personal growth. This decline is not limited to one group or family

background, but happens across societies and families of all economic groups. However, it seems to be mostly in the below-poverty line communities (Neuman & Celano, 2012).

I have observed a similar trend currently within classes in my own school communities. Students who used to read and enjoy much seem to be losing their motivation. Similarly, their attention span seems less focused. Most students think of reading as a painful, not a pleasurable activity. The drop in reading is worrying as it curtails students' capability to gain new knowledge and affects their skills of reasoning, problem-solving, and collaboration—all key components of literacy, as noted by Keefe and Copeland (2011). The increasing presence of digital media and the need for instant gratification have also made it more challenging for students to do sustained reading because they are distracted. In fact, academic researchers (Gee, 2003) have proposed that the increased presence of digital technologies specifically impacts how young people read as they favor short and fragmented pieces of text rather than deep reading of longer pieces.

The decline in reading is also worrisome because it runs counter to the educational aim of schools. The falling off in reading—that is, meaning writing and meaning making with words on the page or screen—directly contradicts the purpose of education. Langer (2001) emphasized the importance of these skills because reading is not only about making meaning of texts, but also about making sense of others and becoming culturally literate. These skills are becoming increasingly important in today's world, and so the decline in reading is especially disturbing.

Within this context, I have situated my research. In order to deal with literacy in the 21st century, we need to understand the causes of its decline. The decline in literacy is not necessarily due to students' inability to learn but more so to systemic barriers and funding cuts. Scholars like Ladson-Billings (2009) and Gay (2010) emphasized the need to use culturally relevant pedagogy to promote literacy. This approach helps draw on students' lived experience and cultural identity

to achieve academic success. Scholars Duncan-Andrade (2009) and Kena et al. (2020) stated that if students are able to critically read text that mirrors their realities, they develop powerful literacy skills. Moreover, they learn to make education work for them. Thus, it is important to think about pedagogical strategies to reverse this trend, and my study explores one such strategy: storytelling in English Language Arts classrooms.

1.2.1 Researcher Positionality: Story as Method

As I reflect on my journey as both educator and researcher, I recognize that my story is not a backdrop to this work—it is a method in and of itself. My identity as a Black male and Haitian American has shaped how I listen, how I interpret, and how I honor the stories shared by participants in this study. Narrative is not only what I study—it is how I live, and how I come to know.

In many ways, my participants' stories mirrored my own experiences in the classroom. I remember interviewing one teacher who described the goosebump moment when a student, after weeks of resistance, suddenly engaged with a text because it was connected to their lived experience. I recalled my own parallel breakthrough with a student who had struggled with disengagement until I shared a story from my life—about growing up in Brooklyn, being the son of Haitian immigrants, and finding my voice through hip-hop and griot traditions. In both cases, the story became the bridge that carried a student into the text and, more importantly, into belief in their own brilliance.

These "goosebump" moments are not isolated anecdotes—they are evidence of how storytelling functions as a pedagogical tool that fosters connection, identity affirmation, and transformation. My role as researcher was not detached from these dynamics. I was constantly in dialogue with the narratives my participants shared, locating myself in relation to them, and

allowing my own lived experiences to guide the questions I asked, the interpretations I made, and the meanings I drew. In this sense, my story is also part of the methodology, not as a distraction but as a critical dimension of narrative inquiry.

By weaving my narrative alongside those of my participants, I underscore that storytelling is not just content to be studied—it is a practice of knowledge creation, resistance, and care. My voice, interlaced with theirs, reflects the collaborative, co-constructed nature of this research and affirms the methodological commitment to story as both data and analysis.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

1.3.1 Inquiry into This Topic

As an adolescent, I spent a lot of time in my library. I made many friends there, mostly librarians. I received newspapers, newsletters, articles, and my favorite of all books were Young Adult novels. My passion for reading started at a young age. However, an incident in which a school librarian falsely accused me of stealing books when I was younger highlights the difficulties that some students (especially from marginalized communities) face in accessing literature. Despite that experience, I have stayed committed to reading. However, I face difficulty with reading as an adult because I am busy with work, family, hobbies, and other distractions of modern life.

I am not alone in this issue: I also see this decline in the amount of reading done by my students, both in class and out. Overall, students in New York City, especially in lower-income areas, are struggling in their reading scores, especially Black and Brown students. The New York State Education Department (NYSED, 2020) indicated that reading proficiency among students in New York City has steadily declined. Black and Brown students in particular are seeing low levels of reading proficiency; in fact, only about 22% of Black students and 24% of Brown

students have met state-mandated standards (NYSED, 2020). This gap has remained constant and reflects inequities in access to educational resources and high-quality instructions.

At M.S. 53 Brian Piccolo, where I began my teaching career in the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), I observed similar patterns in my past classrooms. Only about 16% of my 7th-grade students scored proficient (3-4) on the state reading test—significantly below the state average. Upon examining the data, it became clear that reading comprehension was the primary area of struggle. Interestingly, students' writing scores followed a similar pattern, improving only when their reading comprehension skills were strengthened. This observation reinforces what research has shown: Reading proficiency is closely tied to writing ability (Graham & Hebert, 2010).

This pattern is worrying because it indicates bigger problems faced by low-income and minority children in urban districts such as the one where I taught. The Children's Defense Fund's (2018) report on Black and Latino students in New York City showed that the gap in what these students can achieve is not simply a question of whether they are trying hard enough or are smart enough. It is about whether or when they have access to books, educational resources, and environments that inspire them to read. The students who struggle the most are students of color who often do not have access to quality libraries and family resources that will help students want to read, and help students be able to read outside of school.

This gap in reading ability raises several essential questions: How do we deal with the structural inequities preventing students from developing strong reading habits? How can we make reading interesting for students particularly those from deprived areas? How do we ensure reading becomes a priority for younger generations, especially Black and Brown students in New York City?

In my view, enhancing reading skills is essential to students' success in English Language Arts and in other disciplines. To close the opportunity gap and empower students from marginalized communities, the first step should be making reading accessible and enjoyable. Not only do we have to teach reading comprehension; we also have to foster a love of reading so that students carry it forward when they leave the classroom.

1.4 Purpose of Study

1.4.1 Initial Wonderings for the Research

The primary purpose of this study was to have discourse with other teachers and explore strategies for fostering a love of reading and improving reading outcomes among students, particularly in under-resourced schools where reading proficiency is low. My initial questions revolved around how to make reading more engaging and accessible for students who struggle to find motivation or time for it. I began this inquiry with several initial questions: How can we make reading enjoyable again? How can we create more opportunities for students to read, despite the distractions they face in their daily lives?

Based on these early reflections, my central research question emerged: *How do five urban secondary teachers use storytelling as a pedagogical tool when teaching Black and Brown students?*

My questions became ever more focused on digging more deeply into this theme to discover specific strategies and practices. How can we use stories from young adult literature to interest students? How can we create reading activities that will enhance motivation and improve reading comprehension? Before arriving at reading scores, I want to know how we can engage students with texts more meaningfully. Which reading and writing activities are most effective in

attracting students to read and encouraging them to read deeply? How can we connect students' lived experience to the texts we give them?

Furthermore, I wondered why interest in books often ends for students. I have sometimes found students who like certain books but still do not read them. What makes them lose interest, and how do we stop that? Another issue that has surfaced is how students who are reading at a 3rd-grade level can possibly do the 8th-grade ELA exam. Which support strategies or instructional practices will best help these students grow in reading proficiency over the year?

Through this study, I investigated various solutions to these challenges and discovered effective methods and strategies for enhancing reading engagement and performance in the English Language Arts classroom, especially among Black and Brown students who have great academic difficulties. Finally, I gained insight from other teachers who can help me bridge the gap between students' reading levels and state evaluations while also instilling a love of reading that will last our students' whole lives.

1.5 Context of Study and Research Questions

My students, mostly Black and Brown, come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom face systemic barriers to academic achievement. These students often do not have the resources necessary to be successful, either as support at home or as literature outside the classroom. As a result of all these factors, they are branded as "struggling readers" or "underperformers" when measured by standardized testing. However, as a Black male teacher, I have witnessed these students have keen strength and an ability to thrive that contrasts with the narrative of failure. Therefore, I specifically outlined these lived experiences and perspectives through this research via the counter-storytelling approach. Through the lens of critical race theory (CRT), this research was anchored in the narratives and lived experiences of Black and

Brown students. CRT is a theoretical framework that interrogates how race, power, and inequality play out in educational contexts. If we consider counter-storytelling as a method which acknowledges and gives voice to the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities, we see that it aligns perfectly with CRT, which also uses lived experiences.

As well as centering Black and Brown students' voices, I wanted to learn from the teachers who teach them. Urban teachers who teach Black and Brown students, especially in under-resourced schools, can have a significant impact on their academic identities. These teachers frequently face the conflicts between standard expectations and cultural responsive pedagogy. They try to affirm their students' identities along with other issues. This research showed how teachers can challenge the accurate and biased interpretations of their students' problems and employ counter-storytelling to oppose the deficit view of their students. This study looked at what these teachers do to help Black and Brown students succeed academically, what challenges they face to do their best for their students, and what success they have had until now.

CRT is an educational movement created in the 1970s and led by civil rights scholars and activists Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Booker, Charles R. Lawrence III, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia J. Williams in the United States. They all inquired to analyze the law critically as it converges with problems of race and to dispute mainstream liberal methods towards racial justice. In education, and while supporting their colleagues in sound research, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) claimed that education policies and systems in the United States often contribute to inequitable educational outcomes for scholars of color and are a logical result of a larger inequitable social and political system that is postulated on the oppression of people of color and those who live in hardship. Furthermore, they contended that the study of race has also been undertheorized in the educational world. CRT

encourages the use of counter-narratives or counter-storytelling, which are personal stories and experiences that challenge dominant narratives about race and racism. These counter-stories aim to shed light on the lived experiences of marginalized groups and to challenge the dominant cultural understanding of race.

Counter-storytelling, according to critical race theorists, is a way of telling stories that challenges the dominant narratives of the world. When it comes to Black and Brown students and reading, the hegemonic narrative is that they are disengaged or incapable, without consideration for the cultural, social, and systemic factors that affect their relationship with reading. Study after study has shown that students from these communities do not read well because they are unmotivated, come from dysfunctional homes, or do not receive adequate support at school (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017; Tatum, 2005). But, these stories about lack of engagement fail to deal with the broader context—namely, structural inequities in accessing education, lack of culturally relevant teaching, and standard literacy tests that cannot assess the full strength of what students know.

Black male adolescents in particular are frequently labeled as struggling readers. Tatum (2005) stated that they are not placed in this category due to their lack of ability but rather because of the labels imposed upon them. Ladson-Billings (1995) mentioned that teaching which incorporates students' histories, identities, and experiences must be employed to help students succeed academically. According to Paris and Alim (2017), "culturally sustaining pedagogies" go beyond just including student voices to actually sustaining and valuing the use of those voices in the classroom.

The failure to recognize these strengths results in instructional approaches that alienate rather than empower students. Black and Brown students possess rich cultural capital in the form

of oral traditions, multilingualism, and community storytelling practices—elements that are often ignored or devalued in mainstream literacy instruction (Yosso, 2005). Counter-storytelling, as a pedagogical strategy, not only provides a platform for these students to share their narratives but also disrupts the myth that literacy is a neutral skill divorced from cultural identity. By incorporating storytelling into literacy instruction, educators can move beyond deficit perspectives and, instead, recognize Black and Brown students as knowledge bearers with valuable contributions to make to the classroom.

By elaborating on these important points, it is clear to see why we need to rethink traditional literacy instruction. When storytelling is used within an inclusive and culturally responsive framework, and when it is viewed as a tool of resistance, storytelling empowers Black and Brown students to be seen, heard, and affirmed.

In addition to looking at the experiences of Black and Brown students in this study, I also examined the experiences of their teachers and how they can help create a more equitable and engaging literacy classroom. Teachers play a critical role in students' relationships with reading, especially when they utilize relevant texts and culturally sustaining pedagogies that affirm student identity (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). Thus, I analyzed how teachers use counter-storytelling in their pedagogy to disrupt deficit narratives and create space for Black and Brown students. This helps Black and Brown students see themselves in the literature they read (Bell, 1987; Love, 2019). I also analyzed how teachers decide to switch the order of instruction to help build students' motivation and literacy development in specific groups but not be limited to struggling readers (Muhammad, 2020; Tatum, 2005). By taking into account student and teacher perspectives, this research demonstrates how culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogies alter literacy instruction and students' engagement in reading.

To gather data, I conducted interviews with educators who work with Black and Brown students in under-resourced schools. These interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai, providing accurate and detailed records of the conversations. The transcriptions offered rich, qualitative insights into the strategies and challenges faced by teachers. The data collected was then analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis steps, which involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how these educational practices influence student engagement and literacy development.

1.6 Background of the Study

Before embarking on my current study, I explored how educators utilized oral storytelling in their classrooms, particularly when working with Black and Brown students. Building on this earlier inquiry, I sought to examine how storytelling—within the context of English Language Arts instruction in U.S. secondary classrooms (grades 7–12)—can be used as a pedagogical strategy to support students' literacy development while affirming their cultural identities and lived experiences. As introduced earlier in Chapter 1, the central research question guiding this study is: *How do five urban secondary teachers use storytelling as a pedagogical tool when teaching Black and Brown students?*

To deepen this inquiry, I investigated how teachers perceive the role of storytelling in enhancing students' critical reading comprehension—particularly in ways that affirm students' cultural identities and engage them with texts that reflect their own lives. I also explored how the use of storytelling influences classroom dynamics more broadly, focusing on its transformations on student engagement, classroom culture, and the relationships between teachers and students.

These dimensions are especially important in under-resourced urban settings, where affirming and responsive instruction can make a substantial difference in how students experience literacy. Furthermore, this study examined the specific strategies teachers employ to connect students' cultural backgrounds with literacy instruction. By analyzing how educators intentionally incorporate culturally relevant narratives and storytelling practices into their reading and writing instruction, I aimed to understand how these practices foster not only academic skills, but also a sense of identity, motivation, and belonging among students.

Through this research, I hoped to demonstrate that storytelling can be a transformative tool in urban classrooms—one that not only supports academic achievement in reading and writing but also enhances students' social-emotional learning. Ultimately, the study seeks to highlight how teachers' pedagogical moves, rooted in storytelling and culturally responsive teaching, create inclusive and empowering literacy environments for Black and Brown youth.

1.7 Summary of Methodological Design and Research Questions

This qualitative research used counter-storytelling to investigate the factors that contribute to low reading scores of secondary school students in urban public schools, particularly the role of teachers in the literacy of students. Counter-storytelling is a technique conceived in CRT that underscores the rich narratives of marginalized communities in order to challenge white cultural stories, so as to gain in-depth information on social issues (Bell, 1987; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For this study, I used counter-storytelling to shed light on what both the student and the teacher are doing when the latter works against a system that strives to *not* allow the former to read, write, or learn any content. For example, in the research, Frank utilized alternative teaching strategies to effectively engage Black and Brown students in reading, countering systemic barriers to literacy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muhammad, 2020).

The study's overarching research question—*How do five urban secondary teachers use storytelling as a pedagogical tool when teaching Black and Brown students?*

—emerged from a deeply personal and reflective inquiry that began during my first year as a teacher. At the time, I was grappling with a central concern: why were so many of my black and brown students disengaged from reading, and what could I, as an educator, do differently to support their growth? This study does not claim to directly measure or improve reading scores; rather, it seeks to understand what teachers who work with Black and Brown students in under-resourced urban schools are doing—particularly through the use of storytelling—to foster deeper engagement with reading and writing. I set out to learn from these educators: What instructional moves, narrative strategies, and culturally responsive practices are they using to connect with students and help them see reading as meaningful? The focus is on their pedagogy—how they use storytelling to inspire interest, promote identity development, and create literacy-rich environments where students of color feel seen and motivated to read.

As I engaged with my students and observed their struggles and successes, I realized that the issue extended far beyond standardized test scores. It became evident that literacy instruction in urban classrooms was shaped by a complex interplay of systemic barriers, instructional practices, and students' lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tatum, 2005). Research has shown that culturally relevant pedagogy, including the use of storytelling and students' lived experiences, plays a critical role in fostering literacy engagement and comprehension (Muhammad, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017). Through these early observations, I began to develop a more nuanced set of questions—ones that sought to move beyond identifying deficits and

instead to focus on how culturally responsive teaching practices, particularly storytelling, could transform literacy outcomes for Black and Brown students (Gay, 2018; Love, 2019).

To address this overarching research question, I explored the following sub-inquiry questions, which were informed by my early teaching experiences and continued pedagogical reflection. These questions were grounded in research on culturally responsive teaching, literacy development, and counter-storytelling as a method for challenging dominant deficit narratives about Black and Brown students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muhammad, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This study specifically centered the role of teachers—how they navigate instructional challenges, implement culturally relevant literacy strategies, and use storytelling to empower Black and Brown students in urban classrooms.

1. **Teacher Challenges in Improving Reading Skills for Black and Brown Secondary Students**

What obstacles do teachers face when teaching Black and Brown students in order to improve literacy? Teachers in city schools experience challenges to obtaining culturally relevant teaching materials because of high-stakes testing and school constraints that privilege standardized measures over student-centered instruction (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers must deal with negative stories that say Black and Brown students are bad at their subjects or not interested in trying, even as they face systems that make learning hard for them. This research drew on counter-storytelling to show how teachers push back against these narratives and use instructional approaches that validate students' language and culture (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

2. **Integrating Students' Cultural Backgrounds into Reading Comprehension and Engagement**

This question examined how teachers leverage students' cultural backgrounds, home experiences, and identities to foster engagement with reading. Research on culturally sustaining pedagogies has emphasized that when teachers integrate students' lived experiences into the curriculum, literacy instruction becomes more meaningful and accessible (Muhammad, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017). I explored how teachers use storytelling and narrative-based approaches to bridge students' personal identities with academic literacy, fostering deeper connections to texts. By foregrounding teacher perspectives, I examined how educators create classroom environments where Black and Brown students see their voices and histories reflected in the curriculum (Gay, 2018; Love, 2019).

3. Instructional Strategies to Enhance Reading Skills and Motivation Among Black and Brown Secondary Students

This question focused on identifying and analyzing the instructional strategies that teachers use to improve literacy skills and increase motivation among Black and Brown students. Research has indicated that culturally relevant teaching—including the use of Young Adult (YA) literature, multimodal literacy approaches, and student-driven storytelling—can significantly enhance student engagement and reading comprehension (Muhammad, 2020; Tatum, 2005). Teachers who incorporate diverse narratives and student-centered discussions create literacy experiences that are both rigorous and affirming (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Thus, I investigated how educators use storytelling, not only as a pedagogical tool to enhance critical reading and writing skills but also as a means of counteracting dominant narratives that marginalize students' voices in literacy education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

These questions were an effort to generate a more complex understanding of challenges and opportunities associated with teachers in supporting Black and Brown students' literacy

development in urban schools. This research aimed to reveal how teachers deal with demands from the system, what they are doing in the classroom, and what else they might need to achieve desired effects. The purpose was to acquire instructional knowledge with the goal of incorporating diverse literacy experiences in school contexts that will ultimately support student capacities and capabilities.

1.8 Conceptual Framework

For this study, I used Critical Race Theory and Educational Equity as its framework. This framework permits a focus on the role of teachers in Black or Brown students' literacy experiences. Using CRT as a theoretical framework, I focused on the ways teachers create literacy experiences for Black and Brown students, particularly as public urban schools label Black and Brown students as deficient (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I used CRT to examine teacher strategies that challenge these narratives through their instructional practices, texts, and student engagement.

A central component of this framework was **counter storytelling**, a methodological tool that amplifies the voices of marginalized communities and provides a more nuanced understanding of their lived experiences. In this study, counter-storytelling was used to examine how teachers who work with Black and Brown students to navigate the challenges of literacy instruction while actively resisting deficit-oriented perspectives in their classrooms. By collecting and analyzing the stories of teachers, I explored how educators incorporate **culturally relevant pedagogy**(Gay, 2018) and **culturally sustaining pedagogies** (Paris & Alim, 2017) to foster engagement, improve literacy outcomes, and affirm students' identities.

This framework was informed by qualitative research that privileges teachers' stories about their reflections and stories of their practice. As a result, I will derive an understanding of

what educators do to teach by conducting interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of teacher-created curriculum materials. Some areas of focus and relevant teacher inquiries are:

1. **Use storytelling as a pedagogical tool** – How do teachers integrate storytelling and counter-storytelling into literacy instruction to create more inclusive and engaging learning environments?
2. **Incorporate culturally relevant texts** – How do educators select literature that reflects students' racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and what influence does this have on student motivation and reading comprehension?
3. **Challenge deficit narratives** – In what ways do teachers resist traditional, standardized approaches to literacy that fail to account for the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of Black and Brown students?
4. **Navigate institutional barriers** – How do teachers work within (or push back against) systemic constraints, such as curriculum mandates and standardized testing, to implement equitable literacy practices?

I applied both CRT and counter-storytelling to teachers' experiences to help the education field think more about what success means. This research will be useful in teacher preparation, professional development, and literacy policies for Black and Brown students in urban schools. All in all, teachers are more than reading instructors; they work to eliminate inequitable structures and engage in a wider social justice movement. Their experiences illustrate the need for a richer account of the role of teachers.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Storytelling Pathway to Academic Access

This figure illustrates how storytelling, grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy and counter-storytelling theory, fosters identity affirmation, which enhances student engagement and creates conditions for greater academic access for Black and Brown students.

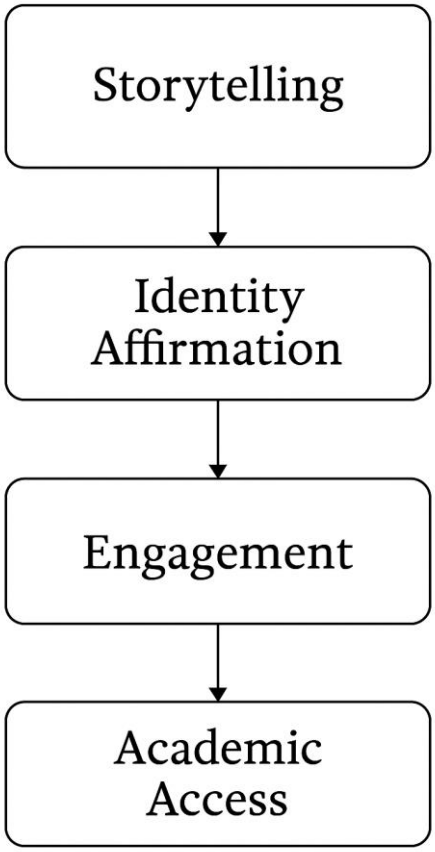


Figure 1. Conceptual pathway from storytelling to academic access, as grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy and counter-storytelling theory.

This conceptual model reflects the findings of scholars such as Paris and Alim (2017) and Ladson-Billings (1995), who assert that culturally relevant pedagogy begins with affirming students' identities and lived experiences. Storytelling, as this study argues, is not only a literacy strategy but also a cultural and political act that repositions marginalized students as knowledge holders. The diagram helps visualize how storytelling operates as both a culturally rooted and

pedagogically powerful tool—bridging identity formation and educational access in literacy classrooms serving Black and Brown youth.

1.9 Significance of Study

This study is important because it considers how teachers in urban schools can use culturally relevant pedagogy and storytelling techniques to improve the literacy of Black and Brown students. Although systemic barriers and instructional gaps identified in prior research hurt reading scores, there is still an urgent need to know how teachers can intervene and change the educational experience for these students. This has been proven effective in engaging, meaning, and achieving academic success (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Yet, while students have received a significant amount of research attention, there is less research on how teachers adopt, adapt, and implement these strategies in their classrooms.

This study is an attempt to bridge this gap by specifically examining **teachers' roles** in fostering literacy growth through storytelling, counter-storytelling, and the integration of culturally relevant texts. By investigating how educators resist deficit narratives and instead focus on the strengths and cultural wealth of Black and Brown students, this study will provide critical insights into how teachers can challenge traditional teaching practices that often fail to account for students' diverse experiences and backgrounds (Gay, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Using storytelling as a tool in literacy instruction is especially important because it can pivot attention from student deficits to student strengths. This creates the opportunity to amplify students' voice and identity. Storytelling can be used as a pedagogical tool to integrate students' lived experiences into the curriculum. It enables a space where students can see themselves in the texts (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Teachers who make use of storytelling effectively improve reading comprehension but also get students emotionally and intellectually connected to texts,

increasing their motivation to read (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). This study is important because it addresses how storytelling can be used within literacy instruction to help negate the negative, often oversimplified stories about Black and Brown students, and instead validates their own cultural narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

As noted previously, the importance of this project lies in its ability to inform the design of teacher professional development, curriculum, and instruction that is student-centered and responsive to culture to ensure that all students, particularly those in urban classrooms, have access to a relevant and engaging literacy education. From this research, we can learn how teachers can be empowered to disrupt systemic inequities, foster cultural affirmation for Black and Brown students, and develop spaces where they can both perform and thrive in reading and writing.

1.10 Key Terms

This section defines critical terms for this study which appear regularly throughout this dissertation and should be explained for readers.

1. **Black and Brown Students:** Refers to students of color, specifically Black or African American and Latinx students, or students who otherwise come from racially and ethnically marginalized communities. They typically experience different cultural, social and systemic challenges in educational spaces. To help make the classroom more equitable, it is crucial to understand their experiences and use culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018).
2. **Counter-Storytelling:** A method of sharing narratives that challenge dominant cultural perspectives, particularly in addressing stereotypes and systemic oppression. In the context of education, counter-storytelling allows students and educators to highlight and

validate the experiences of marginalized groups, fostering critical awareness and empowerment (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

3. **Culturally Relevant Storytelling:** The use of stories and material related to cultural identities, experiences, and history of various groups of learners. This strategy seeks to engage students by helping them affirm their cultural identity and feel a real connection to the content (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
4. **Engagement:** The level of curiosity, desire, and engagement students show when learning. Reading engagement is how willing students are to read, continue reading when they face challenges, and want to read. Learners who are engaged in reading are more likely to develop strong literacy skills and love reading as well (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).
5. **Instructional Strategies:** Techniques or methods used by teachers to improve learning outcomes. One of the important ways to get students engaged in the reading process is to make tasks captivating and appealing, so that students want to engage in that process. Fisher and Frey (2014) used the word *value* for those tasks.
6. **Literacy:** The ability to read, write, and understand information. Generally, being literate does not just mean being able to read but also being able to understand and critique different types of writing (National Institute for Literacy, 2007).
7. **Reading Comprehension:** Reading involves understanding and interpreting written text. Reading is making sense of words, links, inferences, prior knowledge, new knowledge, and decisions. Therefore, by reading, we make meaning (Snow, 2002).
8. **Secondary Classroom:** Educational environments specifically for middle school (often Grades 6-8) and high school (often Grades 9-12) students. These classrooms work

towards the developmental and academic needs of adolescents, to equip them for postsecondary and career endeavors (Vacca et al., 2011).

9. **Storytelling:** Telling stories either by speech or in writing to express an idea, a culture, a value, an experience. In the education system, storytelling is being used as a technique to ignite creativity, achieve cultural understanding and instill critical thinking (Egan, 1986).
10. **Urban Classrooms:** Refers to classrooms located in cities that are full of people and students from different social backgrounds. Teachers working in city classrooms often face challenges with resources but use their students' rich experiences to help with their teaching (Milner, 2012).
11. **Young Adult (YA) Literature:** Books that are aimed at readers between the age of 12 and 18 and deal with adolescent issues. YA literature is commonly used in secondary education to motivate students to engage with and discuss contemporary issues (Cart, 2016).
12. **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**: A teaching and learning approach that acknowledges the influence of students' cultural background. This aims to make the classroom a space where everyone can learn without feeling judged, and, in that space, the teachers will help them if required (Gay, 2018).
13. **Deficit Narratives**: Also called deficit framing, refers to the negative and stereotypical narratives or assumptions that are often placed on marginalized groups, including Black and Brown students, regarding their academic potential. Most narratives of students of color often talk about their "shortcomings" rather than strengths (Valenzuela, 1999).
14. **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**: A framework that builds on culturally responsive pedagogy but emphasizes not just affirming students' cultures but also actively sustaining

and advancing their cultural practices and identities within the educational environment (Paris & Alim, 2017).

15. **Achievement Gap**: The difference in academic achievement between groups of students, often associated with race and ethnicity outcomes. Testing and results help measure this gap (Lee, 2002).
16. **Literacy Instruction**: The techniques and strategies used to teach reading and writing. Literacy instruction strategy is tailored to students' needs and culture while offering strategies for understanding, analysis, and production of a text (Snow, 2010).
17. **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)**: A process through which students learn to manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. To assist learners with their educational and personal development, SEL is frequently incorporated into literacy lessons (Durlak et al., 2011).
18. **Cultural Capital**: A concept from Pierre Bourdieu which refers to a set of knowledge, skills, and cultural experiences that individuals bring to the educational setting. Black and Brown students often have cultural capital that is ignored or not valued in traditional education (Yosso, 2005).
19. **Trauma-Informed Teaching**: An approach to teaching that recognizes the impact of trauma on students' learning and behavior. This consists of crafting secure, supportive surroundings through which learners will be enabled to learn freely and not be hindered by trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014).

20. **Student Agency**: The ability of students to take charge of their learning. This refers to choice making in what and how to learn, advocate for self, and self-regulation that supports academic success (Noguera, 2017).
21. **Urban Teachers:** Educators who work in schools located in densely populated, economically and racially diverse metropolitan areas. These educators often serve communities that face systemic challenges such as poverty, underfunding, and racial inequity, requiring them to navigate complex cultural, linguistic, and social dynamics while fostering inclusive, equity-focused learning environments (Milner, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The above definitions aid in understanding this study more clearly while also ensuring uniformity of thoughts on the various concepts of the study. Also, defining these terms brings the research contextually together with the educational literature from which this study springs.

Finally, these definitions are the basis for data analysis and the interpretation of the findings. While this research is deeply concerned with the literacy development of Black and Brown students, the primary focus of the study is on the *pedagogical moves and instructional strategies employed by teachers*—particularly how they use storytelling and culturally responsive pedagogy to foster student engagement and connection to reading. The literacy experiences of students are considered through the lens of teacher practice: how educators interpret, respond to, and nurture those experiences within their classrooms. Clear definitions were necessary to guide this inquiry and to ensure that the study remained grounded in its core aim—to investigate how teachers intentionally challenge deficit narratives and create culturally affirming literacy spaces for their students.

By elaborating these terms, I allude to the evolving nature of educational research and pedagogy. The definitions of culturally responsive teaching, engagement, and literacy are influenced by continued academic discussion and classroom experience. These definitions offer a lens through which I explored the contributions of teachers to implementing equitable, meaningful, and empowering literacy instruction for Black and Brown students in urban spaces.

This dimension has been defined from the outset to assist in understanding the analysis, discussion, recommendations, and conclusion of the study. Thus, better sense can be made of the research findings within this well-defined conceptual framework.

1.11 Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the problem, purpose, and design of the study. It also outlined the key research questions driving the investigation into the use of storytelling to enhance critical literacy among Black and Brown secondary students in urban classrooms. This chapter further elucidates the study's problem, purpose, and methodological design, and introduces the principal research questions on the use of storytelling to improve critical literacy of Black and Brown secondary students in urban classroom contexts. These frameworks help to explore the significance of race and culture in the classroom, and how storytelling can create tools of defense for academic and social-emotional growth. Finally, the chapter specified research design, data collection methods (interviews with educators), and thematic analysis.

Through the social and political evaluation of an issue, a study of its robustness can be conducted using reflexivity, validation from the participants, and ethical consideration. Voices and experiences of the participants matter significantly.

The chapter ends with a series of relevant definitions of key terms, such as critical literacy, culturally responsive pedagogy, counter-story, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. The

terms help readers understand how storytelling, especially the storytelling that uses cultural relevancy as well as counter-storytelling, can help counter deficit narratives and support equitable literacy instruction in the urban classroom and the secondary classroom. These concepts also place emphasis on building caring and supportive classrooms that affirm the lived experiences of Black and Brown students, including socioemotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed teaching. Through the lens of cultural capital and culturally sustaining pedagogy, I examined how storytelling can not only affirm students' identities but also be a tool for engaging with young adult novels (YA) as a way to close the opportunity gap and provide reading instruction to students at all levels. CRT and culturally sustaining pedagogy frame this study conceptually, while narrative inquiry and counter-storytelling provide the methodological tools for analyzing teacher narratives.

The next chapter provides an in-depth review of relevant literature on literacy challenges and instructional strategies in urban public schools. It synthesizes existing research on the barriers to literacy development faced by Black and Brown students, particularly in underfunded urban schools, and examines instructional strategies that have been shown to address these challenges. This review sets the stage for understanding the gaps in the current literature and how this study contributes to the field by exploring the influence of storytelling as a pedagogical tool for enhancing critical literacy skills in urban classrooms.

Chapter 2: A Journey Through Storytelling and Literacy

Interlude: Story as Framework

"Long before I read Clandinin, Connelly, or Ladson-Billings, I learned theory in the cypher. In the call-and-response of a griot's tale, in the rhyme schemes of hip-hop, in my abuela's quiet wisdom. These were frameworks of knowing that sustained us. I bring them here not as add-ons, but as central literacies—living frameworks that continue to guide how I read, teach, and resist."

2.1 Researcher Positionality and Personal Connection to Storytelling

As a Haitian American educator born of two Haitian immigrant parents, there was so much life about multiple cultures and languages that shaped mine. My mother came to the United States as a teen and my father in his early twenties. Both carried Haiti in their spirits. My early understandings came from French and Haitian Creole—my first languages. In our big extended family, language and storytelling formed the threads that helped weave together our identity.

I was born into a community of oral tradition when I was young. My memories of Saturdays at our Haitian church are filled with stories and more stories. After the prayers and chants, the elders would gather us children in a circle with their voices rising and falling. They made the teachings come alive using Haitian folklore and life stories that were full of wisdom, laughter, and resilience. The memory of strong collective moments or similar influences shaped us and dedicated us to our past, dreams and collective strength.

Even outside the church walls, literacy and cultural identity were more nourished. The rich scent of cooking epis, the seasoning of tasso cabrit, and the moist frying of plantains also known as *bannann peze* at my grandmother's home in Brooklyn, NY became our 2nd classroom.

My little sister, cousins and I used to eagerly sit around the kitchen table of grandma's house eating Haitian patties and partaking of soup joumou during the holidays listening to the folklore stories from the older family members' past and their wisdom. In this space of laughter and debates take place the stories that talk about the legacy of our culture. And the stories also build bridges across generations.

Through play and competition in the house, my mother and her belief in education nurtured our literacy. My sister and I often held competitions to see who could read the most books. Through this playful rivalry, we cultivated not only a love for reading but also a deeper appreciation for the power of words in inspiring curiosity and understanding. At the same time, my aunt, who was more Americanized, helped me with the sounds of English letters as is done in old American books such as kids' books. Her attentive help taught me that language and literacy are not fixed things: they can shift, stretch, and change form, and never just belong to one specific culture.

These formative experiences strongly shape my identity as an educator and researcher. In my upbringing as a Haitian American, storytelling was not just a form of recreation but also a literacy practice that served as a source of cultural grounding, preservation and empowerment. Upon entering this study, I commit to honouring, as best I can, the diverse and rich form of literacies that Black and Brown students will bring to the spaces in which they enter. My research perspective embraces oral, written, performative, and communal story-telling. Together, they add to one toolbox for understanding how students from marginalized communities see and use literacy as a part of life.

As my education began from listening to stories that took place at kitchen tables by Haitian elders, I want to show how storytelling can turn literacy education from a sight of lack to one of cultural strength and intellectual freedom. Furthermore, I also give literacy education a

completely different meaning, for I am not stronger than the Black and Brown children in the urban city classroom.

2.2 Introduction to the Literature

Specifically building on the reading underachievement of Black and Brown students, I explored the following overarching research question, consistent with what was stated earlier in this study: *How do five urban secondary teachers use storytelling as a pedagogical tool when teaching Black and Brown students?*

This study centers the pedagogical moves of teachers—particularly how they use storytelling as a culturally responsive strategy to engage students, affirm their identities, and make reading more meaningful. I argue that the low reading levels of many Black and Brown students are connected to instructional approaches that often lack cultural relevance and fail to reflect students' lived experiences. When teachers integrate storytelling that reflects students' realities, it can create a bridge between the curriculum and students' cultural identities. This research explores how storytelling can serve as a tool for teachers to foster deeper reading comprehension, greater motivation, and stronger engagement. As Gay (2002) suggests, when students see themselves in the curriculum, they become more energized and connected to learning.

Despite ongoing efforts to address educational disparities, African American students continue to lag behind their White peers in reading proficiency. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the 2024 results reveal that the reading gap remains a significant issue. In 2021, 39% of Black fourth graders scored below the basic level in reading, compared to just 17% of White students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). The 2024 NAEP assessment further highlights this persistent gap, with average

reading scores for Black students continuing to trail behind those of White students. This disparity underscores the ongoing challenges in providing equitable learning opportunities and achieving comparable learning outcomes across different racial groups. The opportunity gap, which had shown signs of narrowing in previous years, appears to be stagnating, emphasizing the need for renewed focus and targeted interventions to support literacy development among African American students (NCES, 2024).

2.3 Positionality and Storytelling in the Research

Storytelling has also been widely associated with reading comprehension, particularly in English Language Arts classrooms (e.g., Isbell, 2002; Peck, 1989, Powell & Murray, 2012). One of the earliest forms of storytelling is oral tradition, which is still very much used universally and continues to confirm how traditions hold value and merit (Banks-Wallace, 2002) While there has been much research on how storytelling improves literacy, a good number of researchers have also taken urban classrooms into consideration. One of the main concerns in these types of classrooms is that the "average vocabulary level of students in urban schools is often below the national average," which contributes to difficulties in reading comprehension (Kieffer et al., 2007). By addressing this gap in vocabulary levels, storytelling becomes a potent tool that enhances language skills and empowers students in urban classrooms to engage with narratives that resonate with their experiences, fostering a holistic approach to literacy development that encompasses cultural context and personal growth.

Studies have shown how storytelling improves reading comprehension. Research done by Jirata (2011) and Widdowson (2009) focused on using storytelling in the past and how it was effective in various educational settings. They examine the process of storytelling, as well as the telling and the sharing of the story to the student and why it is necessary. Many researchers such

as Champion et al. (2011), Katz et al. (2013), Muldrow et al. (2010), Dail et al. (2011), Jones et al. (2012), Chapman et al. (2014), and Love (2019) have also researched how storytelling can help students of diverse backgrounds improve their reading comprehension skills. Research findings called for the inclusion of speaking, listening, and communication in literacy education, thus departing from exclusive reading and writing as the norm. Miller and Pennycuff (2008) asserted that storytelling is one of the most complete strategies to enhance literacy because it engages most aspects of literacy including oral language skills. Even though researchers have mostly studied how storytelling has positive influences on literacy, the effect of oral traditions on reading comprehension is more powerful than one might think, particularly in urban classrooms. Research suggests that this statement is true. Storytelling—by linking orality (i.e., spoken word) to the written word—does not just improve literacy skills. It also connects students to oral traditions and cultures. By contrast, however, it facilitates a direct link to the text. This contribution works significantly towards improving reading comprehension, particularly in urban classrooms.

According to the idea, storytelling is not only to get better critical reading comprehension, it is also seen as medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression. It is used to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself When something has no name or there is a lack of awareness of there being a name and others going through the same experience, oppression escapes the sanctioners' view. As Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explain in their work on Critical Race Theory, storytelling is the very essence of marginalized groups in order to authenticate their lived experiences. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1998) explains that narrative and counter-story are key in culturally relevant pedagogy, as students of colours deserve to see their truths reflected. Bell (2010) also states that stories are not only reflective to help people make sense of what happened to them, but they help make sense of the nature of

harm – trauma, oppression, discrimination, marginalisation and so on. When people tell their own stories, they reclaim power and foster critical awareness, which is important for fighting against internalised oppression (Freire, 1987/2000). Thus, it is important that "we attempt to make linkages between critical race theory and education, we contend that the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016, p. 58) Storytelling also opens doors to multiple dialogues. Research has proven that cogenerative dialogues "can help teachers learn to communicate effectively across cultural, social, ethnic and economic boundaries" (LaVan, 2004). The goals of this dialogue are to improve teachers' pedagogical practices, cultivate relationships between scholars and educators, enhance classroom culture, and overall develop school culture. As Christopher Emdin (2016) explains, **"cogenerative dialogues are a space where teachers and students become co-teachers and co-learners, disrupting the traditional hierarchy of the classroom"** (p. 27). Having these goals in mind can give Black and Brown scholars in urban schools an equitable chance at a high-quality education by centering their voices and experiences in the co-construction of knowledge.

2.4 A Personal Pedagogical Narrative

During my first year of teaching, I worked with students in the urban community of Far Rockaway, New York. Many people say the first year is a teacher's most challenging year of teaching, but in fact, it was the most challenging year of my life. The challenges ranged from students having behavioral issues, academic problems, social-emotional development issues, and family concerns to administrators' lack of support for us teachers. Nevertheless, despite these hardships, I had to find a way to help my students. I used the technique of

> restorative justice circles, where students were encouraged to share their personal stories as a way to foster community, empathy, and open dialogue. Research has shown that

> restorative justice practices, including storytelling, can significantly improve students' social-emotional learning, relationships, and academic engagement. (Evans & Vaandering, 2016, p. 8)

I knew that could be a way to reach them. I also knew other teachers had tapped into the discovery of using storytelling as a strategy to help Black and Brown students improve their literacy skills. Hearing some of their stories helped me center my position in this research, as storytelling has been shown to be an effective tool for enhancing literacy, especially when it connects to students' cultural backgrounds and identities (Miller, 2012).

In one particular year, I taught a unit on The Central Park Jogger case using the Netflix mini-series *When They See Us*. This powerful series chronicled the unjust conviction and eventual exoneration of five Black and Latino teenagers who were falsely accused of a crime in 1989. The show not only highlighted the personal and collective trauma experienced by the young men but also exposed systemic racism and profound flaws within the criminal justice system. Before diving into the unit, I posed a driving question to my students: *"Is there a time in your life when you felt you experienced racism?"* This question was deliberately chosen to help students reflect on their own experiences with injustice and discrimination, creating a space for introspection and open dialogue. It encouraged a safe and supportive classroom environment where students could connect their personal stories to the broader societal issues explored in the series. This question set the stage for transformative discussions, allowing students to critically engage with the material and to better understand how systemic oppression affects them and their communities. Research has shown that using culturally relevant media and incorporating personal experiences into lessons can significantly deepen student engagement and promote critical thinking about social justice issues (Delgado-Bernal, 2002).

From the onset, it was already evident that racism made up the core of my personal experience. I introduced my story to my students by explaining that 3 years before, I took a winter vacation to Paris, France, with two of my friends. We were out exploring the city and decided to visit the Eiffel Tower. The weather was beautiful, and many people were also outside exploring. We were dressed in nice clothes and started to take pictures of each other by the Tower. While taking pictures, a white family walked by us with their child. The young one looked at us with admiration and started smiling, waving his hands at us. We reacted by smiling back and saying "Hi!" The parents instantly saw who their child was saying hello to, looked at us with mild but well-perceived disdain, and dragged him away while saying something in French that did not sound complimentary. To make things even more interesting, the same scenario happened a few minutes later with another group of white people, but the parents did not react as overtly as the first time. At this point in the story, all the students' eyes were on me and some of them screamed out in anger and surprise "Mr. B, that ain't right!" I continued by saying that even though the white family did not openly direct their racism towards us Black men, they were clearly being indirectly racist through their covert actions. At the end of my story, students had so many questions. "Mr. B, did you get mad at them?" I told them yes, I was mad, but would not show it in such a delicate situation. My friends and I had decided to continue walking peacefully around the family while enjoying the rest of what Paris had to offer. Then other students slowly began to share their own stories. At that moment, seeing that other students were eager to share, I knew I had started a dynamic and powerful movement. My modeling of storytelling had triggered a domino effect in which others wanted to share their own stories. As stories intertwined and a collective narrative emerged, a palpable sense of unity and empathy enveloped

the classroom, igniting discussions that enriched their understanding and nurtured a profound sense of community among the students.

So I proceeded to let another student speak about how he was racially profiled when he walked into a deli in Far Rockaway, New York. He explained that when he walked into the store and attempted to purchase some food items, he felt that the store owner's eyes were on him as a suspect. As he walked around the store to pick up certain items, the deli owner rushed over to where he was and automatically accused him of stealing. At that moment, that student had all the other students' attention. They all felt his anger and some were even empathizing with him. "Yo, Joe, how you gonna let him do that to you man!" one student screamed out. He ended the story by saying that he left the store without buying anything because he did not want to argue with the man or support the business of a racist. For the remainder of the class period, similar stories from my Black and Brown students were shared around the room.

By the end of the unit, most students could write excellent essays that included relevant textual evidence from books and articles they had read and researched. Starting the unit with storytelling and having conversations around the topic was a great way to engage students in what they were going to watch, read, and write. It also helped them better understand what they were reading because they now had prior knowledge and knew what to look for while reading. This approach not only deepened their comprehension but also instilled a sense of confidence and engagement, highlighting the transformative power of connecting personal experiences to the texts they encountered.

Storytelling as a scaffold teaching tool can be exhibited in different ways to lead to the improvement of reading comprehension. Whether through interactive group discussions, personal reflections, or creative activities, the versatile nature of storytelling as a teaching tool

provides a rich avenue for enhancing reading comprehension skills and fostering a deeper connection to the content being explored. A study done by the University of Groningen stated: "A well-told story enables the speaker (lecturer) and the listeners (students) to optimize the learning process by integrating cognition, emotion, and imagination in the didactic process", which can lead to better quality content from students and interaction with students. Overall, we should understand that "good storytelling is an art and a skill". This underscored the profound impact of skillful storytelling in education, emphasizing its ability to enhance engagement, foster deeper understanding, and cultivate a more dynamic and enriching learning environment.

2.5 Integrating Oral Storytelling into Classroom Practices

Oral storytelling has been a timeless way to captivate and engage the young minds of Black and Brown students. By engaging them through storytelling, we are able to improve their literacy skills in English Language Arts classrooms (Egan, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Using the cultural approach of Black and Brown students, oral storytelling can be one of many effective ways to remedy this problem (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). While being a positive strategy, the way the story is told must also be captivating, relevant, and detailed. Oral storytelling can amplify the voices of Black and Brown students, make reading different types of literature more engaging, and help with making the writing process of the detailed accounts of their experiences more enjoyable (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

The Black and Brown student voice can be a powerful instrument of expression both inside and outside of the classroom. One of the most powerful ways to leverage these voices is through storytelling which comes in many forms, including the use of spoken word. In 2003, Fisher looked at "how contemporary spoken word poetry is framed and grounded in BAM (Black Arts Movement) as a critical approach to framing an ethnographic study of performance

poetry venues (open mics) in black communities" (p. 23). This link illustrates spoken word is a contemporary version of oral storytelling based on an ancient form from the Black community. The latter part also explores the way storytelling through spoken word can allow students to empower themselves and work as a catalyst for social change through student voices. The language and lived experience can be seen through the personal stories of Black and Brown students as they draw the links that give them the power to change their communities (Cole, 2010). Student Olivia who went through the process said "I reflected and discovered things about myself I did not know before." I was introduced to the power of spoken word and how it can be used to bring social justice (personal communication, October 2016). Because of her experiences, she is an empowered spoken word artist and a change agent in her community. Through Olivia's story, we see the power of voice. Through that power, oral stories can be told. The invitation is open for us to think about how these stories might connect to print and deepen reading. Students like Olivia are using the power of personal narrative to not only affirm their own identities, but to also illuminate how we can be agents of change.

Reading and analyzing the stories of Black and Brown ancestors have served to immortalize the pain, the joy, and the healing of their experiences. By delving into these ancestral stories, we not only honor their legacy but also gain invaluable insights into the resilience, wisdom, and enduring spirit that continue to shape the narratives of Black and Brown communities today. As a form of text-to-self connections, sharing stories that relate to what is being read "allows us to put our collective stories in conversation with one another and against dominant narratives" (Johnson, 2017, p. 45). Hearing of like-minded stories builds not only a space of healing but also the power to fight against "white privilege, white supremacy, and patriarchy" (p. 58). Within these spaces of healing, through the unison of voices and the sharing

of stories, it is important to consider oral storytelling as a pedagogical strategy. As Miller and Pennycuff (2008) explain, "storytelling as a pedagogical strategy can strengthen reading comprehension by helping students develop a sense of story" (p. 37). This approach emphasizes how storytelling enhances students' understanding of narrative structures, thereby improving their overall literacy skills (Alex, 1988; Craig et al., 2001; Phillips, 1999). As reading comprehension skills become strengthened through social-emotional aspects, so do other literacy skills such as speaking, listening, and writing, which are the focus of the next section.

Oral storytelling also helps writers reflect on their Black and Brown experiences. Listening to the words of the stories and resonating with them prepares students to write down whatever is resonating in their souls. Thinking about “the use of stories in the struggle for racial reform” allows students to turn these experiences into action as change-makers within their own communities (Delgado, 1989). Black and Brown students also need a place to write down their thoughts privately. These thoughts can be written down as “artfully designed parables, chronicles, allegories, and pungent tales like the one told in the anonymous leaflet can jar the comfortable dominant complacency that is the principal anchor dragging down any incentive for reform” (p. 242). Recorded and written language can become a form of power as it can empower the experiences and lives of Black and Brown students. When harnessed effectively, these modes of communication not only validate their narratives but also serve as tools for cultural preservation, self-expression, and advocacy within a broader societal context.

Although oral storytelling can be a great way to engage Black and Brown youth, these stories can be undermined or even deemed untrue by others,; especially when we recognize that the “dominant group creates its own stories as well” (Delgado, 1989). Who will take the time to read or even analyze these stories, especially in a system where “America’s disdain, visceral

hate, and disregard for Black life, Black love, Black empowerment, Black resistance, Black joy, and Black education" are pervasive (Love, 2021, p. 32)? In such a context, scholars like Kantawala (2022) argued that the systemic neglect of these essential aspects of Black existence continues to undermine meaningful change and growth. The oppressive nature of what these students experience every day bears weight on their very existence—especially when, as Kendi (2019) reminds us, "we are all in... the struggle to be fully human and to see that others are fully human" (p. 11). In response, we must strive to humanize our experiences through what Animashaun and Sealey-Ruiz (2023) describe as "deep self-examination," which they argue "requires actions that can lead to sustainable social justice and educational equity for all students, and in particular, Black students." Recognizing the transformative potential of such introspection and action, we can collectively forge a path towards dismantling systemic inequalities, fostering inclusivity, and nurturing the holistic growth of every student, regardless of their background or identity.

Storytelling has served as a therapeutic means of "healing" (Johnson, 2017). In thinking about how this healing can happen, we must recognize that when we are storytelling, we realize that "accessing the stories of our trauma (of the past) and making plans on how to face it and reconcile (in the present) provides hope for future moments when the residual effects of trauma enter our lives" (Animashaun & Sealey-Ruiz, 2022, p. 433). If we are to strive for excellence in the quality of education and improvement in the literacies of Black and Brown students, we must continue to share our stories and experiences that can provide leverage in reaching that goal. Through the shared narratives of healing and resilience, we create a tapestry of empowerment that not only amplifies the voices of marginalized students but also propels us toward a more inclusive educational landscape where their literacies and potential can truly flourish.

2.6 The Importance of Verbal Narratives

Fundamentally, verbal narratives convey shared stories and experiences by means of speech or spoken words. In outlining the positioning of narrative research, Josselson (2011) paraphrased Sarbin (1986) in *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis* when she wrote, "narrative research takes as a premise that people live and/or understand their lives in storied forms, connecting events in the manner of a plot that has a beginning, middle, and endpoints" (p .224). Narratives are non-linear and can be used as a reflection piece, moving audiences to different parts of the narrative (past/present/future) in order to illuminate the complexity of that person's story. A story follows a typical cycle or pattern to give us an understanding of how the story is created, which allows a sense of familiarity for scholars to begin to comprehend and meaning-make the literature they read. When speaking out loud through these experiences, the individual has a chance to reflect on their sense of self and of history that often includes descriptions of mood, conflicts, stressors, and concerns. This is especially important for Black and Brown scholars because, through their words, they are able to self-reflect, which leads to their self-awareness in life, education, and themselves. This is also important to me as a researcher because there is more sensitivity in the language used by educators in their stories that will provide clarity on how to best connect with Black and Brown scholars to promote improvement in critical reading comprehension.

2.6.1 Language in Verbal Narratives

Focusing on the language or words that are exchanged during a verbal narrative through "Bakhtin's conception, [that] self is construed as always in relationship to some other, whether that other be another person, other parts of the self, or the individual's society or culture" shows that the self is complex and often difficult to express in written words (Bakhtin, 1986, as cited in

Wertz, 2011, p. 227). However, verbal narratives allow co-researchers and scholars to process pieces of their identities in relation to culture or society. Verbal narratives give educators as well as scholars the chance to share their experiences in which they can make meaning through their own languages. It can be the language with which they are most comfortable. For example, when it comes to Black and Brown scholars from urban communities, some of them use the language of Ebonics, which is a vernacular form of African American English. By honoring the languages they use, it "acknowledges the context in which they find themselves" in terms of constructing their own identities (Nieto, 2010, p. 13). When we acknowledge diversity in speech, whether it be the academic language spoken in the classroom by some educators or the scholars' home languages, "not only do we question how the research can represent the experience of others without the researcher placing themselves at the center of the research story, but also the very possibility that language can ever accurately reflect experience" (Denzin, 1997; MacLure, 2009, as cited in Byrne, 2017, p. 38). Through narrative inquiry, as a researcher, I take into account cultural considerations, especially when it comes to having verbal interactions with participants and analyzing the context of the found data.

Verbal narratives offer participants a way to speak their truth from their positions of "I," using their own languages and identities through which they position themselves. Intertwining narrative inquiry with Hermans and Hermans-Konopka's dialogical self-theory, narratives can be understood as complex interrelations that reflect personal, historical, and social processes between individuals and society. Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) explain that the dialogical self consists of multiple "I-positions," each capable of receiving a voice and engaging in dialogue with one another. Allowing participants to narrate their experiences from their unique languages and perspectives provides an authentic platform for them to express their genuine

selves. Sharing verbal narratives validates these experiences, creating powerful connections—especially when someone responds affirmatively, “I went through that too.” This multiplicity of “I’s” can be deeply affirming and therapeutic for both participants and listeners. In recognizing the power of narrative, it is essential that I, as a researcher, remain conscious of my own positioning and biases. Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2014) emphasize the importance of acknowledging one's decentered position as a researcher, stating, "In understanding the process of positioning, it is important to acknowledge that I am also decentered" (p. 155). By maintaining authenticity and transparency, my participants are more empowered to share pivotal stories. These narratives have significant potential to positively transform critical reading comprehension, ultimately contributing to the advancement and well-being of Black and Brown scholars.

In terms of this conversation of language, Coulter and Smith (2006) also argued that a polyphony can be seen in the exchange of this discourse, where the “researcher can choose to vary the point of view from section to section, portraying multiple voices” (p. 578). Bakhtin (1981) called this approach *heteroglossia* (in Smith, 2009, p. 604). Through this realization of multiplicity, we see that these stories are more than just “stories.” They are narratives that are aligned and interconnected with culture, family, and society. Due to these multifaceted components of narrative creations, many voices interact with each other. This dialogism of voices allows the researcher and participant who are the urban teachers, and even their Black and Brown scholars, to make meaning and make sense of an experience together—highlighting which voices and perspectives to emphasize in the process. Co-construction as researcher and participant is significant because it balances out power levels. By co-creating that knowledge

with both researcher and participant, we are providing more equitable opportunities in the realms of power within the research.

2.6.2 Verbal Narratives as Power

Educators, who are the participants, can be co-researchers through their stories and can share the benefits of verbal narratives. When educators tell their narratives, this enables their scholars to share their own stories within the classroom as it relates to the piece of literature they are exploring. When looking from multiple perspectives, often through written narratives, there is sometimes a barrier to reading comprehension with vocabulary skills and sentence/syntax construction. This is why verbal narratives are studied to improve foundational literacy skills. Spencer and Petersen (2018), in *Bridging Oral and Written Language: An Oral Narrative Language Intervention Study with Writing Outcomes*, state:

> "Research indicates that, although oral and written narration are strongly associated, the development of oral narration precedes the development of written narration (Fey et al., 2004; Gillam & Johnston, 1992; Scott & Windsor, 2000), suggesting it is possible that young students can learn to generate language that is transferable to writing without having a simultaneous focus on spelling and handwriting" (p. 570).

If oral narration comes before written narration, it represents a highly accessible skill for all, regardless of reading level, which can help scholars when using verbal narratives.

Having Black and Brown scholars share their verbal narratives in the comfort of their own language can take pressure off these literacy foundations of vocabulary, spelling, and handwriting and give them a way into the text. Ladson-Billings (2016) wrote that oftentimes “we decry the demise of English because our youth are inventive with language,” but instead an advantage of “creative language use is that youth have been able to connect the broader social and civic concerns of their lives in ways that school literacy has failed to do” (p. 65). Giving this outlet for scholars to conceptualize their stories in their own language provides them with an

equitable opportunity to better understand not only the literature they are reading, but also the way they make meaning of their own experiences and understand the world in order to make a positive impact on society.

It is also interesting how storytelling has been seen as a low form of art; Bahktin (1963) wrote that “a storyteller, after all is not a literary person; he belongs in most cases to the lower social strata, to the common people—and he brings with him oral speech” (p. 192). This statement relates to James Gee (2015), who argued that many home-based or non-mainstream Discourses of minority children are often invalidated as "non-standard" in comparison to the school or mainstream Discourses. Gee emphasizes that "the values of many school-based Discourses treat African-American people as 'other' and their social practices as 'deviant' and 'non-standard'" (p. 4), highlighting how deeply intertwined literacy, Discourse, and identity are within educational contexts; this also underlies the basis of his theory where discourse does not occur in isolation. As a researcher, I am lifting up that form of narrative through oral storytelling because it shows there is power in the voices of participants who are urban educators that can change the minds of those who are in dominant positions. Those who utilize verbal narratives do not only belong to a “lower social strata”; instead, they share those experiences to provide opportunities to leave the cycle of struggle (e.g., lower college attendance and graduation rates, higher likelihood of incarceration, and generally bleaker futures (Wexler, 2020), as seen in some communities of these Black and Brown scholars. When it comes to theorizing these data, I also realize that a powerful story that includes all voices can stand alone without even drawing on other texts.

2.6.3 Verbal Narratives as Critical Counter-narratives

Unpacking verbal narratives has also made me realize that in relation to my research, verbal narratives are also seen as critical counter-narratives. Critical counter-narratives have us seriously think about the narratives that arise from the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized. The idea of "counter" itself implies a space of resistance against traditional domination. According to Mora (2014), "A counter-narrative goes beyond the notion that those in relative positions of power can just tell the stories of those in the margins" (p. 1). In addition, Miller et al. (2020) noted that "Counter-narrative has recently emerged in education research as a promising tool to stimulate educational equity in our increasingly diverse schools and communities" (p. 269). Verbal narratives as counter-narratives can elevate the voices of educators and scholars from urban classrooms/communities alike and shed light on dominant discourses. As a researcher, it is also important to use this methodology with educators to model how they can share their stories with those in their communities and also their Black and Brown scholars.

A continuation of shared narratives from participants through interviews provides a space for empowering dialogue that will lead us to a collective transformation in urban classrooms. To have this collective impact, my participants share a shared vision for change in improving critical reading comprehension for Black and Brown scholars. This vision is "captured in the counter-narratives voiced by students of color and their teachers" (Paris, 2020, p. 270). As a researcher, I stayed consistent in collecting data on this topic from this congregation so that we all could "represent the collective voice of a marginalized group" (Paris, 2020, pp. 279-280). These lengthy stories can even be supplemented with artifacts, pictures, videos, and the like, for qualitative research, all of which can be further explained in a narrative way by both me and the researcher as well as the participants as storytellers. Overall, as storytellers against

oppressiveness, it is good to know that “counter storytelling tackles white supremacy, rejects notions of neutrality, and centers the voices and knowledge of people of Color” (Johnson. 2018, p. 269). By amplifying marginalized voices and dismantling the status quo, counter-storytelling becomes a potent tool in reshaping narratives, challenging oppressive structures, and nurturing a more inclusive and equitable societal narrative that embraces the diversity and experiences of all individuals.

2.6.4 Conceptualizing Literacy Across Modalities

Literacy is not one-dimensional nor is it a static thing, especially in Black and Brown communities that possess rich cultural traditions of storytelling, performance, and the oral transmission of knowledge (Muhammad, 2020; Paris and Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005). For the purposes of this study, literacy is conceptualised as dynamic and layered, possessing oral, performative, digital and print (Gutiérrez, 2008; Muhammad, 2020).

To inform this study, there was a need to move beyond narrow definitions of literacy which privilege only print based practices (Street, 2003). Instead, we view literacy as a layered and interconnected set of practices rooted in Black and Brown culture, and responsive to the lived experiences of students (Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005).

The study undertaken by Muhammad (2020) suggested that storytelling is not just any classroom strategy, but rather a central literacy event involving the oral, performative, digital and print. The urban community is alive with different types of literacies as are the practices that embody and sustain the culture. (Gutiérrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017).

This research is anchored by the Layered Literacy Framework shown in Figure 2. The comprehension of ‘literacy’ is within the oral traditions, performed, digital, and print academic (Muhammad, 2020; Street, 2003).By showing these rich traditions, this study challenges the

deficit models of literacy. It seeks to affirm and draw on the multiple literacies that already exist within Black and Brown students (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Yosso, 2005).

The layered conceptualization of literacy that informs urban teachers' use of storytelling is outlined in Figure 2 below.

Layered Literacy Framework for Understanding Storytelling

This framework conceptualizes literacy as a dynamic, interconnected set of practices, moving outward from traditional oral traditions to more formal academic literacies. Each layer builds upon the cultural and historical foundations of storytelling, particularly in Black and Brown communities.

Core Layer: Oral Literacy

- Griot traditions (West African storytelling)
- Haitian oral storytelling traditions
- Abuela storytelling (Latinx familial oral histories)
- Family and neighborhood oral histories

Foundation: Oral literacy represents the original mode of meaning-making, rooted in ancestral knowledge-sharing. It is storytelling in its purest form, passed down across generations through the tongue and lived experience.

Second Layer: Performative Literacy

- Hip-hop MCing and lyricism
- Spoken word poetry
- Performance-based storytelling

Expression: Performative literacy emerges as a natural extension of oral traditions. It allows

students to embody narratives, express resistance, and animate their lived experiences through rhythm, voice, and performance.

Third Layer: Digital Literacy

- Podcasts

- Digital storytelling (video, photo essays)

- Multimedia narratives (social media storytelling)

Evolution: Digital literacy adapts storytelling to modern platforms, making use of technology while maintaining the essence of oral and performative traditions.

Outer Layer: Print Literacy

- Traditional reading and writing practices

- Essays, reflective narratives, critical analyses

Academic Translation: Students learn to translate their rich oral, performative, and digital literacies into formal academic settings. Print literacy often represents institutional recognition of knowledge, yet it builds upon the storytelling traditions at the center.

Visual Concept:

Literacy Layer	Characteristics	Purpose
Print Literacy	Essays, written analysis, reading comprehension	Formal academic success; translation of cultural literacies into school-based forms
Digital Literacy	Podcasts, digital stories, multimedia texts	Evolving oral and performative traditions for modern audiences

Performative Literacy	Hip-hop, spoken word, embodied storytelling	Expression of voice, resistance, and community knowledge
Oral Literacy	Griot storytelling, Haitian oral narratives, Abuela storytelling	Foundational tradition; knowledge-sharing, cultural memory

This study conceptualizes literacy as a dynamic and layered phenomenon (see Figure 2). At its core lies **oral literacy**, a foundational practice deeply rooted in Black and Brown storytelling traditions that affirm communal histories and cultural identities (Muhammad, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017). Surrounding this core are **performative literacies**, through which storytelling is expressed in embodied forms such as hip-hop, spoken word, and other culturally resonant performances that validate students' lived experiences and promote active engagement (Alim, 2011; Love, 2019). Additional layers include **digital literacies**, reflecting how storytelling is adapted and reshaped across contemporary media platforms, thereby connecting traditional cultural narratives with modern forms of communication and representation (Morrell, 2015). The outer layer, **print literacies**, represents the academic forms in which students translate their cultural and experiential knowledge into conventional school-based texts, bridging home and school literacies (Street, 2003; Gutiérrez, 2008).

By honoring these interconnected literacies, the study positions storytelling not merely as a supplementary instructional strategy but as a central, transformative literacy practice that fosters critical thinking, identity formation, and deeper comprehension among Black and Brown students (Muhammad, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2014). This holistic conceptualization of literacy

informed the selection of storytelling strategies explored with participating teachers and shaped the thematic analysis presented in subsequent chapters. Specifically, the layered literacy framework guided the study in understanding how educators leverage storytelling practices to validate students' cultural identities and empower their voices within classroom instruction.

Clarifying Literacy Constructs: Functional, Critical, and Cultural

In order to define the impact and potential of stories in literacy instruction, we need to differentiate between different kinds of literacies. Functional literacy is the conventional, test-based skills that are normally assessed in a standardized way, such as reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary. These measurements are often used in policy and school accountability. Unlike the functionalist view, critical literacy is based on Freire (1970)'s work and treats literacy as an empowering practice that leads students to question, analyse and challenge dominant narratives and power relations. This type of literacy creates agency and socio-political awareness of marginalized youth. The last type is cultural and oral literacy that refers to embodied, performative, and communal traditions to transfer knowledge. The West African griot epic; call-and-response folktales from Haiti known as krik-krak; and the African American Creole folktales of Bouki and Lapin. Literacy is not merely about printing on paper, as these traditions suggest. It has always been a living spoken practice rooted in the memory and identity of communities. Oral storytelling traditions—ranging from the griot's *nommo* to the Haitian elder's lamplight tale to the MC's narrative verse—exemplify how narrative functions as pedagogy: transmitting cultural knowledge, affirming identity, and cultivating narrative skill. The literacy practices of Black and Brown students are crucial because they are often unheard and invisible in educational contexts. They are often deemed not worthy of attention in the classroom. This study makes clear that what it means by using critical and cultural literacies is

certainly not replicating functional literacy tests. However, an increased engagement with identity-affirming storytelling would also lead to improved confidence in school performance.

2.7 Narrative Inquiry into Reality

Taking everything into account, my study engaged narratives and sought insights from teachers who teach Black and Brown scholars in urban classrooms to better understand how to improve their critical literacies in their educational practices, especially through oral storytelling. As a researcher, I saw that narrative inquiry first provided me with a way to gather information about these educators and scholars through stories that are engaging, informative, humanizing, therapeutic, and inspirational. It also helped me co-create with participants on understanding tensions, navigating variations of truths, seeing from different perspectives, and layering various voices or languages. Lastly, narrative inquiry provided me with an in-depth understanding of how a participant experiences a certain situation or phenomenon. Suppose one result can be gained from this study centered on narrative theory. In that case, clearly, it is that I now catch the vision of a better-constructed interpretation of these experiences. This is explored in the next section on the effects of storytelling in classrooms.

Overall, some of the key findings in these studies from the literature review showed that students who are continuously engaged in storytelling do better in reading comprehension (Champion et al., 2011; Chapman et al., 2014; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008), find storytelling culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017), and benefit from the stimulation of diverse language use through oral narratives (Katz et al., 2013; Powell & Murray, 2012). Through my research, I chose to bring a different perspective to the importance of using storytelling in oral tradition in order to picture a scene that can contribute to creating a new world through written words on a printed page. This can translate into improving the language

learning modalities known as reading/writing level scores as well as strong listening, speaking, and communication skills. Nonetheless, through more research, personal experiences, and supporting literature of oral storytelling in the classroom, we can find a direct correlation between those and critical reading comprehension (Isbell, 2002; Jirata, 2011; Love, 2019).

2.8 Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework that challenges the traditional claims educational institutions share and works toward eliminating forms of subordination (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). This framework also places race at the center of analysis when examining the academic performance of those of color. CRT allows for a shift in thinking about race and racism in education "by challenging existing methods of conducting research on race and inequality" (Love, 2004, p. 228). Despite what many choose to believe, race still plays a considerable role in the decisions (and choices) made both in and outside the classroom, yet "race, unlike gender and class, remains untheorized" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 50). CRT was an appropriate perspective to use in this study because it refuses the deficit theorizing of urban teachers' involvement in their Black and Brown students' education and recognizes the experiential knowledge of urban educators in making decisions about education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Wilson & Thompson, 2020). Through CRT, counter-storytelling, and my willingness to engage in conversations with educators, I intend to gain insight into the reasons, approaches, and measures urban teachers take to advance their students' literacy achievement.

There are eight tenets of CRT: the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Taylor, 2016); interest convergence theory (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017); the social construction of race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Parker & Lynn, 2002); intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Lynn & Dixson, 2016); critique of liberalism (Zamudio et al.,

2011); commitment to social justice (Adaway, 2015; Shenvi, 2018); whiteness as property (Booker, 1993); and the power of voices of color/importance of experiential knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Zamudio et al., 2011). The CRT tenet (i.e., voice) was utilized to frame this study. The last tenet of CRT holds that marginalized and racialized people have a voice about their own experiences of race and racism that whites have unlikely heard. AS Bell (1992) stated, "I truly believe that analysis of legal developments through fiction, personal experience, and the stories of people on the bottom illustrates how race and racism continue to dominate our society" (p. 144).

The tenet of voice was evident in my participants' counter-stories as they shared how they prioritized school choice. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained that CRT values the power of "voice," or the ability to name one's own reality. CRT embraces various forms of storytelling, such as parables, chronicles, poetry, and revisionist histories. Unlike mainstream scholarship, CRT emphasizes the experiential knowledge of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This knowledge is deemed legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding race (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and affects the lives of people of color (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005). CRT enables researchers to prioritize the "voice" of people of color, particularly urban teachers, and hear their counter-stories. According to Delgado (1995), counter-stories challenge or deconstruct the dominant discourse and offer alternative perspectives (Milner, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997). Counter-stories defy the established order and control (Berry et al., 2011). Counter-stories are critical of the master narrative and come out of the experiences of individuals from marginalized groups whose voice, perspective, and consciousness have been suppressed and devalued (Bell, 1995; Berry et al., 2011; Delgado, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). With my research focus on centering urban teachers and their

experiences in their classrooms, CRT amplified their voices around their Black and Brown students' academic literacy success.

2.9 Counter-storytelling in Education

Based on Ladson-Billing's (2006) critique of the achievement gap, Love (2004) explained how the achievement gap was told through a majoritarian storytelling model, which suggested that Black students and their families could be fixed, improving their academic achievement. Love asserted that the "achievement gap" harms Black students who have endured many obstacles to obtain schooling, which they thought would be better than it has turned out to be. In addition, the majoritarian achievement gap storytelling shifts the focus from the establishments that fail to provide a rigorous curriculum to the Black students themselves (Love, 2004).

Counter-storytelling is a way to challenge the stories told by those in power, which are damning to Black Americans and other people of color. Love (2004) used counter-storytelling to discuss African American educational struggles and academic achievement. Love's research added to the counter-story by "bringing community members as well as elementary and secondary school students into a constructed discourse about schooling and academic achievement" (p. 233). In my research, I explored how the use of storytelling in reading and writing instruction influences the critical reading comprehension and writing skills of Black and Brown secondary students in urban classrooms. To support this inquiry, I collaborated with teachers who work with these students in urban classrooms. These teachers provided valuable insights into how storytelling has been incorporated into their instructional practices and how it has influenced their students' literacy development. Through this collaboration, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how storytelling as an instructional strategy can enhance critical reading

comprehension and writing skills among Black and Brown students in urban educational settings.

Solórzano and Yosso (2004) shared that majoritarian stories "generate from a legacy of racial privilege...indeed white privilege is often expressed through Majoritarian stories" (p. 229). Rather than counter-stories, majoritarian stories continue to be perceived as accurate because of their natural and ordinary appearance. Society has constructed the white story as right without others questioning its credibility or authenticity. Love (2004) shared that the reasons behind the common acceptance of these stories are that people have been led to believe that all people have an equal opportunity to receive a quality education and those who are subordinate have not taken advantage of this opportunity and are responsible for their subordination.

Overall, counter-narratives are a foundational tenet of CRT that focuses on the experiential knowledge of people of color. Narrative permitted me to honor, value, and recognize the experiential knowledge of teachers of Black and Brown students while viewing this experiential knowledge as having the potential to contribute to new knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

2.10 Teachers of Black and Brown Students and Counter-Storytelling as a Research Method

In my study, the central focus was on how **teachers support and increase interest in reading among Black and Brown students** in urban classrooms. To understand this, I centered the **experiences, instructional strategies, and reflections of teachers** who work closely with these students. These educators shared how they use culturally responsive storytelling to affirm student identity, build engagement, and improve literacy outcomes. While the participants in my study were teachers, their **counter-stories** offered critical insights into the systemic challenges they face and the creative, humanizing approaches they implement to disrupt deficit narratives.

As Hatch (2002) notes, “the voices of participants ought to be prominent in any qualitative report” (p. 7), and this research honors their stories as essential knowledge. Historically, teachers of color have been marginalized in educational discourse, their perspectives often overshadowed by dominant, white, male-centric narratives (Taylor et al., 2016). These “master narratives” uphold white privilege, obscure systemic racism, and reduce complex experiences to simplistic stereotypes (Hunn et al., 2006; Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016). This study aims to counter that trend by amplifying teacher voices and demonstrating how their storytelling practices transform literacy instruction for Black and Brown students.

In contrast, counter-stories seek to dismantle, challenge, and expose these dominant ideologies, especially regarding race and privilege in education (Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016; Zamudio et al., 2011). Counter-stories challenge prevailing assumptions, reveal hidden truths, and open up new ways of thinking about race, equity, and justice. These stories are crucial for reimagining policies and practices in education that truly include and empower teachers of Black and Brown students. Storytelling, particularly in the context of Black and Brown communities, has a deep-rooted tradition of capturing perspectives often dismissed or erased by mainstream narratives. Counter-stories are essential because they reveal societal inequalities and contribute to social, political, and cultural cohesion as well as survival and resistance among marginalized groups (Hunn et al., 2006, p. 245).

By utilizing counter-storytelling, I allowed teachers of Black and Brown students to share their stories, providing insights into **how they engage and support these students in developing reading skills and motivation**—a multifaceted issue that cannot be reduced to numbers alone (Hatch, 2002). Daniel and Yosso (2002) identified three types of counter-stories: personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories. For my study, I focused on “other people’s

stories," specifically gathering narratives from teachers in urban classrooms who work closely with Black and Brown students. This approach was inspired by exemplary studies that used counter-storytelling to amplify the voices of educators—particularly educators of color—whose insights and strategies are often excluded from dominant discourses in education. By highlighting these narratives, the study sheds light on the pedagogical approaches teachers use to foster literacy, affirm student identity, and disrupt deficit-based narratives in the classroom.

2.11 Narrative Inquiry and Storytelling Methodology: Exploring Teachers' and Students' Stories

Alongside CRT mentioned earlier in this chapter, I intertwined storytelling with narrative theory. As the foundation of this theory, narrative inquiry is an interdisciplinary and relatively new methodology that focuses on storytelling through the gathering of information from participants who I also view as co-researchers. It was first practiced by F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin (1990) as a way to narrate the unique stories of teachers. It was noted that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 2). It is the same as what we do as researchers, educators, and individuals. These narratives shed light on how we think and how we live; it is embedded in our everyday lives. These shared narratives "cause us to question our values, prompts new imaginings of the ideal and the possible. It can even stir action against the conventional, the seemingly unquestionable, the tried and true" (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 577). Essentially, narrative research aims to portray experience, question common knowledge, and offer a degree of interpretive space. I was interested in studying these accounts from a range of different perspectives, specifically through oral narratives.

Using oral narratives as a tool of power also brings Black and Brown scholars into the places of dominant educational spaces, which levels the power playing field. These scholars in

general have still been seen as a marginalized group that is "locked up in a school system which is structurally designed to fail them, rather than preparing them to succeed in life" (Orelus, 2012, p. 4). In order to leverage the playing field in this "structure of power" (Foucault, 1982, p. 795), we must circle back to the oral aspect of narratives, which places emphasis on "the 'voice' component of Critical Race Theory [that] provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 58). This implies that for educators and learners alike, oral storytelling is a powerful way of understanding the essence of our beings through words, language, and imagination that can shape, strengthen, or challenge our opinions and values.

In collaboration with art-based research, oral narratives as counter-narratives can be used in YPAR to make a social media impact. YPAR (Youth-led Participatory Action Research)

> engages in rigorous research inquiries and represents a radical effort in education research to take inquiry-based knowledge production out of the sole hands of academic institutions and include the youth who directly experience the educational contexts that scholars endeavor to understand. (Caraballo, 2017, p. 314)

The youth, who are a driving force in using social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Tik-Tok where they are sharing research-based information social media stories that can go viral, can serve as a powerful tool. Like a domino effect, passing down that research from myself to co-researchers to their scholars can also lead us to a collective impact. Through this collaborative effort in narrative inquiry, we better understand the educational phenomenon of critical reading comprehension for which we are trying to find a solution.

Although narrative theory can be more in-depth on the meanings of individual experiences, a few questions linger. Coulter and Smith (2009) wrote that the "use of the unreliable narrator allows the researcher to portray layers of self in a single narrative" (p. 581). In reflection, my analysis as a researcher can change the meaning of a story. On the other hand,

is there anything wrong with writing one's own "justifications" in narrative theory/inquiry? "The researcher adds 'rich detail' and makes 'causal links' and identifies 'themes' to provide a fuller narrative" (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 332). When adding extra detail and making meaning of the data, how does one know that the interests of the researcher and participants are balanced? Moreover, to reduce the privilege of the researcher as a writer and in an ultimate position of privilege, is there a way in which the researcher can co-create the narrative that the participant tells and discuss it together (or does that ruin the objective standpoint that the researcher needs to have)? These are some of the considerations I considered as I moved forward with this study.

2.12 Recent Research

While early researchers like Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2010) afforded theoretical bases for culturally responsive teaching, recent research literature has confirmed that storytelling pays off in literacy teaching. According to Smith and Johnson (2019), storytelling-based interventions improved reading comprehension scores by 20% among Black and Brown students in urban schools. Similarly, Martinez (2021) also highlighted the benefit of multimodal storytelling (e.g., students engaging with oral, written, and digital stories) in bridging the literacy gap for multilingual learners. According to Gee (2020), students developed meaning rather than taking things word-by-word, which improved their reading comprehension. Schema-building refers to the cognitive process whereby knowledge is modified in the mind of a learner to create greater fit with some new information. According to studies, storytelling is a great way to motivate reluctant readers, particularly when stories are culturally relevant and reflect students' backgrounds (Morrell, 2022).

Despite these successes, critiques exist. Taylor (2020) argued that while storytelling enhances engagement, it must be paired with **explicit literacy instruction** to ensure long-term skill development. The current study explored how educators balanced **culturally relevant storytelling** with **structured literacy frameworks** to maximize impact.

The following table provides a synthesis of key research literature that underpins the theoretical and pedagogical foundation of this study, connecting findings on storytelling, culturally responsive teaching, and literacy development among Black and Brown students.

Table 1: Summary of Key Literature on Storytelling, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Literacy Development

Author(s)	Focus/Findings	Connection to Current Study
Ladson-Billings (1995, 2006)	Culturally relevant pedagogy; affirms student identity	Foundation for linking storytelling to cultural identity
Gay (2002, 2010, 2018)	Culturally responsive teaching enhances engagement and comprehension	Supports using relatable narratives in English Language Arts classrooms
Solórzano & Yosso (2002)	Introduced counter-storytelling and emphasized the CRT voice tenet	Validates teacher and student storytelling as essential knowledge

Spencer & Petersen (2018)	Oral storytelling precedes and supports written language development	Positions oral storytelling as a gateway to critical literacy
Delgado (1995); Bell (1992)	Storytelling as racial justice and knowledge production	Grounds narrative inquiry and counter-narratives in justice and equity frameworks
Johnson (2017, 2018)	Storytelling as a healing practice and resistance to white supremacy	Emphasizes storytelling as emotional and identity development
Morrell (2023)	Storytelling validates identity and promotes critical literacy development	Demonstrates how narrative helps students connect to texts and build reading confidence

These studies collectively inform the rationale for utilizing storytelling as a culturally relevant literacy practice and reinforce the role of narrative inquiry in capturing the voices and lived experiences of teachers and students in urban classrooms.

2.13 Counter-storytelling and Literacy Connection (Bridge Theory to Practice)

Storytelling enhances the development of literacy skills by fostering reading comprehension, writing fluency, and critical thinking. Jones and Carter (2020) describe storytelling as "an excellent way to help students interpret a text, make inferences, and

synthesize ideas, particularly when the content reflects their cultural lens" (p. 88). When students engage in storytelling, they help create meaning rather than simply receiving information. As Delgado Bernal (2002) explains, "students take ownership of knowledge when they are positioned as knowers through their own narratives" (p. 116). According to Ladson-Billings (2009), storytelling also provides a vehicle for affirming students' cultures. "Writing narratives that reflect one's cultural roots builds coherence, voice, and purpose in ways traditional instruction often neglects" (p. 87). These culturally affirming stories help students not only develop stronger writing structures but also a more personal investment in their work.

Teachers who use counter-storytelling—narratives that challenge dominant ideologies and center student voice—have reported higher levels of engagement and academic progress. As Williams (2021) affirms, "Counter-stories empower students of color to speak against erasure, and teachers who encourage such stories shift the academic space into one of liberation" (p. 134).

Moreover, counter-storytelling allows Black and Brown students to reject deficit-based narratives imposed upon them. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) assert that these stories "serve as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 32). The storytelling process allows marginalized youth to position themselves as experts of their own lives—an act of resistance against historical silencing.

Muhammad (2020) echoes this sentiment by explaining that storytelling nurtures both literacy and identity: "When students are given the opportunity to author their own stories, they not only develop their skills as readers and writers—they also gain agency and a renewed belief in their capacity to impact their world" (p. 71). This research study, informed by such scholarship, examined how storytelling not only enhances literacy instruction but also reauthors

the academic identity of marginalized students. Through teacher interviews and classroom examples, it became clear that narrative work helps bridge academic rigor with students' lived realities, affirming both their intellect and humanity.

2.14 Addressing Challenges and Institutional Barriers

A main barrier to literacy learning through storytelling instruction is the emphasis on standardized testing. These assessments privilege measurable literacy skills that align with test requirements, often at the expense of deeper engagement with narrative (Smith, 2020). As a result, teachers face the challenge of fostering authentic literacy experiences while also delivering the curriculum mandated by the state, creating significant tension in classroom instruction (Garcia & Lewis, 2021).

Furthermore, many educators have cited not having any professional development about integrating storytelling into literacy instruction in effective ways. Teacher training programs often highlight technical literacy skills as opposed to pedagogy that efficiently responds to culture. Teachers may fear that storytelling will take away time spent on "covering" required material if they are not trained well enough.

However, successful models have demonstrated that storytelling can be effectively aligned with academic standards. The **Freedom Schools Initiative**, for example, integrates storytelling with structured literacy instruction, resulting in **increased reading proficiency** among Black and Brown students (Hale, 2018). Schools that implement **dual literacy approaches**—pairing storytelling with explicit reading strategies—have seen both **higher engagement and improved test scores** (Duncan-Andrade, 2019).

The present research looked at how urban teachers deal with each of these pressures and developed effective strategies to use storytelling for literacy without ignoring school pressures.

2.15 Conclusion

Considered strictly in its magnitude and content, this study, as stated from its inception, leads unequivocally to the following possibilities of enlightenment: Storytelling can be one of the keys that unlock diverse learning possibilities for Black and Brown students in lower grades up to Grade 12, specifically in the subject of English Language Arts. Evidence of such has been shown through the research discussed through these studies. Furthermore, whether the issue is utilizing storytelling and identities/cultures of Black and Brown students in the classroom, employing new methodologies, or tolerating what seems academically inferior and therefore unacceptable in the school environment, we as educators—specifically, English Language Arts teachers—keep in mind that our task is to take our scholars from low ground and elevate them to a higher ground of competence and proficiency in the four modalities of language learning. The pedagogy of storytelling can be employed across various educational settings, from early childhood education to adult learning environments. Teachers, educators, and trainers can use storytelling techniques in classrooms, workshops, seminars, and online courses to enhance the learning experience and promote deeper understanding and engagement with the subject matter.

I will continue to delve into counter-narratives and collaborate with educators who teach Black and Brown students in urban classrooms. The hopeful outcome is an enhanced comprehension of effective teaching methods that foster critical literacies, with a particular focus on culturally responsive pedagogy. These narratives offer valuable insights into critical narrative inquiry, humanizing the literacies of Black and Brown children both within and beyond the classroom environment. Building on these possibilities, this study explored the influences of storytelling in English Language Arts instruction for Black and Brown students in urban classrooms. Utilizing a qualitative methodology grounded in counter-storytelling and narrative

inquiry, this study provides insight into how storytelling can support literacy development, foster cultural relevance, and promote critical engagement among students, while informing the development of culturally responsive teaching practices.

Chapter 3: Narrative Threads: Weaving Methodology with Purpose

Interlude: Story as Method

"Every time I sat with a participant, listening to their stories, I thought of the journal pages I had been filling since the start of this journey. My reflections weren't margins to the work—they were the work. Narrative inquiry, for me, meant listening outward and inward. I carried my participants' words alongside my own, weaving a tapestry where my story and theirs could breathe together."

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present a comprehensive overview of the research design and methodology used in this study. The sections that follow describe the research questions, participant selection process, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, study limitations, and my role as a researcher. This qualitative study employed counter-storytelling and culturally responsive pedagogy to investigate how storytelling can be used as a tool to enhance critical literacy among Black and Brown students in urban classrooms.

Building on the research foundation established in Chapter 1, this study was guided by the following overarching research question:

How do five urban secondary teachers use storytelling as a pedagogical tool when teaching Black and Brown students?

To further explore this question, three sub-research questions were used to frame the analysis:

1. What specific challenges do teachers face in improving reading skills for Black and Brown secondary students?
2. How does the use of storytelling in instruction affect student engagement, classroom culture, and teacher-student relationships?

3. What instructional strategies do educators find most effective in using storytelling to connect students' cultural backgrounds with literacy instruction?

In addition to these guiding research questions, specific prompts and inquiry areas were used to structure interviews and observations. For example, I explored how students perceived the role of storytelling in their learning, which storytelling techniques seemed most effective in fostering comprehension and critical thinking, and how teachers integrated storytelling into culturally responsive teaching. These questions informed the design of the data collection instruments, but they were not presented as separate research questions for the study.

By distinguishing between the overarching research questions and the tools used to collect data, this chapter clarifies the methodological alignment of the study and ensures coherence with the earlier sections of the dissertation. Grounded in the conceptual lenses of CRT and culturally sustaining pedagogy, this study uses narrative inquiry and counter-storytelling as its primary methodological tools.

3.2 Research Design

This study's research design was informed by qualitative tradition, which used counter-storytelling as the main data collection instrument. Counter-storytelling, which comes from critical race theory (CRT), was most useful for centering the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. Likewise, it was the perfect fit for exploring the lived experiences of Black and Brown students in urban classrooms. The choice to use counter-storytelling was informed by the belief that much of the existing educational research on Black and Brown students does not capture their reality but merely offers master narratives. On the other hand, counter-storytelling is a way of expressing stories that have been silenced or ignored by master narratives. It allows

those who are not normally heard to tell their own stories in their own words, challenging the "norm" in education.

As DeCuir and Dixson (2004) explained, counter-storytelling—or counter-narratives—is useful to reframe the educational story of teachers, students, and schools and expose the structural racism and social inequalities embedded in it. Counter-stories do not positively message the marginalized alone; they create opportunities to identify and challenge the "normalizing" power of mainstream ideologies. In doing so, the marginalized can resist dominant discourses to re-define and re-construct their identities as they see fit (Yosso, 2006). Coulter and Smith (2009) pointed out that counter-stories cause us to reflect and act on what they see as traditional tales, which prompt questioning of narratives and challenge assumptions about race and power that are commonly held in educational spaces.

In addition, counter-storytelling is an essential way of becoming subsequently engaged with the realities of those who are often silenced and excluded from the larger social narrative. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), who are narrative inquiry theorists, "we organize our experience and construct knowledge by means of stories" (p. 2). According to Clandinin and Connelly, "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 2). Thus, the stories people tell about themselves and others are basic to themselves.
As such, we can record or explore this lived experience through narrative inquiry. It helps to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of their lives, which is important when investigating how storytelling helps in the critical literacy development of Black and Brown students. Creswell (2009) stated that narrative inquiry is useful when one investigates the experiences of individuals and groups. What both educators and learners at the school revealed was that storytelling is critical.

Narrative inquiry allows for the gathering of rich, detailed narratives from educators, providing insights into their practices and the transformation of storytelling on student learning. Chase (2005) explained that narrative inquiry, as a methodology, emphasizes the subjectivity and relational nature of experience, focusing on the stories people tell about their lives and work. This is particularly pertinent in the context of storytelling in the classroom, as teachers' own stories and the ways they narrate their pedagogical practices can reveal the impact of cultural responsiveness on student engagement and achievement. By examining the way teachers integrate storytelling into their practice, we can better understand how it helps Black and Brown students make sense of their own experiences, both in the classroom and in the world beyond.

Furthermore, counter-storytelling provides a space for teachers to reflect on their practice. Teachers can get to know more about their students if they try to counter stories. It can make a classroom more culturally responsive and equitable. Educator and researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014, 2016) has advocated for "culturally relevant pedagogy," which refers to teaching that educates Black and Brown students at high levels while sustaining their cultural heritage. Specifically, this means selecting stories that speak to students' lives. This way will narrow the disconnect between students' out-of-school experiences and in-school learning. In addition, it will develop critical literacy where we can affirm and validate the identities of students.

According to Riessman (2008), narrative inquiry yields insight into a person and material through the use of a narrative framework in which different kinds of discourse can help decode multiplicity. This method allows for the investigation of race, class, and gender and how these issues participate in student engagement with text and their interpretations of the world. By integrating these counter-stories into the larger narrative of his research, I can gain a deeper

understanding of how storytelling can be used as a powerful tool to foster critical thinking and social awareness, particularly in relation to issues of race and inequality.

In sum, counter-storytelling offers an invaluable methodological tool that not only centers marginalized voices but also exposes the power dynamics embedded in education. By employing counter-storytelling in this study, I have provided a platform for the educators of Black and Brown students to share their stories, thereby offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of the intersection between storytelling, literacy development, and identity in urban classrooms. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted, "stories are the bridges between the personal and the collective" (p. 16). By using counter-storytelling, I sought to illuminate these connections in the context of urban education.

3.2.1 Reflective Journaling and Analytic Memos

To align method with purpose in a narrative inquiry, I used **reflective journaling** and **analytic memos** throughout data collection and analysis. Journaling functioned as (a) a reflexive space to examine how my identity as a Black, Haitian American educator shaped the meanings I made, (b) a record of emergent insights during interviews and transcript review, and (c) an **audit trail** documenting coding decisions, theme refinements, and changes to the protocol.

Practically, I journaled:

- **Immediately after each interview** (within 24 hours) to capture affective responses, early hunches, and questions to probe in follow-ups.
- **During transcript review** to preserve nuances of voice, cadence, and emphasis that risk being flattened in text.

- **Across coding cycles** (open → focused → axial/theme mapping) to mark tensions, disconfirming evidence, and alternative readings of the data.

Journals and memos were linked to transcripts and codes via unique identifiers (e.g., P3_T1_Memo02) and stored in the project's digital audit trail (protocol drafts, codebook versions, theme maps, decision logs). During analysis, I treated memos as **data-adjacent artifacts** that informed code definitions and theme boundaries rather than as data themselves. When an insight from a memo materially influenced a code or theme, I noted the connection in the codebook to make my interpretive moves transparent.

Short Journal Excerpt (Illustrative)

Date: 02/18/2025 — *After Interview 2 (Pseudonym: "Delgado")*

Prompt: What did I feel/hear beneath the words?

"I felt a familiar charge when Delgado said, 'Once I share my own protest story, the room exhales.' It echoed my own classroom memories from the BLM summer. My excitement is data—but also a bias risk. Note to self: do not over-elevate 'protest stories' as the only route to engagement. Look for counter-instances where identity affirmation occurred through quieter, familial narratives (name stories, abuela wisdom) or craft moves (structure, voice). Add a probe for follow-ups: 'Tell me about a non-protest story that shifted the room.' Update codebook: under ***Identity Affirmation****, add subcode* ***Quiet Resonance****."*

How journaling informed analysis.

1. *Feeling → probe:* emotions flagged a targeted follow-up question.

2. *Memo line → subcode:* "quiet resonance" trialed, then retained/merged based on salience.
3. *Memo cluster → theme:* convergent memos + excerpts supported a theme (e.g., *Story as Relational Practice*).
4. *Tension → disconfirming search:* memos triggered active searches for counter-examples (trustworthiness).

3.3 Participants

The selection criteria were established in order to have a diversified sample for this study.

3.3.1 Diversity of Backgrounds

Participants in this study included five secondary urban education teachers from various ethnic backgrounds, primarily those who work with Black and Brown students. Ensuring diverse perspectives was essential for capturing a range of experiences and insights into how storytelling influences critical literacy in urban classrooms. As Gay (2010) noted, educators who come from diverse backgrounds are more likely to understand and relate to the experiences of their students, providing a culturally responsive pedagogy that is essential for supporting diverse learners. This is especially significant when working with students from historically marginalized groups, as their teachers' cultural competency can significantly influence classroom dynamics and educational outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

3.3.2 Teaching Experience

Urban teachers selected for the study must have a minimum of 3 years of experience in urban classrooms. This criterion helped to ensure that the participants have enough pedagogical knowledge and are familiar with the challenges. Based on Darling-Hammond's (2000) findings,

teachers who have experience across a diverse range of settings have a much greater chance of implementing sound methodology that caters to all students, including disadvantaged students. It is widely acknowledged that experienced teachers have greater chances of coming up with pedagogical strategies, such as storytelling, which effectively engage the students and lead to better academic achievement. It was also highlighted by Ingersoll (2003) that teachers with several years of experience possess a better understanding of classroom management and student engagement, which is important while assessing the influence of storytelling on students.

To ensure data relevance to the research question on the role of storytelling in improving critical literacy, teachers who have applied storytelling in their teaching were included in the study. Dewey (1938) suggested that students must learn through things which are real and of the world. Therefore, they learn through personal and cultural stories. Similarly, cultural relevance which mandates the use of strategies that connect a student's culture to the learning was emphasized by Ladson-Billings (1995). In all likelihood, educators who have incorporated storytelling into their teaching practices are aware of how storytelling enhances engagement, motivation, and understanding. Furthermore, Alexander (2004) proposed that storytelling can work effectively to create a community spirit in classrooms that promotes an inclusive environment where students feel valued and understood.

3.4 Participant Selection and Recruitment

To give the reader the necessary context of who the participants are, and where the teaching took place, the following table outlines the five teachers involved in the study. The pseudonym of each participant is recorded to protect their identity, along with the grade(s) they teach, the pseudonym of their school, the city where they are located, and demographic information about their students. The pseudonyms were also chosen by their respective

participants to keep their identities anonymous for the study. I selected these teachers specifically because their instructional practices closely mirrored culturally responsive storytelling—drawing upon rich traditions such as Haitian oral storytelling, hip-hop pedagogies, Griot narratives, and community-based personal stories—as discussed earlier in the literature review.

Table 2: Participant Overview Chart with Demographic Information

Participant (Pseudonym)	Teaching Years	School Name (Pseudonym)	City	Demographics (Black and Brown Students)
Claudia	10 years	Tech Academy (Brooklyn Technical High School)	Brooklyn, NY	Approximately 12% Black and Latinx students; 60% Asian, 24% White.Source
Javelyn	15 years	Riverstone Academy (Mildred Avenue K–8 School)	Boston, MA	Approximately 90% Black and Latinx students Source.
Steven	10 years	Horizon Middle School (MS 53 Brian Piccolo)	Queens, NY	Approximately 93.7% Black and Latinx students (47.6% African American, 46.1% Hispanic). Source
Grace	10 years	Empower Academy (KIPP Metro Atlanta Collaborative)	Atlanta, GA	Approximately 98% Black and Latinx students. Source
Frank	7 years	Legacy Middle School (IS 171 Abraham Lincoln)	Brooklyn, NY	Approximately 95% Black and Latinx students.Source

This table illustrates the geographic, instructional, and demographic diversity represented within the study, while also reinforcing the shared characteristic that unified all participants: their commitment to serving predominantly Black and Brown student populations through culturally sustaining pedagogical practices. The range of grade levels (from middle to high school), along

with the consistent use of storytelling across contexts, enriched the study's analysis and allowed for a nuanced understanding of how narrative can foster critical literacy in diverse urban educational settings.

Based on where my participants taught, I concentrated on 5 urban secondary schools in 3 major cities of the USA: New York City (3 schools), Atlanta (1 school), and Boston (1 school). I specifically looked at the school report cards and the profile of the school. The school had at least 75 percent Black and/or Brown students based on state reports issued by the Department of Education. In this study, I use the term *Brown* to refer to non-White people of color, including Latinx, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and some Native American groups but not to the whole East Asian groups. The selected schools for this research were Brooklyn Technical High School, the MS 53 Brian Piccolo Middle School, the IS 171 Abraham Lincoln Middle School, the KIPP Metro Atlanta Collaborative and the Mildred Avenue K–8 School (00350378) in Boston. Each of the schools has a student body that is racially and culturally diverse. The selected institutions also demonstrate the urban education setting and fit in with the culturally responsive literacy practices of the study.

The participants were identified and recruited mainly through my professional and academic networks. These included people I have worked with in schools and fellow doctoral students and faculty who were aware of my work. As an English teacher and doctoral candidate in English Education, I had access to a network of teachers already known for employing imaginative and culturally responsive instructional practices in their classrooms, particularly storytelling (Gay, 2010). In many cases, I had worked with these teachers at professional development or had seen their teaching in the same academic spaces. Having this familiarity with teachers allowed me to intentionally look for teachers who fit well with this study.

I informally screened potential participants to confirm their fit for the study. These conversations confirmed that they taught English Language Arts in Grades 7–12, had a minimum of three years' experience, served majority Black and Brown students, and used storytelling in their teaching. The conversations also served to gauge the teachers' willingness to reflect on their own classrooms and what they observed about storytelling and its relationship to student engagement and literacy development.

I designed a selective process to ensure the participants in my study were well-positioned to address the study's main research question: *How do five urban secondary teachers use storytelling as a pedagogical tool when teaching Black and Brown students?*

Qualitative research is a process of bringing out deep knowledge from those who understand the issue, rather than specifying one population and using it to make generalisations about another population (Maxwell, 2012).

I implemented an informed consent process after confirming the participants were identified to maintain the ethical protocol of qualitative research. The participants were informed about the study and that they could not be forced to participate, and they could drop out of the study at any time without penalty. The participants were also assured that they would identifiably be protected with the use of pseudonyms and all data would be securely stored and used only for academic purpose. Patton (2015) states that informed consent is one of the ethical principles of qualitative inquiry. To follow up, Niesz shares how it is equally helpful to safeguard participant autonomy and privacy when researchers ask educators to reflect on their practices.

This research produced rich data regarding the use of storytelling in literacy development and affirming the identity of Black and Brown students in urban ELA classrooms because it

actively and systematically recruited teachers who have the knowledge and reflective capacity to take a deep dive into this subject area. Let us dive into the lived stories of our teachers:

Claudia

Claudia Lee described how storytelling shapes her teaching practice:

> As an educator in Brooklyn's bustling urban schools, I teach both ninth-grade English and twelfth-grade journalism. My teaching approach emphasizes storytelling as a powerful gateway to literature, connecting texts like *The Joy Luck Club* and *The House on Mango Street* to students' lives through personal narratives and culturally responsive discussions. Whether sharing humorous anecdotes from my own multicultural background or facilitating rich, student-driven conversations about identity and family, storytelling is integral to my classroom culture. This approach not only enhances students' critical engagement with literature but also empowers them to recognize their own voices and experiences as central to their learning. (Lee, 2024)

Javelyn

Javelyn Booker reflected on the role of storytelling in her instructional practice:

> As an educator in Mattapan, Boston, I support K–8 students in math and ELA, and provide inclusion services for eighth graders. Throughout my teaching journey, I've discovered storytelling as an invaluable strategy to build relationships and capture students' curiosity, especially those from low-income backgrounds. By connecting classroom texts, such as nonfiction explorations of animals, to my personal experiences—like swimming with dolphins—I help bridge gaps in exposure and spark meaningful engagement. Storytelling allows me to meet students where they

are, nurturing a learning environment rich with curiosity, connection, and mutual respect. (Booker, 2024)

Steven

Steven Perry shared how storytelling shapes his pedagogy and purpose:

> As an educator at Brian Piccolo Middle School in Far Rockaway, Queens, I work with diverse seventh and eighth graders across ELA, science, and social studies. My teaching philosophy prioritizes critical thinking, empathy, and real-life connections—values deeply informed by my own experiences growing up in the Manhattanville projects of Harlem during the turbulent 1970s and '80s. Overcoming significant adversity, including the tragic loss of my brother and navigating the profound impacts of poverty and systemic racism, shaped my commitment to education and mentorship. The pivotal moment in my educational journey occurred when I was recognized as functionally illiterate in the eighth grade. With the compassionate guidance of my Aunt Barbara and cousin Fran, storytelling became the tool that unlocked my potential, sparking a lifelong passion for learning and literacy. Today, storytelling remains integral to my classroom, enhancing student engagement, deepening comprehension, and fostering critical literacy skills. I live by two powerful principles: "When you know better, you do better," and "Always give your best effort to do your best work." These mantras have guided my mission of mentoring young scholars for over three decades, especially those from underserved communities like my own. My commitment extends beyond academics, aiming to ensure every child feels safe, respected, and inspired to surpass their invisible boundaries. By sharing personal narratives and integrating storytelling into

> my teaching practice, I strive to build empathy, cultural understanding, and a sense of community within the classroom, empowering students to confidently navigate their own journeys. (Perry, 2024)

Grace

Grace Harper reflected on how storytelling shaped her instructional practice and student engagement:

> As a Brooklyn native with over 10 years of teaching and coaching experience, I've spent my career in Title I schools across Perryville, FL and Atlanta, GA—primarily in charter settings. From the start, I've used storytelling as a powerful tool in my classroom, beginning with my first year teaching Romeo and Juliet by connecting Shakespeare's themes to modern pop culture. That moment sparked a deeper understanding of how to make content relatable, a practice I honed throughout years 3 to 7 of my teaching journey. Whether in the classroom or on the field, my focus has always been on connection, clarity, and creativity. (Harper, 2024)

Frank

Frank Delgado reflected on his experience integrating storytelling into his teaching practice:

> I am an ELA Teacher of Puerto Rican descent. I have taught middle school for 6½ years and have always taken it upon myself to teach in a way that incorporates my personality and life experiences into my classroom. I was nervous about incorporating personal storytelling and more of myself into my teaching practice at first. In year two, I started to leverage storytelling as an organic way of teaching and connecting with students. By year 7, it is now a cornerstone of my practice and

> classroom culture to not only include my own storytelling but to encourage students to do so. (Delgado, 2025)

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this research were collected through semi-structured one-on-one Zoom interviews. This helped to understand the use of storytelling in urban classrooms and its transformation on critical reading and writing skills among Black and Brown students. Five teachers who use storytelling in their teaching were interviewed for the study. These semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of participants while permitting flexibility to explore other relevant themes that emerged. Creswell (2013) claimed that semi-structured interviews allow for a combination of structured as well as open-ended questions that provide access to the participants' stories in order to capture detailed and personal recollections. The questions were designed to elicit stories from the teachers about the use of storytelling, the challenges they face, and the successes they have had in engaging and helping students understand through storytelling.

Sample interview questions included inquiries such as: *How do you incorporate storytelling into your teaching practices?* and *Can you describe a specific instance where storytelling significantly influenced your students' engagement or understanding?* These questions were designed to elicit detailed, experience-based responses that illustrate how storytelling functions as a pedagogical tool in practice. Rather than simply gathering factual data, the interview protocol sought to uncover how storytelling transforms students both academically and emotionally, particularly in terms of engagement, comprehension, identity development, and cultural affirmation. The full interview protocol, organized into four main categories—**(1)**

teaching background and philosophy, (2) storytelling practices, (3) student engagement and literacy influence, and (4) culturally responsive pedagogy—can be found in **Appendix A**.

Besides the in-depth interviews, I looked at the use of story in literacy instruction through the lived experiences and reflections of the teachers. I did not carry out formal classroom observation, but used rich narrative descriptions given by the participants who narrated how they did storytelling with students and the responses of the students. The teachers' reports gave me insights into the pedagogical choices made regarding the storytelling, the nature of the stories deploying and their influence on student engagement, identity and literacy. The content analysis focused on themes that situated storytelling use derived from the interviews, which were the main data source for understanding its role in culturally responsive literacy teaching.

Thematic analysis, as per Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the data. Reflective journals and analytic memos operated alongside transcripts to surface positional influences, generate follow-up probes, and justify code/theme decisions within the audit trail. Through this method, it was possible to determine various patterns or themes concerning the qualitative data related to how storytelling affects teacher practices and student learning. The process of thematic analysis includes becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. This familiarization process ensures that the analytical work remains closely tied to the participants' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As indicated in Bazeley and Perry (2013), the next step was initial coding using NVivo and Otter.ai which helped in transcribing, organizing, and classifying significant parts of the data. The voice of the participants was ensured through the transcription. For qualitative coding, NVivo was used. Initial codes were developed that related to the research questions, such as storytelling strategies or the students' responses to specific stories (Saldaña, 2021). After coding,

the codes were collated into possible themes, which drew together all the data relating to each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One theme might be about the emotions students showed towards culturally relevant stories, whereas another theme might look at what role storytelling played in building a sense of community in the class. As this process evolved, these themes were checked to make sure they fit the coding and matched the overall story (Nowell et al., 2017).

Subsequently, I used the refined themes to weave a narrative that connected the findings in a compelling way. This narrative addressed the research questions while providing rich illustrations from the data to demonstrate how storytelling enhanced the critical literacy of Black and Brown students. Narrative inquiry, as explained by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), involves collecting and retelling rich stories that provide insights into the participants' lives and experiences. It offers a fuller picture of educational practices. By analyzing the experiences of different teachers, this study contributes to understanding how storytelling can serve as a transformative pedagogical tool in urban classrooms.

Although Critical Race Theory (CRT) was initially explored as a theoretical lens, its most significant contribution to this study is methodological. Specifically, CRT's emphasis on counter-storytelling provided a guiding framework for amplifying the narratives of urban educators who resist dominant deficit narratives about Black and Brown students. By using counter-storytelling as a methodological approach, the study situates teacher voices as acts of resistance and reclamation, offering alternative accounts of literacy instruction grounded in community, culture, and critical consciousness (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

3.6 Role of the Researcher

I am a researcher who has a background in urban education, and who has lived experiences implementing culturally responsive teaching (CRT). I knew that my positionality would shape the ways in which I designed the study, engaged participants and interpreted data. Recognizing what positionality was important to the faithfulness of the project. I accepted that my strong commitment to storytelling to create change will mean I will see things much more positively and may be selective in telling success stories without looking at the negatives or drawbacks. As a Black male educator in community with other educators of color, I was aware that assuming similar social and cultural backgrounds could result in the creation of trust as well as overly simplistic assumptions about one another. In my awareness of these positional influences, I began to recognize how my social identity, lived experiences, and prior knowledge may shape data collection and analysis (Patton, 2015). As I engaged continually in reflexive practices using memo writing, participant checking, and revisiting the data (especially to question one's own takes), I was seeking to mitigate these biases and promote validity and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A primary way I dealt with my positionality drawback was through keeping reflexive journals during the study. I used various journals to document the development of my thoughts, feelings and critical reflections at different stages of my study. I took note of the pattern of our conversations, when I felt more connected or more distant from the participants, and how my identity as a Black male educator may be shaping them. I also wrote down coding and theme-development decisions I made during data analysis, and whether any of these were influenced by assumptions I hold or cultures to which I belong. After one interview, I said to myself how a participant's storytelling internals connected with my own practice so I went back and checked the transcript to make sure I wasn't putting my own values on that. The benefit of keeping these

journals was that it maintained a stance of critical self-awareness. They also allowed me to notice patterns in my reflections and identify when my perspective might overshadow the authentic voices of the participants (Richardson, 2000; Creswell, 2013).

I also did peer debriefing with fellow doctoral students who could offer their outside views of my research process and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My debriefing happened over Zoom with two of my peers, Matt and Marie, who were also doing qualitative research in education. We communicated our findings which led us to reveal something new. We reflected on our essential nature and we questioned each other's beliefs. Matt and Marie raised important questions, offered alternate interpretations, and helped me see blind spots I might have missed. This process confirmed my findings but forced me to think further so that my thinking thus analysis did not fly off into the clouds. According to Houghton and others (2013), trustworthiness can be enhanced through transparency, deepening reflexivity and making apparent multiple meanings.

Member checking was utilized in the study to verify how accurately the voices of the participants were recorded and whether or not my interpretations aligned with their experiences. Member checking is the process of sharing participants' findings or thematic interpretations with the participants while soliciting their feedback on the interpretations—whether it is either accurate and authentic representation of their data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Once all interviews were transcribed and coded, I drafted a short summary of the themes and quotes that emerged from the data for each participant (pseudonymized). I sent each participant an email containing a complete transcript of their interview and a summary of one to two pages that identified the findings that arose from their interview. A brief email was sent to participants inviting them to respond to the following: Is this what you said? Do the themes resonate with

your classroom? If anything has been misinterpreted, left out, or anything else you would like to offer please do. This enabled the participants to check if we were taking them at their word and that my analysis stayed true to their meanings. Several participants affirmed that the transcripts and summaries felt accurate, others commented with some clarification or elaboration that enhanced the overall findings. Through member checking, the data became more credible, and participants were given the opportunity to contribute to the findings. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), involving participants in the conclusions drawn from the data provided makes the findings more authentic and rigorous by allowing the data contributors to speak.

3.6.1 Co-Researcher Stance and Member Reflections

My role in this study was intentionally **relational and co-constructive**. I approached participants not as subjects but as **co-researchers** whose professional wisdom shapes knowledge production. I enacted this stance by:

- Opening interviews with brief self-location (why storytelling matters in my practice) to situate myself as a listener with shared stakes;
- Sending each participant a short, plain-language **member reflection brief** (1–2 pages) with salient quotes, preliminary codes, and emerging interpretations;
- Hosting optional 20–30 minute follow-ups to discuss what resonated or felt off;
- Honoring editorial agency (pseudonym changes, quote clarifications, redaction of identifying details), documenting any impact on analysis.

Feedback from these co-interpretation touchpoints informed code refinements, expanded context for quotes, and occasionally led me to merge or split themes.

3.6.2 Addressing Orality and the “Flattening” of Voice

Because oral narratives can lose meaning in transcription, I:

- Reviewed each transcript while listening to audio to retain meaningful pauses, repeated phrases, and emphasis when analytically relevant;
- Noted paralinguistic cues (laughter, sighs) sparingly, only where they shaped meaning;
- Preserved vernacular and code-switches unless a participant requested standardization.

These moves aimed to reduce the "flattening" of voice and to keep the sonic, rhythmic qualities of story present in the analysis.

3.6.3 Trustworthiness

I supported **credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability** through prolonged engagement (multi-contact cycles), member reflections, thick description, a maintained **audit trail** (protocols, codebook versions, memos, theme maps, decision logs), and reflexive transparency (journal-to-code links noted in the codebook).

3.7 Limitations

3.7.1 Generalizability

A drawback of this study is that the result may not be generalizable. Given that this study focuses on five English Language Arts teachers working in urban schools that serve predominantly Black and Brown students, the findings of this study are not meant to be generalized to a larger population. The small sample size of five was adequate for qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and sufficient for limited generalizability. Per Creswell (2013), qualitative research is not meant to be generalized. The results of this study are not generalizable. But knowledge from it can be useful to many to understand how teachers use

storytelling as an effective pedagogy to teach their students. These insights can be useful in conducting future research, classroom practice, and policy talks revolving around literacy, identity, and culturally responsive pedagogy in urban schools.

- **Limited Generalizability to Other Educational Contexts.**

The focus of this research is urban schools that cater to Black and Brown students. Findings of the study provide good information on culturally responsive teaching practices in urban schools with large Black and Brown student populations but may not be generalizable to suburban or rural school settings. Also, accounts of the role of storytelling in urban schools may have also been influenced by school dynamics, community stance and teacher-student relationships not found in other schools. In the future, other studies can look at storytelling in rural, suburban, and international schools to see if they have similar benefits and challenges.

- **Exclusion of Student Perspectives.**

While this research focuses on teachers' experiences, it does not include students' input on whether they think this influence story-telling has on their literacy development. Culturally relevant pedagogies are best understood through the lens of student voices (Ladson-Billing 2009). An incomplete picture of how storytelling transforms literacy engagement, identity formation, and empowerment is presented in the absence of students' perspectives. Future research should involve interviewing students, conducting surveys, and carrying out participatory research to uncover students' experiences and interpretations of storytelling in classrooms. Learning about the students' views will provide us with greater insight into the ways that storytelling creates critical literacy and belonging.

3.7.2 Self-Reported Data

Study data were generated through interviews that may limit findings due to self-reporting. As indicated by Patton (2015), self-reporting may lead to bias when participants give a socially desirable response deliberately or unconsciously. Additionally, participants may not recollect things accurately. Because of that, these limitations can distort the data collection process because people may maximize the influences of storytelling while underplaying the challenges. Because I did not observe the classroom, I was not able to see storytelling in action, which might have further corroborated or contextualized some claims. To deal with this limitation, I asked questions that would help them reflect in detail and provide examples. Also, I engaged in member checking which allowed them to check if the findings were correct. Although many of these practices cannot be considered full triangulation, they nonetheless endorsed the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.7.3 Sample Size

The sample size of this study was purposefully small, which is common in qualitative research, although it could limit perspectives. As Creswell (2013) informed, qualitative studies usually want small samples that help in getting in-depth insights into people. Despite the depth-focused nature of this study, however, I cannot generalize the findings based on a small sample size. Nonetheless, the goal was not to get a wide or statistical picture, but rather a detailed analysis of how storytelling transforms the literacy development of Black and Brown students in urban classrooms. In addition, using a small sample size helped to foster a more intimate and reflective understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Patton (2015) argued that this approach is crucial in capturing the complexity and richness of participants' lived experiences.

3.8 Conclusion

The study was useful for learning how storytelling as pedagogy critically helps literacy development among Black and Brown students of urban classrooms, despite the aforementioned limitations of the study. Using qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, enabled me to explore participants' experiences in ways that more traditional quantitative methods could not. While recognizing these limitations, I also submit that this study contributes to greater conversations about urban education issues related to storytelling as a pedagogical tool to be used in critical literacy.

3.8.1 Expected Contributions of the Research

This study may contribute substantially to educational policy and practice, particularly to support culturally responsive pedagogy in urban classroom settings. This research on the influence of storytelling on Black and Brown students will add to the literature based on storytelling as an educational resource.

One of the primary expected outcomes is **understanding how storytelling as a pedagogical tool can improve the critical literacy** of Black and Brown students in urban classrooms. Storytelling can connect students' lived experiences to academic content when used, and help students make meaning of learning. As Ladson-Billings (1995) highlighted, the cultural background of a child may emphasize the lesson with which they engage. When students use storytelling to share their personal histories and use their culture, it further engages them and promotes critical thinking. By undertaking this study, I hope to find out if storytelling provides evidence that it can create critical literacy in the reading comprehension and writing as well as critical thinking skills of Black and Brown students (Yosso, 2005).

Another expected outcome is discovering **specific storytelling techniques** that are most effective with urban students. Helping with everything from reading comprehension to writing

fluency, storytelling can address a variety of literacy issues when used purposefully. Studies have shown that the integration of students' personal stories and culturally relevant stories can be powerful ways to engage students and promote achievement (González et al., 2005). The goal of this research was to reveal methods that teachers can use to embed storytelling in the teaching process to empower themselves to construct effective and culturally-responsive lessons. Exploring techniques for narrative inquiry, oral history, and community storytelling might be ways to generate more inclusive, engaging spaces (Creswell, 2013; Watson, 2013).

Based on the results of this study, I will develop **recommendations for incorporating storytelling into educational policies and teacher training**. Storytelling offers an important option for building more culturally responsive teaching practices and, ultimately, more effective pedagogies. Culturally responsive teaching practices are those pedagogical approaches which connect classroom learning to the students' home and community experiences. Future professional development that is offered may focus on using storytelling as instructional strategy as well as revising teacher training to include techniques to incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into the instruction (Gay, 2018). The results of this study can inform educational policy at the local or state level about adopting methods that are culturally responsive practices for teaching that will allow students' marginal success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This study illustrated the transformation of storytelling on critical literacy to aid in the movement towards greater inclusivity, equity, and culturally responsive educational institutions.

In sum, these findings will not only help education at large but also future educational research on storytelling in urban classrooms. The outcomes are expected to be extremely helpful for educators, policymakers, and researchers who are interested in making the education of Black and Brown students more inclusive and effective.

3.9 Summary

This chapter presented the research design and methodology for the study, including research questions, participants, data collection and data analysis procedures, and limitations. The methodology adopted in this study, which is based on narrative inquiry and counter-storytelling, is premised on the belief that the lived experienced of Black and Brown students as well as their teachers can speak volumes about the transformative potential of telling stories in urban classrooms (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The goal of this study was to help those who are not familiar with the practice of storytelling to learn from educators who use storytelling in the classroom as part of their pedagogy for lesson planning to enhance students' critical literacy and build relationships with their students.

Through a purposive sampling method, I chose teachers who already had experience in using the strategy of storytelling in urban classrooms for Black and Brown students. The semi-structured interviews and thematic data analysis allowed for a more nuanced understanding of storytelling's influence on classrooms, thus aligning with qualitative research best practices (Creswell, 2013). I also explained the limitations of the study regarding generalizability, self-reported data, and sample size. However, the overall conclusion is that this study will make valuable contributions and useful insights for educational practice and policy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Chapter 4 next presents the findings of this study, specifically focusing on the core themes that emerged from the data. These themes highlight the ways in which storytelling, when employed thoughtfully and intentionally, can enhance critical literacy skills, improve student engagement, and create spaces for culturally relevant teaching practices. In doing so, the results will provide actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers aiming to support

Black and Brown students in urban classrooms, especially within the context of English Language Arts instruction. Drawing from the data, Chapter 4 illuminates how the integration of storytelling as a pedagogical tool can foster more inclusive, reflective, and empowering learning environments for marginalized students, ultimately contributing to their academic success and well-being.

Chapter 4: Unveiling Narratives:

Insights into Storytelling's Transformation on Literacy

Interlude: Story as Resonance

"When one teacher described a goosebump moment—when a reluctant student suddenly leaned into a text because it mirrored their own experience—I felt the memory rush back. I had been there too. I remembered sharing my own story of protest, of marching in the streets, and watching my students' eyes widen with recognition. That resonance—the spark that jumps between story and story—is what this chapter is about."

Framing Teacher Narratives as Counter-Stories

The stories in this chapter are not just talking about classroom practices. Rather, they are counter-stories. They disrupt the pathologizing discourses regarding the literacy practices of Black and Brown students. They instead emphasise how educators are leveraging these practices as culturally sustaining, affirming, and critical. The counter-narratives show storytelling is used as a teaching tool and a form of resistance against educational injustices, finds the study.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter shares the findings of the study on the role of storytelling as a pedagogical tool to enhance the critical literacy of Black and Brown students in urban classrooms. This information was obtained through interviews with teachers regarding their experiences, observations, and reflections on storytelling as a pedagogical tool to enhance the critical literacy of Black and Brown students in urban classrooms. The results are categorized according to major themes.

To provide context for the findings that follow, Table 2 presents an overview of the teacher participants. This includes their pseudonyms, school locations, and the grade levels they teach. These details are important for understanding the varied perspectives and experiences reflected throughout the study.

Table 3: Teacher Participant Profiles

This table presents an overview of the participating teachers, including their pseudonyms, school locations, and grade levels taught. These profiles provide contextual background for the qualitative findings discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Teacher Name (Pseudonym)	Location	Grade Levels Taught
Steven Perry	Far Rockaway, Queens, NY	Middle School (Grades 6–8, ELA)
Frank Delgado	East New York, Brooklyn, NY	Grade 7 ELA (also experienced with Grades 6 & 8)
Claudia Lee	Brooklyn, NY	Grades 9-10 ELA
Javelyn Booker	Mattapan, Boston, MA	K–6 Resource and Grade 8 Inclusion (ELA and Math)
Grace Harper	Atlanta, GA	6-8 Middle School Literacy & ELA

The teacher profiles provide essential context for interpreting the narratives presented in this study. Each participant brings a unique geographic, cultural, and professional background, which enriches the diversity of perspectives explored through the data. By identifying their locations, grade levels, and pseudonyms, readers are better equipped to understand how individual teaching experiences shape the ways storytelling is used to support literacy

development in urban classrooms. This foundation ensures that each voice is anchored in a specific educational context throughout the thematic analysis.

4.2 Thematic Findings Through a Counter-Storytelling Lens

To visualize how interview data were organized during thematic analysis, Table 4 presents a coding tree outlining the relationship between initial codes, subthemes, and overarching themes. This structure guided the identification of key findings across all teacher narratives. The findings presented in this chapter were shaped by the principles of narrative inquiry, emphasizing the importance of teachers' lived experiences and stories. Rather than simply extracting themes, the goal was to preserve the integrity of each narrative and understand how storytelling functions in real classroom settings. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, data were first coded inductively before being organized into broader patterns. Themes were reviewed for coherence and alignment with the study's focus on storytelling and literacy. The result is a structured yet flexible representation of the participants' insights.

Table 4: Coding Tree

This table outlines the relationship between initial codes, subthemes, and major themes identified through the thematic analysis.

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Storytelling as a Teaching Tool	Scaffolding, Engagement, Real-Life Application	Hooking students, using rap lyrics, relating to protests
Cultural Relevance in Learning	Cultural Connections, Identity Reflection	Relating to students' heritage, name stories

Enhancing Teacher-Student Relationships	Trust Building, Personal Sharing	Teacher vulnerability, community building
Challenges in Storytelling Implementation	Time Constraints, Curriculum Limits	Mandated texts, test prep pressure
Influence on Student Development	Confidence, Comprehension, Critical Thinking	Reading improvement, student voice, motivation

The coding tree in Table 4 illustrates how interview data were distilled into meaningful categories. This hierarchical structure reflects the depth of teacher narratives and how recurring ideas—such as cultural connections, student engagement, and institutional barriers—formed the basis of the five key themes. The progression from raw codes to refined themes reinforces the rigor of the analysis process, ensuring that the interpretations presented in this chapter are grounded in the lived experiences of the participants. Coding was conducted using NVivo to systematically organize the interview data. Transcriptions generated via Otter.ai ensured the participants' exact words were preserved, which helped maintain the authenticity of their voices throughout the thematic development process.

Also as Table X illustrates, each teacher drew from distinct cultural traditions—whether rooted in MCing, griot histories, testimonio, diasporic memory, or Southern oral forms—to bring storytelling into the classroom in ways that reflected and affirmed their students' identities.

Table X: Types of Storytelling Practices Used by Participants

The **table** summarizes the **distinct storytelling approaches** each educator used in their classrooms, based on interview data. It visually captures how each teacher employed storytelling

not just as a strategy, but as a culturally responsive, pedagogically intentional, and context-specific literacy practice.

Teacher (Pseudonym)	Storytelling Type	Cultural Tradition Referenced	Description
Steven Perry	Hip-Hop Lyricism and Protest Stories	MCing / Oral Tradition	Used rap lyrics and protest narratives to scaffold critical analysis and connect texts to real-life activism.
Frank Delgado	Historical Analogies and Personal Activism Stories	Latinx Oral History / Testimonio	Linked Orwell's Animal Farm to the Trujillo dictatorship to create cultural resonance and promote critical literacy.
Claudia Lee	Name Stories and Immigrant Narratives	Asian Diasporic Oral Tradition	Used stories about her name and cultural identity to spark student dialogue about belonging and cross-cultural identity.

Javelyn Booker	Griot-Inspired Personal Storytelling	West African Griot Tradition	Shared orally transmitted stories to build trust, validate student voice, and connect students with unfamiliar texts.
Grace Harper	Scaffolded Retellings and Everyday Narratives	Black Southern Vernacular / Church Testimony	Retold complex texts using culturally resonant stories to support comprehension and affirm student identity.

4.1.1 Teacher Vignettes: Stories from the Field

Before delving into the thematic findings, this section presents brief narrative vignettes based on Table X of each teacher participant to highlight the lived realities behind the data. These vignettes are drawn from interview responses and are intended to ground the subsequent analysis in the unique classroom contexts, teaching philosophies, and storytelling practices of each educator. In line with the narrative inquiry framework, the vignettes offer a humanizing and situated entry point into how each teacher uses storytelling not merely as a strategy, but as a reflection of their identity, values, and commitment to culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Vignette 1: Steven Perry (Far Rockaway, Queens, NY)

Steven Perry teaches middle school English Language Arts in Far Rockaway, Queens, and brings a vibrant, real-world energy to his classroom. He often incorporates hip-hop, sports, and community narratives to help students connect with texts in meaningful ways. "If I'm teaching *The Odyssey,* I'm bringing in a rap battle," he joked. For Perry, literacy is about empowerment: "I tell them, if you don't know what you're reading, someone else will—and they'll use it against you." His storytelling is performative, rooted in MCing traditions, and grounded in social critique.

Vignette 2: Frank Delgado (East New York, Brooklyn, NY)

A seventh-grade teacher in East New York, Frank Delgado draws heavily on his identity as a Dominican activist to infuse his classroom with purpose. His stories are political, personal, and historical, linking literature like *Animal Farm* to the Trujillo dictatorship. "When I share my protest stories, the kids see me as real—and then they start sharing their own." His approach blends oral tradition with resistance, rooted in justice-driven pedagogy.

Vignette 3: Claudia Lee (Brooklyn, NY)

Claudia Lee, a high school English teacher in Brooklyn, bridges her Chinese-American identity and first-generation experience with her teaching. "When I tell the story of my name, students laugh—but then they open up about their own families," she said. Her pedagogy is dialogic and relational, using storytelling to create spaces of vulnerability and critical thought. Her use of multimedia storytelling also extends the griot tradition into digital terrain.

Vignette 4: Javelyn Booker (Boston, MA)

As a K–8 inclusion and resource teacher, Javelyn Booker works with students in under-resourced Boston schools, many of whom face limited cultural exposure. Her stories are nurturing and often spiritual. “Sometimes students just need to hear something that sounds like home,” she explained. Booker’s storytelling reflects the tradition of the *nan granmoun*—elders who pass down life lessons through affirming, wisdom-rich tales that help students feel seen and safe.

Vignette 5: Grace Harper (Atlanta, GA)

Grace Harper teaches middle school ELA in Atlanta and centers students' lived experiences as gateways to comprehension. “If the text doesn’t speak to them, I’ll retell it through a story they know—then bring them back to the text,” she said. She uses scaffolded retellings, pop culture references, and personal anecdotes to build bridges to challenging material. Her classroom feels like a story circle—interactive, affirming, and deeply intentional.

These vignettes illustrate the diversity of contexts, identities, and pedagogical approaches embodied by each teacher. They are more than instructional snapshots—they are counter-narratives that challenge deficit framings of urban education. As we move into the thematic findings, these vignettes serve as a touchstone for understanding how storytelling manifests in real classrooms and how teachers leverage their own stories—and their students'—to transform literacy into a tool of liberation.

4.2.1 Confronting Literacy Barriers: Challenges Faced by Black and Brown Students

RQ1: What do teachers perceive to be the key challenges to student motivation and engagement in reading among Black and Brown secondary students?

Through the semi-structured interview process, data was collected from 5 teachers namely Steven Perry, Claudia Lee, Javelyn Booker, Grace Harper, and Frank Delgado. The interviews looked at each educator's thoughts and experiences regarding barriers to student literacy, focusing mainly on socio-economic, cultural and systemic factors. Through this, a greater understanding of the problems that teachers see in the class and how it affects how they teach and student engagement.

Key Findings:

- Steven Perry, a literacy teacher from Far Rockaway, New York, highlighted a significant barrier to student literacy development: an overemphasis on rote memorization rather than analytical reading and critical thinking. "Growing up, I was always told to memorize things," Perry explained, "but I didn't know how to problem solve or figure things out on my own. That's what I try to change for my students—teaching them how to think, not just what to think" (Perry, Interview, 2024). This perspective aligns closely with Claudia Lee, who similarly noted that many students arrive in her classroom well-trained in test-taking strategies but ill-equipped for reflective, personal writing. "They've been doing test prep for years, but when I ask them to write about themselves, they don't know how," she said. "They've been taught to analyze quotes but not to tell their own stories" (Lee, Interview, 2024). Conversely, Javelyn Booker emphasized socioeconomic and cultural exposure as central factors affecting her students' comprehension. "Many of my students come from low-income backgrounds and haven't had the chance to see much of the world," she noted. "Storytelling gives them that exposure—it makes the reading feel relevant and gives them something to connect to" (Booker, Interview, 2024). Meanwhile,

Frank Delgado and Grace Harper echoed these views by underscoring the transformative power of personal stories in instruction. Delgado shared, “When students see that their experiences matter, they begin to look at reading differently. It becomes about them, not just the characters in the book” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Similarly, Harper emphasized that storytelling helps students access even the most challenging texts: “It gives them that access point,” she said. “When the story relates to them, they’re in” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Collectively, these educators expressed a shared belief in shifting away from test-centered, decontextualized literacy practices toward approaches that honor students' cultural and personal identities. Through storytelling, they found a way to cultivate critical thinking, deepen reading comprehension, and foster more meaningful, authentic classroom engagement.

- Claudia Lee, a high school English teacher from Brooklyn, New York, expressed concern that excessive testing pressure significantly limits her ability to teach literacy in creative and culturally responsive ways. “Testing takes up so much of our time that there’s barely room for culturally relevant teaching,” she explained. “It becomes about drilling and less about helping students connect personally with what they’re reading” (Lee, Interview, 2024). This frustration mirrors Steven Perry’s critique of rote memorization as a dominant instructional method. “I was always told to memorize things,” he shared, “but I didn’t learn how to think critically until much later. That’s what I try to change—I want my students to ask questions, not just give answers” (Perry, Interview, 2024). Javelyn Booker also emphasized how standardized testing often alienates students who need instruction grounded in

cultural relevance. “The assessments don’t reflect their lives,” she said. “It’s hard for students to engage with texts when nothing in them feels familiar” (Booker, Interview, 2024). Both Frank Delgado and Grace Harper echoed these frustrations. Delgado noted, “With some of the new curriculum mandates, we’re not allowed to bring in materials that actually reflect the kids’ realities. That limits engagement—and comprehension” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Similarly, Harper pointed out, “There’s no room for access points when everything’s so scripted. Storytelling helps students get into the text, but testing culture pushes that out” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Collectively, the educators critiqued standardized testing as a significant barrier to culturally responsive literacy instruction. They highlighted the need for greater autonomy and flexibility to incorporate storytelling and personal narratives—tools they viewed as essential for validating student identities and fostering authentic, meaningful engagement with texts.

- Javelyn Booker, a resource K–8 special education teacher from Boston, Massachusetts, highlighted how limited exposure to cultural and global diversity among students from low-income backgrounds contributes to gaps in their understanding of various literary genres. “A lot of our kids don’t know what’s out there—they haven’t been exposed to different types of stories or perspectives,” she explained. “Storytelling helps open those doors and makes reading more meaningful” (Booker, Interview, 2024). This insight aligns with Claudia Lee’s view that storytelling is a powerful tool for expanding students’ cultural awareness. “If I can introduce a story or show a video that connects to a culture they haven’t seen before, it builds curiosity and helps them better understand what we’re about to read” (Lee,

Interview, 2024). Steven Perry also spoke to the need for culturally responsive teaching to bridge knowledge gaps. “I teach in a diverse community, and I use stories that reflect where the kids come from,” he shared. “Once they see themselves in the story, they’re in—they want to read, they want to talk, and they want to learn” (Perry, Interview, 2024). Frank Delgado and Grace Harper echoed this sentiment, with Delgado noting that “personal stories help students expand their understanding of what literature can be—it’s not just about distant characters, it’s about real life” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Harper added, “When kids see that literature reflects their world, it opens up their thinking. They begin to see that genres aren’t just labels—they’re ways of telling stories that can include them” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Collectively, these educators emphasized that literacy instruction becomes more effective when it intentionally addresses the cultural and experiential gaps that many students, especially those from low-income communities, bring to the classroom. Storytelling, in their view, serves not only as a bridge to comprehension but also as a gateway to identity, curiosity, and critical engagement.

- Grace Harper, a middle school literacy teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, identified a major challenge in literacy development: students’ lack of personal connection to texts, which she described as a key factor in their low reading motivation. “They just don’t see themselves in what we read,” Harper explained. “When that connection isn’t there, it’s hard to get them to care about the story—or even finish it” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Her insight echoes Javelyn Booker’s observation that limited exposure to diverse cultural contexts can make it difficult for students from low-income backgrounds to engage with literature. “Our students don’t always come in

with the same cultural background knowledge, so genres and stories that seem simple to others just don't resonate with them," Booker shared (Booker, Interview, 2024). Claudia Lee similarly stressed the importance of culturally relevant storytelling in boosting motivation and comprehension. "When students see themselves in the text, or in the stories I tell before we read, they get more excited—they want to participate, and they start to see reading as something that matters to them" (Lee, Interview, 2024). Steven Perry reinforced this approach by highlighting how traditional methods often overlook the power of connection. "Too much of school is about memorizing facts," he explained. "What I try to do is get them to think about the story, and how it relates to their own life—that's what makes reading stick" (Perry, Interview, 2024). Frank Delgado echoed these views, emphasizing the emotional and intellectual value of personal storytelling. "When I share my own stories, especially ones about protest or family, students open up. They start to realize reading isn't just about someone else's life—it's about their own, too" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Together, these educators underscored that students are far more likely to engage with reading when they see their identities, backgrounds, and interests meaningfully reflected in the texts and discussions within the classroom.

- Frank Delgado, a 7th-grade ELA teacher in East New York, Brooklyn, emphasized that student engagement remains one of the greatest obstacles to developing literacy skills. "A lot of my students come in already feeling defeated," he explained. "They think they're too far behind to catch up, so they don't even try" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). He further critiqued the inflexibility of curricula like NYC Reads, which limit teachers' ability to adapt content to reflect students' lives. "We're told what to teach

and how to teach it, but the texts often don't speak to our kids' realities. That makes it harder to get them interested, let alone invested" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Delgado's concerns align closely with those of Claudia Lee, who also pointed to the constraints imposed by standardized testing. "There's so much pressure to teach to the test that it leaves little room for creativity or cultural relevance," Lee shared. "And without that connection, students just disengage" (Lee, Interview, 2024). Steven Perry echoed these sentiments, critiquing traditional instruction rooted in rote memorization. "If we just keep drilling facts, we're not teaching students how to think critically or see themselves in the material," Perry explained. "I want them to see the story, feel it, and ask questions about it" (Perry, Interview, 2024). Similarly, Javelyn Booker emphasized the importance of culturally relevant content, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. "They need stories that speak to them," she said. "Otherwise, the material feels distant and irrelevant" (Booker, Interview, 2024). Grace Harper added, "If students can't find that access point—something familiar—they're not going to engage. Storytelling helps open that door" (Harper, Interview, 2024). Together, these educators underscored the need for instructional flexibility and culturally grounded pedagogy. They emphasized that meaningful literacy engagement requires texts and practices that reflect students' lived experiences, allowing them to see reading not as a hurdle, but as a mirror and a tool for understanding the world around them.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis recognized issues in this field making it very hard to improve students' reading skills. These issues included the unavailability of culturally

responsive texts, pressure from standardized testing, and socioeconomic challenges.

Time Spent: 4-5 hours of interviews

4.2.2 Reading the Self: How Students' Backgrounds Shape Comprehension and Engagement

RQ2: How do students' personal experiences and backgrounds affect their reading comprehension and engagement?

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teacher participants. These interviews focused on how students' cultural and personal backgrounds influenced their reading engagement and comprehension. Teachers shared their observations and insights, providing a nuanced understanding of how students' identities and lived experiences shaped their interactions with literacy practices in the classroom.

Key Findings:

- Claudia Lee emphasized that when students see their own lives, experiences, and identities reflected in the texts they read, they are far more likely to engage actively in classroom discussions and assignments. "When students can say, 'This reminds me of me,' or 'This happened in my family,' they don't just read—they talk, they write, and they care," Lee explained (Lee, Interview, 2024). Her insight reinforces a broader consensus among the participating teachers that culturally relevant pedagogy is not a supplemental strategy but a central component of effective literacy instruction. Grace Harper shared a similar perspective, stressing the importance of personal connection in addressing motivational gaps. "They have to see the story as something that matters to them. If they don't feel connected, they check out before we've even started," she noted (Harper, Interview, 2024). Likewise, Frank Delgado pointed out

that rigid curricula often prevent teachers from creating these essential connections. "Some of the texts we're required to teach just don't speak to our students' lives," he said. "Without that connection, comprehension and engagement suffer" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Steven Perry and Javelyn Booker also emphasized the value of culturally reflective storytelling in fostering critical thinking and sustained attention. "If you give them a story that reflects where they come from, you'll get more than answers—you'll get insight," Perry observed (Perry, Interview, 2024). Booker added, "When they feel represented in the material, they open up. They want to talk. They want to learn" (Booker, Interview, 2024). Across all interviews, storytelling and cultural relevance consistently emerged as powerful strategies for overcoming barriers to literacy. These approaches validated students' lived experiences and fostered a stronger sense of belonging in academic spaces, positioning students not only as readers of texts but as co-creators of meaning.

- Javelyn Booker emphasized that when texts reflect students' cultural backgrounds, they resonate more deeply and lead to more meaningful classroom engagement. "When the story feels familiar—when it sounds like something they've lived or seen—they start talking more, asking more questions," she explained. "And that's when their comprehension really takes off" (Booker, Interview, 2024). This insight parallels Claudia Lee's view that cultural relevance is essential for engagement. "If students don't see themselves in the material, it's hard for them to care," Lee stated. "But once they feel that connection, everything changes. They talk more, write more, and actually enjoy the process" (Lee, Interview, 2024). Frank Delgado also highlighted the power of relatable content, saying, "When students connect what we

read to their own lives—especially to their culture or family history—they start thinking more critically about what it all means" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Grace Harper added, "It's about that access point. When a story hits close to home, that's when they dive in and really start to learn" (Harper, Interview, 2024). Steven Perry echoed these sentiments by emphasizing the role of storytelling in building both trust and intellectual curiosity. "When I tell them stories that reflect their world, they start to trust me—and they start trusting themselves as thinkers," he explained. "That's when the critical thinking kicks in" (Perry, Interview, 2024). Together, these educators illustrated that culturally responsive texts do more than improve engagement—they validate student identity, deepen comprehension, and foster critical dialogue. In urban classrooms especially, culturally relevant storytelling emerges not just as a literacy strategy, but as a vital pedagogical approach for equity and empowerment.

- Grace Harper emphasized the importance of providing students with "access points"—materials or real-world connections that are relatable to their lives—to help them engage with complex texts like The Odyssey. "If they can't see themselves in the story, they won't connect," she explained. "We have to give them access points—something familiar—to pull them in. Once they see that, they're hooked" (Harper, Interview, 2024). Her approach reflects a shared belief among the participants that bridging students' lived experiences with academic content is essential for fostering deeper comprehension. Claudia Lee shared a similar view, stating, "When students see their lives in the literature—even just one small piece—they start to lean in. They participate more, they ask questions, and they take the reading seriously" (Lee,

Interview, 2024). However, Frank Delgado pointed out that rigid curricula often restrict the ability to make such meaningful connections. “There are times I want to swap a story out or supplement it with something culturally relevant, but I can’t,” he said. “That flexibility is what makes engagement possible” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Javelyn Booker also emphasized that culturally grounded content plays a crucial role in making reading accessible. “So many kids haven’t had the exposure they need,” she noted. “If you give them stories that reflect their world—even a little—they’re more likely to engage” (Booker, Interview, 2024). Steven Perry echoed this, saying, “I use storytelling from the community to teach critical thinking. It helps students see that their experiences matter and that they have something valuable to say about the text” (Perry, Interview, 2024). Together, these educators advocated for a pedagogical shift that centers relatability and relevance as foundational to literacy development. Especially when working with challenging or historically distant texts, their collective practice demonstrates that personal and cultural connections are critical for unlocking student engagement and deepening comprehension.

- Frank Delgado illustrated the power of culturally relevant teaching by sharing how his Dominican students initially struggled to connect with George Orwell’s Animal Farm—a text far removed from their lived experiences—until he linked it to the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. “Once I made that connection,” he recalled, “they were like, ‘Oh, now I get it.’ Suddenly the pigs weren’t just animals—they were symbols of power and corruption they could recognize from their own history” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). After this parallel was introduced, students became more engaged and demonstrated a deeper understanding of the text’s themes.

This example powerfully reinforces the broader consensus among the teachers interviewed: students are far more likely to invest in their learning when classroom content is linked to their own histories and cultural identities. Grace Harper's emphasis on providing "access points" and Claudia Lee's insight that "students need to see themselves in the story" (Lee, Interview, 2024) align closely with Delgado's approach. Similarly, Javelyn Booker and Steven Perry emphasized that real-life connections and culturally grounded storytelling are critical in making abstract or complex texts more accessible. Collectively, these educators demonstrate that literacy instruction is most transformative when it allows students to locate themselves within the curriculum, transforming distant material into something personally meaningful, intellectually engaging, and socially relevant.

Data Analysis: Participants indicated how reading a narrative analysis reveals a student's cultural and personal reading engagement styles.

- **Time Spent:** 4-5 hours of interviews

4.2.3 Pedagogies of Access: Instructional Strategies That Enhance Motivation and Comprehension

RQ3: What instructional strategies can effectively enhance reading skills and motivation among secondary school students?

Data were collected through interviews with teacher participants, focusing on the strategies they employed to enhance students' reading motivation and comprehension. Teachers described specific instructional methods, activities, and classroom practices that they found effective in engaging students and strengthening their literacy skills, offering insights into practical applications and outcomes within their classrooms.

Key Findings:

- Steven Perry demonstrated how storytelling can be powerfully integrated with real-life applications to enhance literacy, particularly through the use of culturally relevant and familiar content such as rap lyrics and sports contracts. “If a kid wants to be a rapper or a basketball player, I show them what a real contract looks like and make them read it,” he explained. “Then I say, ‘If you don’t understand what you’re reading, someone else will—and they’ll take advantage of you.’ That’s when reading becomes real for them” (Perry, Interview, 2024). By embedding literacy skills into scenarios that reflect students’ interests, Perry made reading feel both practical and essential, promoting not just comprehension but life preparedness. His approach aligns closely with Grace Harper’s emphasis on providing “access points” that help students connect complex texts to real-world experiences. “They need something familiar—a hook,” she noted. “Once they have that, they’re willing to go deeper into the text” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Frank Delgado similarly used historical analogies, such as linking Animal Farm to the Trujillo regime, to help students relate to abstract literary themes. Claudia Lee and Javelyn Booker also echoed the importance of culturally grounded storytelling, with Lee emphasizing that “when the content reflects their lives, students are more willing to engage,” and Booker noting that “stories they can relate to help them feel more confident and curious” (Lee, Interview, 2024; Booker, Interview, 2024). Across the board, the teachers emphasized that when students view reading as a tool for understanding and navigating their own lives—whether through music, sports, history, or culture—their

motivation increases, and their ability to engage critically with texts deepens significantly.

- Claudia Lee employed multimedia—such as videos, interviews, and real-world narratives—to create meaningful entry points into reading materials, allowing students to form personal connections before engaging with the texts themselves. "Sometimes a student won't relate to the book right away, but if I show them a short video or interview that connects to the theme, they're suddenly much more interested," Lee explained. "It helps them see why the story matters before we even open the book" (Lee, Interview, 2024). This strategy not only contextualized unfamiliar content but also fostered emotional and intellectual investment, which Lee found essential for cultivating critical reading skills. Her approach closely mirrors Steven Perry's method of integrating storytelling with real-life examples. "I use stories from their world—music, sports, everyday experiences—because that's when they start to care about reading," Perry noted (Perry, Interview, 2024). Grace Harper's emphasis on "access points" also aligns with Lee's strategy. "They need a connection before they can engage," Harper said. "Once they see the link between the material and their life, they're in" (Harper, Interview, 2024). Similarly, Frank Delgado connected literature to students' cultural histories to increase relevance and engagement, explaining, "When I tied Animal Farm to the Trujillo era, my Dominican students finally saw themselves in the story—and that changed everything" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Javelyn Booker highlighted that culturally reflective materials don't just support comprehension but also "help students feel like their voices matter. They get excited to share and dig deeper" (Booker, Interview,

2024). Together, these practices underscore a shared pedagogical belief: when students are given tools to see themselves in and around the texts—whether through multimedia, storytelling, or personal reflection—they become more engaged, confident, and thoughtful readers who approach literacy with both curiosity and critical awareness.

- Grace Harper used storytelling as a tool to make abstract literary themes more accessible by retelling complex narratives in ways that allowed students to connect them to their own lived experiences. “Sometimes the text is too far from what they know,” she explained. “So I’ll break it down through a story—one they can relate to—before we go back to the book. Then they see it differently” (Harper, Interview, 2024). In addition to personalizing content, Harper employed scaffolding techniques to support students’ comprehension, gradually guiding them from surface-level understanding to deeper engagement. “We build from the outside in—first what they know, then what they can feel, and then finally what they can analyze,” she added. This approach aligns with Claudia Lee’s use of multimedia to build personal connections prior to reading. “A short video or a real-world example opens the door. Then they’re more willing to step into the complexity of the text,” Lee noted (Lee, Interview, 2024). Steven Perry shared a similar view, emphasizing real-life applications: “If I tie the reading to something they care about—music, sports, their community—they’re way more interested and willing to dive deeper” (Perry, Interview, 2024). Likewise, Javelyn Booker and Frank Delgado stressed the importance of using culturally responsive materials and linking instruction to students’ backgrounds. Booker shared, “If they don’t know the world the story comes

from, they won't care about it. But if you start with something familiar, they start to open up" (Booker, Interview, 2024). Delgado added, "It's about meeting them where they are—culturally, emotionally, and academically—and walking with them into the harder stuff" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Collectively, the teachers revealed a shared commitment to scaffolding and culturally anchored storytelling as instructional strategies that support literacy growth—especially when students face abstract or unfamiliar texts. By starting with relevance and relationship, they create pathways for students to think critically, connect deeply, and succeed academically.

- Frank Delgado emphasized the importance of co-creating stories with students as a way to build meaningful connections and deepen engagement. "When I share parts of my own life—like being in protests or growing up in the same neighborhood—it makes me real to them," he explained. "It builds trust, and once that trust is there, they're more willing to open up and take risks in their own writing" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). This approach reflects a broader pedagogical trend among the educators in the study, all of whom highlighted the power of storytelling to affirm student identity and create relational depth. Claudia Lee similarly used personal stories to strengthen the classroom community. "When I tell them something from my life—like growing up as a first-generation student—it helps them feel like their story matters too," she said (Lee, Interview, 2024). Steven Perry echoed this sentiment, sharing, "Storytelling isn't just about the content—it's about connection. When I talk about where I come from, my students feel seen" (Perry, Interview, 2024). Grace Harper added, "Students want to know you understand them. When you share your story, it gives them permission to share theirs" (Harper, Interview, 2024). Javelyn

Booker emphasized that this relational approach is particularly critical for students from under-resourced backgrounds. “A lot of my students don’t see themselves in the curriculum,” she explained. “So when you take the time to hear their story—or share your own—they finally feel like they belong in the classroom” (Booker, Interview, 2024). Across the board, the teachers demonstrated that when educators share and invite stories, they cultivate a more inclusive and responsive learning environment—one in which literacy is not only a skill, but also a pathway to self-expression, affirmation, and mutual understanding.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis identified best practices in literacy instruction, emphasizing culturally relevant teaching and multimodal approaches.

Time Spent: 4-5 hours of interviews

4.2.4 Storytelling as Critical Literacy: Empowering Students to Question and Reframe Narratives

RQ4: How does storytelling support the development of critical literacy skills among Black and Brown students?

Data were collected through interviews with teacher participants, focusing on the strategies they employed to enhance students' reading motivation and comprehension. Teachers described specific instructional methods, activities, and classroom practices that they found effective in engaging students and strengthening their literacy skills, offering insights into practical applications and outcomes within their classrooms.

Key Findings:

- Steven Perry emphasized that storytelling empowers students to engage in counter-storytelling, enabling them to challenge dominant narratives and develop critical

thinking skills. “When students tell their own stories,” he explained, “they begin to see that the version of the world they’ve been given isn’t the only one. They realize they have the power to rewrite it—to speak back to it” (Perry, Interview, 2024). By encouraging students to reflect on and share their own lived experiences, Perry offered them the tools to question mainstream assumptions and reframe their identities through their own voices. This use of storytelling as a vehicle for resistance and reflection strongly resonates with Frank Delgado’s commitment to amplifying student voice. “When we co-create stories in class—when I share my own and invite theirs—it changes the whole energy,” Delgado said. “They realize their voice matters, and that they have something important to say about society, about history, about power” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Similarly, Grace Harper described how she scaffolds abstract themes through personal experiences: “I’ll retell the story in a way that makes it theirs,” she shared. “When students connect it to their lives, they can go from just reading it to really thinking about what it means” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Claudia Lee also pointed to the use of multimedia and real-world narratives as ways to “help students see how literature relates to their world—and how they can question it” (Lee, Interview, 2024). Javelyn Booker added that storytelling leads to richer discussion and deeper understanding, especially when it reflects students’ cultural realities. “When the story feels like it could be theirs, they’re more willing to think critically, ask questions, and dig into what’s really going on in the text,” she explained (Booker, Interview, 2024). Together, these educators highlight storytelling not just as an instructional strategy, but as a transformative practice—one that

supports critical literacy, affirms identity, and empowers students to interrogate and reshape the world around them.

- Claudia Lee reported that verbal storytelling plays a crucial role in helping students unpack complex themes by providing a space to articulate their own perspectives and interpretations. “When they talk it out—when they tell stories in their own words—they start making connections they wouldn’t have just by reading silently,” she explained. “It’s in the discussion, the storytelling, that meaning begins to form” (Lee, Interview, 2024). Through this dialogic process, students are not only better able to process abstract ideas but also more likely to link those ideas to their lived experiences and identities. This finding aligns with Steven Perry’s emphasis on storytelling as a tool for developing critical consciousness. “I want my students to think about the stories they’ve been told—and the ones they haven’t,” he said. “That’s where critical thinking starts: in questioning the narrative” (Perry, Interview, 2024). Grace Harper similarly retells challenging narratives in accessible and culturally resonant ways. “If I can break it down in a story they understand, then they’ll start asking questions. That’s when they begin to really engage with the deeper themes,” she shared (Harper, Interview, 2024). Frank Delgado also underscored the power of co-constructing stories with students. “We build stories together—me and the students—and that process helps them get to the heart of what the text is really about,” he noted (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Javelyn Booker added that when storytelling reflects students’ cultures and realities, it leads to richer, more meaningful discussions. “They feel like the story is theirs,” she said. “And when that happens, they’re more likely to speak up, ask questions, and think deeper” (Booker, Interview,

2024). Collectively, the teachers demonstrated that verbal storytelling is far more than just a communication tool—it is a dynamic, student-centered pedagogical practice that promotes critical reflection, deepens comprehension, and validates the voices and experiences of all learners.

- Javelyn Booker highlighted that storytelling fosters deeper student engagement by transforming reading from an isolated, individual task into a social and interactive experience. “When students tell their own stories or listen to each other, it becomes a conversation, not just an assignment,” she explained. “They start to build meaning together, and that’s when the real learning happens” (Booker, Interview, 2024). She noted that this collaborative environment encourages students to reflect more deeply and connect more personally with the material. This perspective aligns with Claudia Lee’s emphasis on verbal storytelling as a way for students to process complex themes. “Sometimes it’s through talking—just telling the story out loud—that students figure out what it really means to them,” Lee shared (Lee, Interview, 2024). Frank Delgado also spoke about the power of shared narratives in building a strong classroom community. “When I tell my story, and then they tell theirs, something shifts,” he said. “They see we’re all connected, and that connection opens up space for real discussion” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Steven Perry emphasized that storytelling draws on students’ lived experiences to foster critical thinking and participation. “If the story is real to them—if it sounds like something they’ve lived—they’ll engage with it and ask the right questions,” he noted (Perry, Interview, 2024). Grace Harper added, “Storytelling helps students feel like their voice matters. It turns the classroom into a place where everyone has something to contribute” (Harper,

Interview, 2024). Together, these educators illustrate that storytelling functions not just as a literacy strategy, but as a communal practice—one that invites dialogue, builds relationships, and fosters collective meaning-making. By turning reading into a shared experience, storytelling enriches student engagement and deepens comprehension in meaningful and enduring ways.

- Frank Delgado noted that using personal narratives as a bridge to complex texts allowed students to better understand abstract themes by grounding them in lived experience. “When students shared stories about their families being involved in protests or activism,” he recalled, “they started to see the deeper purpose behind revolutions we read about in class. It wasn’t just history—it was something they could relate to” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). This strategy reflects a shared belief among the participating teachers that connecting literature to students’ real-world experiences not only increases engagement but also deepens comprehension. Claudia Lee emphasized a similar approach, saying, “When I bring in interviews or videos that reflect students’ lives or their communities, it opens the door for more critical thinking. They realize literature isn’t separate from the world they live in” (Lee, Interview, 2024). Grace Harper added, “I’ll retell stories in ways that make sense to them. Once they connect to it emotionally or personally, even the hardest texts start to make sense” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Steven Perry reinforced this by explaining that storytelling invites students into critical inquiry: “Once you tie a story to their own experience, they ask better questions—they start thinking beyond the surface” (Perry, Interview, 2024). Similarly, Javelyn Booker shared, “When students see a part of themselves in the text, they start to care more. They dig deeper, they talk more, and

they reflect more" (Booker, Interview, 2024). Collectively, these educators demonstrate that personal storytelling is not simply a classroom activity—it is a powerful pedagogical tool that makes abstract ideas tangible and meaningful. By situating complex content within the context of students' lived experiences, storytelling fosters deeper understanding, empathy, and critical literacy.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis focused on storytelling as a vehicle for empowerment and critical literacy development.

Time Spent: 4-5 hours of interviews

4.2.5 Identity and Belonging: The Role of Storytelling in Student Empowerment

RQ5: What role does storytelling play in fostering a sense of identity and belonging for Black and Brown students?

Data were collected through interviews with teacher participants, centering on the ways storytelling enhances students' sense of identity and belonging. Teachers reflected on their experiences incorporating storytelling into instruction, highlighting specific instances where narratives helped affirm students' identities, foster a sense of community, and create a more inclusive classroom environment.

Key Findings:

- According to Steven Perry, students who initially lacked confidence in their reading abilities became more engaged when given opportunities to tell their own stories. "Some of my students shut down when it comes to reading aloud or writing essays," he shared, "but when I ask them to tell a story—something from their life—they light up. It gives them a way in" (Perry, Interview, 2024). For Perry, storytelling served as a low-stakes entry point that allowed students to participate and express themselves

without the pressure of performing traditional literacy tasks. This mirrors Claudia Lee's observation that verbal storytelling helps students process complex themes by giving them a space to share their own interpretations. "When students can talk it out first—tell their version of the theme—they're more prepared to understand what's happening in the text," she explained (Lee, Interview, 2024). Grace Harper similarly emphasized that retelling stories in accessible ways and using scaffolding techniques supports comprehension and builds students' confidence. "When we start with their experiences and slowly layer in the complexity, they're less intimidated and more curious," she noted (Harper, Interview, 2024). Frank Delgado and Javelyn Booker also spoke to the relational power of storytelling in fostering inclusive, student-centered classrooms. "When I tell them parts of my story, it makes them feel safe enough to share theirs," Delgado said. "That trust is what makes learning possible" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Booker added, "A lot of my students don't get to see their voices valued. Storytelling lets them know their story matters" (Booker, Interview, 2024). Across these interviews, storytelling emerged not only as a strategy to enhance reading skills, but also as a way to build confidence, validate student voices, and support a more equitable and engaging literacy experience.

- Claudia Lee described how students developed deeper connections with texts when they were encouraged to see themselves reflected in the narratives, noting that this personal engagement enhanced both their motivation and comprehension. "When students can say, 'This reminds me of me,' they're more likely to care about what they're reading," she explained. "It gives them a sense of belonging in the story, and in the classroom" (Lee, Interview, 2024). By making space for students to relate their

identities and experiences to those of characters or themes in literature, Lee fostered a sense of ownership and participation in the reading process. This approach is echoed by Steven Perry, who emphasized the importance of counter-storytelling as a tool for students to challenge dominant narratives and validate their own. “I tell my students that their stories are just as important as the ones in the book,” he shared. “When they learn to tell their truth, they learn how to think critically about everything else” (Perry, Interview, 2024). Similarly, Frank Delgado highlighted the power of cultural relevance in making literature more accessible. “When I connect the story to something from their lives—like the Trujillo regime—they suddenly understand Animal Farm in a completely new way,” he said (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Grace Harper added, “It’s all about giving them an access point. If they see themselves in the story, they don’t just read it—they engage with it” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Javelyn Booker also stressed that culturally reflective stories promote richer discussions. “If they can relate to it, they talk more, they think deeper,” she explained. “It’s not just about answering questions—it’s about understanding the world through their own lens” (Booker, Interview, 2024). Collectively, these teachers demonstrated that when students are invited to locate themselves within the literature, reading becomes not only more accessible but also more transformative—shifting literacy from a task to a meaningful act of identity, reflection, and empowerment.

- Grace Harper stressed that storytelling played a crucial role in cultivating a classroom culture where all students felt a sense of belonging. “Storytelling creates a space where every student’s voice matters,” she explained. “When they hear each other’s stories—and share their own—it builds respect, empathy, and trust in the room”

(Harper, Interview, 2024). By centering student experiences, Harper used storytelling to foster community and connection. This emphasis on belonging aligns closely with Steven Perry's view that storytelling empowers students to challenge exclusionary narratives and affirm their identities. "When my students share their stories, they're taking back control of how they're seen," he shared. "It's about showing them that their truth matters, even when the world tells them otherwise" (Perry, Interview, 2024). Claudia Lee also described the emotional influence of personal storytelling in her classroom. "When I share something real from my life, it changes the way students see me—and each other," she said. "It helps them feel safe enough to take academic risks" (Lee, Interview, 2024). Frank Delgado echoed this, noting, "One story can change the whole atmosphere of a class. When students see we've been through some of the same things, it opens the door for connection and engagement" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Javelyn Booker further emphasized how storytelling turned reading into a communal experience. "It's no longer just one student reading alone," she explained. "They're reading together, talking together, building meaning together" (Booker, Interview, 2024). Together, these teachers revealed that storytelling is not only an instructional tool, but also a foundational practice for building inclusive, affirming, and equitable classroom communities—spaces where students feel seen, heard, and empowered to learn.

- Frank Delgado shared that storytelling was instrumental in building a classroom culture rooted in trust and shared experience. "When I tell students about my activism—about what I've fought for—they see that I care," he explained. "It creates a space where they feel safe enough to bring their full selves into the room" (Delgado,

Interview, 2025). This trust became especially evident when a student, after hearing Delgado speak about his advocacy work, approached him privately to express fears about being undocumented and not being able to attend college. “That moment showed me how powerful storytelling is,” Delgado recalled. “It wasn’t just about engagement—it was about survival, identity, and being seen” (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Similar dynamics were described by Grace Harper, who emphasized how storytelling cultivated a sense of belonging. “When students hear each other’s stories, they realize they’re not alone,” she said. “That connection builds a classroom culture where everyone feels like they belong” (Harper, Interview, 2024). Steven Perry also spoke about the importance of sharing personal experiences. “I let them know where I come from,” he shared. “And when they see that, they open up. It’s like, ‘Okay, this teacher gets me’” (Perry, Interview, 2024). Claudia Lee observed that students become more emotionally invested when they’re invited into authentic, culturally affirming dialogues. “If we want them to engage deeply, we have to meet them where they are—culturally, emotionally, personally,” she said (Lee, Interview, 2024). Javelyn Booker added, “Storytelling brings the room together. It makes learning social, and that social connection is what keeps students engaged” (Booker, Interview, 2024). Collectively, the teachers demonstrated that storytelling is not only a literacy strategy but also a powerful relational practice—one that builds trust, supports student well-being, and affirms the full complexity of their identities within the classroom.

Data Analysis: Research showed that when teachers used storytelling in academia, it improved students' identity and inclusion.

Time Spent: 4-5 hours of interviews

The Revised Research Design Matrix (see Appendix B) now incorporated the findings from the qualitative interviews in alignment with the research questions, indicating the direct influence of storytelling on the reading comprehension, identity, and literacy engagement of Black and Brown students.

To support the thematic analysis, the following coding chart presents illustrative data extracts, initial codes, overarching themes, and corresponding source documents. This chart highlights the connection between teacher narratives and the themes that emerged in response to the study's guiding questions.

Table 5 - Thematic Coding Chart: Teacher Narratives on Storytelling and Literacy

This table summarizes selected qualitative data extracts from teacher interviews, paired with their initial codes, overarching themes, and corresponding source documents. The codes reflect emergent patterns in how storytelling supports literacy development, cultural relevance, identity formation, and engagement in urban classrooms.

Data Extract	Initial Code	Theme	Source Document
'By the end of the book, kids are more invested because we've talked about it.'	Storytelling in education	Storytelling as a Teaching Tool	Interview with Grace Harper

‘They understood that kind of oppression... they got it.’	Cultural connection	Cultural Relevance and Identity	Interview with Frank Delgado
‘It teaches them how to connect, understand, and annotate.’	Skill development	Developing Literacy Skills	Interview with Steven Perry
‘It’s cool to show them you’re human... someone willing to share their story.’	Teacher vulnerability	Building Student-Teacher Relationships	Interview with Grace Harper
‘You have to hit those objectives… there’s only so much time.’	Instructional constraints	Challenges in Implementation	Interview with Claudia Lee
‘Students started venting… it bonded them through shared experiences.’	Student voice and identity	Empowering Student Voices	Interview with Claudia Lee

‘Storytelling gives my students the opportunity to kind of get a glimpse of my exposure.’	Exposure through storytelling	Building Student-Teacher Relationships	Interview with Javelyn Booker
‘They like go off and share their stories… using the mic now… that’s engagement.’	Verbal engagement	Empowering Student Voices	Interview with Claudia Lee
‘When students see themselves in the story, they want to keep reading.’	Representation and connection	Cultural Relevance and Identity	Interview with Frank Delgado
‘I connect the theme to my real-life protest experience… suddenly they understand revolution.’	Real-world application	Storytelling as a Teaching Tool	Interview with Frank Delgado

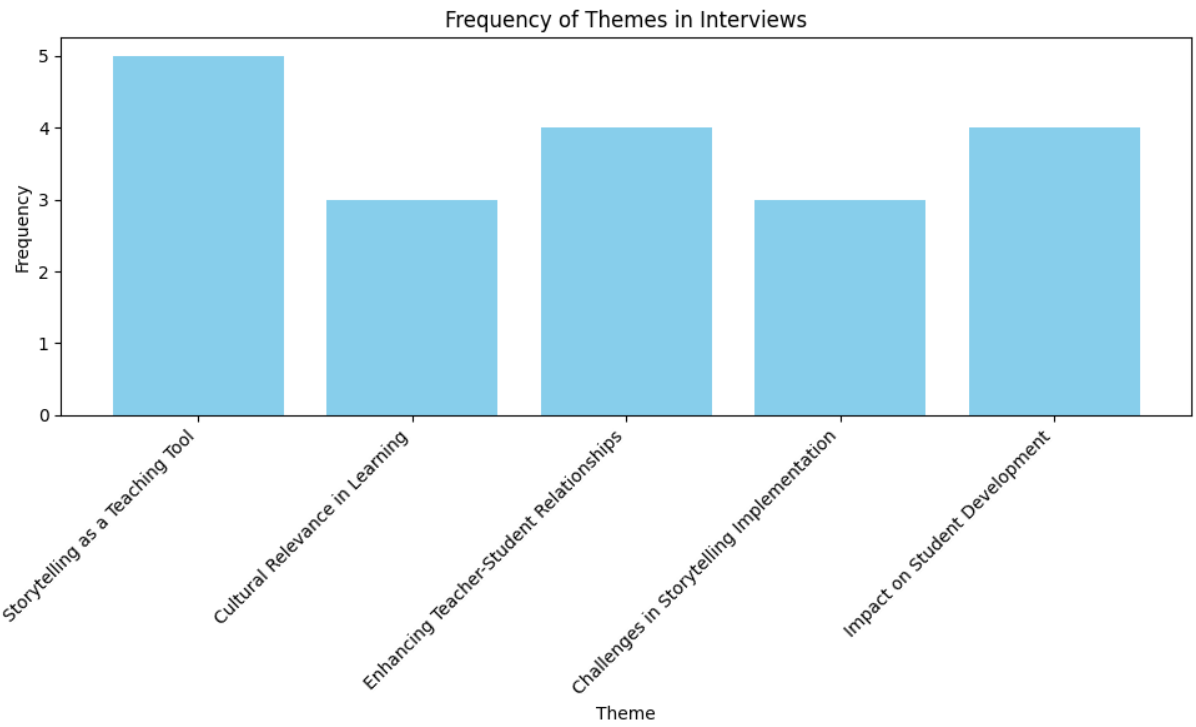
Table 4 offers a thematic coding chart which provides a link between the findings and the source of the data that is raw and obtained from the interviews that were conducted. The table shows how teacher narratives were coded and themed by linking illustrative data extracts with initial codes and overarching themes. The analysis written out which follows this chart helps inform the reader more clearly about the layered and complex nature of teachers’ experiences.

Each quote does not just back up a theme but also showcases the bodily knowledges and pedagogies of educators whose work seeks to disrupt normative literacy practices through culturally sustaining storytelling.

One example is, Storytelling as a Teaching Tool is a theme brought forth in the text through not only what is in the teachers' stories but also what was left out and the choices that were made. Also, the codes under Cultural Relevance and Identity do not only reiterate a plea for representing identity – they point to the significance of relevance as a literacy access point for children historically marginalized by the dominant curriculum. As you read through the analysis, the pattern in table 4 will help better understand how storytelling serves as a teaching tool and more, an affirmation, resistance, and transformation for urban teachers and students in each of the thematic sections.

Figure 3 - Frequency of Themes in Teacher Interviews (Bar Graph)

This figure presents the number of participants (out of five) who referenced each of the five major themes at least once during their interviews. Rather than measuring how many total times each theme was mentioned, the bar graph shows how **widely shared** each theme was across the dataset. For example, if all five teachers discussed "Storytelling as a Teaching Tool," the bar for that theme would be marked at 5.



This illustration shows how often each theme appeared for participants and may assist in showing which concepts were mentioned most regarding storytelling and literacy. All five themes were significant in their own way, but the fact that each participant spoke to "Storytelling as a Teaching Tool" and "Influence on Student Development" suggests these are at the core of their teaching. The graphic adds to the analysis as it showcases how strongly participants across the group believe in the different themes that were the focus of our analysis.

Table 6: Frequency of Storytelling Strategies

This chart shows how often different storytelling strategies were mentioned or used by participating teachers.

Strategy	Number of Teachers
Personal Storytelling	5
Cultural Connection	4
Scaffolded Retelling	3

Multimedia Storytelling	2
Historical Analogy	3

Table 5 emphasizes that while all teachers used storytelling, their approaches varied in frequency and focus. Personal storytelling and cultural connections were the most consistently utilized, reflecting a shared commitment to making learning relatable and affirming. The use of scaffolded retelling and multimedia approaches demonstrates a willingness to adapt storytelling to meet diverse student needs. These patterns affirm the central argument of this study: that storytelling is not only an effective literacy tool, but also a flexible practice that allows teachers to meet students where they are. To better illustrate the prevalence of various storytelling strategies among participating teachers, Table 5 presents a summary of how frequently each approach was referenced across interviews.

4.3 Theme 1: Storytelling as a Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategy

Before turning to teacher accounts, I recall my own early lessons where I brought protest chants and hip-hop lyrics into the classroom. Students leaned forward, recognizing themselves in the rhythm and urgency. Those moments taught me that stories are not just anecdotes; they are **acts of resistance** that challenge who and what counts as knowledge in schools. As I listened to participants describe their counter-stories, I found myself nodding, hearing the same impulse—to use story not as decoration, but as a direct confrontation with deficit narratives that erase Black and Brown brilliance.

Participants frequently discussed how storytelling in the classroom supports culturally responsive teaching (CRT), emphasizing its ability to connect students' lived experiences with academic texts. Educators noted that storytelling allows students to see themselves reflected in the material, making literature more accessible and personally meaningful. Steven Perry, a

middle school teacher in Far Rockaway, shared, “Storytelling allows students to put themselves inside of the story, and it allows them to continue the story on their own” (Perry, Interview, 2024). This moment affirms what I’ve witnessed in my own classroom: when story enters, deficit framings exit. The narrative is doing double duty here—teaching content while redistributing power back to students. By integrating diverse narratives into instruction, Perry encouraged students to move beyond passive reading and begin reimagining themselves as part of the curriculum.

Similarly, Grace Harper, a middle school teacher in Atlanta, highlighted the importance of providing students with entry points into complex texts through storytelling. She explained, “We have to give them access points—something relatable—so they can connect with what they’re reading. Once they see how the story reflects their own life, then they’re in” (Harper, Interview, 2024).I read this not as a tangent but as a method. The story is functioning as counter-evidence against the assumption that Black and Brown students are disengaged or incapable. Harper used storytelling to bridge difficult literature, such as *The Odyssey*, to students' real-world experiences, enabling them to engage more critically with challenging content. Through these firsthand accounts, it becomes clear that storytelling is not just an instructional strategy but a culturally responsive practice that affirms identity, fosters engagement, and cultivates deeper comprehension.

Frank Delgado, a 7th-grade ELA teacher in East New York, Brooklyn, emphasized that storytelling helped students view literature as a reflection of their own realities. He recalled a moment when his Dominican students were initially disengaged from reading *Animal Farm* until he introduced a historical parallel: “When I brought up the Trujillo period in the Dominican Republic, something clicked. They saw the connection and suddenly *Animal Farm* wasn’t just

about animals on a farm—it was about power, oppression, and resistance they could recognize" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). What's powerful is not only what was taught but who was centered. The story recenters students as knowledge holders, which is precisely the move CRT invites. This real-life connection not only deepened students' comprehension but also affirmed the value of culturally relevant teaching. As Delgado explained, when students "see their story in the story," they become more invested in the reading, turning abstract political allegories into meaningful reflections of lived experience.

Javelyn Booker, a resource teacher in Boston, Massachusetts, noted that students from low-income backgrounds often struggled to connect with the stories typically found in the curriculum. "A lot of our kids just don't know about the world outside their neighborhoods," she explained. "So when we bring in stories that reflect their culture or give them a glimpse into something new, it not only exposes them to more—it makes them feel like they belong" (Booker, Interview, 2024). This idea of using storytelling as both a bridge and a mirror was echoed by Claudia Lee, a high school teacher in Brooklyn, New York, who shared, "Storytelling helps students see that literature isn't just something old and distant—it becomes something they can live through and relate to" (Lee, Interview, 2024). Both educators underscored how storytelling helps students find relevance and connection in texts that might otherwise feel disconnected from their realities. As Gay (2018) argues, culturally relevant teaching creates the conditions for students to become more engaged and better able to comprehend the material, especially when their identities and experiences are reflected in the learning process.

4.4. Theme 2: Enhancing Critical Literacy Through Narrative Inquiry

My participants' reflections on critical literacy resonated with the times I asked my students to rewrite canonical endings or respond to injustice in spoken word. I remember one class where students read *Of Mice and Men* but refused Steinbeck's ending; they wrote alternatives where survival and solidarity were possible. Their stories became critiques. In hearing participants describe similar practices, I recognized how storytelling creates not only comprehension, but also **critical stance-taking**—an insistence that young people can interrogate and rewrite the world.

The use of storytelling to develop students' critical thinking was widely discussed. Teachers noted that storytelling helped students analyze texts beyond surface-level comprehension. Lee explained how discussing personal narratives before reading a text helped students engage critically: "I think the storytelling is actually very, very important to understand the text, but also as a way to understand each other" (Lee, Interview, 2024). This is a shift from comprehension to critique. The story opens a doorway for students to interrogate authorial choices and the social conditions that make those choices legible. By connecting their own experiences to literature, students developed analytical skills that allowed them to question dominant narratives, a core principle of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Steven Perry also contributed to culturally responsive teaching by encouraging students to think critically and creatively through storytelling. "I ask them to write alternate endings to the stories we read," he explained, "and then we talk about why the author might have chosen the original ending and what that says about the society they were writing in" (Perry, Interview, 2024). Here, narrative becomes a rehearsal space for revisioning the world—students practice reading *and* rewriting power. That is critical literacy in action.This approach not only deepened students' comprehension but also promoted critical thinking by inviting them to engage with

texts as both readers and meaning-makers. Similarly, Grace Harper emphasized the use of storytelling as a form of scaffolding to help students navigate and personalize complex texts. "Storytelling has always been a tool," she said. "It's how I help them get into something like *The Odyssey*. They connect it to their own experiences, and suddenly the text feels less distant and more relevant" (Harper, Interview, 2024). Both teachers demonstrated that storytelling is not just a means of engagement but a vital strategy for analysis, reflection, and cultural connection—core tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Frank Delgado also emphasized how personal storytelling served as a catalyst for critical engagement in his classroom. "When I made references to my personal experiences with revolution," he shared, "the students became aware of what makes people rise up and what sociological changes transform society. They can then critically analyze the text with a contemporary reference" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). I hear an invitation to move from "What happened?" to "Why this, for whom, and at what cost?" Story is the catalyst for that analytic turn. By weaving his own protest experiences into lessons on historical and literary revolutions, Delgado created an entry point for students to interrogate themes of power, resistance, and justice in ways that felt immediate and relevant. This approach not only deepened students' understanding but also empowered them to draw parallels between literature and the world around them. Such practices reflect what Ladson-Billings (1995) describes as powerful literacy experiences—ones that affirm students' identities and equip them to question and resist negating or marginalizing narratives embedded in traditional curricula.

4.5 Theme 3: Strengthening Student Identity and Voice

When participants spoke about identity work, I immediately thought of the day I shared my own "name story" in class—explaining how "Beauzil" carries Haitian lineage, Brooklyn grit,

and the prayers of my parents. Students' eyes widened, and one quietly said, *"I didn't know school could sound like us."* That moment echoed in every participant's account that followed. Storytelling is not only a mirror—it is an amplifier, affirming that the voices students carry into the classroom are not distractions but the very content of literacy.

In the opinion of many educators, storytelling allows students to find and affirm their voice within the classroom. Javelyn Booker, an inclusion teacher in a Boston school, observed, "A lot of our Black and Brown students hardly ever see their own stories reflected in what they read. But when we make space for them to share their own, you can see the confidence build—it gives them ownership over their learning" (Booker, Interview, 2024). The resonance here is unmistakable: recognition precedes rigor. Once identity is affirmed, students take up academic risk with far greater confidence. Booker's reflection speaks to the transformative potential of storytelling as a pedagogical tool that shifts students from passive recipients of information to active participants in meaning-making. This aligns with Freire's (1970) conception of education as a dialogical process—one in which learners are co-creators of knowledge, capable of producing their own narratives and contributing to a shared understanding of the world. In this way, storytelling not only supports literacy development but also affirms students' identities and encourages a more democratic and liberating classroom environment.

Lee showcased a type of training exercise that invited students to tell stories about their name and identity, followed by further discussion. She explained, "I tell them about my name, my family name, my Chinese name, and my English name. They find it very funny," referring to the students' amusement at the contrast between her formal and informal names, as well as the cultural differences embedded in naming traditions (Lee, Interview, 2024).This echoes my own "name story" moments—laughter becomes entry, and entry becomes belonging. Literacy grows

from that felt sense of being seen. This lighthearted moment served as an entry point into deeper conversations about identity, culture, and belonging. The exercise not only helped students better understand the texts they were reading but also fostered a sense of community in the classroom. As Banks (2006) emphasizes, students' experiences are valid sources of knowledge and should be actively explored within educational spaces.

Frank Delgado emphasized that storytelling fosters a classroom culture grounded in trust and community. He shared a powerful moment when a student approached him privately after class to express fears about being unable to attend college due to their undocumented status. "That student opened up to me because of the stories I shared about my activism," Delgado explained. "Storytelling let them know this classroom was a safe space" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). I'm struck by how quickly voice follows validation. As soon as students see themselves in the narrative, participation shifts from compliance to authorship and ownership. This experience illustrates how storytelling not only builds emotional connections but also creates space for students to express personal concerns that may otherwise remain hidden. In doing so, it affirms their identities and helps them feel seen and supported. The sense of belonging cultivated through storytelling mirrors the culturally responsive practices advocated by scholars like Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (1995), who argue that affirming students' lived experiences strengthens both academic engagement and social-emotional development.

4.6 Theme 4: Challenges in Implementation

As I coded teachers' reflections on constraints, I felt the familiar tension of pacing guides, testing calendars, and the quiet calculation—*Is this story safe to tell?* In my own classroom, I began practicing what I called "story seeds": 90-second narratives tucked at the start of a lesson, harvested later for analysis or vocabulary. It was my way of carving space for

relevance under pressure. Hearing participants describe similar adaptations reminded me that the power of the story is resilient; even under constraint, it finds a way through.

Teachers pinpointed several obstacles to effectively using storytelling in literacy instruction, despite its recognized potential to enhance engagement and cultural relevance. While many educators were encouraged—either by personal conviction or school initiatives—to integrate narratives into their curriculum as a way to build students' literacy skills, structural constraints often limited how and when this could happen. Booker highlighted the difficulty of balancing culturally affirming instruction with the pressure of standardized testing. In many classrooms, the need to prepare students for high-stakes exams leaves little room for exploratory, student-centered approaches like storytelling. She noted that while storytelling can support literacy goals, it is often viewed as secondary or even unrelated to the "real" work of meeting testing benchmarks (Booker, Interview, 2024). The tension is real: pacing guides demand speed; stories demand breath. Even so, these "story seeds" show how relevance can be woven into tight instructional frames.

Similarly, Lee observed that some of her colleagues considered storytelling a luxury—something to include only if there was extra time after covering mandated curriculum content. This perception reinforces a narrow view of literacy that prioritizes test-based reading and writing skills over deeper comprehension, cultural connection, and critical thinking (Lee, Interview, 2024). I read this as pedagogical improvisation—teachers bending constraints without breaking trust. The micro-story keeps culture in the room when the curriculum tries to crowd it out. Both teachers' experiences point to a systemic issue: storytelling is undervalued not because it lacks educational merit, but because current policies and accountability measures do not adequately support its implementation. These insights reflect a broader tension in education

between compliance with external standards and the need for pedagogical practices that affirm students' identities and foster authentic engagement.

Moreover, teachers expressed concern about the delicate balance required when facilitating storytelling activities in the classroom—particularly around the risk of students oversharing. While personal storytelling can be a powerful tool for engagement and identity affirmation, it can also open emotional or sensitive topics that may be difficult to navigate in a structured educational setting. Harper noted that although students often become more enthusiastic and open when given the opportunity to tell their own stories, these moments sometimes lead to disclosures that touch on trauma, family struggles, or deeply personal experiences (Harper, Interview, 2024). Constraint doesn't negate narrative; it refines it. The brevity here sharpens purpose and keeps the human stakes at the center.

This puts educators in a challenging position: they must foster an inclusive and trusting environment where students feel heard, while also ensuring that discussions remain appropriate, respectful, and within the boundaries of what can be safely explored in a public classroom. Teachers are not always equipped with the training or support to manage these complex emotional dynamics. Additionally, Harper emphasized the importance of setting clear boundaries and having protocols in place for redirecting conversations when necessary. This underscores a need for professional development that not only trains educators in using storytelling as a pedagogical tool, but also prepares them to respond with care and ethical responsibility when students share vulnerable parts of their lives. Without this support, the emotional labor required to manage storytelling sessions can become overwhelming, and the potential for harm may outweigh the benefits if not handled with sensitivity and structure.

Delgado expressed concern that educators are often restricted in their ability to use storytelling as a meaningful aspect of instruction due to rigid, standardized curricula such as NYC Reads. These programs, while well-intentioned, often prescribe specific texts that do not reflect the cultural backgrounds or lived experiences of many Black and Brown students. As a result, teachers have limited flexibility to select stories that resonate with their students or to create space for students to share their own narratives. Delgado advocated for greater autonomy at the school level to allow educators to choose texts that align with the identities and realities of their classrooms. His point echoes Nieto's (2013) distinction between authenticity and tokenism in educational storytelling. According to Nieto, simply including diverse content is not enough—authentic storytelling requires that students see themselves meaningfully reflected in the curriculum, not just included for the sake of diversity. Without this authenticity, storytelling risks becoming a performative act rather than a transformative pedagogical tool. Delgado's insight underscores the need for institutional support that empowers teachers to make culturally responsive choices that validate student identity and enhance literacy engagement.

4.7 Theme 5: Storytelling as a Tool for Motivation and Relevance

Participants often described storytelling as the spark that reignites student curiosity. I remembered one day reading a dense informational article, watching disengagement spread across the room. I paused and told a quick story about my first sports contract with myself—how I promised to outwork my limitations. The room changed; students leaned in, then tackled the article with new persistence. In hearing teachers narrate their own motivational stories, I saw how story is not extra—it is often the difference between withdrawal and engagement.

Across interviews, teachers frequently emphasized storytelling's capacity to increase students' motivation by connecting classroom content to students' lived experiences and personal

interests. In urban classrooms where Black and Brown students often feel alienated from the dominant curriculum, storytelling becomes a culturally affirming method to re-engage learners who may otherwise be disengaged from literacy instruction.

Steven Perry shared a powerful example of how he uses storytelling to foster intrinsic motivation. He explained, *"When I bring in real-world stuff like sports contracts or even lyrics, and then tell a story around them—it's like a lightbulb goes off. They see the why behind learning to read critically"* (Perry, Interview, 2024). Motivation rises when meaning is visible. By tying reading to recognizable futures, the story turns literacy from task to tool. Perry's approach shows that literacy instruction becomes more meaningful when students can see direct, real-world applications—especially when embedded in stories that reflect their values, interests, and cultural capital.

Similarly, Javelyn Booker pointed out how even the tone and familiarity of a story could awaken student curiosity. She reflected, *"Some of these students just need to hear something that sounds like home. That's when they perk up and lean in"* (Booker, Interview, 2024). This is an access-point strategy with ethical weight: students are invited to care because the text is made consequential to their lives. For students who feel disconnected from the texts presented in school, stories rooted in shared community experiences—whether directly or metaphorically—can spark a renewed interest in literacy activities.

These perspectives illustrate the motivational power of storytelling as a culturally responsive strategy. Storytelling does not merely engage students on a surface level—it affirms their identities, validates their experiences, and frames literacy not as an abstract skill but as a meaningful practice that helps them navigate and make sense of the world. Teachers found that when students saw themselves reflected in narratives, their willingness to participate increased,

as did their comprehension and willingness to persist through challenging texts. I've seen this pivot in my own practice—the room leans in once the "why" is narrated. After that, stamina and persistence follow.

This theme reinforces the theoretical argument that culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly through the lens of storytelling, increases motivation by aligning instruction with students' lived realities (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this way, storytelling functions as both a bridge and a catalyst: it connects culturally diverse students to the academic world and ignites a desire to learn, empowering students to see literacy not just as a school subject, but as a tool for self-empowerment and self-expression.

4.8 Theme 6: Storytelling as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Finally, when participants spoke about vulnerability and emotional connection, I thought of the first time I admitted to my class how nervous I was during my own middle school years. The silence that followed turned into a flood of student sharing. That day, literacy became a vehicle for healing. Storytelling is not just about comprehension or test scores—it is about creating spaces where students can be fully human. The narratives my participants shared underscored this truth: stories carry not only knowledge, but also **care**.

In addition to its academic benefits, storytelling emerged from the data as a deeply humanizing practice that nurtures students' social and emotional development. Several teachers highlighted how storytelling created a space where students could explore their emotions, process personal experiences, and develop empathy within a safe and affirming classroom environment. These emotionally charged storytelling moments reflect the principles of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), underscoring the importance of self-awareness, relationship-building, and emotional regulation in literacy instruction.

Claudia Lee described a classroom activity where students shared personal stories about their names and identities. One moment in particular stood out: *"I was shocked at how open they were. One student even said, 'I never told anyone that before,' and then the rest of the class just… listened. They listened. It felt like healing"* (Lee, Interview, 2024). What unfolds here is literacy as care. The act of telling doesn't just transmit information; it builds a holding space where students can risk being known. Lee's account illustrates the way storytelling fosters trust and vulnerability, enabling students to reveal parts of themselves that often go unheard in traditional classroom settings. This type of verbal storytelling builds not only language fluency but also emotional fluency—giving students the words and context to process complex feelings and identity-based experiences.

Similarly, Frank Delgado shared a powerful exchange following a storytelling session about his family's immigration story. *"After I told a story about my own family's struggle with documentation, a student waited until after class and said, 'Can I talk to you?' Then he just told me everything. That wouldn't have happened without the storytelling"* (Delgado, Interview, 2025). I hear restorative practice embedded in ordinary instruction. Story normalizes vulnerability and teaches listening as a scholarly skill. This moment reflects how storytelling allows for the transfer of empathy and shared experience between teacher and student, building a bridge of connection that can foster resilience, safety, and a deeper sense of belonging—key dimensions of SEL.

The accounts from Lee and Delgado are not isolated examples. They point to storytelling's potential to serve as a form of restorative pedagogy, where students are not only absorbing information but actively engaging with their inner worlds and external realities. This aligns with my experience: once trust is narrated, analysis deepens. Emotional safety is not extra

to literacy—it is the precondition for it. Storytelling in this context becomes a healing practice—a tool for both individual expression and communal understanding. This aligns with Freire's (1970) conception of education as dialogical, where humanization and critical consciousness are developed through authentic dialogue.

Moreover, as students participate in storytelling, they learn to listen empathetically to others, engage in respectful discourse, and develop deeper interpersonal awareness—essential competencies in SEL frameworks. When students share stories of hardship, cultural identity, or fear, and receive validation from peers and educators, they begin to view their experiences as worthy of attention and care. This validates students' humanity in a system that too often marginalizes their voices, especially for Black and Brown youth navigating urban school environments.

Incorporating storytelling as an SEL practice thus reinforces the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogy. It equips students with not just the cognitive tools to decode text, but also the emotional vocabulary to articulate their own narratives, confront internalized trauma, and build authentic relationships in the classroom. When approached with intention and structure, storytelling becomes a powerful conduit for emotional growth and community-building—two outcomes often sidelined in standards-driven literacy environments.

4.9 Conclusion

To consolidate the perceived outcomes of storytelling, **Table 7** provides a concise summary of how teachers observed its multifaceted influence on student development—including areas such as reading comprehension, self-confidence, critical thinking, engagement, and belonging.

Table 7: Student Influence Summary

This table summarizes how teachers observed the influence of storytelling on student literacy, confidence, and engagement, along with the specific storytelling strategies used.

Influence Area	Teacher Example	Storytelling Strategy Used
Reading Comprehension	Improved understanding via protest analogies (Delgado)	Historical Analogy
Student Confidence	Students opened up after sharing identity stories (Lee)	Personal Storytelling
Critical Thinking	Analytical discussions after name story activity (Lee)	Cultural Connection & Personal Story
Classroom Engagement	Reluctant readers became active discussants (Perry)	Scaffolded Retelling
Sense of Belonging	Stories helped students feel represented and seen (Harper)	Cultural Connection

As shown in Table 6, storytelling moved beyond surface-level engagement to produce a range of meaningful academic and social-emotional outcomes. Teachers described how storytelling improved literacy skills by offering students accessible entry points into complex texts. They also reported increased student confidence, participation, and emotional expression—especially

when classroom activities created opportunities for students to see their lived experiences reflected in the curriculum.

Storytelling was described as both a pedagogical and humanizing force. Students who previously struggled to find relevance in classroom texts became enthusiastic participants when lessons included narratives they could relate to. Teachers also noted the power of storytelling to foster community and build trust, often facilitating the emergence of critical consciousness and identity exploration. These influences underscore the transformative nature of storytelling as a culturally sustaining practice—one that affirms student voices, cultivates critical literacy, and supports academic growth.

However, the findings also highlight systemic barriers that must be addressed. From curricular mandates that restrict content choices, to the pressure of standardized testing, educators often face institutional constraints that limit their ability to incorporate storytelling as a core instructional strategy. Furthermore, the emotional weight of storytelling—particularly when students share vulnerable or traumatic experiences—requires thoughtful facilitation, boundaries, and professional support.

Overall, storytelling emerged in this study as more than an instructional technique—it is a powerful vehicle for equity, empowerment, and engagement in the literacy development of Black and Brown students. For storytelling to be fully integrated into urban education, schools and districts must actively support teacher autonomy, curricular flexibility, and culturally responsive training.

The next chapter revisits these findings through the methodological frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and narrative inquiry, while drawing on the theoretical lenses of culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and expansive conceptions of

literacy and storytelling. It also outlines the broader implications for practice, policy, and future research aimed at building equitable and affirming learning environments for historically marginalized students.

Chapter 5: Reimagining Literacy:

Storytelling as a Catalyst for Change

Interlude: Story as Vision

"The work of teaching is the work of telling stories—of our students, of ourselves, of the worlds we imagine possible. As I write these implications, I return to my own classroom: fluorescent lights, graffiti-tagged desks, and the hum of young people who want to be seen. Storytelling was not an extra—it was survival. And it is in survival that we find vision. This chapter is about that vision."

5.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the data in relation to critical race theory (CRT) and narrative inquiry, noting what teachers and policymakers can do by using this study. The chapter also discusses the study's limitations and future research.

5.1.1 Personal Story & Metaphor

I begin this chapter with a story from my own classroom. I remember a student who once told me, *"Reading just isn't for me. None of these books sound like my life."* For weeks, he sat disengaged, silent in the back row. One day, I paused our lesson on *The Odyssey* and shared my own story of protest—of marching through Brooklyn streets as a young man, chanting for justice. His head lifted. "That's in a book?" he asked. That moment—his eyes widening, curiosity breaking through—was a turning point.

That student's shift mirrors what I found throughout this study: **storytelling creates resonance that transforms literacy from distant text to lived truth**. Like a spark leaping across wires, narrative connection ignites critical engagement.

5.1.2 Link Back to National Literacy Urgency

These classroom moments unfold against a national backdrop of urgency. As highlighted in Chapter 1, the most recent NAEP results (2022) showed only **31% of 8th graders and 37% of 12th graders reading at or above proficiency**—with persistent racial disparities disproportionately impacting Black and Brown students. In 2025, these statistics remain largely unchanged, underscoring a literacy crisis that is not merely academic but profoundly social and cultural.

The findings of this study must be understood in that context: when students disengage from reading, it is not because they lack ability, but because they lack **recognition**. Storytelling reintroduces that recognition into the literacy process.

5.2 Interpretation of Findings

As teachers shared their stories, distinct yet overlapping patterns emerged in how they used storytelling to support student learning. The following table offers a cross-case look at how each educator brought storytelling into their classrooms, revealing both shared beliefs and individual approaches that shaped students' literacy experiences. In keeping with narrative inquiry, the interpretation of findings centers not only on what themes emerged, but on the stories that brought them to life. Each participant's narrative was treated as a unique case study, contributing to a collective understanding of storytelling as a transformative literacy tool.

Table 8 - Expanded Cross-Case Analysis of Thematic Findings Across Teacher Interviews

This table provides a comprehensive view of how storytelling transformed instructional practice, student engagement, and literacy development across five teacher interviews. It reflects deeper insights into the pedagogical and cultural roles of storytelling as described throughout the dissertation.

Theme	Steven Perry Interview	Frank Delgado Interview	Claudia Lee Interview	Javelyn Booker Interview	Grace Harper Interview
Storytelling as a Teaching Tool	Describes storytelling as the most powerful instructional tool. Uses pop culture and real-life scenarios (e.g., basketball contracts, rapper contracts) to make reading engaging and relevant.	Uses storytelling to connect texts like Animal Farm to Dominican history. Also shares stories from his own activism to engage students.	Uses videos and narratives to frame reading materials. Tells personal and student-centered stories to hook attention.	Uses storytelling to build background knowledge, especially for nonfiction. Story about swimming with dolphins helped boys engage with informational texts.	Uses stories to scaffold complex texts like The Odyssey and make abstract themes accessible to students.

Cultural Relevance in Learning	Focuses on critical thinking and real-life applications over rote memorization. Builds culturally relevant discussion around classic texts.	Explicitly connects text themes to students' heritage (e.g., Dominican Republic history) to build understanding.	Believes cultural connection is vital. Uses identity-based storytelling and multilingual elements (e.g., name story) to build engagement.	Emphasizes the importance of cultural exposure for low-income students. Stories provide insight into unfamiliar topics.	Centers curriculum around relatable cultural moments and stories that allow students to 'enter' the text from personal angles.
Enhancing Teacher-Student Relationships	Opens up about his own experience as a special education student. Encourages transparency and mutual respect through story-sharing.	Grew up in the same neighborhood as students. Shares local and personal stories to break down teacher-student barriers.	Shares stories about her name, family, and experiences to humanize herself and build community.	Believes storytelling enhances student trust and helps younger students feel connected.	Notes that sharing personal stories is essential for students to feel seen and to build trust within the classroom.

Challenges in Storytelling Implementation	Sees tension between test prep demands and critical, skill-based learning. Finds creative ways to embed stories but struggles with time constraints.	Points to NYC Reads initiative as a constraint on text selection and storytelling. Advocates for teacher autonomy.	Expresses concern that storytelling sometimes consumes too much class time, though sees its value. Needs curricular flexibility.	Notes that storytelling can derail lessons when students overshare. Emphasizes the need for balance and preparation.	Mentions difficulty in finding the "right" stories that connect culturally while fitting within pacing guides and test standards.
Influence on Student Development	Sees marked improvement in students' reading comprehension, confidence, and willingness to participate. Students go from reluctant readers to volunteers.	Observed major shifts in comprehension when stories made connections to real-life experiences. Storytelling builds academic and emotional investment.	Noted growth in both reading engagement and analytical thinking after implementing storytelling. Students made personal and textual connections.	Observed increased participation and enthusiasm, especially in nonfiction reading, when stories were used to build context.	Reports that students gain confidence, access complex material more readily, and show more motivation through storytelling.

The cross-case analysis table synthesizes the range of teacher perspectives, highlighting commonalities and differences across participants. This comparative view not only reinforces recurring patterns—such as the power of personal storytelling and the constraints of standardized curricula—but also reveals how context (such as teaching location or grade level) can shape

pedagogical choices. The table deepens the reader's understanding of how individual experiences with storytelling vary while still converging around key themes that support critical literacy development.

While themes were central to the analysis, it is also helpful to examine the types of storytelling strategies teachers most frequently employed. Table 8 shows the relative frequency of different approaches—such as personal storytelling, cultural connection, and scaffolded retelling—used across classrooms.

An examination through the lens of CRT and Counter-storytelling, each of these themes purposefully disrupts dominant educational narratives that work to silence, marginalize, and erase the voices, experiences, and cultural knowledge of Black and Brown students. Teachers in this study did not use storytelling just as a strategy but also as resistance and rehumanization to center the lived experiences of students during the teaching and learning process. For instance, they told personal stories and had cultural conversations that added to the curriculum that often did not include people of colors' communities. The narratives shown by these teachers correspond to CRT's claim that people of color's knowledge based on their experiences is relevant, legitimate, and essential for understanding racial subordination in education. In addition, the difficulties that teachers experienced while attempting to incorporate storytelling—like test-driven mandates and strict pacing guides—mirror the structural injustices that CRT tries to uncover and criticize.

This analysis counters negative assumptions regarding urban education through highlighting personal stories of educators and experiences as socially transformative, relevant, and inclusive. It claims storytelling as a significant resource for not only literacy class

instructions but also narrative justice enabling teachers and students to reclaim space identity and agency in the class.

Research confirmed that storytelling enhances critical literacy by making learning more relevant and engaging for Black and Brown students. According to CRT, counter-storytelling plays a role in which students contest the dominant narrative and claim their identity through storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As seen in the work of the five teachers who are Perry, Lee, Harper, Booker, and Delgado, storytelling makes literature more relevant for Black and Brown students, encouraging critical literacy. Perry, in particular, shared his own story as a student who struggled with literacy, making it a strong example. By sharing his own story, Perry created a safe place for students to admit their struggles and work to get better at reading. Similarly, Booker emphasized that students from low-income communities rarely see themselves in narrative text. Lee highlighted how being verbally told something creates community and offers students a chance to visualize themselves in stories. Delgado's experience of helping students share their stories of the past convinced him of the effectiveness of lived experience. His achievement in using stories of advocacy and social protest to demonstrate ideas in literature suggested the empowering nature of stories in the teaching of literacy (Delpit, 1995).

5.3 Implications for Educators

Storytelling is more than an add-on to the reading program. It should be treated as the bedrock of the literacy program especially in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. Telling stories connect children to events and people, leading to improved participation, multicultural reciprocity, and critical literacy. Educators must view it as a significant pedagogical practice that develops student voice, critical literacy, and connections to text—not something that is done for fun or as an add-on event.

Teachers need to be intentional in ways of using storytelling which are culturally responsive and sustaining – ie. helping to sustain the identity of the child in their learning (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). Professional development needs to include teacher training to recognize the literacy value of students' lived experiences and home cultures, choose texts that reflect a range of narratives, and guide storytelling in ways that affirm identity and foster belonging. Teachers need frameworks for personal storytelling, scaffolded narrative writing, oral tradition techniques, and multimedia storytelling that adhere to academic standards and promote equity.

The teachers from this study show how storytelling can be used in different grades and classroom situations in real ways. For instance, Mr. Perry exemplifies how telling stories enables critical thinking. In the other case, he took kids to complex literary texts through real-world applications. These applications include rapper contracts and basketball deals. Ms. Booker pointed out that storytelling helps fill in students' literacy gaps, especially for students who lack background knowledge. This is because stories are accessible and engage students, especially in reading nonfiction literature. Mr. Delgado drew on students' preferred historical storytelling and narratives of activism to build student investment to facilitate deep comprehension and critical inquiry around texts. Ms. Lee used personal and identity stories- name stories and cultural tradition stories to get kids writing analytically and build community. Ms. Harper used storytelling techniques to help students make sense of complicated texts such as The Odyssey, providing scaffolding stories that offered entry points to abstract ideas.

These cases suggest that we can tell stories to do a lot of different things. For example, to help with comprehension, but also to help with writing and how to work together and feel good. When tied to the cultural identities and actual lived experiences of the students involved,

storytelling can be a way for students to grow academically, but also for them to affirm their cultures.

For educators to maximize the potential of storytelling, they should work in community groups that share strategies, reflect on practice, and co-create lessons. To make storytelling a rigorous and culturally sustaining literacy tool, schools and districts should revisit their curricular frameworks. In the end, storytelling has the power to help students and educators redefine the meaning of literacy instruction, all while making significant change in the classroom.

5.4 Policy Recommendations

Curriculum Integration: Urban schools that cater to diverse children should incorporate storytelling in their literacy curricula. The traditional curricula focuses on grade-level canonized text or other standardized approaches to literacy that do not reflect the experiences of Black and Brown children. Schools can allay their identities and endorse critical thinking through daily instruction. It will also mean greater engagement with literacy. This can happen through oral history projects, digital storytelling, creative writing, and any other type of project that can fit into daily instruction. Additionally, the curriculum should include literature by writers of colour that represent the students' culture in order for storytelling to be the foundation of literacy, not just an activity.

Teacher Training: To effectively implement storytelling in the classroom, professional development must equip teachers with the necessary pedagogical skills and strategies. Claudia Lee emphasized the importance of this preparation, stating, "If we want teachers to use storytelling well, they need space and training to think about their own stories—and how those stories connect to the lives of their students" (Lee, Interview, 2024). Through culturally responsive teaching, educators can foster interactive and engaging discussions prior to reading,

setting the stage for deeper comprehension and personal connection (Lee, 2024). The present study's use of narrative inquiry—which encourages teachers to reflect on both their own and their students' lived experiences—should be more fully integrated into teacher education programs. This reflective practice can support the development of critical literacy approaches that challenge dominant narratives and empower students to see themselves as co-constructors of knowledge. Teacher preparation programs should go beyond theoretical knowledge and include practical strategies for integrating storytelling into everyday instruction. This includes student-centered storytelling techniques, the use of multimedia tools to support diverse modes of expression, and opportunities for students to share their own histories and identities through narrative. When educators are trained to intentionally incorporate storytelling into lesson planning, they are better positioned to create classrooms that value authenticity, promote equity, and build critical literacy skills that extend beyond the text.

Institutional Support: For storytelling-based literacy instruction to take place meaningfully in schools, a supportive infrastructure that provides teachers with the necessary materials and instructional flexibility is essential. Both Frank Delgado and Grace Harper emphasized that institutional support plays a pivotal role in enabling culturally responsive teaching. "If we're expected to use the same scripted curriculum no matter who our students are, then we can't respond to their needs," Harper stated. "We need the freedom to choose materials that reflect their lives" (Harper, Interview, 2024). Delgado added, "When we have the ability to adapt our texts and lessons, we reach them in ways that standardized materials never could" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). Their insights reflect the need for school systems to allocate dedicated funding for culturally sustaining tools such as diverse books, digital storytelling platforms, and partnerships with local storytellers, elders, and authors who can enrich the curriculum through

community-based knowledge. In addition, school administrators must advocate for policies that allow educators to incorporate storytelling into literacy instruction without fear of being penalized for deviating from rigid mandates. Supporting storytelling pedagogy requires more than instructional permission—it calls for the creation of professional learning communities (PLCs) focused on culturally responsive practices. These collaborative spaces can foster mentorship, provide platforms for teachers to share best practices, and promote continuous improvement in instructional strategies. A comprehensive infrastructure—grounded in resources, autonomy, and professional development—is essential for storytelling to serve as a transformative force in equitable literacy education.

Assessment Reforms: Standardized tests heavily rely on inflexible learner knowledge that excludes diverse forms of literacy and cultural ways of knowing (Au, 2011). Black and Brown students are heavily disadvantaged by this reliance. To make evaluation measures more equitable, we should include storytelling in literacy assessments. One way to improve evaluation measures is the inclusion of oral storytelling assessments that assess students' reading comprehension, critical thinking, and story structure through story rather than only reading and writing. Students should also be able to use portfolio-based assessments which allow them to document their literacy development through recorded oral narratives, written reflections, and multimedia storytelling projects. Given students' experience with the art of storytelling, more alternative assessments would build on student strengths to teach reading and writing. These alternative assessment models recognize the diverse literacies that students bring into the classroom and validate multiple ways of demonstrating literacy competency.

The educational policymakers can develop a better learning experience for Black and Brown students by embedding storytelling into literacy curricula, prioritizing teachers' training, ensuring institutional support, and reforming assessments. The recommendations are in line with some research which stresses on how pedagogy should be culturally responsive and storytelling. We can improve literacy by adopting these policies to make students feel like they belong inside the students who always suffer from educational settings which marginalize them.

5.5 Challenges of the Study

Although this study provides important information on the role of storytelling in supporting the literacy development of Black and Brown students, it also has its drawbacks. Self-reported data from teachers can introduce bias, and the findings are limited to urban classrooms, which may not reflect experiences in other educational settings (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Additionally, while the study offers valuable insight from educators, future research could expand to include students' perspectives on how storytelling impacts their learning. Teachers Lee and Booker also highlighted the need to further examine institutional constraints, particularly the challenge of balancing storytelling with standardized test preparation. These limitations underscore the narrowness of implementing storytelling-based pedagogy within rigid educational structures.

Potential Bias in Self-Reported Data.

This study's one major limitation is that it relied on self-reported data from the teachers. While the qualitative interviews yield rich narratives, they are subjective in nature and driven by the interviewees' desires to please. In this regard, teachers may sometimes report the success of their practices without reporting on the challenges or the reasons behind their decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, memory recall can influence how much teachers exaggerate and whitewash

certain aspects of their storytelling practices and downplay others. Future inquiry may utilize classroom observations, student thinking, and artifacts such as lesson plans and student work to create multiple measures of how storytelling works within urban classrooms (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Institutional Constraints on Storytelling in Literacy Instruction.

One significant limitation of implementing storytelling-based instruction is the potential conflict it creates with the demands of state standardized testing and mandated curricula. Claudia Lee expressed concern over this tension, stating, “The pressure to prepare students for standardized tests often leaves little room for creative approaches like storytelling” (Lee, Interview, 2024). She emphasized that such constraints hinder the integration of culturally relevant pedagogy, which is essential for fostering engagement and deeper comprehension. Similarly, Javelyn Booker noted, “High-stakes testing environments make it challenging to prioritize storytelling, even though it's a powerful tool for connecting with students' experiences” (Booker, Interview, 2024). In schools where strict pacing guides and accountability measures dominate instructional time, teachers may feel limited in the extent to which they can employ narrative-based approaches. These structural barriers often lead to a narrowed curriculum that prioritizes test preparation over culturally sustaining pedagogies. The ongoing tension between standardized testing and identity-affirming instruction represents a critical challenge in literacy education. Future research should examine how school policies, district mandates, and teacher autonomy impact the ability to use storytelling as a transformative, student-centered literacy practice.

Challenges in Measuring the Long-Term Effects of Storytelling.

Although the study shows that storytelling can be a culturally relevant literacy tool, it fails to show how this tool affects students after they leave the school. Evaluating “impact” in

education—especially when it comes to Black and Brown youth—can be a charged and complicated business, one generally framed narrowly through testing and other forms of institutional accountability. But this research instead takes oral traditions, identity development, cultural affirmation, and critical consciousness as forms of literacy, even if these same forms are not considered literacy by those who measure literacy.

Nonetheless, we should keep in sight pending queries about long-term academic and developmental consequences. Future research can look at whether or not the students who experience storytelling-based pedagogy perform differently on standardized tests, navigate high school graduation and get into postsecondary school smoothly, and build academic identity and self-efficacy over time. To measure effectiveness of these literacies, DESSA tools must be used over multiple years on subjects to see how they are growing in different areas. As well as critical reading, expressive writing, verbal, and so on functionality.

In this study, to breakdown what is meant by literacy; we distinguish between academic or print-based (typically gauged by test scores), performative and oral literacies (storying, MCing, and narrative) and critical literacies (students' capacity to interrogate texts, systems and power relations). While it might be tougher to quantify the latter two, they are nonetheless important for the full development of Black and Brown students and crucial for rethinking literacy in ways that honour their cultural wealth and intellectual agency.

This study adds to the existing literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and literacy development of Black and Brown students in spite of these limitations. Moreover, future work could examine how storytelling affects students' educational outcomes such as literacy test scores, college enrollment, and career aspirations. Despite the limitations, this work helps to further the research on culturally responsive teaching and literacy of Black and Brown students.

Future research that addresses these limitations will further validate storytelling as an effective strategy that promotes literacy, identity affirmation, and critical consciousness in diverse classrooms.

5.6 Future Research Directions

Future research can build on these findings by exploring students' experiences with storytelling as a form of literacy instruction, particularly through longitudinal studies that assess its sustained impact over time. As Morrell (2021) suggests, investigating how storytelling functions in multilingual classrooms could also offer valuable insights into language acquisition, cultural affirmation, and inclusive pedagogy. Additionally, Frank Delgado highlighted the importance of examining teacher autonomy within the curriculum, specifically noting how "the freedom to choose texts that resonate with students directly impacts their engagement and comprehension" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). His insight points to a critical area for future inquiry: how curricular flexibility enables culturally responsive teaching. Furthermore, Javelyn Booker's reflections on storytelling as a tool for fostering student identity and belonging suggest potential research directions into how narrative-based instruction might influence students' self-efficacy and motivation. Together, these avenues underscore the multifaceted power of storytelling—not just as a teaching strategy, but as a foundation for more equitable, personalized, and transformative educational experiences.

Examining Students' Experiences with Storytelling in Literacy Instruction.

This study of teachers engaging students in storytelling notwithstanding, future studies should also engage the students and seek to understand how storytelling shapes their learning experiences. We can check the effectiveness of storytelling in the classroom through students' lived experiences and response as per Morrell (2021). Future research may employ student

interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory research techniques to evoke the voices of Black and Brown students. Key questions to explore include.

- How do students perceive storytelling as a literacy tool?
- How does storytelling affect their engagement, understanding, and critical thinking?
- How do students connect what they already know to the storytelling events in a classroom?

Fostering further research on student narratives would be beneficial for offering a broader perspective on the power of storytelling.

Conducting Longitudinal Studies to Measure Storytelling's Effect.

Though functional literacy outcomes (e.g., standardized tests) are not directly measured in this study, teacher narratives suggest that engagement and identity development may create conditions that support long-term academic success. The major implication of this research is the necessity for longitudinal studies. The major implication of this research is the necessity for longitudinal studies in the time to come to evaluate the longer term effects of storytelling on students. The research outlined how teachers utilize storytelling to promote identity development, cultural affirmation, and engagement; it did not measure how such practices translate into longer-term academic or literacy gains. Participants did not place explicit focus on 'academic' or 'functional' literacies – the standardized reading and writing skills measured by tests such as NAEP. On the contrary, it was shown in their reflections and pedagogical actions that what can be considered critical literacies and expressive literacies with cultural foundations have a transforming potential.

To clarify these distinctions, it is necessary to return to a wider definition of literacy; as not only referring to reading and writing in print, but also orally, narratively, performatively and

critically. The teachers involved in this study conceptualized literacy as an embodied, relational, and situated act in which storytelling acted as a conduit to better student engagement, comprehension, and expression. According to their own observations, it seems that such motivation may ultimately foster children's perseverance and confidence in mainstream literacy activities and those tested by standardized measures.

Thus, future longitudinal studies should examine multiple facets of literacy development over time, including but not limited to:

- Gains in standardized reading and writing test scores;
- Growth in critical thinking, interpretive skills, and narrative analysis;
- Increased student participation in literacy-adjacent activities (spoken word, journalism, debate);
- Strengthening of student voice, confidence, and academic identity;
- Connections between cultural affirmation and school engagement.

Such studies could offer a fuller understanding of how culturally sustaining pedagogies like storytelling contribute to student success—not merely by direct instruction in tested skills, but by transforming the conditions under which students read, write, and come to see themselves as literate beings. They would also help validate storytelling as not just an engagement tool, but as a viable and powerful form of academic literacy development in its own right.

Investigating Storytelling in Multilingual Classrooms.

Morrell (2021) stresses the need for a study of storytelling in multilingual classrooms. In urban public schools with students who speak different languages, storytelling may provide a link between students' home languages and academic English, and bridge to literacy. There should be

future research on how multilingual storytelling is understood by multilingual students and whether it builds their linguistic confidence, bilingual literacy and cultural identity.

Some key research questions include.

- How Does Storytelling Aid ELLs in Their Developmental Literacy?
- Does storytelling encourage students to communicate in ways that incorporate their first language and home culture?
- How do multilingual students respond to stories from their culture versus dominant literature?

Through an exploration of these questions, researchers can design teaching strategies that use storytelling to foster multilingual learners' full engagement and inclusion.

Exploring Teacher Autonomy in Curriculum and Text Selection.

Frank Delgado maintains that if teachers control the curriculum, they will also control the texts in their classrooms. How can I be expected to engage my students if I'm not allowed to choose texts that fit their lives?" he asked. "We must have the liberty to share important stories" (Delgado, Interview, 2025). His comments indicate that concern around the district-directed curricula, particularly in schools that follow strict pacing guides or use district-mandated curricula. Studies show teachers can't choose texts, and this narrows opportunities for culturally relevant and responsive instruction (Applebee, 1996; Skerrett, 2010). On the other hand, more curricular autonomy allows teachers to adapt materials to students' cultural identities, which enhances motivation and engagement (ISL 2011, Sleeter 2011, Gay 2018). Delgado's appeal for curricular flexibility reinforces the need to allow teachers agency to teach storytelling as a critical literacy practice. Future research must look at the role of institutional policies and school

leadership practices that can affect teachers' ability to choose culturally relevant texts for the students but also enhance their literacy and classroom engagement.

Potential research areas include.

- How does teacher autonomy, in terms of the text, affect student literacy?
- Do teachers feel constrained by high-stakes testing when it comes to storytelling?
- What district or institutional policies either prevent or support teachers from using culturally relevant storytelling in literacy lessons?

Recognizing how teacher autonomy works can help create policies that empower teachers to use storytelling in a culturally responsive way while working within institutional constraints.

Storytelling as a Means of Identity Development and Motivation.

Javelyn Booker's reflection shows storytelling plays an active role in identity formation and belonging. She has also pointed out future research areas. According to Booker (2024), students who see elements of their own life in the curriculum feel that they matter, and this impacts the way that they show up. Her observations hint that storytelling empowers the students. It affirms their identities and helps them feel that they have agency. This agrees with the other studies which show that culturally relevant pedagogy increases students' motivation, students' engagement, and students' self-concept (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In addition, narrative-based instruction enhances students' academic self-efficacy through the validation of lived experience and authentic opportunities for self-expression (Usher & Pajares, 2008; Nasir et al., 2014). Additional research should target storytelling's impact on students' self-beliefs in their academic capacity. Research should extend the examination of storytelling not only as a pedagogy, but as a psychological and emotional agency for empowering students—especially

historically excluded youth—who try to find their way in spaces that have often rendered them invisible.

Potential research directions include.

- How does storytelling shape how students view themselves and their cultures?
- Does storytelling boost students' motivation to participate in literacy?
- Can literacy-related anxiety diminish and confidence in reading and writing improve through storytelling?

By looking into these psychological and socio-emotional aspects, future studies can provide a better understanding of how storytelling can help enhance literacy and facilitate classroom persistence and self-worth.

Future studies should build on this one by including the students'' perspective, finding longitudinal assessments, and other applications in multilingual classrooms. Looking at the autonomy of the teacher, especially the constraint and confounding factors, critical analysis will happen in the study. Lastly, looking into the effectiveness of storytelling in student identity development and motivation will strengthen the case for its use in supporting student agency. If this gap is bridged, researchers will be able to contribute more to the body of research that stories are useful in literacy education.

5.7 Conclusion

Through this study, it has been shown how storytelling can enhance critical literacy in Black and Brown students. Educators can become more inclusive and empowering in their classrooms, shaping students' experience and voices when they prioritize storytelling in classrooms. The collective findings of teachers Perry, Lee, Booker, Harper, and Delgado showed

that storytelling has numerous benefits like critical engagement and identity formation. Addressing institutional barriers and rethinking assessment methods will be crucial in making sure that storytelling occupies a place of prominence in urban schools' literacy education.

Just as seasoning brings depth and flavor to a meal, storytelling brings complexity, richness, and cultural authenticity to literacy instruction. Black and Brown students are not blank slates awaiting knowledge; they are carriers of profound literacy traditions that must be honored and built upon. The findings of this study affirm that culturally sustaining storytelling practices not only deepen critical literacy skills but also foster belonging, agency, and identity formation. Storytelling, in the hands of conscious and culturally grounded educators, becomes a form of liberation—one that redefines what it means to be literate, powerful, and seen.

Epilogue: The Echoes of Storytelling

Urban classrooms are melting pots of stories. For diverse groups of children, creativity flows from their experiences. Storytelling is driving change these days. This research has travelled through the journeys of teachers and students to show how storytelling has influenced as well as empowered the literacy and identity of Black and Brown students. A fitting end to this study is to say that stories have the power to change the world.

Storytelling is not just a tool for teaching; it helps students connect to their cultures, validate their experiences, and empower their voices. We see how storytelling can connect students with one another, their histories, and their cultures, while challenging prevailing narratives and helping teachers and students feel welcome. Thanks to the stories shared by teachers Perry, Lee, Booker, Harper and Delgado, we see that helping students to find themselves in the stories they read and tell allows them to reclaim their identities and imagine new futures.

The research journey demonstrated the necessity of weaving storytelling throughout education. We must allow our students to dream big through storytelling when they fall into the demographics of underrepresented communities. This story is a call to arms for educators, policymakers, and communities. Focusing on students' voices will erase unwanted systems and make classrooms places where every student is heard and seen.

Moving forward, we must take the lessons from this study with us and not take them lightly. Let us make storytelling a tool for freeing people, healing, and helping us understand one another. Let us inspire young ones to continue using storytelling and narratives as they grow up.

As Maya Angelou said, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” We need to keep listening to stories as well as narrating them. This will not only help us in understanding ourselves but each other.

Final Reflection: When Storytelling Changed the Room

One moment I will never forget occurred during a unit on power, voice, and resistance. I had just finished telling my students a story about a trip to Paris, where my friends and I—Black men—were met with thinly veiled racism. A child had smiled and waved at us, but his parents quickly pulled him away and whispered something sharp in French. I told my students how that experience made me feel—angry, yet committed to not letting it ruin the moment. As I spoke, the room grew quiet. Then one student shouted, "Mr. B, that ain't right!"

That story opened a floodgate.

One by one, my students began to share their own stories. A young man recounted being falsely accused of stealing at a local deli. Another spoke about how he was followed by police while walking home. They weren't just venting—they were connecting. By the end of class, the room had transformed. We had built something sacred: trust, vulnerability, and community.

By the end of the unit, students were writing some of the strongest essays I had ever seen. They cited texts, yes—but they also cited themselves, their lives, and each other. Storytelling had done more than engage them. It had *freed* them.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol for Teachers

Study Title: "Black and Brown Scholars' Identities: Storytelling's Transformative Potential"

Researcher: David Beauzil

Institution: Teachers College, Columbia University

Introduction to the Interview:

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this interview is to understand your experiences and perspectives on the use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool in fostering critical literacy skills, engagement, and identity development among Black and Brown students in urban classrooms. Your insights will be valuable in contributing to the research on how storytelling can support literacy outcomes in culturally responsive ways.

The interview is semi-structured, so while I have a set of questions to guide our conversation, feel free to share any additional thoughts or experiences you believe are relevant. Your responses will remain confidential, and you will have the opportunity to review and approve the findings related to your participation. The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes.

Thematic Categories and Interview Questions

Category 1: Challenges in Improving Reading Skills

This set of questions aims to understand the specific challenges that students face in improving their reading skills in an urban classroom context.

1. What challenges do you observe in your students' ability to develop strong reading skills, particularly among Black and Brown students?

2. How do socio-economic factors and cultural background impact your students' reading comprehension and engagement?
3. Are there any systemic barriers (e.g., lack of resources, standardized testing) that you believe limit students' opportunities to improve their reading skills?
4. How do you think students' identities and lived experiences influence their reading development? Can you give an example of this in your classroom?
5. In your experience, how do mainstream literacy practices sometimes fail to meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

Category 2: Impact of Personal Experiences and Background on Reading Comprehension

This section explores how students' personal histories, cultures, and backgrounds intersect with their reading engagement and comprehension.

1. How do you see students' personal experiences (e.g., family life, community, cultural identity) affecting their engagement with texts?
2. Can you share an example where a student's cultural background influenced their understanding or interpretation of a reading assignment?
3. What role does student identity play in their connection to reading materials and classroom discussions?
4. In your experience, how do students from marginalized backgrounds relate differently to various genres of literature (e.g., contemporary fiction, historical texts, personal narratives)?
5. How do you use storytelling or narrative techniques to make texts more accessible to students with diverse backgrounds?

Category 3: Instructional Strategies to Enhance Reading Skills and Motivation

This section focuses on identifying effective teaching strategies and how storytelling fits within these methods.

1. How do you integrate storytelling into your teaching practices, particularly when addressing reading and writing instruction?
2. Can you describe a specific instance where you used storytelling and noticed an improvement in your students' reading comprehension or engagement?
3. What kinds of storytelling techniques have you found to be most effective in engaging your students? (e.g., oral storytelling, digital storytelling, narrative writing)
4. How do you incorporate culturally relevant texts or storytelling methods that resonate with your students' cultural backgrounds?
5. Do you think storytelling is an effective tool for improving students' motivation to read? If so, how does it foster a deeper connection to the material?
6. What instructional strategies do you use in conjunction with storytelling to promote critical thinking and literacy skills?

Category 4: Broader Reflections on Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool

This set of questions is designed to gather reflections on the overall impact of storytelling and its potential for transforming literacy instruction.

1. How do you think storytelling can be used to create more equitable and inclusive learning environments in urban schools?
2. In what ways does storytelling contribute to the development of critical literacy skills, especially for Black and Brown students?

3. How does storytelling support your students' ability to critically engage with texts and make meaning from them?
4. Do you think storytelling helps to build a sense of belonging or community among students? If so, how?
5. What changes or improvements would you like to see in the ways storytelling is integrated into urban classrooms?

Closing Questions:

1. What advice would you give to other educators who are trying to integrate storytelling into their classrooms, particularly in urban schools?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to share regarding the use of storytelling in your classroom that hasn't been covered in the questions so far?

Conclusion:

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences today. Your contributions are invaluable to this study. If you have any further questions or thoughts after the interview, please feel free to reach out. I will share a summary of the findings with you once the study is complete.

Notes for the Researcher:

- Allow space for the teacher to share specific examples, stories, and reflections to provide rich, detailed data.
- Take notes on non-verbal cues (if in person) and be prepared to probe deeper if the interviewee touches on particularly insightful or unexpected points.

- Ensure that the teacher feels comfortable and that their responses are kept confidential.

Appendix B: Research Design Matrix

Research Questions:	Data Source	Data Collection	Data Analysis	Time Spent
RQ1: What specific challenges do secondary school students face in improving their reading skills?	*Teachers*	*Semi-structured interviews: Interviews with 4-5 teachers to understand the challenges students face in improving reading skills. Questions will focus on barriers like socio-economic factors, cultural influences, and systemic inequities.*	*Thematic analysis to identify recurring themes regarding challenges faced by students in improving reading skills.*	*30-60 minutes per interview, with 4-5 teacher participants. Total: 4-5 hours.*
RQ2: How do students' personal experiences and backgrounds affect their reading comprehension and engagement?	*Teachers*	*Semi-structured interviews: Teachers will be interviewed to share how they perceive the role of students' personal experiences and backgrounds (e.g., cultural, familial) in influencing their reading comprehension and engagement.*	*Narrative analysis of teacher responses to identify patterns in how background factors affect reading engagement and comprehension.*	*30-60 minutes per interview, with 4-5 teacher participants. Total: 4-5 hours.*
RQ3: What instructional strategies can effectively enhance reading skills and motivation among secondary school students?	*Teachers*	*Semi-structured interviews: Teachers will discuss the strategies they use to improve reading skills, particularly those they find effective in motivating students, such as storytelling and culturally relevant teaching methods.*	*Thematic analysis of teacher responses to identify effective instructional strategies for improving reading skills and motivation.*	*30-60 minutes per interview, with 4-5 teacher participants. Total: 4-5 hours*

RQ4: How does storytelling support the development of critical literacy skills among Black and Brown students?	*Teachers*	*Semi-structured interviews: Teachers will share their experiences with using storytelling in the classroom, and how they believe it supports the development of critical literacy skills, particularly for Black and Brown students.*	*Thematic analysis of interview responses to uncover how storytelling supports critical literacy, particularly focusing on themes of empowerment and identity.*	*30-60 minutes per interview, with 4-5 teacher participants. Total: 4-5 hours*
RQ5: What role does storytelling play in fostering a sense of identity and belonging for Black and Brown students?	*Teachers*	*Semi-structured interviews: Teachers will describe how storytelling in their classrooms helps foster a sense of identity and belonging for Black and Brown students.*	*Thematic analysis to explore how storytelling promotes a sense of identity and belonging, and how it shapes students' sense of self and community.*	*30-60 minutes per interview, with 4-5 teacher participants. Total: 4-5 hours*

Appendix C: Invitation Letter to Participants

David Beauzil
Doctoral Student, Department of English Education
Teachers College, Columbia University
dob2107@tc.columbia.edu
[Date]
[Teacher's Name]
[Teacher's School Name]
[School Address]
Dear [Teacher's Name],
I hope this message finds you well. My name is David Beauzil, and I am a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University, working on my dissertation titled "Black and Brown Scholars' Identities: Storytelling's Transformative Potential." I am conducting research on how storytelling as a pedagogical strategy can influence the critical literacy development of Black and Brown secondary students in urban classrooms. I am reaching out to invite you to participate in this important study, which seeks to explore the role of storytelling in shaping the identities and literacy practices of students from historically marginalized communities.

Purpose of the Study

The study aims to understand the challenges that Black and Brown students face in reading comprehension and writing skills, and how storytelling—specifically through narrative inquiry and counter storytelling—can serve as a transformative tool in fostering their academic engagement and identity development. Through your participation, I hope to gain valuable insights into the ways in which storytelling practices impact student motivation, comprehension, and classroom dynamics.

What Participation Involves

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Participate in 1 semi-structured interviews (via Zoom or in-person), each lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. The interviews will explore your experiences with incorporating storytelling into your teaching practice and your observations regarding its impact on students.

All data collected will be kept confidential, and you will have the opportunity to review and approve the findings related to your participation. I will also employ reflexive practices to minimize any researcher bias, and member checking will be used to ensure that the data reflects your lived experiences accurately.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. I greatly value the experiences and perspectives you would bring to the study, and your involvement would make a significant contribution to understanding how storytelling can shape the academic journeys of Black and Brown students.

Informed Consent

If you choose to participate, I will provide a consent form that outlines your rights and the nature of your involvement in the study. The consent form will also include details about how your personal information and contributions will be protected.

If you are interested in participating or would like further information about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at dob2107@tc.columbia or 516-458-4065. I look forward to collaborating with you on this important research.
Thank you for considering this invitation, and I hope to hear from you soon.
Sincerely,
David Beauzil
Doctoral Student, Department of English Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

Appendix D: Consent to Participate in Research

Title of Study: *Black and Brown Scholars' Identities: Storytelling's Transformative Potential*

Principal Investigator: David Beauzil, Ph.D. Candidate, English Education
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the role of storytelling in literacy development among Black and Brown students. The goal is to understand how storytelling influences identity formation, engagement, and critical literacy in urban classrooms.

Procedures

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an individual interview (approximately 30–60 minutes).
- Share your experiences with storytelling as a pedagogical tool.
- Review and confirm the accuracy of your responses (if needed).

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom. They will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. You also have the right to decline answering any questions that make you uncomfortable.

Confidentiality

Your identity and personal information will remain confidential. All data will be anonymized, and pseudonyms will be used in research reports. Audio recordings and transcripts will be securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Potential Risks and Benefits

- **Risks:** There are minimal risks associated with this study, primarily related to sharing personal experiences. If any discomfort arises, you may stop the interview at any time.
- **Benefits:** Your participation will contribute to research on culturally responsive teaching and may help inform future instructional practices for Black and Brown students.

Compensation

Teachers College, Columbia University
Institutional Review Board
Protocol Number: 25-208
Consent Form Approved Until: 02/25/2026

There is no monetary compensation for participation.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact:

- **David Beauzil** at dob2107@tc.columbia.edu
- **Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz** at sealeyruiz@tc.edu

For concerns about your rights as a participant, you may contact the **Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB)** at IRB@tc.edu.

Consent Statement

I have read and understood the above information. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Participant Name: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

Researcher Name: David Beauzil
Signature: _____
Date: _____

Teachers College, Columbia University
Institutional Review Board
Protocol Number: 25-208
Consent Form Approved Until: 02/25/2026

Appendix E: Invitation Letter to Committee Members

David Beauzil
Doctoral Student, Department of English Education
Teachers College, Columbia University
dob2107@tc.columbia.edu

Subject: Invitation to Serve on My Dissertation Committee

Dear [Recipient's Name],

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to invite you to serve as a committee member for my dissertation, *"Black and Brown Scholars' Identities: Storytelling's Transformative Potential."* As a Ph.D doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, I am deeply engaged in exploring the ways storytelling serves as a transformative tool in shaping the identities of Black and Brown scholars in educational spaces.

Given your expertise in English Education, I believe your insights would be invaluable in shaping my research. Your scholarship has greatly influenced my work, and I would be honored to have your guidance throughout this process.

My research aims to highlight how storytelling fosters identity development, agency, and academic engagement among marginalized students. I anticipate that committee members will provide constructive feedback on my methodology, theoretical framework, and findings to ensure the study contributes meaningfully to the field.

The responsibilities of committee members typically include reviewing dissertation drafts, providing feedback, and participating in the dissertation defense. I anticipate the timeline for completion to be [provide an estimated timeframe], with committee meetings scheduled as needed to support progress. I am happy to accommodate your availability to ensure this commitment is manageable.

Please let me know if you are willing to serve on my committee. I would be happy to discuss this further at your convenience and answer any questions you may have. Thank you for considering my invitation—I truly appreciate your time, expertise, and support.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,
David Beauzil
Doctoral Student, Department of English Education
Teachers College, Columbia University