Reading representations of themselves: Urban youth use culture and African American textual features to develop literary understandings

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How do African American students interpret literature containing "authentic" depictions of their own ethnic group? Three of my study participants, Mark, Tramira, and Lisa (all names are pseudonyms), might answer this question quite differently, depending on which narrative about African American life they read. Contextualized ways of understanding stories certainly make sense when framed by constructivist views of reading and poststructuralist literary theories. Although these students share membership in the African American community, one cannot presume that commonalities exist among each participant's cultural knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of African American life. In a similar manner, analyses of African American children's literature convey long-standing, permeable, and contested views on what constitutes an "authentic" representation of African American culture (Franzak, 2003; Harris, 1995; Johnson, 1990; Martin, 2004; McNair, 2003; Sims, 1982; Smith; 1994; Tolson, 2005). To deepen our current thinking about how readers of similar ethnicity use culture to interpret literature that represents their lives, this article summarizes a study about an eighth-grade class's responses to "culturally conscious" African American children's literature (Sims, 1982, p. 49).

After establishing the theoretical and methodological foundations of my research, I begin with findings from thematic analyses of the following novels: *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), and *The House of Dies Drear* (Hamilton, 1968). Next, I put forward categories of reader response that conceptually represent my study participants' interpretations of the

This article describes a qualitative research study that explored how a middle school case-study class read and responded to "culturally conscious" African American children's books (Sims, 1982, p. 49). First, I relied on literary analyses conducted mainly by Sims (1982) and Harris (1995) to identify African American textual features contained in three African American children's books. Second, using several theories from reader response criticism, I inductively examined how the study participants read and responded to the textual features identified. Data included 18 audiotaped literature discussions, observational field notes, and 270 written artifacts. The study provides two core findings: (1) recurring cultural themes, African American linguistic patterns, and ethnic group practices are identifiable African American textual features; and (2) participants actively use cultural knowledge, experiences, and African American textual features to develop literary understandings. These findings suggest that culturally influenced textual features have the potential to become important pedagogical tools for literacy instruction.

Este artículo describe un estudio de investigación cualitativo que exploró cómo en un aula de grados superiores objeto de un estudio de caso se leyó y respondió a libros infantiles afro-americanos "culturalmente conscientes" (Sims, 1982, p. 49). En primer lugar, me basé en análisis literarios desarrollados por Sims (1982) y Harris (1995) para identificar los rasgos textuales afro-americanos contenidos en tres libros infantiles afro-americanos. En segundo lugar, usando varias teorías de la respuesta crítica de los lectores, examiné inductivamente la forma en que los participantes leyeron y respondieron a los rasgos textuales identificados. Los datos incluyeron 18 discusiones audiograbadas sobre literatura, registros de observación de campo y 270 materiales escritos. El estudio proporciona dos hallazgos centrales: (1) los temas culturales recurrentes, los patrones lingüísticos afro-americanos y las prácticas étnicas grupales son rasgos textuales identificables y (2) los participantes usan activamente el conocimiento cultural, las experiencias y los rasgos textuales afro-americanos para desarrollar la comprensión literaria. Estos hallazgos sugieren que los rasgos textuales de naturaleza cultural tienen el potencial de convertirse en herramientas pedagógicas importantes para la enseñanza de la lectoescritura.

Dieser Artikel beschreibt eine qualitative Forschungsstudie, die untersuchte, wie eine ausgewählte Mittelschulklasse „kulturell bewußte" afrikanisch-amerikanische Kinderbücher (Sims, 1982, p. 49) las und darauf reagierte. Erstens vertraute ich auf die hauptsächlich von Sims (1982) und Harris (1995) durchgeführten Schreib- und Leseanalysen, um die afrikanisch-amerikanischen Textmerkmale, die in drei afrikanisch-amerikanischen Kinderbüchern enthalten waren, zu identifizieren. Zweitens, durch Nutzung verschiedener Theorien von der Reaktionskritik der Leser untersuchte ich induktiv wie die Teilnehmer an der Studie die angemerkten Textgrundzüge lasen und darauf reagierten. Die Daten schlossen 18 auf Tonband festgehaltene Literaturdiskussionen ein, sowie beobachtete Notizen und 270 schriftliche Aufzeichnungen. Die Studie liefert zwei Kernentdeckungen: (1) wiederkehrende kulturelle Themen, afrikanisch-amerikanische linguistische Muster und ethnische Gruppenausübungen sind erkennbare afrikanisch-amerikanische Textmerkmale, und (2) die Teilnehmer nutzten aktiv kulturelles Wissen, Erfahrungen und afrikanisch-amerikanische Textgrundzüge zur Entwicklung des Schreib- und Leseverständnisses. Diese Erkenntnisse lassen darauf schließen, daß kulturell beeinflußte Textmerkmale das Potential besitzen, wichtige pädagogische Hilfsmittel für den Schreib- und Leseunterricht zu werden.

ABSTRACTS

Reading representations of themselves: Urban youth use culture and African American textual features to develop literary understandings

Representaciones de sí mismos a partir de la lectura: Jóvenes de un medio urbano usan la cultura y los rasgos textuales afro-americanos para desarrollar la comprensión

Lesen von Selbstdarstellungen: Städtische Jugend nutzt kulturelle und afrikanisch-amerikanische Textmerkmale zur Entwicklung des Schreib- und Leseverständnisses

自分達のリーディング描写： 都市に住む若者達は、文学理解を深めるため、 文化と
アフリカ系アメリカ人のテキストの特徴を使用する

本稿は、ケーススターディーに選ばれた中学校のあるクラスが、『文化的に意識している』
アフリカ系アメリカ人の児童書 (Sims, 1982, p. 49) をどのように読み、それに対しどのように
応答するのかを探求した質的研究を叙述する。最初に、アフリカ系アメリカ人の児童書３冊
におけるアフリカ系アメリカ人のテキストの特徴を識別するため、主にSims (1982) とHarris
(1995) によって行われた文芸分析を用いた。次に、読み手応答批判の幾つかの理論を用いて、
本研究の参加者達が、識別されたテキストの特徴をどのように読み、それにどのように応答
したのかを帰納的に考察した。データには、文学に関する１８の議論の録音、観察ノート、
そして２７０の文章があった。本研究は、核となる２つの結果を提供する：（１）繰り返され
る文化的テーマ、アフリカ系アメリカ人の言語学的パターン、そして民族的集団実践は、識
別可能なアフリカ系アメリカ人のテキストの特徴であり、（２）参加者達は、文学理解を深め
るため、文化的知識、経験、アフリカ系アメリカ人のテキストの特徴を積極的に使用した。
こうした結果は、文化的に影響を受けたテキストの特徴がリテラシー指導のための重要な教
育的道具となる可能性を備えている事を示唆する。

Représentations culturelles d'eux-mêmes : utilisation de la culture et de caractéristiques textuelles afro-américaines pour le développement de la compéhension de la littérature par de jeunes urbains

Cet article présente une recherche qualitative sous forme d'étude de cas qui examine comment une classe d'une école de classe moyenne a lu et réagi à des livres de jeunesse afro-américains présentant une « conscience culturelle » (Sims, 1982, p. 49). Dans un premier temps, on s'est appuyé sur des analyses littéraires effectuées principalement par Sims (1982) et Harris (1995) pour identifier les caractéristiques textuelles afro-américaines de trois livres de jeunesse afro-américains. Dans un second temps, en utilisant plusieurs théories critiques des réactions du lecteur, on a examiné de façon inductive comment lisent les participants de l'étude et comment ils réagissent aux caractéristiques textuelles préalablement identifiées. Les données comportent 18 discussions, des relevés d'observation de terrain, et 270 travaux écrits. L'étude conduit à deux conclusions principales : (1) les thèmes culturels récurrents, les structures linguistiques afro-américaines, et les pratiques ethniques de groupe ont des caractéristiques textuelles afro-américaines identifiables, et (2) les participants se servent activement de leur connaissance de la culture, de leur expérience et des caractéristiques culturelles afro-américaines pour développer leur compréhension littéraire. Ces résultats suggèrent que les caractéristiques textuelles influencées par la culture sont des outils pédagogiques potentiels importants pour l'enseignement du littérisme.

"Чтение отражает меня": городская молодежь использует афро-американскую культуру и текстовые особенности для развития собственного восприятия литературы

В статье описывается качественное исследование, посвященное урокам литературы в средней школе, где для чтения и обсуждения были предложены афро-американские детские книги с подчеркнутой идеей национального самосознания. Во-первых, автор – на основе литературного анализа по Симсу (Sims, 1982) и Хэррису (Harris, 1995) – идентифицировал текстовые особенности трех афро-американских детских книг, характерные именно для афро-американской литературы. Во-вторых, используя некоторые положения теории "ответного критицизма читателя", автор индуктивно исследовал, как школьники читают эти тексты и реагируют на них. Собранные данные включают в себя 18 литературных дискуссий, записанных на аудиопленку, а также полевые наблюдения и 270 письменных работ. Исследование дало два ключевых результата: (1) повторяющиеся национально-культурные темы и афро-американские языковые ходы являются опознаваемыми особенностями афро-американских текстов; (2) участники исследования активно используют культурные знания, опыт и текстовые особенности, характерные для афро-американских текстов, при становлении собственных литературных понятий. Эти выводы предполагают, что культурно окрашенные текстовые особенности потенциально способны стать важными инструментами для обучения грамотности.

three novels' African American textual features. I include tables depicting the textual features as well as the reader response categories, definitions, and examples. I then share two representative pieces of data analysis to illustrate the multiplicitous nature of the participants' responses to two of the three novels. The implications of this study address literacy instruction in classrooms where culturally influenced textual features are viewed as pedagogical tools. I conclude by discussing future research directions that consider ethnically diverse readers, reader response modes, cultural knowledge and experiences, as well as African American children's literature.

Theoretical frames

This study draws on two complementary frames: the theorization of culturally conscious African American children's literature (Sims, 1982) and reader response criticism. By merging these theoretical positions, I achieve two goals. First, I underscore that we can make explicit an author's decisions about how to depict traditions, products, conventions, and discourses of culture. Second, I acknowledge a reader's ability to draw from a knowledge base or set of experiences accessible to members of a particular cultural community while interpreting literature.

Culturally conscious African American children's literature

Broadly defined, African American children's literature is written both by and about African Americans. These books constitute one of several types of multicultural literature and, admittedly, represent only a fraction of books about African American life (Harris, 2003; Martin, 2004). As mentioned in my introduction, contradictory and specialized theorizations of this type of literature currently exist. For example, within the broad category of *African American*, Sims-Bishop identified a type of story she referred to as "culturally conscious" (Sims, 1982, p. 49). Sims-Bishop (2003) preferred culturally conscious books for children because their authors recognize the genuine experiences and subtleties of African American life.

Recurring themes, systematic linguistic patterns, and defensible depictions of everyday ethnic group practices constitute several of the primary textual features that stand out in culturally conscious narratives. Vaughan-Roberson and Hill (1989) con-

tended that themes, including surviving racism, spreading African American heritage and history, living in the city, and developing racial pride, recur discursively in many children's stories about African American life. Along with thematic regularities, Sims-Bishop explained that "the most readily recognizable element of African American culture to appear in books is the accurate representation of many...structures that identify a speaker as a member of the African American community" (1990, p. 560). For instance, characters speak with various linguistic patterns ranging from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to rural dialects (Harris, 1997). To capture the subtleties and sensibilities of a culture, everyday ethnic group practices, including family activities, community events, and religious ceremonies, stand out in culturally conscious African American children's literature (Harris, 1992). These and other features frame complementary theoretical discussions about the scope and cultural markers of an African American literary tradition that is defined through adult rather than children's literature (Gates, 1988; Tolson, 2005).

Reader response criticism

While relying heavily upon the theorization of culturally conscious African American children's literature, I also situate this study theoretically within reader response criticism. As a strand of literary theory, reader response criticism focuses on the reader's role during meaning construction, and a range of perspectives exists (Beach, 1993; Marshall, 2000; Tompkins, 1980). According to Marshall, theorists are guided by their attempts to explain variations in responses. Beach grouped these theorists into five heuristic categories: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural, according to which aspects of the meaning-construction process they address. Beach carefully pointed out, however, that each category is limited by "the fact that it illuminates only a particular facet of the reader/text transaction" (p. 9). Taken collectively, textual, experiential, and cultural reader response theories provide an appropriate lens for situating this study.

Textual theorists, such as Rabinowitz (1987), emphasized the significance of narrative conventions. These conventions shape the nature of the reading experience. Although textual theorists do not diminish readers' capacities to accept, critique, question, and resist literature, textual theorists pay particular attention to authors. They acknowledge the ways authors rhetorically create stories that call for certain interpretive decisions and behaviors.

Rabinowitz, for example, argued that "authorial reading" (p. 30) occurs when readers apply appropriate rules of reading to gain defensible understandings of narrative conventions and can read as the author invited the audience to do (p. 22). In particular, Rabinowitz considered the following rules essential to any reading experience: (1) rules of notice, (2) rules of significance, (3) rules of configuration, and (4) rules of coherence (pp. 43–46).

Culturally influenced themes and distinct linguistic patterns in African American children's literature make up two essential textual features that give meaning to the term *culturally conscious.* Likewise, textual reader response theorists pay attention to how authors appropriate conventions such as themes and linguistic patterns into their narratives. Textual theorists also delineate the varied processes readers need to infer meaning from a given story (Rabinowitz, 1987). As a result, textual theorists would likely argue that culturally conscious literature cannot be fully appreciated if readers fail to pay attention to particular culturally influenced textual features. By encouraging the discursive practices characteristic of authorial reading, textual reader response theorists hope that a reader's literary understanding coincides to some degree with an author's expectations (Beach, 1993; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998).

On the other hand, experiential reader response theorists (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1982) focused on "the nature of readers' engagement or experiences with texts—the ways in which, for example, readers identify with characters, visualize images, relate personal experiences to the text, or construct the world of the text" (Beach, 1993, p. 8). Rosenblatt (1982) addressed two stances of reading: aesthetic and efferent. These stances determine readers' approaches to literature. An aesthetic stance addresses personal and experiential transactions with books, whereas an efferent stance concentrates on extracting facts, examples, and other information from reading. According to Rosenblatt, however, the stances lie on a continuum. Depending on the reader, all or part of a text can be read either aesthetically or efferently.

Experiential reader response theorists offer, I believe, a compelling argument for the increased use of African American children's books in classrooms. Because this literature allows students from African American backgrounds to "see themselves" depicted in print, the books provide opportunities for linking cultural knowledge and experiences to text worlds. Experiential theorists anticipate that readers will identify with, experience, and use cultural depictions while reading (Henderson & May, 2005; Rogers &

Soter, 1997). Readers of African American children's literature are often exposed to these stories because of the embedded cultural depictions they offer. Experiential theorists focus on the value of these life–text links.

A more contemporary view of aesthetic reading problematizes the concept of identifying with a story, however. Lewis (2000) posited that when we define aesthetic reading merely as a lived-through type of relatable experience, we deny students' abilities to extend beyond their experiential identifications to critique or simply evaluate a piece of literature. By adding another layer to the notion of textual identification, Lewis created a context for considering the varied ways children from all backgrounds might resist relating to or identifying with representations of another group in order to interpret culturally unfamiliar depictions. At the same time, fluid categories of ethnicity suggest that readers who engage with stories about their own cultures may also benefit from questioning their identifications with a text if the representations offend, silence, or contradict their cultural knowledge and lived experiences.

A growing number of reader response theorists address cultural influences on reading within a poststructuralist framework (e.g., Beach, 1995; Bleich, 1992). These cultural reader response theorists focus on how, within certain groups and institutions, "readers' attitudes and values shape their response" (Beach, 1993, p. 125). At the same time, they acknowledge that readers engage in continually negotiated and sometimes resisted cultural practices. Such practices include language and norms; ways of socializing group members; and methods of allocating authority, power, and status (Beach, 1995). Cultural response theorists also highlight cultural allegiances and ask whether competing or evolving subjectivities influence literary interpretations (Bleich). Overall, these theorists focus on whether readers respond to stories according to how they are situated in terms of ethnicity, social groups, or culture. Cultural strands of reader response criticism would critically address the ways African American readers draw from historical, discursive, ideological, and social contexts. These theorists might also consider how responses come from local and global layered systems of knowledge, values, and experiences. In a similar manner, authors of culturally conscious African American children's literature purposefully write within and about these contexts, knowledge bases, values, and experiences.

Review of related research

Both of the theoretical frames just summarized informed my research focus on reader responses to texts, African American students, and culturally conscious books. Before turning to the study itself, I now offer a review of naturalistic research on student responses to African American children's literature that collectively reveal several noteworthy findings.

Over two decades ago, Sims (1983) conducted a landmark study of a female African American reader's response to African American children's books. According to this study, depictions of African American children's experiences, lyrical and rhythmical language, resonating illustrations, and humor all contributed to the study participant's interest and engagement in the stories. Smith (1995) and Davis (2000) found very similar results. Smith discovered that African American fifth graders self-selected books and "responded to texts that had themes and illustrations that most closely mirrored their own life experience and culture" (1995, p. 571). Davis reported that a small group of African American adolescents preferred reading books about particular experiences with which they could identify, including those about African American life as well as experiences common to adolescent females. A study by McGinley and Kamberelis (1996) found that a class of African American third and fourth graders' responses to texts about African Americans and other culturally related issues linked to the development of their identities as well as their constructions of social and cultural views. These results and others (Altieri, 1993; Encisco, 2003) support the notion that we can enhance reader engagement by providing young people with stories they identify with as well as ones that validate personal experiences and ongoing constructions of social and cultural views.

African American readers do not always identify with and feel validated by African American literature, however. It is not surprising that readers experience varying degrees of influence from stories, even when the stories represent their own cultural group. A study conducted by Grice and Vaughan (1992) revealed that if African American elementary school children possessed limited knowledge of African American history, their desire to embrace books about their own ethnic group decreased. Furthermore, two research studies done with various ethnic groups showed that African American literature evoked identification as well as racial tensions when teacher and student discussions about disrupting racism occurred (Diaz-Gammati, 1995; Spears-Bunton, 1990). Regarding group identity

construction, Bleich's (1992) research also uncovered the various ways that predominantly African American ninth-grade students interpreted stories by Zora Neale Hurston. Bleich reported that students read and responded to Hurston according to perceived racial or gender memberships. These memberships, however, tended to be very fluid. The participants questioned several of the unfamiliar cultural depictions in the stories, such as "Harlem slang" (p. 9). The students also questioned the European American teachers' motives for including Hurston in the curriculum. Reports of tensions of this sort have been corroborated by the work of Moller and Allen (2000) in their study of a group of 4 fifth-grade struggling readers who responded to Mildred Taylor's *The Friendship* (1987). In this case, the African American children identified with the story and its relationship to their families and communities but avoided experiencing and thus identifying with the racism depicted through "engaged resisting" (Moller & Allen, p. 171).

Along with considering individual and group identity development, cultural validation, and the development of racial views, research conducted with African American children's literature examined connections between cultural and literary understandings. Harris (1995) explored whether infusing an elementary program with African American children's stories shaped student responses to characterization, plot, and action. Harris categorized responses to the stories by levels of engagement, perception, interpretation, and evaluation. The students' responses "centered primarily on their personal reactions, character, plot, and action" (pp. 249–251). Copenhaver (2001) searched for degrees of literary understandings by studying a group of African American readers' responses. She classified responses according to Sipe's (2000) conceptual categories of literary understanding: intertexual, analytic, personal, and transparent. Copenhaver reported "substantial evidence of literary understanding" (p. 347) and argued that students' "cultural backgrounds provided significant resources for making meaning of story" (p. 347).

From a slightly different vantage point, Rickford (1999) and Lee (1993) reported on pedagogically situated studies that explored interpretations of African American literature. Extending the question of how to develop literary understanding and analysis, both studies reveal promising pedagogical interventions. Rickford focused on identifying the comprehension gains linked to incorporating African and African American folklore and short stories into a fifth-grade class of ethnically diverse students. Rickford administered very structured

questioning protocols as a teaching tool and as a way to assess comprehension. She found that participants performed better on higher order thinking questions rather than lower order ones. Lee's (1993) investigation examined whether signifying, which is a culturally influenced linguistic pattern, could be used as a pedagogical tool to scaffold high school students' interpretation of African American literature and other canonical texts. In addition to highlighting the "positively and statistically significant" (p. 135) improvement in reading as indicated by pre- and posttest scores, the qualitative findings indicated changes in the students' discourse, increased understanding about signifying, and deepened interpretations and critiques of the literature.

Notwithstanding this prior research, there is still much work to be done. For instance, with the exception of Rickford (1999) and Lee (1993), none of the studies discussed previously included in-depth analyses of the African American literature itself that would illustrate readers' use of culturally influenced textual features. Recognizing and using textual features might prove to be an essential tool in the pedagogical scaffolding of literary understanding, as Lee (1993) and Rickford discovered. Although several studies address better understanding the relationship between students' literary understandings and African American literature, additional studies are warranted. Corroborative findings can lead to more substantial claims about the significant relationships between cultural and literary understandings. The seemingly contradictory findings of studies that address identification collectively depict the multiplicitous nature of response within just one ethnic group. These results show the need to theorize about African American readers and their interpretive processes across different dimensions of identity and contextualization.

This article reports on a study that addresses several of the research gaps mentioned previously. In particular, I aim to answer the following research questions: (1) What African American textual features are identifiable in three culturally conscious African American children's novels? (2) In discussions with their teacher and through written artifacts, how do study participants respond to the African American textual features identified in the novels?

Research methodology

Epistemology and design

I situate this case study design within a socio-constructivist epistemology (Kamberelis &

Dimitriadis, 2005). Through a bounded context of an urban middle school classroom, I describe the particular phenomenon of reader responses to culturally conscious African American children's literature (Barone, 2004; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Moreover, a socioconstructivist epistemology appropriately situates research about how participants draw from a number of different resources (i.e., cultural) to derive individual and group textual understandings. Meaning, then, is not inherent in the novels read by my study participants, but rather it emerges as students apply their backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge bases to the cultural practice of reading.

Context and participants

John Erickson Middle School (JEM; school name is pseudonym) belongs to a northeastern urban public school district in Pennsylvania. Ninety-five percent of its students are African American and 5% are Latina/o, all from low-income families. Typical of many urban schools with these demographics, JEM reports some of the lowest standardized achievement scores in its district. Study participants belonged to an eighth-grade reading class and included 16 girls and 12 boys. Of the 28 students, one self-identified as Puerto Rican and another as Dominican/African American. The remaining participants self-identified as African Americans (although the ancestry of several children is likely mixed, including Native American, Hispanic, and European lineage). Most of the participants traveled together as a cohort throughout their sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade years.

Participants were purposefully selected for this study for several reasons (Creswell, 2003). Because the students displayed various levels of literate proficiency and demonstrated a range of motivations for practicing literacy, I captured a representative range of African American middle school readers attending a school in a low-income, urban area. At the study's onset, the teacher, Rhonda Hines, an African American, was 35 years of age. Rhonda held a bachelor's degree in elementary/middle school education. She began teaching at JEM in the early 1990s. Unlike approximately half of the teachers at JEM, her tenure there lasted well over three years. Rhonda's reading curriculum consisted of an eclectic mixture of instructional activities and materials. She exposed her students to books ranging from the Goosebumps series by R.L. Stine to biographies about famous individuals such as Harriet Tubman and Anne Frank. Rhonda instructed the students through a commercially published literature antholo-

gy as well. Throughout these literacy experiences, Rhonda focused her instruction on developing reading skills and strategies, such as identifying context clues or main ideas. She also taught her students to improve literary understanding through distinguishing literary elements such as theme, point of view, foreshadowing, and characterization. She provided opportunities for participants to derive personal meanings and pleasure from reading. For example, she allowed uninterrupted silent reading, permitted varied reader response modes such as drawing and drama, and encouraged unprompted writing in dialogue journals. She also provided time in her curriculum to critique texts from various perspectives, including historical, cultural, and economic. This last aspect of her pedagogy, however, was far less developed than the others.

The literature

Rhonda, the school librarian, and I selected "culturally conscious" (Sims, 1982, p. 49) African American children's literature for the students to read. All of the books genuinely depict African American life and are of exemplary literary quality, as indicated by the authors' popularity, book reviews, and numerous awards. The books included *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), and *The House of Dies Drear* (Hamilton, 1968). Walter Dean Myers, Mildred Taylor, and Virginia Hamilton are three of the best-known African American authors of children's literature and boast well-established histories of publishing books about the lives of African American children. To avoid presenting only one image of an ethnic group to the participants, we selected a variety of stories that illustrated different time periods, family formations, geographical settings, and genres. The selection criteria allowed us to expose participants to a wide range of culturally influenced recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and ethnic group practices.

The three novels hover between sixth- and eighth-grade reading levels, and none of the participants had previously read the stories. I determined the texts' readability using the publishers' approximation and in consultation with the school's librarian and Rhonda. We used genre familiarity, probable story interest, and narrative difficulty to decide the order in which to read the novels. The eighth-grade class's reading level averaged 6.5 according to an informal reading inventory administered to participants in October of that school year. Despite its limitations, this inventory provided a starting point for matching readers with texts. We augmented find-

ings from this assessment based on Rhonda's insights and my own experiences and observations with the participants as readers and writers.

Data sources

Facilitating large-group literature discussions allows teachers to simultaneously instruct and informally assess children's understanding of books. Discussions also expose students to a wide range of perspectives that may help deepen their textual understandings (Beach & Philippot, 1999). In this study, literature discussions lasted about 30 minutes and occurred almost weekly from mid-November to April of one school year. Despite the documented advantages and disadvantages of small versus large formats, Rhonda preferred the latter because it allowed her to guide the nature and direction of the students' discussions with greater ease. The class spent approximately five to six weeks reading each novel. Rhonda read chapters with the participants as a whole class, in small groups, and in pairs, and sometimes they read silently. Several times per week, Rhonda designed part of her instruction around the novels, although my primary interest centered on the literature discussions and written responses to the stories.

The class held 18 literature discussions, each of which I audiotaped and fully transcribed. Talk during the discussions followed a pattern whereby Rhonda led and facilitated and the participants responded to her and to one another. In keeping with the categories of reader response criticism discussed earlier, her questions and prompts mainly derived from textual, experiential, and cultural perspectives (Beach, 1993). She posed planned questions and discussion starters and also facilitated the talk based on student-initiated queries and comments. Some questions and discussion starters evoked predictable responses, and others did not. Because of the teacher–student and student–student literature discussion process, collective influences shaped the data.

To ensure that students who spoke sporadically or not at all during the class discussions (about 56% participated during any given session) were fairly represented in the data, I collected 270 written artifacts, consisting of 7 to 10 responses from about 74% of the participants. Written responses were typically one to two paragraphs in length and addressed the recently read chapters. In addition, about half of the prompts asked participants to react to a wide range of issues that covered foci considered in categories of reader response criticism (Beach, 1993).

Rhonda facilitated the classroom discussions, and I assumed a participant–observer role

(Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996). In this capacity, I assisted Rhonda with developing discussion prompts and questions about the novels. I also provided regular feedback on the written artifacts. As the participants wrote their responses, they sometimes asked for my assistance. My particularly active role during times of writing likely derived from the teacher and student relationship they also shared with me. As a former teacher at JEM, I had taught this cohort of students in language arts during the previous two school years. I provided reactionary rather than leading responses to the students' requests, which often included grammatical/editorial concerns or minimal amounts of assignment clarification.

Finally, I recorded field notes during each visit. The notes were descriptive (Patton, 1990) and designed to provide a broader contextual picture of the school, classroom literacy environment, and participants' literacy experiences, because reading and responding to the African American novels constituted just one component of Rhonda's literacy curriculum. The field notes were later transferred to a computer. At this time, I also inputted interpretive and reflective comments about my observations.

Data analysis

Textual

Theories advanced mainly by the work of Sims (1982), Harris (1997), and a few others (e.g., Nikola-Lisa, 1995; Smith, 1994) guided the textual analyses. In the three selected novels, I searched for textual features from African American children's literature that have been identified and written about by the theorists just mentioned. I identified three overarching textual features: (1) *recurring themes* (culturally influenced), (2) *linguistic patterns*, and (3) *ethnic group practices*. These textual features correspond to the literary constructions of the novels. *Recurring themes* most obviously represent a literary element. *Linguistic patterns* correspond to the literary element of style (Hillman, 1999). Authors create style through characters and narrators who communicate using culturally based vernacular, syntax, and lexicon. *Ethnic group practices* cut across various literary elements depending on how they are depicted. These practices help to evoke a tone or mood, provide milieu for a particular setting, or depict a character's activities.

In keeping with a constructivist paradigm of reading, responses to the identified textual features depended on how participants interpreted the stories. My analyses did not presuppose that partici-

pants would engage in similar forms of meaning construction. By carefully selecting the literature, however, I established this possibility. As a part of the analyses, I also reviewed academic articles written about the authors of the three books and looked for corroborating evidence from published author interviews and websites.

Responses

Initial analysis of the reader response data followed a partially inductive (Patton, 1990) approach and occurred in three iterative phases. In Patton's view, an "inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data: they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (p. 306). I view my analysis, however, as partially inductive. Although the categories emerged from the data, I focused only on responses to previously identified recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and ethnic group practices. After the class completed the first book, I made an initial attempt at categorizing the students' responses. I examined all of the students' verbal and written responses and loosely arranged them into groupings. Dyson (1997) referred to categorizing as a procedure for creating "a kind of analytic vocabulary for naming and describing the children's actions and reactions" (p. 26). When the class completed the second book, I made another attempt at creating categories based on the students' responses. I paid particular attention to recurring regularities that could be formed into new categories (Guba, 1978). These categories combined with and added or deleted categories derived from the first pass through the data. After the class read the third book, I subjected the data to another level of refinement by building upon the first two passes. In the end, the categories that emerged were specific to the novels and illustrated each book's distinctive cultural and literary contributions.

To ensure trustworthiness, I obtained feedback from a colleague practicing and researching in the literacy field. She coded 20% of the data with the categories to search for confirming or discrepant examples (Erickson, 1998). After redefining and depicting some categories, we fully agreed on each category's definition and several representative examples.

In order to roughly determine which features from the literature students responded to, I conducted frequency tallies (Erickson, 1998) on units of analysis, including the general themes of written responses and "extended stretches" of conversation (Beach & Philippot, 1999, p. 4). These stretches captured a par-

ticipant's initial comment about a textual feature followed by other student comments about the same feature. I relied upon frequency counts to narrow in on the specific culturally influenced textual features that participants responded to orally or in writing. The counts did not evaluate, however, the importance of the textual features to the participants.

Definitions

I identified culture in this study in two ways. First, I defined *culture* through the African American literature by identifying recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and ethnic group practices depicted in the novels. Each book represented one cultural portrayal, among many, of the African American experience. Next, to capture participants' responses to the literature, I relied on Gutiérrez and Rogoff's (2003) conceptualization of cultural ways of learning, which addresses "how to characterize commonalities of learning approaches of individuals who are members of ethnic groups that historically have been underserved" (p. 19). My participants, although predominantly African American, shared a culture not simply because of racial classification or cultural traits, but because they engaged in a wide range of common practices and experiences in their community, school, and homes. As a result of these practices and experiences, participants used or had access to a common knowledge base and set of experiences when interpreting the literature.

Discussion of findings

African American children's literature contains identifiable, culturally influenced textual features (Harris, 1997; Sims, 1982) included by authors deliberately or because, as Walter Dean Myers described, "It's what you remember. It's your cultural fabric" (Sutton, 1994, p. 26). Author Mildred Taylor conveyed this notion when talking about the Logan family from *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976):

> Through David Logan have come the words of my father, and through the Logan family the love of my own family. If people are touched by the warmth of the Logans, it is because I had the warmth of my own youthful years from which to draw. If the Logans seem real, it is because I had my own family upon which to base characterizations. And if people believe the book to be biographical, it is because I have tried to distill the essence of Black life, so familiar to most Black families, to make the Logans an embodiment of that spiritual heritage; for contrary to what the media relate to us, all Black families are not fatherless or disintegrating. (Taylor, 1977, p. 403)

Table 1 distinguishes the culturally influenced textual features identified within the novels as an answer to my first research question. The analyses support the idea that when reading culturally conscious African American children's literature, students have the opportunity to read culture, so to speak. I summarize these opportunities next.

According to frequency tallies, among the novels' recurring themes, participants focused on (1) *forging family and friend relationships*, (2) *confronting and overcoming racism*, and (3) *surviving city life*. Regarding responses to linguistic patterns, students only considered AAVE in any depth. Within this vernacular, participants concentrated on contemporary slang. One ethnic group practice evoked great interest, *beliefs in the supernatural*. Analyzing the data consisted of generating 13 reader response categories to represent how participants made sense of the textual features mentioned above. Table 2 summarizes the findings from my second research question: How did study participants respond to the African American textual features identified in the novels?

The African American textual features and their response categories described in Tables 1 and 2 explicate the complete nature of the study. Table 3 provides brief examples of evidence to support the reader response categories constructed.

Two representative pieces of data analysis

Next, two representative pieces of data analysis illustrate participant responses to the *surviving city life* recurring theme and the ethnic group practice *beliefs in the supernatural*. The two pieces vividly demonstrate the complexities involved in how students use their own cultural knowledge and experiences to make sense of the culturally influenced textual features. In both examples, the books provided a range of different cultural access points for students to enter in the story worlds. In both examples, culture clearly intersects with literary understandings to bring forth a multiplicity of interpretive meanings.

Example 1: "Things like this do happen to people"

Walter Dean Myers, an African American author, wrote *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988). Myers received several awards for this book, the most notable of which was the Newbery Honor. A number of Myers's stories depict an African American urban experience, and teenage boys often assume the protag-

TABLE 1

AFRICAN AMERICAN TEXTUAL FEATURES IDENTIFIED IN THREE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S NOVELS

General feature	African American textual features	*Scorpions* (Contemporary realism)	*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Historical realism)	*The House of Dies Drear* (Mystery)
Recurring themes	Forging family and friend relationships	✓	✓	
	Confronting and overcoming racism		✓	✓
	Surviving city life	✓		
	Discovering history as a source of pride		✓	✓
	Valuing education		✓	✓
Linguistic patterns	African American Vernacular English	✓	✓	✓
	Southern/rural dialect		✓	✓
	Standard English			✓
	Poetry			✓
Ethnic group practices	Beliefs in the supernatural	✓	✓	✓
	Distinct character names	✓	✓	
	Everyday experiences	✓	✓	✓
	Food preparation	✓		
	Religion	✓	✓	✓
	Quilting		✓	
	Hair rituals	✓		
	Storytelling		✓	✓
	Discipline practices		✓	

Note: See Brooks (2002, 2003) for a discussion of analyses, which include multiple text examples and theoretical references to substantiate the existence of a particular African American textual feature.

onist role. *Scorpions* takes place in an urban city during the mid-1980s. Jamal Hicks, a 12-year-old African American boy, becomes profoundly affected by his urban environment and family circumstances. Eventually, he joins a gang called the Scorpions, despite warnings from his best friend, Tito. Because the book is set in an economically depressed urban context, it closely represents the social reality of my participants' daily lives. Myers artfully touches upon issues of peer pressure, the drug trade, an unjust legal system, and schooling inequities.

One of the recurring cultural themes embedded in the novel is *surviving city life*. The *surviving city life* theme fits within a long-standing tradition among African American authors who write in the urban realism genre (Whitlow, 1974) or simply about city life (Harris, 1997; Johnson, 1990; Sims, 1983). This theme addresses how characters successfully survive particular aspects of city life or make decisions that

result in tragic outcomes. Myers (1988) suggested throughout *Scorpions* that young African American males from impoverished cities indeed long to survive, but impulsive and dangerous choices often prevent them from doing so. These youth experience the economic distresses tied to living in poverty, in addition to threats of physical harm, gang involvement, and criminal activity. As the theme of *surviving city life* initially surfaces in the narrative, Jamal reflects on the eventual arrest of his brother Randy:

> Mama didn't say anything. It was like she knew that the police were coming to get Randy. It was part of living on the block, part of the walking past Mr. Evans's raggedy store, part of what their lives were about. If you were a part of the life they were living, Jamal thought, then after a while you did something and the police came and got you. (Myers, p. 117)

Myers does not idealize the *surviving city life* theme, and his characters do not all overcome their

circumstances. He focuses, rather, on the lures that do attract African American youth growing up in poor, urban areas.

Two categories capture my participants' responses to the *surviving city life* theme: (1) *uncovering motives* (examining character intentions through individual and cultural perspectives) and (2) *affirming or opposing choices* (judging the decisions made by characters in light of individual and cultural influences). In deriving these responses, their teacher did not directly solicit a thematic interpretation of the story. Because the theme of *surviving city life* mainly revealed itself through characterization, I inferred thematic understanding from participant responses to literary constructions of character.

Uncovering motives

Throughout *uncovering motives*, which is the first reader response category, many students contemplated Jamal's intentions to join the Scorpions and accept a gun from another gang member. The participants knew about gangs in their community and thus had experiential insight into the author's depiction of gang life and its apparent appeal. One of the study participants was also a known gang member. Their responses, then, partially reflect their views of these experiences. Here, the larger economic and social forces outside of the school context that regulate and maintain gang life intersected with an in-school literacy activity. Against this backdrop, several participants talked about Jamal's need for a weapon:

(1) Ronald: Jamal wanted respect, and they had to give him respect with the gun. If he hadn't pulled out the gun, Dwayne would have whooped his butt!

(2) Diane: If he pulled out a gun and said he was with the Scorpions, then people would respect him, and they won't even mess with nothing like that. Now, it's going to spread all around about the gun. He could get expelled from school, and his mom or little sister find out and he'll be in more trouble.

(3) Mark: Jamal is doing this to get respect. So that nobody will mess with him anymore because even his brother used to call him a little punk. He's doing it to get respect. He ain't really trying to get his brother out of jail!

(4) Ronald: It's all about him.

(5) Diane: Ever since he had the gun, then it wasn't about his brother no more.

TABLE 2
CATEGORIES AND DEFINITIONS OF RESPONSES TO AFRICAN AMERICAN TEXTUAL FEATURES

General feature	African American textual features	Response categories	Definitions of response categories
Recurring themes	Forging family and friend relationships	Accentuating mothers	Identifying with, respecting, and feeling sympathy for the mother character.
		Preserving sibling bonds	Considering the complexities involved in sibling/friend relationships.
		Unpacking parental responsibilities	Evaluating how well mothers and fathers or father figures carry out their parental duties.
	Confronting and overcoming racism	Sharing historical knowledge	Conveying information about ethnic groups and race relations in the past.
		Venting anger	Displaying anger about racism currently or in the past.
		Seeking or giving rationale	Focusing on the rationale behind race relations currently or in the past.
		Appreciating fairness	Expressing appreciation for ways of retaliating against or disrupting racism.
	Surviving city life	Uncovering motives	Examining character intentions through individual and cultural perspectives.
		Affirming or opposing choices	Judging the decisions made by characters in light of individual and cultural influences.
Linguistic patterns	African American Vernacular English	Translating lexicon	Providing definitions and usage of specific lexicon/slang.
		Situating language in context	Explaining how slang is accepted and used in certain social and cultural settings.
Ethnic group practices	Beliefs in the supernatural	Distinguishing viewpoints	Identifying similarities and differences between spirits and ghosts.
		Scrutinizing depictions	Judging the legitimacy of how characters reacted to ghosts.

TABLE 3
CATEGORIES AND EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO AFRICAN AMERICAN TEXTUAL
FEATURES

African American textual features	Response categories	Participant response examples
Forging family and friend relationships (Theme)	Accentuating mothers	*Scorpions*: "Jamal is sitting by the window waiting for his mother because maybe she's taking longer to get home than usual. He's worried about her.... That's something that happens in real life in many families."
	Preserving sibling bonds	*Roll of Thunder*: "I wonder why T.J. didn't say nothing about the test. Why did he let Stacey get whipped? If he was a real friend he would of said something. T.J. even lied on his own brother to make him look bad."
	Unpacking parental responsibilities	*Scorpions*: "He's [Jamal's father] not a real father because if he was then his son wouldn't be in jail and his other son wouldn't be getting beat up and stuff."
Confronting and overcoming racism (Theme)	Sharing historical knowledge	*Roll of Thunder*: "Back in the time of 1930s...things wasn't the same. We didn't have pencil, paper, chalkboards, or books. There wasn't many things that us blacks could afford."
	Venting anger	*Roll of Thunder*: "I am mad that white people were able to ride the bus.... Black people had to reuse the white people's stuff. They also had to walk to school. Black people also had to work to live on the white man's land."
	Seeking or giving rationale	*Roll of Thunder*: "White people had no reason to linch [lynch] blacks in the first place. What did they have to gain by killing off an organization of people they didn't even know about until they brought us here?"
	Appreciating fairness	*Roll of Thunder*: "I like the part when the bus got stuck inside the ditch that the children made for the bus.... Then all the whites had to walk [to school] the same as blacks. Cassie and the rest have gotten the whites back."
Surviving city life (Theme)	Uncovering motives	*Scorpions*: "Why should he [Jamal] bring a gun to school if he can fight his own battles without a gun?"
	Affirming or opposing choices	*Scorpions*: "Jamal didn't use to handle his business like that until he started hanging around with Mack. If the school finds out he will be rest [arrested]. So, I wouldn't try that [shooting someone] because I wouldn't want to go to jail."
African American Vernacular English (Linguistic pattern)	Translating lexicon	*Scorpions*: "The only time I needed an ace man was when I was in a fight.... Then my sister came."
	Situating language in context	*Scorpions*: "The difference between a Black person and white person is that when a white person says it [nigger], they mean it in a mean way."
Beliefs in the supernatural (Ethnic group practice)	Distinguishing viewpoints	*The House of Dies Drear*: "It's [ghosts and spirits] the same thing, it means the same but is just a different way of saying it."
	Scrutinizing depictions	*The House of Dies Drear*: "Why didn't they [Small family] immediately move out of the house? That didn't make any sense.... If you so scared of the ghosts why don't you just move?"

According to Ronald, Mark, and Diane, Jamal connected gaining respect to owning a gun, and needing respect surpassed Jamal's concern for his incarcerated brother. The issue of how various members of low-income African American urban communities seek respect has been well documented (Anderson, 1999). Because the participants referenced this notion of respect, their discussion extended beyond an individual/psychological interrogation of a character's motivations and the ethics underlying the use of a weapon. Shared cultural knowledge about the seriousness of gaining respect in a low-income community undergirded the students' interpretation of how Jamal approached his survival. Without this shared cultural knowledge, participants' views of Jamal's behavior may have lacked the level of sophistication needed to understand threads that weave the *surviving city life* theme through the narrative.

Janine provided another perspective on Jamal's feelings of disrespect and the need to assert oneself with a gun. By attending to symbolic meaning and, thus, adhering to a rule of signification (Rabinowitz, 1987), Janine recalled how the author portrayed Jamal as feeling small inside:

> I am now understanding why Jamal is feeling so little inside. Because of how everyone is believing whatever Dwayne says and everyone picks on Jamal with Dwayne and makes him feel even smaller. That's why now I understand why Jamal pulled a gun on Dwayne.

Janine's ability to understand Jamal's actions might be rooted in the way she sympathizes with the metaphor of feeling small inside and how surviving city life as depicted in the story involves attempts to stand up to bullies. Myers's decision to use this particular metaphor results in Janine assuming a sympathetic stance toward a soon-to-be gang member. This sympathetic stance will likely influence her views of the *surviving city life* theme.

Even though several participants recognized, as did Janine, Jamal's motivations for pulling out a weapon, some were concerned when Tito (Jamal's best friend) was forced to kill Angel (another gang member). Erica addressed the issue of killing and being killed.

> I think Jamal feels happy now because someone is taking over the murder. He feels relief because everyone says he didn't do the merder [murder]. And in another hand I think he feels sad because he know Mack didn't do it. Jamal know that Tito did all the murdering. But, Jamal feels good about hearing Mack talk about the murdering because he know Mack can tell people that he had nothing to do with it. At least Jamal didn't do it.

Now contrast Monica's critique of this event with Erica's. Monica explicitly relies on cultural knowledge that Erica does not mention in order to position Jamal's motivations contextually within broader socially and culturally produced spaces.

> Mack lied about shooting and killing Angel and just shooting Indian. I think Jamal felt relieved and scared at the same time. Because Mack is putting his own self out like that, but then maybe Mack is trying to set him up. Because when you're in the Game you can't trust no one, because maybe you know they acting like they ya best friend and they be setting you up to get killed or probably kill you themselves. So maybe he was thinking you know I can't trust Mack. You know he's taking credit for something Tito did, like it's cool or something. That ain't cool.

Monica's reference to "the Game" illustrated that she drew from a knowledge base not explicitly

mentioned in the narrative to evaluate a character's motivation on his own terms and within the social, ideological, and cultural context in which the author places him. In a display of adolescent subjectivities and affiliations, while writing about "the Game," Monica subtly altered her own linguistic style by incorporating additional features of AAVE into her response. These insertions include the verb *to be*, deletion of final letters, and contemporary lexical expressions. Because Monica was very adept at code switching from standard English to AAVE, her choice of language in this written response stood out to me. Bleich's (1992) study addresses a related issue of reading membership. In his research, ninth graders reading African American literature openly aligned themselves in membership groups around race and ethnicity. In a slightly different way, I believe that Monica's linguistic decisions allowed her to share cultural knowledge without stating a position, affiliation, or moral judgment. In this instance, Monica's decision enables her to not align herself in any way for or against gang life. By not aligning herself, she makes room for a thematic interpretation of *surviving city life* that considers the motivations of characters through both individual and cultural perspectives.

Affirming or opposing choices

The second response category, *affirming or opposing choices*, addresses the degree to which character decisions are judged to assist in the survival of city life. Also, the category recognizes that individual and cultural influences shape character decisions. Below, Cedric implicitly responded to the *surviving city life* theme by focusing on Jamal's decision making when confronting family pressures:

> The part I liked the best was when Jamal was telling Tito that he was going to run away from home because of family problems. I like this part because it's a situation where is though Jamal is making a decision where as if he's going to stand up to his problems or run away from them. Something like this has happened to me. If Jamal were my friend I would tell him the best thing to do is to work out your problems don't run away from them.

"Something like this has happened to me" refers to some type of individual experience that, perhaps, compelled Cedric to "stand up to his problems." Here the recognition of a life–text similarity is apparent as he reads from an aesthetic rather than efferent stance continuum (Rosenblatt, 1994). He apparently engages in a lived-through encounter, as evidenced by his talking back to the main character. Although he begins with his own life, Cedric leads

the parallel life–text story line back to the narrative. Students also engaged in critical examination of decision making when they read about Jamal's impending confrontation with a classmate. Another example of the *affirming or opposing choices* category manifested when one student focused on both the unlawful and social nature of fighting with guns and not fists:

> Other people would at least try to fight him. Jamal didn't use to handle his business like that until he start hanging around with Mack. If the school found out he will be rest [arrested]. So, I wouldn't try that [shooting] because I wouldn't want to go to jail.

In this writing, Devon displayed concern over Jamal's decision to threaten Dwayne with a gun for two different reasons. First, Jamal behaved out of character by confronting his challenge with Dwayne in this manner. The words "other people would at least try to fight him" suggest that it is more culturally acceptable in Devon's view to fight rather than shoot someone. The noted change in Jamal's behavior Devon recognized also signals a major shift in the plot. It is at this point in the narrative that Jamal begins to intimately align himself with the Scorpions to survive city life. Rabinowitz classified such a shift as one of several "rules of configuration" (1987, p. 44). Acknowledging rules of configuration allows readers to interpret plot patterns as the author anticipated. Leaning on a prior cultural experience of how schools respond to students with weapons, Devon also acknowledged the significant risk Jamal took by bringing a weapon to school.

As a third example of the *affirming or opposing choices* category, Bennie, the class's own gang member, responded to Jamal's risky behavior with a weapon:

> I think this book is all right because things like this do really happen to people. Some people know how to avoid [avoid] things like that and some people don't. Some people don't know when to stop. That's why I like this book.

Bennie understood firsthand Jamal's decision to become a gang member. On more than one occasion, Bennie responded to the narrative from the standpoint of why one might choose gang affiliation as a means to survive city life:

> I see young people joyning [joining] gangs to be down with people. Some people joyne [join] gangs so if they get into a fight the hole [whole] guard can fight. I see people half [have] to shoot at people just so they can get into a gang. Gangs are not that bad. Some gangs like to meet up and go places like to the movies, arcade and to have fun.

According to his teacher, Bennie's gang participation had not resulted in any bodily injury or long-term incarceration. It is possible that most of the time his gang watched movies and played video games together. Indeed, gang-life appeal can be attributed, in part, to the type of belonging its members experience through watching movies and playing video games together. At the same time, Bennie's responses to the gang in *Scorpions* might have been more independent of the textual depiction than those of other students. Although there is no data supporting this claim, he could have inserted more of his own positive attitudes about gang membership into the story's gang-life depiction. If so, Bennie may have viewed the Scorpions gang as less dangerous and coercive than other students did. Here Lewis's (2000) concerns about the limits of identification with a text apply. Does Bennie's close identification with the story prevent him from critically viewing gang life or the social, political, and historical conditions in which he and the book's main character derive? Or does this identification provide Bennie with a type of validation he seeks? Prior research examining the potential benefits of reading African American literature has certainly focused on the degree to which readers positively identify with books that reflect their own cultural experiences (Davis, 2000; Sims, 1983; Smith, 1995). According to Davis's analysis of an African American middle school girl's reading preferences, "Reading about others with similar life events, [cultural] experiences, and problems gave Nikki the assurance that she was not alone in her experiences; her experiences were validated through her reading" (p. 259).

To some degree, cultural validation is surely a worthy outcome for readers who have had fewer opportunities to see their lives represented in books (Harris, 1997). For Bennie, identifying with aspects of the narrative while relying on cultural knowledge and experiences afforded the type of validation Davis (2000) described. Bennie's identification with the story uncovered several layers of literary understandings that rested upon his own cultural knowledge and experiences. And yet questions still remain regarding the degree to which viewing representations of one's self must also include the questioning of cultural assumptions and text constructions. For instance, Bennie illustrated his perceptual conflict when he wrote, "I see people half [have] to shoot at people just so they can get into a gang. Gangs are not that bad." These seemingly contradictory stances are thematically apparent in the narrative. Indeed, it could be that Bennie recognized many similarities in the book not solely because of the gang depictions.

Instead, it appears that through the *surviving city life* theme, the author, Walter Dean Myers, brought to the surface the deeper issues Bennie grappled with as a gang member.

Example 2: "Only white people would stay in a haunted house"

Like Walter Dean Myers, the late Virginia Hamilton is a widely acclaimed author who wrote over 30 books for children. In 1992, she was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal for her entire body of work (Mikkelsen, 1995). Throughout Hamilton's career, she often chose genres that other writers of African American life overlooked, such as magical realism, science fiction, mysteries, folk tales, and myths. While writing *The House of Dies Drear* (1968), Hamilton relied heavily on her childhood memories of African American and American Indian traditions and heritage. In this novel, the Small family, which is African American, moves into a home previously located on the Underground Railroad. According to local legend, three ghosts haunt the house. Two ghosts are escaped slaves who were eventually caught and killed. The other is the white abolitionist Dies Drear, who owned the home. While Mr. Small does not believe in ghosts, his son Thomas's main concern is figuring out if they exist. After his first night in the house, Thomas believes there are ghosts living with his family. To unravel this mystery of the supernatural, he learns a great deal about African American history and culture.

An ethnic group practice I call *beliefs in the supernatural* contributes to the story's tone, mood, and plot. Hamilton portrays this practice in part through characters who believe in dream premonitions and ghosts. Here is one example.

> The twins fell into tantrums unlike anything Thomas had ever seen. They kicked their legs and flailed their arms wildly.... "You'll hurt yourselves!" Thomas warned them.... "Quiet, kids! You'll have Mama come get you!"... So you saw something?" Thomas whispered. His eyes were wide. "Something scary? Something I didn't see and couldn't take care of?" Thomas thought of ghosts. Suddenly he was afraid, not for himself but for the twins, who could see but not say. (Hamilton, 1968, pp. 43–44)

According to Sims (1982), "religious and other belief systems" are characteristic of culturally conscious African American books (p. 12). Although Sims did not mention spirits or ghosts specifically, she explained that in addition to more traditional depictions of religion, such books also refer to non-Christian beliefs. Some of these beliefs include a

second sight and the notions of "conjuring" and "mojo" (p. 72). Within African American literature for adults, a number of authors include the supernatural as an integral part of their narratives. Toni Morrison's highly regarded Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *Beloved* (1987) is one example. Scholars have documented the prevalence of beliefs in either ghosts or spirits in African American culture in general (Holloway, 1990).

I group the students' reactions to *beliefs in the supernatural* into two reader response categories. The first category, *distinguishing viewpoints*, captures how participants identified similarities and differences between spirits and ghosts. The second, *scrutinizing depictions*, refers to the ways participants judged the legitimacy of how characters reacted to ghosts.

In discussing the supernatural, students began by defending their opinions about ghosts, which were clearly derived from cultural knowledge and experiences. Thus, the first category is *distinguishing viewpoints*. While some participants admitted to believing in ghosts, others steadfastly argued their disbelief. Several students complicated this notion entirely by making distinctions between ghosts and spirits.

(1) Rhonda: Do you believe in ghosts?

(2) Students: No, no, yes, no, no, yes. [all at once]

(3) Marcus: No, because they aren't real.

(4) Kevin: There ain't no such thing as them.

(5) Tariq: Yeah, I think there's such thing as them.

(6) Rhonda: Why?

(7) Tariq: Because remember when we went into that old library? [referring to a recent class field trip]

(8) Tramira: That's spirits, not ghosts!

(9) Tariq: It's the same thing. It means the same but is just a different way of saying it.

(10) Tramira: No, Tariq, that's different.

(11) Dia: I don't believe in them because do you see them? No! Can you hear them? No! Are they around? No!

(12) Camryn: I think they are real because my cousin said that she saw my Grandma—that she came back.

This conversation extended to the students' writing activities. In their responses, several restated whether they believed in ghosts, and others clarified their perceptions of the differences between ghosts and spirits. Dia slightly changed her initial position and admitted, "I only think there are spirits and not ghosts." This discussion also sparked private conversations among participants about whether they or someone in their family had encountered a ghost.

When the class period ended, the students left the classroom sharing family stories with one another while teasing out differences between supernatural entities. To explicate the *distinguishing viewpoints* category, three different opinions about the supernatural emerged: (1) a nonbelief in ghosts or spirits, (2) a belief in spirits and not ghosts, and (3) a belief in ghosts and spirits as the same entity. Even a class field trip "into that old library" evoked varied supernatural viewpoints that manifested in an unanticipated range of responses.

To achieve a defensible understanding of the unfolding mystery in *The House of Dies Drear* (Hamilton, 1968), those participants who were skeptical of ghosts needed to suspend disbelief (as readers) to at least interpret the conflict from the narrator's point of view. Thomas, the protagonist, was only able to unravel the ghost mystery because he allowed for the possibility of supernatural occurrences. Rabinowitz (1987) would classify this feigned suspension of disbelief as playing the narrative audience (p. 95). As a reader of this novel, one must ask, "What sort of reader would I have to pretend to be—what would I have to know and believe—if I wanted to take this work of fiction as real?" (p. 96). While reading the book's first few chapters, talk and writing that aimed at clarifying the ghost/spirit depiction occurred more often than Rhonda and I had expected. This heightened need for clarification marked the participants' first observed textual tension, and an ongoing questioning of the author's expectations for the audience surfaced. Students who rejected the idea of ghosts failed to realize that when reading Hamilton's narrative they had to "go even further and pretend to abandon...reality beliefs and accept in their stead 'facts' and beliefs that even more fundamentally contradict...perceptions of reality" (Rabinowitz, p. 96). Although a number of the participants certainly exhibited nuanced and critical thinking about supernatural depictions, their views varied greatly. Early on, many participants lost interest in the narrative because the supernatural depiction contradicted their own beliefs.

Despite the disagreement about ghosts and spirits, the participants eventually conceded and referred to the supernatural representation in the narrative as ghosts rather than spirits. One point they did not concede, however, was whether the Smalls' reactions to the ghosts appeared culturally authentic and realistic. My second reader response category is thus *scrutinizing depictions*. This category describes how participants evaluated whether the Smalls' reactions to ghosts matched preconceived notions of African American behavior. Uncertainty in this area left some participants feeling that the author's portrayal of *beliefs in the supernatural* (as an ethnic group practice) came across as unrealistic.

Several participants questioned the Small family's behavior once they realized that the house was possibly haunted. Although Mr. Small's profession as a historian initially influenced his decision to buy a home that had formerly been part of the Underground Railroad, students minimized the importance of this detail. Perhaps similar to the African American children in Grice and Vaughan's (1992) study, students appeared less concerned about the Railroad's historical and cultural significance and more concerned with ghosts:

(1) Rhonda: What race is Thomas's family?

(2) Lisa: Black.

(3) Ronald: No, only white people would stay in a haunted house!

(4) Tariq: They are black but just act white.

(5) Ronald: You are racist then!

(6) Tariq: No, I'm not.

In this example, Ronald and Tariq's collective membership is questioned (lines 4–6). Bleich (1992) argued that including multicultural literature in classrooms is partially a debate over which cultural groups and memberships are acknowledged:

> It seems incontrovertible to me that each class, each group, each collection of readers that is even slightly open to fresh self-discovery must interrogate the nature of the memberships they bring to the reading experience and must examine the memberships that reading and discussion disclose through their response process. (p. 6)

When Ronald accused Tariq of being a racist, he no longer identified with Tariq's group membership because their norms about African American behavior differed. This realization established a context for both students to evaluate how they situated themselves as members of an ethnic group. Without a critical or reflective intervening comment, Ronald and Tariq did not reconsider and interrogate African American behavior. Both students contended that only a white family or a black family with white actions (as they perceived them) would live in a haunted house (lines 3, 4). As a result, within the *scrutinizing depictions* category both students relied on and attended to perceived cultural characteristics rather than incorporating into their character depictions compelling textual information that marked the Small family as African American.

Teachers often hope to rely on students' personal beliefs and "unique reservoir of public and private significances, their residue of past experiences with language and texts in life situations" (Rosenblatt, 1986, p. 123). Connecting one's cultural knowledge to the text can be viewed as a culturally validating and empowering goal. Nevertheless, according to Ronald's reasoning, a European American family would live in the haunted house but African American families would not (lines 3, 4). He and others questioned the book's source of conflict (unraveling a haunted house mystery) because behaviors of the African American family contradicted their own cultural knowledge and experiences. The students expected African American families to be frightened of ghosts or, at least, not naive enough to live with them. In Dora's view,

> I think that the family is white. White people always buy old, dark, scary houses and then they stay in the house knowing there's ghosts and monsters in there. And expect to stay alive.

Even when students did not comment directly on preconceived images of African American families, some still wondered why any family would occupy a haunted house. In Nikki's opinion, whether a ghost haunted the home or not, the family should have been cautious enough to leave.

> I don't understand how and why they continuingly [continuously] lived in a house where they heard footsteps and music and stuff. That could have been anybody. It could have been someone living up there. It could have been a person who was planning to rob them and was just waiting. They should have moved or did something.

Rather than trying to solve the mystery of the Dies Drear house, students such as Nikki chose to question the family's reasoning. Although I do not know for certain where Nikki's concerns about safety derived from, being robbed by a ghost is generally unlikely. But unusual noises in a home might certainly suggest a need to consider one's safety.

Overall, in the view of a number of participants, African Americans would be unlikely to live with ghosts. It seems that identification with a story can be linked to a student's self-perception within an ethnic group, and literary understandings are shaped as a result. Unlike the African American high school students Spears-Bunton (1990) studied, who enjoyed the "book's mystery, its language, and the vivid pictures it conjured" (p. 572), my participants appeared less absorbed by the book. Although lively discussions occurred about ghosts/spirits and the de-

finition of an African American family, a number of students shared that they were largely uninterested in the story. Because a majority of the participants concentrated so intensely on their depiction and authenticity concerns, the book's intended mysterious elements did not meet as much inquiry. Rather than solving the mystery of the Dies Drear house, many participants complained about reading it. (Other factors may have contributed to such a significant loss of interest as well, such as an unfamiliarity with the mystery genre, readability level, and peer pressure, to name a few.)

Virginia Hamilton's literary acclaim and the genuineness with which she depicted African Americans in her narratives largely speak for themselves. According to critics, her books provide authentic representations of African American families (Harris, 1992). Yet the responses from my study participants reveal that culturally conscious African American literature can be authentic and still vastly unfamiliar to today's African American middle school readers, depending on how they use culture as they read.

Summary and conclusions

It has been well established in the literacy field that readers use culture as they engage in literacy practices (Copenhaver, 2001; Lee, 2001). It is clear that the more we know about the ways students from different ethnic backgrounds respond to texts, the better informed our curricula and instruction can become. I believe that we can enhance our understanding of the reading processes through careful analysis that scrutinizes how readers from a similar ethnicity respond to salient African American textual features represented in culturally conscious African American children's literature.

In this research, analyses of the children's novels *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), and *The House of Dies Drear* (Hamilton, 1968) revealed that African American textual features are identifiable in these stories. I analyzed the books according to (a) recurring themes, (b) linguistic patterns, and (c) ethnic group practices (see Table 1). The authors of the books embedded various depictions of cultural practices into their books, and these depictions help to characterize the stories as culturally conscious African American children's literature. My first group of findings, the textual features, encompass what my study participants responded to. The second group of findings emerged from the students' responses to the textual features identified. Of

these, the five that the students responded to most frequently included three recurring themes (*forging family and friend relationships, confronting and overcoming racism,* and *surviving city life*); one linguistic pattern (AAVE); and one ethnic group practice (*beliefs in the supernatural*). I captured the students' responses to these five textual features with 13 reader response categories (see Tables 2 and 3). The reader response categories depict how students used culture to develop literary understandings.

Two representative pieces of data provided an in-depth account of 4 of the 13 categories: (1) *uncovering motives,* (2) *affirming or opposing choices,* (3) *distinguishing viewpoints,* and (4) *scrutinizing depictions.* Throughout the analysis, I illustrated how cultural knowledge and experiences contribute to students' development of a wide range of literary understandings, such as characterization, metaphor, plot patterns, theme, conflict, and author's intention. The multiplicitous nature of the students' responses provides an in-depth look at how culture contributes to the constructions and understandings of story worlds. Even for children of a similar ethnicity who read representations of themselves, cultural complexity must be acknowledged from the beginning.

Implications for practice

The textual features (recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and ethnic group practices) identified in this research can be used as a heuristic way of analyzing multicultural literature, such as African American literature. For example, just as the theme of *surviving city life* recurs in African American literature, migration is often woven into Caribbean children's literature (Bello, 1992). Or, just as African American children's literature includes ethnic group practices such as *beliefs in the supernatural,* stories written by and about Asian Americans often include references to spirits, demons, and dragons (Aoki, 1992).

Considering multicultural literature in this way conveys the notion that broad categories, such as African American children's literature, can be subcategorized into areas that might complement specific instructional goals depending on textual features. These textual features require readers to use culture when interpreting in ways specific to the story. When exposing children to the concept of literary themes, for example, a teacher might deliberately look for recurring themes that cut across multicultural books. As an alternative, teachers may select a textual feature closely tied to participants' social and cultural realities, like *surviving city life* for my study participants.

When children read, teachers have at their disposal cultural knowledge and experiences to rely and build upon during instruction. Lee's (2001) use of an AAVE linguistic pattern (signifying) depicts these types of strategies as a starting point for teaching higher levels of reading interpretation. Rickford's (1999) use of narrative structure in African American folk tales to teach questioning strategies and higher order comprehension conveys another example. As the data indicated, however, interpretations and uses of culture while reading can never be taken for granted or presumed similar, even across individuals from similar racial or ethnic backgrounds. Last, because a theme such as *surviving city life* speaks to issues prevalent in many different cultural contexts and groups, a book such as *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988) cannot be limited to just African American readers. African American literature, as well as all multicultural books, contains various entry points for students from all ethnicities. But unless we analyze books for these entry points, teachers may be limited by how they use these books pedagogically.

Study limitations and future directions

Although this study does not focus on pedagogy, Rhonda's role as the teacher in the classroom was integral to the students' accomplishments. How the students interacted with Rhonda and the types of literary scaffolding she provided required further observation and clarification. Furthermore, in terms of participant responses, the focus on African American youth and books did not allow for comparisons across different ethnicities or varied types of multicultural stories. In other words, I cannot rule out the possibility that a class of contemporary European American youth living in a low-income urban environment may have similar responses to the selected stories. This limitation, I believe, does not discount how the African American students in this study drew on their cultural knowledge and experiences to construct interpretations.

In this study, participants demonstrated specific ways of engaging with texts, but the group investigated represents only one segment of the African American student body in schools today. It is appropriate to consider how African Americans growing up in more ethnically integrated and middle class environments might interpret these same types of books. Research efforts with children and adolescents from other ethnic backgrounds will aid in comparing and contrasting how culture is used by readers when reading different kinds of multicultural literature.

Because the context created for interpretation is significant, we might also benefit from future studies that seek to understand how particular kinds of teacher questions and prompts solicit children's cultural knowledge and cultural experiences. Finally, a wider array of analysis of multicultural stories (text, digital, and oral) coupled with reader responses in forms such as dramatic, written, electronic, artistic, and music, could deepen our understanding of what multicultural literature, such as African American literature, has to offer pedagogically.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE