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The Impact of Response to Intervention on the Reading Performance of Third-Grade African American Male Students: An Action Research Study

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THE IMPACT OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION ON THE READING PERFORMANCE
OF THIRD-GRADE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS:
AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

This action research study followed Mertler's (2014) action research cycle of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting as the participant-researcher explored the impact of cultural and individualized differentiation to address the affective needs of learners within a response to intervention (RTI) framework in a third-grade classroom at Oak Park Elementary School (a pseudonym). A traditional RTI framework places the student at the center of all instruction while providing a scientific approach to meeting the needs of struggling learners (Williams, 2015a), but, as argued by Beth Harry (n.d.), simply providing evidence-based strategies to struggling students may not be enough; students also need to be engaged. Individualized differentiation approaches address not only the cognitive aspects of engagement, but also the affective level of engagement (Williams, 2015a). As stated by Hammond (2015), culturally responsive teaching serves as a means of increasing academic engagement by establishing teacher/student connections in a culturally diverse group of students. The focus of this study stems from observed "one-size-fits-all instruction" and the low performance of the identified participants on the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt *Reading Inventory*, which is the universal screening assessment used by the school district in this study. This study shows that through the application of strategies for addressing the affective domain of learning as well as the cognitive domain of learning within an RTI framework, third-grade African American boys' reading ability and engagement in reading have increased.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps between Black students and White students were first noted over forty years ago. At that time, the gap was mainly attributed to the family background of the students (Tatum, 2005). Since then, other explanations—including peer groups, culture, discrimination, heredity, and schooling—have been offered (Delpit, 2002; Hammond, 2015; Williams, 2015a).

Building on Tatum's explanation of the outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps, Mayfield and Garrison-Wade (2015) credited this gap between Black students and White students to unconscious racism. In a 2009 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, 44 states showed gaps in reading achievement for students in grade 3, and there is a national average gap of 27 points between White and Black students.

As the participant researcher in this study, I hold a non-expert positionality and am a White female from a middle-class home. I have observed that at Oak Park Elementary School (OPES; a pseudonym), students of color, particularly African American males, perform lower than their White counterparts in reading. Observations at OPES show that this problem is growing due to the rising number of African American males performing below grade level on the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt *Reading Inventory.* As defined by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2015), the *Reading Inventory* is a

research-based, adaptive student assessment computer program that measures reading skills and longitudinal progress from kindergarten through college readiness. The Lexile Framework for Reading defines "college readiness" as the ability to read independently at approximately a 1300 Lexile (MetaMetrics Inc., 2018). This assessment is administered in a roughly 30-minute, whole-group setting 3–5 times per year. The results are recorded as Lexile reading level scores. The Lexile Framework for Reading (MetaMetrics Inc., 2018) defines the Lexile framework as a scientific approach that places both the reader and the text on the same developmental scale, making it easy to connect a child with books targeted to his or her reading ability. Because this assessment is nationally normed and accepted, this study contributes to other research that attempts to identify issues related to reading instruction that have resulted in a high number of African American males reading below grade level.

To address students' needs at OPES, the school district works within a three-tiered response to intervention framework for instruction. In *An RTI Guide to Improving the Performance of African American Students,* Williams (2015a) explained that traditional intervention models such as response to intervention (RTI) are intended to prevent academic failure and intervene when students appear to be "at risk," and such students may require special education services (2015a). However, I would argue that some school districts and school systems overly rely on the response to intervention framework. The problem with this approach is that traditional RTI methods do not address the affective and cultural needs of all learners. Anderson (2009) characterized affective instruction as the teacher's ability to attend to and value the individual worth and emotional needs of each learner.

Cultural relevance is one method of attending to these affective needs. Williams (2015a) explained how the addition of cultural relevance within a traditional RTI framework should look. He added,

Considering RTI is an evidence-based method of providing appropriate instruction to all students, educators who implement CR-RTI models must pay particular attention to not only the cognitive aspects of engagement—such as processing information—but also the affective level (which deals with feelings), including creating an environment where students of color feel that they belong, feel that they are valued, and feel that relationships are as important as turning in assignments or doing well on tests. (p. 24)

Hartlep and Ellis (2012) questioned the effectiveness of the RTI framework and its ability to significantly alter academic outcomes for particular students:

RTI believes that it can fix the student's disability (or inability to learn at the rate and fluency we want) with a certain type of program, strategy, or intervention. RTI contends that the "disability," whatever it may be, is an abnormality of the student, rather than a characteristic that may be related to the learning environment—specifically at the culture of climate that we create as school leaders—or at the culturally biased instructional strategies that many teachers use. (p. 93)

They further clarified,

The dominant culture assumes that there is something wrong with the student, rather than with the educational establishment, which is causing him/her not to learn. This is precisely why the "medical model" paradigm proliferates and speaks

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to the popularity of RTI and intervention programs. Intervention programs exonerate Eurocentric biases' culpability, and maintain the *modus operandi*—which results in overrepresentation. (p. 93)

As explained by Hartlep and Ellis (2012), RTI does not include any responsive elements of instruction to address the affective domain of learning, and therefore it is not meeting the needs of children.

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice (PoP) for this action research study focused on the rising number of third-grade African American male students in the school under study who were identified as "reading below grade level" on South Carolina's standardized reading test. By failing to take a responsive approach to reading instruction and materials within the required RTI framework, teachers are not appropriately addressing the affective needs of Black boys, and consequently, the boys are not engaged in literacy instruction. Thus, I propose that most teachers are not meeting the needs of these students in terms of their literacy practices, even within the closely monitored tiers of the RTI framework.

Although data on Black boys suggest they are underperforming in reading, few studies explore why this is the case. This lack of understanding poses a major issue because, as stated by Proctor, Graves, and Esch (2012),

For African American students, difficulty acquiring early reading skills can have dire consequences, as there is evidence that lack of early literacy development is associated with inability to complete coursework in later grades, aggression and behavioral problems, and dropping out of high school. (p. 274)

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Alfred Tatum (2005) discussed the multiple barriers that stand in the way of Black adolescent males' ability to receive appropriate instruction in literacy. He noted that educators tend to focus on strategy and skill instruction but ignore "curriculum orientation, forms of pedagogy, and other factors found to be effective in increasing the reading achievement of African Americans students" (Location No. 296). I believe that this focus on strategy and skill instruction is driven by RTI, and that lack of awareness of and response to the affective domain of learning has caused the underperformance mentioned above.

Tatum further alluded to the need for responding to the affective domain of learning by stating that teachers must move beyond instruction by addressing the turmoil that many Black boys have experienced, and continue to experience, in all areas of our nation. Teachers do not know how to meet the affective needs of Black boys, and therefore Black boys are not engaged in school. Emotional and psychological scarring must be taken into consideration in order for African American males to develop an identity that is useful outside of the classroom walls (Tatum, 2005). According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013), nearly 60% of prisoners cannot read at the third-grade level.

Michelle Alexander (2012) affirmed:

For most people coming out of prison, a criminal conviction adds to their already problematic profile. About 70 percent of offenders and ex-offenders are high school dropouts, and according to at least one study, about half are functionally illiterate. Many offenders are tracked for prison at early ages, labeled as criminals in their teen years, and then shuttled from their decrepit, underfunded inner city

schools to brand-new, high-tech prisons. The communities and schools from which they came failed to prepare them for the workforce, and once they have been labeled criminals, their job prospects are forever bleak. (p. 150)

Education must be reformed to meet the needs of all learners in order to play at least a small role in stopping this pipeline from school to prison.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present action research study was to investigate the impact of RTI in collaboration with the affective domain of learning on the literacy engagement behaviors of third-grade African American boys, as measured by the International Center for Leadership in Education's *Student Engagement Checklist* and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Reading Inventory* assessment.

Research Question

The following research question was advanced for this study:

What is the impact of RTI in collaboration with the affective domain of learning on the literacy engagement behaviors of third-grade African American boys, as measured by the International Center for Leadership in Education's *Student Engagement Checklist* and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Reading Inventory* assessment?

Significance of the Study

This study was significant because the most recent *Reading Inventory* data showed extreme gaps in the literacy development of students from marginalized groups within this district. At the beginning of the year at Oak Park Elementary School, only 18% of White males entered grade 3 reading below grade level, but 51% of African

American males entered grade 3 reading below grade level. As mentioned in the Problem of Practice section of this project, few studies have explored literacy and Black males as well as the interaction of White teachers with these students. We must find ways to address the literacy needs of African American males earlier on in their school careers, and we must find a way to educate White teachers in practices that fully meet the needs of these students.

Study Rationale

As stated by Dell'Angelo (2014),

> This isn't something that gets done in diverse classrooms, or classrooms that lack diversity, or urban classrooms—or any other special category of school. It is a way of teaching and being that supports high-level thinking and learning throughout our lives. (p. 1)

Dell'Angelo suggested that when making curricular decisions, educators should consider and build upon the prior learning experiences of all students, explaining that the classroom walls are not barriers to the real world. I propose that the lack of engagement and motivation that some students display while participating in a traditional classroom setting results from a lack of appropriate instruction and not only affects students' futures in detrimental ways, but also the future of our society. This poses a major issue that our nation must resolve. Proctor, Graves, and Esch (2012) noted, "This is particularly important for African American students given that their historical and current overrepresentation in special education programs has resulted in educational outcomes that maintain social and economic stratification and marginalization for African Americans in the United States" (p. 278). I suggest, based on studies on responsive

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teaching, that exploring strategies to meet the affective learning needs of these students will not only address reading performance and engagement, but will help to remediate a major social issue as well.

<div align="center">**Action Research Methodology**</div>

My roles as both the researcher and a participant of this study made action research a suitable methodology to use. The methods chosen for this study aligned with the concept of action research as defined by G. E. Mills in Mertler (2014). As Mertler (2014) explained,

> Action Research is defined as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn. (p. 4)

A large-scale study targeting an entire district undergoing the same kind of reform would yield more generalizable results, but the results of an action research study are not intended to be generalizable (Mertler, 2014).

This study, furthermore, focused on responsive teaching to address the affective domain of learning within an RTI framework intended to increase the engagement and reading performance of African American males entering the third grade. In doing so, it used the cyclical and iterative action research process defined by Mertler (2014). This process consists of the following phases:

- Phase One: The planning stage, which consists of identifying and narrowing the topic as well as gathering information, reviewing related literature, and developing a research plan.

- Phase Two: The acting stage, consisting of implementing the plan as well as collecting and analyzing the data.

- Phase Three: The developing stage, which consists of developing an action plan.

- Phase Four: The reflecting stage, consisting of sharing and communicating the results and reflecting on the process.

Assumptions

As the participant researcher in this study, I acted under several assumptions. The first assumption was that the initial *Reading Inventory* scores were both accurate and reliable. The second assumption was that beyond lack of engagement and motivation, there were no outlying factors affecting the participants' ability to read.

Limitations

I was not able to control the consistency of attendance by the participants or outside factors that may affect learning within the classroom.

Scope and Delimitations

This study covered a six-week window of time and only 1 elementary school within a district that contains 20 elementary schools. That school was chosen due to its culturally and racially diverse population and because it had already adopted an RTI framework that had proven unsuccessful, according to results from ongoing reading

assessments. The study was limited to a maximum of 10 third-grade students from marginalized cultural groups and backgrounds.

Glossary of Key Terms

- *Action research:* Any systematic inquiry that is conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn (Mills, 2011, in Mertler, 2014, p. 4).

- *Affective domain of learning:* The domain of learning that addresses the emotions involved with learning, representing one of three domains in Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, Blomm, & Masia, 1964).

- *Response to intervention (RTI):* A multi-tiered approach to the early identification and support of students with special learning and behavioral needs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, Inc., 2016). As explained by Mary Howard (2009), "The RtI we need does not require everyone to read the same book, complete the same task, and be on the same page in scripted, whole-class sameness" (p. 21). Using an RTI framework with the identified students may not only address the cognitive aspect of learning, but also the affective level of their engagement with texts, thus leading to increased reading performance (Williams, 2015a). As stated by Hammond (2015), culturally responsive interventions increase the academic engagement and teacher/student connections of a culturally diverse group of students. According to Howard (2009), responsive interventions change

the playing field within classrooms for all students. Furthermore, Howard (2009) also believes that a more appropriate name for RtI might be "response to instruction," stating that responsive instruction is the heart of an RtI framework and that the goal of any RtI framework should be to broaden instructional alternatives in order to meet the needs of every student in every classroom.

Theoretical Framework

Response to Intervention (RTI)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was originally passed in 1975 and required a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012). Amendments to IDEA were passed in 2004, and the response to intervention (RTI) framework evolved from those amendments (Mattingly, 2014) to address outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps in education.

A traditional RTI approach has three tiers of instruction, as shown in Figure 1.1 (NWEA, 2018). Tier 1 involves the quality instruction in a general education classroom, which is given to all students (Howard, 2009). Tier 1 is most commonly referred to as "core instruction." In tier 2, the classroom teacher uses scientifically proven, data-driven interventions within the general education classroom (Howard, 2009). In tier 2, students considered to be reading below grade level receive more intentional instruction using various interventions. The final level, tier 3, includes involvement of the special education department, which occurs only after data shows that classroom interventions are not working (Howard, 2009).
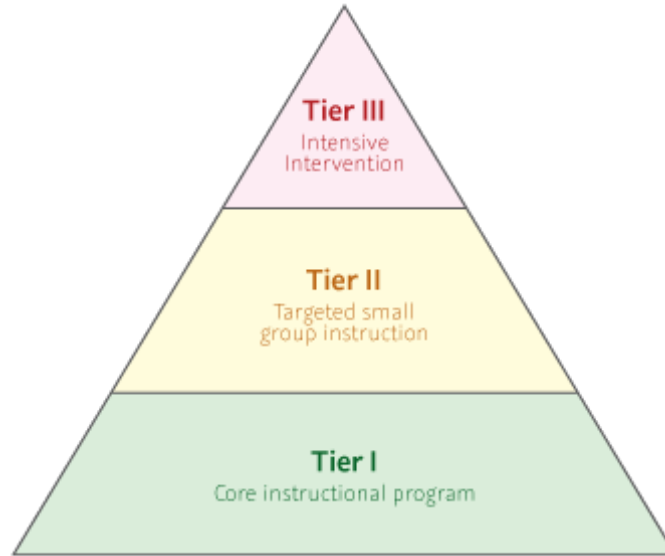
Figure 1.1. The response to intervention framework, as presented by
the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities
(2012).

Critiques of RTI

Traditional evidenced-based response to intervention (RTI) strategies do not

include strategies to address the affective domain of learning. All instruction should be

based on scientific evidence of what works in classrooms (Howards, 2009). Culturally

responsive response to intervention (CR-RTI), as well as other methods of addressing the

affective needs of learners, solve this problem of traditional RTI. CR-RTI provides

guidance on determining what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts

(Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Klinger and Edwards (2006) questioned how instruction

should vary within each tier of the RTI program regarding students with diverse

backgrounds. They explained that literacy instruction begins in the home, and that

educators should build on that foundation. I would argue that traditional RTI methods

ignore this foundation and try to work around culture and background rather than building upon it.

To further expound on this point, Klinger and Edwards (2006) stated, "To decide if a practice is appropriate for implementation as part of an RTI model, it should be validated with students like those with whom it will be applied" (p. 111). Failure to meet this expectation reveals a weakness in the validity of traditional RTI models.

Affective Domain of Learning

Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964) first explained the affective domain of learning as relating to feelings and emotions. Since that time, others have built upon this work. The affective domain is one of three domains in Bloom's taxonomy. Seels and Glasgow (1990) explain:

> The taxonomy is ordered according to the principle of internalization. Internalization refers to the process whereby a person's affect toward an object passes from a general awareness level to a point where the affect is "internalized" and consistently guides or controls the person's behavior. (p. 28)

Krathwohl et al. (1964) presented the affective domain taxonomy in five ordered stages, which increase in complexity from one through five. The first stage is *receiving*, which refers to the learner's ability to listen and pay attention, revealing a willingness to learn. The second stage is *responding*. At this stage, the learner actively participates and interacts with the learning; the learner reacts voluntarily and complies with learning. The third stage involves *valuing*. At this stage, the learner has reached acceptance and values the ideas being learned, perceiving their worth in the activity. The fourth stage of the affective domain taxonomy is *organization*, which allows the learner to prioritize the

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above-mentioned values and begin rearranging his or her own value system. Lastly, the fifth stage of this taxonomy involves *characterization*. At this final and most complex stage, the value system is internalized and affects the behavior of the learner. The values gained become part of life.

To offer an example of how the affective domain has evolved, Emdin (2017) addresses reality pedagogy. "Reality pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf" (Emdin, 2017, p. 27). Much like the work of Krathwohl et al. (1964), Emdin places value in what students bring into the classroom and situates the student as the expert in their own lives. Open discourse about where a student is academically, psychologically, and emotionally, is encouraged and becomes a part of a co-constructed classroom space in reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2017).

Conclusion

I have observed that traditional RTI methods of instruction and intervention simply do not address the affective, and therefore the academic, needs of all students. This lack of responsive reading instruction is perpetuating the academic outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps between Black and White students. These outcome differentials may occur in part due to lack of interest stemming from educators' lack of responsive practices. I propose that if responsive strategies for addressing the affective domain of learning and reality pedagogy were used within a response to intervention framework, students would be more engaged and therefore more successful with reading instruction.

Dissertation Overview

This chapter has provided an introduction of this action research study. To fully understand the response to intervention framework and the use of responsive teaching to address the affective domain of learning, this chapter has also included a theoretical framework consisting of information about the response to intervention framework as well as critiques of it. Chapter Two, the literature review, discusses the history and prevalence of the need for intervention as well as current research regarding effective strategies for preventing students from experiencing low performance in reading. Chapter Three includes a detailed description of the action research study itself and the methods used in it. Chapter Four then presents a discussion of the research findings, which is followed in Chapter Five by a summary of the study and reflections on its findings, along with next steps for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature addresses three areas of research. In the first section, I

share elements of the historical struggles with literacy that Black males have faced in the

U.S. over time and describe how our nation has forced many African Americans to

struggle with illiteracy. In the next section, I detail the schooling experiences of Black

males by explaining the opportunity gap for Black males in literacy and discussing the

so-called "outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps." In the third section, I

address how the field of education has responded to this "underachievement" in recent

years using the traditional RTI framework.

Black Males and the Historical Struggle for Literacy

Throughout history, African Americans have struggled to become literate.

Heather Williams (2009) followed this struggle by exploring what literacy meant to

enslaved people—who had to keep it a secret—as well as the contraband literacy of

African Americans during and after the Civil War, followed by the influences of African

Americans on the instructional practices of White schools. Williams (2009) explained,

"Despite laws and custom in slave states prohibiting enslaved people from learning to

read and write, a small percentage managed, through ingenuity and will, to acquire a

degree of literacy in the antebellum period" (p. 7). Strategies such as memorization of

conversations heard via eavesdropping helped enslaved people to gain information about routes to freedom.

In one instance noted by Williams (2009), a White enslaver began using letters to spell out things to his wife so that an enslaved person could not overhear them. By using the strategy of memorization, an enslaved person would be able to memorize the letters to share with a literate enslaved African, thus still allowing the much-needed information to be gained (Williams, 2009).

Perhaps the most fitting historical example of the challenges faced by Black males and literacy would be Frederick Douglas. Perry, Steele, and Hillard (2003) examined his experiences from the promising attempts at literacy instruction by Mrs. Auld, to the transformation brought about by her husband that would lead her to snatch newspapers away from him when she caught him attempting to read. Douglass was an intelligent Black man who demonstrated persistence and intensity in his desire to learn, yet the obstacles he faced seemed insurmountable at times.

However, drawing on Ladson-Billings' proposition of critical consciousness, one must note that before Douglass had the ability to read and write, he was critically literate (Ladson-Billings, 2013). That is, he understood how he was socially positioned in the world, which did not sit well with him. Being critically conscious (Ladson-Billings, 2013), Douglass had the ability to challenge the institution of slavery by orating an important speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" to a predominantly White crowd. In this speech, Douglass suggested that celebrations of American values such as liberty, citizenship, and freedom were offensive to enslaved people of the United States because of the lack of freedom, liberty, and citizenship of those groups of people.

Douglass referred not only to the imprisonment of enslaved people, but to the torture and severity to which they were subjected while enslaved.

In 1864, following the Emancipation Proclamation, a man named Elijah Marrs left the farm where he had been enslaved and enlisted as a soldier in the Union Army (Williams, 2009). Marrs had secretly learned to read and write as an enslaved child because he believed he would do something important with his life. Marrs used his literacy skills to lead 27 enslaved persons from his farm to enlist with the Union Army to fight against slavery. Eventually, because of his leadership, more than half of the enslaved population in Kentucky enlisted to fight alongside Union soldiers (Williams, 2009).

Until 1954, Blacks had to endure segregated school systems that were anything but equal. In 1954, the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that separate schools are "inherently unequal" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2004).

Following this decision, our nation continued finding ways to keep racial groups divided. "The array of forces that have divided people and landscapes in the United States, particularly since the turn of the twentieth century, is striking in its breadth: racial zoning, discriminatory home finance programs, restrictive housing covenants, legally mandated segregation, and gerrymandered school zone lines, among others," assert Highsmith and Erickson (2015, pp. 563–564).

Following the Civil War, many freedmen publicly sought opportunities to become literate (Williams, 2009). Because of the chaos and uncertainty facing them, becoming literate had grown more important than ever. Marrs, along with many others, knew African Americans still faced many challenges.

Schooling Experiences of Black Boys

Although a cursory glance at the achievement of African American males would suggest that these students are not performing in school, a closer look demonstrates that it is the educational system itself that is failing these males (Irving, 2009).

Walker (2011) explained the paradigm of deficit thinking in relation to African American males. He asserts, "Deficit thinking theory blames school failure for these students on the students' lack of readiness to learn in the classroom, the parents' lack of interest in their education, and the families' overall lifestyle" (p. 576). Milner (2017) stated, "Teachers who accept this paradigm are also saying that their methodologies, pedagogies, teaching practices, and school systems are not responsible" (p. 578). In essence, through their treatment of these students, educators who operate under this paradigm are communicating to these students and to society that these students cannot succeed unless their background, family, and culture change (Weiner, 2006).

With the paradigm of deficit thinking in mind, I address the so-called "outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps," referred to by Milner (2010) as the "opportunity gap." Ladson-Billings (2013) explain, "The notion of the outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps seems to cast blame on individual students, parents, schools and teachers without looking at the structural inequalities that have been at work since the establishment of the nation" (p. 105). This underachievement has become such a part of the educational system that we have come to expect this gap (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2013) presented this gap as an "educational debt" we owe to African Americans whom our educational system has failed. Ladson-Billings explained that this educational debt owed to minority groups includes four components: historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral.

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Further supporting the idea of educational debt, Howard (2014) explained that race and racism are endemic to our society and force Black males into a plight of "formal manifestations of racialized power" in school (p. 23). Black males are expected to be unsuccessful; therefore, many are. Moreover, Howard explained that often the successes of Black males are overlooked. He asserts,

> The reality that is frequently absent from the discourse on Black males is that not all of them are suffering and dropping out of schools, most of them are not imprisoned, many of them do experience varying degrees of success and social adjustment in schools, and many are hardworking and disciplined. (p. 18)

Howard (2014) also stated that "the normalized depiction of Black males as academic failures has become so enmeshed in the educational fabric of many schools and districts that it almost becomes alarming and inexplicable when Black male success, outside of the athletic domain, occurs" (p. 19). Black males suffering from such a plight need a reprieve. As Bryan (2016) asserted, "Black males are the most academically and socially disenfranchised and marginalized in public K–12 schools, and such disenfranchisement and marginalization are reflected in all categories of academic achievement" (p. 79). Their disenfranchisement and marginalization are reflected in all categories of academic achievement, including reading.

In his study emphasizing the abilities of young Black boys, Kirkland (2008) supported the idea that the successes of Black boys are often overlooked. "They read, but they read in ways we English teachers sometimes fail to value, respect, and acknowledge," he asserted (p. 69). A traditional RTI framework does not recognize the types of literacies some students are using. In his study, Kirkland (2008) followed,

interviewed, and observed a group of high-school-age urban Black men who, according to their test scores and teachers, should not be literate. He followed these men over the course of a three-year span of time, observing and documenting how literacy unfolded in their lives. A participant in that study illustrates this well:

> I had an attraction to English early on but was fast realizing that English standards did not look like me, sound like me, or think like me. While they represented English, the standards represented a narrow English, one that did not necessarily include me. As a result, my relationship with English was one that receded into shadows, where I never read aloud, where I never fondled books in public.
> (Shawn, as cited in Kirkland, 2008, p. 70)

Our world is changing. What is considered "English" must change as well. I propose that this shift should begin in primary school.

Kirkland (2009) also argued this point in an article entitled *The Skin We Ink: Tattoos, Literacy, and a New English Education*. In this article, Kirkland discussed a Black male he calls Derrick. Kirkland visited with Derrick twice a week for three years, to study the "unexamined human story of literacy" through Derrick's tattoos (Kirkland, 2009). Kirkland asserts that these tattoos are a form of literacy that is being ignored by teachers of English. Students are reading and writing in different ways, such as on computers, on walls of buildings, and on their skin (Kirkland, 2009, p. 375). Students are "making meaning" and "expressing thoughts" in multiple ways that are not acknowledged, even in the early grades. Building on these ideas, the present study investigated how third-grade Black boys view English standards, which seem to only reflect a narrow slice of the world in which we live (Kirkland, 2008). Kirkland (2008)

offered hip-hop as an addition to the classics studied within today's classrooms, as a method of "allowing all ELA teachers to conceive of beauty moving forward" (p. 70). Perhaps modern music will be considered classics in the future. By acknowledging these forms of literacy as acceptable, educators can begin to address the affective domain of learning within literacy instruction.

Kirkland (2015) explained, "A growing body of literature on Black male school experiences shows that being Black and male speaks almost definitively to issues of literacy underachievement" (Location No. 3428). Attempts at reform have achieved little success. Black males are more likely to be placed in special education classrooms than any other group of people (Kirkland, 2015), yet, as observed in the current study, most Black males are not underachieving; they are simply not achieving via the methods that traditional schooling uses to measure achievement. The purpose of this study is to show that traditional RTI methods simply are not meeting the needs of Black males.

In a 2006 study, Kirkland followed six Black males from urban backgrounds over the course of three years to observe how they participant with and interact with literacy. Kirkland (2006) explained the circumstances surrounding the problem of literacy underachievement in Black males by redefining literacy, both at school and in "neighborhoods." By observing and interacting with six urban Black male high school students in two English classrooms, the hallways of a high school, the lunchroom of a high school, and then in their neighborhood, he determined that people use literacy on three distinct levels: sociocultural, socio-political, and personal. The sociocultural level involves communication to one another and about their heritage. The socio-political level involves resisting social and cultural domination, and the personal level involves finding

one's self and telling one's own story (Kirkland, 2006). Kirkland showed that young Black males are in fact successfully using literacy to communicate on all three levels, just not in the traditionally accepted ways of our nation that are most commonly tested and recognized by traditional RTI methods. This finding aligns with the present study, showing that by addressing the affective domain of learning, Black males are able to communicate on all three levels beginning in elementary school.

Kirkland and Jackson (2009) followed a group of Black males ages 11–14 who called themselves "the cool kids" in inner-city Detroit. Using video records, field notes, audio transcripts, and site artifacts, Kirkland and Jackson (2009) showed that this group of Black males constructed their own version of "cool" through a set of literacy practices that represent the part of the pop culture to which they were most accustomed. In this study, Kirkland (2011) details his experience with an African American male student called Etherin. "In order for me to write, I gotta have something to brag about," Etherin explained (Kirkland, 2011, p. 188), thus demonstrating the importance of the tradition of masculine storytelling, involving rewriting one's own narrative, in his culture. Kirkland attempts to illustrate in this study how using cultural practices from outside the classroom within the classroom can allow educators to begin providing a truly equal education. By implementing strategies such as masculine storytelling, educators can begin addressing the affective domain of learning.

In addition to the lack of practices that address the affective needs of African American males, Delpit (2002) stated that African Americans are often given "permission to fail." Delpit (2002) explained that permission to fail occurs when a student is allowed to perform poorly when stubbornness is used as a ploy to distract from inability to

perform. Ladson-Billings (2002) observed a six-year-old student named Shannon who was regularly permitted to avoid work when she simply walked away. Ladson-Billings (2002) argued, "I cannot help but wonder if permission to fail was granted Shannon so easily, in part, because her cultural style, form of language, and attitude deemed her unworthy of teaching in her teacher's eyes" (p. 110). By being granted permission to fail, African American males are being pushed through the educational system and passed along, grade after grade, through the tiers of the RTI framework and into special education classrooms, never having fully learned to participate in literate societies.

Others addressing the permission to fail model, such as Williams (2015b), explained that this model—which is also called the aptitude-achievement discrepancy—does not address the needs of the learner, only the intelligence quotient (IQ) of the learner. This way of thinking allows students to fall further and further behind, until their IQ and classroom performance do not line up, and then they quality for special education services that would not have been needed if appropriate interventions had been implemented earlier (Williams, 2015b). In the current study, I suggest that based on the studies discussed in this review of literature, if educators use the term "literacy" more broadly—accepting culturally relevant literacies into their classrooms—third-grade African American males will be more engaged, and therefore more successful, in the classroom, thus decreasing the number of African American males who reach special education services due to lack of success in tiers 1 and 2 of the RTI framework.

Responses to the Opportunity Gap for Black Boys

Although efforts have been made to address the opportunity gap for Black boys— and 2015 marked the 20-year anniversary of the introduction of the culturally relevant

pedagogy (CRP), published in the *American Educational Research Journal* by Ladson-Billings in 1995—it can be argued that in many ways, the educational state of Black children remains just as dismal as it was at the time of CRP's inception (Milner, 2017, p. 2).

A report by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation in 2015 showed an increase in the performance of African Americans in the United States, although there is still much room for improvement. The report states:

> On the 2015 NAEP, only 18% of African-American fourth graders were found to be proficient in reading and only 19% scored proficient in math. The eighth grade numbers were even worse, with only 16% of African-American students rated proficient in reading and only 13% rated proficient in math. (p. 3)

The report pointed out that too many young African Americans are suffering at the hands of our educational system.

In response to the opportunity gap for Black males in California, another study observed the effects of play on literacy instruction of second-grade African American males (Plenty, 2014). In this study, five Black males participated in a six-week activity-based intervention program to promote literacy. Using interviews and observations, Plenty (2014) demonstrated that when African American males are immersed in print-rich classrooms and have the opportunity to participate in autonomous meaningful literacy activities, they develop positive reading attitudes and are more likely to read for pleasure, thus increasing their literacy skills.

RTI Approach to Opportunity Gap for Black Boys

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was originally passed in 1975 and required a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012). Amendments to IDEA were passed in 2004, and the response to intervention (RTI) framework evolved from those amendments (Mattingly, 2014) to address the so-called "outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps" found in education.

The RTI framework was intended to provide a more valid identification system for disabilities and to lead a reformation in general education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). Although variations of the model exist, several components are consistent across all variations of the RTI framework (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). The first component is a universal screening to identify students who are likely to struggle academically in tier 1, the general education classroom. Academic progress is then monitored systematically and documented so that tier 2 interventions can be implemented if progress is deemed inadequate. Progress continues to be monitored more closely during interventions, and if students still do not make adequate progress, tier 3 of the framework—special education—is provided (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017).

However, according to Hartlep and Ellis (2012), "RTI does not ask critical questions such as, Why are minority children overrepresented? And How does the current educational structure—including standardization—feed into this overrepresentation?" (p. 93). They continue, "RTI, in essence, could be labeled as merely an extension of an already Eurocentric and culturally biased batter of education processes and practices" (p. 93).

A 2010 study conducted by Sam Bouman in California focused on the traditional RTI framework via a 35-question survey of 190 school psychologists representing 142 school districts. This study reviewed traditional RTI data from participating schools over a five-year timespan. The results showed that while overall placement in special education programs decreased with the use of RTI, the disproportionality of both male and female African Americans placed in special education significantly increased while using the traditional RTI model (Bouman, 2010).

Exploration of Alternatives

In response to this underachievement and the weaknesses of the traditional RTI framework discussed previously, Williams (2015) published a book titled *An RTI Guide to Improving the Performance of African American Students.* In the book, Williams (2015) states that IDEA of 2004 and NCLB of 2001 place emphasis on scientifically based instruction to increase performance among all students. When these scientifically based instruction methods do not work, explain Hierck and Weber (2014), "The key to this step is not teaching slower and louder, but rather using an alternative instructional approach and allocating more time" (p. 7). Williams (2015) furthered this point by adding, "No matter how long we provide support, if the support is not catered to the students' sociocultural needs, interventions may not be effective" (p. 18). The 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education (as cited in Williams, 2015) reported that 40% of minority students were functionally illiterate. Students have changed. Expectations have changed. Instruction needs to change as well.

Because of noted weaknesses with traditional RTI, studies (Jordan, 2017; Plenty, 2014) have been conducted to explore other options to address the needs of African

American males. A qualitative study conducted in Philadelphia revealed educators' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of existing strategies and conditions designed to close the reading outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps of Black boys (Jordan, 2017). Eleven educators involved in the literacy instruction of third-grade African American males were interviewed over a 45-minute timespan during the months of July through October. This group included teachers, literacy coaches, and school administrators. The report concluded that positive relationships, high expectations, parental and family involvement, background knowledge, engagement, collaborative learning, equitable representation in literature, leadership roles, and deemphasis of standardized testing have proven to be effective strategies to use with African American males participating in third-grade literacy classrooms (Jordan, 2017).

Conclusion

Throughout history, systems—including our educational system—have created challenges for African Americans in terms of literacy. For over 40 years, education reformers have attempted to resolve these challenges, but they have simply replaced the existing challenges with new ones. Although more studies are being conducted at this time, little research has been done with primary-age African American males, and thus, more research is needed in this area.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the process used to answer the research question in detail. It begins with a reintroduction to the topic and purpose statement, along with the problem of practice and research question. Then, it outlines the research design. Drawing on the work of Mertler (2014), this was a mixed-methods action research study. Both qualitative data and quantitative data were used to answer the research question.

Topic and Purpose Statement

The purpose of this action research study was to evaluate the impact of additional strategies used to address the affective domain of learning within a response to intervention (RTI) framework with a group of third-grade African American male students who were identified as low-performing on the *Reading Inventory* assessment.

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice (PoP) for this action research study focused on the increasing number of third-grade African American male students in the school under observation who had been identified as "reading below grade level" on South Carolina's standardized reading test. By failing to take a responsive and affective approach to reading instruction and materials within the required RTI framework, teachers are not addressing the literacy needs of these boys, and the boys are therefore not being engaged in literacy instruction; as a result, appropriate growth is not occurring in reading for these

boys. Thus, I have proposed that most teachers are not responding to the needs of these students in terms of their literacy practices, even within the closely monitored tiers of the RTI framework. For these teachers, the framework only addresses the structure of their instruction, not the actual instruction the boys are receiving.

Although deficit research studies on Black boys suggest they are underperforming in reading, few studies explore why this is the case. This is a major issue because, as previously mentioned, Proctor, Graves, and Esch (2012) state,

> For African American students, difficulty acquiring early reading skills can have dire consequences, as there is evidence that lack of early literacy development is associated with inability to complete coursework in later grades, aggression and behavioral problems, and dropping out of high school. (p. 274)

Research Question

The following research question guided this study:

> What is the impact of RTI in collaboration with the affective domain of learning on the literacy engagement behaviors of third-grade African American boys, as measured by the International Center for Leadership in Education's *Student Engagement Checklist* and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Reading Inventory* assessment?

Research Design

Role and Positionality of the Researcher

In the tradition of action research, as the participant researcher, I served as both the researcher and a participant in the study. According to Bourke (2014):

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The nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process. (p. 1)

As a White, middle-class female teaching Black males, there are risks, and sometimes resistance, in this type of work. I must remain aware of my own privileges and powers afforded to me both historically and financially. I must also remain aware of the privileges and powers of those who enter my classroom. Keeping my privileges in check, I must constantly work to stay up to date on research and critical literature conducted with African American males.

Although traditional research views researcher involvement in a study as a threat to its validity, action research, because of its participatory nature, requires the researcher to take part in the study itself (Mertler, 2014). Therefore, guided by the research question and research design outlined below, I served in two roles: that of an action researcher and that of a classroom teacher.

Research Context

This action research study was conducted in a large, racially diverse school district in the southern U.S. consisting of 20 elementary schools, 7 middle schools, and 5 high schools. OPES Elementary School was selected for the study based on its highly diverse student population and its teaching staff that is predominantly White. At the time of this study, OPES served a population in which 58% of K–5 students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Sixty-two percent of the students reported African American heritage, yet 97% percent of the faculty claimed White American descent (see Figure 3.1).
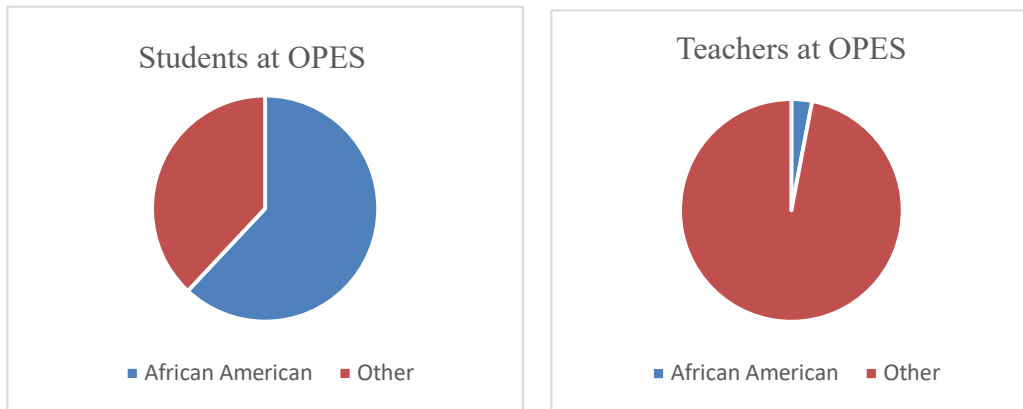
31

Figure 3.1. School demographics at Oak Park Elementary School (OPES).

Two third-grade elementary classrooms at Oak Park Elementary School (OPES) were involved in this study. The group from which I learned consists of a population wherein 69% of students claim African American heritage, with the comparison group claiming 70% African American heritage (see Figure 3.2).
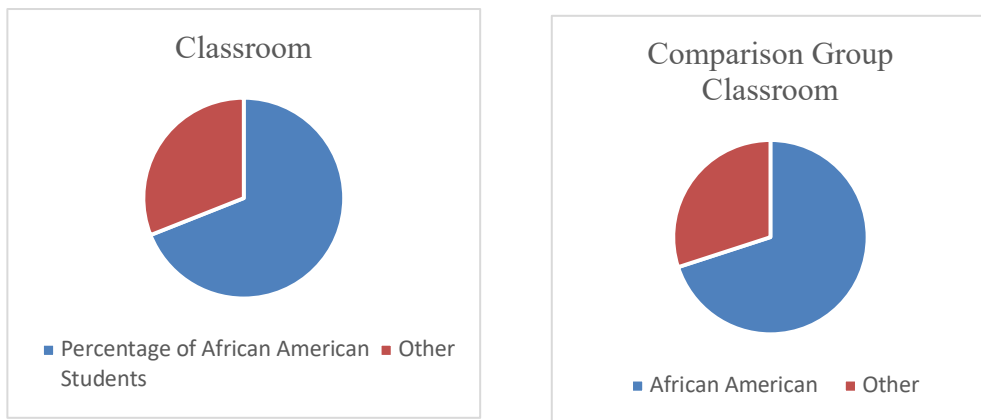

Figure 3.2. Classroom demographics at Oak Park Elementary School (OPES).

At the time of this study, OPES had six third-grade regular education classrooms, but these two classrooms were chosen for the study because of the identical RTI frameworks in place and the identical teaching schedules, which included 120 minutes for reading and writing instruction which incorporated 60 minutes allotted for reading interventions as needed. A workshop model of instruction was used in both classrooms during reading and writing instruction. Other classrooms engaged in reading and writing instruction at various times and did not use a workshop model of instruction. Both teachers involved in the study, including myself, were married White females from middle-class homes who were raised with both parents living in the home throughout childhood, further underscoring the non-expert positionality at play in this work.

Design of the Study

Mertler (2014) categorizes four phases of the action research process. As the participant-researcher, I addressed each of the following phases during this study: planning, acting, developing, and reflecting.

Planning. The first phase of action research is the planning phase (Mertler, 2014). This initial phase required identifying a problem in practice, determining a research focus, and selecting and narrowing the research question.

Evolution of the research question. As an experienced elementary school teacher of 19 years at the time of this study, I have observed significant outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps between populations of students from differing backgrounds, ethnicities, and economic statuses. In addition to these academic outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps, I have observed a lack of engagement and overall aversion for education from many of the African American male students in this

particular elementary school setting at OPES. Given this identified problem in practice, I gathered information and conducted a review of literature to investigate possible solutions to this problem. After conducting this review, I narrowed the focus of the topic to responsive instructional strategies in order to address the affective domain of learning as defined by Krathwohl et al. (1964) within a response to intervention framework.

Development of a research plan. As suggested by Mertler (2014), I then developed the following research question to guide this study:

What is the impact of RTI in collaboration with the affective domain of learning on the literacy engagement behaviors of third-grade African American boys, as measured by the International Center for Leadership in Education's *Student Engagement Checklist* and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Reading Inventory* assessment?

It was then necessary to identify interventions that would be used, and to specifically design what data would be collected and how. The interventions offered for the study included implementation of responsive reading strategies to address the affective domain of learning within tiers 1 and 2 of an RTI framework for instruction. Tier 1 involves core instruction that all students receive, while tier 2 instruction includes 30 additional minutes of temporary support to accelerate learning in order to help a lower-performing student catch up with his or her peers (Howard, 2009).

Using the work of Anderson (2009), I began the study with a strong focus on the affective domain of learning, while building up to address the cognitive needs of the students. By focusing on building relationships with the participants, their families, and their communities, I was able to begin opening the door for a willingness to learn within

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the boys, thus addressing the simplest emotional stage of the affective domain of learning: receiving.

I then worked to foster a classroom environment that addressed the affective needs of the students by removing intimidating factors within the classroom. Additional interventions to improve the classroom environment were implemented as well. I worked to set up diverse partnerships, offered choice in texts and topics for writing, and provided opportunities for leadership roles within and outside of the classroom.

During tier 1 instruction, students were allowed opportunities for choice and freedom to help them reach expectations in a manner that best suited their individual needs, which also addressed the affective needs of the students. During tier 1 instruction, the classroom supported comfort and relationships. Students were not required to work in their seats, as long as they were working. They were allowed to find a comfortable, less intimidating spot to work in, and they could even work in groups as long as each student completed his or her own work. Students had a choice of which texts to read and which topics to write about. Through assistance from administrators and grant writers, a wide range of texts were available. Options included sports magazines, car magazines, mysteries, biographies of successful African Americans, and series that include African Americans as the protagonists in the stories. One participant's knowledge of cars fascinated the rest of the students, thus allowing this student to take a leadership role with others who had an interest in cars as well.

In addition to fulfilling high expectations for academic success, students were required to be problem-solvers for themselves and others as needed, fostering their development of a sense of critical consciousness. For example, one of the student

participants was trained as the classroom technology expert to bolster the student's confidence. If a problem arose, other students had to visit him to allow him to try multiple computer "fixes" before going to the teacher if they were experiencing a technical problem, thus allowing him and others to view him as a leader in the classroom during both tier 1 and tier 2 instruction. This student was even given the opportunity to model the Read Naturally (2018, https://www.readnaturally.com/) computer-based program for other teachers in the building who were interested in how the program worked.

Students were encouraged in a supportive and caring manner. Friendships and bonds were formed through one-on-one conversations between the teacher, the participants, and the families of the participants. One participant was being raised by a single father without a high school diploma. The participant researcher worked one-on-one with the father and helped set up a working relationship that the student viewed as teamwork by inviting the father in from time to time to assist with projects that would not be intimidating but would still place him in a leadership role in the classroom. All actions of the teacher and expected outcomes were explained in a manner that took into consideration the needs and knowledge of the participants in relationship to their cultures and backgrounds, thus building a community.

After reviewing many tier 2 interventions, I determined that a program called Read Naturally (2018) would be the best option for a tier-2 intervention for the study. This program offered reports for goal-setting and motivational prompts throughout the program itself; therefore, this program constantly reinforced the high expectations and self-motivation to address the affective domain of learning. I met with each participant

prior to the start of the program, and then daily to check in and update goals. The boys were allowed to share their progress with any administrator in the building as goals were met.

During tier-2 instruction, Read Naturally (2018) allowed options for text selection as well. This program offered a selection of texts that addressed all needs and interests. Biographies based on the lives of African Americans, as well as texts on sports, science, and adventure, were among the options available.

The comparison group received no additional instruction to address their affective needs outside of the predefined curriculum.

Ethical considerations. Mertler (2014) defines research ethics as, "Moral aspects of research, including such values as caring, honesty, fairness, and openness" (p. 312), further explaining that the primary responsibility of an educator-researcher is to adhere to ethical standards. The ethical treatment of students and their data must be a component of planning a research study (Mertler, 2014). Therefore, I addressed the following principles while planning and conducting the research in order to ensure that all ethical considerations were addressed.

The first principal of ethical consideration to address is the principle of accurate disclosure, as Mertler (2014) discusses. Because the data collected in this study remained at the classroom level and would have been collected regardless of the study, school- and district-level consent was the only form of consent necessary.

The principle of beneficence, as described by Mertler (2014), states that every research project should aim to benefit someone or some group of people. After much consideration of whom this study may benefit, I concluded that it may serve as a small

beginning step toward improving the school performance of elementary-age African American male students, which would benefit that demographic group. The idea that all students should be instructed in the same way is only equitable if students are the same— and of course, no two individuals are ever exactly the same. To build upon the strengths of each child, educators need to be aware of those strengths and help the child learn to use them effectively. Teachers should probe deeply into the interests, backgrounds, parental relationships, and cultures of their students, according to Gleason (2014).

The principle of honesty described by Mertler (2014) should guide all aspects of research as well as all aspects of education. Throughout this study, I took careful steps to ensure honesty in all aspects of the study's data, analysis, participants, and purpose; this includes honesty in communicating the study's results and interacting with the participants and their parents throughout the process. Because I value objectivity, I also remained as objective as possible during the study.

The final principle described by Mertler (2014) is the principle of importance. The high number of low-performing African American male students entering the third grade at OPES reflects this study's adherence to this principal.

Acting. During this phase of action research, data that determined the effectiveness of the interventions were collected and analyzed.

Participant selection. This action research study employed a twofold selection process that took place in two third-grade classrooms at OPES using convenience sampling, due to the classroom placement of students previously identified as needing tier-2 interventions in reading. The first step in the selection process was to narrow down the list of potential participants using data from an initial reading screening assessment,

the *Reading Inventory* (RI). Selected students scored below grade level based on the *Reading Inventory* data and were African American males. In OPES' district, a student must enter the third grade with a Lexile score of 456 or higher to be considered on grade level. The second step involved use of an observational checklist obtained from the International Center for Leadership in Education (see Appendix A). This checklist was used to narrow the group even further, based on observable levels of engagement and overall motivation in the classroom. I determined that an observational score of less than 25 met the selection process criteria by suggesting that the student was "unengaged."

Sources of data collection. The data collection phase involved use of multiple sources in order to establish trustworthiness and verify the study's consistency (Mertler, 2014). More specifically, these sources included the following:

a. *Reading Inventory* data were recorded at the onset of the study as a pretest and again at the conclusion of the study as a posttest.

b. An observational checklist was used as a pretest and a posttest to determine each participant's level of engagement in the classroom.

Statistical analysis. In this step, the observational checklists were tallied and compared. Reading data charts were taken from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt to compare the pretest data with the posttest data. This step provided information that aided in answering the identified research question (Mertler, 2014).

Qualitative data analysis. In this step, visual representations via charts of the students' Lexiles scores from both their pretest and their posttest were used to analyze and report the data collected from the participants' *Reading Inventory* through tools found on the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt website. Visual representations via charts from

both the pre- and post-observational checklists were also used. Additionally, I analyzed the results of the observational checklists along with observations that I made to discuss the participation and attitudes of each participant in the group from which I learned.

Developing. According to Mertler (2014), "At the risk of sounding repetitive, developing and implementing an action plan is the aspect of conducting the type of research that really puts the action into action research" (p. 210). The initial role I fulfilled as the participant researcher in this study was that of a classroom teacher for grade 3 in a large school district in South Carolina. Having collected and analyzed the data, I intend for the results to be used to develop an action plan for grade 3–5 instruction in this school district.

Reflecting. Action research is a recursive process; it requires participant researchers to reflect on the results and often repeat the process or repeat the steps in a different order several times (Mertler, 2014). As I reflected on the findings of this study, I questioned the results, considered their implications, and worked to improve my craft and the pedagogical practices of the district involved.

<div align="center">

Summary and Conclusion

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As noted in the problem of practice for this study, the number of African American males performing below grade level at OPES is rising. As a devoted educator, I am searching for solutions to this problem. To further the goal of bridging the gap to success for African American males, I therefore developed a plan to address the affective taxonomy of learning as defined by Krathwohl et al. (1964). As I have noted, strategies were added to address not only the cognitive needs of the learners within an RTI framework, but also the affective needs of the learners. Chapter 4 of this study will

present the study's findings and interpretations of the results. Chapter 5 will then share

suggestions for further action and research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF RESULTS

Chapter Three of this study explained the methodology used to conduct this
research. Chapter Four will now discuss the findings and interpretations of the results of
the study. After a reintroduction of the study's purpose and foundation, I will explain the
findings and results, concluding with a summary of these findings.

Research Question

I sought to answer the following research question for this study:

What is the impact of RTI in collaboration with the affective domain of learning
on the literacy engagement behaviors of third-grade African American boys, as
measured by the International Center for Leadership in Education's *Student
Engagement Checklist* and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Reading Inventory*
assessment?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the impact of the
addition of strategies to address the affective domain of learning within a response to
intervention (RTI) framework on the literacy achievement of third-grade African
American male students who have been identified as low-performing on the Houghton
Mifflin Harcourt *Reading Inventory* assessment.

Findings of the Study

Using data collected from the Center for Leadership in Education's *Student Engagement Checklist* and from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Reading Inventory* pre-assessment, I selected four African American males to participant in the study and six African American males to participate as a comparison group in the study. All participants selected for the study had demonstrated lack of engagement by scoring below a 25 on the observational engagement survey and scoring below third-grade level in reading scores during pre-assessments by receiving a Lexile score below 456 on the *Reading Inventory*.

Student Engagement Findings

Engagement findings from the study group. On the Center for Leadership in Education's *Student Engagement Checklist*, on which a perfect total score equals 55 points, participant A scored 15 on the pre-assessment and a score of 38 points on the post-assessment. Participant B scored 24 on the pre-assessment, with an increased total score of 36 on the post-assessment. Participant C started with a total of 23 on the pre-assessment, while earning a total of 40 on the post-assessment. Lastly, participant D began with an engagement score of 11 and ended with an engagement score of 37. Therefore, via the observational checklist that I used throughout the study, those four participants showed increased engagement in reading after a six-week timespan during which they participated within an RTI framework centered on the affective domain of learning, as noted in the chart below (see Table 4.1).

Using the results of the observational checklist, the group from which I learned showed the highest increase in engagement in the areas of confidence and positive body

language, followed by verbal participation. Although the results did not show strong increases in clarity of learning, students were able to communicate the meaning of the work they participated in.

Data from this group were also collected via notes taken through conversations with students' parents and the students themselves. These notes show that everyone involved felt that as the teacher, I cared about their education, and that the efforts made on behalf of the students were greatly appreciated. Comments such as, "You're not like other teachers," and "You should be good to her, because she's good to you" were common in the conversational notes. In a text conversation regarding one participant's behavior, the father stated, "I talked to him. I told [him] he better be good to you because you take good care of him" (B. Green, personal communication, March 22, 2018).

Table 4.1

Study Group Engagement Checklist Results
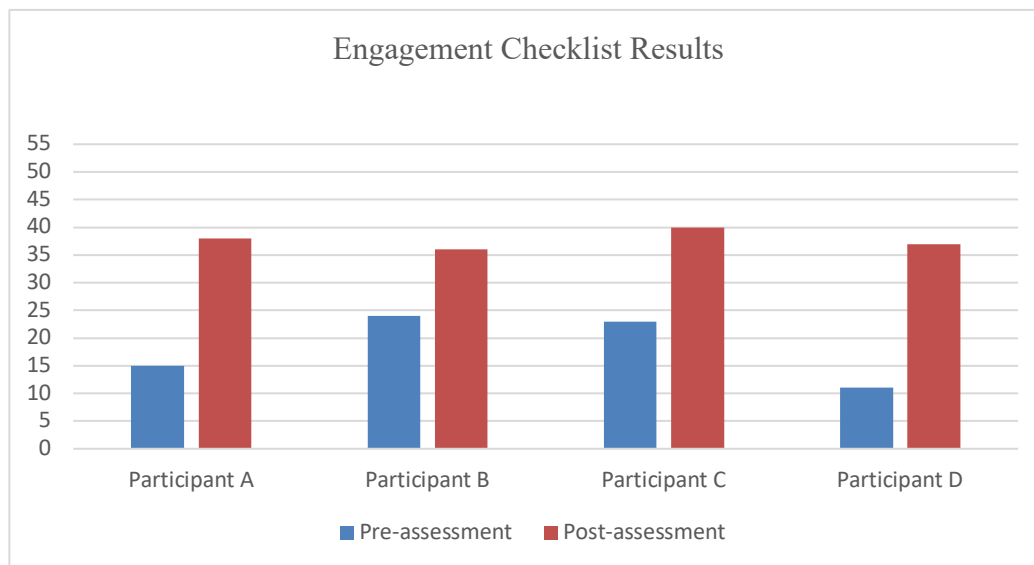
Student engagement findings from the comparison group. The data collected from the comparison group revealed a similar engagement level on the pre-assessment but very little increase on the post-assessment, with three participants actually showing decreased engagement on the post-assessment, as noted in the chart below (see Table 4.2).

Using the observational checklist, students in the comparison group showed a decrease in positive body language and verbal participation, with an additional decrease in the ability to communicate the meaningfulness of their work.

Table 4.2

Comparison Group Engagement Checklist Results
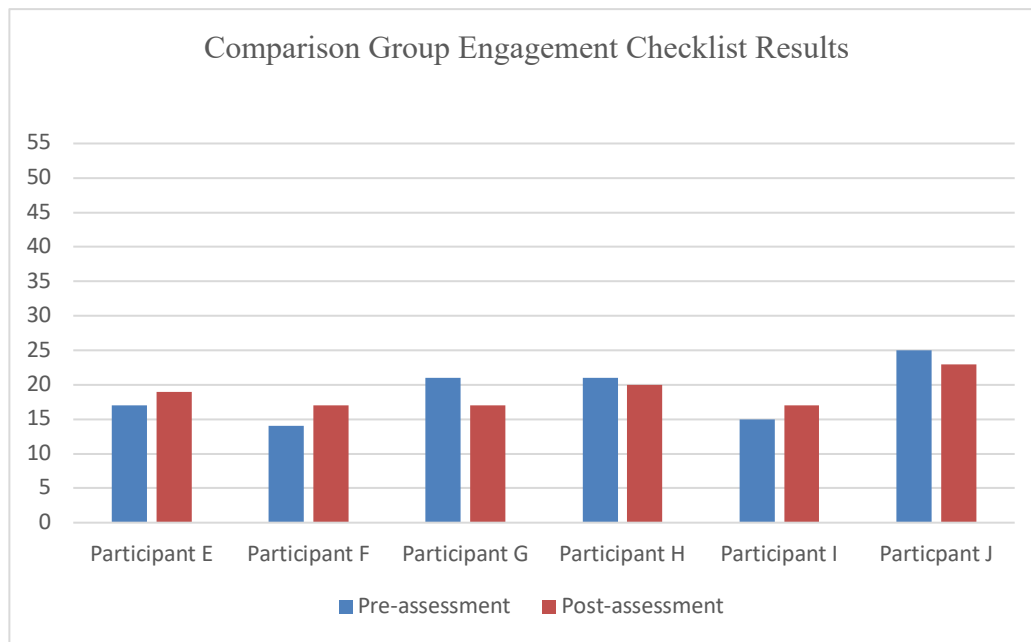
Student Reading Score Findings

        Reading scores of the study group. Data collected from Scholastic's *Reading Inventory* showed that participant A began with a Lexile score of 397 on the pre-assessment and finished with a 604 Lexile score on the post-assessment. Participant B began with a Lexile score of 235 and increased the score to 294, participant C increased his score from 65 to 363, and participant D increased from 79 to 154.

Table 4.3

Reading Growth of the Study Group in Lexiles
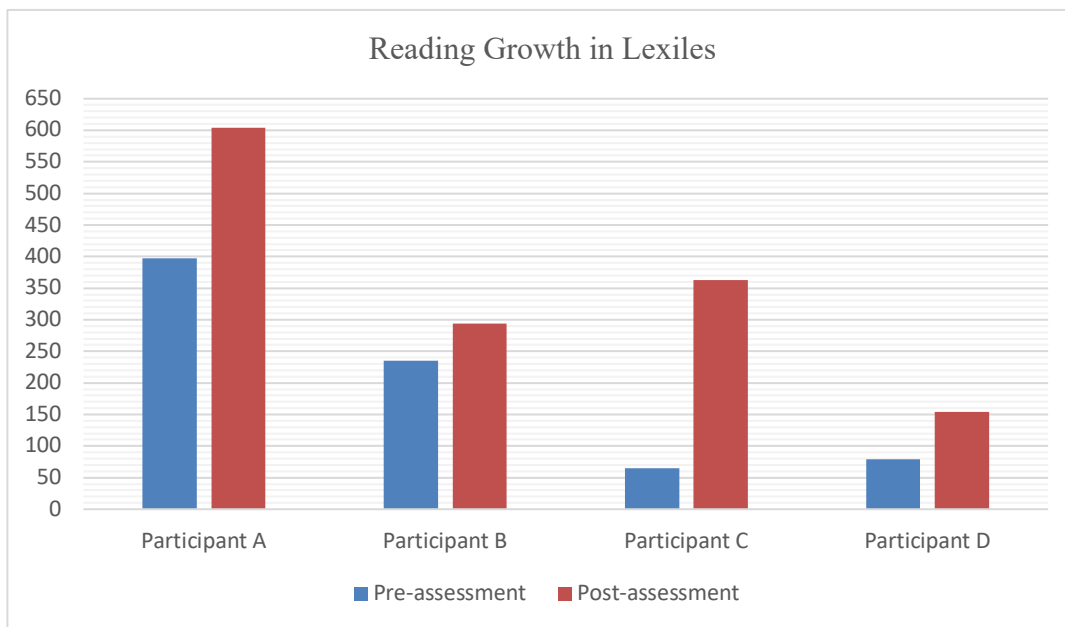
        Reading scores of the comparison group. The comparison group showed similar Lexile scores on the pre-assessment. Some participants in the comparison group showed growth in their Lexile scores. Participant E began with a pre-assessment of 265 and ended with a post-assessment of 297. Participant G began with a pre-assessment

Lexile score of 7 and rose to a post-assessment score of 67. Participant H went from a 267L to a 388L; participant I, from 315L to 375L; and participant J, from 100 to 100.

Table 4.4

Reading Growth of the Comparison Group in Lexiles

Comparison Group Reading Growth in Lexiles
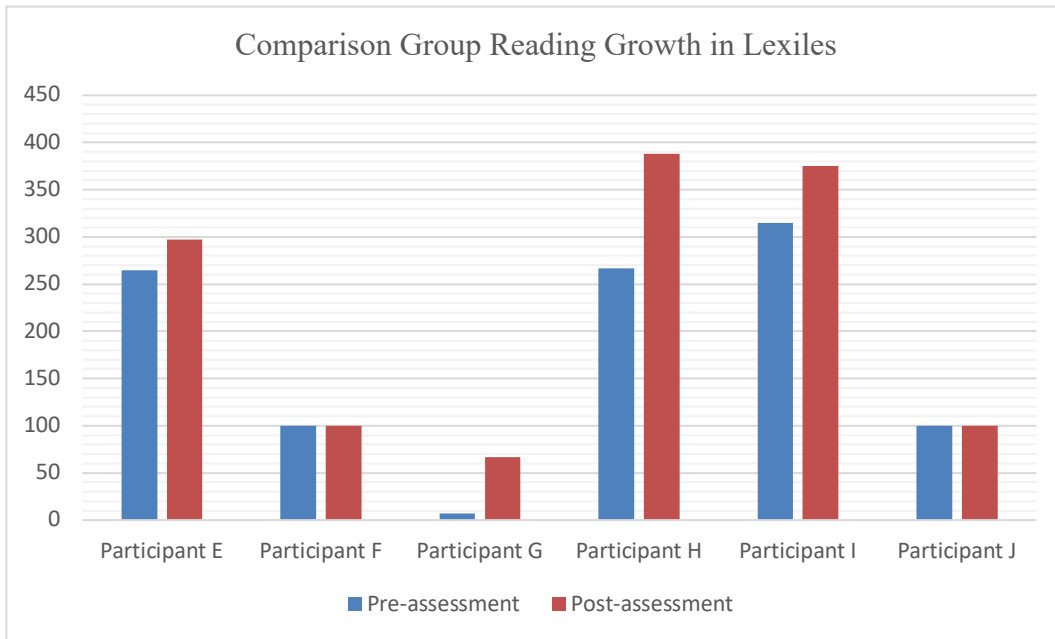
Conclusion

In conclusion, I strongly believe that addressing the affective needs of students is imperative in each classroom. The collection of data by this study serves not only as a beginning step in demonstrating that these practices increase both the engagement levels and reading scores of African American male students in the third grade, but perhaps more importantly, that there is a need for professional development in this area and specially in the area of reality pedagogy as discussed by Emdin (2017).

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This action research study followed Mertler's (2014) action research cycle of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting as I explored the impact of using additional strategies to address the affective domain of learning within a response to intervention (RTI) framework in a third-grade classroom at Oak Park Elementary School (a pseudonym). A traditional RTI framework places the student at the center of all instruction while providing a scientific approach to meeting the needs of all learners (Williams, 2015a), but as argued by Beth Harry (n.d.), simply providing evidence-based strategies to struggling students may not be enough; students also need to be engaged. Individualized differentiation approaches, such as those found in culturally relevant practices and those addressing the affective domain of learning (Krathwohl et al., 1964), address not only the cognitive aspects of engagement but also the affective level of engagement (Williams, 2015a). The focus of this study stemmed from observed "one-size-fits-all instruction" and low performance of the identified participants on the *Reading Inventory*.

Discussion of Major Points of the Study

Several major points appear in a close examination of this study. The results suggest that African American males may need teachers who address their affective needs in order for these students to become and remain engaged in the classroom. "One

size fits all" does not work in today's world. As noted by Delpit (2002), the affective needs of African Americans are not being met. Children, particularly children in subgroups, come from many different backgrounds and lifestyles, bringing with them a variety of needs. One-size-fits-all instruction cannot meet those needs.

There is risk, and sometimes resistance, in changing perspectives and pursuing social justice work. As a White, middle-class female teaching Black males, I, along with my colleagues, must remain aware of the privileges and powers afforded to us both historically and financially. We must also remain aware of the privileges and powers of those who enter our classrooms. As noted by Kirkland (2008), students are reading, just not in the ways that traditional educators accept. While keeping our privileges in check, we must constantly strive to stay up to date on research and critical literature pertaining to African American males, and we must use this research to select culturally appropriate instructional methods and materials as they become available to us.

Action Plan: Implications of the Findings

As this study's participant researcher, I feel that this research may serve as a beginning step to providing stronger strategies for classroom teachers working to improve educational outcomes for young African American males. In our classrooms, we must begin to address the affective needs of our students as well as their cognitive needs. Krathwohl et al. (1964) presented the affective domain taxonomy in five ordered stages that increase in complexity from one to five, which provides a framework for working toward this objective. The first stage is *receiving*, which refers to the learner's ability to listen and pay attention, showing a willingness to learn. As classroom teachers, we must develop relationships with our students so they will be willing to listen to and learn from

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us. Without this stage, students will not be ready or even willing to learn from us. The second stage is the stage of *responding*. At this stage, the learner actively participates and interacts with the learning; the learner reacts voluntarily and complies with learning. Because relationships have been established, students are more willing to comply with and participate in classroom activities. The third stage is *valuing*. At this stage, the learner has reached acceptance and values the ideas being shared, seeing their worth in the activity. At this point, the student becomes eager to learn, recognizing the benefits that learning affords them. The learner is then fully engaged in the learning process. At this stage, relationships with other family members play a critical role not only in reinforcing learning, but also in solidifying and supporting the bonds being formed at school. The fourth stage of the affective domain taxonomy is *organization*, which allows the learner to prioritize the above-mentioned values and begin rearranging his or her own value system. Lastly, the fifth stage of this taxonomy is *characterization*. At this final and most complex stage, the learner has internalized the value system, which in turn affects the behavior of the learner. The values gained become part of life. If the affective domain of learning is addressed within the RTI framework, students feel valued, they value the learning, and true learning can take place. Williams (2015a) perhaps explained it best:

> Considering RTI is an evidence-based method of providing appropriate
> instruction to all students, educators who implement CR-RTI models must pay
> particular attention to not only the cognitive aspects of engagement—such as
> processing information—but also the affective level (which deals with feelings),
> including creating an environment where students of color feel that they belong,

feel that they are valued, and feel that relationships are as important as turning in assignments or doing well on tests. (p. 24)

Suggestions for Future Research

The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the impact of RTI in collaboration with the affective domain of learning on the literacy engagement behaviors of third-grade African American boys, as measured by the International Center for Leadership in Education's *Student Engagement Checklist* and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Reading Inventory* assessment. As evidence from the study illustrates, more work needs to be done in this area of research. Thus, as the study's participant researcher, I have currently moved to the fourth grade with these students and am still collecting data on them. It would also be valuable to repeat this study in other classrooms with other educators and participants to find out whether future studies would yield the same results.

Additional work in the form of teacher leadership and professional development programs is also necessary and will occur as a result of this study. It is important to observe and remain aware of teacher positionality. Educators have the responsibility to intentionally select culturally appropriate instructional methods and materials that will effectively address the problem of practice identified in this study. As noted by Hammond (2015), authentic engagement is necessary in the learning process and cannot be ignored.

Suggestions for future research would include a longitudinal study following these Black boys throughout their academic careers to observe and collect data on the instructional practices used with them in the future and how those practices affect their abilities to succeed. Another suggestion would be to observe whether the addition of

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these practices in preschool could help African American males avoid the outcome differentials based on opportunity gaps rather than fighting to close the gaps later. Additionally, a study on the impact of the addition of strategies to address the affective needs of Black girls and other marginalized populations would be interesting.

Conclusion

Addressing the needs of culturally diverse students will continue to pose challenges. According to the data collected during this study, strategies to address the affective needs of students do increase engagement, thereby increasing the reading abilities of third-grade African American males, and thus offering a beginning step to closing the opportunity gaps between subgroups of students at Oak Park Elementary School.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

OBSERVATIONS

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Positive Body Language	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students exhibit body postures that indicate they are paying attention to the teacher and/or other students.

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Consistent Focus	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

All students are focused on the learning activity with minimum disruptions.

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Verbal Participation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students express thoughtful ideas, reflective answers, and questions relevant or appropriate to learning.

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Student Confidence	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students exhibit confidence and can initiate and complete a task with limited coaching and can work in a group.

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Fun and Excitement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students exhibit interest and enthusiasm and use positive humor.

PERCEPTIONS

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Individual Attention	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students feel comfortable seeking help and asking questions.

Question to Ask: What do you do in this class if you need extra help?

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Clarity of Learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students can describe the purpose of the lesson or unit. This is not the same as being able to describe the activity being done during class.

Questions to Ask: What are you working on? What are you learning from this work?

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Meaningfulness of Work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students find the work interesting, challenging, and connected to learning.

Questions to Ask: What are you learning? Is this work interesting to you? Do you know why you are learning this?

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Rigorous Thinking	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students work on complex problems, create original solutions, and reflect on the quality of their work.

Questions to Ask: How challenging is this work? In what ways do you have the opportunity to be creative?

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Performance Orientation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Students understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. They also can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated.

Questions to Ask: How do you know you have done good work? What are some elements of quality work?

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Overall Level of Student Engagement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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