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Representation, Identity, and Literacy: Why Seeing Matters for Student Success

A child opens a book and begins to read. Within a few pages, they are asked to imagine a world, a character, a life. However, none of it looks like them, sounds like them, or reflects anything they know to be true. Over time, this quiet absence sends a message louder than any words on the page: *this story is not for you*. When this pattern repeats across classrooms, it raises a critical question: What happens to a child's motivation, engagement, and identity as a reader when they are consistently left out of the story?

This question did not emerge in isolation, but through direct experience working as an instructional assistant in a Title I elementary school. While leading guided reading groups, I observed a consistent pattern: students, particularly Black and Brown children, showed greater enthusiasm, participation, and confidence when reading texts that reflected their cultural experiences. Conversely, when texts lacked representation or felt disconnected from their realities, engagement declined. These observations led to my research question: **How does representation in literacy materials impact reading motivation and engagement among Black and Brown children, and how might culturally relevant texts enhance both literacy and social-emotional outcomes?**

Research strongly supports the connection between representation and literacy engagement. In a meta-analysis of reading motivation and achievement, Rettig (2023) found that intrinsic motivation, reading driven by interest and personal connection, has a significant positive relationship with reading comprehension and overall literacy outcomes. This suggests that when students feel connected to what they are reading, their academic performance improves. Representation plays a key role in fostering this connection.

Further supporting this relationship, Hardy, Pennington, and McIntyre (2020) conducted an experimental study examining how the race of a story's protagonist affected preschoolers' engagement. Their findings revealed that children demonstrated higher levels of attention and participation when characters reflected their own racial identity. This provides measurable evidence that representation is not simply symbolic; it directly influences how students interact with text.

The importance of identity in literacy is also emphasized in the work of Gholdy Muhammad (2020), who argues that effective literacy instruction must center identity, intellect, and joy. According to Muhammad, when students see themselves reflected in curriculum, literacy becomes an affirming and empowering experience rather than one of disconnection. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts that culturally relevant pedagogy, teaching that affirms students' cultural identities, leads to improved academic success and deeper engagement. Together, these frameworks highlight that representation is not an added benefit, but a necessary condition for equitable learning.

Beyond academic engagement, representation also plays a critical role in shaping students' social-emotional development. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), in her widely cited TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, explains that limiting narratives about a group of people “robs people of dignity” and restricts how they see themselves and others. When children are only exposed to narrow or stereotypical portrayals, or excluded altogether, they may internalize those limitations. In contrast, diverse and affirming stories expand their sense of possibility and belonging.

This research underscores the need for literacy and social-emotional learning (SEL) materials that reflect the identities and lived experiences of students in underserved communities. When SEL resources fail to resonate culturally, their effectiveness is diminished. Students are more likely to engage with and internalize lessons about emotions, problem-solving, and relationships when the characters and situations feel authentic and relatable.

It is within this context that *Hayden Booth the Super Sleuth* was developed. This book series is designed to provide culturally relevant, engaging stories that center Black and Brown children in positive, affirming roles while integrating literacy and social-emotional learning. The purpose of the series is not only to improve reading engagement, but also to support identity development, confidence, and emotional intelligence through storytelling.

Importantly, the series has already been introduced to its intended audience. Through informal testing with elementary students and faculty, *Hayden Booth the Super Sleuth* has received overwhelmingly positive feedback. Students expressed strong interest in the characters and stories, with many indicating a desire for more books in the series. Faculty members

similarly noted the potential for the series to support both literacy instruction and SEL integration in the classroom. These responses reinforce the central claim of this research: when students see themselves reflected in meaningful and positive ways, they are more engaged, more motivated, and more eager to learn.

In conclusion, the relationship between representation, literacy, and student outcomes is both measurable and deeply human. Research demonstrates that culturally relevant texts increase engagement, strengthen comprehension, and support identity development. For Black and Brown children in underserved communities, representation is not optional, it is essential. *Hayden Booth the Super Sleuth* exists as a response to this need, offering stories that affirm, engage, and empower. When students are finally able to see themselves in the pages they read, the question is no longer whether they belong in the story, but how far they can go once they know that they do.