"REAL TALK":
THE PARTICIPATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN
AMERICAN YOUNG MEN IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL BOOK CLUB

BY

KIMBERLY NICOLE PARKER

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

    Professor Arlette I. Willis, Chair
    Assistant Professor Christina P. DeNicolo
    Professor Anne H. Dyson
    Professor Violet J. Harris
    Professor Theresa Perry, Simmons College

Abstract

My dissertation research examines what happens when four middle school boys of African descent gather to read a shared text in a series of classroom book clubs. I draw on sociocultural theories of literacy development (Rogoff, Gutierrez, Dyson) that present evidence of the importance of understanding literacy practices in relation to the sociocultural contexts in which literacy events occur. Based on data collected for five months (field notes, interviews, institutional and instructional documents), I consider the situated book club practices from ideological and pedagogical perspectives.

Dedicated to my grandmother, Beulah May Parker, and to my students

Acknowledgments

In the children's picture book, *Pitching in for Eubie* (Nolen, 2007), everyone in a small, rural Black family pitches in to help the oldest daughter attend college. Despite the additional strain the family faces (missing church, extra work that leaves no time for the family to eat together), no one complains and everyone helps Eubie to accomplish her dream. In that same way, I have been fortunate to benefit from a community that has pitched in for me, and has made the completion of this project possible.

First, I express my deepest gratitude for my advisor, Dr. Arlette I. Willis, who guided me through this dissertation. Professor Willis was instrumental in getting me to the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, and I know that through her dedication to excellence, I have become a better writer and a better researcher. Thanks, too, for toughening me up for the world of academia; I know that all the feedback and constructive criticism was to teach me to have the discipline to persevere, to keep figuring it out, to keep trying. I will hold those lessons dear.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

You know,
I've been wondering lately,
Trying to figure out just how it could be
That you're around me so often
And still don't know a thing about me. (Flake, 2010, 3-4)

What is required to know young Black men beyond deficits, and discourses of

failure, and endless blame? What must we know about them, about the books they read,

about the characters that matter to them, about what they think of reading, to know them?

What has taken us so long to figure out how to know young Black men? Young Black

men are struggling. Statistics about their achievement in school--as compared to their

European American peers and even in comparison to their peers of the opposite gender--

indicate how they have been underserved. However, considering only statistics fails to

take into account the complexity of the state of Blacks in public schools. Every day,

African American and Caribbean American young people balance their identities with the

different worlds they negotiate: school, home, and their lives in between (Kirkland,

2006). Often, dissonance occurs between those worlds. Considering African American

young people in monolithic terms, however, fails to recognize their distinctive identities

and personas. Coyne et. al (2007) note,

> If we take the time to listen to young Black Americans, they are willing to reveal
> the challenges they face and the strategies they deploy, not just for survival but
> with the hope of securing joy, pleasure, and progress in their lives and for the
> country. (p. 29)

More specifically, statistics about African American young men are bleak. The Schott

Foundation (2006) indicated levels of achievement for African American young men that

lagged behind their White peers. A pervasive deficit discourse surrounds Black young

men. This discourse focuses primarily on what this group of young people cannot do rather than recognizing their talents and abilities.

Background of the Problem

The statistics about African American young men and their educational achievement are discouraging. In its 2006 Annual State Report Card entitled "Public Education & Black Male Students," the Schott Foundation notes that half of the nation's African American young men do not graduate in four years, as well as the existence of a 25% gap in the graduation rates between African American young men and their White male peers (Holzman, 2006). In another report, "A positive future for Black boys: Building the movement" (Sen, 2006) the same foundation reports

> The nation increasingly recognizes the growing crisis affecting the life chances of five million Black boys in the United States. Nationwide, schools are graduating a dismal 42% of Black males who enter the 9th grade. Enormous disparities in achievement levels and graduation rates exist regardless of the family's socio-economic levels. Discrimination in school discipline and special education, among other things, has created the kind of dramatically disproportionate statistics that help build the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, Black students comprise only 17% of public school students, but 41% of special education placements, 85% of which are boys. Following this pattern to its logical end, Black men are also overrepresented in the country's criminal justice systems and prison populations. (p. 3)

Some academics have pointed out that one of the causes of this crisis in schooling is African American, and other, young men's lack of engagement with reading and the drop in their reading interest as they progress through high school (Wilhelm & Smith, 2002). Ironically, many boys and some girls who are disengaged in urban schools and have lower levels of traditional literacy, as measured by standardized tests, often excel in out-of-school literacies (Mahiri, 2004). In these external environments young men read magazines of special interest to them and participate in spoken word performances where

they write and perform original poetry. Many young men who practice out-of-school literacies find acceptance and validation from their peers and other concerned adults that they often do not receive during the course of their schooling. Some researchers have incorporated the external experiences of adolescents to in-school environment. For example, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) successfully incorporated hip-hop as a bridge between popular culture and canonical literature in a high school English classroom. The authors found that "hip-hop texts, given their thematic nature, can be equally valuable as springboards for critical discussions about contemporary issues facing urban youth" (p. 89).

Although problems about a decline in reading engagement have been identified for boys and girls (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004), public concern has tended to focus on White, middle class boys (Kindlon and Thompson, 2000; Pollack, 1999; Sommers, 2000) to the disadvantage of low income boys and boys of color (Kleinfeld, 2009; Mead, 2008). While casting boys' performance in school in the language of crisis, the researchers cited do indicate that, in terms of reading, boys lag behind girls in the areas of reading engagement and reading performance. The social nature of book clubs, as well as the opportunity to spend time with their peers, has had some success engaging adolescents in reading (Alvermann, 1999; Casey, 2009; Lapp and Fisher, 2009; Polleck, 2010), however. Adolescents' participation in book clubs indicates that book clubs might be one area where they can engage in reading; however, little research has been extended to the idea of the participation of Black young men in book clubs as an attempt to explore how such involvement influences their reading engagement.

Purpose of the Study

I was interested in what happened when African American and Caribbean American young men gathered within a classroom book club. This interest brought me to the Urban Progressive School, where I met Finesse, Marlon, Damien and Paul (All names and locations are pseudonyms). These young men helped me understand how they made sense of their schooling experiences, and how they understood and employed various communicative practices amongst themselves and with their teacher. In the process, I also was reminded that regarding this population from a deficit-based perspective severely limits understanding the complexity and proficiency these young men use to skillfully negotiate their worlds. It is to these negotiations that we must pay more attention.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how a group of Black young men participated in a middle school Humanities (English and History) classroom book club. I explored the socialization process through which their book club participation behavior was learned, the way peer group dynamics played out in this participation, and how particular kinds of literature mattered in that participation. The time is overdue to turn to young Black men to articulate their literacy experiences, and to expand our understanding about their experiences with reading.

Geographic location. This study took place at Urban Progressive School (UPS), a K-8 middle school located in a large, metropolitan city called Oceanside in the northeastern United States. (All names and locations are pseudonyms). While once a city of immigrants of largely European descent, over the last few decades, Oceanside proper has become increasingly diverse racially and ethnically. The schools reflect the changes, as most of the students attending Oceanside Public Schools (OPS) at the time of the study

were students of color. Within OPS, schools are organized into different categories, among them traditional public schools, pilot schools, charter public schools, and private schools. Of these schools, pilot and charter public schools receive more autonomy from the city and state to operate, and the academic results vary among all schools. More detailed information about OPS is contained in chapter 3.

Statement of the Problem

Some African American young men in high schools are characterized as disinterested in reading and do not view this activity as pleasurable and meaningful (Kirkland, 2006; Tatum, 2005; Wilhelm, 2002). In an urban public school setting, African American young men have not performed at consistently high academic levels and have disengaged with the canonical literature traditionally taught in high school classrooms (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Outside of classrooms, however, students may be actively engaged in discourses in which they utilize different literacies, ones defined in context and that demonstrate their active engagement and concern about the worlds they inhabit (Mahiri, 2004). This participation in literacy is often influenced and supported by peer interactions (Kirkland, 2006, 2009).

In carrying out the work in this dissertation, I explored how a group of African American and Caribbean American young men was socialized into the practice of a classroom book club. Key to both socialization and the enactment of the book club is discourse, or the language the participants used to talk about their reading. I was especially interested in how literacy events such as book clubs played a role as the participants negotiated texts, as well as their relationships with each other and the facilitator of the book club.

Within Oceanside, the achievement of young Black men is disturbing, and reflective of national trends. Oceanside has failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for students of color, low-income students, and special education students since 2003 in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. It is in corrective action for the lack of progress of these groups. Grades 3-8 of the same subgroups have not made AYP, while in grades 9-12, the subgroups that include low-income, special education, Hispanic, and limited English proficient students have not made AYP. Under corrective action, Oceanside has made no change in Mathematics, and has made some change, but still has not improved to the target in English/Language Arts.

Through this inquiry, I hope to contribute to the body of knowledge that repositions Black young men in a non-deficit perspective and opens up spaces for them to discuss their lives and literature in ways that enhance their classroom learning and achievement. This dissertation research was necessary to understand the lives of the young men who were behind the statistics, as well as to think about curriculum and instruction that can be meaningful to this group. This research was an attempt to know more about the literacy experiences of the young men at the center of this study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

I was interested in exploring relationships between young Black men and literacy. Because the relationship between self and reading is influenced by more than school-based factors, and because particular types of literacy hold more currency than others, I used a sociocultural approach to literacy to frame this study. Using this frame was appropriate because it allowed me to look closely at the "social work" conducted by the participants while members of their book club as they went about creating their own ways

of talking about a shared text with each other. A sociocultural approach to literacy development also allowed for the interrogation of values associated with literacy, primarily as those values work to devalue young men of color in classroom spaces. This framework encourages consideration of the social functions of language, and the skillful ways that the young men incorporated language in their interactions with each other, and allows for a process of understanding how they "find themselves…amidst the diverse, potentially contradiction-ridden worlds of the classroom" (Dyson, 1993, p. 18). Finally, this theory enables thinking about what sorts of environments are beneficial to encourage the development of literacy for adolescents of color.

A sociocultural approach to literacy posits that literacy must always be examined in a social and cultural context. Barlett (2007) explains, "Sociocultural approaches to literacy are integrating the concept of *identity* to think about the purposeful ways in which individuals endeavor to position themselves through (and/or in conjunction with) literacy practices in social and cultural fields" (p. 53; emphasis in original). Schools are locations where young Black men have struggled to be positively recognized and valued for their academic performance, specifically as related to reading (Tatum, 2002, 2009). However, as much as schools attempt to shape young men, young men are equally active in their shaping of schools. These shaping processes are fraught with race, gender, and class expectations; as young men of color make their ways in schools, these "figured worlds" require them to "perform" in ways that mark their success or their failure. Bartlett and Holland (2002) note,

> Particular persons are figured collectively in practice as fitting certain social identities and thereby positioned in power relations. Over time actors grow into such worlds, figuring themselves as actors in those worlds and gaining a sense of

position, their standing, in the relations of power that characterize the particular community of practice. (p. 13)

A sociocultural approach to literacy encourages the critical examination of how the participants position themselves as actors within a classroom book club, and allows me to consider power relationships in regard to race, and think about how those relationships function to shape the experience of young men of color as they attempt to become readers. I can privilege the narratives of young Black men while situating their experiences in a classroom book club within the sociocultural, historical and institutional contexts in which they are located.

Critics of a sociocultural approach to literacy assert that researchers who employ it do not "overtly address important issues of identity, agency, and power in the production of knowledge that are central to understanding literacy as a social and cultural practice" (Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2009, p. xi). It is my hope that this study has indicated some "new directions" (Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2009) when thinking about how to critically engage this theory and address those areas.

Adopting a more critical lens within the frame of a sociocultural approach to literacy does allow for the interrogation of identity, agency, and power particularly as those issues relate to the success—or failure—of young men of color attending urban schools if I expand the frame to extend to theories of Critical Race and sociolinguistics. Also, a critical lens enables me to foreground race, much in the way scholars of Critical Race Theory (CRT) foreground race. Ladsen-Billings and Tate (1995) write, "Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States" (p. 47). Also, using aspects of Critical Race Theory helps to think about how to improve the literacy experiences of young Black men in schools, rather than remain mired in deficit

discourse that repeats the same adages about what they cannot do. Solorzano and Yosso describe one tenet of CRT as "offer[ing] a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination" (p. 24). Thus, extending the theoretical frame to include CRT enables me to think about and critique how race functions within the classroom experiences of the participants, as well as how to consider solutions that engage young men in positive literacy experiences within the classroom.

Sociolinguistics considers language in use. In this study, I consider how sociolinguistics can be used to think about how young Black men's use of language affects their interactions with each other and their teachers. Foster (1992) notes the importance of research that examines

> The contextually specific nature of language use, that is, how the various settings or contexts—classrooms, churches, and courtrooms—affect the way language is used, and the demonstration, moreover, that far from being a neutral setting, the classroom is a context with its own specific cultural and communication norms. (p. 304)

Drawing on sociolinguistics allows for understanding the pragmatics of the language the participants employ in their interactions with each other. Rickford & Rickford (2000) assert that African American Language is "dynamic and variable" and "speakers deploy it to greater or lesser extents to delineate identity, to mark differences of social class, gender, and age, and to express how comfortable they are with their audiences and topics" (p. 128). Considering how the participants employ African American Language allows for another layer of analysis that reflects their positioning with each other and their teacher, and how they use language to express the text they read.

A sociocultural approach to literacy also provides a way for looking at how students are taught—and expected to learn—school-based discourses, that may/not create

successful outcomes. Young Black men are often faulted for their inability to follow rules and are punished at alarming rates. A sociocultural approach to literacy, however, offers the potential for critically thinking about how teachers and others help and hinder the efforts of young Black men to learn what a particular context deems an "appropriate" discourse. Moreover, a sociocultural approach to literacy also allows for thinking about how teachers and others charged with academic responsibility for young Black men are socializing students into cultures of achievement or cultures of failure. Delpit (1988) documents the achievements of notable Black male academics that had teachers who taught them to master academic discourses. That mastery, and the teachers' commitment to the students, were the factors these academics attributed to their success. Knowing that young Black men need to acquire fluency in the standard code, a sociocultural frame of literacy allows me to look at whether or not opportunities exist in a classroom book club for young Black men to attain competency around literacy. Because my interest is in how young men make sense of those relationships and interactions within a classroom book club, a sociocultural approach to literacy is appropriate for this study; however, it is my hope that I can engage the theory in the more critical ways demanded by critics.

Conceptual Framework

I subscribe to Dyson's working definition of literacy (who borrows Vygotsky's notion of "tool" and Bakhtin's notion of "dialogue"). Vygotsky (1986) asserts, "The primary function of speech, in both children and adults, is communication, social contact" (p. 34). Futher, Vygotsky contends, "…speech becomes gradually intellectualized and starts serving as a mediator in purposive activity and in planning complex actions" (p. 39). Literacy—including acts of literacy—is a form of

communication that serves a particular purpose, an extension of action for a purpose as described by Wertsch (1991) who claims, "Human beings are viewed as coming into contact with, and creating, their surroundings as well as themselves through the actions in which they engage" (p. 8). Dyson states, "Literacy is using, in a deliberate way, a cultural tool that has a symbolic function to engage in social dialogue" (November 2006, class notes). Given this definition, a question that frames this study becomes, first, what are the cultural tools Black young men have at their disposal, and second, how do such tools shape the social dialogue within which these young men find themselves?

Furthermore, Dyson's definition implies a broad definition of literacy. Kirkland and Jackson (2009) apply the importance of a broad notion of literacy to adolescents, when they write, "Youth, in particular, practice literacy by weaving together identities and common world views" (p. 279). The International Reading Association reinforces the specific needs of adolescents and the importance of accommodating those needs as related to literacy in its position statement (Moore et. al., 1999).

> Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. (p. 3)

Adolescents draw from a broad array of media and various symbolically mediated social dialogues to construct their worlds, including television, cell phones, computers, video games, magazines, and much more. These media and associated genres cannot be dismissed; instead, as these technologies develop, so too, do adolescents' proficiency and use of them (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell, 2010). These genres are also encoded

with meaning, an important attribute researchers simply cannot ignore (Alvermann, 2007; Alvermann & Heron 2001; Alvermann & Hagood 2000; Dyson 2003; Fisherkeller 2002). Additionally, these interactions are cultural processes that define the participants. Rogoff (2003) affirms, "People contribute to the creation of cultural processes and cultural processes contribute to the creation of people. Thus, individual and cultural processes are *mutually constituting* rather than defined separately from each other" (p. 51; emphasis in original).

We must focus on the places and the spaces where literacy takes hold and how students are socialized into those spaces and literate practices. These are the places where literacy identities are formed. Some of those areas are not easily defined by standardized tests or other "traditional" measures of literate achievement. Book clubs, however, are non-traditional places where African American young men might develop their literacy tools, especially as urban schools tighten their reading instruction and limit student choice in the drive to improve standardized test scores. In book clubs, young Black men can hone their literacy tools, add new ones, or even cast them off, as they engage in a (hopefully) more complicated dialogue that involves the individual and the group, and the subsequent developing relationships, and extend those relationships to different texts. For the purpose of this study, I conceptualize discourse through a Bakhtinian perspective (1981). His is a perspective that considers discourse as grounded in relationships, that is, how others perceive and respond to language-in-use. Similarly, Nystrand (1997) articulates "discourse is essentially structured by the interaction of the conversants, with each playing a particular social role" (p. 8). Gee (2000) strengthens the idea of discourse as a function of relationships as follows

> Discourses are characteristic (socially and culturally formed, but historically changing) ways of talking and writing about, as well as acting with and toward, people and things. These ways are circulated and sustained within various texts, artifacts, images, social practices, and institutions, as well as in moment-to-moment social interactions. In turn, they cause certain perspectives and states of affairs to come to seem or be taken as "normal" or "natural" and others to seem or be taken as "deviant" or "marginal." ("Converging areas," ¶ 3)

I was curious to learn what the discourse of the studied young men's book clubs was, how it was constructed by and constructed relationships among participants, and how both discourse and relationships changed over time.

The specific idea of book clubs is part of the larger belief in book clubs as a literacy event that provides a space to examine the "social meaning of literacy" (Swzed, as cited in Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 35). Heath (1982) defines *literacy events* as "occasion[s] in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (p. 50). Miller and Goodnow (1995) define *practices* as "actions that are repeated, shared with others in a social group, and invested with normative expectations and with meanings or significances that go beyond the immediate goals of the action" (p. 7). Book clubs are social environments in which participants read and discuss books (among other things) together. It is in these interactions that participants learn book club behavior, test out peer group dynamics, and begin to determine the place of literature in those interactions as they develop a language for those interactions. In these book clubs, "language is constantly being tugged in opposite directions" (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007, p. 551). During this time, students are taking control of literacy as they interact with peers around a common text and create a basis for understanding, for as Bakhtin (1981) notes,

> [the response] creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the

response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other. (p. 282)

As students create their own discourse within a book club, and as others increasingly familiarize themselves with the practice, they, too, join in the discourse and change it as necessary. Fecho and Botzakis (2007) contend that during that time of creation, "knowledge is under construction and always open to scrutiny. One perspective begs the need for other perspectives. One utterance seeks the company of other utterances. One text positions itself within other texts" (p. 553). That texts hold the potential for helping students have promising literacy experiences is not lost on Fecho and Botzakis (2007), who summarize, "Somewhere in the room, other perspectives may lie waiting to be triggered by the dialogue. In that unknown lies discovery and possibility, ultimately leading to engagement" (p. 553).

The dialogue of the literacy event constantly changes. Rogoff (2003) contends, "As people develop through their shared use of cultural tools and practices, they simultaneously contribute to the transformation of cultural tools, practices, and institutions" (p. 52). From my observations and understandings of the participants, I was able to answer the need for linking literacy events to "larger social, cultural and ideological processes", as explained by Street, (as cited in McCarty, 2005, p. xxi). These young men were, indeed, taking up a discourse. The larger questions and implications now became how to validate these discourses in classrooms. Those working with young Black men also need to find more ways to integrate relevant discourses and events, as well as the dynamics of a peer group, into the curriculum in a manner that makes these students feel valued.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how a group of African American and Caribbean young men participated in a middle school Humanities (English and History) classroom book club. The following main question guided this study: What happens when a small group of African American and Caribbean young men gathers to read a shared text?

The following sub-questions were based on more specific aspects of the studied case:

1. How were members socialized into the group?

    a. What were the norms of participation as articulated and enacted by the teacher?

    b. What were the norms of participation as articulated and enacted by the students?

    c. Through what pedagogical and interactional means did the teacher work to socialize students into these norms of reading club membership?

        (a) Did the teacher use existent peer relationships and peer discourse in this process? If so, how?

        (b) Did the students use existent peer relationships and peer discourse in this process? If so, how?

        (c) What was the relationship between how teachers and students used peer relationships and peer discourse in this process?

2. What were the group relationships within the book club?

    a. What relationships emerged between the participants?

    b. What relationships emerged between the participants and the teacher?

3. What texts resonated with the group?

    a. How did student selection of texts matter (versus teacher-selected texts)?

b. What were the features of texts with which participants had a strong association?

Significance of the Study

While much is known about what young Black men aren't doing, what they *are* doing, and doing relatively well, is less clear. Nationally, and within Oceanside, young Black men's standardized test scores are lagging. Research about this population has pointed to factors that contribute to their achievement, but little, if any, research has looked closely at the participation of young Black men in a book club. As a teacher, I experienced success when pairing young Black men with young adult, multicultural texts. I used book clubs and other strategies and practices to help them shift their perceptions of themselves as readers. When I looked for substantiation and help from other researchers and other practitioners, however, I was unable to find much.

The young Black men I know, and have taught, are readers, but their experiences are not reflected in the research about them. It is my hope that this study contributes to helping educators and researchers understand ways in which texts, peer relationships, and teacher expertise matter in the literacy experiences of young Black men, particularly in middle school. Drawing on the participants' experiences, rather than relying on data that does not necessarily account for the nuances of youth discourses, allows thinking about this group that moves beyond deficits. In addition, this research that foregrounds the literacy experiences of young Black men reinforces the need for more work of this kind, so that we may truly know what is required to involve this population in positive, sustained literacy experiences.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided to ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout the study.

Adolescent literacy. In this study, adolescents are defined as those between 12-18 in age and who attend middle and high school. Adolescent literacy—the literacy research, policies, and practices targeted at adolescents—can be understood through prominent research organizations' position statements. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) position statement "A call to action: What we know about adolescent literacy and ways to support teachers in meeting students' needs on adolescent literacy" (2004) explains

> Adolescents are already reading in multiple ways, using literacy as a social and political endeavor in which they engage to make meaning and act upon their worlds. Their texts range from clothing logos to music to specialty magazines to Web sites to popular and classical literature.
> (http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/literacy/118622.htm)

Black/African American/Caribbean American/young Black men. I use the terms Black as well as the terms African American and Caribbean American to identify people of African descent. The school district did not disaggregate data by ethnicity, despite having significant numbers of students who self-identified as Caribbean American. I use the phrase young Black men to identify the collective group of African American and Caribbean American young men.

Cultural tools. In this study, I use Vygotsky's notion of cultural tools, described elsewhere as "A means of achieving things in the world which are acquired during development and passed on to subsequent generations. Cultural tools can be either

physical (e.g. a hammer) or psychological (e.g. language) in nature." (The Open

University, http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=216560)

Texts. In this study, texts are defined as materials participants read throughout

their lives. Texts take the form of printed matter (books, magazines, newspapers,

brochures, etc.), which includes electronic matter (i.e. computer web pages). Texts can

also include music lyrics.

Delimitations and Limitations

A delimitation of this study is that the unit of analysis was confined to four young

Black men in a single eighth-grade Humanities class. The classroom structures, expertise

of the teacher, and number of students in a classroom can vary dramatically between

classrooms and between schools. This study does not account for the responses of more

than the focal participants included here. While Black girls are equally worthy of study,

my research did not focus on them because the focus of this study was on Black boys and

their classroom literacy experiences.

The purposeful and selective nature of the qualitative design of this study reduces

the generalizability of the findings to a wider population with any degree of statistical

confidence. This was not a randomly chosen sample. Rather, the qualitative design of this

study was intended to provide an in-depth look at the literacy experiences of a small

group of young Black men in the hope of finding suggestions about future research that

can better serve this group.

Role of the Researcher

When I began this study, I thought I was looking "correctly," or as correctly as

one might attempt to look as a fledgling qualitative researcher new to data collection. I

remember one of the phrases that Dr. Anne Dyson told me during a class was that ethnographic research was learning how to look; "you gotta know how to look," she'd say as she helped me think about my research questions. Before entering the site, as I thought about how I could go about researching my area of interest, I was guided by my idea of what an effective teacher was. An effective teacher, in my opinion, was one who was culturally competent and pushed all his/her students to achieve at high levels. I had experienced parts of being effective, and the desire to be more effective had driven me to graduate school. I also felt confident that texts mattered the most in a teacher's ability to turn students into readers. Again, I had been effective when using texts that captivated students. When I had those initial conversations with the focal teacher, I was highly attuned, or attempted to be highly attuned, to his needs as a teacher. I thought it noble that he was trying to start book clubs in his class, and I thought that all he needed was some guidance, which I was more than happy to provide when he asked for it. Thus, my early observations contained endless data about what he did, and not nearly enough about what the students did. I wasn't looking correctly, but, at the start of the study, I thought I was.

Spending time in the same location, going to the same class at the same time daily, makes one much more aware of routines and habits. While I continued to notice Nigel's interactions with students, continued speaking to him about his teaching decisions, and continued to be patient with him, I also was listening more to the students, who were concerned with their own business of being young adults: the flirting with each other, the navigation of assignments, the absorption of friendships. When I read through my field notes at the end of a day in the field, I began to ask what the students were doing, but those questions about the students didn't occur immediately. The desire to

think about them, to foreground their experiences rather than the teacher's, finally put me on the right path to understanding how to look in a way that privileged the students rather than favored the teacher. Fortunately, I was able to shift my observations within a couple of weeks of being in the field, but my early field notes were largely teacher-centered.

As the researcher in this study, I had "overlapping identities" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 57) with which I negotiated. As a former teacher, I understood what might happen in high school English classrooms, but was less familiar with what might happen in a middle school Language Arts classroom. As an African American woman, the lens that I looked through helped me create rapport with students through our shared racial identity. I realized, however, that simply because I shared the same identity did not make data collection any easier, and, not all students were African American; some were Caribbean American and others Latina and European American. Nigel and I did not share the same ethnicity, either: he was Haitian American. I also was accustomed to holding the floor in a classroom of young adults; as a researcher, I did not have that role, and had to develop a new way to occupy classroom space—when I saw students off task, or heard them swear, or behaved in ways I would not tolerate if I were their classroom teacher, I had to instead record what I saw, what I heard, rather than intervene. Such discipline took an effort to achieve, but the longer I remained in the site, the more I honed my role: I was there to conduct a study, not to teach.

Students were initially reluctant to give up part of their lunch or recess for me to interview them. As a result, I rescheduled some interviews several times before they were actually completed. I learned to temper my impatience, and when I finally was able to interview the participants, the data was revealing and invaluable. It was during these

rescheduling moments that I also realized another difference between the student participants and me: generational. I was older, didn't share the same appreciation for technology, and didn't consume popular culture in the ways they did; I had to understand that my expectations of communication and follow-through were influenced by my own habits and practices, and these were not the same as the participants' ways.

I am a graduate student originally from the South. I thought my educational achievement and regional identity might be challenging for students to accept, but they were curious about the subject of my study and thought that the anticipated length of the final dissertation required too much work (Finesse commented, "I would just not have a degree, then" when I told him about the anticipated length). Since I had been living in Oceanside for a few years before the study, and lived in the neighborhood during the data collection, they were more interested in locations I frequented that were relative to UPS than they were in the fact that I was from the south.

Nigel perceived me as a teacher first, researcher second; he asked me questions about curriculum planning as it related to the book clubs. We shared a collegial relationship in that regard. In front of the students, Nigel and I were friendly: we tended to discuss popular culture (he was planning a unit on the history of hip-hop music and we chatted about our favorite rappers); sports teams, and television shows. He allowed me to introduce myself to students, and I explained that I was writing a really long paper and that it was about students and book clubs. I also explained that they did not have to participate in the study if they did not want to, and distributed the consent forms. With the students, I generally observed classroom procedures, sitting in the back of the classroom for large group instruction, and moving into the smaller boys' book club once

they began. I was positioned as a friendly observer much of the time. I think students eventually regarded me not as a teacher, but as someone who was not going to immediately run to Nigel and tell him what I had witnessed them doing (there was a good deal of horse play among the male students, who would hit or throw things at each other, in front of me, and watch as I made notes of their actions). Only on a few occasions did I describe to Nigel what I saw, and only when I was concerned about a student's safety. For the most part, the students seemed to consider me someone who was trustworthy, or at least someone who was not going to threaten their freedom in any punitive manner.

In order to work within these overlapping identities, extended time spent in the field interacting with participants throughout their day helped lessen the unfamiliarity between us. I also interacted with students on Fridays for an additional half hour during my lunch duty assignment—my small gesture of service to the school. I worked diligently to create and maintain a balance between my role as a researcher within their book clubs and a friendly observer in their lives outside the classroom, and I was more successful in those attempts near the end of the study than when it began. I realized the difficulty in maintaining a balance between researcher and friendly observer, but learned alongside the students as I gained more knowledge about their lives.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The subsequent review of the literature focuses on how a sociocultural approach to literacy can be used to examine Black young men and peer groups, book clubs, and literature. The hope is that each area offers the potential for thinking about how Black young men and their peer groups enact discourses and cultural patterns and how those discourses and cultural patterns might take shape in a book club.

Chapter 1 presented an introduction to the issue under study. Chapter 2 contains the review of related literature. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology and procedures used to gather data. Chapter 4 presents the results of analysis and findings from the data. Finally, Chapter 5 contains a summary of the study and findings, conclusions drawn from the findings, a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

I focus on research that explores students' lives and relationships, including the discourses they themselves use to enact those relationships as a way of understanding the participation of young Black men in a book club, and of the book club as a literacy event within the context of school. I look first at adolescent literacy, next at young Black men and achievement, then at youth discourse practices, specifically as they relate to young Black men, subsequently at how peer groups factor into those discourses, and finally how book clubs function as sites for the creation of discourses.

Adolescent Literacy

The concern about adolescent literacy has reached a near fever pitch over the last decade. Snow & Biancarosa (2003) suggest the renewed interest is attributable to "continued failures to close the achievement gap between privileged and not-so-privileged high school students" (p. 2). These authors also note the need for successful instructional strategies targeted to adolescents that address lagging achievement of students of color. At the federal and local level, educators and researchers are struggling to understand and educate the needs of adolescent readers, and the rates of success in those attempts vary (Miller, 2009). Much of the key to understanding how to reach adolescent readers lies in understanding the needs of adolescents and how they leverage relationships with each other, particularly in relation to reading.

Moore et. al. (1999) state that "adolescents use print—and learn how to use print—in countless ways" (p. 3). Noting that adolescents' reading engagement tends to decline as they progress through school, and that such a decline especially disadvantages

struggling readers, researchers have worked diligently to document different interactions between adolescents and broadly defined literacy practices. Moje (2002) articulates, "by and large, the field continues to focus on early childhood or adult literacy, allowing the span of years between childhood and adulthood to remain an unattended void. Such an oversight allows society to neglect and, in some cases, to devalue, youth" (p. 120). The attention to adolescents has also revealed the different ways adolescents access texts, and the need to think about how to integrate students' use of 21st century technologies into classroom instruction.

Extensive research has been conducted with adolescents, both in school and in out-of-school contexts. Alvermann et. al. (1996) conducted a multi-case study with five adolescents about their experiences with assigned classroom readings and found that students valued the ability to discuss their readings with each other as much as the teacher. The researchers wrote, "Students are aware of the conditions that are conducive to discussion…students say the tasks teachers present and the topics or subject matter they assign for reading influence participation in discussion…students see discussion as helpful in understanding what they read" (p. 253). Overall, however, the participants in these studies were largely European American, as were the researchers, and the texts were not multicultural. The 1996 Alvermann study alludes to "culturally diverse" participants, and the participants also make reference to social class differences, but little, if any, attention is given to analyzing how such differences impact participants' responses and attitudes.

In a 1999 study with 22 middle and high school students, three of which were African American, that met after school at a public library for 15 weeks to discuss their

reading, Alvermann et. al. learned that adolescents' reading extended beyond traditional hardback and paperback books to include letters, trading cards, magazines and comic books. In this afterschool environment that met at a local public library, the participants were insistent that their discussions not resemble school-based discussions. The researchers also found that the participants enjoyed attending the "Read-and-Talk Groups" to interact with their peers. Other studies working with adolescents (Almasi & Gambrell, 1994; Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Dillon, 1989) reveal similar characteristics of adolescents' desire to engage in reading texts for the ability to connect with their peers, while others (Moje, 2000) worked with gang-affiliated students of color and found that these youth used "unsanctioned literacy practices" to make meaning of their worlds.

The studies cited here point to adolescents' use of spaces external to school and the importance of peer relationships in promoting positive reading interactions, and the need for schools, as more traditional spaces, to figure out how to integrate aspects of out-of-school literacy practices that adolescents use within school-based contexts.

African American Young Men and Achievement

Current research regards African American young men and their lack of academic achievement in schools from a deficit perspective (Noguera, 2003; Reed, 1988). This "myopic lens" locates young African American young men in an "educational crisis…while scant emphasis is being placed on structural and economic marginality" (Polite & Davis, 1999, p. 2). School policies and procedures (punishment, viewing teenagers as adults and treating them as such rather than as adolescents, teachers who are threatened by African American young men and either ignore them or hold them to lower

expectations), function to cause these young men to view school increasingly as a place not designed for them (Brown & Davis, 2000; Duncan, 2002; Ferguson, 2000).

School becomes an oppositional place in which African American young men enact coping mechanisms to allow preservation of "pride, dignity and respect" and in which they feel compelled to prove their manhood (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 9). This "cool pose," however, sometimes makes education an either-or proposition: academic achievement is sacrificed in favor of peers and social relationships. School is not a place where they feel competent.

This "cool pose" coping mechanism is cited frequently as a reason why African American young men do not excel in education, but the methods Majors and Billson incorporated, and their explanation of those methods, are somewhat sparse in their ability to provide a definitive reason for school failure. A more comprehensive delineation of the methods the researchers undertook for this study would have provided even more insight into how they obtained their data as well as how such data methods influence the analysis of their results. As it stands, after interviewing sixty African American young men, only excerpts of interviews are included in the final product. In similar studies, young men resist participating in schooling, but this resistance, while allowing them some feeling of control, also distances them from academic achievement (Fordham, 1996; Roderick, 2005). Researchers in these latter studies are clearer in their methods and analyses, yet few solutions are provided for how to engage African American adolescent boys in their learning. Tatum (2005) calls for the need for instruction that specifically addresses the literacy needs of young Black men when he writes, "Teachers' failure to provide instruction that leads Black males to read about, and think about important issues related

to their existence contributes to their invisibility and demasculinization in school and society. It certainly does little to help them" (p. 49).

While research focuses on how poorly young Black men are doing in school, more research is needed about the specific structures that lead to success and failure as well as the importance of hearing from young Black men themselves. Duncan (2005) argues for the need for counterstories to challenge what can become a taken-for-granted discourse about the academic underperformance of young Black men. Duncan argues,

> I regard the stories of people of colour as necessary to disrupt the allochronic discourses that inform racial inequality in schools and society. In particular, they provide potent counter-points to challenge the existing narratives that shape how we understand the post-Civil Rights schooling experiences and outcomes of students of colour. (p. 101)

Thus, he draws on Critical Race Theory as a way of being "guided by the voices of those most injured" (Duncan, 2005, p. 109) and a way of understanding the importance of hearing from the young men at the center of the struggle to understand how they make sense of their lives.

Similarly, Howard (2008) used a Critical Race Theory (CRT) frame because he felt prior research "has not included first-hand, detailed accounts from African American males about the roles that they believe power, race, and racism play in their educational experiences" (p. 967). In his study, Howard surveyed 200 African American middle and high school young men about their schooling experiences, and how race affected those experiences. In his qualitative case study, most of the participants "stated that they believed that race was frequently a factor in how they were dealt with by their teachers and school administrators" (p. 971). Howard's study points to the need to include the first-hand accounts of young Black men when thinking about educational policies and

administration that directly affects them. Moreover, while Howard calls for the need for more "reliable research, useful strategies, and effective interventions that will improve the day-to-day realities, educational prospects, and life chances of African American males and other disenfranchised student groups" (p. 977), he does not detail what those systems and interventions would look like within the context of urban schools that are constrained by numerous demands, including inexperienced teachers and tight budgets.

Williams (2008), however, does identify specific factors that contribute to the success of young Black men in middle school. In her ethnographic study of six academically successful fifth and sixth grade boys, Williams found that "Black middle school students excel if they have supportive families, a will to succeed, diligence, and high teacher expectations" (p. 242). Her participants were viewed as school leaders, and teachers and parents within the school considered the young men academic achievers. Williams argues that despite living in poor socioeconomic conditions and being in foster care or with a single parent, the young men in her study were still academically successful. She states, "All six students valued education, and they respected self and others. Everyone had a high regard for their teachers, parents, and support that they recognized as contributors to their academic success. …Literacy and resiliency were hallmarks of their academic success" (p. 272). While Williams does not extend her discussion to specific texts or literacy activities that resonate with the participants—she talks broadly about curricular aims—she does offer research that counters the deficit discourse about young Black men and academic achievement.

Sullivan (2009) also indicates the importance teachers have for making their classrooms an environment that encourages academic success with young Black men. In

her study of five classrooms, Sullivan found that successful teachers used instructional

practices such as incorporating pictures of African Americans into classroom displays,

having frank and honest discussions about race with their students, and using cooperative

learning, among other practices. Teachers also held students to high expectations, and the

students in the study responded positively. In relation to reading, Sullivan found students

self-determined a change in their reading habits. She states, "These changes, they said,

included acknowledgement of the value of reading, reading more varied materials,

increased grade activities that have to do with reading, and a more positive perception

about reading in general" (p. 165-166). Despite conducting two classroom observations

and relying more heavily on survey questionnaire data, Harding does provide more

evidence for the teacher's role in helping young Black men succeed. Harding writes that

the teachers

> Cultivated a classroom environment where students were able to incorporate their
> cultural funds of knowledge into new learning experiences, use their natural
> talents and cultural resources to enhance their academic success, engage in
> learning experiences that were meaningful and relevant to them, affirm and
> appreciate their cultural identities, and learn strategies that will help them to attain
> academic success in reading and writing. (p. 174)

Thus, teachers are another critical component in helping young Black men succeed and

are another influence that determines school achievement.

Though he does not use a CRT framework, Harding (2010) does foreground the

experiences of young men of color living in Boston as a way of understanding the

influences of violence on decisions about education, housing patterns, and parenting,

among others. Harding, who interviewed sixty Black and Latino adolescent boys in

Boston from three different neighborhoods found that "two characteristics of poor

neighborhoods illuminate the mechanisms underlying neighborhood effects on adolescent

boys: neighborhood violence and cultural heterogeneity" (p. 240). While Harding's focus was on neighborhoods and not within actual schools, he found the young men in his study, and their parents, regarded education positively. He notes, "postsecondary education was a goal of almost every boy, and they understood the labor market consequences of failing to finish high school" (p. 250). The challenge, Harding found, was the difficulty of "constructing realistic and informed pathways for achieving their educational goals" (p. 250) from the options of community college, athletic aspirations, four-year colleges or universities, or school-to-work programs. Harding's study is important because it considers the structural factors that contribute to the perceived success and failure of young Black men and it grapples with the idea of "multiple frames" that young Black men use as they negotiate their lives and relationships within their neighborhood.

Fergus & Noguera (2010) argue, too, for the need for understanding the comprehensive factors that contribute to the achievement of young Black men. In their recent study of single-sex schools, the researchers found that each school in their study "consists of a dynamic set of leaders who maintain that creating a nurturing school climate will positively impact the boys' social, emotional, and academic development" (p. 29). Working within a theory of change framework to "illustrate the multiple components of a system and the underlying assumptions that are expected to work in concert in order to meet the desired outcome," Fergus & Noguera conducted site visits of five single-sex schools in two waves of data collection, where they used interviews and focus groups (p. 31). Participants in the study were primarily Caribbean American youth. School size varied, however, the schools typically enrolled fewer than 270 students and

were a combination of public, private and charter. Overall, the researchers concluded that single-sex schooling is "a viable intervention model for the educational dilemma facing low-income, Black and Latino boys, or boys of color" (p. 29). Given that single-sex schools educate a small population of young men, though, consideration needs to be given to how these components of success operate in coed settings.

Generally, despite attempts to rely on deficit theories to explain the underachievement of young Black men, researchers call for the need to hear from the young Black men themselves to think about the factors that influence academic achievement. Given that the present study involved participants of African American and Caribbean American descent, it is also important to examine research that relates to within-group differences for a deeper understanding of differences in academic achievement.

Caribbean Immigrant Youth

Research about within-group variations concerning the academic achievement of students of African descent is scarce. Waters (1999) has conducted important research about Caribbean immigrants and their process of identity formation within the United States. After interviewing a sample of Caribbean immigrants in New York, of which 83 were adolescents, Waters concluded that adolescents face difficult choices regarding their ethnic identity. She characterized Caribbean adolescents as taking one of three paths in their identity development. One path was a "Black American identity" wherein Caribbean immigrants identified with other African Americans. These adolescents, Waters contends, were also more likely to adopt an "oppositional identity" and more likely to "describe racial prejudice as pervasive and more limiting of their own individual chances in life"

(p. 288). The second group of respondents was found to have a "very strong ethnic identity which involved a considerable amount of distancing from American blacks" (p. 288), while the final group of participants "had more of an immigrant attitude toward their identities than either the American-identified youth or the ethnic-identified youth" (p. 288). These differences in ethnic attitudes resulted in how immigrant youth regarded race and their social mobility within the United States. Middle class immigrants were more likely to view African Americans negatively and to distinguish themselves by ethnic origin. However, it was much more difficult for adolescents who were members of families who were less socially mobile and who lived within urban areas to do the same. These adolescents were confronted with the same racism that African Americans experienced, as well as other aspects of living within urban areas (high rates of crime and limited employment options, for example).

According to Waters, adolescents face pressure from their peers, which causes them to identity with African Americans differently. Citing the potential for being criticized for "acting White" or being an "Oreo," some Caribbean American adolescents clung tightly to their African American peers in hopes of rejecting those associations. However, they acted differently when around Caribbean American peers, asserting an ethnic identity. Waters also noted Caribbean adolescents are in conflict with their parents, who have career aspirations for their children that are not always realized. Parents wanted their children to be different than their perceptions of African Americans, who they viewed as lazy and violent. When Caribbean adolescents, primarily American-identified ones, rejected their parents, they tended to adopt African American cultural markers. Waters states, "The assimilation to America that they undergo is most definitely to Black

America: they speak Black English with their peers, they listen to rap music, and they accept the peer culture of their Black American friends" (p. 296). At odds with their parents, American-identified second-generation adolescents place more value on being accepted by their peers, many of whom—even ones who are not African American—display markers of African American identity. Waters continues, "In the peer culture of the neighborhood and the school, the American-identified teenagers describe a situation in which being American has higher social status than being ethnic" (p. 296).

Waters makes clear that racism and racial discrimination "level[s] the aspirations of the teens downward" as they determine their life choices. Lower class Caribbean American adolescents attend urban schools, live in urban environments, and are not immune to the lack of opportunities created by these circumstances. She notes, "The second generation experiences racism and discrimination constantly and develops perceptions of the overwhelming influence of race on their lives and life chances that differ from their parents' views" (p. 309). The boys in Waters's study adhered more closely to an African American identity for "racial solidarity in the face of societal exclusion and disapproval" (p. 315). Waters found that the boys were more aware of racial boundaries than the girls in the study, were more likely to be socially stigmatized for speaking Standard English, and were more likely to accuse others of "acting White" (p. 319). The young men in the study also used speaking standard English as a way of enforcing social boundaries among each other (for example, being accused of "acting White" might lead to distancing from a group of peers or being called a "faggot"). Finally, Waters concludes that for the large number of Caribbean American adolescents who do not live in upwardly mobile families, adopting an African American identity is

possible. Those who choose instead to express a strong ethnic identity face ostracism from their peers unless they reside in areas that are majority ethnic. What Waters's research reinforces is that differences do exist between immigrant youth and African American youth, and the ways that adolescents navigate those differences effect their peer group membership as well as their parental relationships.

Though her interviews were with 83 adolescents in New York, Waters's research is important because it explores how a group of Caribbean American adolescents either adopts or rejects its ethnic identity within different contexts, specifically the contexts of peer group and the contexts of school. While interviews specifically related to their academic achievement in school would have helped understand the particular ways her participants identified with "acting White" or enacting "oppositional identities", Waters does articulate distinctions between African American and Caribbean American youth, suggesting that enacting African American identities are not easy for Caribbean American youth, but adopting African American identities is a way that youth cross ethnic lines.

Thomas et. al. (2009) articulate the importance of seeing beyond Blackness as monolithic to understand how different people of African descent make their way in the United States. They write

> African Americans and Caribbean Blacks may share the same race of being Black but are of different ethnicities due to their different histories, culture and nationality. However, given that ethnic differences do exist among Blacks, the overwhelming majority of educational and social science research continue to categorize all Black people into one ethnic group, despite the fact that some are born in different countries (e.g., Caribbean and Africa) or come from families who migrated to United States. (p. 420)

The authors also contend that it is important to make distinct within-group differences because they might affect achievement. They state, "Within-group variations among Black youth based on their varied histories, ethnicity, and diverse circumstances may have relevant implications for their academic achievement outcomes" (p. 421). In an attempt to mark variations in academic achievement among African American and Caribbean American youth, these researchers surveyed 1,170 Black youth, which included 810 African American and 360 Caribbean American youth, using the National Survey of American Life. They wanted to "examine the role of racial identity in buffering perceived teacher discrimination on academic achievement among ethnically diverse Black adolescents" (p. 426). The researchers found that both groups experienced teacher discrimination within academic settings. However, African American students were found to respond worse to that perceived discrimination. Caribbean American youth, the researchers reasoned, were less affected by teacher discrimination because "Caribbean Blacks who believed that other groups perceived Blacks negatively (i.e., low public regard) were buffered from the negative impact of perceived teacher discrimination on academic achievement" (p. 427). This study suggests that within-group variations do exist between African American and Caribbean American youth when thinking about academic achievement. Additionally, these findings reveal "[Caribbean] individuals who feel positively toward Blacks and whose race is central to their identity are more likely to be protected from the negative consequences of teacher discrimination on academic achievement" (p. 429). This is a quantitative study; qualitative data might have enhanced understanding the participants' responses and also helped think about their perceptions of racial identity, teacher discrimination, and specific instances that they experienced that

discrimination. A qualitative methodological approach would allow for the exploration of the question of "whether the behaviors observed were endemic to the group or a part of a larger social phenomenon among a wider collectively of social actors" (Carter & Warikoo, 2009, p. 384). Also, this study does not look specifically at gender differences other than to note demographic details. Despite these factors, this study is important because it indicates that both African American and Caribbean American youth perceive racial discrimination from their teachers.

Rong and Fitchett (2008) sought to understand "the socialization and identity transformation of Caribbean immigrant teens" (p. 36) and used Asian American teenagers as a point of comparison because both races can be categorized as voluntary immigrants. The authors note, however, that Caribbean immigrants are disadvantaged because they must contend with racism in the United States in ways that Asian immigrants do not. The authors also note that middle class Caribbean immigrants are "inclined to distance themselves from Black Americans and to shun the negative stereotypes connected to them" (p. 38). Working class Caribbean immigrants, though, identify more readily with working class African Americans. Rong and Fitchett surmise

> Realizing that the treatment they receive is not different from that received by native-born Black students, and recognizing that schooling will not necessarily guarantee economic prosperity and social mobility, working-class Black immigrant students identify themselves more quickly with the domestic Black population than do middle-class Black immigrants. (p. 38)

Black immigrant youth are also susceptible to similar patterns of underachievement the longer they are in the United States. The authors note, "American children's educational attainments (such as total schooling years, enrollment rates in college, high school graduation rates, etc.) decline with the generation of residence" (p. 38). Concluding with

recommendations for educators, the researchers argue for the need for people charged

with educating immigrant Black youth and African American youth to understand the

adaptive strategies used by immigrant Black youth within schools. One of the

recommendations is that schools teach immigrant Black history as well as African

American history as a means of reducing intra-group tension. They write

> Black immigrant students must be taught the history of Black Americans in order
> to understand that their prospects, by and large, will be tied to the overall struggle
> for racial justice in American society. However, the history of Caribbean and
> African nations also should be part of the school curriculum in order to help Black
> children rediscover their origins. (p. 40)

While the authors assert "maintaining a Caribbean identity is an urgent need for Black

immigrant parents" (p. 39), they contend that "adversarial youth subculture" is

responsible for undermining parental wishes. It is unfortunate that the authors do not

interrogate what they mean by "youth subculture" as well as what aspects of it they deem

detrimental. They offer that Asian language and culture schools offer refuge for

maintaining cultural traditions, and suggest that similar schools might offer the same

refuge for immigrant Black families. However, putting youth subculture at odds with

maintaining cultural traditions does not address what might be a deeper understanding of

what is appealing about youth subculture for immigrant Black youth. An awareness of the

characteristics of youth subculture might lead to development of programs and activities

that engage youth rather than place them at odds with their parents. Moreover, whereas

the authors make recommendations about what educators must do to make schools more

welcoming and responsive to the needs of Black immigrant students, they do not include

any direct instruction about how to go about enacting such reforms.

Rong and Brown (2002) stress, "Educators need to understand that not all Blacks are the same" (p. 267). In their review of research about racial identity formation and socialization of Black immigrant youth, the authors make several recommendations to educators about how to make classroom practice responsive to the needs of Black immigrant and non-immigrant youth. They caution,

> Immigration is a complex phenomenon, therefore teachers should avoid simplistic expectations about Black immigrant students' attitudes, educational aspirations, and academic performance. Educators need to recognize and respect the wide range of identities and cultural competencies in Black students: immigrant and non-immigrant alike. (p. 262)

Rong and Brown note that understanding Black immigrants' identity must be considered within a context of their larger experiences within the United States. Such a consideration would also account for racial and social factors that affect the life and schooling experiences of immigrants and native-born African Americans. The researchers urge moving beyond a limited, binary understanding of race and that such a move will ultimately lead to a more nuanced understanding of the schooling experiences of Black immigrant youth as well as African American youth.

Thus, researchers have documented differences between African American and Caribbean American youth. What also needs to be examined are the ways—similar and different—that both groups use their own forms of youth discourse to communicate with each other and how their youth discourse contains information about their lives.

Youth Discourse Practices

Youth of all races and ethnicities seek spaces to construct their own identities. Working within worlds often socially stratified and racialized, youth response to such stratification assumes different forms. Moje (2002) stresses the need for understanding

the connection between youth culture and literacy, "Youth offer a unique possibility for studying the power of literacy. Youth are in the position to make a number of interesting choices among texts, experiences, and practices" (p. 218).

African American youth are no different in their desire to carve out their own space. The conditions within which they often live, however, demand a unique, culturally specific response. Given the erosion of hope in urban communities, Kelley (1992) surmises that

> Nothing is certain, except the further deterioration of already unlivable neighborhoods. The most likely scenario is mo' misery, mo' misery and mo' misery, combined with mo' uprisings, mo' repression and mo' blame placed on single mothers for raising "violent" children in "dysfunctional" families. (p. 796)

Notable, however, are the creative responses by African American youth to the conditions as outlined by Kelley. These responses take the form of popular literacies of rap and hip-hop music and spoken word performances, for example, and occur within school as well as spaces external to school. Au (2005) described rap music in the following manner

> At its heart, rap music has revolved around the concept of battling. Whether it is battling to keep your chin up during hard times or proving yourself by battling in competitions of vocal style, performance, and rhyming skill; rap music has been a way for urban youth to say to the world, "Look at me, I can take whatever you dish out and come out standing." (p. 210)

Au contends that rap and hip hop are sites of urban youth cultural production, and that adolescents are using rap and hip hop to locate their own anger about education. Land and Stovall (2010) argue for the lasting relevance of hip hop because it "continues to serve as a vehicle to express the frustration and desires, the pains and triumphs, and the oppressions and dreams of young people of color and the older hip hop generations around the world" (p. 2). Now, some researchers are using rap and hip hop to help

students respond creatively and critically within classroom contexts, thereby opening up hip hop to the potential of bridging youth culture with school-based discourses.

Morrell (2002) documented his teaching of a hip-hop unit in a secondary English classroom for a poetry unit as a way of articulating critical literacy pedagogy over an eight year span in the San Francisco Bay area and southern California. As part of this unit, Morrell and his colleague paired hip hop with canonical texts. He found that students' "critical investigations of popular texts brought about oral and written critiques similar to those required by college preparatory English classrooms" (p. 74). Morrell's ability to move between canonical literature and popular culture demonstrate a way to draw on students' knowledge to develop other important skills without sacrificing one for the other and for developing students' critical thinking and analytical abilities.

Morrell and other researchers do not incorporate hip hop lightly; rather, their intention is to help students develop the critical analysis skills, and eventually cultural production skills, that enable them to address issues of power and privilege and consider how they can effect change in their worlds. In a study about using hip hop as a curricular tool, Hallman (2009) details a teacher's attempts to allow pregnant and parenting adolescents to write letters to hip hop artists as a means of bridging in school and out of school literacies. Hallman argues "recruiting an 'out-of-school' literacy, such as hip hop, enabled Eastview students to build on their literate competencies as well as investigate their individual agency" (p. 48). While this study was conducted with pregnant and parenting adolescents, Hallman's study indicates the importance of a teacher's role in helping students connect their literacies to those of school. Though left to wonder how this study might work with boys, in a traditional urban classroom, and with a teacher who

does not view him/herself as a cultural bridge (as did the teacher here), this study does argue for the need for a skilled teacher to help students feel connected to the classroom. Hip hop is a way to forge a connection.

Love (2009) worked with African American adolescents in an afterschool program in Atlanta with the objective of learning "how they read the messages of rap music" (p. 174). In the 16-month ethnography, Love found that Black youth viewed their identity in complex and troubling ways. The researcher notes, "Youth perceived rap messages as absolute truths, which informed youth to deem Black youth as oversexed, promiscuous, unintelligent individuals" (p. 171). The researcher found Black youth susceptible to internalizing racist and sexist stereotypes through their failure to critically interrogate the messages of rap music. Student assumptions extended to their classrooms. They thought their teachers were racist and thought teachers favored students who were White or Asian. The participants also worked to disprove teachers' assumptions as they "learn[ed] from the margins" (p. 173). Of the 9 participants, 3 were young men. Love's study raises the question of what happens when youth internalize messages from popular media—in this case, from rap music—and do not have a teacher or someone to help them critically read the messages that are bombarding them. What Love's study also does is indicate the need for spaces for Black youth to have conversations about their lives and for someone to facilitate what occurs in those spaces.

Sanchez (2010) worked with transitional (in their first college class) African American students in a college English class. Her goal was to help one African American young man use hip hop and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to master academic literacy. She found that by allowing the focal student of her study to write

about hip hop music, he was able to "find agency by inserting himself, his personal interests, and his language to both make a contribution to academic discourse and work against the prototypical language" (p. 484). Moreover, the young man was also "taking up cultural and social critique" (p. 486) through his analysis. Though Sanchez's study was on the collegiate level, it is an example of how one instructor leveraged hip hop as a way of helping a student master academic literacies and discourse while validating the young man's competencies.

Schools invalidate the ability for African American youth to "code-switch," a practice of moving between Standard English and African American Vernacular, for example. Youth demonstrate the flexibility of their language, deciding which English to speak based on a particular circumstance and in the process demonstrating their ability to change identities as situations warrant. Smitherman (2000) notes African American youths' ability to adapt languages to situations and defines code-switching as a "complex skill" (92). Such flexibility demonstrates their knowledge of the purposes of different types of language. Unfortunately, mainstream connotations of African American Vernacular/Black English compel many to think African American youth are not sophisticated enough to use the "appropriate" language (Standard American English) in varying contexts. This is an assertion that is simply untrue given the research that illustrates how African American youth select from an array of language varieties based on their location and to whom they are speaking.

Linguistic fluency, and how young people pragmatically employ language to communicate with each other, is also an aspect of youth discourse practices that researchers find important in relation to youth of color. Alim (2005) documented the

linguistic practices of African American adolescents through what he called the "most recent instantiation of Black American expressive culture, i.e., Hip Hop culture" (p. 189). He found that African American adolescents had knowledge of, and used, a wide range of linguistic styles. Specific forms of what Alim refers to as "verbal creativity and competition in the Black speech community" (p. 190) include "battlin'" in which males (usually) "rap at each other" in a type of competition. Unfortunately, teachers of these students viewed these linguistic battles as violent and did not allow students to participate. Alim contended that despite these students' verbal expertise, in schools, predominantly White teachers "misinterpret[ed]" and "denigrate[d]" students' competence. As a result, these attitudes toward African American adolescents' linguistic styles are used to "exclude Blacks from full participation in society in a number of ways" (p.193). Again, how a teacher views students' forms of discourse and cultural production will affect how students are either invited into or denied access to classroom participation.

Paris (2009) found that multiethnic students used African American Language (AAL) "across ethnic lines" in a west coast charter high school populated by African American, Latino and Asian students in an ethnographic study. Using the concept of "language sharing" which is defined as "those momentary and sustained uses of the language that are ratified—when use of the language traditionally 'belonging' to another group is ratified as appropriate by its traditional speakers" (p. 431), Paris found that students employed markers of AAL that crossed ethnicities. The researcher notes, "AAL was the primary linguistic practice of cultural togetherness" (p. 443). While other students were able to also use their home languages of Spanish, Paris states, "Black youth

were the only group without an ethnic and linguistic safe haven within this multiethnic youth space" (p. 443). Thus, Paris indicates the challenge that even speakers of AAL experience: the language can be used to build solidarity, but, in this study, African American students did not have spaces that were solely their own, which was a source of tension for the African American students; nor did they have places to grapple with the pride and shame of speaking AAL. While Paris' results indicated, "AAL *was* a unifier in youth space," it received no attention within classrooms (p. 444, italics in original). Thus, while the researcher and the students were using AAL as a means of "help[ing] youth, both consciously and unconsciously, move across divisions predicated on ethnic difference and seek common ground in an oppressive world" (p. 444), teachers and administrators did not recognize the powerful opportunities for channeling their language use into classroom practice. Despite this study being conducted in a charter high school, Paris indicates how multiethnic students choose AAL as the language to communicate with each other.

Kinloch (2010) worked with two African American young men over several years in New York as she attempted to learn about "youth perceptions of language in the struggle to acquire academic success" (p. 106). Through a series of written responses, observations, and surveys (created collaboratively with the participants), Kinloch found that the two young men consciously used African American Language because it deeply connected them to their identities as young Black men living in Harlem. Described by the researcher as "code-switching superstars," the participants were aware of the need to use Standard English, but they also felt as strongly about using AAL because it connected them to their community. One of the participants acknowledged the necessity of learning

Standard English, but worried it would mark him as abandoning his community. Kinloch states, "His reluctance to learn is intricately connected to how he believes others will view him: as a traitor and a sell-out *or* as a loyal homeboy who's down for the cause" (p. 131, emphasis in original). The participants expressed frustration, however, that teachers lack understanding of AAL and cannot leverage it to help students improve their writing. Kinloch's study indicates the difficulty students face when they make intentional decisions to use their home language, and that such decisions are difficult and, in this case, were a site of uneasy compromise. The study ends with assertions about the need for teachers to account for students' use of their home languages, such as AAL, and she provides some useful projects teachers might use that help them "promot[e] the rights of students who too often feel like traitors in our very own classrooms" (p. 133). Missing from this study, though, is more information about how teachers might incorporate these products within the larger contexts of their daily demands. In addition, the two young men in this study were in their first year of college when this study was published; this study poses important questions for what happens to the young men who express similar ambivalence about code-switching that do not make it to college and if their outcomes are limited because of that refusal to use Standard English.

Schools are only one site of this exclusion and derision; however, given that African American adolescents spend such an extensive amount of time within schools, it becomes imperative to find ways to include their "broad range of speech styles" in classrooms. The lack of acceptance of African American adolescents' linguistic varieties leads to the flourishing of spaces external to school that are more welcoming.

Fisher (2003) found that participants in spoken word performances were there primarily for three reasons: "a personal search with respect to identity, personal growth, and development; an extended search for a local Black community with which to exchange ideas and information; and a movement to understand meanings for Blackness in a global context" (p. 374). In another study, Fisher (2004) examined Black bookstores as sites of informal learning. Locating her research in two Black-owned bookstores in California, Fisher showed that these places became a location for the transmission of knowledge about aspects of the Black experience as well as a location for informal teaching and learning. Fisher termed these bookstores "Participatory Learning Communities" (PLC) and defined them as

> Spaces in which people are engaged in reading, writing, and speaking in chosen spaces that include spoken word poetry events, writers' collectives, book clubs, and bookstores. In these learning spaces, written work is created to be shared and performed and to incite discussion, debate, and an oral exchange between author and audience (p. 86)

Fisher does not extend her PLC to traditional classrooms, but further study into whether these PLC could be achieved in schools would be extremely valuable, and an extension the author views as possible and necessary (November 2006, personal communication).

Finally, Blackburn (2005) worked with a group of African American gay young men in Philadelphia to create a dictionary they called "Gaybonics." Throughout the course of the study, Blackburn asserted that the participants created their own localized, group-specific vocabulary that was known only to members of the group. As she explored the creation of terms with her participants, Blackburn noted that participants used Gaybonics as a mediator: in some large group situations, participants would use words only known to other group members. She reasoned that this form of exclusion was

also a way for members to protect themselves against homophobia and to "subvert oppression" as well as enact agency. Blackburn's study brings up the complexity that is created when young people, who are traditionally excluded from spaces (in this case, hetero-normative spaces), use language as a means of creating group solidarity but also use language to exclude others, thereby reinforcing notions of difference.

Overall, these studies demonstrate how African American youth find spaces to enact their identities in ways that allow them to respond creatively to their worlds. These studies also indicate that, within schools, teachers are critical for their ability to invite students—and their discourses—into the classroom. Unfortunately, those invitations are rarely extended to the students who would benefit most—young Black men.

Many of the participants in the studies cited in this section were connected to their peers and leveraged those relationships creatively. Relationships with peers groups, though, are complicated. I next look at the peer group as it relates to young Black men as a way of thinking about how peer relationships affect academic achievement.

Peer Group

African American young men who distance themselves from their peers and Blackness to pursue academic achievement face challenges. Noguera (2008) reminds us, "Peer groups play a powerful role in shaping identity because the desire to be accepted by one's peers and fit in with one's peers often becomes a paramount concern for most adolescents" (p. 30). Some researchers have found that young Black men make choices about their academic achievement in order to maintain their friendships. Gayles (2005), who conducted unstructured weekly interviews with young men, found that African American young men in an urban high school in Florida "diminished the significance of

their own academic achievement" (p. 254) and viewed such achievement not "as an end in itself but as a means to an end" (p. 257). Strikingly, however, the three young men at the center of Gayles' study experienced no negative social consequences for their high academic achievement because they masterfully hid their academic success from their peers. Gayles identifies two types of achievement the participants used: "distanced and diminished achievement" and "utilitarian achievement" (p. 250). Distanced and diminished achievement was used when participants thought, "academic achievement did not 'prove' anything about them" (p. 255). In doing this, the participants were able to limit the distancing from their peers as academic achievers, and reduced the chances of their peers knowing they were smart (p. 256). In terms of utilitarian achievement, Gayles notes

> Grades were more aptly described as something that these youths felt they *needed* as opposed to something that they *wanted*. Their performance in school did not reflect abstract enjoyment of the learning process. Each of the youths dismissed the "intrinsic value" of a good grade. (p. 256, emphasis in original)

Gayles continues, "For these youths, academic achievement was something that they *did* without circumscribing their sense of who they *were*" (p. 259, emphasis in original). The fact that these students felt they had to hide their academic achievement is troubling, though, as it speaks to the participants' larger societal worries that they maintain a particular image that is inconsistent with one of academic success despite being in the top 10 percent of their graduating high school class.

Kirkland's research with African American young men has documented how this population accesses literacy for communicative purposes among its peer group. Kirkland (2006) found that his participants used different practices, among them rapping and tattooing, to express their peer allegiance and collectively work for acknowledgement of

their competency. Kirkland, whose study included six participants from the Midwest,

noted that the "Guys'" literacy practices were not recognized in school. However,

Kirkland states

> …the Guys also practiced literacy (e.g. rapping) as a way to personally connect with peers, navigate peer experiences, and most importantly establish peer commitments (i.e., obligations that bind individuals to groups through literate practice). These peer commitments helped the Guys establish a set of common literacy practices that privileged popular culture. The Guys also expanded their literate universe beyond the popular media, as literacy became a tool for their own cultural production. (p. 89)

Thus, the peer group of Kirkland's study fashioned its own practices to communicate

with each other about issues of importance to them. In this study, Kirkland, who

employed the ethnography of communication, also attempted to work with a teacher

inside a classroom as a way of thinking about how to integrate the Guys' literacy

practices with school-based literature instruction. Once inside the classroom, however,

the Guys' literacy practices were at odds with the "standardized literacies of society" (p.

130). Kirkland theorizes the dissonance as follows

> As they practiced literacy, the Guys contested cultural domination. They employed literacy to call attention to, to critique, and to reconfigure the relationship between and to put into dialogue society's racist points of view and their own. In this way, their practices of literacy were sometimes at odds with the norms of society. (p. 129)

Kirkland found that providing the Guys with comic books as a bridge to reading a

canonical text helped them to enter a conversation about literature. However, Kirkland

also found that the nature of the Guys' talk was gendered and racialized. As a teacher, he

was able to help them have critical discussions about the text, which led into discussions

about hip-hop and African American Language, where they had the ability to discuss the

implications of their talk. Kirkland indicts racism as a reason the literacy practices of the

young men in his study—who also used other forms of technology such as cell phones, computers, video games, mp3 players, etc.—were unacknowledged. He claims, "Racism…prevented other people from seeing the Guys as literate/human. Further, racism was the basis for social opposition to the Guys and their preferred practices of literacy" (p. 163). Thus, despite being adept at using various communicative practices among the peer group for sophisticated means of interaction, the young men in this study were not credited accordingly for their competence, nor did they have that competence accessed within the classroom. Therefore, the peer group was of central importance because, within that group, the Guys' literacy practices were acknowledged and valued.

In another study, Kirkland (2009) worked with young Black men in an afterschool program called My Brothers' Keeper in Detroit to "describe, interpret and explain the relationships between coolness as a cultural phenomenon and the young men's literacy practices through their symbols of coolness" (p. 283). By enacting coolness, the seven focal young men, age 12-14, were able to express their racial and gendered identities. In the process, they also imbued symbols (i.e., eyeglasses) with meanings that they used as communicative tools for their literacy practices. Cool talk, or the language the participants used to communicate with each other, involved markers of popular culture as well as hip-hop, African American language, and a "discourse of critique" that helped them comment on their worlds (p. 283). Kirkland also found that the participants used their cool talk to create and maintain boundaries between them and the other participants. In arguing for a theory of Black masculine literacy, Kirkland ties the relationship between popular culture, young Black men, and the literacies they use together when he articulates the following

In practicing a Black masculine literacy, the cool kids constructed coolness through symbols of speech and dress taken from pop-cultural locations. These larger systems helped to shape complex relations—relationships between how the young men wanted to be cool and how they articulated this desire through literacy. (p. 293)

Kirkland's study asserts that "Black males are literate" and practice literacy, in this case as members of peer groups, in ways that need acknowledgement and validation in traditional classroom spaces.

What must not be overlooked, however, is the fact that many African American young men are doing well in school and that their peer relationships are not always antagonistic or detrimental. Noguera (2003) "obtained consistent evidence that most Black students value education and would like to succeed in school" (p. 448). He found that 90 percent of the African American young men in his study expressed a positive desire to attend college and placed a high value on education. Berry (2005) worked with middle school African American young men and found that his participants demonstrated high academic achievement in high-tracked mathematics classes. He compiled descriptive portraits that included how students perceived their mathematical experiences, factors that contributed to their mathematical success, and the perceptions of parents and teachers on the students' mathematical abilities. Using a series of interviews with the students, teachers and parents, as well as classroom observations, a review of documents, and mathematical autobiographies, Berry hoped his study would provide a different, positive view of young Black men and their mathematics achievement. The factors for their success included positive self- images and parents who were actively involved in their children's schooling. Berry, who adopts a Critical Race Theory framework, asserts the need for such successful counternarratives, primarily because:

In order for more African American males to achieve success academically, it is critical to focus on the success stories of those African American men and boys who are successful to identify the strengths, skills, and other significant factors it takes to foster success. (p. 61)

While his research is with middle school mathematics students, the implications for the broader role of helping African American young men achieve success is not limited to a single subject. Garibaldi (1992) reminds us that "Contrary to public perception, African American boys *do* want to finish school and many want to be challenged academically" (p. 6). The problem, Garibaldi asserts, is that schools often do not take up such challenges.

Schools lament the achievement gap, yet few policies have been enacted to specifically address this particular population that are not deficit-driven. In classrooms, African American young men suffer from academic under-stimulation (Tatum, 2009). Reading is only one academic area where African American young men lag behind, but it is central to the focus of this research.

Book Clubs

Over the years, book clubs have gained increasing popularity as teachers incorporate them to provide reading choices for their students. While some handbooks exist to help teachers implement book clubs (Faust et. al, 2005; Appleman, 2006), the research is limited on the use of book clubs in middle school classrooms, particularly as related to young Black men; thus, I look at the broader research about middle school and high school book clubs that include both boys and girls.

Book clubs offer students the potential to lead their own discussions about a text of interest to them. Teachers might opt to incorporate young adult literature from which students may choose, with the goal that students read these high-interest texts and feel

compelled to enter into conversations about them. Some book clubs use formalized role sheets to help students conduct their conversations, while others are more informal (Daniels, 2002). Ultimately, the goal of book clubs within a classroom is for students to read books of interest to them, and to be able to discuss them as real readers might.

One of the appealing aspects of book club membership is collegiality. As adolescents, students might enjoy spending time with their peers under the auspices of a book club meeting. Swanson (1999), however, did not find collegiality in her study of high school juniors and their participation in book clubs. Her research examined four different groups of juniors (all boys, all girls and two mixed gender) and their responses to books in their English class. In the all-boy group, two boys controlled the discussion through aggression and dominance of the other members. As a result, the group could not develop new ways of exploring texts and remained in the "recall/retell" mode of discussion. When asked to probe a text, the boys would summarize what they read without either analyzing or commenting on their reading. Swanson's participants were upper track students and 94 percent European American. The texts the participants read were canonical, and none were written by a person of color.

O'Donnell-Allen and Hunt (2001) worked with a group of pre-service teachers and middle and high school students to introduce the concept of book clubs (based on Raphael & McMahon's *The book club connection: Literacy learning and classroom talk,* 1989). The book clubs included 4-5 students and one pre-service teacher who served as facilitator. While the teacher initially led much of the discussion, O'Donnell-Allen and Hunt found that "as the semester progressed…young readers became much more comfortable in suggesting texts, initiating conversation, asking questions, altering reading

schedules, and responding to texts in ways that were tailored to their specific needs and preferences as readers" (p. 83). While the authors make these findings, there is no discussion of the racial demographics of the participants in their study (either of the students or of pre-service teachers), or of the implications for the young adult texts discussed (though there is a brief discussion of gender and a particular book's appeal to male readers). For example, the participants read *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor (1995), a novel with troubling racial implications, but there is no evidence of discussing the racial problems presented by the novel, even though one of the stated goals of the study was to challenge students and teachers to engage in "collaborative inquiry."

Next, in a study about book clubs and adolescents, Caribbean immigrant girls combined reading with writing in a discussion setting. In this study, Henry (2001) required her eight Caribbean female ESL participants to keep a journal and respond to literature. She found that "discussing engaging, relevant topics, and reading each others' writing, as well as reading *to* each other, helped the girls think critically and jointly explore issues they would not feel 'safe' approaching in their classrooms" (p. 188). These weekly "reading/writing/discussion workshops" incorporated literature written by Caribbean authors to encourage participation from the girls as well as to provide cultural relevance to the study. As a result, the girls found themselves able to "reflect on and discuss their own lives" (p. 186) in a manner that was not accepted in their other classes. This study used a text by a Caribbean author (Latoya Hunter) and encouraged the participants' self-discovery as they felt more confident discussing their own lives in response to the book they read with Henry. Interestingly enough, Henry does not discuss her role as teacher/researcher in these groups, nor does she discuss how her own racial

identity (which is never identified) might have played a role in the interactions with her participants.

Kumasi (2008) facilitated an out-of-school book club with 13 Black youth (aged 13-18) in the Midwest to learn "how racial identity is articulated by a group of African American youth inside a culturally responsive book club" (p. 33). Using critical sociolinguistic ethnography, Kumasi found that the book club was a site where participants were able to challenge whiteness through discussions she facilitated with five other researchers (which included an African American woman, a Black male research assistant, and 3 white women). These facilitators allocated time to community building with the participants before the book club began. Using *The First Part Last* (Johnson, 2004), the researcher documented how the participants "explore[d] issues related to Black males in society" (p. 56), pairing the young adult novel, about a young Black man who takes care of his child, with videos and rap music to help students think comprehensively about the issue and pursue a line of inquiry about the topic. Whereas the researcher reasoned that, in structured book clubs teachers might be reluctant to let students talk about issues such as race because of their own discomfort, within the out-of-school book club, students were able to struggle with racial tension. Throughout this struggle, Kumasi concluded that "Overall, this event [discussing racial identity in *First Part Last*] helped illustrate that tension can prove to be a productive component of racially sensitive discussions, provided that educators cultivate a climate of intellectual curiosity and respect" (p. 118). Kumasi incorporated discourse analysis to analyze her results and relied on the frames of whiteness studies and double consciousness.

While this study demonstrates the power of a text to help students have discussions about their racial identity, it leaves open the question about the effectiveness of this study within a classroom context, particularly given that Kumasi notes teachers' reluctance to straddle racial tension while students have discussions. In addition, Kumasi had the assistance of a team of experts: from librarians, to researchers, to pre-service teachers, to help her carry out the study. Since a teacher has limited resources, in terms of time and of additional help, some thought must be given to how much a teacher can be expected to do in order to create environments that encourage students to collaborate, as well as the training teachers need to facilitate book clubs with subject matter that is potentially uncomfortable for them.

Finding books that appeal to young people of color is central to the success of book clubs. In the last decade, urban fiction has garnered attention for its potential to attract adolescent readers of color (Hill, Perez, Irby, 2008). Gibson (2010) suggests that urban fiction can be used to create a culture of reading with African American girls. Gibson also stresses that urban fiction can be used as a bridge to helping girls read more canonical texts. She writes, "Urban fiction, which may be considered a window of sorts, provides insight about the lives of participants and how more dominant forms of texts can be applied to their realities; this understanding may serve as an entry point for teaching an English-related skill" (p. 570). Tatum (2009) echoes the need to use culturally relevant texts as "bridge[s] of opportunity" when he argues for the need to anchor texts that "pay attention to [young Black men's] multiple identities—academic, cultural, economic, gendered, personal, and social" (p. 14). Both researchers (Gibson and Tatum) stress the importance of culturally relevant texts that encourage young people of color to read, and

also the need for teachers to, again, help young people make critical connections and continue developing their reading competency.

Summary

As other researchers have indicated, young Black men need to share their first-person accounts to help those charged with educating them understand their specific needs and move away from deficit-laden discourses to ones more hopeful and useful. A review of the literature relevant to my interests in young Black men reveals that, though this population is considered to have lower levels of school-based achievement than their mainstream counterparts, this group participates in the world in ways that require much more positive attention. They are fluent in the discourses of the day: hip-hop culture, rap music, spoken word communities, and enter into those spaces as sites of experimentation, friendship, and affirmation. The relationships young Black men create with each other results in a form of youth culture that enables them to not only play with language, but to also create their own responses to their worlds. However, given the dismal performance of young Black men within schools, more research attention needs to be directed at practices that successfully leverage youth discourse inside classrooms that will lead to academic achievement.

It is my hope that this research extends our understanding of how young Black men create and leverage their relationships with each other within classrooms. As young Black men are pushed further from classrooms, the need arises to explore school-based settings in hopes of understanding how these spaces might be utilized to encourage them to demonstrate those competencies in concert with (as opposed to) classroom instruction. This study will be of significance because of its potential to add to the body of research

that currently exists about the academic achievement of young Black men in general and book clubs and the use of multicultural texts within school-based settings with this group in particular. In addition, this study contributes to the literature about the schooling experiences of Caribbean immigrant youth, particularly as related to the literacies employed by Caribbean American young men in a middle school language arts class. It will also help clarify assumptions about the role of a teacher in creating a classroom environment that enables young Black men to participate in a book club and have positive, lasting experiences with literature.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how a group of African

American and Caribbean American young men participated in a middle school

Humanities classroom book club. The following main question guided this study: What

happens when a small group of African American and Caribbean American young men

gathers to read a shared text? This chapter describes the study's research design and is

organized in the following sections: (a) rationale for research approach; (b) sample and

population; (c) overview of research design; (d) methods of data collection; (e) methods

and procedures for data analysis and synthesis; (f) trustworthiness; (g) ethical

considerations; (h) limitations of the study, and (i) a brief summary to conclude.

Rationale for Research Approach

Rationale for qualitative research design. My reasons for using qualitative

methods were similar to Taylor and Bogdan's (1998), a commitment to "understanding

people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it"

(p. 7). For the participants in this study, it was important to allow them to define their

reading practices and habits, and the role reading plays in their lives, as well as how

participating in a book club might shape their attitudes toward reading. The best way to

gather this information was through participant-observation and in-depth interviews

because these methods helped get at the role of context and the link between context and

the participants' attitudes. The voices of these participants are not often heard in the

literature that is written about why they do not read or speculation about what can be

done to improve their reading practices. Young Black men are far too often considered from a deficit perspective, in which they allegedly choose not to read or choose note to actively participate in their education. Qualitative methods allowed for the opportunity to work towards an accurate depiction of the participants' worlds as they constructed them and, with that information, to work towards a more accurate portrayal of young Black men's attitudes toward reading and what those entrusted with educating them might do to improve their academic experiences.

Rationale for case study methodology. The research design was an "intrinsic case study" (Stake, 2005, p. 445). Intrinsic case studies are interested in particular cases, or, as Dyson and Genishi (2005) explain, the "local particulars of some abstract social phenomenon" (p. 3). For this study, I was interested in how a particular group of young men interacted with their peers as they read multicultural texts. An intrinsic case study was appropriate for this research because it allowed me to focus on one particular group of students for a given amount of time to determine the processes at work in their lives. This focus enabled the collection of information-rich data. Focusing on this particular case also allowed me to "gain insight into some of the factors that shape, and the processes through which people interpret or make meaningful, an urban landscape" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3).

Approach. This study incorporated a grounded theory approach. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) explain that grounded theory is a "method for discovering theories, concepts, hypotheses, and propositions directly from data rather than from *a priori* assumptions, other research, or existing theoretical frameworks" (p. 137). Once I was in the site, I recorded observations and interviewed participants. From that data, I

formulated theories. I continued to record observations and interviews about the theories I formulated to determine the importance to the participants. This continuous process allowed me to constantly compare the data I collected in the field to theories I formulated or ones that have been formulated about similar situations. I only had some general ideas about this project, and was much more interested in letting phenomena emerge as they happened, while the participants engaged in daily activities. Grounded theory was applicable because as the data was collected, I could determine the future directions for the study. The primary intention of using grounded theory was to determine how the subjects constructed their worlds and the role reading played within those worlds.

Sample and Population

I used a criterion sampling procedure to select the participants. I wanted to know more about a particular school population, young Black men who were part of a peer group. Criterion sampling was appropriate because of the potential for a group of young Black men to provide information that could not be gathered by surveys or other quantitative measures. As Patton (2001) explains, "the point of criterion sampling is to be sure to understand cases that are likely to be information rich because they may reveal major system weaknesses that become targets of opportunity for program or system improvement" (p. 238). Understanding the participants and how they navigated reading and their peer relationships offered the opportunity to learn much more about this group, as well as consider solutions for educators, researchers and policymakers. I employed criterion sampling to increase the credibility of the study while not aiming for generalization or representative-ness. In addition, criterion sampling limited the sample to

a manageable size to regularly interview the participants in-depth for my given timeframe for the study.

Participants. The requirements for participation in the study included that participants must be male, of African American or Caribbean American descent (or a combination of both), and enrolled in the eighth grade at UPS. The participants also had to be willing to participate in the data collection procedures (which were completely voluntary and governed by the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign's Institutional Research Board). I identified potential participants during the second month of the 2007-2008 school year: first through preliminary observations of students and then through consultation with the students' Humanities teacher and the school's principal. Since I was interested in students' social interactions, I was particularly observant of peer groups of students that interacted with each other inside and outside of class.

There were two potential peer groups of boys. Both groups had existing peer relationships that extended outside of class, and both were comprised of African, African American and/or Caribbean American young men. After the initial observations and discussions with key school personnel, I settled on a group of four young men (Finesse Jackson, Marlon Hawkins, Paul Valcimond, and Damien Richards; all pseudonyms that I selected) that had existing peer relationships as my focal students. I selected this group over the other potential peer group because I was interested in comments school personnel made about them. They were described as "outliers," within the class, and as having "pulled back from academic achievement" more than other students in the eighth grade. I was curious to explore if, indeed, those descriptors where accurate, given the literature about the schooling experiences of young men of color and the importance of

peer networks and interactions in their development as adolescents. I was also interested in the eventual focal group because they were older than their peers (three of the four were held back at some point in their schooling) and seemed adept at expressing their opinions about the school and each other verbally.

I interacted with both peer groups informally during the first week of unofficial observation, and the eventual focal group was not as welcoming as the other group; the boys appeared wary of me and reticent to answer general questions I asked them about their interests and opinions. When I asked them questions about school and their lives outside of school, they tended to give me one-word answers and avoided more than minimal eye contact. The other group of boys was much friendlier; they asked me questions about my study, my background, and what I was doing with my project. It was not until I officially began the study and observed the two groups that I made the decision to focus on Finesse and his peers. My decision was based primarily on what I perceived as a tension between Finesse and Marlon as well as what I perceived as Finesse's ability to curry favor from a larger number of peers (both male and female) within the classroom. Within that group, Finesse and Marlon commanded attention from everyone else, admiration that was begrudging or otherwise. The boys also seemed to have mastered the art of "doing school"; that is, as I later learned, they completed tasks such as homework when they determined it important to them, and did not seem to worry about consequences. They set themselves apart from the other group of boys, who Finesse and his peers called "EDUBS", or "everyway dumb." "EDUB" was used to characterize the behavior of four other African and African American young men. This group was frequently involved in horseplay in and out of class and exchanged jokes and insults

regularly. Finesse considered the other group immature. He explained, "All that throwing

stuff at each other, all that smacking each other stuff ain't rowdy with me. It ain't rowdy"

(Peer Group Interview, 11/20/07). They voiced their dislike of school structures and

particular teachers, again, with little regard to who might hear their comments and what

perceptions such comments provided. In short, Finesse and his peers were the more

interesting focal group for me because they provided the best potential for exploring

school and reading, particularly because the peer group seemed cohesive and also

because these young men had their own ideas about what made schooling important.

The total number of students enrolled in the study was thirteen; however, given

my interest in peer groups, the four young men, Finesse, Marlon, Damien, and Paul, were

the primary sources of data. I focused largely on their interactions with each other and

their Humanities teacher as the first data source, and their interactions with other students

not in their peer group and their interactions outside of Humanities class as a source of

secondary data. I first detail the participants then their eighth-grade classroom below.

Nigel Bien-aime. Nigel Bien-aime was a 33-year-old male teacher of Haitian

descent in his second year of teaching at UPS and his sixth year of teaching overall. He

immigrated to the United States with his family at age 12, settling in an area of the city

that was predominantly African American and Caribbean American, and continued to

live there during this study. He often rode his bicycle to school. As a student, he attended

public middle and high schools in the city. He described his schooling experiences by

saying,

> …I found [school] to be very easy at first and very lackadaisical. I felt like there
> was a lack of structure…I was able to kind of be in school but to get to know the
> United States socially, around my peers, and so that school didn't have to be this
> huge, present thing. It was just, like, I more did school than anything else. I did

that til maybe I was in the 11th grade; then I started doing work and enjoying school. (Personal Interview, 1/02/08)

After working seven years as a phlebotomist after graduating from high school, Nigel decided to pursue higher education and enrolled in a community college before transferring to a small, prestigious, private liberal arts college in the western part of the state to finish his degree in History.

Nigel described himself as always having been an avid reader, from exploring Malcolm X independently in high school due to his own interest, to perceiving his own lack of knowledge about young adult literature and subsequently reading as much of the genre as he could. Prior to exploring young adult literature, his reading interests leaned primarily towards non-fiction. Once he began reading young adult literature, though, and considering how he could use it in his classroom, he was "pleasantly pleased" and said

> [Young adult literature] is a lot more sophisticated I guess I would say than I thought it would be. I think I'm pleasantly pleased that authors are not necessarily dumbing things down for kids and…a lot of complex issues are dealt with in that. So the reading level might be "easier," but the issue they choose to deal with isn't necessarily, um, light…I've enjoyed it, but it's also becoming a curse. You know, I want to stay on top of it and know as much as possible. I'm tryin to read as much as possible. (Personal Interview, 1/02/08)

Before teaching at UPS, Nigel was an administrator in a charter school in the city, but eventually left that position after five years, citing a frustration with the school's use of what he called "super detention" as a punitive measure for students. Rather than leave schools altogether, Nigel decided to teach within the pilot school environment. When thinking about the difference between the two schools, Nigel explained

> Both schools have it as part of their mission to be teacher-driven or teacher-led…But they interpret it differently. Each school has allowed me to create my own curriculum…This school [UPS] sees itself as progressive, it's known as the stereotypical urban progressive school, um, and I think that [the charter school] saw itself as college prep, and what that meant is it's all about, um, getting kids to

perform better at tests and that was like what was driving everything. (Personal Interview, 1/02/08)

Since being at UPS, Nigel said he struggled to adjust to the "first-name" addresses the school used (that is, students called him "Nigel" rather than "Mr. Bien-aime"). He also continued to adjust to the multiple responsibilities teaching at UPS required. He explained the "idea of teachers as leaders, everybody's supposed to think of themselves as teachers, but also as principal, and administrator…a lot of responsibility is left for teachers to do, which is a lot beyond teaching, the setting of the schedule, discipline…"(1/02/08). Nigel did not have a clear solution to managing the multiple demands; he simply stated, "You just do it!"

Finesse Jackson. Finesse Jackson was a 14-year-old African American young man who had spent his entire K-8 career at UPS. Finesse was retained in the second grade, and was one of the students in the class that was a year older than his peers. The long-time school personnel knew Finesse, and when they interacted with him, it was with a mixture of affection and annoyance. Finesse was unafraid to voice his opinions about school: if he did not like the way a particular teacher treated him, he said so (often loudly). If he did not want to complete an assignment, he did not. However, when he engaged with his Humanities teacher, it was often with humor and a sense of respect.

Finesse had a diagnosed learning disability that made reading difficult for him. The school's special education teacher evaluated him yearly to assess his needs as well as his reading level. Nigel told me that Finesse's reading level had gone from the fifth to the sixth grade based on his most recent assessment. Though special education accommodations were made for him, Finesse said he had not read a chapter book until reaching the eighth grade, and it was only because Nigel presented him (Finesse) with a

book he liked. When thinking about his decision to read more books as an eighth grader, in an interview with him and his peer group, Finesse declared, "Yo, this is my first year I been pickin up a chapter book! A real chapter book. This is my first time <u>ever</u> readin' one was *First Part Last*. <u>EVER</u>! Real talk!" (Peer group interview, 11/20/07). Interestingly, Finesse's peer group knew about his learning disability, but seemed not to regard it as a limitation. Finesse also made no seeming attempt to hide his disability, calling himself "special with the readin."

Of the four young men that comprised the peer group, Finesse emerged as the leader. He influenced where his peers sat in the classroom for morning meeting (they would cluster around him). He introduced topics of discussion during lunch (particularly about girls and web sites about girls), and he also had the ability to impact the overall classroom atmosphere (he said he was going to intentionally get kicked out of his math class to return to Humanities to work on a project and two of his peers said they were going to do the same). However, Finesse also helped Nigel. If Nigel wanted students' attention, Finesse would notice and tell his students to "be quiet because Nigel's tryin' to talk." When the book clubs began, and Nigel gave them specific instructions, Finesse was often the one who attempted to keep the group on task and focused on the discussion. Finesse's means of enlisting his classmates' cooperation was not always within Nigel's bounds of classroom decorum. Nigel frequently had to remind Finesse (as well as others in the class) to avoid calling out or talking over other students. However, Nigel seemed to rely on these reminders rather than proceed to harsher disciplinary measures to curb Finesse's actions.

Finesse's younger brother also attended UPS, and they lived with their father within walking distance of the school. Finesse had two brothers, one of whom had graduated from the high school upstairs that shared the building with UPS, and a younger brother that was in the sixth grade at UPS. Math was his favorite subject, though Finesse reported beginning to enjoy Humanities and Literacy more because he had material he felt competent to read. He was uncertain about where he wanted to attend high school, and was considering applying to a small, pilot high school and two large public high schools in the city. He did not know if he wanted to attend college, saying he anticipated needing a "break," but that he would consider pursuing work in construction, like his father, who owned his own construction business, and for whom Finesse and his brothers worked.

When Finesse came home from school, he reported typically spending time with his brothers, and they played video games or watched television. His father prepared dinner for them at the same time each evening, and afterwards Finesse spent additional time with his family or his friends. He eventually went to bed around midnight, but on the weekends stayed up until 4 a.m. "chillin, talkin, [and] playin video games" (Individual interview, 1/04/08). While he stated that he did not consider himself a reader because "if I don't have to read, I won't" he did admit to reading "the words on the [television] screen or the game, and sometimes the stats on the bottom of SportsCenter" (Individual interview, 1/04/08).

Marlon Hawkins. Marlon Hawkins was a 14-year-old young man of Jamaican descent. He was born in the United States, but explained that he was "born on the line, between here and Jamaica" as a way of describing his ethnic identity. Both of his parents

were Jamaican and his mother maintained friendship ties with people in the city that they had known in Jamaica. Marlon and his family (a younger sister that also attended UPS) returned to Jamaica each summer to visit his great-grandmother's grave.

Like Finesse, Marlon repeated a grade in elementary school. His mother wanted him to repeat the first grade because, in Marlon's words, "she said I wasn't ready." Marlon completed his first years of school at a Catholic school before transferring to UPS in the third grade. He and Marlon became friends in the fifth grade, though they described themselves as having "problems" with each other in the fourth grade and almost "throwin hands" and fighting with each other. Upon entering the fifth grade, though, they forgot about their dislike for each other and became friends. Lingering tension remained between Marlon and Finesse, however. When the four boys were together in Nigel's classroom, clustered around a table or sprawled on the benches, Marlon would sometimes taunt Finesse: he would make loud noises to annoy Finesse, would refuse to answer a question Finesse might ask him, or would call him a derogatory name. Marlon also seemed to resent the attention Finesse garnered. When Paul and Damien aligned themselves more closely with Finesse in their peer group, it was to Marlon's chagrin.

> Yeah, I stand out. I'm loud sometimes, but, he [Finesse] tries to make jokes 24/7. And people actually laugh at em and they're corny. That's what gives me the idea they're [other students] afraid of him. They [Keyshawn and Damien] also follow him, too, like Keyshawn and Damien, yeah, Finesse is their king. (11/13/07)

Marlon described himself as "somebody who works but when they feel like…somebody smart that don't like to show their smarts that much" (11/13/07) in elementary school. He also seemed unconvinced that he could get unbiased decisions made on his behalf in the school, since, as he said, "School was easy for me. But they

was already watchin me hard because in elementary I got in a couple fights, so they was watchin me and I used to get in trouble for stupid things" (11/13/07). In middle school, though, Marlon described himself as a "good kid that gets caught up into stuff sometimes…Like conversations that get you in trouble, and…rumors, and…normal school stuff" (11/13/07). Marlon was concerned with issues of fairness: he said he had been unfairly accused of fighting while in elementary school, which caused some of his current dissatisfaction with UPS. He said, "I want to get out of here, cause as the years go on, this school gets cornier and cornier" (11/13/07). The concern about fairness extended to Marlon's relationship with his science teacher. Marlon was unhappy with what he perceived as the science teacher's inconsistencies in classroom management and in providing feedback about his work. Because of these conflicts, Marlon was not shy about voicing his unhappiness with the science teacher.

Marlon was reluctant to name reading as an activity he enjoyed. He explained, "I'm strong with readin but it's just not somethin I like" (1/4/08). For Marlon, the primary goal of reading was to increase his fluency, something he described as "you read to get better;" once that goal was accomplished, he saw no reason to continue reading. Marlon complicated his own perception of reading, though, when I asked him about reading with his peer group. He said, "If it's a good book, we'll all read it…But if it's like a book they say we have to read and we don't like it, we're not gonna lift a page" (11/20/07). Marlon reported liking his Humanities class because he enjoyed learning about African American history.

Despite Marlon's view of UPS as a place with which he grew increasingly disenchanted, Marlon actively participated in extracurricular activities. He was a member

of a community-based student glass blowing collaborative. Twice a month, Marlon went to a local community studio to blow glass and make sushi plates, Christmas ornaments, paperweights, and coasters. He continued

> We would price our product and keep, keep track of what we made. We would name em so we could make sure that everything's there, but we're not missing nothing. And then we give em to our boss and our boss would actually go out and sell it at events and stuff. And then we get our checks. (11/13/07)

Once during class, Marlon, who considered himself a "professional," told Finesse and Paul how dangerous the glass blowing was, but he said it was also "mad fun." Marlon was also a member of another community initiative. Teen Empowerment brought adolescents from the community together at another community center, where participants wrote their own creative pieces (ranging from essays, raps and poetry) and presented them twice a month for their peers and other community members. Marlon explained

> I, um, we organize programs and stuff like to throw events and I say stuff that I'm gonna do, like we'll go there and we'll sit in a circle and we'll plan out what we're gonna do for this date and the event and somebody'll say I'ma do a rap, I'ma do this, I'ma do that. And we all choose what we're gonna do, then we work on it til the day. We do a quick run through and then on the day we'll have food and stuff and people come in. We throw them a show. (1/04/08)

Marlon performed an original poem about "when your father leaves, like kids without daddies" for one of the performances, then came back onstage to "crump" dance with some members of a dance group. He looked forward to planning more events with the organization in the upcoming months. While he said he was not a reader, he did say he thought of himself as a writer, and said, "I like writin, and I'm good at it" (1/04/08).

Marlon applied to a competitive, all-boys private school in the city. He had spent two weekends during my observation period on prospective student visits and

standardized admission test procedures, and felt confident that, should he be admitted, he would do well academically. He wanted to attend college and wanted to "either be in the law business, like the court system and stuff, or a grant writer, or the president" as a future goal.

Paul Valcimond. Paul Valcimond was a 13-year-old young man of African American and Haitian American descent. Paul entered UPS in the fourth grade, transferring from a public elementary school in the city. Paul seemed to have resigned himself to school: he said he completed much of his work to avoid complaints from his mother. He reported, "I do my work because if I don't, I don't want to hear my mother's mouth" (11/20/07). Nigel said Paul was the most accomplished academically of the four boys, and Finesse agreed, saying, "Yeah, Paul do his work" (11/20/07). Paul said about elementary school, "I was pretty good…I did what I had to do…maybe fooled around once in a while, but it wasn't like that, though. Didn't get in trouble that much" (11/14/07).

Throughout elementary school, reading was an activity Paul said he had to do, but he did not enjoy. He could not name a favorite book from that time and thought that reading was "terrible" and "the worst thing in the world" because he could not read magazines—what *he* wanted to read—during classroom independent reading time. As a middle school student, Paul still described himself as a good student, one that did not "really get in trouble like that cause I don't be messin' around" (11/14/07). Paul did interact regularly with his peer group; however, whereas Finesse and Marlon seemed to take pleasure in drawing attention to themselves, Paul preferred the opposite. He was sometimes the one who told Marlon that he was being mean to a fellow student and that

Marlon needed to apologize. Paul also was often the first to soothe tension between Marlon and Finesse when he saw an argument brewing between them.

In middle school, Paul read *Scorpions* (Myers, 1995) in sixth grade and said that was the first book he enjoyed reading, but could not name another favorite until the eighth grade. He named one of the books he read in his book club (*Forged by Fire*, Draper, 1998) as another one he enjoyed. Paul was upset and declared that he "don't like that I'm likin to read" (Peer group interview, 11/14/07). He blamed Nigel for piquing his interest with books that he (Paul) enjoyed, and worried that "it's just the more I'm gonna like to read I'm just gonna keep readin and readin and…no!" (Peer group interview, 11/14/07). Paul could not reconcile his movement towards liking reading with his perception of reading as something he was not supposed to enjoy. He explained, "It's just…I'm not supposed to like to read…that's not my thing. It's not what I do" (Peer group interview, 11/14/07). However, if Nigel assigned a book for the in-class book clubs, Paul read the book.

Before the eighth grade, Paul used to dance with a community dance group, an activity he said he enjoyed and wished he had continued. He said he liked "going to practice after school and just…dancing in front of lots of people, at shows and things" (11/14/07). Paul stopped dancing, and said he participated in no other extracurricular activities, though he was looking forward to playing basketball, his favorite sport, in the winter. Paul followed college and professional sports as well; he read the local sports page almost daily before school started, perusing scores and other headlines. He did not have a favorite player or team, but was most interested in the overall aspects of the game.

Paul lived with his mother, who suffered from bouts of extended illness, but remained in contact with Nigel. Nigel explained that Paul was "carrying the weight of the world on his back. His mother is really sick" (Personal interview, 1/02/08). When he came home from school, he spent most afternoons and evenings playing with his cousin. He was a Jehovah's Witness, a religion that Nigel contributed to Paul's sense of responsibility, particularly to his mother.

Paul enjoyed math most in school, but said he did not like his teacher because "she threatens us that we're gonna get kicked out" for bad behavior (1/03/08), though Paul said he had never been kicked out of class. He planned to apply to one of the specialty high schools in the city. The school focused on business and technology and Paul said he hoped to own his own business one day. Paul said that during an ordinary day, he did not do any reading, but that he considered himself a reader. However, he added, "I do consider myself as a reader, but I don't like to read, and I don't read" (Personal interview, 1/03/08). He explained

> Because I'm starting to read more. I wouldn't have read any of them books. I would have lied and said I would have read like last year in sixth grade but now I'm starting to like reading even more. I'm not liking it! No like, reading's great. Reading's okay. (1/03/08).

Damien Richards. Damien Richards was a fourteen-year-old young man of Caribbean American descent. His father was from St. Thomas, his mother was African American, and Damien was one of nine children. He entered UPS in the second grade and described himself as "quiet" throughout elementary school. Six of his older siblings had also attended UPS, and, at the time of the study, Damien's youngest sister was enrolled at UPS in the lower school. Damien was a talented artist and said he spent time after school drawing. Nigel encouraged Damien's interest.

When interviewed individually, Damien was reticent, sometimes not offering more than one-word answers to my questions. In the interviews with his peers, however, Damien was much more forthcoming and lively. Damien was a grade ahead of Finesse, Marlon and Paul until he was retained in the sixth grade, and the peer group formed. The other young men kidded Paul good-naturedly for being "half EDUB" a term used to describe the other peer group of young men in their class. Damien was called "half EDUB" because, as Marlon explained, "Like sometimes he wants to do the stuff they're doing and he finds it fun. Sometimes their jokes are funny to him" (11/20/07). Though Damien's peer group ribbed him for spending time with the other peer group, it also recognized his academic achievement. Finesse and Marlon praised Damien for receiving the highest grade on a math test. They admired his accomplishment.

Damien was the peer group member who interacted with his other classmates regularly, more than his peers. Despite the classroom's small number of students, the other three boys tended to spend most of their in-class time together, to the exclusion of others. Damien, however, sat with the other boys' peer group as well as with different girls in the class. Nigel described Damien as having "checked out" of middle school; Damien said the work was not difficult, and he looked forward to attending high school.

Damien said reading was difficult for him in elementary school because he "wasn't good at it," but in middle school, he reported enjoying the books he read in his book club. Reading, in his opinion, was something "I don't like doing it, but I have to do it," and Damien ranked it low on his list of preferred activities (hanging out with his friends, playing sports, and surfing the Internet were his top choices). Damien did spend two weeks near the end of the study reading the first two books in the *Among the Hidden*

(Haddix, 2000) series. He and a classmate, Rosie, discussed plot points, characters and their reactions to the books before school and during their book clubs. They also set goals between each other to read all seven books in the series, carrying on an informal book club of their own. Damien said he liked the series because he enjoyed the first two books because of "a lot going on and stuff", which compelled him to read the remainder of the series. When I asked him if he considered himself a reader, he replied, "a little bit" and explained "Because sometimes I…just don't feel like readin sometimes" (Personal interview, 1/04/08).

After school, Damien either played flag football, or went home. At home, he said he might "go on the computer, watch TV, [or] do my homework" (1/04/08). He listened to music online as well as checked his MySpace social networking Internet site. He also watched cartoons and listened to his iPod occasionally.

While a talented artist, Damien said math was his favorite subject. He said he planned to attend college in the future but was uncertain about his field of study. He was applying to the public arts high school, but was also going to apply to a charter school in the city that his sisters attended, as well as a large public high school.

Site. The site for this study, Urban Progressive School (UPS), was an eleven-year-old K-8 public pilot school located in a large, urban city in the northeast. As one of a dozen pilot schools in the city, UPS and other pilot schools "ha[d] greater freedom and flexibility with regard to how they spen[t] their per capita funds, how and whom they [could] hire, as well as in areas of curriculum, assessment, and scheduling" (Pilot schools, n.d.). There were 168 students enrolled in the school and the classrooms were "multi-age and multi-grade" in which "most children spen[t] two years with the same

teacher." Every classroom averaged twenty students and had at least two adults delivering instruction; the pair might consist of a head teacher and an assistant (who could be a student teacher, parent, or member from the community). Of the 168 students enrolled, 55.4% were Black[1], 19% Hispanic, 21.4% White, 1.8% Asian and 2.4% Native American. Additionally, 82.1% of students were enrolled in regular education classes, while 17.8 % were enrolled in special education classes. There were 12 full-time teachers in the school and five support staff. Of this total staff, 47.1% were Black, 5.9 % Hispanic, and 47.1% White (School district report card, 2007).

The school prided itself on "build[ing] on a tradition of progressive education that place[d] at the center the interests of lively and curious children who seek to make sense of the world" (Fact sheet, n.d.). The school executed its mission by adhering to particular practices and expectations that encouraged students to develop their academic and social skills through participating in school-wide projects that demonstrated their development and proficiency over time. Throughout the year, all grades worked on agreed-upon themes selected for study by teachers for the first two trimesters. These themes included earth science, Ancient Africa, and the African American experience. The principal explained that teachers and students studied topics simultaneously as a way to "connect and extend learning" and that "each part we do alike connects them [students] to something bigger" (Field Notes, 10/23/07). School documents defined the curriculum as "multi-cultural, anti-racist, [and] anti-homophobic" which it explained thus: "We define excellence as including understanding of diverse cultures and a concern for fairness" (Fact Sheet, n.d.). UPS also promoted intense study of a few selected areas rather than a survey of more topics with less concentration. In a public document about its curriculum,

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[1] In this school district, Black was not disaggregated by ethnicity.

the school stated "We believe that students learn best when they are engaged in meaningful topics and when they can focus on depth instead of breadth. We want our students to learn some things well rather than lots of things with little understanding" (Curriculum, n.d.).

The school also had a large art component it considered integral; every student took a weekly art class with the full-time art teacher and could participate in the school orchestra and chorus. Each week, the school gathered in the library to share its work. These presentations were led by student emcees, and were intended to help students improve their public speaking skills as well as celebrate classroom achievements with the entire community (which often included parents and younger siblings).

At UPS, students completed an extensive portfolio to pass the eighth grade that demonstrated their ability to "handle high school work." This portfolio product was the primary measure of assessment the school used to gauge student performance. The school said the following about the portfolio process

> An eighth grade diploma from the Urban Progressive School represents the completion of six exhibitions where students demonstrate their knowledge and competence in areas prescribed by the faculty. Exhibitions include traditional schoolwork, as well as evidence from the experiences students have had in the outside world. Each student's work is represented and collected in a portfolio, which, along with on-demand tasks, becomes the basis for that student's exhibition. (Graduation requirements and portfolio review, p. 1, 2007)

Once they entered the middle school, students worked every year with their teachers to complete preliminary, preparatory projects in the sixth and seventh grade intended to familiarize them with the actual eighth grade portfolio. Every student received a Black, plastic "Portfolio box" in the sixth grade, and used that box for the next three years to file "evidence" of their learning. The school described the portfolio box as containing a

"'living history' of a student's middle school experience—and a variety of works in progress as the student prepare[d] for his/her exhibition" (Graduation, p.2, 2007).

In the eighth grade, students completed a portfolio project in six subject areas or "domains" (Humanities, math, science, art, performance, and an art show). Teachers created a schedule of due dates and expected students to initiate and execute projects that demonstrated their development as learners and as citizens. The completed portfolio was submitted to a committee of teachers, and then students presented their work to a panel that included subject matter teachers, family members, community members and/or a student from a lower grade in the middle school. This graduation committee assessed students against a domain-specific rubric, with regard to the following:

> Urban Progressive School's scoring rubrics assess how well a student demonstrates Habits of Mind, specific levels of skills and competencies relevant to that particular work in each domain (math, literature, history, etc.), and the effectiveness of the student's written and oral communication. The graduation committee also notes whether the candidate has developed appropriate habits of work—reliability, resourcefulness, ability to work with others and to meet deadlines—based on the evidence presented. (Graduation, p. 3, 2007)

Students also had to present a list of 30 books they had read over their three years in middle school. The portfolio committee could ask students questions about any book on their list.

UPS placed importance on "observing students and student work in multiple settings, not primarily standardized testing" (Graduation, p. 3, 2007). This decision to assess students through multiple frames was difficult; for the last two years, the school failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as determined by the Federal Government under No Child Left Behind. In relation to the eighth grade, though, all students passed the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the state assessment.

However, since the school aggregate of students did not make AYP, mandated corrective action required that the principal advise parents about their rights to transfer to a better-performing school in the district and had to provide supplemental tutoring for low-income students. While UPS had a greater representation from White students in the lower grades, the number of White students plummeted in middle school as White students entered the competitive Latin school or other public and private schools in the district.

The classroom. Nigel Bien-aime's classroom was large, and provided ample space for the eighth graders who spent each day with him for Humanities (Language Arts and History). A collection of five circular tables were in the center of the room, and were surrounded by Nigel's desk, a large set of four windows, a large magazine rack, an arrangement of three wooden benches in the back of the classroom, and a computer station and another wooden bench in the far corner. Bookcases lined the wall nearest the entrance. The books were clearly labeled by subjects: fiction, multicultural authors, history, etc. Students walked through the front of the classroom into a smaller room off to the right that housed their lockers. Nigel advised the eighth grade, and his classroom was its hub of activity.

There were 13 students in the eighth grade Humanities class, and all had been with Nigel the previous year in the seventh grade. There were nine boys and four girls. Twelve of the students were of color (nine students of African, African American and/or Caribbean American descent; two students of Latino descent, one student of biracial descent-African American and European American, and two students of European American descent).

Every morning, Nigel gathered students in the back of the classroom on the benches to outline the upcoming day and make general announcements. This morning meeting was a school-wide practice that all teachers utilized. He told them about any changes in their daily schedule, upcoming writing contests he encouraged them to enter, as well as any types of behavioral concerns he wanted to address with the entire group. The morning meeting was also often the location for lively banter about the city's professional sports teams. Nigel was an avid fan, and he and students regularly discussed upcoming games, scores, potential trades, and statistics. On Mondays, students shared the "highlights and lowlights" of their weekends. These ranged from visits to prospective high schools, to family vacations, to reviewing the latest movies.

Within the classroom, students were allowed to select their own seating until Nigel grew uncomfortable with what he perceived as students' not getting enough of their schoolwork done. He then rearranged their seating midway through my observation period. Prior to that time, however, students were permitted to sit where they wanted as long as they arrived to class on time. This took the shape of three or four students at a table, grouped by gender (all girls) or peer group (Finesse and the boys in his group). If students arrived late, they had to sit where Nigel instructed them to sit.

The overall atmosphere of the classroom was that of familiarity: all the students had looped from the seventh grade to the eighth grade with Nigel. He complained good-naturedly that students tended to act like siblings (and he occasionally chastised a couple of students for acting as such) because of their comfort with each other and with overall school structures, as many of them had also attended UPS since elementary school. Nigel tended to preside over the classroom with equal parts humor, understanding of adolescent

development, and patience. He was also firm that rather than allowing his relationships with students to devolve into contentious personal issues, he maintained his insistence that, in his classroom, the driving focus of the class was "about the work," and that focus allowed both him and students to strive for academic progress. It was this same sense of familiarity, however, that irritated the focal peer group. Several times during the study they declared their readiness to move on to high school.

Classroom schedule. Students had Nigel's Humanities class daily for one hour (9:30-10:30). On Tuesday afternoons, students returned to Nigel's class for an extended "literacy block" where the focus was on book clubs, portfolio writing, or financial literacy. On Thursday afternoons, students had art, but spent 20 minutes with Nigel either preparing for their book clubs or silent reading. Students also had 20 minutes (more or less, depending on the length of the assembly) on Friday morning to read after returning to the classroom after the all-school assembly. The book clubs occurred at least once per week and ranged from 10-20 minutes each session.

I was interested in this school as a site for my study because of its approach to student teaching and learning. Students were encouraged to express their ideas and independence, and engaged in intensive investigations about particular topics. The school's approach to literacy and reading instruction was also of interest. The school did not adhere to systematic reading instruction, but instead focused on turning students into "competent readers" through a multi-structured approach adapted to each individual student. A "primer" about its approach to literacy stated

> …while reading is not natural in the way speech is, the evidence suggests that in the long run using our natural abilities to make sense of written language works well, just as it does for oral language. If too much emphasis is put on learning all the hundreds of specific and frequently contradictory information (like which

combinations of letters make which sounds) it interferes with the goal of children becoming fluent comprehending readers. (Lynne, 2003, pp. 2-3)

UPS adopted an approach to reading instruction that included reading aloud, refraining from overly correcting a child learning to read, and helping students become proficient, independent, and lifelong readers. Again, based on its view of each student as an individual, the school also provided additional tutoring to students who needed assistance progressing through the reading spectrum, following the school's belief that students learn at different speeds. UPS divided students into seven stages of reading, ranging from emerging reader at one end to fluent reader at the other, with the expectation that students would progress through stages as they moved from kindergarten to middle school. However, as the primer indicated, "For children to become competent readers, it is critical that they keep learning and not become hung up on one level or plateau. Good instruction, adapted to each child, is the key" (Lynne, 2003, p. 3). However, despite what could be regarded as a holistic view of reading, the school lagged academically on standardized testing measures. I was interested in what occurred regularly regarding literacy instruction, particularly as related to young Black men, and specifically how these practices operated within a classroom book club context.

Historical and Contextual Importance of the Site

Geographic location. This study took place at Urban Progressive School (UPS), a K-8 middle school located in a large, metropolitan city called Oceanside in the northeastern United States. (All names and locations are pseudonyms). Different groups and individuals have long attempted to effect change within the Oceanside Public School system since its inception. Once a place for wealthy whites who sent their male Protestant children to the Oceanside Latin School prior to the 1830s, immigration changed the

demographics of the school-going population; with that change, upper class whites exited the public schools, making way for a pattern of immigrants who had varying levels of success within the system. While groups of European descent were able to migrate from Oceanside proper and begin new lives in the suburbs, African Americans did not enjoy those same advantages. Moving into areas once occupied by Jews and Italians, African Americans faced racism and hostility, and largely created their own opportunities. Cronin (2008) reported, "The new residents established their own stores, funeral homes, and a few taught in the schools. Some families had lived in Oceanside since the 1800s; others had migrated to Oceanside from Virginia, Barbados, or other West Indian islands" (p. 25). Regardless of their efforts, African Americans were confined to the city's limits; since 1940, when African Americans numbered 23, 000, or less than 3 % of Oceanside's population, census data indicates that the largest number of African Americans and people of African descent are within Oceanside, not its suburbs.

As whites moved into the suburbs, Blacks in Oceanside attended inferior schools that were underfunded and unsafe. Though the rest of the commonwealth was desegregated, Oceanside held fast in making Black students attend segregated schools. In the years leading up to the official Supreme Court decision to end segregation in public schools, Black community members advocated for equity for Black children in Oceanside. These attempts were largely unsuccessful because of the School Committee's refusal to take any substantive action to integrate Oceanside schools.

In 1973, the NAACP filed a federal case that resulted in Oceanside's forced integration of its schools. The federal judge ordered that desegregation of Oceanside schools would begin in September of 1974, and that desegregation would continue in

phases until achieving racial balance. Part of the first phase included the busing of 14,000 students, as well as closing the oldest and least safe buildings. The School Committee appealed the judge's decision to the Supreme Court. While its attempt was unsuccessful, the School Committee's defiance was one of numerous acts of rebellion against the desegregation mandate.

The current state of Oceanside Public Schools. Since the desegregation order, Oceanside's schools have steadily enrolled more students of color. Currently there are 55,800 students enrolled in Oceanside Public Schools ("Oceanside Public Schools at a Glance", 2008). 39% of students are African American, 37% are Hispanic, 13% are White, 9% are Asian, and 2% are multi-racial, non-Hispanic ("Oceanside Public Schools at a Glance," 2008).

What is important to note, though, is that Oceanside does not disaggregate its ethnic data; thus, students are classified as "African American" even though they may be from the Caribbean or from African countries. Thomas et. al. (2009) assert the importance of examining "within-group variations among Black youth" because

> African Americans and Caribbean Blacks may share the same race of being Black but are of different ethnicities due to their different histories, culture, and nationality. However, given that ethnic differences do exist among Blacks, the overwhelming majority of educational and social science research continues to categorize all Black people into one ethnic group. (p. 420)

Thus, Oceanside students are Black, but their ethnic identity varies. Particular schools in the district have higher numbers of students from particular ethnic groups (i.e., Cape Verdean or Haitian), increasing the possibility for those schools to be locations for conflict. Rong and Fitchett (2008) explain the tension between African Americans and Black immigrants in the following.

Research indicates that there are tensions between Black Americans and Black immigrants due to different perceptions of race, racism, and opportunities. Black Americans often see themselves as a Black race and emphasize their blackness with a pride and power that is derived from triumphs over a lengthy and brutal racial history of resisting discrimination in the United States. However, Caribbean immigrants may be less likely to insinuate racial prejudice in order to account for systemic injustices, and their voluntary immigrant conceptualization affords them to willfully emphasize their identification with national origins. They are inclined to distance themselves from Black Americans and to shun the negative stereotypes connected to them. (p. 38)

Because Oceanside does not specifically identify ethnic groups within the district, however, little is known about particular schooling experiences of its youth that is examined through a lens of ethnicity; little is known, also, about the complexities that accompany differences in ethnic variations (including class and language).

In addition, 72% of Oceanside's students are eligible to receive free and reduced-price meals (62% free, 10% reduced). For 24,140 of Oceanside's students, English is not their home language. The most common home languages are: Spanish (6,150); Chinese (890); Cape Verdean Creole (820); Haitian Creole (820); and Vietnamese (670) ("Oceanside Public Schools at a Glance," 2008). Within the city, 58% of residents self-reported as White, 24% as Black/African American, 16 % as Hispanic, and 9 % as Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Oceanside "At a Glance" reported, "As of February 2008, 83% of the Oceanside Class of 2008 and 76% of the Class of 2009 had passed the mandatory state competency exam for graduation in English Language Arts and Math. The school district had a sizeable dropout rate, however; at least 20% of students who began the ninth grade in a high school in the district dropped out over his/her next five years ("At a Glance," 2008). Between the 2005-2007 school years, an average of 8% of students dropped out yearly.

A federal presence remained in the school system, as the judge who ordered the first desegregation decision oversaw Oceanside's desegregation actions and intervened when he thought necessary. Oceanside has 75,500 school-aged children within the city, but 18,900 do not attend Oceanside Public Schools ("Oceanside Public Schools at a Glance," 2008). Instead, those students attend parochial, private, suburban and public charter schools around the city and in the suburbs. Thus, while the city's population is majority white, Oceanside's students are predominantly of color and live largely in neighborhoods where they share race or ethnicities.

Pilot schools. Urban Progressive School is a pilot school within the Oceanside Public School district. Pilot schools are not the same as charter schools; instead, whereas charter schools operate independent of school district control, pilot schools are products of the school district and, while having more freedom than traditional schools, still come under the oversight of the school district. One year after charter schools began operating statewide in 1993, the Oceanside Public Schools launched its Pilot School partnership in 1994. The Oceanside Public Schools describes pilot schools as follows

> The Oceanside Public Schools' pilot schools are the result of a unique partnership launched in 1994 among [the mayor], the Oceanside School Committee, Superintendent, and the Oceanside Teachers Union (OTU). The pilot schools were explicitly created to be models of educational innovation and to serve as research and development sites for effective urban public schools.
> Pilot schools are part of the school district but have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment, and the school calendar to provide increased flexibility to organize schools and staffing to meet the needs of students and families. ("Pilot Schools," n.d.)

At the end of the 2008-2009 school year, Oceanside had 21 pilot schools, with three more scheduled to open in 2009-2010. These schools spanned grades PreK-12, enrolling more than 7,000 students ("Pilot Schools," 4th paragraph, n.d.). Cronin (2008) argued that pilot

schools were added to appease the "growing public enthusiasm for charter schools [because] pilot schools, a milder version of charters, remained within the Oceanside public school employment system, allowing teachers to transfer to a pilot school without losing tenure, pension and other benefits" (p. 174).

Pilot schools outperform traditional Oceanside schools. According to the Center for Collaborative Education (2006), an organization that assists district pilot schools,

> On the [state standardized test], Pilot Schools outpace the district at every level tested in English Language Arts, reading, and math, in percent passing and percent proficient. Seventy-nine percent of Pilot high school graduates are enrolled in post-secondary education one year after graduation, as compared with 67% of district high school graduates. ("Essential Guide", p. 2)

Pilot schools might be considered "laboratories of innovation and research and [are] development sites for effective urban public schools" (Center for Collaborative Education, "Essential Guide," p. 3) by some district leaders, parents and students, and are another option for those seeking educational opportunities that traditional public education does not offer. Exploring the literacy experiences of African American and Caribbean American young men who attended a pilot school addresses the need to understand the learning of an important, but understudied, population of Oceanside's schools and helps to think about what factors contribute to, and detract from, their overall academic success.

Overview of Research Design

I used the following steps to carry out this research. A more detailed explanation is included after the summary of the steps.

1. Preceding the actual data collection, I conducted a selective review of the literature for information from other researchers and writers in the broad fields of adolescent literacy, academic achievement and African American young men, and peer group influences.

2. Following the proposal defense, I obtained IRB approval to collect the data for the study. The IRB process involved detailing all procedures as well as how I would obtain informed consent/assent and how I would maintain participants' confidentiality.

3. I began my study in a charter public school before changing the location of the study after learning I would be unable to explore peer group dynamics in the manner I had initially hoped, given the school's structure and objectives. I changed the location of my study after consulting with one of my committee members. I consulted with teachers and administrators to select participants.

4. I conducted semi-structured interviews, as well as observations, of the four participants and their teacher.

5. I analyzed interview and observation data.

6. I cross-analyzed interview and observation data with school documents.

Literature review. I conducted an on-going literature review throughout this study. I began with broader research interests and narrowed the focus as I moved into data collection and data analysis. The focus of the review was to understand what researchers and writers had learned, as well as to provide insight into my findings as I sought to explore the relationships of young Black men with each other and how those relationships extended to their reading of a shared text.

IRB approval. After the literature review, I successfully defended a proposal for this study that included: the background/context, statement of the problem, and research questions in chapter 1; the literature review in chapter 2; and the proposed methodology in chapter 3. I secured IRB approval. All names and locations for participants in this study are pseudonyms.

Selecting the site. I began my dissertation research in another school in the same city, but the school did not want students to independently select their texts and gather in a book club to read. I expressed my desire to find a different site to Dr. Theresa Perry,

one of my dissertation committee members, and she suggested I consider UPS because it had recently installed an African American woman principal whom Dr. Perry admired. I met Dr. Perry for coffee at a restaurant a few blocks from UPS, and we walked over to the school, where we met with the principal who was familiar with my earlier work with African American students. I presented a talk during one of Dr. Perry's summer institutes about African American student achievement as well as was a speaker in a spring seminar open to the school district in previous years. Dr. Perry told the principal I wanted to work with a teacher interested in starting book clubs in his/her classroom, and the principal suggested I speak with Nigel. She then proceeded to give Dr. Perry and me a tour of the school, stopping in Nigel's room for a brief introduction before proceeding on our way. The principal gave me Nigel's contact information, and then asked if I could attend the faculty meeting the next morning, which I did attend. I emailed Nigel, who responded that he was interested in discussing the creation of book clubs.

The next morning, I attended the faculty meeting, where the principal introduced me and said that Dr. Perry suggested I collect my data in the school. She asked me to say a few words about my project, which I described as book clubs and reading with Black boys, and I noticed several faculty members' heads nodding in response. Later, I was able to speak briefly to Nigel, who said he wanted to start book clubs the following month. He asked about my own teaching experience, and I told him I used to teach at a high school in the city. He said he expected me to be able to contribute something to the classroom and left it open to me to determine what that "something" would be. I told him I was knowledgeable about multicultural young adult literature, and he said that it would be helpful to him if I could update his classroom library with more current titles, which I

told him I was willing to do. Nigel also said he would discuss my role with the other

teachers on the eighth grade team. The following day, I realized there was confusion

about my role as a researcher. I think Nigel perceived my role as that of a tutor, given the

number of adult volunteers frequently around the school that provided those services.

This confusion is expressed in the following fieldnote excerpt.

> I think there was some confusion about my role. I explained to Nigel that I wanted
> to work with him, but that I also wanted to travel with the eighth grade. He asked
> me how my algebra skills were and I told him they were decent; he spoke to the
> math teacher. I explained to her that I wanted to observe the students, not
> necessarily tutor them, which is how I think my role was communicated to her.
> She also said that she has noticed that this group of eighth graders is pulling away
> from [their] academic potential and that my study would be useful as a means of
> exploring that. (9/26/07)

The next day, my first full day of observation in the school, I asked Nigel if I could

shadow students through their day, and Nigel said I could. I followed students through

their classes, with the math and science teachers smiling and welcoming me. Then, the

next day, a Friday, Nigel said that the other eighth grade teachers were apprehensive

about me following students into their classes based on a fear of being evaluated. I

explained to him that my interest was in what a particular group of students did within

those classes and that my study was not evaluative, but Nigel asked if I would confine my

classroom observations to his class. I decided that, for this study, I would focus on

participants within Nigel's classroom and observe them during their unstructured times

during lunch on Fridays (the day when I had lunch duty). He said he did not have any

problems with me in his classroom, but that, again, he anticipated it being difficult for me

to simply sit and observe what occurred in his classroom. He told me to teach something;

when I asked him for specifics, he indicated I should teach whatever felt comfortable for

me. I was never asked to actually teach a lesson in Nigel's classroom, but I did secure

funding for him to update his classroom library with multiple copies of various texts, enough for him to run his own book clubs.

Due to my own interest in facilitating book clubs in a middle school classroom, I was particularly interested in working with the middle school Humanities teacher, who expressed his own desire to start book clubs. UPS had the goal of having every student become a competent reader, and of "opening up a whole lifetime of pleasure" (Lynne, 2003, p. 22). As I spent more time in the school and with my participants, however, I began to understand that a divergence existed between the school's goals for reading and how my participants interpreted and enacted those goals for reading, particularly with regard to their interactions with each other and with their teacher.

In the following section, I detail how I collected and analyzed my data.

Methods of Data Collection

The general methodology employed in this study and the sequence for employment of specific methods was participant-observation, group observations and individual interviews. I used these methods to triangulate the data and to provide rigor to the study.

Participant observation. I was interested in the participants' worlds as they saw and lived them in their everyday classroom lives. I could best gain this emic perspective through utilizing participant observation to help understand what happened during the course of a classroom book club. I initially interacted with students as a friendly observer as they went about their classroom business. Participant observation was important because it provided a means to also understand the larger school setting, a way of considering the "interlocking circles" of the participants and a way of considering how

they "locate[d] themselves within groups of identity-makers and in relation to influential formal institutions" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 32).

Group observations. I recorded observations and field notes that indicated how participants responded to texts and each other in a large group setting. These observations occurred during classroom book clubs, as well as during other classroom activity in their Humanities classroom. In addition, my group observations extended to Friday lunch periods, where I observed the focal peer group for approximately 30 minutes. Group observations and field notes permitted me to have a better understanding of peer group socialization and to think about patterns and themes that occurred in different moments throughout the classroom.

Individual interviews. I conducted interviews with individual members to determine their interactions with peers and their responses to the texts they were reading. These interviews were semi-structured (see appendices for protocol). I interviewed the focal participants three times throughout the study and their teacher once.

Data Collected. After three months in the field, the data included 13 hours of observations and audiotaped recordings of book clubs and 75 hours of observations of general Humanities classroom activity. Data also included transcripts of semi-structured interviews with the focal boys and the focal teacher, and my fieldwork notebook wherein I recorded observation, methodological, and theoretical notes. In addition, artifacts that included the school's weekly newsletter, book club handouts, student work and school publications (including its official website) supplemented the data sources. Other data included 15 observation hours of lunch time featuring the focal students, as well as faculty meetings featuring the focal teacher.

My goal for the data collection was to gather any information that offered insight into the participants' interactions and understanding around a text. I used a variety of methods, including participant observation, audio tapings, and interviews to gather the data. Participant observation yielded field notes, and audiotaped book clubs and interviews produced transcriptions. I also collected related artifacts, which supplemented my understanding of the classroom and the school.

Field notes. I observed one book club group twice a week, but was in the classroom for general observations four days a week. The book clubs ranged in length. When they first began, Nigel limited student discussion to 10 minutes. By the time the book clubs ended two months later, they lasted between 15-20 minutes for each session. During the first book clubs, I focused on two participants (Finesse and Marlon) who were in the same book club together. In the second book club, my focus expanded to include Paul and Damien along with Finesse and Marlon, as the four read the same book. I observed their interactions within the book clubs, and their interactions with each other in the larger classroom during non-book club time. I was particularly observant of how the young men spoke to each other and their body language as well as the content of their discussions during those interactions. I also observed them each Friday during lunch for 30 minutes, where I observed their conversations in this unstructured time as they sat together around a lunch table. Every day in the field, I maintained extensive field notes that I continually analyzed. My goal when writing field notes was to "describe the setting and activities in sufficient detail to paint a mental picture of the place and what occurred there" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 74). From the analysis of field notes, I routinely generated memos at critical points of the analysis and time in the field to develop my

understanding of the data and to indicate trends or patterns emerging from the research and future directions for the research, as well as negative cases to refine my theories continuously. Over the course of the study, I wrote 316 pages of field notes.

Interviews. I conducted interviews over the course of the study, both with the entire book club group, a smaller peer group, and individual students and the teacher. I conducted two sets of interviews with each focal student. These interviews occurred early in the study (November) and at the conclusion of the study (January). I conducted interviews before school and during students' lunch break, using one of the school's unoccupied classrooms. I conducted two types of interviews: informally during observations and formally once the book clubs began. The informal interviews largely consisted of conversations between one or more students and me. The second type, more structured interviews, were guided by a protocol (included in appendix), but were conversationally carried out. The individual interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes, while the peer group interviews lasted 30 minutes and the final interviews lasted 10-15 minutes. The single individual teacher interview lasted approximately one hour.

Audiotaping. During my observations, I audiotaped interactions among the participants. These interactions included book club discussions as well as smaller discussions shared between a peer group of students before and after the book club. I also audiotaped initial individual interviews with students. I transcribed all interviews and created a transcription key that I used to analyze the data. The data collected in this study resulted in 163 hours of audiotape. Students were initially curious about the microphone, which I used to record the book clubs. I placed it in the center of the circle where students met, and the omni directional microphone recorded all talk. At the first meeting, one

student inquired if I was going to tape everything that occurred, and I said I was. Several times during the next few weeks, students would ask if the microphone was on; this question usually followed students not following Nigel's directions or when they discussed something directly unrelated to the book they read. Other than those questions, however, they seemed to ignore the microphone. My observations of their behavior indicated that they did not act any differently once the microphone was on than they did when it was off.

Transcription. I transcribed all interviews (individual and peer group) and included the transcription key in the appendix. Features most relevant to my analysis included the ways participants reworded directions that Nigel gave them, instances of students' personal cultural connections, and understanding of the text. As I am not an expert in the area of exact phonetic representation, my transcription process was similar to Peele-Eady (2005), who stated, "I transcribed words as close to Standard English and to African American English orthography as possible" (p. 94). However, since I am not an expert in African American English orthography, I confined my transcriptions to Standard English.

Methods and Procedures for Data Analysis and Synthesis

I drew on the inductive nature of qualitative research and grounded theory to analyze the data. Since I was uncertain what would happen once the book clubs began, I analyzed my data inductively. I constructed theory from the data collected from the study (Charmaz, 1983). The strategies I incorporated into the data analysis were coding and generating memos. First, I used open coding of the data for patterns, trends and themes and then developed focused codes to analyze the collected data (Charmaz, 1983;

Emerson et. al. 1995). Second, I also generated regular memos in order to reflect on

potential themes in the data, methodological challenges and ethical concerns. As the

project progressed, I generated additional memos that traced the evolving data codes. I

reduced and analyzed the data by thematic codes as they became clearer.

The relationship between the research questions, data collection methods, and

plans for analysis in this dissertation project are illustrated in the following table:

Table 1

Research Questions, Data Sources, and Analysis

Research Questions	Data Sources	Method of Analysis
1. How are members socialized into the group?	-observational notes of book club meetings -interviews with students -classroom documents (handouts, notes)	-review teacher and student articulation of expectations for group membership -analysis of field notes for instances of group socialization
1. a. What are the norms of participation as articulated and enacted by the teacher?	-observational notes of teacher's articulation of norms -interview with teacher	-transcriptions of teacher-student interactions -transcriptions of teacher-student conversations for patterns of interaction and correction
1. b. What are the norms of participation as articulated and enacted by the students?	-observational notes of students' articulation of norms -interviews (group, individual) with students	-analysis of field notes for instances of teacher and student articulations of norms of participation
1.c. Through what pedagogical and interactional means does the teacher work to socialize students into these norms of reading club membership?	-observational notes of teacher's pedagogy -observational notes of teacher's interactions with students -collection of classroom documents -transcriptions of book club audiotapes	-review of teacher materials (lesson plans, handouts, etc.) for specific references and expressions about expectations for book club membership -analysis of transcriptions of teacher-student formal and informal conversations and interactions -analysis of field notes for instances of teacher articulation/validation/expression of book club membership

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Research Questions	Data Sources	Method of Analysis
1.c.(a). Does and how does the teacher use existent peer relationships and peer discourse in this process?	-observational notes of student interactions and conversations -observational notes of teacher-peer interactions and conversations -transcriptions of book club audiotapes	-analysis of transcriptions of teacher-student conversations and patterns of discourse -analysis of field notes for instances of teacher interactions with students around book club procedures, expectations
1. c. (b). Do and how do the students use existent peer relationships and peer discourse in this process?	-observational notes of student interactions and conversations -interviews (group, individual) with students -transcriptions of book club audiotapes	-analysis of transcriptions of student conversations and patterns of discourse -analysis of field notes and interviews for instances of peer discourse and instances of how peers use discourse with each other
1. c. (c) What is the relationship between how teachers and students use peer relationships and peer discourse in this process?	-all observational notes of student and teacher-student interactions and conversations -transcriptions of book club audiotapes	-analysis of all transcriptions of teacher-student and student conversations and patterns of discourse
2. What are the group relationships within the book club?	-observational notes of student interactions and conversations -interviews (group-students; teacher)	-analysis of transcriptions of interviews for instances of group membership, group identification -analysis of field notes to gauge group membership, group identification
2. a. What relationships emerge between the participants?	-observational notes of student interactions -observational notes of teacher-student interactions	-analysis of field notes for instances of student agreement, disagreement, collaboration in specific instructional contexts and over time
2. b. What relationships emerge between the participants and the teacher?	-observational notes of teacher-student interactions	-analysis of field notes for properties of relationship (e.g. agreement, disagreement, collaboration) and how those change across instructional contexts and over time

Table 1 (continued)

Research Questions	Data Sources	Method of Analysis
3. What texts resonate with the group?	- classroom documents/texts -interviews: group/individual with students and teacher	-analysis of texts for common elements (themes, characters, plot, etc.)
3. a. How does student selection of texts matter (versus teacher-selected texts)?	-interviews: group/individual with students -observational notes of student conversation and interactions	-analysis of texts for common elements (themes, characters, plot, etc.) -analysis of field notes and transcriptions for instances of discussion about features of texts with which participants have strong association (e.g. talk about related experiences, relatively extended discussions)
3. b. What are the features of texts with which participants have a strong association?	-texts used for book club -other texts participants bring with them to class -interviews: group/individual with students	

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important in qualitative research because it increases the validity of the data. To establish trustworthiness in this study, I incorporated strategies articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), specifically of prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and peer debriefing. These attempts at trustworthiness also increased the study's credibility, defined as "the confidence one can have in the truth of the findings [as] established by various methods" (Bowen, 2005, p. 215).

Prolonged engagement. The time I was in the site provided time for me to learn the school's culture and build trust with the participants. I was in the field for three months officially, then informally for the remainder of the school year. I was able to draw on this time, spent in the classroom and around the building, as a basis for comparison in my observations and my interviews. I was able to build rapport with the participants to learn about them as they moved about their classroom and their book clubs, and I was

able to think deeply about the layers of meaning that encompassed the participants. Spending a prolonged time in the field also generated substantial data, allowing for robust analysis as I tried to understand what I was experiencing.

Persistent observation. Working in conjunction with prolonged engagement, persistent observation allowed me to "identify those characteristics and elements of the situation that are most relevant" to the study, and enable me to direct the study in a manner that preserved the participants' voices and perspectives (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 304). When I first began the study, I was focused too intently on the teacher, to the detriment of the focal group. After reviewing my field notes, however, I was able to shift my focus. As I became more attuned to the participants, I began to understand the levels of complexity that marked with it meant to be a young Black man at UPS. Had I not used persistent observation, which encouraged time to revisit my observations, I would not have been able to remind myself of the need to keep the focal group at the forefront of the data collection.

Triangulation. I used multiple data sources: interviews, school documents and observations to test theories that emerged from the data. In an attempt to "cross over, converse, and tap into different kinds of data" (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 51), I used interviews and observations in concert with classroom documents, student work, school newsletters, and public documents in hopes of having data that was robust and comprehensive.

Peer debriefing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe peer debriefing as "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only

implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). Throughout the study, I shared my hunches, initial findings and concerns with several other graduate students who were at different stages of dissertation completion. I also discussed findings with practitioners who were teaching middle and high school students. These interactions allowed me to continue to hone my findings, made me confront my own assumptions, and provided a resource for support.

Ethical Considerations

All data for this study was kept in a locked box for the duration of the study. All tapes will be destroyed within one year of defending the dissertation. I did my own transcriptions for all audiotapes.

I attempted to maintain distance between myself and the participants, but I think that when the study began, I was too "buddy-buddy" with Nigel. We interacted like colleagues, discussing teaching strategies, student interactions, and school culture, and I allowed myself to become too interested in those issues, causing me to pay less attention to the focal group until a month into the study. Once the analysis began, however, and as the theory I was reading began to play out in my observations, as well as when I began to synthesize my data, I was more insistent about maintaining more rigid boundaries between Nigel and myself. In the classroom, I sat closer to the focal group, followed them when I was permitted during school, and began to listen more to them. The change was not abrupt, however, and Nigel and I remain friends. However, because I allowed my experience as a teacher influence my role as a researcher, I had to re-analyze my data and subject it to reinterpretation to make sure I was accurately portraying what I saw and to assure I had not skewed the account in Nigel's favor.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study include that this study occurred in a particular location at a particular time and under particular circumstances. I relied primarily on observations and interviews for data collection from a small group of participants; thus, drawing any large-scale conclusions about this group is not realistic. Also, this sample was of boys; thus, extracting conclusions to apply to girls is also not realistic. However, the conclusions that I have attempted to draw from the data encourage thinking about "how particular case studies may assume broader professional relevance" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 113).

Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced the site of Urban Progressive School as the location for my qualitative study of the social interactions of African American and Caribbean American young men in a middle school book club. I detailed the participants in this study, the focal group of boys and their teacher, as well as how I collected my data. In the next chapter, chapter four, I discuss the findings from this study, particularly as related to the book club as a literacy event.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present findings and analysis relative to the central question of this study, which was *What happens when a small group of African American and Caribbean American young men gathers to read a shared text?* This chapter will present findings related to each of the following sub-research questions:

1. How are members socialized into the group?

2. What are the group relationships within the book club?

3. What texts resonate with the group?

This study involved four young Black men that were the focal group (Finesse, Marlon, Damien and Paul) and their teacher, Nigel, in their eighth grade Humanities class. I was interested in their discourse, how the participants used language with each other, defined by Nystrand as follows: "discourse is essentially structured by the interaction of the conversants, with each playing a particular social role" (1997, p. 8). Four themes emerged from the analysis of the data and are presented here: 1) teacher-decision making during book clubs; 2) students' decision-making responses; 3) discourses among students; and 4) the work students needed to do for their portfolios. Some themes are broken down into sub-themes to provide for further analysis where appropriate. The themes are grouped chronologically in the order the participants read the texts: *The First Part Last*, followed by *Forged by Fire*.

Teacher Decision-Making During Book Clubs: *The First Part Last*

Getting started. In this section, I look at how Nigel went about instituting book clubs in his classroom. I rely extensively on field notes and transcripts, which are

supplemented by individual interviews with participants to discuss what happened. These data sources indicate Nigel's uncertainty about the implementation of the book clubs, the process of selecting potential texts for students to read, and the procedures Nigel attempted to incorporate to guide students' discussions. The findings indicate that Nigel made decisions about how books were selected, the structure and procedures of book clubs, and literacy strategies. These decisions shaped the resulting discourse among the focal group and took the shape of their frustration, their resistance, and their accommodation to their teacher's decision-making.

Nigel wanted to implement book clubs because he considered it an authentic way for his students to discuss and become more critical about what they read. He explained to me, "I want them to get into the habit of reading, of talking about what they're reading" (Field notes, October 2, 2007). Though he considered himself a novice literacy teacher, the summer before the school year started, he "look[ed] at stuff online and…flipp[ed] through various books" and decided to introduce them. He was reluctant to cede his power as a teacher to his students, however. In our early conversations that preceded the book clubs, he asked me, "What teacher isn't nervous about giving up control of their classroom?" (Field notes, September 26, 2007) In addition, he was unfamiliar with the genre of young adult literature. He expressed a desire to know more about the authors and content, and spent some of the summer before the year of the study reading.

Nigel also introduced book clubs to increase students' independent reading. A school-wide policy required students to read 30 minutes each night. Nigel noticed, however, that students did not consistently complete their reading, except if they liked

their book. In the past, he allocated classroom instructional time to complete student reading, but he was displeased with the results. Book clubs helped Nigel "get [students] to read" and to "know themselves as readers" and "what books they like" (Field notes, October 4, 2007). The observation period for the book club is included in the appendices.

During the literacy block, students performed any of the following activities: Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), book clubs, financial literacy, Model United Nations, or portfolio preparation. In addition to scheduled time, students often had 20 minutes after the conclusion of the all-school assembly to read in Nigel's class. Nigel decided that most of the book clubs would occur during the extended literacy block on Tuesday.

How books were selected. Once he determined a time frame for the books, the next step was to figure out which books students could select to read. Nigel said, in our initial discussion during my data collection, that he was open to incorporating young adult literature into his curriculum, and that book clubs were an appropriate location. I drew on my own experiences using multicultural literature with young adults and initially selected three titles. The list of selections for the first round of book clubs appears in the appendices.

After I selected the books and Nigel read them over a weekend, he said he was concerned about the subject matter of Johnson's *First Part Last* and Draper's *Tears of a Tiger.* Johnson's novel contained scenes of teenage sexual activity and teenage pregnancy, while Draper's novel dealt with teenage drunk driving and suicide. He called himself "prudish" and said that the books might be too mature for "our kids." He was particularly concerned about one student who was younger than her peers. Nigel wanted to give her an "out" to read something that he perceived as less objectionable. For this

reason, Hoffman's *Incantation* (2007), Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2006), and Spinelli's *Stargirl* (2004) were added as potential selections for the first round of book clubs. While these additions broadened student choice, Green's novel also had issues of teenage sexual activity and drunk driving. Additionally, Nigel indicated that Draper, Johnson, and Myers' books featured African American young male protagonists, but not all his students were Black or male. He thought that adding three more prospective books would increase the pool from which all students could choose. Nigel thought Hoffman's book dealt with issues relevant or of interest to his students: friendship, belonging and a love triangle, while all the books dealt with "someone who is an outsider," a position he thought appropriate for students, all of whom might experience those feelings, particularly during the angst of adolescence.

With the list of books for the first round of book clubs picked, he prepared the students for their upcoming selections, which occurred in the children's department at the local public library, a 10-minute walk from the school. Before leaving for the library, he instructed students to write down the names of the four people they wanted and didn't want in their group. The girls in the class wanted an all-girls group, but Nigel told them that they were going to be separated in all likelihood; the girls begrudgingly reworked their lists. Nigel informed students that the "most important factor will be what books you're interested in" for determining their book clubs, and said that students must look at a minimum of four potential books, with five minutes allotted for each book. Despite his pulling the girls aside to ask them to reconsider who they wanted in their groups, Nigel told students that their final selections would be "based on what book you like to read" and that he would attempt to honor students' top choices, but that he could not "make

promises" (Field notes 10/09/07). Although Nigel had the conversation with the girls, group assignments did not become an issue in the first book club.

In the library, Nigel, the children's and young adult librarian, and I gave short book talks to the students. They ranked their top three choices from the six books, writing their lists on index cards.

Four students sat at each table, with several copies of the book club texts clustered in the middle of their tables. During the book talks, students were restless: they continuously picked up the books, read the book flaps, turned the books over to read the summary on the back covers, and flipped through the illustrations of Myers' *Autobiography*. Marlon said he wanted to read *The First Part Last* "cause it's good and because I don't want to make the same mistakes he [the protagonist] did" (Field notes 10/09/07). Given Nigel's stipulations that students spend five minutes with each book, Marlon read the first few pages before he made a final decision. When students ranked their selections and wrote their choices on index cards, Nigel gave the cards to me to place the students into groups. The concern about grouping students based on with whom they did and did not want to participate was not enacted by Nigel once the groups were formed. When he announced the assignments, no students complained.

The final three texts and the number of students reading each text for the first round of book clubs were *The First Part Last* (5), *Tears of a Tiger* (5) and *Looking for Alaska* (3). The student whose maturity level worried Nigel decided not to participate in the book club, choosing to read *Incantation* on her own. Nigel supported her decision and allowed her to read quietly during the book club meetings. He discussed the book with her informally on days when the book clubs met.

Nigel ordered multiple copies of texts through the library, expecting that students would check out individual copies. Unfortunately, some students had fines for overdue or lost books that prevented this from occurring. To prevent delay, Nigel checked out the books for them and required that those students could not take the books home until he could talk to the librarian about clearing their fines. On the day of book distribution, Finesse repeatedly asked Nigel if students were going to receive their books. He was excited to begin reading. When he did receive his book, however, Finesse picked it up, looked through the book, then looked over at Marlon and Paul, who, due to their fines could not take their books home, and pushed the book away. Finesse said that he "doesn't want to take this book home" and left the book in the classroom (Field notes 10/12/07). The excitement he exhibited dissipated quickly once he realized his friends were not going to have their books; Finesse seemed uncomfortable being the only one of his peers to have an assigned book. Despite his position as the peer group's leader, he seemed reluctant to assume that role in this regard: reading, in this case, was not a solo event. Without his friends, Finesse did not want to read.

Structure and procedures of book clubs. In the first book clubs, the focal boys were split into two groups. Finesse and Marlon read *The First Part Last*, while Paul and Damien read *Tears of a Tiger*. I was unable to observe both groups simultaneously, as the book clubs met at the same time and within the same classroom space; so for the first book club, I focused primarily on Finesse and Marlon, who read with another African American young man, Stephen, and two young women, Rosie, who was Puerto Rican, and Twana, who was African American. During this time, I sat with the book club for their meetings in the circle in the back corner of the classroom. Nigel floated between the

other two groups, pulling his chair in to join a group or observe a group as he deemed necessary. When the book clubs began, Nigel let students discuss their books for 10 minutes. This time increased in the next five weeks but never exceeded 20 minutes. The book clubs occurred on Tuesday during the literacy block, but there were a few times during the observation period that students met on different days of the week. The change of date depended on the classroom schedule.

Sticky notes. Nigel tried a few different strategies to encourage students to actively read their texts. They included using sticky notes, conversation starters, index cards and role sheets. His progression through products he wanted students to create became increasingly more explicit.

Nigel gave each student 15 sticky notes, and instructed them to mark ideas they found interesting in their texts. He expounded that those areas might include "questions you have" and "questions for the author" because "this is your chance to communicate with the author and or the text" (Field notes 10/12/07). Students were expected to mark their texts in preparation for their first book club meeting. Nigel convened students for five minutes a few days later (Monday) for them to reach consensus on a reading goal, and provided in-class time for students to read their books independently.

Conversation starters. Nigel did not assess the sticky notes; rather, he provided them as aids for students to use as they read. "Conversation starters," however, represented a more formal attempt at accountability. Students were to complete the one-page handout as they read in preparation for their book club discussions. The handout contained five stems that prompted students to generate topics for discussion. Nigel

indicated he wanted students to choose three of the five stems to complete. (See Appendices for sample Conversation Starters handout)

Index cards. Nigel next tried index cards. He wanted students to write down questions they had about their books to encourage conversation. Nigel provided students with index cards and prompted them during SSR to record questions.

Role sheets. Finally, he used role sheets, where each student in the group was assigned a particular role for the discussion. Role sheets are often used during the more formal process of literature circles rather than book clubs. Students were responsible for generating discussion questions, defining vocabulary words from the reading selection, summarizing the plot, or creating an illustration that represented the reading depending on the role they were assigned. The appendices identify the book club dates, activities conducted, duration, and discussion strategies used.

A note about researcher presence. Nigel did not oversee the *First Part Last* book club. I was present, but as an observer. I did not facilitate any discussions, and I did not bring the discussion focus back to the text once the participants veered away from direct conversations about the book. I did ask clarifying questions near the end of some of the discussions; however, to make sure I understood what the shared reading goal for the group was. Once, when students were done with discussing their texts and awaited instruction from Nigel, I asked for their predictions about the novel's end, as well as their favorite characters. I never told them the book's end nor my favorite characters, despite their repeated questions for me to divulge the book's ending.

Implementing structure and procedures. Nigel was working his way around the classroom throughout the book clubs, listening to other groups and asking questions

and interjecting comments about characters. He also encouraged students to keep reading and to use their text. Nigel often reminded students that they needed to reduce their conversational volume because he could not hear. When he came to Finesse's group, Nigel commented, "You guys were so loud I think I could hear what you were talking about" (Transcript, October 26, 2007). The group was loud because it was sharing its illustrations from the handout. Finesse drew "a stick figure, a pregnant stick figure with hair and just a regular stick figure and no hair, no nothing…Bobby" which caused Marlon and Rosie to laugh, loud enough to draw Nigel's attention. But, Finesse had completed that part of the handout and was attempting to comply with his teacher's instructions.

Nigel sat down in the group and Rosie told him they were trying to figure out what happened to Nia. Nigel requested students to return to their books as a starting point for determining the plot, asking, "Can you take some educated guesses, can we go back to that part of the text?" Finesse responded, "What part? I'm not going back to that part of the book. I probably skipped a couple of pages" (Transcript, October 26, 2007). Marlon did not have his book for the discussion, and couldn't refer to the text. Despite their resistance to going back to the text for more explication and teacher-directed plot clarification, Nigel attempted to provide focus for the group as it prepared to finish the novel. In the excerpt below, Nigel wanted students to think about the social class of the characters. This prompt was not from the conversation starters handout; rather, it was Nigel's attempt to have a conversation about the book with the students and encourage them to think about broader issues the novel elicited.

N: Okay, as you guys are reading the book, think about these themes: um…normally when we hear about teen parents, what's the image that people talk about? Are they rich, poor?

F: Poor.

N: Um, is, is Nia poor?...Is Nia poor?

R: No she's not.

F: Nope.

N: She's middle class, if not upper middle class, um, and the mother seems to be less so warm and caring, and the father seems to be the caring one. So the question is think about what the author is doing as far as pushing—

F: It's reversing things.

N: Why would an author do that? As you're finishing the book, keep that in mind, okay? I'm not going to give you any answers. I'll be able to ask questions and to push you in your thinking—

F: I got a question…what happened to her?

R: Oh you know who read this book?

N: But here's what I'll tell you though: I read that part, I was at a bookstore on Saturday…um, so I would recommend when you guys are finishing the book, don't read it anywhere publicly.

F: Why? It's sad?

N: It's not happy.

F: I'm not gonna cry!

N: [ ]

F: Where was you at?

N: I was at a bookstore.

M: Did you cry?

F: You know you did!

N: I didn't, but I tell you what, *Looking for Alaska* got me. (Transcript, October 26, 2007)

Though Nigel wanted participants to think about how Johnson, the author, provides an alternate portrayal to teenage pregnancy, and despite Finesse's observance of Johnson's writing, what was more important in this exchange, at least for Finesse, was what happened to Nia. In this instance, Nigel did not sustain a discussion about social class; rather, he provided some clues and motivation for the participants to finish reading the novel. What seemed to be absent from this interaction with students, however, was an understanding by Nigel that before they could have conversations about the larger implications of social class, teenage pregnancy, and alternate portrayals of African Americans, they had to understand the plot first. The participants did not stay on the topic for long, and shifted to speculation about the book's ending and its emotional impact.

Student Decision-Making Responses to Structures and Procedures: *First Part Last*

Conversation starters. Finesse and Marlon ranked *First Part Last* as their number one book club choice. Prior to book selection in the library, Marlon sat with the book in his hands, staring at the cover of the book, which depicted a dreadlocked adolescent African American young man cradling a baby in his arms. He loudly declared to his classmates that he did not want to read any other book except the *First Part Last*.

The priority for the first meeting was to set a shared reading goal and to have preliminary conversations about their book. Despite this, the boys sat in the back corner of the classroom with their group, but did not discuss the content of the book as instructed. Nigel wanted them to refer to their sticky notes, on which they were to record impressions about characters and plot, and questions about the text. Instead, they talked about their shared reading goals for the book. Finesse turned to Rosie and talked about reaching the group's goal of reading to page 45, while the other students commented on

the goal (Stephen read ahead while Twana was behind, and Marlon appeared disinterested throughout). The group's discussion did not focus on the plot, characterization, or the sticky notes.

The book clubs were often preceded by 15-20 minutes of time that was used for sustained silent reading (SSR) or, later, for completion of book club. The participants sat next to each other around the horseshoe arrangement of wooden benches during SSR, and whispered or talked; Nigel had to intervene to focus them on their task. All their book club meetings occurred in this location.

The boys did not mark their texts with sticky notes; instead they were used for personal information. I did not observe any repercussions from Nigel for this transgression. The conversation starters, a handout which Nigel distributed during the first meeting, were designed to help students generate conversation. During their first official meeting, the participants ascertained they understood the purpose of the conversation starters (as evidenced by one of the group members who asked, "Are we supposed to use these to start a conversation?" [Transcript, October 18, 2007]), then began their discussion.

Before they began their discussion, however, the participants checked with each other to ascertain if they had met the shared reading goal. When Twana said she was ten pages behind everyone else, the conversation shifted to limiting the discussion to include the pages that Twana had read. In his desire for her to participate, Finesse urged, "Just say something about the book." (Transcript, October 18, 2007). Twana's immediate comment was about a plot point: the main character, Bobby, left his baby unattended to play basketball with his friends. Twana's comment spurred a brief retelling of the plot,

with all participants contributing points of clarification and some judgment about

Bobby's actions (Finesse: "He's whilin—how you almost gonna leave your daughter,

cuz?...That's terrible…terrible" [Transcript, October 18, 2007]). The discussion attempt

by Twana was representative of the first official conversation: one or more of the

participants would prod the other to say something about the book, most commonly using

the conversation starter stem, "I really like..." to which a respondent would provide

something he/she liked about the plot or a character. Then, the participants would retell

the events surrounding the plot and provide some judgment or commentary about the

character or action. An example of this type of response follows. The participants were

discussing a part in the novel when the two protagonists are coping with external

pressures as they navigate their prenatal care.

> F: Yo she was all gettin' upset at him…for when he was tryin' to go to that first appointment wit' her. She was like oh you're doing that because that's what your mother thinks not cause that's what you want.

> M: Like when his mother say—

> F: Why you gotta get so upset for?

> M: --his mother was like, make sure—

> R: He shouldn't have said that to her—

> F: Yeah, he shouldn't have said that. That was real dumb to say. [laughs] That was real dumb to say. When he said it, I was like, oooh, bad hit…

> T: [ ] (F laughs).

> F: She's mad small with mad attitude…

> M: He say, he say—

> R: I wonder what happened to her, though—

> M: He said that he be talkin' to her and stuff…and she be into her books and she don't even be listenin' to him, she just be like get in like three words and keep readin'.

R: What happened to um…did you get to that part yet, why she left the school and stuff?

T: [ ] She didn't want people in her business.

M: She left?

F: She didn't want all the teachers in her stuff.

M: 'Cause she left?

F: Yeah.

R: And why did she take the baby with her?...Oh she was gonna kill the baby?

M: She never wanted to kill the baby; she wanted to keep it; both of them wanted to keep it. People was asking <u>him</u> if he wanted to get rid of the baby. (Transcript, October 18, 2007)

Once the participants seemed satisfied with their plot reconstruction and clarification, they focused on setting a new reading goal for their next book club. The participants' focus for the first discussion was plot clarification. Through collective retellings and summarization, dominated by Finesse and Marlon, the participants constructed a shared understanding of the beginning of the novel. The participants first checked in with each other to determine if everyone reached the reading goal, using one of the conversation starters (usually about what they liked about the text or what they disliked about the text), retelling the plot while interspersing those details with commentary, and finally established reading goals for their next meeting. This first book club was the only time students used the conversation starters. In their next meeting, Nigel provided a different strategy for conducting their discussions, index cards.

Index cards. The book clubs met a week later for their second discussion. Nigel instructed students to generate questions as they read and record those questions on 3x5 index cards. Once students were positioned in their groups, Nigel told them about the procedure: students would take turns asking their question to the group, everyone

responded, and the person who originally asked the question "gets the last word on the question" (Transcript, October 23, 2007). Nigel worried that students had generated only "yes or no or factual questions" and gave students five minutes to change their questions to more open-ended ones before allowing them to begin their discussions. Finesse and Marlon listened to Nigel's instructions, but they did not change their questions on their index cards.

The participants attempted to follow Nigel's instructions about using the index cards. Finesse accurately repeated to his group members what they were supposed to do. Then, as in the first discussion, Finesse prompted others in the group to participate. They quickly went around the circle, asking and answering questions. The questions the group asked were again mostly about clarification: clear up plot points and character motivation. This time, much of the discussion also focused on Bobby, the main character, spending a brief time in jail because he was caught spray painting graffiti on a wall, as well as why his parents responded as they did (they thought Bobby's father was not as upset with Bobby going to jail as he was with Bobby impregnating his girlfriend). They also wondered if receiving jail time was an appropriate punishment for painting graffiti. In the following example, Rosie, Twana, Finesse and Marlon attempt to follow the procedure of asking questions and responding as Nigel requested.

> F: Alright, who, you got a question? [to Twana]What's your question? You got regular questions.
>
> R: She said she ain't got no more.
>
> M: Um—
>
> F: She just got regular ones.

M: Why did he act like he was doin', like why he act like he was doin' mad time when he was locked up, um, about when he was talkin' about what his baby, why did he act like he was doin' like this here and he just got out [ ]. M laughs.

F: Idonknow. Maybe he's done like if you do the crime, the baby 24/7 is gone and you can't see him for a couple of hours, I don't know. Maybe he was scared or something….I don't know. I ain't never been in that problem before.

M: I ain't never gonna <u>be</u> in that problem. (Transcript, October 23, 2007)

After Finesse opens the discussion by inviting questions, he and Marlon attempt to determine the repercussions of Bobby's incarceration on his custody of his daughter. Though Marlon takes issue that Bobby acts like he's "doin mad time" despite being held for less than 24 hours, Finesse's reply that Bobby was scared because he did not know what would happen to his daughter suggests Finesse is thinking critically about the character's actions. Marlon concludes the sequence of responses by asserting that he would not be like Bobby, as his "I ain't never gonna <u>be</u> in that problem" indicates.

Nigel's directive to ask questions that did not have factual answers prevented others from participating in the discussion. Students did not revise their "regular questions" despite Nigel's instruction, and, as a result, the participants did not discuss the text in the allotted time.

Later, the discussion shifted because all the participants were finished asking the questions from their index cards. Marlon posed an abstract question ("What is life?") that frustrated Finesse (because "there ain't an answer") and caused Nigel to intervene. He asked the group which page they were on, and then addressed the class, noting, "based on the noise level in this class and the fact that as I came around people weren't really talking about the books" and ended all discussions (Transcript, October 23, 2007). Shortly thereafter, he asked the entire class which discussion strategy they preferred: the conversation starters or the index cards. Rosie and Marlon said they liked the

conversation starters better. Marlon said he liked that the conversation starters did not require him to write as much but allowed him to talk about the book. Nigel then asked the groups to set new, "realistic" reading goals for their next discussions.

Because Marlon, Rosie, and others preferred conversation starters over index cards for generating discussions, Nigel decided conversation starters would be used. For their next discussion, students were to complete a different conversation starters' handout. Nigel delivered explicit instructions about the product he wanted students to create and bring to the discussion. He told students to generate original questions about their reading, in addition to completing a handout that asked them to summarize their reading, as well as defining "words you don't know," "questions from the text," "some comments or questions to me" that Nigel said he "[would] be writing a response back to you," and, finally, on the last page of the packet, "draw a picture to show something important about the story" (Transcript, October 23, 2007). Students had three days to reach their reading goal and complete their handout in preparation for their next book club discussion.

Advanced conversation starters. At the start of the next book club, Nigel informed students that he wanted them to have a discussion about the book. He was concerned less with whether or not they had completed the conversation starters handout. He said, "The point is to talk about the book. It's not about making sure you fill out the sheet correctly, so I don't want people to necessarily get stuck on, um, reading the answer or making sure they write things" (Transcript, October 26, 2007). Despite his instructions, over half of the students' work was incomplete for discussion. Nigel allowed students the first twenty minutes of their literacy block to complete their work. He

instructed students to finish a minimum requirement of three statements, but "if you have time and you'd like to complete the entire sheet, that's absolutely fine also" (Transcript, October 26, 2007).

Finesse, who misunderstood the directions and began asking questions immediately, had to wait until his other group members completed more of their handout before starting the book club. Once Nigel allowed them to start their discussion, reminding them to go around the group and for each person to participate, Finesse, Marlon and Rosie wanted to ask the first question. Again, the participants' questions were largely about plot clarification. Marlon and Finesse did debate why Bobby chose to visit a local park during a moment of free time away from his daughter. Marlon queried, "And why go to the park when your mother finally gives you some free time?" and continued, "Watching other kids? You're better off there with your kid" (Transcript, October 26, 2007). However, a conversation about Bobby's parental responsibilities was pre-empted by Rosie, who asked Marlon a question about the copyright date of his book, beginning a different conversation among the group and leading to Finesse's conclusion "Yo, these conversation starters don't start conversation. Real talk. They don't" (Transcript, October 26, 2007).

Ten minutes remained in their book club discussion, and the participants sat in their circle, riffling through their books, but not discussing their reading. Bobby's girlfriend, Nia, falls into a vegetative state by the end of the novel. I asked the participants several questions, including: What did they think happened to Nia?, and Who's your favorite character? Finesse, Marlon and Rosie speculated that Nia killed herself and that she gave her baby up due to parental pressure. Rosie said Nia was her

favorite character, while Finesse and Marlon selected Feather, the infant, "'cause she don't say nothin!" according to Finesse.

Effect of Teacher Decision-Making on Structure and Procedures of Book Clubs for

First Part Last

I was interested in book club discourse and how members were socialized into the discourse. The discourse that Nigel employed to socialize the participants into book club procedures focused on structure. This structure took the form of persuasion/invitation to participate in the book clubs, yet Nigel's discourse was also tinged with frustration. For example, he ended the discussions when he thought participants were not focused and he also addressed students who were loudly discussing topics other than the book. Participants had different responses to the discourse Nigel employed to socialize them into the book clubs. The discourses the participants employed were evident in the book club, as were the participants' attempts to change the book club discourse that Nigel tried to establish. In the following sections, I look closely at the discourses of book club socialization as related to the participants.

Discourse about procedures. Nigel wanted students to participate in a discussion about a text, telling them specifically that the discussion starters were "…your chance to communicate with the author and or the text" (Field notes, October 12, 2007). Further, he had an idea of what he thought readers did: they asked questions about their books, they talked about their books, and they referred to their texts for substantiation, based on his own experiences as a reader and the background reading he did in preparation for starting his own book clubs. He instituted the discussion strategies based on what he told me he noticed about his students: they did not discuss their texts in ways he thought were

indicative of what proficient readers did, but he hoped the discussion strategies would help them have those discussions.

Nigel provided several different discussion strategies for students to enter book club discussions. Much of the time during the first book club was spent explaining the handouts that accompanied the strategies, but little time was spent reviewing student responses to those strategies. Several times, Nigel referred to work students did as seventh graders to activate their background knowledge and connect to what he asked them to do. In addition, the participants arrived at discussions with their handouts incomplete. Nigel provided time before the discussions started for students to add more to their handouts, but he did not make them fully complete the handouts on the day of the book clubs; he asked that students complete some of the handout, not all of the handout. This approach shortened the time for book club discussions, but did not increase the likelihood of students completing the handout.

Once he instructed students to use a specific discussion strategy for their discussions, students tried to follow his directions. Finesse emerged as the student who began each discussion based on the established procedure set by Nigel. Problems occurred, however, once participants followed the procedures quickly (within five minutes of starting the discussion) and did not have the facility they needed to return to the text for more explication and further discussion. Then, at the conclusion of the discussion, Nigel instructed students to set new reading goals and provided directions for either a different discussion strategy or reviewed directions for the same discussion strategy (conversation starters).

After the second book club, Nigel remained optimistic about future book club discussions and his students' ability to have those discussions, as demonstrated in the following fieldnote excerpt:

> Nigel says discussions weren't as good today, but the *Alaska* group had some good questions. He said reading a book and talking about it is difficult, and that the whole book club process was so new he wasn't going to get discouraged, but he was going to keep working at it. (Field notes, October 23, 2007)

Nigel's difficulty using the discussion strategies seemed to challenge his desire to interact with students around the texts they were reading in unplanned ways. For instance, in the transition time a day after a discussion, Nigel sat down beside Rosie, Finesse, and Marlon and told them he hoped to sit in on their group for their next discussion because he wanted to know "why is the mother letting him do all the work?" (Field notes, October 25, 2007). Nigel told students he planned to ask them for their responses to that question, though Marlon answered Nigel immediately. Marlon said, "She's lettin him grow…If the mother helps him out he'll start slackin and he won't be a good father" (Field notes, October 25, 2007). In this instance, Nigel might have asked Marlon about what particular parts of the text led him (Marlon) to draw that conclusion. Nigel might have even extrapolated Marlon's comments to a broader discussion about masculinity and gender roles, using the text as a connection. However, Nigel moved on to speak to other students in the class about their discussion plans. When the discussion of gender roles occurred within the context of a future book club discussion, it received passing mention, either when the students introduced the disparity or when Nigel introduced the difference.

Discourse of frustration. Nigel's procedures were also tinged with his frustration that students were not using the discussion strategies to improve their conversations. He

often told Finesse and Marlon's book club that they were so loud that it was difficult for him to hear other group's discussions. In the minutes leading up to book clubs, Nigel also instructed students to sit closer to each other within their groups to allow participants to better hear each other. On other occasions, he informed students that the class felt too "loose" and suggested they improve their focus on the task he assigned. In our informal conversations that followed the book clubs, he noted that students were not yet sustaining conversations about their books that he thought they should be having. However, on two different occasions he told students that the discussion aids were to start conversation, from which they could decide to move on to their own conversations about the text or continue using the discussion aids. His frustration might have been tied more to the conversations students had once they departed from his strategies, but the participants *were* following his instructions.

Nigel implemented different discussion strategies in response to what he perceived as students' difficulty in having those conversations. He allocated 3-5 minutes at the end of several of the first book clubs to review the discussion strategy he wanted students to use for their reading, and, in a later book club also modeled what he thought participation should look like: participants listening to each other, responding and using their text for substantiation. Though he noted to me that students did not yet have the expertise to carry on discussions about their texts, he never talked about discussion strategies and the requisite skills required for discussions. He also never discussed—with me, at least—reducing the number of discussion strategies to allow students the chance to master one before being required to learn another.

There was no penalty for students who did not complete their book club preparation work. Several times, Nigel gave students time to finish their handouts before their discussions, pushing back the scheduled start of the discussions or shortening the length of discussions to provide them additional time. He referred to the handouts as part of a "literacy packet" students completed, but when I watched I did not observe Nigel returning any of the work nor did I see him grade or write feedback on any of the students' work.

Effects of Student Decision-Making in Response to Teacher for *First Part Last*

Students responded to their teacher's decision-making in three distinctive ways: they attempted to accommodate his requests by doing what he asked; they expressed frustration with his requests because they either did not understand what he asked, or wanted to carry on with their own social work; or they resisted his requests by either changing his request to fit their own needs or not complying at all.

Accommodation. Students expressed similar frustration with the procedures, but not with the books. The participants groused at using the discussion tools. In an interview I conducted with Finesse, Marlon, Paul and Damien on November 20, 2007, I asked them specific questions related to their book club participation. When I queried them if they liked using the index cards for discussion, both Finesse and Marlon said they did not. Marlon explained that he did not complete the index card assignment because "I don't feel like writin" while Finesse agreed with Marlon, saying "Yeah. That's why I just don't do em. I just don't" (Transcript, November 20, 2007). Despite Nigel's directions for them to write questions on the index cards as they read, the participants never did. Similarly, they did not complete conversation starters in their entirety.

The students were discussing their books' content, however. They attempted to incorporate Nigel's suggested procedures, but when those strategies proved unsuccessful for them, or when they completed the strategy, their talk incorporated subject matter of importance to them, which was within the instructions Nigel had given them. When this occurred, however, he told them to stop.

Resistance. Participants also resisted Nigel's attempts to socialize them into the discourse of book clubs by not completing their assignments and by voicing their displeasure with the book club procedures. Since Nigel did not regularly sit in their book clubs with the participants, they avoided repercussions for not completing their work during the book club discussion time. They also altered the discussion to include issues of relevance to them as long as they kept their voices down and did not draw attention from Nigel. When they did talk loudly, Nigel would cast them looks intended to put them back on task, ask Rosie to refocus the group, or move closer to observe their discussion.

Changing the discourse: Intense housekeeping. Participants spent their largest amount of their time "housekeeping": establishing reading goals for their next meeting, discussing why some members reached the goal and why others did not, and changing their goals. The students conducted simultaneous discussions that shifted between summarizing the plot, setting new reading goals, and determining how far each member read. This latter discussion was needed to decide how much of the book could be discussed without revealing later parts of the book during the time they were supposed to be discussing the content of the novel. At times, different members would discuss a variety of different issues related to the overall "housekeeping" of the book club, primarily setting reading goals, reaching reading goals, and exceeding reading goals. The

goal setting was also competitive; Finesse and Marlon challenged each other to complete the reading. This housekeeping, however, often consumed the entire time allotted for the discussion.

In the following excerpt from the first book club, the participants do housekeeping around establishing a reading goal that interrupts a discussion about plot clarification and motivation.

M: Yo, why would they listen to that daycare lady like if she's like—

F: Yo, go to page 53—

M: --feed your kid more, um, peas and stuff—

R: Yeah, yeah.

F: Yeah, everyone read to page 53 in that so we can all be on the same page.

R: Tonight?

F: Yeah. It's not that hard.

R: Who…I, I—

F: It's only three pages

R: I do not have the book!

F: Oh yeah; ya'll ain't got the book.

M: It's nothin' though, 'cause I can read that as soon as we come back tomorrow. I'm on page 48.

R: I don't have the booook.

F: I'm 'bout to read that tonight.

R: No you're not.

F: [ ] right here.

R: Oh whatever.

M: I just read the first two paragraphs before then…they won't let me finish it, dog…I'm like, on page 48—

F: I say you finish it—

M: No, she's like—

R: No because she never did that to anyone [ ]

M: So will that make it better so ya'll could try harder to catch up to where Jonathan is.

F: That's what I'm doin' tonight…I'm finishin' this.

R: You're reading?

F: Yeah. I read up to [ ]. I got to page 45. (Transcript, October 18, 2007)

Finesse interrupted Marlon's question about the daycare provider's insistence that Bobby feed his child more vegetables to set the group's next reading goal. In the ensuing discussion about the goal, Rosie countered that she couldn't meet the goal because she could not take her book home. Finesse acknowledged that Rosie and Marlon shared these circumstances, but Marlon was unhindered, instead saying that he could meet the goal the next day when he returned to school. Again, Rosie voiced her disapproval of the reading goal, spurring Finesse's declaration that he was going to keep reading, regardless whether Rosie could meet the goal or not. Then, when Rosie conceded ("oh whatever") Marlon offered that perhaps leaving the goal might encourage everyone to catch up with Stephen, who they had to constantly tell not to read ahead. Finesse's stance reflected his rivalry with Rosie that stretched beyond the boundary of the book club. I observed them trading insults with each other, ribbing each other about clothing, and Finesse declaring Rosie "mad annoyin." Finesse continued his antagonism towards Rosie, using housekeeping, which added an element of competition to the discourse.

Students were also concerned with keeping up with their classmates' reading progress. In the excerpt below, the participants demonstrate their attempts to set a reading

goal as well as what to do when they needed to switch their book. The directive to "switch your book" came from Nigel, who suggested that if students reached the shared reading goal and still wanted to read, they should read a different book rather than risk reading ahead and spoiling the plot for the other participants.

> N: Okay…um, what I would like for you to do now is take some time and discuss, unless you've already done so, your next goal. We will be reading together again on…Fri—we will be discussing, um, on Friday, okay. So go ahead and set a goal. Now, twice in a row that the goal I felt like people were able to reach in a couple of days of a lot sooner than their conversation days. Please make this a realistic goal so that people are not having this issue of one person's done, you have to wait for others. Um, so go ahead and decide your goal now and then when you're done we'll move on to the next thing I have for you to do.
>
> M: It's the same thing for making a goal for a page that's far away 'cause [ ] we're still gonna have to wait for people that's way behind--
>
> R: I can take my book home.
>
> M: That read way slower.
>
> F: Rosie, 86.
>
> R: A hundred. There's another page.
>
> N: Remember that everyone at this point can take their book home.
>
> M: I agree with 86.
>
> KP: Who's behind? [Twana raises her hand]
>
> R: That's 20 pages, 20 minutes!
>
> F: Where you gettin' 20 minutes?
>
> F: I'm sayin', once you're done, switch your book.
>
> R: No! I want to get farther in this book! 'Cause mad people are already ahead of us.
>
> F: Why does it matter what they're doing? Why do you care what they're doing?
>
> M: Their books are thicker than ours!
>
> R: So!

F: You be forcin' it. (Transcript, October 23, 2007)

According to Marlon, the issue with setting the reading goal, for him, was that people were not reaching the goal; therefore, it did not matter what the goal was if group members couldn't discuss it. They could not have full group discussions about the text when all members failed to reach the goal.

Also, in this interaction, Rosie attempted to employ the competitive markers of the discourse, but she was unsuccessful. When she said she "want[s] to get farther…cause mad people are already ahead of us" Finesse dismissed her, telling her that she "be forcin it" and asking "why does it matter what they're doing? Why do you care about what they're doing?" Marlon chimed in with his observation that the other book club groups' books were "thicker than ours!" (more pages), which might have explained why other groups were creating larger reading goals. In an earlier book club, Finesse similarly attempted tried to persuade his group members to read more, and some of his peers complied with his request (primarily Marlon), or at least reconsidered their goal. Rosie met resistance when she attempted to persuade her peers. Thus, in these two instances, the competitive discourse about housekeeping was successful when the young men (Finesse and Marlon) employed it, but less successful when Rosie utilized the discourse. During this round of book clubs, the other two members, Stephen and Twana, never assumed a position of leadership in the book club, and thus did not have any part in establishing goals. However, the other book club members were aware that Twana struggled to meet goals (because she could not take her book home and also because she did not read as fast as her peers during class), and that Stephen usually exceeded his goals. The book club members regarded him as one of the best readers in the class.

Finesse also offered a comment about reading pace when he balked at Rosie's declaration that it would take 20 minutes for them to read 20 pages. However, based on the competitive nature of earlier goal setting, and Finesse and Marlon's ability to control the discourse around goal setting, it was not unreasonable to think that whatever goal Rosie offered would not be acceptable for Finesse and Marlon. They were the two participants that controlled the goal setting in the book club. While there was some discussion about the goal, either Finesse or Marlon clarified the final decision, seldom taking into account Rosie's suggestions.

Two boys dominated book club discussions in a similar manner in Swanson's (1999) study of mixed-gender high school book clubs. Swanson found that two boys, Peter and John, controlled the content discussed in the book club. She summarized, "The students in this group, due to the initial influence of Peter and John, were never able to wrestle with and then develop the skills necessary to enter into a new way of discussing texts and working within groups" (37). In the same manner, Finesse and Marlon controlled the book club, limiting interactions from Rosie, in particular, and complicating the success of the discussion strategies.

In the participants' housekeeping discourse, they employed markers of competition, but they also utilized markers of gender. Finesse and Marlon thought Rosie annoying—they said so during a peer group interview, and I observed their annoyance with her during my classroom observations. They often rolled their eyes at her comments or made disparaging comments to and about her. Twana, the other female in the book club, was not assertive like Rosie—she often had not completed the reading goal and had to be persuaded to offer a comment. Twana did not assume a prominent social role within

the group. She also was absent during two discussions. When present, she responded

largely to requests by Finesse to "say somethin" even if that "somethin" gave away parts

of the plot or was not directly based on one of their discussion strategies. On the other

hand, Rosie often began the discussions as soon as the group formed after lunch. Nigel

always made eye contact with her first when he checked the group's progress. He also

asked her to substantiate or refute other group member's claims about reaching reading

goals or following his directions. She insisted on following Nigel's directions, and Nigel

regarded Rosie as the group's barometer for indicating if they were on task. After their

discussion moved from the text to an abstract area of Marlon's choosing, Nigel caught

Rosie's eye and called her name. Rosie responded, "They're not talkin about the book,

though." Nigel instructed her to help the group "get back…" (Transcript, October 23,

2007). Thus, perhaps Finesse and Marlon viewed Rosie as closely aligned with Nigel and

resented her attempts to keep them on task, or perhaps they did not view her opinions as

having equal weight as theirs and, by extension, as being less important. In either case,

the discourse about housekeeping bore the nuances of competition and gender that gave

some members more advantages than others when establishing and adhering to reading

goals.

Discourses Among Students *First Part Last*

Within the book clubs, the participants employed their own discourse to talk

about the books they read that was a response to Nigel's attempted discourse and their

own attempts to shape their own discourse about their book. In this first book club, the

discourse centered around the participants' opinions about characters' decisions and on

plot clarification.

Discourse about characters and plot. First, the participants' opinions about characters were about decisions that related to gender and societal expectations. While they spent a significant amount of their time in the book clubs clarifying the plot, they often moved on to discussions about characters' decisions and consequences. One of the issues from *First Part Last* that caused the participants' extended discussion was about Bobby's, the main character's, actions towards his newborn daughter. In the excerpt from the first discussion below, the participants discuss Bobby's responsibilities in response to a conversation starter prompt that asked them to recall a part of the text they found interesting.

> M: Um, the part I found interesting, this dude is talkin' about all the stuff he gotta do: he gotta go to school, then after school on the way to pick up his daughter from daycare, he has to…get formula and then he still remember all the memories from his childhood, like what he did and where he was. Go ahead Finesse…
>
> F: I don't remember nothin. I read it on Saturday.
>
> . . .
>
> R: When I read about um Nia and Bobby it made me think about some of the teenagers and how many of them are gettin pregnant.
>
> F: [ ] You know you're gonna have to say that over. You started mumblin towards the end.
>
> M: It made her think about when all the teenagers get pregnant at a young age.
>
> JM: Are we supposed to use these to start a conversation? [holds up handout]
>
> M: Yeah, this is our conversation…so start…conversate.
>
> F: Twana?
>
> T: I didn't [ ]
>
> R: You [didn't] read a lot?
>
> F: So, so, so just say somethin' about it—
>
> M: That you like about the book—

F: A part that you [ ] read; don't go over the page 45. Remember what you—

M: --cause we don't know none of that….Nah, nah, you can stop after page 48. (Transcript, October 18, 2007)

Marlon noticed that Bobby had to juggle multiple responsibilities and that he was not yet a man, largely because he "still remember the memories from his childhood, like what he did and where he was." The transition from adolescent to father, and the difficulty related to that change, did not slip by Marlon. Rosie added that the characters' challenges with their pregnancy caused her to think about larger issues of teenage pregnancy. In this exchange, Marlon and Rosie were commenting on Bobby's particular characteristics (of being responsible) and used the text to help them begin to have conversations about larger societal implications the novel presented.

In a later book club (October 23, 2007), the participants questioned the events surrounding Bobby's incarceration after being caught spray-painting graffiti. Marlon and Finesse debated why Bobby seemed to think he spent more time in jail than he actually did.

The participants were concerned with Bobby's time in jail because of its effect on Feather, the baby. Finesse speculated that perhaps Bobby was scared, which made the time he was incarcerated seem much longer because he was away from his child. Finesse's speculation is tempered by what he does not know about incarceration, and he explains, "I ain't never been in that problem before." Marlon goes a step further, using Bobby's experience as a cautionary tale, and adds, "I ain't never gonna be in that problem." Therefore, the participants' discourse in this situation is about specific elements of the plot, which did include plot clarification, but the discourse also allowed them to conduct their own work about societal implications using the text as a guide.

Another instance of using the conversation starters to shape their discourse about plot and character in their discussions occurred when the participants questioned how Bobby could forget his baby. The participants also clarified a plot point about Bobby's girlfriend, Nia, and her admittance into the hospital.

The participants also were critically thinking about the repercussions of particular actions. Before moving on to the critical thinking, however, they spent a significant amount of time clarifying events in the plot. Without that time, though, it is unclear whether they could have moved on to the more abstract issues raised by the text.

Teacher Decision-Making: Round Two of Book Clubs *Forged By Fire*

Several of the themes from the first book club were in the second book club, as the participants read *Forged by Fire*. The second round of book clubs met four times from November 13, 2007-November 29, 2007. Again, Nigel incorporated discussion strategies intended to help students talk about their reading. Several times during this second cycle, Nigel allowed the groups to meet informally to check in about their reading goals.

Index cards. While Nigel used index cards this time, he was more explicit about the purpose. He gave each student five index cards, on which he or she was to do the following:

> On the top…if a question came into your mind or something interesting…write down the page…When it is time to write your book reviews, the note cards will be handy to use…use the cards like we used index cards. You will keep the index cards in the book. If you find a passage that's interesting, write the page number. (Field notes, November 6, 2007)

Nigel used the terms "index cards" and "note cards" interchangeably.

Conversation starters. Nigel continued using conversation starters, but he assigned students responsibility for particular parts of the handout. For example, one student defined vocabulary words for the group; another facilitated the discussion, while another generated questions about the reading. Nigel gave students a three-page handout to fill out in response to the role they had chosen for the discussion. Students could select their roles, but Nigel expected them to perform different roles for each meeting.

Student Decision-Making: Responses to Structures and Procedures of Book Club

Forged by Fire

How books were selected. In the usual literacy block, Nigel set out multiple copies of the books on tables around the room. He explained about the selections "a couple of them have been suggested by you, a couple I selected based on your interests" (Field notes, November 7, 2007). The two texts students recommended were *Maximum Ride* and *Forged by Fire*. He told students they had seven minutes to sit at the different tables, with the instruction that "you will be expected to spend some time with each book…Give each book a chance" (Field notes, November 7, 2007). But when he held up a copy of *Forged by Fire* before book selection began*,* Marlon declared, "That's me, that's me," referring to the book he wanted to read most.

As the students disbursed to tables around the room, Finesse asked Nigel, "Which book has the most violence?" Nigel replied *Maximum Ride*, but Finesse looked at the book's 464 pages and reacted, "Forget about it." Rosie suggested Finesse read *Forged by Fire* instead. At another table, Finesse and Paul counted the number of pages in *The Last Shot* (240) and Paul surmised that "The print's too small." Students used the allotted seven minutes with each book to read the book's cover and began reading at least the first

several pages. Once the time elapsed for all five selections, Nigel distributed index cards

and instructed students to rank their top three choices. Several students were reluctant to

rank more than one choice. They wanted to read only one book out of the five. In the

field note excerpt below, Finesse, Marlon, Damien, and Rosie discuss the process of

selecting books as well as the characteristics that make one book in particular—*Forged*

by Fire--their choice.

> M: <u>This</u> (*Forged by Fire*) is my first choice. [He holds up the book and motions to it]
>
> N: This is a reminder that I'm expecting you to keep reading, particularly if you're not interested in the book.
>
> F: That book's terrible! [*Maximum Ride*]
>
> N: Let's keep our opinions to ourself.
>
> M: Don't pick up this book. [*Maximum Ride*]
>
> …..
>
> F: I'm not reading it if my life depended on it.
>
> N: Please do not discuss with the rest of the people in here, your 1, 2, and 3 choices. You may not get your #1 choice; I will try to get you your #2.
>
> M: My #2 is…I don't even want to read my #2—I only want to read <u>one book</u>. (Field notes, November 5, 2007)

Finesse and Marlon did not want to read any book except *Forged by Fire*. They had

examined the other books and were dissuaded to read those for various reasons (including

the number of pages and the content of the book). When Nigel did a preliminary

tabulation of how students ranked the books they wanted to read, ten of the 14 students

selected *Forged by Fire*. As a result, Nigel returned the cards to the students "so you can

think hard about your choice," and asked them to re-rank their selections. Rosie

protested, again, however, about *Forged by Fire*, "It's better than all the other books. If I

get another book, I'm not gonna want to read it" (Field notes, November 5, 2007). Once students re-ranked their choices, Nigel collected the cards and assigned students to groups for their first book club meeting, which occurred the following week.

Index cards. The book club members met informally prior to their first official discussion to set a goal for their first meeting. On the day of their book club, Nigel expected them to use their index cards as a supplement to guiding their conversations. He explained, "You guys can guide your own conversations…However, please use your index cards so when you're talking about specific things with the book, you know, you can refer to them" (Transcript, November 13, 2007).

The participants struggled to begin their discussion. Marlon had exceeded the goal the group established, citing the need to finish reading the book so he could record it for his portfolio requirement. On the other hand, Paul had not met the goal. The group spent several minutes after Nigel asked them to begin their discussion attempting to limit their discussion to the pages Paul had read, despite Paul's protests that they "Talk about it!" and "Do what you gotta do!" and have the discussion. Paul's entreaty convinced the other group members to briefly retell-the events that led the main character, Gerald, to move in with his stepfather. This retelling involved five turns (Damien, Rosie, Finesse, Marlon, and Damien) before the discussion returned to reading goals. Marlon teased his group members. While not revealing the plot, he commented that "Chapter 8 is a nice chapter," which prompted Rosie to suggest they increase the reading goal to that chapter. However, Finesse knew that Marlon was several chapters ahead of chapter 8, and he told Rosie they needed to read past chapter 8. He said, "Nah, we gotta…read as much as you can tonight. We gotta catch up with this dude [Marlon]" (Transcript, November 13, 2007).

Throughout their discussion, the group did not reference its index cards. Rosie commented, "I gotta find my index cards," but the cards never materialized.

The group did not agree on a reading goal because immediately after Finesse's comment, the conversation turned, again, to talk about the portfolio requirement, a conversation in which all members participated. After a lull, Finesse commented on Paul's sneakers. Earlier that morning, Paul was embroiled in a conversation with Finesse and Rosie about their shoes: Paul and Rosie wore Air Jordans, and Paul's sneakers were visibly worn, with spots of dirt on them, whereas Rosie's were white and spotless. For several minutes, Paul and Rosie debated the cleanliness of Paul's shoes, aided by Finesse, Marlon and Damien, before Nigel interrupted them to gauge their progress. In the excerpt below, the participants respond to Nigel's inquiry about how they used their discussion time.

> N: When I was trying to eavesdrop, I was kind of listening to your conversation, I heard a conversation about sneakers. I heard a conversation about what's happening in class, somebody tied their shoe laces. Um, did you guys talk about the book?
>
> F, R, M: Yeah.
>
> N: For how long? What percentage of the time do you think you talked about the book?
>
> F: We talked about um—
>
> M: Sixty percent.
>
> F: Oh, about the bike, and the stepfather.
>
> R: About how the mom dies.
>
> M: And then, ah, nevermind.
>
> N: Okay. Um, what's the, is there a couple of people who didn't meet the reading goal?
>
> F: Um—

N: You all all met?

M: I didn't. I overdid it.

N: I'm saying, so you met the goal?

D: I went past the goal.

F: [ ] there.

N: Okay so that might have something to do with it. (Transcript, November 13, 2007)

The participants did discuss the book. They spent most of their time, however, engaged in discussions about other aspects of school, primarily the portfolio and their clothing. Marlon's estimate that they spent "60 percent" of their time talking about the book seemed to account for the time they spent discussing content (approximately 5% or less) as well as negotiating reading goals (approximately 55%). Nigel instructed the groups to set another "realistic goal" in preparation for their next discussion, which caused another round of conversation in the focal group. Marlon wanted his peers to read seven chapters, but the other group members thought that excessive. Marlon explained that he wanted to keep reading so he could list *Forged by Fire* as completed for his literacy portfolio. Finesse and Rosie urged Marlon not to read ahead, and Finesse reminded him "because we said don't read ahead." Rosie told Marlon to "pick another book" if he had already reached the goal on which the rest of the group decided (Transcript, November 13, 2007). Though they worried that Marlon would divulge the plot, Finesse, Damien, Paul and Rosie settled on a goal for their next discussion that would not bring them to Marlon's goal, but it was a goal they agreed to reach. Satisfied with their goal, their conversation returned to talking about Paul and Rosie's shoes until Nigel transitioned to another classroom activity.

Effects of Teacher Decision-Making on Structures and Procedure of Book Clubs

Forged by Fire

Discourse about having conversations. Nigel wanted to respond to students'
requests to "just talk" in the book clubs, but he also wanted them to have focused
discussions about their reading. He attempted to provide fewer discussion strategies,
limiting the strategies to index cards and conversation starters. He also attempted to be
more physically present in the focal group's discussions and provide more explicit
instruction, which included modeling his idea of a discussion. He told students "you guys
can guide your own conversations" (Transcript, November 13, 2007). He instructed
students for the first two discussions to use their book clubs, where they were supposed to
record plot details and questions that they could use for discussions. In the later book
clubs, Nigel assigned students roles based on the conversation starters handouts to
provide a focus for their homework and for their discussion.

When Nigel sat with the focal group, he asked them how much of the book they
discussed, noting they spent time talking about their social lives rather than the book. The
group admitted that it attempted to have conversations, but was limited to what they
could discuss based on Marlon, who did not want to read at the group's pace. Nigel
attempted to mediate disputes between Marlon and Finesse. He tried to help the group set
a shared goal, but Marlon resisted. Finally, after the discussion where Marlon was his
most resistant and left the group, Nigel told Marlon that one option would be to remove
Marlon from the conversations to allow others to hold their discussion.

Though Nigel attempted to provide more structure in the second cycle of book
clubs, students still did not complete their homework in its entirety. The focal group

generally reached its reading goal, but seldom did the assigned paperwork. With the decision to assign parts for the conversation starters, Nigel was explicit in his expectation of how students were to respond to the text: as one who generated questions, as one who summarized, as one who illustrated a memorable part of the text, or as one who defined words from the text. Students did not respond accordingly, however; often, they did not complete the work. Nigel, however, provided class time before the book clubs officially began for students to work on their homework. As in the first round, I did not observe any penalty for students for not completing their homework.

Nigel's decision to disband the book clubs after the cycle seems to indicate his frustration. He cited that students were unable to have discussions in a way he wanted them to. He told students to continue reading independently, but they were released from their book club obligations. Several days after his announcement that the book clubs were over, Nigel commented, "The boys know what they're doing. They just don't feel like participating in a book club at the designated time" (Field notes, November 30, 2007). He continued that the goal of the book clubs were for students to "ultimately through conversation deepen their understanding of the book and share their thoughts on the book" (Field notes, November 30, 2007), but gave the "quality of conversation" and "group dynamics" as the reasons he ended the book clubs. Nigel thought the focal group understood what he expected it to do during the book club, but that they were resistant to the constraints of scheduling, which affected book club performance. He also seemed to discount students' quality of conversation, though the focal group did achieve Nigel's goals of sharing their thoughts about the book and deepening its understanding. Rather

than provide more class time to work on the aspects of the book club he wanted students to master, however, Nigel shifted the focus to preparation for the literacy portfolio.

Effects of Student Decision-Making in Response to Teacher for *Forged by Fire*

Accommodation. Similar to the first book club, the participants did attempt to accommodate Nigel's discussion strategies. Though Rosie could not find her index cards for her discussions, when they used the conversation starters, the participants did try to follow Nigel's direction about conducting a discussion. The group prodded, encouraged and eventually moved on after Paul refused to comment on a chapter. In a later book club, Paul provided a summary. The participants tried to follow the order Nigel instituted for conducting their discussions. However, all of the participants seldom completed all components of an assignment, limiting their involvement in the discussion. Also, once the participants followed Nigel's directions, they found themselves with time remaining in their allotted discussion. They used that time to talk about their own lives, make jokes, or sit quietly until the other discussions ended.

However, when the participants were able to link accommodation with their own lives, they had a robust discussion. In the novel, the protagonist's mother moves in with her abusive partner, a decision that the book club members could not understand. In the following excerpt, they interrogate the mother's decision. Their comments also revealed their personal feelings about domestic violence and abuse. Their responses in this excerpt allowed them to incorporate their own knowledge about incarceration—gleaned from personal experience and from the media—into the discussion.

P: She loves him too much.

D: 'Cause that's her husband or whatever.

P: They're still--

F: How do you not believe it? That they're sittin' there getting beat by him? How do you not believe that?

P: Yeah.

F: And, and, everything that he wanted; like those are your own kids you gotta know what you're doin' with them. Everything.

Finesse was disbelieving that the mother could place the safety of her children in jeopardy to live with an abusive husband. Though Paul contended that the mother's decisions were driven by her marital obligations, Finesse did not accept his rationale. Then, Paul recalled a part from the text, and Finesse again criticized the mother's decisions, which began the longer discussion about domestic violence.

P: She said she deserved it, like she should—

F: I know! She said like he's the man and I have to live with his—are you <u>stupid</u>? Like really, what's good with that?

M: Nah, that's just how some people think.

F: Nah.

M: Like, like, like—

F: I don't care, dog.

M: Like relationships where girls get beat and they keep going back.

D: That's mad dumb.

F: They just like getting abused I guess.

R: No, they think that [ ].

F: Love is not abusive! Real talk!

M: But that's how she thinks. She thinks that when he's hitting her it's showing that he's the man.

R: <u>No</u>, she thought he deserved it.

D: She thought he deserved it?

F: She's not good. Money's not good. [laughs] Money's not good. (Transcript, November 16, 2007)

The participants disagreed with the mother's reasoning: after Paul recalled the text and the mother's acceptance of the abuse, Finesse disagreed. For him, abuse and the safety of children was reason to leave a relationship. Then, when other group members attempted to offer ways of understanding abuse (i.e. Marlon said "That's just how some people think"; and Rosie offered her own "No, they think that [ ]") Finesse did not accept those reasons. When he said, "They just like getting abused I guess" he revealed the tension in what he believed and his disagreement with how the mother acts. In his statement, "Love is not abusive!" he made a final, strident claim about what he thought was acceptable for how men should treat women and his condemnation of women who remain in abusive relationships ("Money's not good"). Despite his peers' attempts to rationalize the mother's behavior, for Finesse, her inattention to her children's needs was enough to warrant her being "not good." After Paul and Marlon spoke, Nigel told the class they had three minutes remaining in their discussions, which prompted Marlon to respond, "Alright, let's get back on the book," and for Finesse to also comment, "Yeah, back on the book. That's what I was gonna say."

Their conversation returned to critiquing characters' actions. This time, the participants did some brief plot retelling before launching into an interrogation of Gerald's stepfather and his reasons for molesting his stepdaughter. Finesse questioned, "She's six years old. What do you get out of her? Take her shirt off? What are you seeing?" (Transcript, November 16, 2007). Rather than continue talking about the father, however, Finesse suggested the group "Feel…Damien's chest" for an idea of what it would be like for the stepfather and stepdaughter. Finesse's comment launched a lively

response from Paul, Damien, and Rosie about playing basketball wearing only t-shirts; they laughed for minutes before Damien said, "It's alright. It was inappropriate" and Marlon attempted to restart the discussion by saying, "Alright, back, back to the book." (Transcript, November 16, 2007).

   Changing the discourse: Intense housekeeping. Much of the participants' time in book club discussions involved creating a shared reading goal. Despite Nigel's expectation that students read 30 minutes nightly, the participants expressed reluctance to reading over weekends and holidays. This reluctance was a source of renegotiation, of persuasion, and of frustration. Finesse and Rosie attempted to set a goal that appeased Marlon, who had read ahead and wanted the group to read faster. The group eventually decided that Marlon would read a different book until the group caught up to him. In this instance, Marlon (eventually) agreed to read a different book, but this interaction was the beginning of another conversation between Marlon and the larger group about what book he should switch to. However, this attempt to please Marlon and build a consensus was the first of many that characterized the remaining book clubs. Marlon, who always read ahead, teased the group about the upcoming plot. The other students would express frustration that Marlon might divulge the plot (Finesse told Nigel "He's [Marlon] gonna tell people what happens." Transcript, November 13, 2007), while attempting to set a goal that placed them within range of Marlon's pace. Marlon remained ahead of the group throughout the cycle. The negotiations with Marlon and goal setting occupied the majority of the book club discussion time, despite Nigel's instruction to talk about the book.

With the exception of the first discussion, the participants met the shared reading goals they established. Marlon continued to read ahead, nevertheless, but he read a second one while waiting for his peers to catch up to him. The housekeeping was also a competitive measure the participants used to encourage each other to read. In the following excerpt, Paul helps set a goal and attempts to persuade Rosie to read over the weekend after Nigel instructs students to set new goals for another discussion.

N: Go ahead and set your goals for next Wednesday morning.

R: Read the most you can.

N: Okay? Go ahead, please.

P: Everybody can end the book this weekend.

F: Real talk?

P: Yo, Rosie, you know you're goin' to. You know you can [ ] read!

R: I'm not gonna read 11 chapters in five days.

P: You can read.

R: I'm not reading Saturday. (Transcript, November 21, 2007)

Though Rosie said she did not plan to read on Saturday, when the group met again, all participants, including Rosie, had nearly finished the book. Prior to their discussion, they self-reported having either 2 or 3 chapters remaining in the book. Also in this example, Paul assumes responsibility for encouraging Rosie to read. During the housekeeping for this cycle, book club leadership rotated among the male members. Rosie, again, attempted to be a leader and set goals. In the first book club, Finesse and Marlon did not allow Rosie entry into the housekeeping; in the second cycle, Damien and Paul encouraged her. Rosie, who had read the book before, did not reveal parts of the text, which was the worry with Marlon. Instead, she participated in the housekeeping sessions,

offering encouragement and her own resistance when she did not want to read, as well as helping set goals for when she did want to read.

One consistent routine occurred throughout all the discussions. Every book club ended with participants setting new shared reading goals. Generally, all participants attempted to participate in the housekeeping, though the participation was not equitable: Finesse usually conducted the housekeeping, with assistance from Paul and Damien. Rosie usually conceded her own wishes and goals to the larger group, though Paul and Damien did occasionally encourage her to read, to participate, or to share her opinion about the group goal; however, the other group members seldom accepted her suggestions.

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Discourses Among Students *Forged by Fire*

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Discourse about plot retelling and social worlds. The participants spent some discussion time retelling the plot or clarifying the plot, and much more time attempting to begin their discussions. When the conversation finally began, the participants usually had less then 10 minutes remaining for their discussion, including housekeeping, to set a reading goal.

In the 10 minutes that ensued, the participants selected a point from the plot that they wanted to discuss with the group. In the example below, the group weaves a plot retelling with its knowledge of incarceration. As the group moves further into its social worlds, it ceases to talk directly about the text. However, after a robust discussion about incarceration, the group returns to discussing the text for the remaining three minutes. In the example that follows, the participants have been discussing a plot point about how the main character's mother was released from jail despite her prior drug addiction. As the

discussion continues below, the students move from using the text to clarify the plot and speculate about the mother into a fuller discussion of incarceration that takes them away from the literal text.

P: She was a crackhead.

F [laughing]: I know.

M: Oh yeah, she smokes [ ] all the time.

F: And then they all…nevermind. She goes back there—

D: Re<u>lax</u> dog!

F: Nah, nah. She's clean.

D: No, she's not.

F: She is…She's def clean [ ] try it. How'd she get out of jail if she wasn't clean?

M: How can she <u>not</u> be clean?

F: I know you can't, you can't do coke in jail.

M: [ ] mad stuff because do you know what you have to do? If you have respect in jail, you get it.

F: Not really. You can just pay for it. From one of the people that do have respect to get it.

D: How you get it in jail, though?

F: Through people from the outside.

M: Nooo; ya'll wanna know why you gotta have respect? Because you get it through the person who does have respect and he just beats you for your money.
F: [F laughs]. So you gotta show you ain't a punk.

KP: How do you all know this?

F: Movies, movies.

M: Movies and D Block.

R laughs. (Transcript, November 16, 2007)

Paul initially asserted that the mother is addicted to crack cocaine (a "crackhead"), but Finesse insisted that she had to be clean to be released from jail. Marlon, however, claimed that being incarcerated does not mean that one has to be off drugs; rather, if one has "respect," then one gets what he/she wants, despite being illegal. Marlon also told Damien that people from the "outside" provide drugs for those who are incarcerated. Respect was also at issue; a person must have respect to make purchases, or else he/she might be beaten up. Marlon indicated an awareness of life in prison, which he said is gleaned from movies and from "D Block," a nickname given to a city neighborhood. In this instance, Marlon moved between the text and his own knowledge to construct a response. His response also contained markers of identity, particularly as related to his neighborhood and media influences.

For the next few minutes, the participants continued discussing aspects of incarceration. Finesse shared that he watched a documentary about an inmate who made his own "double barreled shotgun" that "you can only try once, real talk, it might explode in your hands, you don't know. You gotta chance it." Then, the conversation turned to personal stories about incarceration. Marlon said that his mother had a friend who was incarcerated and who made lollipops to send to Marlon and his sister. Next, Marlon shared that he had a cousin in prison who saw his mother's friend being raped. Paul said he knew "this dude that's been in jail for so long that he doesn't even have to wear a uniform" (Transcript, November 16, 2007).

When the participants began to clarify what they read as well as be involved in a shared retelling, they used the text as a bridge to connect to their lives and their social worlds. With the transition into their social worlds, the participants, in this instance, had a

robust discussion about drug addiction as it related to incarceration, resourcefulness of incarcerated individuals, and the length of sentencing. These topics were of personal importance, as Marlon received gifts from his mother's friend who was incarcerated, and Paul stated that he knew a man who was incarcerated for such a length of time that he no longer was required to wear a uniform.

That the participants returned their conversation to the book after validating their experiences suggests that they used the text as a bridge between retelling and clarification and personal experience. This movement between text and social world seems to reflect the movement that readers of all ages participate in. They do not remain in their social worlds, however, as might be expected from readers who either do not enjoy the text they are reading or have nothing to say about the text. Rather, the text facilitated their conversation.

Portfolio Concerns

The participants seemed to pursue intense housekeeping for competitive reasons (i.e. to "go hard" and finish the book, as Paul explained), but they also seemed to pursue intense housekeeping because they wanted to complete books for their portfolio requirement. The school expected students to read 30 books throughout their middle school career. As December approached, however, the focal group voiced its concern about needing to read more books to fulfill this requirement. In the example that follows that occurred in the first book club, Marlon, Finesse, and Rosie attempt to identify the reading goal, but their conversation turns to discussing a strategy for meeting the 30-book requirement.

F: First of all, we were supposed to read to chapter 11 from the jump. It was supposed to be chapter 10.

M: First of all, ya'll supposed to be reading every night…from the jump, uh-huh.

F: Why the hell are you <u>doin'</u> that?!

M: So I can pass. I'm not tryin' to fail.

F: When have we followed rules, cous?

P: So you can pass on what? So you can pass on reading?

F: [ ] follow rules.

M: So when, so when it comes to graduating they be like, oh you haven't read all those books.

R: The reason I'm on chapter six is because I'm reading two books at the same time.

D: I'm on chapter six. I mean I'm on chapter five because—

M: I have to read five chapters and then after this right here is my fourth…so I'm tryin' to zip through this.

R: Hey read two books like I am.

P: By this month? <u>This month?</u> This month?

M: The end of this month.

P: Over break.

F: For Christmas break I gotta have somethin'.

M: No, not any--

D: I read like five books—

M: From the beginning of last month 'til the end.

F: You gotta read four. Five books by the end of last month to the end of this month?

M: I wasn't readin' last month…I read like…

R: Read two books like I am.

M: Three…And then this is four.

F: You gotta read five chapter books in one month?

M: Nah. In two.

R: That's easy. You read two books at the same time.

M: No...

D: Read like a book each three days…go hard.

M: That's what I'm doin'— (Transcript, November 13, 2007)

Marlon worried that as graduation approached, the teachers and administrators responsible for the portfolio might accuse him of not completing the reading requirement. As a result, he did not adhere to the group's reading goals. Marlon said his goal for reading was not to fulfill the nightly requirement of 30 minutes of independent reading; instead, his goal for reading was "So I can pass." Once Marlon made his statement that he was reading because he wanted to pass, his peers offered suggestions about how he—and they—could and were meeting the requirement. The suggestions from all except Finesse were to increase the pace of what they were reading, and to even read two books simultaneously. The simultaneous reading of two books meant that Rosie was unable to reach the group's shared reading goal, however. Finesse did not seem as concerned about the pressure to meet the graduation requirement, asking, "When have we followed the rules, cous?" though he did concede he needed something to read "For Christmas break…"

Nigel also provided instruction about the literacy portfolio to students during the second book club cycle. He reminded students that one of the components of their literacy portfolio was "that you're going to be comparing two books." While he told students he was "not doing a whole lesson on it" he "wanted to give you guys a heads up

as you're reading to keep all the books in mind and ways to compare it" (Transcript, November 21, 2007). Students in the focal group regarded *Forged by Fire* as one of the books they could use for their comparison.

Marlon, concerned about having enough books to reach the requirement, began to exceed the reading goal for every discussion. During the discussions, he taunted his peers with plot details they had not read yet, saying "Chapter 8 is a nice chapter," and causing Finesse to tell Nigel that he (Finesse) was worried Marlon would divulge the plot because the group was not reading as fast as Marlon.

Though Marlon contended he wanted to finish the book to count for the requirement, he also seemed concerned about the interpersonal relationships within the group. Whereas in the first book club cycle, Finesse and Marlon assumed complimentary relationships to each other: they galvanized against Rosie or against other classmates, in the second cycle Marlon seemed in opposition to everyone else in the group. His refusal to adhere to the shared group goals brought him into conflict with the rest of the group, but Finesse was loudest in voicing his displeasure with Marlon. During each book club discussion, Marlon found ways to draw Finesse's anger: he sang, he rapped, he alluded to plot points others had not yet read, until the discussion on November 20, 2007. Finesse voiced his displeasure with Marlon, who refused to participate in the discussion but also prevented others from discussing the book, by leaving the room. When Nigel intervened, Marlon contended that Finesse had "active days" that disrupted the group, but that Damien and Paul followed Finesse because "Yo, Finesse is their king first of all" (Transcript, November 20, 2007). Marlon seemed to eschew the solidarity he and Finesse had from the first book club cycle. Instead, it seemed that Marlon felt he was

outnumbered, since, in his view, the others aligned themselves with Finesse. Marlon

voiced his discontent by ignoring the group reading goals and by disrupting the

discussions, tipping the power relationship in the group in his favor, at least momentarily.

The book club was a site for a continuation of the rivalry between Finesse and Marlon.

Marlon resented what he perceived as adoration for and allegiance to Finesse from the

other two boys. In the first book club, the participants were in different book clubs; when

they came together in the second one, Marlon felt outnumbered.

Discussion

In the following section, I look at the answers to the questions that guided this

study. The main question was *What happens when a small group of African American*

and Caribbean American young men gather to read a shared text?

Adolescent literacy. Moje et al. (2008) contend that "[youth] do read and write,

but they may not read and write the kinds of texts that adults value" (p. 146). The young

men in this study *did* read and write. Their peers influenced their participation, as well as

teacher guidance, and their out-of-school experiences.

Adolescent literacy has become an area of concern among researchers and policy

makers since the mid-1990s. Jacobs (2008) notes, "National concern about the reading

proficiency of U.S. adolescents has increased in intensity over the past twenty years to

the point of alarm and has been cast most recently in the language of crisis" (p. 7). The

National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association have

issued position statements arguing for more attention to the needs of adolescents (NCTE,

IRA), specifically as those needs relate to expanding ideas about literacy to incorporate

how adolescents use text.

Adolescents' reading interests decline in school, and their performance on standardized reading assessments remains stagnant (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Some of those reasons include: material they find uninteresting (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002), failure to acknowledge the multiple forms of technology adolescents use (Alvermann, 1999), and an inability to leverage adolescents' rich social networks within school-based settings (Alvermann, 1999). Consequently, adolescents are active in after-school spaces that allow them to practice literacy in various ways (Fisher, 2003, Mahiri, Schultz et al. 2005, Vasudevan, 2009). In a policy research brief about adolescent literacy, NCTE articulates the following

> Adolescents also begin to develop new literacy resources and participate in multiple discourse communities in and out of school. Frequently students' extracurricular literacy proficiencies are not valued in school. Literacy's link to community and identity means that it can be a site of resistance for adolescents. When students are not recognized for bringing valuable, multiple-literacy practices to school, they can become resistant to school-based literacy. (p. 2)

The young men at the center of the study had active lives outside of school and were frequent users of technology. All of them also used cell phones to text message, watched videos on the Internet from You Tube about street fighting and music, as well as consumed other markers of their popular culture. Within school, however, they were not allowed to access these literacy tools. This denial of access was a source of frustration for Finesse, who wished that he was able to use his cell phone, complete his work, and listen to the teacher, as illustrated in the following excerpt from one of the peer group interviews.

> Yeah, I'll get mad work done. I'll just be chill. I won't even be talkin or disruptive. I'll just be, when the teacher's talkin, I'll pull out my headphones and turn it down, listen to him, back to independent work, turn it back up, bump my music, chew my gum, got a text, respond to that, and do my work [laughter from others]. What's wrong with that, dog? (Transcript, May 23, 2008)

The participants lived in urban areas that had significant rates of violence. They were also navigating the terrain of identity as related to being a young man. When they wanted to discuss how that violence or another aspect of masculinity affected their lives, however, Nigel attempted to moderate or stop those discussions. The participants did not appreciate the restrictions that accompanied Nigel's offer, and instead responded by thinking their teacher "soft." Paul explained, "We talk about sex," (Transcript, May 23, 2008), but that such talk made Nigel uncomfortable.

During the second half of the study, when the focus of the class turned to portfolio preparation and research papers, the participants wanted to research areas of personal interest. Nigel told students, "The project has to be something you care about to maintain your interest" (Field notes, December 4, 2007). These topics included a serial killer named Richard Kukilinski for Paul that Finesse urged Paul to "You Tube him and watch the videos" because Kukilinski was "an animal" (Field notes, December 10, 2007). Marlon wanted to research gang violence in the city. Both young men were responding to the directive to research something they cared about and those interests resonated with popular culture.

In the final peer group interview of the study, the participants said UPS was a place where "I only come to school cause I have to" (Transcript, May 23, 2008). When I asked what would make school a desired destination for them, Finesse again stressed what he wanted teachers to allow him to do within a classroom.

> Like, yo, let me listen to my music as long as I'm gettin my work done. Let me chew gum if I'm gettin my work done. Let me do me. As long as at the end of the class I got all my work done, why say anything? (Transcript, May 23, 2008)

Finesse seemed to realize that what he proposed was aligned to completing his work. He was not suggesting that he be permitted to participate in one activity (chewing gum, for example) at the cost of academics; rather, he suggests a consideration of ways to integrate the worlds of adolescents fully into school so that schools become a place where these young men want to be.

When I asked them what they wished teachers at UPS knew about them that they did not already know, Marlon, Finesse, and Paul said that the teachers did not know them as students as well as they thought they did. Marlon explained, "Nigel thinks he knows me very well. I wish he knew that I'm not in trouble when I'm outside of school. Like everyday he tries to cuddle me and say 'I just wanna make sure you're safe,' and all this. Guy, come on!" (Transcript, May 23, 2008).

Marlon's sentiment demonstrates the divide between the participants' lives outside of school and within UPS. Within both lives, however, the young men practiced various forms of literacy. Marlon's desire for his teachers to know he was not a troublemaker outside of school illustrates his understanding that, within school, how his teacher sees him is inconsistent with how he, Marlon, lives his life outside of school, but suggests the need for finding ways for students to bring who they are outside of school to bear on their in-school experiences. The participants' responses suggested a need to incorporate their identities as young men living within a racialized, urban world and the literacies used within those identities, in ways that were believable to the participants. The participants also needed a teacher who made his classroom a place that allowed them to vocalize and assert themselves in encouraging ways. Duncan-Andrade (2009) asserted, "Too many of us try to create classroom spaces that are safe from righteous rage, or

worse, we design plans to weed out children who display it" (p. 190). At the conclusion of the study, the participants indicated they disliked Nigel's attempts to moderate their lives as well as his limits on how they could use their own literacies; as a result, the participants revealed that the students they were in class were not the same as the individuals they were outside of school. They did not necessarily articulate an ability to be the same person in both contexts because school structures, and teachers who worked within those structures, were unwilling to accept them.

African American young men and achievement. Before I was officially "on the case" for this study, I gathered information through informal observations and conversations around UPS (Dyson and Genishi, 2005). When I mentioned to different teachers, who were curious to know what my purpose was, that I hoped to work with a group of young Black men in the eighth grade, I was met with different comments that had the same message: Finesse, Marlon, Damien, and Paul were a group of students that concerned teachers and administrators. On two separate occasions teachers declared that the students' perception of school was different from what their teachers expected. Another teacher commented that the focal group seemed to have "disengaged" from learning and hoped I could help by providing some teaching strategies that would re-engage them. The longer I remained at UPS and the more data I collected, however, I began to understand that, while these young men of color confirmed some of the data about young Black men and academic achievement, they also complicated the data. The complications suggested that the relationship between them and achievement was mitigated by factors different from what the data indicate.

Research has shown that school policies and procedures (punishment, viewing teenagers as adults and treating them as such rather than as adolescents, teachers who are threatened by African American young men and either ignore them or hold them to lower expectations), function to cause young Black men to view school increasingly as a place not designed for them (Brown & Davis, 2000, Duncan, 2002, Ferguson, 2000). Similarly, Finesse, Marlon, Damien, and Paul thought of UPS as a restrictive place. They thought the teachers targeted them for activity the teachers considered inappropriate (i.e., Marlon's hugging a female student in the hallway) and the participants also reported a disinterest in their school subjects. They were in school because they were required by law to attend.

A sociocultural approach to literacy posits that individuals and their societies mutually constitute each other (Rogoff, 2003). Thus, while teachers at the school thought that the peer group was responsible for its poor academic performance, the school had a significant role in how the participants had come to view schooling. The participants, all of whom, with the exception of Paul, had spent nearly all of their schooling at UPS, considered themselves ready for high school. They found the school's rules incompatible with how they wanted to act, and, as a result, declared their dislike for the rules as well as their resistance to following the rules. "I just don't feel their rules," said Finesse, while Dominique said, "Nobody really follows the rules." Marlon said, "Their rules are a force," while Damien reminded me that the school's posted rules were "Work Hard, Be Nice" before bursting into laughter. Paul added, "We can't break rules at this school."

UPS designated portfolios as the product that indicated students' readiness for high school. Students were required to meet pre-set expectations in order to graduate. If

they did not meet those standards on the first attempt, however, they had several attempts to meet the standard. The participants seemed to understand the flexibility of the process. Paul even noted that "this school gives you some slack" when it came to meeting deadlines (Transcript, December 18, 2007). Consequently, when they were interviewed near the end of their eighth grade year, half of the participants were still working towards mastery of their portfolios. When I asked what they thought would happen if their portfolios were not completed by graduation, Finesse answered, "Probably summer school, and then if not that then kept back" (Transcript, May 23, 2008). When asked about the educational value they received from participating in the process, all of the participants said they would not go through the process again, and Finesse responded negatively when I asked him if he would do the portfolio process again if given a choice, "No, if I had to do it to pass the grade, yeah I'll do it again. But if I had no reason to do it then no definitely not. To like get extra credit or something? No." (Transcript, May 23, 2008)

Throughout the study, I observed Nigel's inconsistency. Students did not complete their book club homework with regularity. On the day of the book club discussion, seeing that students had not done their homework, Nigel permitted them to complete their homework. Even during these allotted times, the participants did not always complete their work. During my time in the classroom, I did not observe the participants incurring any accountability for not completing their work. During his individual interview, when I asked him about how he thought the peer group would do in high school, Nigel remarked, "You know, I still struggle to meet deadlines. I still struggle to stay organized." (Transcript, January 2, 2008). Nigel's own difficulties with

organization and deadlines may have accounted for his willingness to provide classroom time for students to complete their homework. His leniency also might have contributed to the participants' inability to complete their assigned work. In addition, Nigel thought the participants controlled their own future outcomes. When Marlon did not complete a Humanities assignment, Nigel explained that, "when he's [Marlon] done, he's done." Nigel offered no further insight about consequences for not completing the assignment.

In the individual interview with Nigel, he offered that the participants, who have "gotten to expect school to be a certain way and what that certain way is…a very personalized approach where everyone is seen as an individual," viewed themselves in a particular way. He also spoke about his attempts to help the participants see themselves differently.

> I talk a whole lot about my love of learning and I think being, um…being Black and being a man and being from [this city] and being someone that…you know…they're very conscious of being overly studious. None of them want to be seen as that, so I think, trying, or I've tried to create, um, I try to guide conversations with what I share about my life, conversations I have with them about, things that they've learned through whatever, and, kind of normalize that, so I think that's helped. (Transcript, January 2, 2008)

The participants resented Nigel's self-described attempts to help the participants see themselves as being more studious, however. Paul claimed, "They [the teachers] might think they know you. Nigel thinks he knows everybody" (Transcript, May 23, 2008). In addition, Nigel had his own beliefs about how the participants were situated as young men of color. His beliefs positioned academics at odds with self-identity, as illustrated in another excerpt from Nigel's interview.

> I think everything in our society and everywhere in our homes, especially Black boys, it's being a good student is not prioritized. You know I hate saying this is what I think is the reason but I mean I think some of them have not been successful in school and have made conscious decisions to define themselves in

certain ways other than being a good student. So if you were to see them as that [a good student], then what happens to them? I think Finesse and Marlon have built up, have worked very hard on people seeing them as athletes, as cool, as all of these things. (Transcript, January 2, 2008)

The decision to choose an identity as an athlete in favor of being academic and studious, it seems, was the responsibility of the young men. They made the choice, as far as Finesse and Marlon were concerned, to resist the help Nigel was attempting to give them. When I asked him about how he thought the cohort would do in high school, again, Nigel's comments resonated with the participants' need to assume personal responsibility, and seemed devoid of his responsibility as a teacher in influencing their outcomes.

KP: How do you think they'll do in high school?

N: I think that depends on them for the most part.

N: Yeah? Where do you think they'll go?

N: Um, Parkside, CAA, um, upstairs to the high school, Arts Academy.

KP: Will Finesse go to the high school upstairs?

N: He's, yeah, yeah, I think he might. Um…yeah, so, those are the schools they're looking at and I'll think they'll be fine. I think a lot of it depends on do they have, um, significant events that happens in their life that, um, um, that might derail them from being focused on their education. How much do they, do they make education a priority and how much are they trying to learn who they are socially, so I don't, you know, I'd hate to take a guess, you know, I'd like to say I hope they all do well. I think they will all have skillsets that should translate well in high school, but, you know…as you and I both know, that doesn't necessarily translate to a student being successful, you know. (Transcript, January 2, 2008)

Nigel positions being an achiever as a choice the participants must make on their own. He thought that UPS had equipped them with "skillsets" that prepared them for college. However, the participants thought that, while they were ready for high school, UPS had not necessarily prepared them for high school. For instance, Paul admitted that the school

permitted some "slack" when it came to upholding deadlines, and Finesse said the portfolio process was only valuable if one of them attended a high school that continued the portfolio process. However, Marlon did admit that the "portfolio prepares you for completing big assignments in high school." Notably, though, Marlon was one of the cohort who struggled to complete his portfolio throughout the study.

Nigel was one of the teachers who, through his unwillingness to take responsibility for the actions and education of the participants and his blame of societal and familial influences on their academic achievement, "reinscrib[ed] racist ideologies about the link between race and motivation" (Lynn et. al., 2010, p. 313). The researchers go on to explain, "In other words, 'lack of motivation' becomes a distinct racial/cultural stereotype that can be used to explain these students' failure to meet certain standards" (p. 313-314). In the present study, the teacher, and the school, relinquished responsibility and placed the fault for academic achievement on the participants.

UPS subscribed to Habits of Mind and Habits of Work that it used, in conjunction with the portfolio, to determine a student's preparedness for high school. The Habits of Mind were described as "the habit of meeting deadlines, being on time, sticking to a task, not getting frustrated quickly, hearing out what others say, and more" (Habits of Mind, n.d.). During the study, the participants struggled to display mastery of these Habits of Mind, but the responsibility for not achieving mastery was leveled more on the students than on their teachers. When the participants attempted to diverge from school-articulated expectations, they were regarded as making a conscious decision to define themselves in opposition to the school discourse, thereby allowing Nigel and others to consider them as academically unsuccessful. However, the participants in the study seemed to understand

that the rules (which are, as Damien reminds us, "Be Nice, Work Hard") were flexible. In addition, the participants knew, from their experiences within the school for much of their lives, that the rules were enforced with varying degrees by different teachers, but rarely were those punishments of enough import for the participants to change their behavior. In sum, the school had a role in the participants' development of their self-identity as academic achievers, but UPS was reluctant to assume that responsibility; rather, the participants were distanced from achievement and marked as responsible for their own outcomes. Such treatment is consistent with Ferguson's (2000) findings about how middle school boys were blamed for their own educational failure rather than being placed within a wider social context that impacted them.

> For African American males at Rosa Parks, to be normalized within the school's individualizing discourse is to agree to the school's explanatory frame that not only failure in school but one's very life chances, prison or profession, are a matter of personal choice rather than the consequences of structures of inequality and relations of power. Success or failure, it's up to you. You, rather than external forces, are the problem. To embrace the school agenda is to distance onself from a group identification in the process of fashioning one's individuality. (p. 223)

The participants' responses to rules and expectations imposed by teachers and UPS indicated that academic achievement was fraught with choices, both self-induced and otherwise. The participants chose to follow rules, to adhere to deadlines, to complete their homework for varying reasons. Their teachers, Nigel in particular, thought the participants made conscious decisions that were mediated by their social identity work. Different teachers also disciplined students differently, a finding that resonates with Irvine's (1985) study of teacher communication patterns. She notes that Stebbins's (1970) work confirmed the following

> A teacher's reaction to disruptions is based not only on consideration of the behavior but on identification of the student involved in the misbehavior. Past

academic performance and past deportment are fundamental determinants. Consequently, misbehavior is evaluated differently with different students. (p. 344)

Nigel also thought the participants were responsible for their actions and outcomes. It is unclear whether Nigel understood the implications for placing the onus on the participants for their education (though he alluded to having some personal responsibility in helping them shape their identities, he also concluded that it was up to them), but it is not unreasonable to think that, as their teacher, and a self-proclaimed Black male from the city, that he might attempt to assume more responsibility for their outcomes and help them develop the habits and practices necessary for success in high school and in other aspects of their lives. What, we must ask, is it reasonable to expect adolescents—who are at various stages of their development—to learn on their own, and what must a teacher do to help them learn the rest? The young men in this study, who seemed to understand the that the school presented itself differently to the public as compared to their lived reality, suggest the continued need to consider the structure of schooling as related to improving, or hindering, the educational attainment of young men of color.

Defining the Young Men's Discourse

Peer group. The discourse of Finesse and his peer group was marked by certain characteristics. While they were members of their classroom and of their UPS community, they first were friends. Within their peer group, the young men relied on dialogue to mediate their discourse. This discourse often contained markers of their popular culture (i.e., hip-hop lyrics, web pages and web sites, cell phones and text messages) as well as markers of race and gender. In this section, I explore how the peer group conducted its own "social work" of membership, linking to Dyson's (1993)

articulation that this social work "involves the management of complex social borders" (p. 54). Before looking at Finesse, Marlon, Paul, and Damien as students within their UPS world, I examine how these young men navigate their immediate worlds of friendship, of race, and of gender.

"EDUBS." As Dyson found in her work with younger students, labeling the social worlds of the young men in my study was difficult. Labels used to classify their worlds changed, seemingly mirroring the temporal languages and styles the young men played with throughout my study. What seemed consistent, though, was the peer group's attempt to create personal boundaries to distance itself from its classmates. The young men in this study did not voluntarily spend any structured time with the other young men in class. They sat at their own tables and, even during the class meetings, arranged their seating to be close to each other. When Nigel intervened in their attempts to seat themselves, a female classmate was the likely interloper who joined them. In fact, they called the other group of five young men "EDUBS," or "Everyway Dumb." EDUBS was used in reference to the five other boys, but not to the girls.

This separation allowed the young men to draw a distinct boundary between the school and themselves. What this distinction meant, though, was that the young men worked diligently to maintain those boundaries. While Finesse and Marlon seemed to exhibit the least difficulty maintaining social distance from the EDUBS, it was not as easy for Paul and Damien. Damien often interacted with his female peers, whereas Finesse, Marlon, and Paul openly expressed their frustration and annoyance with the girls. Thus, the young men marked their discourse with language of maintaining personal boundaries. The most common use of the boundary was to label an action as "EDUB,"

causing the person in question to react by either stopping the activity or tolerate being laughed at by his peers. The young men adhered to their created boundaries with varying levels of vigilance. To choose EDUB over the peer group, though, incurred denigration. In the following example, Damien *does* admit to enjoying reading—an activity the other participants classify as EDUB, and by their definition, deviant to their discourse. In this excerpt from a group interview, the participants make a distinction between what they would choose to do and what EDUBS would choose to do.

> F: Yo, if you were chillin' in the summer, you would pick up a book, out the random?
>
> D: Every day? At my house?
>
> M: No, be real.
>
> F: He might, but I know I wouldn't, no.
>
> D: I would.
>
> KP: Paul, would you?
>
> P: No!
>
> M: Damien's half EDUB, half—
>
> F: No, Damien is really an EDUB on the raw. He really is.
>
> KP: Because he reads?
>
> F: No, not just because he reads. No, Damien's really an EDUB on the low.
>
> M: He really is.
>
> F: He's really half a EDUB.
>
> M: Like sometimes he wants to do the stuff they're doin' and he finds it fun. Sometimes their jokes are funny to him that are really funny.
>
> KP: Is that wrong?
>
> M: No, it is for this.
>
> F: <u>Very</u> wrong!

KP: Oh my goodness.

M: But, whatever, he's just half EDUB.

F: Yeah, Damien's an EDUB on the low. (Transcript, November 20, 2007)

While Finesse, Paul, and Marlon said they would not read over the summer, Damien

disagreed. After he asked for clarification about the frequency of reading ("every day?"

"at my house?"), he said he would read. His decision immediately drew criticism from

the other boys. Being "on the raw" and "on the low" suggested that Damien participated

in activities not considered socially acceptable by the group. Equating reading as a choice

as "on the low" also connoted the pejorative sexual marker of being "on the down low," a

term used for men who have sex with other men but do not admit it to their wives and/or

girlfriends (King and Hunter, 2005). Further, Finesse and Marlon contended that

Damien's like of other EDUB activities and EDUB jokes was enough to qualify him as

partially EDUB and different from them. However, Damien was never physically or

socially excluded from the peer group.

It is appropriate here to discuss characteristics that distinguished Finesse, Marlon,

Paul, and Damien from the EDUBS. During a lunch period, I asked them about the

formation of the social groups in their class. Damien explained that, though he, Finesse,

and Marlon had known each other since elementary school, distinct social groups formed

in the sixth grade. Within the classroom, Finesse, Marlon, Paul, and Damien were a peer

group, while the girls had their own group, and the EDUBS comprised another group.

The lone White student, Alex, seldom associated with any groups. In the classroom, I

observed Alex often sat by himself. During lunch Alex sat near the EDUBS, but rarely

interacted with them more than to exchange a few comments. When I asked my focal

group about Alex's lack of affiliation with any of his classmates, Damien told me that Alex "just doesn't want to hang out with us."

How Were Members Socialized Into the Group? What Were the Group Relationships Within the Book Club?

Loudness. Perhaps one of the reasons Damien was never excluded from the peer group was that he shared one characteristic that distinguished him from the EDUBS: all four of the young men considered themselves "loud." Being loud at UPS carried its own set of consequences that determined their access to classroom instruction. For example, "EDUB-ness" and "non-EDUB-ness" played out throughout their academic subjects. During a peer group interview I asked the young men about their other classes and teachers. They distinguished between behavior that got them into trouble and compared that to what they perceived as similar (and worse) behavior by the EDUBS that did not yield the same result. In this excerpt, the peer group first describes its science teacher, Richard, then its math teacher, Susan, in response to my query about what happens in their other classes, and with other teachers.

> F: Richard's day's just everyday, though, but, we gon leave him alone. Susan has her days sometimes, but if you're not doin your work or if you're loud, and doin your work in Susan's class, you're done. You're done. If you're talkin—
>
> M: We do our work, but we be loud. We loud kids.
>
> F: She kicks us out.
>
> M: But if we're loud talkin about math and doin math, she kicks us out for that. The EDUBS, by the way, slap each other, throwin stuff [simultaneously with F]—
>
> F: Say stuff about her [laughs]—
>
> M: --and they don't get in trouble.

P: They definitely do. They sit, they sit there talkin bout her, and she's sittin right next to them.

KP: So do they, do they get in trouble?

F: Nah.

KP: But you all get in trouble?

F & M: Yeah.

KP: Why?

M: Cause we're loud. Doin our math. So… (Transcript, November 20, 2007)

According to the young men a teacher's perception of "loudness" characterized how that teacher responded to Finesse and his peer group. Finesse made the point that one can be loud, but one can also be doing his work. However, in Susan's class being both resulted in being kicked out of class. In Finesse and Marlon's opinion, being loud seemed the ultimate factor in being kicked out of class, more than failing to do the work. "Loudness" or "being loud" characterized the peer group and also was another boundary between them and the rest of the class.

Loudness was the distinction between the peer group in the study and the EDUBS that superseded any of the other behavior by the EDUBS. As Paul noted, the EDUBS made fun of Susan while in her presence and were not kicked out of class. The EDUB behavior seems to be as egregious—or more—in terms of creating a classroom of respectful students. Marlon, too, pointed out the EDUBS' behavior of "slappin each other" and "throwin stuff," was not enough to have them kicked out of class because they did those things but were not perceived by Susan as loud. On the contrary, as Marlon surmised, members of his peer group were removed from their math class because, despite doing the required work, that teacher perceived them as loud.

Though the participants used "loud" to characterize the difference in understanding between themselves and their teachers, other societal, cultural, and racial factors were in play. The young men understood their social position within their math classroom and knew that because of how they self-identified, they were perpetually at odds with the teacher's expectations. Their perception resonates with Ferguson's (1993) assertions about students' ability to read situations and understand explicit and implicit teacher expectations. She writes, "Children are highly knowledgeable about teachers' identifying practices and assessments. They are sophisticated participant observers themselves, skilled interpreters and astute analysts of social interactions, cognizant of a variety of cues that signal teachers' expectations of children" (p. 97). The young men knew that Susan considered them loud and disruptive. Their math competency and access to math instruction was secondary, but that access was filtered through the lens of loudness. With the exception of Nigel, the young men's core subject teachers were European American, and half were women. In my observations, the female teachers voiced their concerns more often about the peer group than other students. And, while the EDUBS also were disruptive, they tended not to incur punishment in the same proportion as the focal peer group. Though Lopez (2003) had a mixed gender study of Caribbean youth, her conclusion that young women "were not disciplined as harshly as young men, even when they engaged in the same type of infractions of school rules" (p. 110) resonates with the difference in discipline Finesse, Marlon, Damien, and Paul voiced.

Marlon's admission that "We be loud. We loud kids," both characterized and distanced his peer group from the others in his classroom. It was a daily occurrence for Nigel to ask students to be quiet, to wait for silence, to remind students that the level of

"noise" in the classroom was too much. Indeed, during my interactions with the peer group, their volume in regard to speaking to each other *was* louder than that of their classmates. Their classmates sat in close proximity and whispered or spoke quietly to each other. On occasion, I did watch the young men yell across the classroom at each other, enter class singing popular hip-hop songs that became a group sing-a-long, and continue talking once a teacher asked them for quiet. Again, Lopez (2003) asserts, "as schools became more overcrowded, 'feminine traits' such as passivity, silence, and obedience were rewarded" (p. 167). Despite teachers' attempts to reinforce quiet and discipline, the participants resisted, and faced different penalties for their resistance.

Marlon's explanation of being loud seemed to tie directly to his identity, if not to the others in his peer group. It seems difficult to extract loudness from who they were as young Black men, particularly given that being loud was how Marlon defined himself. Further, when the young men interacted with each other while not under a teacher's direct supervision (i.e., in my presence or in that of their student teacher), they participated in robust discussions about sports, about girls, about videos on You Tube. They laughed at each other, ribbed each other, and their volume ebbed and flowed with points they attempted to make. Yet, in their classrooms, this identity was at odds with teachers' expectations for acceptable behavior. Moreover, being loud was reason for penalty in their math class—despite completing their work and despite the EDUBS, who made fun of their teacher in her presence—and in Nigel's class, though he seldom required students to leave class.

Thus, it is not unrealistic to think that one of the reasons the young men marked their discourse by creating and maintaining personal boundaries was that it was difficult

to separate their identities from teacher-directed academic demands in a way that allowed them to be who they were. Or, if not difficult, then perhaps they were unwilling to "silence" themselves in subordination to the UPS teacher-directed discourse (Fordham, 1993). All of the young men said they did not agree with the teachers' and the school's rules. They all expressed a dislike of the expectations (i.e. "Rules are made to be broken" (Finesse); "Nobody really follows the rules" (Paul); "Their rules are a force" (Marlon)). The penalties associated with breaking the rules were not important to the young men, perhaps because from their perspective, rules did not carry much import. All, with the exception of Paul, had been suspended at least once at UPS, but the punishments were not enough to make the young men change their actions.

With the decision to be loud came consequences more far-reaching than being kicked out of class for a period. As was the case of Rita, an African American high school student at the heart of Fordham's (1993) study, challenging behaviors led to negative outcomes. "…Rita's consistent practice of breaching the cultural assumptions so valued in the school context often leads her teachers to erase their perception of her as a bright, intelligent person" (p. 17). One of this study's peer group's teachers noted that they had "pulled away" from academics while another thought they were spoiled and had a particular expectation of schooling with which the teacher disagreed. The behaviors that teachers found disruptive were connected to the participants' being kicked out of class, leading to missed instructional time and causing increased feelings of frustration by the peer group. Moreover, because the participants refused to enact the school and classroom discourses of their teachers, their teachers regarded them as disruptive underachievers.

Manipulating loudness. Notable, though, and important to understanding how the young men understood their schooling experiences, is how they used being loud for their own purposes. Early on in my observations, I witnessed Finesse and Marlon use "being loud" to their advantage. With a Humanities essay looming, as they prepared to transition to math and were out of earshot of their teacher, the young men said they planned to "get kicked out" of their math class to have additional time to work on their essays. Within fifteen minutes of leaving for math, I observed Finesse, then Marlon, stroll into the main office to use computers to work on their assignment. Thus, "being loud" did not appear to be a negative consequence in this situation. Such maneuvering demonstrated an ability to use language, and by extension, their identities, to benefit themselves.

Nystrand (1997) articulates "discourse is essentially structured by the interaction of the conversants, with each playing a particular social role", (p. 8). Within classroom spaces, Finesse, Marlon, Paul, and Damien were limited by the role they could assume in the discourse because adults perceived them as loud. In their math class, the young men could not even enter the discourse. However, with the intentional decision to "be loud", Finesse and Marlon subverted social roles and power roles.

The peer group realized the tension between who they were as students and what their teachers expected of them. Thomas and Stevenson (2009) call this awareness of difference from a teacher "rejection sensitivity" and cited it as a "potential instigant of behavior adjustment problems among African American boys" (p. 171). These researchers suggest that African American boys respond to inequity they perceive in ways that "exacerbate negative attention from teachers and lead to poor academic

adjustment outcomes" (p. 171). During the period of data collection with these young

men, I witnessed multiple occasions in which they were shushed, were sent out of class

for being too loud and for other acts of insubordination (i.e., not listening to their teacher,

throwing items at each other, arguing with each other). Ferguson (2001) argues that the

penalties such as the ones received by participants in this study contribute to how others

(students, other school personnel) consider their behavior as deviant and in need of

eradication as well as contributes to the "adultification" of young men of color. She

writes

> As "not-children," their behavior is understood not as something to be molded
> and shaped over time, but as the intentional, fully cognizant actions of an adult.
> This means there is already a dispositional pattern set, that their behavior is
> incorrigible, irremediable. Therefore, the treatment required for infractions is one
> that punishes through example and exclusion rather than through persuasion and
> edification… (p. 90)

The participants often did not attend the weekly eighth grade lunch because they had

been written up more than three times in a given week in the school's disciplinary record.

While their classmates enjoyed a potluck lunch in Nigel's classroom, the participants

spent their lunch period in the cafeteria.

Thus, if the social roles the young men play in their relationships with each other

are mediated by the school discourse and the classroom, it seems important to also

discuss that larger discourse, which I do in the following sections, by examining the

markers of the peer group's discourse in relation to race and gender.

Masculinity and race. The participants recognized that the school was at odds

with their development as young Black men. The young men wanted to bring their

identities with them into the classroom and into their literacy practices. These attempts at

identity work were important, as Kirkland (2006) writes

> For many urban adolescent young Black men, it is the personal aspect in the dialogic of literacy that is vital for both life and liberty, as it affords them some agency, or control, over how they are perceived and perceive themselves in relation to a larger society. (p. 132)

Despite their desire to read texts that resonated with their experiences of coming of age in an urban environment, their teacher often told them that their experiences and requests were not as valued as others. If a book contained violence, Nigel either did not use it or offered an alternative. He publicly condemned what he considered gratuitous violence in the classroom. During classroom meetings, if one of the participants hoped to recap a "violent" movie, Nigel curtailed those discussions. In an individual interview, Nigel explained his rationale for keeping discussions of violence out of the classroom.

> I try to make sure that they don't necessarily feel like…I want, I'm trying to censor them or anything's taboo, but I also don't want it to be …I also worry because there are a couple of kids who they are curious and interested in violence and I don't want it to be like, um…a couple of kids who are obsessed with sex and violence and I don't want it to be it becomes, it then becomes…a way to… engage people in conversations they might be uncomfortable for [ ]. It's a very calculated straight and narrow, you know. (Transcript, January 2, 2008)

Nigel attempted to mentor the young men. He was their advisor and checked their assignments and provided additional help with their work. However, the young men resented that attention, calling Nigel "soft" for his resistance to talk about, and write about their passions.

In this section, I look at the participants' discourse for markers of Black masculinity. What emerges is that the young men draw on their lives outside of school to help define their discourse. The discourse contained paternal and heteronormative threads that also reflected their relationships with their fathers: a father as primary caregiver; a father who has remarried and has other children; and a father who is missing. Through

these interactions, the participants discussed characters and their understanding of gender roles.

Gender roles. An important marker of the peer group's discourse concerned who they were as young men of African descent. Inherent in defining their ethnicity, though, was an understanding of gender. Lopez (2003) makes the following claim about gender

> Gender refers to the historical processes by which socially constructed behavior patterns are defined as appropriate for men and women in a given society. Gender is a process of assigning difference and meaning to the behaviors a given society believes to constitute the "masculine" and the "feminine" social spheres. (p. 17)

While Finesse was African American, Marlon was of Jamaican descent, Paul was of African American and Haitian descent, and Damien was of African American and Virgin Island descent. I asked them for their own definitions of their ethnicity during another peer group interview. Their responses, which intersect ethnicity and gender, follow.

> M: As a Jamaican young man, Jamaican American young man…what is the question?
>
> KP: What does it mean?
>
> M: Oh, it means you're from the Caribbean, so you can dance. It means you're African American so you can dress. It means you get a lot of girls when you tell em where you're from, and it means you can do anything you put your mind to. And you're gonna wind up, in the long run, with more than three jobs cause Jamaican men love to work and love money. So and I'm probably gonna do construction cause I'm mad good, right? Then West Indians…They have a lot of children. I'll probably have four or five.
>
> D: Ya'll too!
>
> M: The maximum we have is ten.
>
> D: That's not a lot? [laughter]
>
> P: Take care of ten babies.
>
> M: We be workin like 50 jobs, dog. That's nothin for us!
>
> D: Ten kids dog?

P: You gotta buy everyone, all them sneakers.

M: So what's that, I gotta give em child support.

P: So what's, what's a lot of kids?

M: Twelve.

D: So ten's not?

M: No. (Transcript, May 23, 2008)

Marlon equates being Jamaican with style: being able to dress well, which increases his abilities to attract attention from girls. At least weekly during the study, I observed Marlon come to class wearing outfits that got his peers talking. Once he wore a pair of denim coveralls that stopped all conversation and turned into a fierce debate about Marlon's fashion sense. Another time, he wore a large gold chain with a white button down shirt that prompted Nigel to comment that Marlon's style was reminiscent of what he (Nigel) wore in the 1980s. Marlon also sported intricate haircuts each week. A particularly memorable one featured a man pouring out a bowl of letters that spelled out Marlon's name and, again, was the source of an extended conversation. Additionally, Marlon flirted with girls when on school field trips, and bragged about his ability to convince girls he'd just met to give him their phone numbers. He also associated being Jamaican with working hard and holding multiple jobs ("like 50")—not to support one's family, but because of a love of work and a love of money. He marked a particular occupation as Jamaican ("construction") and as a source of income, and his comment about being able to "do anything you put your mind to" was hopeful and reminiscent of an immigrant, self-deterministic narrative.

While some of Marlon's description was exaggerated and performative, it does contain markers of a gendered discourse. When talk turns to children, Marlon and

Damien distinguish between what each thinks is a great deal of responsibility and how they anticipate taking care of that responsibility. They agree that ten children is a large number (but not twelve, which is "a lot of kids"), but Marlon rationalizes that through his work and through child support, he will take care of his responsibilities. These responsibilities are gendered and traditional, however. The men work outside the home, generating an income to support their children.

Talk of male responsibility occurred during their book clubs, too. The *First Part Last* is a novel that plays with gender roles: the young father is the primary caregiver for his newborn daughter; male characters display more affection than female characters. The young men noticed the non-traditional gender associations during one of their book club discussions. While reading *First Part Last*, Marlon and Finesse could not believe that the main character, Bobby, would forget his newborn daughter and go play basketball with his friends. Finesse called Bobby an "EDUB" to criticize Bobby's actions. They also debated Bobby's father's response to an event in the novel. Bobby's father—not Bobby's mother—cried, sparking a brief conversation. Finesse and Marlon expected the mother to cry rather than the father. Thus, a brief interaction over an event in the text hinted at the potential for broader conversations about intersections of gender roles and expectations.

The young men also had ideas about what behavior was acceptable in a relationship. Finesse said that an ideal or perfect guy was "non abusive," though he admitted to being confused about why some girls seemed to allow their partners to hit them. Marlon confirmed that his girlfriend at the time "doesn't like to be smacked or nothing like that" though Finesse said "she likes…the men to be aggressive with her." I asked Marlon directly if he hit his girlfriend because I wanted to clarify what he said and

also because I was unclear about Finesse's comment about Marlon's girlfriend. Marlon responded adamantly, "No, hell no, no, no. If I hit a female, I'd be done for the rest of my life. My parents would kill me, anything. A female could do anything to you—you can never hit a female" (Transcript, May 23, 2008).

Within the peer group's discourse about gender roles was the subtext of heteronormativity. Cohen (2005) defines heteronormativity as structures and practices "that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and 'natural' within society" (p. 24). The young men discussed relationships through traditional, male-female, social constructions. They were also vigilant about maintaining distinct boundaries between what they considered heteronormative and acceptable behaviors and homosexual or gender-bending behaviors. During another lunch session, Marlon told Finesse, Paul, and Damien the rules of being a young man as noted in my field notes that follow:

> Marlon says there are three rules that every boy should know:
> 1. No boy-on-boy action.
> 2. No doing a girl up the butt.
> 3. No "carpet cleaning" with a girl.
> This sends all the boys at the table off into peals of laughter and high-fives for about five minutes. (Field notes, November 2, 2007)

Marlon's rules demonstrate the work he was doing around maintaining his heterosexuality. The young men were quick to call some behaviors "gay," which allowed them to distinguish between the heterosexual behaviors they thought normal and those they thought abnormal. In this way, they also called Damien "gay" several times while I was around, as well as saying he was "on the low." In addition, during a pointed interaction with Alex in the cafeteria, Marlon suggested Alex was gay. ("You heard what she said: she focuses on boys," a comment that sent Alex storming out of the cafeteria

and provoked the other young men to chastise Marlon for being disrespectful. Their responses did not make Marlon take back what he said, however). They worked hard to portray themselves as young men who were popular with the opposite sex: bragging about phone numbers secured from girls they met, dates they'd gone on, sexual exploits (primarily Marlon), and other ways to distinguish themselves as heterosexuals. If they felt any threat from another boy (i.e., from the EDUBS or from Alex), they reaffirmed their heterosexual identity, which often came at the price of being demeaning and of being homophobic.

In a study with Black adolescents in an urban summer camp, Froyum (2007) found that her participants similarly used heteronormative language and disassociated themselves from any hint of being gay, or being perceived as such, by their peers. She reported participants "…treated homosexuality, and even cross-gender behaviors, as a deficiency or a contagion that needed to be guarded against. They also reaffirmed the group rejection of 'gay' as a viable identity, while reinforcing the group's assertions as moral and sexually mainstream" (p. 617). The young men in my study used their discourse, of labeling something as non-heterosexual, to remind each other about their peer membership. Indeed, when they called something that Damien did gay or related to being an EDUB, he typically laughed and appeared to reconsider his involvement (at least momentarily) with the behavior.

The significance of heteronormative markers in the young men's discourse is that within the school, there were visibly out Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered (LGBT) members of the faculty and staff. Additionally, the school used welcoming, inclusive language in its publications and among its school community. However, while

the young men did not veer outside of the school's language when adults were present, they did participate in a heteronormative discourse when adults were not present, marked by celebrating behaviors that were acceptable and denigrating behaviors that were unacceptable. These unacceptable behaviors were typically viewed as non-heteronoramative (i.e., gay or gender bending).

  Race and ethnicity. Throughout my observations, the young men seldom voiced statements about being people of color navigating within a racialized world. I suspected, but was unsure whether they were aware of being raced and racialized. Marlon and Damien wore clothing and jewelry that identified them as of Caribbean origin, while Finesse and Paul did not. In the following excerpt from a group interview, I asked them about their specific ethnic identities. I selected this question from work by Isom (2007), who asked the same questions to African American middle school young men in an afterschool program to "investigate the meaning-making that children undertake in their expression and development of a racialized gender identity" (p. 407). I shared the goal of understanding how race operated within the peer group's discourse and how race influenced its identity development within the classroom and, if possible, their lives outside of the classroom.

> KP: Okay, here's another one. I'm gonna give you a phrase and you tell me what you think of. You've sort of done this before.
>
> . . .
>
> KP: Black young man.
>
> P: Starting to mature.
>
> F: Um…Black young man I think it's a little different than a White young man.
>
> D: Going through struggles.

F: Yes, definitely. I think Black people go through a little more struggles than White people.

KP: What kind of struggles, though?

M: Like…homes, house struggles [overlaps with F: house struggles], no money, yeah. Schools, females, probably got somebody pregnant.

F: Yup. And um, what else? Struggles with the, with the people [ ], court struggles and things like that.

P: Police.

KP: Do you think these are struggles that will happen to you all?

M: Nah. It already happened to us.

D: Not no pregnant or nothing like that. (Transcript, May 23, 2008)

These responses indicate what being a young Black man meant for the participants. They contain an awareness of the threats facing being people of color in urban environments, from police violence, to housing foreclosure, to education, to parenthood, to a struggle for money. Marlon reminded me that some of those struggles had already happened to him. During my observation, I read an article about his mother in the city's African American newspaper and her attempts to prevent foreclosure. The young men were also aware of racial inequities: of differential treatment between whites and Blacks, and while they do not say it, their acknowledgement of racial inequalities coupled with events that have already happened to them indicate an awareness of race in their lives.

The participants seemed to understand a number of the "everyday realities of urban African-American children and youth" (Ginwright, 2000, p. 102) as indicated by comments in response to my query about what it means to be a Black young man. While they did not explicitly discuss them unless prompted, their responses indicate an awareness and understanding of how race affects their lives. There is little, if any, hope when the participants describe a young Black man, perhaps because, at their age (14-15),

they have had their share of challenges that have tempered their optimism for the future. With the exception of pregnancy, the participants seem to view their futures as ones of struggle. Those struggles intersect their lives in school and outside of UPS. Ginwright (2000) makes the following assertion about the connection between struggle and identity.

> I argue that identity for poor Black youth is largely tied to the everyday struggles found in their communities. It is the product of competing interests brought on by multiple forms of oppression, and it is from the negotiation between these forms of oppression that Black urban identity emerges. (p. 93)

The discourse the participants employed around race indicates their awareness of their intersecting identities and illustrates what Duncan (2005) describes as "the ability of oppressed people to name their realities" (p. 102). Duncan and McCoy (2007) also note, "Black youth do not exist in the world as self-evident and distinct entities" (p. 44). The participants' lives were not restricted to UPS. They attempted to bring their experiences, and their resulting identities, to school.

Because they were members of the classroom as well, it is important to understand the discourse of the classroom. In the next section, I look at how Nigel attempted to control the discourse of his classroom, resulting in another area where the peer group had to figure out ways to incorporate their discourse into the classroom space. Understanding the positioning of the peer group discourse within the classroom discourse is important to framing what happened once the book clubs began.

Defining the classroom discourse. Nigel hoped students would gain competence as readers and writers through practicing reading and writing. He did not give tests, instead focusing on other products as indicators of student learning. In the following interview, Nigel explained why he emphasized these areas and how they aligned with his ideas of student growth.

> I never give tests. I never have tests [ ], so the way students demonstrate to me that they've learned something is through their writing and through discussion, so I think that gives me a chance to build certain skills in their writing but also…each kid grows according to where they were from before… (Transcript, January 2, 2008)

Many of the assignments Nigel assigned had a writing component, and students spent class time working on their products, in conferences with each other and/or with Nigel, or as part of a larger group lecture or class activity. Producing the work was messy: students managed multiple drafts of their work, moved in and out of the classroom to work with different teachers around the school, and assisted each other with the work.

Nigel had a specific objective for how he wanted students to conduct discussions around books, but his standards about student achievement were not as clear. He said that he wanted them "get used to coming together and…having a comfort level with having dialogue around an author, a character, asking questions" (Transcript, January 2, 2008). He attempted to model what he considered appropriate discussions with the class, and he stopped groups during book clubs to provide feedback about their discussions. In terms of student achievement, however, his objectives were not as direct. His general assumptions about teaching played out in his classroom.

For adolescents, the peer group occupies an important role in terms of social and identity development. Ferguson (2000) suggests, "Friendship is a fruitful relationship to explore in terms of the place it occupies in the trying out of alternative identities as passages to power and understanding" (p. 121). Indeed, the participants in this study had their own discourse that separated them from their peers. Using the language of "EDUB", the participants were able to make claims about masculinity and about academic achievement, and to use those claims to enforce peer group membership. The focal group

characterized the EDUBS as immature, as drawing attention to themselves for

misbehavior, and for doing their academic work. As a result, the focal group thought the

EDUBS received preferential treatment from some of their teachers because, though they

made fun of their teachers in the teachers' presence, they were not overly loud or

disruptive. In the focal group, on the other hand, as Marlon described, "We do our work,

but we be loud. We loud kids" (Transcript, November 20, 2007). Thus, by separating

themselves from the other young men in their class, the participants were also opening

themselves up to notice from their teachers because of their refusal to adhere to teacher-

based norms of behavior.

In their work with an afterschool mentoring program of young Black men,

Kirkland and Jackson (2009) found that a small group of participants manipulated images

of "coolness"—as demonstrated through language and clothing—"in an attempt to

distinguish themselves from others" and to produce "social transcripts" they "used to

critique or accommodate the world" (p. 284). However, while Kirkland and Jackson

suggest their participants wanted to set themselves apart, they also contend that "cool

talk," defined as the "recognizable discourse patterns that governed language use and

literacy practice" served as "an interior anchor that allowed them to straddle the

scholastic margins of school and the social parameters of peers" (p. 285). That is, the

participants in Kirkland and Jackson's study found a way of being in the world that

allowed them to mediate between threats of marginalization and their identity

development. Their cool talk was the medium that enabled the participants to move

between "internal and external worlds" (p. 286). In addition, the "Cool Pose" theory

(Majors and Billson, 1992) contends that young Black men respond to the attempted

silencing and mistreatment in schools by adopting a "cool pose." This positioning places young Black men in opposition to school, but, the authors argue, allows them to preserve modicums of "pride, dignity and respect" (p. 9). What the present study suggests, though, is that teachers can interrupt the cool pose and help young Black men to think about how to successfully measure pride, dignity and respect within an academic context.

Similarly, the participants in the present study considered themselves "cool" and produced a discourse that identified them as young Black men in an urban context. Their markers of talk often contained references to popular movies, to Internet programs about street fighting, or to sports scores and athletes. In addition, Marlon stated he learned about incarceration conditions from a friend of his mother's, who sent candy to him and his sister. Also, they critiqued their education through their discourse. For example, the participants knew that teachers enforced rules with varying levels of consistency. Thus, the participants did not follow the rules, or at least attempted not to. The participants groused at teacher's attempts to get to know them, and, by the end of the study, disliked their advisor. They did not complete their assignments, and devised ways to circumvent completing the graduation portfolio required by the school.

While the participants identified behaviors that separated them from the EDUBS and solidified their group membership, Ferguson (2001) suggests that such behavior came at a cost. In her study, young Black men chose to speak Black English despite their teachers' demands to speak Standard English. Ferguson and others (Smitherman, 2000, Rickford, 2000) contend that language ties people to culture, and to identity, and that demands to speak another language—at the cost of one's home language—can have damaging results. While the participants did speak Black Language when they were

together, I did not observe any instances of them being asked to speak or write, explicitly, in Standard English. However, like Ferguson's participants' resistance to code-switch, the participants in my study were unwilling to code-switch to the school's expectations of academic behavior. As a result, the participants were viewed as disengaged and as controlling their own academic destinies (as per Nigel's descriptions), seemingly releasing the school from accountability for them.

When viewed in opposition to the school—and the participants' comments and actions suggest that they were in opposition to the school's goals—group membership emerged as a context in which the participants were able to maintain their identities, to be competent, and to simultaneously critique UPS structures. Unfortunately, their decision to distance themselves from teacher and administrative expectations resulted in those teachers and administrators placing the blame on the peer group rather than accepting responsibility for the peer group's limited academic success. The blaming that came from teachers was similar to a "crisis of faith" (Lynn et. al. 2010) in the students, described as "when teachers and administrators display a lack of faith in students, it impacts students' interest in school. And, of course, a lack of interest in school can contribute to school failure" (p. 316).

What Texts Resonated With the Group?

Book clubs: What makes a young man a reader? I was interested in how the participants regarded reading, specifically if they considered themselves readers and how reading figured in their lives. Through peer group interviews, supplemented with observations and a teacher interview, I learned that the young men had difficulty articulating an identity as a reader. This difficulty was caused by a belief that reading was

something to be done as a choice, and while two said they would not make that choice to read, the other two agreed reluctantly. The boys valued teacher-supported recommendations to select more books. The more participants read books of interest to them, the more likely they were to keep reading.

The teacher missed opportunities in class to help the focal group develop their identities as readers. For instance, when students talked about a text and connected it to a larger social problem they observed (i.e., domestic violence), the teacher couldn't help them make critical parallels between literature and political action, for example, because he was not directly facilitating their book club. The teacher was an active participant in one of the other classroom book clubs, and viewed the other groups through observation and check-ins about their progress. Those check-ins, however, occurred usually once the focal group had finished discussing their text or if the teacher had to discipline students. He also lacked experience in helping students have a sustained discussion about a shared text. As a result of his inexperience and their need to have him help them continue engaging with texts, the young men experienced difficulty thinking about reading as more than a school task.

Reading and self-perception. The following excerpt is from a peer group interview where the participants were asked if they considered themselves readers. When presented with other options, readers, by one participant's definition, would still opt to read. Participants identified themselves as readers based on their agreement with reading as an activity they would choose if not assigned by a teacher.

KP: Okay, here's my last question, honestly. Um, would you describe yourself as a reader?

F: Nah, not yet, not yet. Nope, not yet.

M: Probably the middle of ninth grade—

KP: --Paul, what would you say?

M: Yeah.

P: No.

KP: Damien?

D: A little bit.

KP: Why do you all say no and you say a little bit?

F: Cause I just started readin'.

KP: Okay. Marlon?

M: I say no because, um, I don't really <u>like</u> readin' that much, like, I mean, if it's a good book, Ima read it, you know what I'm sayin', but once I start readin', I'm not gonna, and then once I finish, I'm not gonna wanna pick it up again. I'm gonna be like: I just don't like readin' right now.

F: Yeah, no, and I just started readin', and if I didn't have to read, I wouldn't. So I'm not gonna call myself a reader. A reader, I would think, if you don't have to read a book, like if you're just chillin' over the summer, you'll pick up a book and read. I'm <u>not</u> gonna do that. There's no way I'm doin' that.

M: Real talk, Damien is not a reader. The only reader we have in the class is little Michael.

D: Nah, how am I not?

F: Yo, if you were chillin' in the summer, you would pick up a book, out the random?

D: Every day? At my house?

M: No, be real.

F: He might, but I know I wouldn't, no.

D: I would.

KP: Paul, would you?

P: No! (Transcript, November 7, 2007)

Several aspects of this excerpt are important to how the participants view themselves as readers. First is Finesse's clarification that he only began reading during his eighth grade year. While he was new to reading (having said elsewhere that this was the first time in his life that he'd read more than lower-level chapter books), Finesse thought that he might consider himself a reader the next year. His "not yet, not yet" indicated that he had not discounted the possibility of becoming a reader in the future. For Marlon, reading was not an activity he enjoyed—however, if the content of a book was compelling, he would finish it. Also, it seems that completing the book was important to Marlon. These factors suggest that being a reader was tied to the content of the book (specifically, Marlon explained in other places, realistic, non-fiction material) as well as a feeling of completion. Interestingly, Marlon did not consider himself a reader despite articulating behaviors that seemingly do distinguish him as a reader (i.e., he said he would read "if it's a good book" and that he would finish that book—actions and phrases that those who identify as a reader might do or say). Yet, based on Finesse's working definition of a reader in this excerpt (that a reader would pick up a book "out the random"), and based on Marlon's explanation that he would not continue to read once he finished another book, they did not think of themselves as readers.

Throughout the study I remained interested in how the participants viewed themselves as readers. Two months after I began this inquiry, I again asked Finesse if he considered himself a reader. This time, I interviewed him separately. His response to my inquiry follows:

KP: Do you consider yourself a reader?

F: No.

KP: You don't? Can you tell me more about that?

F: Cause I just, if I don't have to read, I won't. (Transcript, January 4, 2008)

Again, Finesse seemed to consider choice as an important factor in determining how he self-identified as a reader. Unlike with his peers, where he indicated that he could eventually be a reader, his response here does not hold that same anticipation. This interview occurred after the book clubs ended and participants were no longer meeting in small groups to discuss a shared text. Thus, the motivation to reach reading goals no longer existed. When he participated in book clubs, Finesse completed the reading, even completing his reading homework so he could participate in his discussions. Finesse's response here seems to indicate that removing an external motivator to read (in this case a book club) changed his perceptions about reading. He also did not express any feeling about improving his reading (i.e., earlier he said that he thought he was "not yet" a reader) as he did in the peer group interview, and reading became a compulsory activity that he did not want to do.

Out of school literacies. While the participants engaged in various activities in their lives outside of school (i.e. spending time with friends, looking up their favorite web sites on the internet using home computers, playing sports), Marlon was the one young man who participated in organized activities other than sports. Similar to Finesse, Marlon disliked reading, but, unlike Finesse, he did enjoy writing. As a participant in community programs that encouraged adolescents to write and perform spoken word, raps, and music, Marlon excelled. In the following excerpt, he explained the difference between his affinity for reading and writing.

> KP: So Marlon, you do, and tell me if I'm right or wrong, you do a lot of reading and writing that is not necessarily in school?
>
> M: Uh-huh.

KP: Um…do you consider yourself a reader?

M shakes head no.

K: No? Why?...Or can you talk a little bit about it?

M: Um…I'm strong with readin but it's just not somethin I like, so…

KP: Do you consider yourself a writer?

M shakes head yes.

KP: You do? Can you talk more about that?

M: I like writin, and I'm good at it. (Transcript, January 4, 2008)

Within his afterschool programs, Marlon wrote poetry, organized events for other

adolescents from the community, and performed as part of a dance troupe. When I asked

him if he could remember any of the poetry he wrote for his performances, he recited one

he had written about absent fathers. Regarding reading within school, Marlon considered

it something he was "strong with" but not something he enjoyed, again suggesting that,

for him, to be considered a reader, reading must first be considered enjoyable. However,

even though he participated in an afterschool program where he wrote and read poetry

(his own and that of his peers), he did not consider this reading.

During my study, Marlon spoke about his out-of-school activities several times,

but only when I asked him if he had an upcoming event or if he was describing his work

to Finesse and Paul. Within school, while I was there, he did not draw on his out-of-

school literacy skills. Recent research (Hallman, 2009; Hinchman et. al 2003/2004;

Kinloch, 2009; Salika et. al, 2009; Staples, 2008) suggests the benefits of bridging out-of-

school literacies with in-school literacies rather than maintaining rigid boundaries

between the two that make students pick one or the other. Vasudevan and Campano

(2009), arguing for a reconceptualization of adolescent literacy that takes into account

multiple literacies that adolescents use, state "students have to suppress or distance themselves from their own forms of personal and cultural expression to advance in school" (p. 324) rather than being able to draw from their entire lives in a single setting. The authors also assert that by perpetuating a discourse of adolescent literacy as "risk," students of color are shortchanged. They argue, "For many adolescents, whose cultural affiliations place them at the margins of resilience discourses and at the center of remediation scripts, the institutional contexts in which they practice their literacies must be reconfigured" (p. 331).

Marlon considered himself literate in the context of his out-of-school activities. He had a pleasurable association with writing. He was part of a community of his peers that gave him feedback, that encouraged him, and that celebrated with him. He was competent in this setting. Marlon did not enact any of his out-of-school practices that would enable him to acquire reading fluency in class, and his teacher did not create any opportunities for Marlon to do so. Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) caution against "discounting the reading proficiency" (p. 8) of students like Marlon, which is possible if we do not consider the proficiency students have with out-of-school literacies. Instead, they argue, we must remember that these students bring a "wealth of literacy practices and knowledge, as well as some charmingly idiosyncratic interests and motivations, to [their] reading" (p. 8). The National Council of Teachers of English (2004) noted that successful adolescent literacy programs for at-risk students "emphasize connections between students' lives, prior knowledge, and texts, and emphasize student conversations to make those connections" (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/adolescentliteracy, paragraph 6). With some attention to his active, literate life outside school, Nigel, the

participants' teacher, might have been able to help Marlon see similarities across his in-school and out-of-school spaces, and might have helped Marlon see that indeed, he was a reader in both places.

A book's content. Book selection was important to all the participants. Even Finesse and Marlon, who were eager to express their dislike for reading, could not deny that a captivating book could persuade them to read. In the following peer group excerpt, I ask them about reading. This interview was the first time I pulled them together in a formal group, and happened mid-way through the book club period of data collection.

> KP: Okay, I'm going to ask you some questions now about reading. Tell me how you feel about reading.
>
> P: For some reason, I'm starting to like reading, and I don't like that.
>
> F: Yeah!
>
> P: I don't like that.
>
> F: I don't like that [laughs] Paul! He's mad serious! He's real serious! For some reason, I'm starting to like readin', and I don't like that at all. He was real serious.
>
> D: It's just the books we're readin'.
>
> F: Yeah.
>
> M: Nah, nah, nah, if it's a good book, we'll all read it.
>
> F: Real talk?
>
> P: I already read four books this year!
>
> M: But if it's like a book they say we have to read and we don't like it, we're not gonna lift a page.
>
> F: I read seven, but mines, some of ems be mad little, like the Matt Christopher books about sports players are not that short.
>
> M: You get to read that. We don't!
>
> F: Nah, they're not that short, though. They're like a little bit smaller than thing, *Forged by Fire*. They're a little bit smaller than them.

M: [sucks teeth] I would read like fifty of them.

F: Yo, this is my first year I been pickin' up a chapter book! A real chapter book. This is my first time <u>ever</u> readin' one was *First Part Last*. EVER. Real talk! *Scorpions*? I didn't read that. (Transcript, November 20, 2007)

Paul voiced his seeming disbelief that he enjoyed reading, enough that it made Finesse laugh. However, Damien suggested that this enjoyment was not permanent, and was mediated by the content of books (i.e., Damien said "It's just the books we're readin", a response with which Finesse agreed). Marlon, though, refuted Damien's assertion, instead seeming to regard reading as something they would continue to do as long as "if it's a good book." Marlon is not as quick to limit reading enjoyment to a short-term phase, but he does define the limitations of reading: if it is not a good book, and regardless of a compulsory requirement, "we're not gonna lift a page."

Finesse drew the conversation in a retrospective direction when he talked about the change in his reading attitude. He listed the assigned book that he did not read (*Scorpions*) in the years leading up to eighth grade. He also talked about the sports books by Matt Christopher that he did read (which caused some derision from Marlon). Yet, it was only once he began reading the assigned book club books that Finesse completed a chapter book, "EVER. Real talk!" These young men were not reading assigned books before they participated in the book club. According to them, the participants made it through nearly nine years of schooling without reading a book. Once the book clubs started, however, they were interested in the content and other aspects of participation (explained later), and consequently completed their assigned reading, oftentimes outside of class as fulfillment of their homework.

What is troubling about the participants' change in relationship to reading, though, is evident in Damien's suggestion that the connection with reading completion

and positive reading association is not enduring. They could not dwell in that unfamiliar place where reading was pleasurable, and where they might hope to reconcile a dislike for reading (Finesse and Marlon) with a movement towards viewing reading as something positive (Damien and Paul) and lasting. They had no reason to believe that they would continue to develop their positive association with reading based on their years at UPS. Their responses indicated that positive reading association, in their case, was by chance: if a teacher gave them a book that resonated with something in their experience, then they were inclined to read it. The more they read, the more positive their association with reading and their self-perception of reading became. Unfortunately, after their participation in the book clubs—which was cut short because their teacher had to move on to the portfolio graduation requirement, coupled with his dissatisfaction about how students were participating within the groups—the participants did not continue to read on their own, and hopes for a positive change in their reading identity was lost. Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) underscore the meaning of this lost opportunity in helping adolescents develop as readers in the following:

> A critical and often unacknowledged component of adolescents' literacy development involves encouraging them to transform identities they may have constructed as nonreaders into new identities as more capable readers and learners. As students explore and experiment with possible selves, teachers can encourage them to try on new reader identities, expanding their visions of who they are and who they can become. Such identity work is critical if they are to embrace literacy, engage as readers, and improve academic performance. (p. 6)

Reading books they liked helped the participants think of themselves as readers, thereby opening them up to the possibilities of accompanying literacy and academic success. As adolescents, however, unskilled in how to transform their identities, the young men

needed a competent adult to help them. I now turn to understand Nigel's role in the young men's development of their "possible selves" as readers.

The Teacher's Role in Students' Reading Identity Development

Teachers can help students become better readers. A skilled teacher helps his/her students to conduct "extensive reading of a range of texts, supported by strategy lessons and discussions [to help them] read for meaning more efficiently and effectively" (NCTE, 2004). In this study, Nigel regarded his students as readers, but admitted to not knowing explicitly how to teach reading. I was interested then, in how he conceived book clubs and their role in developing a community of readers within his classroom, largely because of a teacher's importance in helping students improve their reading competencies. What follows is his response to my query during an individual interview about his rationale for introducing book clubs.

> N: Um…well what made me decide to do them was because, a couple of reasons. I, I felt like it's the most authentic way of trying to get students to read. Um…and I came to that conclusion because what I did last year didn't seem, it felt rigid.
>
> KP: What'd you do last year?
>
> N: Um…we read books together, um, we would read, well at first there was a lot of read alouds in class and I expected them to also be doing independent reading at home so when I found that most of them were not reading independently at home, um, we read it in class together and they brought it home, where they did a lot of their reading also. So, it was accelerated in the sense that instead, and so, the kids who liked the book liked it, and the kids who didn't like the book didn't like it. And…a lot of them, I think, agreed that it was a good book but it was not necessarily something they would want to read, um…and…I also believe in that my, when I feel the most successful as a teacher is when I'm, when I'm definitely in charge and in control, but I'm not driving the conversation…my ideal class would be that kids don't even raise their hands, like normal people talking, like adults talk, so why can't kids do it? Um…there's something you want to say, you say it, but, to have kids feel engaged, things like that, and, so that, that's what made me want to do [ ] but also it was just kind of out of my own curiosity as a teacher in wanting to, see what works best, um, I'm still, I'm still what I would consider a new teacher at teaching, literacy. (Transcript, January 2, 2008)

Nigel conceived book clubs as an "authentic" location for students to discuss their reading. Also, Nigel thought book clubs might be a successful practice for his overall literacy instruction. In his explanation about how book clubs started, Nigel admits students completed their independent reading based on whether they like the book's content. He wanted all students to read because they found the book's content compelling, but he worried about being too "rigid" in his attempts to have students read. Nigel hoped his students would engage in conversations about their reading similar to adults, without needing to raise their hands. Then, he admits to being a novice literacy teacher, underscoring his lack of knowledge about the sophisticated planning and practice—for both teacher and students—necessary to integrate classroom book clubs as a successful literacy practice (Daniels, 2001).

The mismatch in accounts about reading behavior suggest that either the participants were adept at disguising their non-reading behaviors from teachers, or that the teacher was not proficient in determining if students were reading texts. This disconnect resulted in years where the participants reported not reading assigned books in middle school at all, regardless of portfolio or teacher expectations. Additionally, Nigel was not a skilled facilitator in his interactions with students around text. He had no training opportunities in adolescent literacy other than ones he created for himself, making him less likely to know how to help students connect the literacies of their lives outside of school to their in-school literacy practices (for example, in Marlon's case), as well as teach them specific skills, strategies and texts that would compel them to continue reading. The disconnect in understanding between teacher and students might also indicate that the teacher did not place enough importance on a book's content as a

motivator for students to complete their book club required reading, even though the participants said a book's content made them read it.

Nigel also did not have the facility to continue conducting the book clubs as a space for participants to openly talk about their reading. Several times he expressed his frustration—to me and to students—that they were not discussing their books in a manner satisfactory to him. However, the peer group needed Nigel to be competent if they were to develop as readers. The participants knew a teacher could be a competent ally in their reading development, if only to create a steady supply of texts they wanted to read.

In the next excerpt, Paul articulated the expectation he had for a teacher to know what he liked to read. His response was representative of Damien and Finesse, who also placed importance on the teacher's role. Here, Paul explained why he would be more open to a suggestion from a teacher than one of his peers about a suggested book to read.

> KP: What if a teacher recommended a book to you, would you read it?
>
> P: Um…probably, because the teacher should know me, and the teacher should know what I like, maybe, and so, yeah, I might.
>
> KP: So which person's opinion about what to read next would you value more: your friend or your teacher?
>
> P: My teacher.
>
> KP: Can you just tell me a little bit about that? You said probably because the teacher—
>
> P: I mean, I mean, like…Nigel, I've only known him for like two years and I've known like Marlon and 'em for like three, four, five years, like Finesse, like, they know that I like sports books and…so, if like, Finesse, if like he recommended a sports book to me, I'm like oh, okay, I'm gonna read it. But…yeah, I just…yeah, I think I'll still go with a teacher, though. Because he might, the teacher, he might recommend a book and I might like <u>that</u> book and I might like books like that and maybe I get a sense of reading books like that if they're just like sports books. (Transcript, November 14, 2007)

Paul's response indicates the trust he has for a teacher's recommendation about reading. More so than his peers, he seems to understand he needs an adult to nurture his reading progress. Paul's words also help underscore the need for a teacher that can consistently connect students to texts that keep them reading, and for a teacher that can help them develop their reading identity. Nigel, however, was learning about young adult literature and adolescent literacy simultaneously with his students. He had not taken any literature courses in college and was introduced to young adult literature the summer before the present study began.

It does not seem unreasonable that Nigel could know enough about texts to guide Paul through a process of figuring out books he likes to read, but it requires a substantial commitment. At UPS, Nigel said teachers were required to fulfill many responsibilities, leaving little time for on-going professional development. These young men needed Nigel to know how to help them become readers; unfortunately, Nigel could not be that resource.

Reading completion. The participants indicated that compelling content motivated them to read a text. Their book clubs' selections were tied to their realities of being young men of color living in an urban community. In this section, I look closely at responses by the participants as they elaborate on the characteristics of a text that made them willing to read. I attempt to understand if a connection existed between texts they favored and an increase in their reading completion and an improvement in their reading comprehension.

I asked each young man to recommend a book for a school-wide reading program. I was interested in the texts that warranted recommendation to a wider group of their

peers and of adults. Marlon disclosed how *Forged by Fire* changed his earlier strategy of reading selectively in the following individual interview.

> KP: Tell me about the name of a book you enjoyed, that you read and enjoyed.

> M: Tell you the name of a book that I actually read the whole book? That I enjoyed. Hmm. *Forged by Fire*.

> KP: Was that the first book you've read all, completely?

> M: Yeah. When I was little, I was smart, so I would read the, first two chapters, then I'd read two chapters in the middle, then the last two chapters.

> KP: What was it that you enjoyed about *Forged by fire*?

> M: It was something that, like, I see other people in my community going through, so, like, I could really picture the pictures in my head as I'm readin'. So, I kinda like that. (Transcript, November 13, 2007)

Marlon, as well as Finesse, cited *Forged by Fire* and its connection to his life as an important factor in his decision to read the book as well as recommend it to others. Several things are happening in Marlon's response. First, he disclosed his strategy for reading: he read selectively when he was younger because he was "smart." He did not read a book in its entirety. Not until reading *Forged by fire* did he experience reading a complete text. Next, Marlon articulated the qualities of a text that would keep him reading: realistic content that enabled him to visualize real situations. Both Marlon and Finesse shared the experience of finishing a book for the first time after being at UPS for nine years. Had Marlon and his peers not encountered texts like *Forged by Fire*, they might have spent their entire K-8 schooling having not completed a book more substantial than the *Goosebumps* series Marlon reported reading in elementary school.

Once again, too, a skilled teacher could name the strategy Marlon was using (visualization) and help him become proficient using this strategy to learn other reading strategies. Harvey and Goudvis (2007) state, "visualizing strengthens our inferential

thinking. When we visualize, we are in fact inferring, but with mental images rather than words and thoughts" (p. 130-131). Since many state testing items rely on inferential thinking, a knowledgeable teacher could capitalize on Marlon's ability to think abstractly and teach him to transfer that capacity to test taking. Unfortunately, because Nigel did not have this competency, Marlon's completion of his novel was an event that he (Marlon) did not connect to reading more books or to thinking of himself as a reader.

Specific features of texts. Literacy experts who work with young men (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002) and African American young men in particular (Tatum, 2005; 2009) share similar views about the penchant for young men to prefer realistic texts. Likewise, the texts the young men appreciated had specific textual features; most importantly that the texts were realistic, or contained elements that resembled their daily lives. Marlon expressed his dissatisfaction with *Dragonwings* (Yep, 1977), a young adult novel Nigel attempted to read with Marlon and his classmates during the seventh grade.

> KP: Can you tell me the name of a book you read that you did <u>not</u> enjoy?
>
> M: Well, what's the name of that book that Nigel made us read in class? Um…Dragon, no, no, no, the wings of a dragon? Or dragonflies or something?
>
> KP: Oh, *Dragonwings*?
>
> M: Yeah. This man brought in a book about some Chinese people and some dragons. Are you serious? We're readin' a book about dragons, actual dragons. Nah, that's pitiful.
>
> KP: You couldn't get into it?
>
> M: Huh?
>
> KP: You couldn't get into it?
>
> M: Nah! I'm lookin' at 'em like, and they're all like, yo, you got to the next chapter and I'm like—I didn't even read the book. They all [classmates] were readin' it to me in class. I ain't readin' this book about dragons, Chinese people climbin' mountains, seein' dragons.

KP: You don't want to read about other people?

M: I want to read about somethin' that's <u>real</u>, like, that, that happens basically on a daily basis, know what I'm sayin'? Like, teen pregnancy, that's a common, *Forged by Fire*, no, that's not even how *Forged by Fire* was. Um—

KP: Oh, *First Part Last*.

M: Yeah, *First Part Last*, I could picture that.

KP: Did you read all of that one, too?

M: Huh?

KP: Did you read all of the *First Part Last*?

M: Yeah. And then *Forged by Fire*, about a crackhead mom and stuff? I could picture that. And then the book I'm readin' now [*Somewhere in the Darkness*], about his father gettin' locked up for a crime and then breakin' out of jail and then comin' and grabbin' him, it's a little fake, but, some of the stuff actually makes you picture it. Like I could picture his house when his father was standing outside with the suitcases like I'm your dad, stuff like that. (Transcript, November 13, 2007)

Again, Marlon admits to making an intentional decision not to read based on his dislike for the content of the text. *Dragonwings* is an historical fiction account of Chinese immigration and San Francisco's Chinatown. The main character builds a flying machine to garner respect from his immigrant community. Marlon recounted some of the plot elements of the novel that he disliked and thought "pitiful" ("dragons, actual dragons").

On the other hand, reading *Forged by Fire* and *First Part Last* enabled Marlon to visualize the plot. He preferred reading about "something that's <u>real</u>" rather than being assigned to read (and not reading) a book with elements of science fiction and fantasy. When I asked him for clarification about his reading interests ("You don't want to read about other people?") he insisted that he wanted realism. The book's subject was secondary as long as he could connect the text to his immediate, lived reality. Earlier in the interview from which the previous excerpt was taken, Marlon said he liked to read

non-fiction books about "African Americans and their struggles." Marlon is clear in his dislike for science fiction and fantasy; however, interestingly all of the book club selections he read *were* fiction. The book club selections differed from others like *Dragonwings* because they were contemporary realistic fiction featuring African America protagonists rather than science fiction and fantasy.

Paul also enjoyed reading realistic texts. The elements that Paul found compelling included a main character in *Forged by Fire* forced to make a number of decisions that determined his survival. These factors, coupled with an urban setting that posed additional difficulties (gangs, substance abuse, incarceration), encouraged Paul to read. He said that these two books (*Scorpions* was the other one) were the only ones he read in their entirety during middle school.

Book clubs have become a site of increasing interest for their ability to promote students' reading comprehension and foster a love of reading. More specifically, research has shown that struggling readers benefited from participation in before school independent book clubs, experiencing an increase in their positive association with adolescent texts the longer they remained in the book club (Whittingham and Huffman, 2009). Casey (2008) found that a teacher's interest in facilitating literature circles led to her struggling readers to "actively pursue literacy events because they want to become readers and writers" (p. 291). Within the setting of Casey's study, the teacher used flexible groupings, including literature circles, to help increase students' ability to read different types of texts as well as to collaborate with each other around reading comprehension. Lingo (2007), who worked with students she characterized as aliterate readers in her middle school, found that the most important factor in her work as a

librarian running all-boys book clubs was the text selection. She found that boys in her

book clubs preferred reading books that featured action and adventure. These three

researchers worked primarily with European American students, however; the

participants in these studies were also not situated within urban classrooms.

In the present study, book club participation resulted in an increased positive

association with reading. The participants reported that being in the book club made them

complete the required reading. In addition, the book club selections, featuring adolescent

African American males as protagonists, were the texts the participants said they would

recommend to their peers. By their own admission, before participating in the book clubs,

the participants did not read. Finesse stated, "I didn't read at all. This is really my first

year [reading]" (Transcript, November 20, 2007). Though he described himself as "kinda

special with the reading," referring to his diagnosed language-based learning disability,

Finesse completed all of his book club selections, and reported that once the book clubs

ended, "I haven't touched a page at home" (Transcript, December 28, 2007). Book club

participation, which lasted for a few short months, improved the reading rates of the

participants.

The book club selections appealed to the participants, who said that a "good

book" contained elements of "real life situations" that included "shootin, drug dealin,"

"sex" and "action." All of the texts they read had a combination of those characteristics.

Sharon Flake, a popular young adult writer whose work features African American

protagonists, suggests the reason young Black men find her work, and others like it,

appealing is for depictions of themselves. She states

> One reason I believe boys gobble up such books is because finally someone is
> telling their story, or that of people who look like them and live where they live.

Let's face it. In the world of young adult literature, Black youth aren't just a minority on the pages of books, they are an endangered species. They are practically invisible; missing in action from the written word…They don't see their place, or their faces, in literature. One of the solutions to the problem, is simple, really: give them stories about people who look like them, who behave as they do. (2007, p. 14)

The book club selections also allowed the participants an entry into thinking about different representations of Black masculinity. For instance, the main character, Bobby, of *The First Part Last* was middle class, as was his girlfriend. Bobby's parents were supportive, but his mother was standoffish and his father assumed the maternal role. Finally, Bobby took care of his newborn daughter. These examples defy stereotypes about the irresponsibility of Black men, and the role of mothers. Therefore, while the book club selections appealed expressly to the participants' requirements of a good book, the selections also presented spaces for the participants to expand their thinking about masculinity, class, and gender. Beach (1998) reinforces the importance of students' accessing their real-world experiences to think more broadly about unfamiliar characters and settings. This rethinking is important, Beach notes, because "in having to continually revise or reframe their conceptions, students acquire perspective-taking strategies—the ability to entertain alternative conceptions of reality" (p. 177). New realities lead to richer experiences and, perhaps, a sustained engagement with texts if students are able to interact regularly with texts that challenge their thinking and are able to discuss how their new knowledge fits with what they already know.

Within the book clubs, the participants adhered to differing levels of collegiality. Their difficulty creating cooperative discussions was similar to findings from Clarke and Holwadel (2007). In their work with middle school students and their attempts to successfully create book clubs, the researchers admitted,

> We learned that creating an 'interpretive community' to foster a transactional textual experience was not as easy as it looks in the books…We had to make significant adjustments in order to help students find common ground within a 90-minute reading block in order to encourage productive discussions. (p. 22)

As Marlon's ability to disrupt the book club indicated, if one of the participants had not completed the reading or did not want to discuss particular portions of the text, the other participants were limited by what they could discuss. However, Marlon and Finesse controlled the book club during the reading of *The First Part Last*, working collectively much of the time to silence Rosie, in particular. Once the group membership shifted in the second book club, however, Marlon and Finesse vied for control of the group, with Finesse often controlling the tempo, the discussion topic, and the discussion facilitation. In the second group, during which the participants read *Forged by Fire*, Marlon openly resented the camaraderie between Finesse, Damien, and Paul, and rather than silencing Rosie, who remained in the group, Marlon's dissatisfaction was aimed much more at the other three young men.

Marlon and Finesse's attempts at dominance, and how those attempts shaped a discussion, were similar to Swanson's (1999) findings about high school same gender book clubs. There, two male participants controlled the discussions and limited their peers' input. While Swanson's participants were primarily European and read canonical literature, the participants shared similarities with the participants in this study because both sets of young men influenced their peers' participation in the book clubs and limited the topics of discussion. Therefore, the intra-group dynamics of the present peer group influenced the level of discussion in which the participants engaged.

Nigel, the teacher, had a limited understanding of how to facilitate book clubs in his classroom. Despite doing some reading in the summer prior to the start of the study,

Nigel still expressed a lack of understanding about how the book clubs should run, the role of students, how to select the texts, and what a quality discussion looked like. His lack of knowledge about how to facilitate the book clubs resulted in discussions where he introduced an array of discussion strategies for students, but did not allow them time to gain proficiency with any of them. He also did not give much attention to creating a foundation for collaboration, an important consideration given Clarke and Holdawel's assertion (2007), "Because a main goal of literature circles is to promote trust and respect for multiple voices and opinions, one of its significant foundations is providing a supportive and safe environment" (p. 21). Throughout the study, Nigel and I had conversations about the book clubs in which he voiced his frustration with students who were not sticking to their discussions, but he did not have any additional professional development that might have helped him to think about how to help students master a set of reading and discussion strategies in a manageable way. Nigel's frustration that the participants were not holding discussions like he thought they should eventually led to him disbanding the book clubs altogether, which resulted in one of the participants saying that he did not read anymore books once the book clubs ended. Lee (2001) reminds us that less-competent readers need a teacher who knows how to help them. She writes,

> The readers' skill, use of reading strategies, and their history of reading other texts allow them to enter a text world that is distant from their own experience. The negotiation process with unfamiliar story worlds is difficult for novice readers, those who lack strong reading strategies, and those who have little history of reading many different kinds of literary texts. (p. 101)

Focused professional development, as well as helping Nigel understand how to leverage peer group relationships while teaching reading and discussion strategies might have helped alleviate Nigel's worry about students' participation in the book club and might

have encouraged him to continue the book clubs, for as Lee cautions, "Because such transformations [into competent readers] are slow and tedious, it is important to describe and understand the negotiated processes through which intellectual change takes place" (p. 134).

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented findings relative to the central question and the subsidiary questions that drove this study, which was *What happens when a small group of African American and Caribbean American young men gathers to read a shared text?* I looked first at the discourse of the participants, as mediated by race, and gender. Then, I examined the teacher's attempt to create a classroom discourse and the participants' response to that discourse. Finally, I explored what happened once the teacher instituted book clubs, paying particular attention to his attempts to create his ideal book club discourse. The participants responded to the teacher's discourse, socialized each other into that discourse, and also changed the discourse to suit their own social work. In the following chapter, I summarize the study and offer suggestions as well as implications for future literacy work about and for young men of color.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

In this chapter, I discuss the larger issues of the study as a way of situating what happened in the classroom within a wider context. I summarize the study, then conclude with recommendations for future research.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how a small group of African American and Caribbean American young men participated in a middle school Humanities (English and History) classroom book club. I explored the socialization process that enabled the young men to learn book club participation behavior, the way that peer group dynamics played out in this participation, and how particular kinds of literature mattered to that participation. Key to both socialization and the enactment of the book club was discourse, the language the participants used to talk about their reading. I was especially interested in how literacy events such as book clubs played a role as the participants negotiated texts, as well as their relationships with each other and the book club facilitator. Through this inquiry, I hope to contribute to the body of knowledge that repositions Black boys from a non-deficit perspective and creates opportunities for them to discuss their lives and literature in ways that enhances their classroom learning and achievement rather than works against their academic success. This study demonstrates that the literacy experiences of young Black men can be powerful, and possible, in urban schools.

What the study indicated was that the participants, young Black men, read their book club texts. Whereas the participants had not completed assigned reading with regularity before the study, as members of book clubs, they set reading goals, met their

goals, and were often able to discuss what they read. However, the young men were constrained by their teacher's expectations and limited expertise and they struggled to sustain discussions about the text that extended beyond their immediate social worlds. In addition, the participants, who largely considered themselves non-readers, *did* have experiences within the book club that challenged their ideas of reading as an unfavorable activity; unfortunately, within the larger context of their school, they did not have the supports to continue to either think of themselves differently or have transformative experiences with literacy.

Recommendations

Future research is necessary to explore ways of sustaining the experiences young men of color have in a book club. Future research might also explore ways of bridging the multicultural young adult texts that appeal to young men of color to more canonical and traditional classroom texts, as well as ways to leverage aspects of peer relationships (i.e., camaraderie, popular culture, etc.) in ways that encourage this population to draw on their own "funds of knowledge" to engage in literacy practices (Moll et al, 1992; Morrell, 2002). Future work will continue to demand that we reposition young Black men, from passive consumers to active literacy learners.

In addition, teachers must become more knowledgeable about texts that resonate with Black boys. Flake (2007) asserts, "Black boys will read. But to get them off to a flying start, we've got to give them books that remind them of home—of who they are" (p. 14). While publishing houses need to do much better about finding, promoting and sustaining young adult authors of color, teachers can make sure they know the existing body of literature for young adults, apply to that literature the tests for quality (Harris,

1993; Sims, 1982; Sims Bishop 2007), and make sure students have access to that literature. Hughes-Hassell and Lutz (2006) worked with a group of urban, African American middle school students and found that the students did read, but the researchers called for more texts that appeal to urban adolescents. They note, "Since urban teenagers are reading, the publishing industry needs to view them as a viable market and provide more of the types of materials these teens request, especially young adult novels that accurately reflect urban life" (p. 42). The popularity of urban literature indicates a potential avenue for sustaining their interest in reading, but this genre is relatively new and unfamiliar to classroom teachers (Hill, Perez & Irby, 2008).

Furthermore, future research might explore what is necessary to help teachers become competent in helping students have critical discussions about their texts and the on-going professional development teachers need that will encourage them to keep trying the practice rather than to abandon book clubs after moments of frustration. Also, schools should seriously consider how to help their teachers become "transformative intellectuals" who are capable of disrupting dominant discourses, and are capable of helping their students do the same. In literacy instruction, this means "help students produce written language that mirrors the expressiveness and liveliness of their actual life as students and also encourages them to become more expressive and lively participants in the social world" (Morrell, 2004, p. 93).

Additionally, future research must continue to take a critical eye to the schooling experiences of young men of color, specifically as related to rules and structures that are permissive and detrimental to this group. As suggested by the participants in this study, what happens in the classroom is not separate from the larger contexts of school. This

study suggests that the school culture created unrealistic expectations of schooling and was complicit in the participants' failure and lack of preparation for high school. Moreover, as young Black men continue to lag behind their peers nationwide (Holzman, 2010), listening to the ones who offer their accounts about what happens in schools cannot be ignored.

This study additionally suggests the need to explore factors that contribute to the literacy development of young Black men and also account for distinctive differences in ethnicity. The participants in my study did express ethnic markers of their Haitian and Jamaican identities, whether through their clothing or the expectations of masculinity. Future studies might explore how those identities affect students' literacy achievement that differs from the achievement of African American young men. Rong and Fitchett (2008) note, "The Black population in the United States is becoming more heterogeneous, comprising people of different national origins and socioeconomic status with divergent cultures, histories, ideologies, identities, and interests" (p. 39). Thus, future research must account for those differences and think about how intra-group differences might account for literacy experiences of young men of color.

Applying a critical theoretical framework, like that of Critical Race Theory, might bring more counternarratives of the literacy experiences of young men of color to the forefront. These counternarratives would build on the existing research that seeks to challenge perceptions of how schools see themselves and how young men of color see themselves as constructing, and constructed by, schools, and the ways that race influences those constructions. Moreover, a critical framework would permit the examination of the structures that make success within school difficult. Noguera (2003)

writes about such a need, explaining, "the factors that give rise to misbehavior go unexplored, ignored, and unaddressed, while the penchant to punish proceeds with little thought given to long-term consequences on students" (p. 346). These counternarratives would also begin to fill the void that exists about the literacy practices of young men of color and point to how all involved in educating young Black men can do the work rather than theorize about the work. Howard (2008) articulates that in the next phase of CRT application to education, the focus should be on "reliable research, useful strategies, and effective interventions that will improve the day-to-day realities, educational prospects, and life chances of African American males and other disenfranchised student groups" (p. 977). Similarly, Morrell (2009) argues for literacy research to be more critical and suggests that it "holds the potential to provide the missing link in the theory-to-practice research chain" (p. 99). As such, future research will focus on the competencies teachers need to be able to create classroom environments in which young Black men can excel, and classroos in which teachers can "develop and understand pedagogical practices that lead to excellence and power for all students" (Morrell, 2009, p. 103). Such attention will also shed light on the structures of power and inequality that continue to systematically discount and disadvantage young Black men.

In conclusion, this study indicated that young Black men will read texts that resonate with their experiences, as well as texts that allow them to think of themselves differently. This study adds to the research about the literacy experiences of middle school young Black men as well. Moreover, this study indicates that while classroom practices such as book clubs hold the potential for transformative literacy experiences, experienced and patient teachers are necessary to help students navigate the larger

contexts of race, gender, and ethnicity as this population attempts to continue their positive reading experiences.

Summary

I wanted to know what happened when a group of four young Black men gathered to read a shared text. Guided by a sociocultural approach to literacy, I sought to learn how the focal group used language as a tool for specific purposes. Indeed, the most immediate purpose for their use of language within their book clubs was to communicate with each other. This discourse contained markers of identity that were raced and gendered. The "social dialogue" in which they engaged was quite complicated, however. Within the structure of the book club, the focal group was able to use language for particular means; in exercising language in those ways, they were able to control the tempo and content of the book club. They were even able to extend their use of language to other aspects of their schooling. What was evident, though, was that their use of language was limited because it contended with school structures that were not always welcoming to them. As a result, the focal group resented school structures and eventually, their teacher, and the school, was able to shirk any responsibility for maintaining structures of power that did not benefit the young men.

Within the book clubs, however, the focal group read texts and constructed knowledge together that drew on their rich personal experiences. There, they were able to experience "other perspectives…triggered by the dialogue" that compelled them to read outside of class and to think of themselves as readers, if only for a short time (Fecho and Botzakis, 2007, p. 553). The findings from this study indicate the enduring need to link what happened in this book club to ways of changing the discourses of school to validate

the discourses of young Black men as they read texts and have literacy experiences that are meaningful.

Final Thoughts

This study confirmed my hunch that when young men of color are given books that resonate with their experience and are allowed to come together to discuss the books, they will read. Troubling, though, was what happened when the book clubs ended—the young men returned to their lives as non-readers. They left UPS and entered high school. I saw Finesse often throughout his freshman year: he went upstairs to the high school, and I ended up teaching at that school for a year. He displayed many of the same characteristics as in middle school: didn't do his homework, was popular among his peers, and had teachers who were frustrated because they did not know how to make him do his work regularly.

I ran into Marlon on a subway platform. He was returning from visiting his girlfriend in the suburbs. Initially, I didn't recognize him: gone was his intricate haircut, his fashion-forward style that often brought classroom conversations to a standstill, and his smile. He told me that once he left UPS, he began his freshman year at one of the city's schools-within-a-school. He stopped attending school and become involved with activities that now have him on probation. He did tell me, however, that, because of his age, he was promoted to the 11th grade. Recently, I saw a friend who teaches Marlon's younger sister. Marlon attempted to rob someone, she told me, and now has limited freedom because he wears a "low jack" to allow authorities to track his movement.

Damien began his freshman year at a charter school in the city that his siblings had attended, but transferred within a few months to the city's arts pilot school. There,

Damien's concentration is visual arts. I've seen him several times, and each time he reports that his grades are "good" and that he is happy.

Paul attends another school-within-a-school that is, coincidentally, located in the same building as the school Marlon attended (but not the same school). The fall after the study, I gave a professional development workshop at Paul's school. As I walked in, I heard him calling my name as he waved vigorously. He told me that he, too, was happy at his school. I didn't ask him about his grades, but one of his teachers later told me (after I found out that she taught freshmen) that he was a great student and that he was performing well academically in her class.

I offer these updates because they are deeply troubling, and demonstrate that, as a researcher, there are few, if any, tidy endings. While I had hoped that these young men might be able to overcome a disappointing middle school career, two of the four of them were on track for graduation, while I am less clear about the potential outcomes for the other two. As a teacher, I always have believed that books make a difference, and the right book, at the right time, might be able to have a transformative effect on students. I still have those beliefs; however, conducting this study has made me understand the crucial importance of making sure that there are multiple opportunities and places for young men of color to have those experiences.

I set out to explore what happened when a group of four young Black men read a shared text. I learned that young Black men need time to read, texts that resonate with their experiences, and a teacher who is willing to help them in their reading development. I also learned that race and gender affected the focal group and the discourse the group used as it attempted to make its way in an oppositional space. Most importantly, I learned

that it is impossible to "just close your door and teach," as I remember saying was all I wanted to do when I first began teaching; rather, on the other side of that door, as well as within the classroom, are the myriad languages and conversations that either help students to see, and believe themselves of worth, or serve to crush them with statistics, data, and deficits. To traverse the two worlds is complicated, frustrating, and exhausting, and when young Black men are criticized for opting for self-preservation, they are regarded as failures. That is unacceptable.

Conducting this study also reminded me that there are not enough of those literacy experiences and not enough trained teachers who will help young men of color continually think of themselves differently: as young people with something important to say, and as young people who need a constant supply of books—and conversations about those books—that matter.

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Appendix A

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Appendix B

Preliminary Activity Ranking Sheet[2]

Directions: Please rank the following activities in the order you like them. Put a 1 next to the activity you like most, moving down to a 14 for the activity you like least.

___ Listening to music

___ Hanging out with friends

___ Playing sports

___ Playing video games

___ Doing something mechanical, like fixing an engine

___ Drawing or painting

___ Reading a good book

___ Watching a favorite sports team on TV or at the stadium

___ Surfing the net

___ Learning something new about a topic that interests me

___ Working on a hobby (Please specify your hobby _____)

___ Going to school

___ Watching television or going to the movies

___ Other (Please specify _____)

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[2] Smith and Wilhelm (2002). *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*

Appendix C

Topical Observation Guide

For Book Club meetings:

Observe and note the following before the meeting:
- o Number of boys at the meeting
- o Where each boy sits
- o Who sits around each boy (quick sketch)
- o If each boy has his book with him
- o Which boys talk to each other and which do not

Observe and note the following during the meeting:
- o Which boys talk most
- o Which boys talk least or not at all
- o Which boys tend to dominate the conversation
- o If any boys talk specifically to other boys and if they attempt to get others involved in the conversation
- o If boys talk about the book or aspects of the book; if they try to change the subject of the book
- o Any negative comments, glances or body movements

Observe and note the following after the meeting:
- o Which boys linger after the meeting is over and what they talk about
- o Where the boys place their books (in their backpacks, in their pockets, etc.)
- o The order in which the boys leave the meeting

For peer group meetings:

Observe and note the following:
- o Number of boys at the meeting
- o Which boys talk most, least, or not at all
- o Which boys tend to dominate the conversation
- o The nature of the conversation (subjects brought up)
- o References they make to school; reading; popular culture

For individual meetings:

Observe and note the following before the interview:
- o Overall appearance of the interviewee
- o Facial expressions
- o If the boy brings a book with him
- o Where he positions himself during the interview in relation to the interviewer

Observe and note the following during the interview:
- o Facial expressions
- o Body movements (shifting in chair, fumbling with items in hand, etc.)
- o Other reactions to questions

Observe and note the following after the interview:
- o If student remains after the interview or if he leaves immediately
- o If he stays, what does he do, say, etc.?

Appendix D

Individual Interview Guide

I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today. I am working on a project that looks at how young men your age think about reading. I have some specific questions that I'd like to ask you about, but if there are other things you want me to know, please tell me.

I want you to know that you don't have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable, and that I will keep everything you say confidential. Please be as honest as you can. If you'd like me to repeat something or have any questions at any time, just let me know. It's also fine to interrupt me.

I will be audiotaping this interview so I can make sure to have an accurate record of what we talked about today, but this tape will be kept confidential. I am the only one who will have access to it. Try not to worry too much about the tape recorder. The mike is powerful and picks up everything, so you don't have to speak directly into it. Is this okay with you? Do you have any questions about this part of the interview?

Finally, before we get started, would you please sign this standard consent form? The University Human Subjects committee, as well as the school district committee has approved it. You are free to keep a copy.

Now, let's get started.

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General (select one)
- Tell me about your day.
- What was something that happened in school today?

Early Experiences-Elementary
- What was the first book you remember either reading or having someone read to you?
- What do you remember about reading in elementary school? Tell me about some high points and some low points.
- What did you think of reading?
- What were some of your favorite books in elementary school?
- Tell me about any teacher who talked a lot about reading and made you want to read?
- How would you describe yourself as a student?

Middle School Experiences
- Please tell me about what middle school was like.
- How would you describe yourself as a student?
- What groups were you involved with?
- What were your favorite activities to participate in (in school and out of school)? What made them enjoyable?
- What were your least favorite activities to participate in (in school and out of school)? What made them not enjoyable?
- Tell me about the name of a book you read that you enjoyed?
- Did not enjoy?
- What was the appeal (or lack of appeal) of these books?
- If a friend recommended a book to you, would you read it? If a teacher recommended a book to you, would you read it? For what reasons?
- Which person's opinion about what book to read next would you value more: your friend or your teacher? Please explain your reasons.
- Have you ever received a book as a gift? Have you ever purchased a book or magazine at a:
  - Bookstore?
  - Street vendor?
  - Mail order catalog?

Closing Questions
- If you were asked to recommend a book for the school-wide summer reading program, which title(s) would you suggest? For what reasons?
- If you could give one recommendation to your high school principal about how to make your school better, what would you tell him/her?
- Is there anything you would like me to know that I have not asked you about in this interview?

Conclusion

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I appreciate your honesty and look forward to working with you more as the project continues.

Appendix E

Book Club Schedule for Observation Period

Dates	Activities	Activity Completed by Students: Y/N
10/15/07-10/28/07	Book Club Number 1	Y
10/29/07-11/04/07	Mini Project	Y
11/05/07-11/27/07	Book Club Number 2	Y
11/27/07-11/29/07	Book Club Number 3	N

Appendix F

Weekly Classroom Schedule for Participants

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
AM Schedule				
Morning Meeting	Morning Meeting	Morning Meeting	Morning Meeting	All-School Assembly
Humanities	Humanities	Humanities	Math	Science
Math	Math Block		Science	Math
PM Schedule				
Science Block	Literacy Block	Math	Art	Literacy Block
Afternoon Meeting	Afternoon Meeting	Science	Humanities	Free Time/Clean Up
		Afternoon Meeting	Afternoon Meeting	Afternoon Meeting

Note: Blocks were two hours long

Appendix G

Potential Book Club Selections, Round One

Author	Title	Publication Year
Draper, S.	*Tears of a Tiger*	1996
Green, J.	*Looking for Alaska*	2006
Hoffman, A.	*Incantation*	2007
Johnson, A.	*The First Part Last*	2004
Myers, W.D.	*Autobiography of My Dead Brother*	2006
Spinelli, J.	*Stargirl*	2004

Appendix H

Discussion Strategies for Book Club, Round One

Date of Book Club	Duration (approx.)	Activity	Discussion Strategy Used
10/18/07	2:05-2:15 p.m.	Preparation for discussion	Sticky Notes, Conversation Starters
10/23/07	2:10-2:30 p.m.	Discussion	Index cards
10/26/07	2:15-2:30 p.m.	Discussion	Advanced conversation starters
10/29/07	2:10-2:30 p.m.	Mini Book Project	None

Appendix I

Potential Book Club Selections, Round Two

Author	Title	Publication Year
Draper, S.	*Forged by Fire*	1998
Farmer, N.	*The House of the Scorpion*	2004
Flake, S.	*The Skin I'm in*	2000
Frey, D.	*The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams*	2004
Myers, W.	*Somewhere in the Darkness*	2008
Patterson, J.	*Maximum Ride*	2007

Appendix J

Discussion Strategies for Book Clubs, Round Two

Date of Book Club	Duration (approx.)	Activity	Discussion Strategy Used
11/13/07	2:05-2:15 p.m.	Discussions	Index cards
11/15/07	2:10-2:30 p.m.	Discussion	Index cards
11/21/07	2:15-2:30 p.m.	Discussion	Conversation starters
11/27/07	2:10-2:30 p.m.	Discussion	Conversation starters