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Shaping literate identities: African American male youth, literacy, and middle school

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Abstract

Shaping Literate Identities: African American Male Youth, Literacy, and Middle School

By Latrise Johnson

In this study, I considered the literacy practices of African American male youth in an urban middle school. Using ethnographic case study methodology and drawing from several frameworks, I investigated the social and cultural contexts of literacy participation within literacy classrooms/spaces. The study situated the literacy participation of African American male youth within Gee's (2001) theory of Discourse and New Literacy Studies in which I considered the ways that the youth discussed and asserted their literate identities in relation to two distinct discourses present in the school. Because a larger failure narrative confounds the literacy experiences of African American male youth, critical theory was framework for considering the social and structural inequities of school and provided a lens for interpreting, critiquing, and transforming interactions among individuals (Gibson, 1986; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). In other words, critical theory provided space for examining how literate identities were shaped despite larger issues of failure that plague schooling experiences for African American males. I examined how the literate identities of these African American male youth were shaped within literacy classrooms/spaces as they contended with complex notions of literacy practice, ideologies, and texts. Opportunities provided for literacy participation, literacy space, as well as mode and level of participation were factors that influenced the literate identities as well as the literacy participation of the African American male youth in this setting. I conclude with considerations for examining the processes, pedagogies, texts, ideologies, and practices of literacy spaces that are attentive to developing positive literate identities for African American male youth in order to improve their overall schooling and literacy experiences.

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"Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better. " Carter G. Woodson

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Chapter 1: Shaping in the Midst of "Crisis"

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The social condition of African American males has been described as one that is "endangered and in crisis" (Brown, 2011). African American males are more likely to be incarcerated, unemployed, suspended from school, placed in programs for mental retardation, retained in a grade, and killed from firearms than any other racial group. Among the nation's population, 580,000 African American males are serving sentences in either state or federal prisons while fewer than 40,000 earn a bachelors degree each year (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). Alarming statistics and negative language used to describe the social condition of the African American "underclass" (Anderson, 2008) have also invaded discourse that describes the educational experiences of African American male youth.

Social and educational discourse characterizes school failure and disadvantage as being a "normal" part of the African American male experience. Public schools all over the country report little success regarding the education of their African American male students. *Yes We Can: The Schott Foundation 50 state report on public education for Black males* (2010) estimates that over 50% of the nation's African American males did not graduate from high school in 2008. In a southeastern city, the statistic is starker, reporting only 34% of African American males graduating from the Urban School District[1]. In addition to signaling a rally cry to schools failing Black boys, Schott Foundation outlines further inequities in basic reading proficiency, discipline referrals, special education, and placement in advanced courses. Other data related to the unique academic and social challenges of African American males further illuminate the disheartening, yet typical, story (Anderson, 2008; Davis & Jordan, 1994; Gregory,

[1] Urban School District is a pseudonym.

Skiba & Noguera, 2010; Howard, 2008; Irvine, 1990; Noguera, 2008). The pervasiveness of African American male failure is normalized in ways that such information is not surprising or alarming to "educators [who] have grown accustomed to the idea that a large percentage of the Black male students they serve will fail, get into trouble, and drop out of school" (Noguera, 2008, p. xix). There are several theories used to explain the pervasiveness of failure among African American male youth (see Anderson, 1988; Brown, 2011; Davis & Jordon, 1994; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Irvine, 1990; Noguera, 2008; Ogbu, 1995; Perry, 2003; Siddle Walker, 1995; Tatum, 2008). However, I expound briefly on cultural conflict theory that frames an argument for the exclusionary nature of literacy expectations for African American youth.

The oppositional nature of school to African American male identity often perpetuates the negative condition of African American male youth, which contributes to their marginality (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Noguera, 2008). Perry (2003) explains that the "disproportionate school failure of African Americans and other minorities can be attributed at best to mismatch and at worst to a conflict between a student's home culture and the culture of school" (p. 53). In addition, schools uphold the literate practices of the dominant culture (i.e. promote the use of standard English), encourage ways of behaving (i.e. sitting quietly, raising hands to speak), and promote certain aesthetics (i.e. school uniforms, collared shirts) in order to preserve standards of normative culture. This tension may exist because social institutions, including schools, affirm the dominant culture while repudiating the cultures of others (Delpit, 1995). Literature related to the school-to-prison pipeline also suggests that schools are oppositional, even hostile, environments for African American male youth because young Black males are often criminalized and stigmatized in these spaces (Duncan, 2002; Meiners, 2007). African American male youth as a group "encapsulates the stigmatizing effect of 'negative' status-determining

characteristics, in this case gender and race" (Anderson, 1990). In other words, school language, policies, every day practices (i.e. discipline practices), and discrimination challenge African American male youth culture, calling into question their personal, social, academic, and literate identities.

While literacy classrooms are sites of opportunity to grapple with issues related to literate identities of African American male youth, many are dismissive of African American male literacies. Because literacy classrooms may not support the literate identities and practices of African American male youth (i.e. the way African American male youth may choose to express themselves in language), African American male students are not viewed, or may not view themselves as academic achievers or literate individuals. According to Holland (1987), Black males perceive most schooling activities as feminine and irrelevant to their masculine identity and development. In her work with high school students, Carter (2005) talks to Maxwell, a high-school senior, in which he describes a gender-divide in education. As he perceived it, girls were more "book" smart than boys but less "street" smart. "Book smarts" entailed reading, going to class daily, finishing homework, and earning decent grades. Carter (2005) continues with an explanation of "'street smarts' [which] include knowing how to look someone in the eye, to avert one's gaze at the right moment, to avoid life threatening fights and encounters, and to defend oneself by fighting" (p. 79). Issues of gender socialization and cultural conflict affect how African American male youth view and participate in activities related to schooling, namely reading, writing, and engaging in discussion.

In addition to the tendency to dismiss the existence of a literate identity for African American male youth, their languages and practices are devalued or ignored in literacy classrooms. Practices, pedagogy, and texts used for literacy education fail to accommodate the

literacies of African American male youth because of schools' refusal to recognize the importance of building on "students' race, culture, and language to create academic success, rather than suppressing linguistic and cultural diversity" (Greene, 2008, pp.20-21). One of the reasons for the suppression is "the curriculum in schools seem to have narrowed to accommodate increased testing and accountability so that children do not have opportunities to engage in a wide range of literacy practices" (Greene, 2005). Moreover, students most affected by the implementation of more regimented and standardized curricula are those "at risk" and deficient in reading skills, namely African American males, and other marginalized youth (Greene, 2005).

Ironically, historically and presently, African Americans have understood the political power of, and need for, literacy (Johnson, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Litwack, 1979;) and have had a strong motivation for literacy and book learning (Anderson, 1988). Morrell (2008) further illuminates that "for African Americans, literacy has always been tied to social critique, to uncovering systems of oppression, to access to previously denied discourses, and to power and social change" (p. 67). Despite depressing economic, political, and racial setbacks, African Americans found that literacy and education were concrete reasons to remain optimistic about their future in America (Anderson, 1995). African Americans have always valued literacy however the level of value is misconstrued by the hostile nature of schooling to African American male culture, by inequality rooted in school policies and practices (Carter, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Nieto, 2000) and by the pervasiveness of failure discourse used to mask the structural inequities and unique obstacles that make it difficult for African American males to experience academic success.

Despite the multitude of research describing African American male youth failure, literacy research in out-of-school spaces has documented and continues to document meaningful

literacy participation among African American males (Fisher 2007; Green 2011; Kinloch 2010; Morrell 2004). Because out-of-school spaces are usually created out of some need to right a wrong, pedagogy, processes and ideologies reflect empathy and care towards its participants. As a result, out-of-school spaces attend to and cultivate the social identities of participants in which their involvement and voice are integral to the functioning of the space itself (Fisher, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

My aim in this study is to examine the literacy participation of African American male youth within literacy spaces inside an urban middle school. I am interested in how the literate identities of nine young men—David, William, Trenton, Winston, Dex, Henry, Joshua, and Michael—are shaped in light of complex and contradictory discourses apparent at their school and within particular literacy spaces. Within an urban middle school context, my study (1) provides examples of literacy participation of African American male youth in literacy classrooms/spaces, (2) examines the literacy artifacts, practices, and ideologies that make up their literate identities and (3) explores the tensions that exist between the literate identities of African American male youth and the complex discourse of school and schooling that interrupt or "sustain the sociocultural and sociohistorical constructed forms of social existence" (Stinson, 2006, p. 478). I am keenly interested in what we can learn from the literacy artifacts produced by African American male youth as well as how their literacy participation represents and/or contradicts their literate identities. In order to interrupt the larger narrative of negative social conditions and educational failure for African American male youth, I also explore the contexts in which particular literacy participation and practices promote the development of positive literate identities. My study is guided by the following questions:

(1) How are the literate identities of African American male youth shaped within literacy classroom/spaces in an urban middle school context?

(2) What practices, ideologies, and texts, extend/complicate notions of literate identities for African American male youth in an urban middle school?

(3) In what ways do the literacy artifacts produced by African American male youth and the literacy practices they engage represent and/or contradict their literate identities?

In the following sections, I provide the significance of my work that considers the importance of exploring questions that challenge the larger failure narrative of African American male youth. Then, defining literacy in terms of in- and out-of school provides a distinction for how literacy has been defined and redefined according to space. The end of this chapter is a triadic theoretical framework that considers theories of literacy, identity and space. This framework informed the study during its proposal stage, while conducting the study, and during analyses. The triadic framework also provides a way to understand how attention to literacy pedagogies can shape and influence positive literacy identities for African American male youth despite the complex and oftentimes contradictory discourse of school.

Significance

As a counter-narrative[2] to the story of African American male youth failure, the significance of this study is linked to the intersection between current literacy practices of African American male youth and the possibilities for literacy learning and academic achievement. I invite the voices, practices, and texts that African American youth engage within

[2]According to Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2008), "the counternarrative … is contained in the African American narrative tradition [that] includes stories about struggles for literacy, stories about the purpose of literacy, stories about what people were willing to do to become literate, and stories about how people became literacy so they could 'be somebody'." (p. 92)

literacy spaces in order to examine the ways in which literate identities are shaped in an urban middle school context. Few researchers include the perspectives and voices of African American male youth or consider the ways in which their literacies, their value of literacy, and ideologies related to literacy can inform classroom instruction and foster a positive literate identity (Haddix, 2009; Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2009). At best, research includes the ideas and perspective of educators, researchers, and individuals who work with African American youth in either in-school or out-of-school contexts. My research aims to examine new questions about African American male youth that will explore the complexities of their schooling and in their literate lives. I conclude my work with considerations for challenging and revising the current narrative of failure that suggests African American males are 'endangered and in crisis' (Brown, 2011) while interrupting current ideologies that distinguishes in- and out-of-school literacy practices and participation.

Definition of terms

The following terms are defined to clarify the meaning of key concepts presented in this study: literacy, out-of-school literacies, in-school literacies, and literacy spaces/classrooms.

Literacy

Literacy, at a very basic level includes reading, writing, and speaking. In addition Hull and Schultz (2002) describe literacy in school and out-of-school as "events, practices, activities, ideologies, discourses and identities" (p. 11). According to Freire and Macedo (1987), literacy "is best understood as a myriad of discursive forms and cultural competencies that construct and make available the relations and experiences that exist between learner and the world" (p. 10). Literacy is a social practice that involves using texts for "culturally meaningful purposes within culturally meaningful activities" (Greene, 2008, p. 9). Social aspects of literacy and literacy

learning that occur in order to communicate relationships between individuals and the spaces (physical and metaphysical) they occupy are considered within the context of this study. In other words, all events, texts, practices, ideologies, discourses and identities are recognized and inform the definition of literacy for this study.

Out-of-school literacies

Out-of-school literacy practices have been distinguished as activities related to reading, writing, and speaking that take place in out-of-school settings. Out-of-school literacy practices include literacy and literate activities that occur in homes, communities, and workplaces (Hull & Schultz, 2002). They can also include what Cushman (1998) describes as "institutional" language as the oral and literate skills needed to negotiate with the gatekeepers of certain institutions (i.e. offices of federal social welfare). Out-of-school literacy is also associated with media and the "ability to access, interpret, communicate, and create print, video, audio, and digital media texts (Hill & Vasudevan, 2008). In addition, "computer programs, music videos, rap songs, and video games are also a part of students' literate environment" (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Out-of school literacy practices are important to understanding which literacies are necessary for negotiating spaces outside of school, which essentially make up a large part of one's literate identity.

In-school literacies

In-school literacy practices involve activities that include reading, writing, and speaking which happens in traditional educative spaces (i.e. classrooms). In this case, school literacy is usually associated with embodying a set of specific skills. In-school literacy practices tend to be based on "essay-text" form of literacy, which is dominant in western and academic circles (Street, 1995). School literacy is associated with academic success, progress, civilization, and

social mobility (Street, 1995). In addition, in school literacy participation usually consists of timed writing tasks and focuses on the conventions of writing (Haddix, 2009).

Literacy Classrooms/Spaces

Literacy Classroom/Spaces refer to spaces within and outside of schools in which numerous literacy practices are key to successful participation within the space. For example in Language Arts classrooms, Drama class, and club meetings, which I consider a literacy classroom/spaces, reading, writing, speaking (as well as other literacies) are integral to successful and meaningful participation for students.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines how African American middle school boys engage activities associated with reading, writing, and speaking and how such engagement in literacy activities shape their literate identities within the context of school. Important in addressing the shaping of the literate identities of African American male youth is a clear understanding of the discourses they use and identify within several contexts. In addition, I examine their literacy participation, and how their literate identities are shaped within a larger context of a dominant narrative, which focuses on the African American male youth failure.

Due to the pervasive and systematic nature of the dominant narrative which describe the negative educational and social conditions of black males, New Literacy Studies (NLS) provides a lens through which to examine youth literacy participation and practice as African American male youth contend with a failure narrative that pervades educational discourse and attempts to dictate their educational experiences. Perspectives of NLS recognize how and for what purposes do participants engage popular media, use technology, and participate in numerous literate activities in order to negotiate a myriad of discourses they face in the world. Literacy research

contends with refining definitions and reframing perspectives of literacy that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and liberating. According to Street (2001):

> Research into "vernacular" literacies within modern urban settings has begun to show the richness and diversity of literacy practices and meanings despite the pressures for uniformity by the nation-state and modern education systems. (p. 430)

Emphasizing literacy practices in modern urban settings highlights perspectives that position literacy in social and cultural contexts. In other words, participants define and redefine literacy on their own terms.

The data are examined and presented in order to include how participants defined literacy in several contexts. I also consider Gee's (1989) definition of literacy as an "identity kit," the idea that cultural groups enact their own forms of literacy. These forms include the discourse practices associated with using language, which are tied to the beliefs and values held within the worldview of a particular group, and thus connected to one's identity. Literacy profiles of the nine participants also include other aspects of their literacy participation—aspects observed by literacy teachers, others who facilitated, encouraged, or coordinated literacy participation, and myself.

Critical theory provides a framework for considering disparities in education for African American males. Fundamental to critical theory is the process of self-conscious critique and transformation, which provide space to interpret interactions among individuals, school, and society (Gibson, 1986; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). When participants described their literacy participation, they were prompted to include their thoughts regarding the larger narrative of academic failure as well as their evaluation of the "problem." Because critical theory in education attributes underachievement and academic failure to social and structural inequities, it

provides a lens through which to examine school as a system that is responsible for reproducing unequal and unfair outcomes based on power, wealth, opportunity, and privilege (Gibson, 1986; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Conversely, I use critical theory to also discuss how the discourse of place—even within institutions—can interrupt the sociocultural and sociohistorical narratives that describe school as perpetuating social, academic, and racial inequities (Lewis, 2007).

NLS, literacy as an identity kit, and critical theory consider the connections and contend with tensions between literacy, identity, and space in relation to the shaping of literate identities for African American male youth within a middle school context. To explain further, NLS and critical theory provide a platform for presenting and discussing numerous factors influencing the literate lives of African American male youth inside schools. To answer the first research question—how are the literate identities of African American male youth shaped within literacy classroom/spaces in an urban middle school context? —I will examine the artifacts collected from the students, teachers, and other staff. The lens of New Literacy Studies help to bring into focus the ideological and contested natures of literacy as well practices that are rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being (Gee, 1989; Street, 2003). To answer the second question of this study—What practices, ideologies, and texts, extend/complicate notions of literate identities for African American male youth in an urban middle school?—I use observations to understand broader, structural concerns that impede students' progress. Critical theory is particularly relevant because it helps to bring into focus the pedagogical approaches that fail to build upon students' experiences as African American male youth. For the final research question—In what ways do the literacy artifacts produced by African American male youth represent and/or contradict their literate identities?—I conduct ethnographic interviews in order to illustrate the literacy narratives of African American male youth and elevate the ways in

which they think about their own literate identities and how literacy spaces within school work to shape who they are as literate individuals. New Literacy Studies is useful here in that it suggests that literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another (Street, 2003). Although NLS has been criticized for "exaggerating the power of local contexts to set or reveal the forms and meanings that literacy takes" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 1) for individuals, I consider it useful when asking youth to discuss their literacy participation in various contexts. The triadic framework allows me to consider the global, local, and social perspectives of literacy engagement and how they relate to one another in this study.

Chapter Two: Shaping the Conversation

Review of the Literature

Consideration of research that investigates the literacy experiences of African American male youth uncovers a complex and unique record of how African American male youth negotiate literacy participation in- and out-of-school. Included in this review are studies that describe both negative and positive literacy experiences of African American male youth within several contexts. Although my study is conducted in a middle school setting, literacy studies situated in elementary and high schools provide pertinent data that compare to phenomena seen in middle school settings. Though some of the literature included in the review considers academic achievement for African Americans broadly, it frames a discussion of literacy participation and practice that considers the intersection of language, culture, and the educational outcomes of African American male youth in particular. In addition, literature included in the review may or may not address African American males specifically, so I consider elements of the research in which African American male youth are included and discussed in order to examine current phenomena related to their literate identities, practices, and participation in-and out-of-school. The following review of research is divided in the following sections: (1) Literate identities of African American male youth discusses research that describes social and academic factors that influence the formation of literate identities for African American male youth; (2) Literacy practices of African American male youth provide examples literacy participation for African American male youth in various contexts; and (3) Literacy narratives of African American male youth explores research that has documented ideologies centered around literacy and literacy participation.

Literate Identities of African American Male Youth

The construction of literate identities of all students has become more complex as they are challenged in school and outside of school to engage a variety of media (Mahiri, 1998; Morrell, 2004). Students come to school with varying levels of exposure, access, and values in particular kinds of media and literacy in general. African American students, especially male, may come to school with limited access to traditional forms of literacy such as textbooks, workbooks, novels, and other traditional literacy texts (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Their home literacy practices may or may not include literacy events (Heath, 1983) that prepare them for the types of practices upheld and valued in school. Identification with academic literacies is especially relevant to the overall academic success of African American students (Awad, 2007; Gordon, et al, 2009; Osborne, 1999), However, the literate identities of African American male youth are coalesced with imposed sociocultural and sociohistorical ideas about what it means to be African American males and by the larger failure narrative that begins to plague black male youth upon entering school. African American male youth may be viewed by teachers, peers, and other school officials in stereotypical ways which positions them as a non-literate group in which they are "isolated collectively" (Gordon, et al. 2009). Universal misunderstandings that are perpetuated by educational and social discourse related to African American male youth "carry over in schools and negatively influence the ways young Black male students are treated, positioned, and distributed opportunities to learn" (Davis, 2003, p. 520). Thus, the literate identities of African American students are shaped in "an atmosphere that feels hostile [which] arouses defensive reactions that interfere with [their] intellectual performance" (Steele, 1992, pp. 74-75). In addition to the disrepute African American male youth are forced to wear upon

entering school, at the crux of literate identity formation (or in many cases, the mis-formation) rest issues of racial identity, as well as limiting and exclusionary views of literacy.

Schools play an integral role in racialization processes and are responsible for the shaping of racial identities (Lewis, 2007). Understanding the role of school in this process is especially important when considering the literate identities of African American male youth as they struggle with a unique set of realities—among them, "the deleterious outcomes these young men experience in school and society" (Tatum, 2008, p.156). Scholarship that focuses on the racialization of literacy recognizes a white ownership of literacy (Gordon, et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Trainor, 2008) and that there are a set of skills, behaviors, and ideologies needed to do well in school. Embedded within layers of literacy expectations of school is the notion that African American male students (and other minorities) come to school lacking, deficient, and in crisis. In her study conducted in urban middle schools, Dixson (2008) asserts that teachers regarded the literacy abilities of their African American students as deficient. She posits that superficial understanding and limiting literacy pedagogies were fueled by "racialized beliefs the teachers have … [which] control and limit what students know and do" (p. 145). African American male youth are stigmatized because of preconceived notions of what it means to be African American, male, and to exist within school walls.

Traditionally, literacy practices inside schools seem to have exclusionary qualities that position African American male students as having deficits and not embodying the attitudes and values of literate individuals (Carter, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Hilliard, Perry& Steel, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Noguera, 2008; Smitherman, 1999). Teachers uphold formal writing, reading and analyzing canonical texts, and the speaking of Standard English as premier. The problematic nature in upholding such standards exists when students who are not proficient

in school literacies are assumed to have no relevant knowledge to be drawn upon to improve academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As a result of the exclusionary nature of schooling and expectations for literacy participation, African American male youth internalize a negative literacy identification in which they "[assume] the identity of *nonwriter"* (Haddix, 2009). In a study conducted with African American students during a community writing project, Haddix (2009) explains, "when I ask students whether they considered themselves to be writers, they answer 'no' because they make an immediate connection between writing and school sanctioned literacy practices" (p. 341). Exclusionary practices of literacy education is also apparent in a study conducted by Tatum (2008) with a young African American male student who describes how the failure to make connection with students is "a waste of time" (p. 171). Quincy describes:

> It is something we should be reading in school, but the teachers would read it and use it like a story. Hey ain't going to explain what it means. They going to give us things to write about it and all, but they ain't going to really explain it like the book is. The kids that don't understand what they see in here, they ain't going to really know what they are talking about. (Tatum, 2008, p. 171)

The formation of a literate identity for African American male youth inside schools is met with great difficulty. They face an enduring and elusive problem that has persisted for African American males for generations (Anderson, 1988; Slaughter-Defoe & Richards, 1995). Long before African American male youth enter many literacy classrooms, they face low expectations in their ability to participate in the doing—that is, the reading, writing, answering questions, and the behaving—of school.

Developing a positive literate identity for African American male youth is integral to their overall success. Further exploration is needed in school spaces where youth, teachers, and communities are cultivating positive literate identities and reshaping negative schooling experiences and ideologies by including literacy education that lead to positive academic and social outcomes for African American male students.

Literacy Practices of African American Male Youth

Out of the multiple literacies that exist, literacies associated with schooling seem to be considered as those that define what literacy ought to be in other contexts. Street and Street (1995) suggest that "non-school literacies have come to be seen as inferior attempts at the real things, to be compensated for by enhanced schooling" (p. 106). Lee (2008) states that "literacy teaching in schools is an instrument for expanding the opportunities for youth to learn to contribute to the development of communities" (p. 162). Conversely, researchers have grown concerned with more expansive views of literacy. For example, Gutierrez (2008) calls for sociocritical literacy education in which "everyday and institutional literacies are framed to encompass a broader notion of what counts as literacy [including] academic literacy" (p. 178). Building on the multiple literacy experiences of students in out-of-school contexts can encourage connections between students' identities and experiences to literacy learning and participation inside classrooms.

Instances in which literacy classrooms accept and invite expanded notions of literacy provide important documentation for educators concerned with encouraging increased and meaningful literacy participation for African American male students. Kirkland (2007), Johnson (2008), and Hill (2009) explore the possibility of using hip-hop as text in order for students to engage in critical thinking, textual analysis, discussion and writing--all skills important to any

English/Language Arts classroom. Lee (2000) explores a similar approach by using students' knowledge of signifying and rap music to teach literary interpretation. In more recent studies, Lee (2006; 2008) welcomes students' use of African American Vernacular English as a way to consider a range of new practices that are possible for classroom discussion. The consideration of students' language assists in fostering a positive literate identity in which students feel a part of and connected to the literacy practices the take place within classroom spaces.

Though research paints a somewhat dismal picture of the status of African American achievement and their participation in school literacy, research on connections between students' out-of-school literacy and academic literacy participation tells a strikingly contrasting story. Morrell (2004) contends that the critical study of popular culture can assist in the development of academic and critical literacies. In his study, he focused on bridging popular culture texts and canonical texts so that students could "engage academic language of critique and analysis" (p. 12). By considering a medium (popular culture) in which students were familiar, Morrell regards his students as literate individuals with knowledge and expertise to add to scholarly discussion. Such consideration is especially powerful for African American male youth particularly in in-school spaces because "by building on students' literacy experiences with popular culture in a school setting, teachers can make authentic and powerful connections between students' worlds and the demands of the classroom" (Morrell, 2004, p. 7). Instances in which teachers approach teaching that connect the existing literate identities of African American males and an expected level of academic literacy are able to foster academic success for African American males in which students themselves are invested. Mahiri (2004) explores the use of African American youth culture as a bridge to writing development through their writing of "street scripts." Here the writings of the students are used as a lens through which they are able to reflect on their lives

as well as provide critique of their world in the way that they understand it. Mahiri (2004) concludes that the students' writing "go beyond the socially acceptable subjects and stylistically permissible forms of writing most often valued in schools …" (p. 40). Here, African American youth participate in a medium that is valued in school spaces and are allowed to use their expertise and knowledge in order to develop that medium.

Research conducted in out-of -school spaces also provided pertinent information regarding the possibility for meaningful literacy participation for African American male youth. Fisher (2007) explores the out-of-school literate practices of the "Power Writers," a group of African American, West Indian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Latino students in New York City. Students in the study composed and recited original poetry, participated in read and feed processes, explored the possibilities of language, expanded vocabulary, discussed relevant cultural ideas, as well as "aspire[d] beyond –their] 'ascribed lives'" (Fisher, 2007, p. 19). Students were invested in the literacies that they engaged in this out-of-school space because their voices mattered. One of the students, Manny, raised questions and evaluated his existence. According to Fisher (2007), "Manny confronted his fear of becoming a stereotype that people in his school community and neighborhood sometimes expected him to fulfill" (p. 88). Manny illustrates in a poem, "… I just don't want to be like that/ Selling drugs, stealing, killing/ … Remember the dreams we had?/ Of getting out of the hood, going to college, playing football/ … But that don't matter no more/ Because 'til then/ God is still holding me back by a thin string (Fisher, 2007, p. 88). Manny uses his literacy to articulate a dream deferred and to renounce participation in drugs and crime, realities that threatens every young African American male life because of enduring stereotypes and unique circumstances.

Several studies enumerate the literacy practices of African American male youth as alternative ones. Literature suggests that such practices are not inherently a part of today's literacy classrooms and require special invitations. Research is needed to further interrogate the literacy practices of African American male youth as possibilities for meaningful literacy participation in today's classrooms.

Literacy Narratives[3] of African American Male Youth

Many researchers are considering the lives and perspectives of African American male youth in order to include their voices into the meaning-making of their own literate lives (Howard, 2008; Johnson, 2010; Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2009). In her book, *Harlem on Our Minds: Place, Race, and the Literacies of Urban Youth*, Kinloch (2010) includes the voices of two African American male youth who consider their literacy narratives as means of critique. For example, Phillip, who is described as outspoken and popular shared, "I don't think I got many problems with writing. I said I don't think. I try to give 'em what they want since there's no room for creativity when everything's all about standards" (p. 22). Here, Phillip critiques two aspects of his writing experiences, one, that they lack the opportunity for creativity, and two, that everything (instruction, pedagogy, and classroom experiences) are about meeting testing standards.

In the same study, conducted by Kinloch (2010), the same participant shares a literacy narrative in relation to responding to gentrification:

> I could create a response by using literacy. I guess you can call it a literacy story, narrative, whatever. The simple fact that we listening to each other and sharing ideas without you having to tell me what to do or agreeing with me and me with you, that's

[3] See Kinloch, V. (2010). *Harlem on our minds: Place, race, and the literacies of urban youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.

like literacy. We gotta first listen and find ways to use our language to get our point across. That's making a literacy response to anything, especially gentrification. (p. 42)

Phillip's literacy narrative provides a definition of literacy as a process. His literacy narrative delineates his meaning-making process of how he can use literacy as a response to what is going on in his community.

Kirkland (2009) considers a different type of literacy narrative in which "Derrick's tattoos helped me begin to understand the complex ways in which literacy functioned across multiple centers in his life" (p. 380). Here, Derrick's literacy narratives are a series of struggles, stories, and symbols used to tell his story and represent his experiences. Derrick uses tattoos as a form of literacy to represent his life's struggles. According to Kirkland (2009), "as much as it is a social practice, literacy must also be conceived as personal, a practice in which the individual engages to negotiate and articulate the human aspects of self" (p. 391). The consideration of the many ways in which African American male youth view their engagement in literacy activities—for example, through an examination of literacy narratives—could lead to real and lasting connections with students in literacy classrooms, foster students' literacy development, and improve the schooling experiences of African American male students.

In a study that documented African American male youth schooling experiences, Howard (2008) collects "accounts of counterstorytelling[4]" in which the young men made "explicit attempts to not reinforce widely held beliefs and stereotypes about African American males" (p. 969). I include this study because it speaks to how young Black men use their literacy to articulate their opinions and critique schooling practices, which negatively impact their schooling

[4] Howard uses the "counterstory" in the tradition of Critical Race Theory. See Howard, T. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of African American males in pre-k-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. Teachers College Record, 110(5), 954-985.

experiences. Jelani offers a literacy narrative as a critique of how teachers view African American male students:

> I play football, so you know they expect you to be good in sports. But when you are on the ASB (Associated Student Body) council, like I am, and being a school leader, have good grades and talking about going to college on an academic scholarship, then they look at you like Whoa!! I didn't think that they (Black males) were into those kind of that meant, but believe me, I knew what that meant. (Howard, 2008, P. 970)

Studies conducted to obtain the literacy narratives of African American male youth have been conducted in alternative spaces. In addition, few studies have been conducted in which the perspectives of young African American males were considered as an important part of revising their overall educational failure narrative. In order to provide more concise alternatives to the narrative of educational failure and literacy disengagement of African American, further exploration is needed that examines the practices, ideologies, and specific texts that are a part of literacy classrooms and the lived experiences of African American male youth.

The narrative of African American male failure is pervasive and has imposed a literate identity on African American male youth, which has created and perpetuated their disrepute. Although African American male youth engage a variety of literacy practices related to in- and out-of-school participation research seems to focus on successful participation in out-of-school spaces without fully examining in-school (and more traditional) influence. Finally, the literacy narratives of African American male youth—that is, the way one describes aspects of his/her own literacy—are rich descriptions of their value and investment in literacy; all of which are important in informing how educators and researchers alike may move towards reframing

discussions around the literate identities of African American male youth, and reexamining how African American male youth experience literacy-centered activity in classrooms.

Chapter Three: Shaping a Plan of Inquiry

Methodology

This study considered the relationships between the literate identities of African American male youth and their participation within literacy classroom/spaces. I used multiple data sources informed by ethnographic and qualitative research methods, collected over the span of a school year. Specifically, I employed participant observation (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002), ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 1979), and document collection in order to examine the practices, ideologies, and texts of African American male students within literacy classroom/spaces in an urban middle school. The following questions guided the study:

(1) How are the literate identities of African American male youth constructed within literacy classrooms/spaces in an urban middle school context?

(2) What practices, ideologies, and texts extend/complicate and/or extend notions of literate identities for African American male youth in this context?

(3) In what ways do literacy artifacts produced by African American male youth and the literacy practices they engage represent and/or contradict their literate identities?

I addressed these questions through an examination of the daily literacy practices of African American male youth in the school in general and use ethnography as a research method in order to center the perspectives and practices of specific participants. Because I was interested in how participants developed and changed over time "through learning to be and to work together, knowing that their representation to the outside world depends on how effectively they create and maintain their identity," (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 14), I observed characteristics and practices of classrooms, other literacy spaces, and during other in-school interaction (e.g. cafeteria, hallways, front office, and assemblies) for over a period of a school year.

While participant observation allowed me to act as researcher, teacher, and as a member of the school community, ethnographic interviewing was helpful in attaining African American males' perceptions of literacy participation as well as documenting how they perceived their literacy development over time. Ethnography allowed me to see not only how participants perceived themselves, but also how their literate identities were ascribed in classroom talk and the like. In the following sections I describe the processes for site and participant selection, data sources and collection, data analysis.

Site

Starks Middle School is located on the east side of a major city in the southeastern United States. It is one of 15 middle schools in the Urban School District which serves 48,147 students. Within the district, approximately 83% of students are African American and 57% are economically disadvantaged. The student population at Starks Middle School is 92% African American, 2% White, 4% Hispanic, 1% Asian and 1% identifies as multiracial. Approximately 96% of the students receive free or reduced lunch (State website). According to the *2008 Adequate Yearly Progress Overview Report*, Starks Middle School met AYP in all three areas, test participation, academic performance, and a second indicator, which was attendance rate. The school includes 6-8th grades and each student attends four academic classes (i.e. Language Arts, Pre-Algebra or Algebra, Georgia History, and Science) and two exploratory (e.g. Foreign Language, Physical Education, Art, Band) classes (school's website).

If you ask people in the neighborhood and former students about the school, they will tell you how it has "gone down" in the last decade. The principal at Starks is committed to rebuilding the reputation of the school through her commitment to student achievement and by creating a space where students who come to Starks "are safe and where they want to be" (January 25,

2011). Starks Middle School was a typical example of an urban middle school as it faced distinct challenges related to academic achievement, socio-emotional development, and behavioral adjustment (Felner et al., 1997).

Participants

I spent over 150 hours at Starks Middle School. At the beginning of the school year and for much of the first semester, I got to know and understand the everyday happenings of the school. I walked around with the principal and literacy coach, introduced myself to students, teachers and other school personnel, attended content and grade level meetings, held classes in teachers' brief absences, conducted a workshop, and facilitated a short-lived drama group for the after school program. During this time, I identified key people to participate in the study; nine African American males in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, six literacy teachers, two parents, the school's literacy coach, one of the school's counselors, and the principal. After spending time observing in the school, I identified a total of 21 individuals who could inform my study and offer insight to the literacy practices of African American youth at Starks Middle School.

For the selection of the youth in the study, I observed several literacy classrooms and other spaces (e.g. football practice, pull-out classes, after-school program, and school assemblies). Primarily, I chose youth participants based on their level of participation within their Language Arts classrooms. Usually, their comments, suggestions, postures, etc. were striking or stood out from others. After gaining an understanding of the school's culture and observing across several literacy spaces, I finally chose participants who could offer particular insight into activities across literacy spaces within the school. The youth in the study (n=9), all identify as African American males and represent a range of life experiences, academic achievement, and interests. Although the youth participants were selected in order to inform

larger themes around African American male literacy participation as it relates to Starks Middle School, I considered their individual perspectives in order to demonstrate the complexity and range of literate identity among African American male youth. Each youth participant selected a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

In addition, I observed, interviewed, and collected documents from adult participants (n=11) who were closely involved with literacy instruction or facilitation in the school. The adult participants provided information regarding the literate lives of the African American males in the school either directly or indirectly. Adult participants were given pseudonyms.

Data Sources and Collection

I followed Emory University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines as well as the Guidelines for Conducting Research Activities set by the Department of Research Planning and Accountability for the Urban School District as it relates to informed consent (see Appendices A and B for consent form and documentation of assent respectively), interview procedures, and participant observation protocols throughout the course of the study. Approval through the Urban School District was obtained on August 2, 2010. The letter of approval contains actual names of the district and school participating in my study and is not a part of this document due to issues of confidentiality.

The data sources for the study include qualitative interviews, documents (i.e. student work, handouts, student writing samples, and other texts), and literacy classroom/spaces observations.

Interviews

One of the primary sources of data for this ethnographic case study was qualitative interview. I conducted at least one formal interview with each participant. For each interview, I

considered "ethnographic elements" (Spradley, 1999) to build rapport with participants so they were willing to share their knowledge with me. Interviews were conducted informally and more like a friendly conversation as suggested by Spradley (1999). Interview questions focused primarily on asking descriptive, structural, and contrast questions related to my research questions. Follow up interviews were conducted in order to "figure out" what I observed, compare observations, or to clear up misunderstandings (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 2). Follow-up interviews were conducted during on-going, and multiple levels of, analyses. Interview notes, summaries, and follow-up questions were organized and managed on a Contact Summary Form (see Appendix C) adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994). Also, numerous informal conversations took place over the course of the study in which notes were kept in my research notebook.

Documents

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) suggest that documents be targeted in order to elicit themes and content. I collected literacy artifacts[5] in order to do the following: 1) provide context for the types of literacy activities and subject-matter students engage in and out of the classroom, 2) compare and contrast how they may contradict and/or represent the literate identities of participants, and 3) describe literacy curriculum including the types of texts, practices, and ideologies different literacy spaces within the school. Summaries of documents were included on Document Summary Forms (see Appendix D) adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994).

[5] Literacy artifacts refers to any text that was engaged by participants, including but not limited to poetry, novels, articles, short stories, biographies, as well as student-authored texts, songs, recordings, speeches, blogs, etc.

Literacy Classroom/Spaces Observations

I conducted formal observations of each youth participant in their Language Arts classroom at least once per week during the second semester. Observations of the classes during the first semester were informal and were used primarily to gain an understanding of school and classroom culture and to identify participants who would best inform my research questions. In addition, I observed them in other literacy spaces in order to capture how participants participated in, interacted with, and/or created literacy in various spaces (i.e. football practice, drama club, Student Government Associations meetings, talent show practice, etc.). Field notes were hand-written in a research notebook during each observation.

Data Management

My data were generated as a result of interviewing, document collection, and field notes from observations. Seidman (2006) suggests researchers must ensure that data is accessible and organized, by "keeping track of participants through the participant information forms, making sure that consent forms are copied and filed in a safe place, labeling audiotapes of interviews accurately, managing the extensive files that develop, and keeping track of decision points in the entire process all require attention to detail, a concern for security, and a system for keeping material accessible" (p. 112). Interviews were recorded using *Garage Band* recording software and my personal Macintosh computer. Using *Garage Band* allowed me to securely store and transcribe interview data. I also used an Interview Summary and Notes form to keep track of probes and follow-up questions while conducting interviews. A Contact Summary form, adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to organize contact information as well as summarize salient, important, and/or illuminating ideas that stood out during the interview. Both summary forms, the Interview Summary and Notes form and the Contact Summary forms, will

be housed in a locked file cabinet in my home along with signed consent forms. Documents were collected and filed based on type in a secure file cabinet. Field notes were handwritten and kept in a small notebook. Analyzed and coded data were kept in a research notebook and as a Word document on my personal computer.

Data Analysis

For this ethnographic study, I used "inductive, interactive, and recursive data collection and analytical strategies to build local cultural theories" (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, p. 9). LeCompte and Schensul (1999) suggest that ethnographers should engage in several levels of analysis. At the initial level of analysis, I conducted a content analysis in which recurring items, elements, patterns, structures, and themes related to my research questions were isolated for each interview transcript, document, and field notes. I assigned first level data codes that emerge from the data themselves. Some codes were informed by the review of literature and theoretical framework. A sample of codes used during analyses is in Appendix E.

A second level of analysis was conducted in order to review the frequency of key terms, themes, and patterns that emerged across data. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) describe patterns as "groups that fit together, express a particular theme, or constitute a predictable and consistent set of behaviors" (pp. 154-155). According to LeCompte and Schensul this level of analysis is "repackaging and aggregating the data" (p. 92). Also, I focused on commonalities, differences, and connections across different sources of data to produce larger themes, which serve as the heading for my dissertation findings section. I also consider here what LeCompte and Schensul (1999) identify as the constitutive or structural level of analysis in which the "pieces of the analytic puzzle come together to create an overall picture" (p. 155). The final level of analysis

focused on interpreting and synthesizing of all data sources in order to construct an explanatory framework.

My analysis aims to bring into focus what happens in literacy classrooms and literacy spaces in and around Starks Middle School related to the shaping of a literate identity for African American male youth. Each data source offers opportunity to illustrate the complexity of literate identities of African American male youth. The multiple sources of data also provides opportunity to triangulate data for more credible findings and serve to explain the multi-layered dimensions of literacy participation that inform and determine the literate lives of African American male youth.

Researcher perspective

My researcher perspective is unique in that I am a product of the school system in which I conducted this study. I taught middle and high school for the system for six years as well. I feel a sense of connection to the system, school, and to the students. As a former secondary Language Arts teacher in schools similar to my research site, I am aware of the varying achievement levels, social behaviors, and dispositions that African American students in this particular urban setting have. As a youth, I shared many of the same realities with "marginalized" youth (i.e. race, class, urban schooling, low teacher expectations, moderate achievement, etc.). However, as a Language Arts teacher who has experienced relative success, I know the ways in which these students can experience academic achievement, engage literary work, intelligently discuss and analyze elements of literature, create well-developed ideas in writing, and generate extraordinary examples of media although some literature and educational discourse suggest otherwise. As a teacher, I was almost always able to connect to my students and openly discuss their lives. I intentionally crafted my Language Arts class as a space for students, African American

especially, to make connections between their lives and being literate. My experiences as a youth and as a teacher, and my expectations for students and teachers have undoubtedly shaped the design of this study in that I am examining how African American males view their own engagement in literacy and how their literate identities are shaped within literacy classroom and spaces in schools.

Provided positions of privilege and power as a teacher and now as a researcher, I considered that which Brown and Brown (2006) suggest is a "fundamental aspect of productive power" (p. 461). I recognize that research which considers a group of individuals situated in bound educational settings (schools and classrooms) cannot make generalized or blanket statements about them. One of my concerns related to this project was not to add to the normalizing discourse of failure on the part of African American males that have become so pervasive in public school spaces (Noguera, 2008). I seek not to add to "discourses of normalization [which] generally refer to how particular individuals or groups of students become positioned and understood by themselves and others, with a particular focus on marking those values and beliefs that differentiate between the normal and the abnormal" (Brown & Brown, 2006, p. 461). Instead, I hope to reveal insights into how the literate lives of African American male youth are cultivated inside literacy classrooms and literacy spaces.

Reliability

This ethnographic case study occurred in a bound educational setting and examined how the literate identities of African American males developed as a result of their participation in literacy-centered activities. Though the study can be replicated in methodology by using the same protocol and observation techniques, the findings are applicable to this particular setting and for these particular participants. Also, the role of ethnographer as socially positioned cannot

be ignored. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) asserts that "in some ways, no ethnographer can replicate the findings of another because the flow of information is dependent on the social role held within the studied group and the knowledge deemed appropriate for the incumbents of that role to possess" (p. 37). With that in mind, I noted clear and specific descriptions on research design, researcher decisions, and how data were obtained throughout the process in a research notebook. I considered relevant queries that were useful when determining reliability during the study. Specifically, I considered several data sources in order to show parallelism across informants, contexts, and time.

Internal Validity

Internal validity addresses the question of whether or not researchers actually observe or measure what they think they are observing and measuring (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). In order to address internal validity, Miles and Huberman (1994) list useful possibilities for addressing internal validity. To improve internal validity, I triangulated the emerging findings based on the multiple sources of data in this study. Several stages of analysis allowed me to link categories to prior theory associated with African American male literacy. Finally, I conducted member checks with adult and youth participants throughout data collection in order to ensure accuracy of my conclusions.

External Validity

External validity refers to "what extent are the abstract constructs and postulates generated, refined, or tested by scientific researchers applicable across groups" (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 43). Generalizability is difficult because of the qualitative nature of this study. Miles and Huberman (1994) provide a list of questions to consider when addressing external validity. I include "thick description" of the setting in the findings so that readers can assess

potential transferability and appropriateness to their own settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Also, the narratives and recordings obtained during data collection are preserved unobscured (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Limitations

The qualitative nature of this study limits the ability to generalize the results. Given the focus of this case study in a single setting, over the course of a school year, generalizability is not a goal. In order to meet the challenges and demands of being primary research instrument, I spent time getting to know participants and allowed them time to get to know me. I used recording devices, when appropriate, and invited participants' voices as a part of meaning-making throughout different processes of this study. In addition, because I gathered information about adolescent African American males situated in a particular context, I do not suggest that my findings are applicable to all African American males.

Chapter Four:

Shaping Literate Identities within Literacy Spaces: Competing Discourse of Place

Upon entering Starks Middle School, one may wonder where the students are. The quiet rotunda adorned with blue and gold paint—the school's colors—is silent and still. Banners with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s picture and the words "Remember the Dream" hang from the high ceiling. Five posters encouraging students to show their Starks PRIDE everyday are taped to the cafeteria windows looking out to the rotunda. Each poster represents one letter in the word reminding students to show their pride through their participation, respect, integrity, dedication, and excellence. Before obtaining my visitors pass each day I visited Starks, I sat on a park bench outside the main office to wait for the morning announcements and the change to first period.

Each grade level was made up of two teams of four teachers each. Each team was housed in a different Learning Community (LC)—a cluster of classrooms that shared common space—which was identified by a number. Seventh and Eighth graders were located in LCs 1-4 on the main floor. Sixth grade teams occupied the first floor downstairs in LCs 5 and 6. Special Education and classrooms used as office space were located in LC 7. Connections classes were located on the basement floor of the building and were not a part of any Learning Community. Bulletin boards covered with student work, hand-painted quotes by famous people, as well as the five-poster set eliciting students' pride could be found in each LC.

As "Lovely Day" by Bill Withers played over the intercom system, I walked to Learning Community (LC) 3, which housed one of two seventh grade teams and the classroom/office of the literacy coach, Mrs. Hall. Students passed noisily, but quickly to their first period class. They were ushered into classrooms by teachers and other school staff. "Ms. Latrise," as I had become

affectionately known by many, “You coming to my class today?” Winston, a seventh grade student and study participant, ran up to me and greeted me with a hug.

While spending time at Starks Middle School, it was difficult for me to not perceive aspects of school culture and daily happenings as more complex social phenomena that include larger social and cultural meaning that participants could ascribe to particular literacy events. As, a result, I left nothing to chance—from the writing on the wall to the morning announcements, I attempted to examine how the literate identities of African American male youth were shaped within various spaces in the school. The purpose of this chapter is to explore literacy spaces inside schools in which literate identities are shaped according to the complex and sometimes contradictory discourses of such spaces. Findings describe the varying discourses of literacy spaces through an examination of symbols, signs, and practices with and across them at Starks Middle School.

The symbols, practices, and events of literacy spaces at Starks Middle

“You do not wake up one morning a bad person. It happens by a thousand tiny surrenders of self-respect to self interest” ~Robert Brault

The above quote is representative of the types of quotes that are hand painted throughout the school building. Quotes that address morality and behavior could be found in each Learning Community and on restroom walls throughout the building. Learning Communities were also shared space in which teams of teachers included their own attempts to motivate students to act in ways that were appropriate for school and in other spaces. Bulletin boards, wall space, and ceiling tiles contained messages reminding students that they were in a “learning zone,” that they were “headed for success,” or on the path toward their “Ph.D.” Pictures of Obama and Martin Luther King, Jr. hung in each Learning Community. In LC 2, a graduation gown hung alongside

our president and the renowned civil rights leader. Students were reminded by both teachers and teacher-made signs to “walk quietly”, have their “tools for learning,” and to “pull and tuck”—which reminded the boys to pull up their pants and tuck their shirts. Several Learning communities held town hall-type meetings to stress and reinforce acceptable behaviors, which varied across and within LCs.

In order to address my first research question, I am particularly concerned with the discourse of place and how it works to shape the literate identities of African American males at Starks Middle. In the following sections, I illustrate the signs, symbols, practices, and events in relationship the discourses of failure and promise present within and across literacy spaces at Starks Middle. Such discourses initiated teachers to respond in ways I characterize as active or passive.

Discourse of Promise

At various times during my yearlong inquiry, I was reminded of the familiar essence of school and of the Urban School District in particular, which Starks was part of and in which I had been a student and a teacher. I remembered the mantra I recited as a student decades ago that claimed that “All students *can* learn. All students *will* learn,” as Dr. Burdette proclaimed that “we can do this job." All of our students can do well. We just have to know how to prepare them… and to reach them.” Dr. Burdette concerned herself with creating an atmosphere where students were “comfortable and happy,” and insisted that the rotunda at the front entrance of the school be repainted blue and gold—the school’s colors—in order to cover the “prison paint” that was there before. It was also her idea to include pictures of President Obama and Martin Luther King, Jr. in each Learning Community. She explained:

> I had the literacy coach purchase the posters for each LC because it's so important for our boys to see positive images of themselves so that they know what they are capable of. They have to be reminded each and every day. … And that's why there is a Black male on almost every one of my teams. They [Black male students] have to understand the possibilities out there for them. (January 25, 2011)

The school's principal was very intentional and purposeful when it came to "things other principals would consider small." Dr. Burdette attempted to create, in her attention to space, an atmosphere of promise in which she hoped students would feel hopeful towards the possibilities for their lives.

Other instances in which teachers attended to presenting symbols and text related to a discourse of promise was evident in LC2. Each of their classes were text-rich and displayed paraphernalia—pennants, t-shirts, and poms—from various colleges and universities. I inquired about their decision to include items from the different colleges and universities and Ms. Phillips, the 8th grade science teacher on the team explained that "our students need to be reminded each day of the possibilities." Displaying the symbols and text related to college was a way that teachers created spaces in order to encourage students and to convey the idea that college was an attainable goal.

Ms. Naomi, a 7th grade Language Arts teacher in LC 4, discussed many of her classroom practices as it related to her African American male students. Although she was critical about most of their writing, she was confident that they would improve. She indicated that:

> We [teachers] have to provide opportunities for them [African American male youth] to improve on certain skills. Many of them write how they speak but we are the ones who

> have to show them. So many of them fear being wrong, but I let them know ‘be wrong in here so you can be right out there. ‘

For Ms. Naomi, African American male youth in her class needed correcting and direction in which she provided. Promise for African American male youth meant that they first needed to right some wrongs –“improve on certain skills” and discontinue to “write how they speak.”

As one of the coordinators of the school’s talent show, I found myself emerged in this discourse of promise. Mr. Camp, the school’s counselor, put me in charge of it once he realized he “really [didn’t] have time to do it.” Of the participants, seven of 13 were African American males. During practice, which I often facilitated alone, I found myself questioning students, confronting behaviors, and challenging students’ lyrics. I made reference to many of their talents, including Jai, who was the lead rapper in a rap trio. After a dull and lifeless practice performance, I explained to him how I thought how he had such promise if he would articulate his words and perform “I Ball” as if he really did. As I critiqued his performance, I proceeded to show him the way he ought to do it.

There was a sense that many of the symbols, practices, and events—which may or may not be explicitly related to African American male youth in the school—stemmed from a universal belief that school prepares one for his/her future and offers promise if students pay attention to the signs and symbols that encourage them, and participate fully in the practices and events that prepare them.

Discourse of Failure

A discourse of promise was evident within and across literacy spaces at Starks Middle. Some participants assumed a discourse of promise in which students who accepted particular “ways of being” could be successful in school and in their lives. Conversely, several literacy

practices, symbols, and events that illustrated a discourse of failure was indicative in the ways in which literacy facilitators accepted notions that urban African American male youth were not interested in or capable of doing the business of school.

As I arrived in LC 3 to put my belongings down in the classroom/office of the school's literacy coach, I noticed Winston, one of my participants, standing outside his Language Arts classroom. He followed me into the classroom across from where he stood. I removed my jacket and asked him why he was not in class. "I was late coming from my locker," he explained to me, "and she locked the door." I instructed him to remain quiet as I explained to his teacher that I wanted to observe Winston in his Language Arts Class that particular day. She proceeded to let us in and commented that "I hope you can find out what's wrong with him. He don't want to be at school no way." During the observation of Ms. Owens' 7th grade Language Arts class, in a span of no more than 10 minutes, I noted that on seven different occasions, Ms. Owens addressed Winston:

> Winston, I need you to write the notes from the board. Winston, are you writing?
>
> Winston, I need you to stop talking. Winston, you don't have anything on your paper?
>
> Winston is still talking. Winston, I need you to read number four. Winston, sit down.

As I sat in one of the student desks noting Ms. Owens' practice of voicing her opinion about Winston's lack of desire to be at school and her academic harassment of him, I recorded descriptions of the class.

> Balled up pieced of paper are all over the floor. Desks are in disarray. No student work on the bulletin board. Students are working out of grammar books. Promethean board displays a group of five sentences. On the dry erase board: Objective for the day: The students will identify and demonstrate the understanding of subject-verb agreement.

> Homework: Write 5 sentences and underline the subject and the verb in each sentence.
>
> (Field notes, January 31, 2011)

The teacher had students write answers to questions from their grammar book. Then, she would call on students to read answers from their paper. There were few indications that Ms. Owens was interested in or capable of delivering meaningful exchanges with the 20 students present for class that day. She had not paid attention to the physical space and had not hung any reminders that it was indeed a literacy classroom. The symbols (or lack of symbols in this case), the practice of low-level literacy teaching, and the disclosure of her opinion of Winston were indications that she either accepted the notion of failure for her students or that she had been permitted to fail her students.[6]

Other indications that the literacy spaces showed evidence of a discourse of failure were less extreme, but salient. Many instances of failure discourse came from the mouths of literacy facilitators—educators who were charged with improving the literacy of students in a variety of settings—themselves. Many teachers, the literacy coach, and drama teacher made comments regarding low expectations, antipathy against particular students, and their literacy pedagogy (literacy practices and events planned for students during class). Because teachers had come to expect me in the building and to pop in their classes at different times of any school day, I decided to visit Ms. Jennings, one of the 8th grade teachers in LC 1. Before I could enter, she stopped me at the door and explained to me that I should not observe her during that period because it was her ”slow class” and that they would not have anything to offer my study about literacy. The class she spoke of was comprised of 19 students-- over half of them African American males.

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[6] Assumptions were made based solely upon my observations as Ms. Owens declined an interview with me.

On a separate occasion, as I walked with the literacy coach, Mrs. Gilbert back to her classroom/office, we ran into an African American male student who was apparently cutting class. Their exchange was:

Mrs. Gilbert: What's up, Criminal?

Dex: Don't turn your lip up at me.

Mrs. Gilbert: Don't turn your lip up at me.

Mrs. Gilbert explained that Dex was a student who hardly attended class, caused havoc on a daily basis, and that she gave up on trying "to talk to him." Mrs. Gilbert attempted to address problems with Dex by attempting to reason with him on several occasions, however, Dex refused to attend class and caused several fights. If he continued on the destructive path, Dex would indeed fail school and as Mrs. Gilbert put it "fail life."

In addition, policies and procedures were in place to control student behavior, which could be characterized as failure discourse because it is usually marginalized students who are subject to control. Students wore uniforms, walked in straight lines to classes and lunch, lined up on specific squares along the floor, and were subject to raids—in which police and administration staff would lock down the classes and search students' book bags and person for contraband.

Literacy pedagogy in some classrooms also embraced a discourse of failure, which was evident in the ways in which content was presented, in the construction of literacy events around content, and the reasons certain pedagogical decisions had been made. For example, I observed the 8th grade Language Arts teacher, Ms. Jennings class of 23 students, 13 of which appeared to be African American males. She stood at the board and recited instructions explaining how to identify adverbs in the passage. Students sat quietly in pairs arranged in rows and were reminded

to write their answers on their paper. Ms. Jennings proceeded to read from the Promethean board a passage about a class of fourth graders on a fieldtrip. Ms. Shoemaker asked clarifying questions along the way, reminded students to raise their hand, corrected students' grammar and wrong answers, and commented on unacceptable behaviors. When a student asked if she could go back to number one, Mrs. Jennings replied, "You didn't start when I told you to. So, no!"

I visited Ms. Jennings's class during a different class period on the same day. I popped in to check on one of my participants because he had explained to me when I saw him on the hall that he needed help with an essay. Upon entering, I noted a very different atmosphere of the class. Several students sat in groups of four and five in their desks. Ms. Jennings sat at a table with three of the students, while the remaining four sat at computers typing essays. Out of approximately 21 students, six were African American male. I sat beside David to help him with an essay about three things he would take with him on a trip out of space. When I asked Ms. Jennings about the differences in her class that day she told me that the previous class needed more structure and could not function if she did not explicitly tell them what to do almost every moment in class. The ladder class, she explained, were "smart kids" and could function with less structure.

Even though individuals may not have intentionally centered a discourse of failure around African American male youth, it is important to note that in the majority of cases where there seemed to be talk, practices, symbols, and events that demonstrated low expectations, disdain for individuals, mediocre and poor teaching, African American male youth were disproportionately represented.

Active Shaping

Though there seemed to be several indications that were indicative of the presence of a discourse of failure, it was confounded by a discourse of promise in which individuals throughout the school accepted a discourse of promise and acted in ways to counteract failure discourse. Failure discourse informed a need for action in which teachers and other schools staff engaged in order to interrupt failure discourses—one concentrated in the school marked by the occurrences illustrated above and by a general consensus that the current state of school is failing.

As a conspicuous member of the Starks Middle School community, I walked the halls, visited classrooms, interviewed participants, assisted with cheerleading, attended football games, coordinated a talent show, conversed with parents, ate lunch with students, sat in various meetings, volunteered in the afterschool program, and attended workshops during the year of my study. I witnessed numerous accounts and examples of how teachers and other individuals took action as a result of students' academic, social, and physical needs. Individuals sought out external support and created opportunities in order to respond to the needs of students. Also apparent were individuals acting on behalf of the needs of the school ranging from professional development for teachers to tangible resources.

While I waited in the cafeteria for some eighth grade girls who I ate lunch with to arrive, I was curious to know why so many students were missing from lunch on that particular day. "People taking their lunch back to their classroom," Seleena, a cheerleader, informed me. Students, carrying their Styrofoam trays, and I followed Ms. Endu back to LC 1 for what she called "Review Café." Students in her science class read from books, listened to direct instruction, responded to questions, and ate their lunch. After administering a benchmark test to

students, many of them did not do well. As a result, Ms. Endu instituted “Review Café” where students could choose to attend tutorial during the lunch period.

In a separate response to the academic needs of students, Mrs. Gilbert noted that at least half of the Language Arts classes and the majority of the other classes did not have class libraries. During informal observations of the Language Arts classes, she noted the issue on observation forms. Classroom libraries developed slowly or not at all. Teachers’ complaints, indifference, and/or actual need for help motivated Mrs. Gilbert to raise awareness about the importance of classroom libraries for each discipline. She gathered reading material and disseminated information during team meetings. In addition, she coordinated a literacy drive which solicited magazines, brochures, books, maps, comic books, newspapers, and other periodicals from teachers, parents, and others who visited the school. Mrs. Gilbert said that she “wanted students to have access to different kinds of reading material.”

After a district-wide mandate, Starks and other middle schools in the Urban School District were to create an advisory period for in order to assist with the social needs of students and to generate at least one more adult students could go to in different times of need. In response to the mandate, a team of administrators, teachers, the parent liaison, and the math and literacy coaches were assembled in order to brainstorm ways to best implement the Advisory period. Additional goals identified by the group were to encourage positive student behavior and to increase school pride among the students at Starks. During one of the meetings, after recognizing a need for additional advisors, Dr. Burdette, the principal, Mrs. Gilbert, the literacy coach, and Mrs. Butler, the math coach, all volunteered to teach an Advisory, that met twice a week for an hour, even though it would put a strain on their already hectic schedules.

In response to several needs for resources in the school, individuals sought outside support from business, individuals, and parents. For example, Mr. Dallas, a pull-out literacy teacher who taught small groups of students in grades 6th-8th, along with two other individuals, volunteered to attend a gardening workshop for five hours on a Saturday in order to obtain knowledge and support for the school's garden that wasted away each day. I attended the workshop during its final hour. At the end of it, I causally asked Mr. Dallas what he was doing there on a Saturday and he responded, "Starks is the best thing that has ever happened to me." I did not want to delay him any longer and followed up with him during my next visit at the school. He explained to me that he was a trial lawyer who had done work on a high profile case involving the execution of a young African American male. He told me that he was "tired of seeing young Black boys on that side of the law." He explained that as a teacher, he wanted to make a difference in their lives before they were on trial so that he could "keep them from getting there." Mr. Dallas' activism was accounted for in small ways and in his decision to no longer practice law and become a teacher.

Individuals acted in various ways in order to respond to the needs of students and of the school. Deficits, lack of achievement, social problems, and general need in urban schools like Starks is usually framed in a discourse of failure which blamed schools, teachers, testing, poverty, as well as students but does not account for the many individuals in education who are responding to the day-to-day academic, social, and physical needs of students and attempting to overcome the many obstacles to educating children in poor, urban centers. The culture of action at Starks Middle School is perhaps a result of a clear philosophy which drives their principal who picked up trash on the halls or arranged for a student to get her hair done three hours before the

Eighth grade spring dance. Dr. Burdette believed that "we have to act on behalf of our kids. If we don't, who else will?"

Passive Shaping

Although individuals at Starks Middle responded actively to the needs of students and of the school, teachers responded passively to the social, physical, and academic needs of students. In other words, there seemed to be acquiescence among staff who acted, reacted, and responded in ways that affirmed failure discourses for African American males at Starks Middle School. I observed several instances in which literacy facilitators and teachers were passive in designing and implementing literacy pedagogy, administrators were passive in evaluative practices, and individuals were passive when engaging students. A discourse of passivity is also characterized by indifference towards and/or the dismissal of the academic and social needs of students.

After a meeting with the literacy coach in order to discuss strategies that could make literacy learning more meaningful and exciting for students, Mrs. Gilbert and I devised a workshop that would focus on including meaningful texts (especially for African American male students) as a part of the curriculum. The workshop was conducted during each grade-level content meeting. Teachers were given poems, websites, short stories, essays, sample activities, and related curricular standards for each. They were asked to consider including some of the examples in their daily practices in order to encourage active and meaningful engagement through dialogue, writing, and completing projects. No teacher included any of the suggested texts in their lesson plans and I never observed any teacher using the texts or project samples in their classes. Literacy teachers had dismissed the information given to them during the workshop and turned in lesson plans that included one or more of the following characteristics: focused on grammar, used only readings from the literature book, contained lessons, objectives, and

assignments from previous weeks, and/or used insufficient language which made it difficult to know exactly what students did on a daily basis.

Mrs. Owens, one of the seventh-grade ELA teaches, was identified as a "struggling teacher" by the literacy coach and principal. She received close support from the literacy coach throughout the school year. In order to improve her pedagogical strategies, Mrs. Gilbert met with her weekly, observed her bi-weekly, created lessons for her to implement, and modeled three lessons for her over the course of six weeks. Even after strategies had been implemented, Mrs. Owens's teaching did not improve. Mrs. Gilbert indicated that "she acts as if she does not understand the things I tell her." Although her dismissal was highly recommended by the Mrs. Gilbert, Mrs. Owens was permitted to remain a teacher at Starks Middle School.

An example in which a teacher was passive in his engagement of students (or the failure to engage) was seen while I stood in the commons area of LC 3 observing the change of classes. Shortly after class changes in LC 3, Mr. Hack stood in the common area in order to move along straggling students to their classes. Curtis and Dejuan remained there and proceeded to use profanity and speak to each other disrespectfully and inappropriately. Mr. Hack watched and listened to the two boys exchange words, run, and swing coats at one another. He turned his gaze towards me and said, "these children are crazy" and proceeded to walk into his classroom and close the door. I found that his passive behavior was also ironic in that he did not consider himself responsible for reinforcing the rule of respect that hung above where he stood. "Respect," the poster read, "using appropriate language."

Although I recognized LC 2's attempt at creating a discourse of promise by hanging a graduation gown in the common area for students to see, I also concluded that those responsible for attempting to create a positive discourse of promise around graduation, were passive in their

communication of the meaning behind the symbol. After conducting an interview with David, one of my participants, I walked him back to LC2 and asked him why he thought the gown was up there. He said very precociously, "I have been wondering that very same thing myself."

During an observation of Ms. Toney's sixth grade Language Arts class, I watched several instances where she was dismissive of the student talk and behavior as well as in her pedagogy. The following exchange exemplifies the discourse of passivity present in this particular classroom.

> **Ms. Toney**: If you want the privilege of going to the library to peer-read, then you need to have good classroom behavior. The whiners and complainers will be chosen last.
>
> **Student**: The whiners and complainers will be chosen last (mockingly).
>
> **Ms. Toney**: I'm going to start us off.
>
> **Joshua**: We never get to read.
>
> **Ms. Toney**: First, someone summarize what has happened so far.
>
> (A student provided a summary.)
>
> **Another student**: That's not what happened.
>
> (Teacher proceeds to read from Chapter two of the book.)

After Ms. Toney read for about five minutes, she identified 12 students to send to the library to "peer-read" while seven students remained in class. While students read, Ms. Toney read from her book at a separate table. During class, students made animal noises, walked around the class, and one student rolled his eyes at me.

At various times when I visited the school, teachers seemed to be tired and worn out. They responded in different ways, which could be characterized as indifference, unpreparedness, or lack of concern. Although my illustrations above attempt to describe a discourse of passivity

that was present in the school, certain occurrences of passivity could be attributed to frustration initiated by uncontrollable circumstances. For example, I visited LC 6 in order to observe one of the sixth grade Language Arts teachers, Ms. Tanner. Before I arrived to her class, I met one of her teammates in the hall and asked how things were. She indicated that she was "frustrated and waiting on May." Upon entering Ms. Tanner's class, I noticed a large amount of students (about three-times the normal amount) sitting in the dark. She informed me that two of the teachers on their team were absent and only one substitute teacher had shown up and had walked out before the end of the workday.

The amount of passivity present at Starks Middle School, and in schools like it, fueled the discourse of failure that plagues education today. As a result of the failure discourse, teacher accountability measures have been increased and the opinion of teachers downgraded. Even students recognize a general nature of passivity and indifference in some of their teachers and are stunned at enthusiasm in others. During one of the practices sessions for the school's talent show in Mrs. Gilbert's classroom/office, Juan asked Mrs. Gilbert, "What did you go to college for?" She replied simply, "Education." He darted back, "Then, why are you so energetic? You not supposed to be that energetic."

Complex and contradictory discourses at Starks Middle

Literacy facilitators were responsible for creating and spreading discourse through the presentation of text and symbols and through literacy practices and events which provided context and information regarding school and class culture at Stark Middle School. Considering place as an important part of the discussion of educational discourse provides a glimpse into how discourses can be perpetuated and/or interrupted at different times by the same individuals. Although individuals at Starks Middle School attempted to imagine promise in the midst of

failure, they acted in ways that did not always exhibit attitudes or actions characterized by promise or action.

The discourses present at Starks Middle School relay messages to African American male youth about identity (social and literate). The discourses present at Starks Middle sent conflicting and confounding messages to African American youth in the school: that there were few acceptable positive images of Black males[7] and that African American male youth were in need of direction and correction. Noguera (2003) discusses the potential for positive identification with school for African American boys with school and posits that if schools become "more nurturing and supportive, [black boys] would be more likely to perceive schools as a source of help and opportunity rather than an inhospitable place that one should seek to escape and actively avoid" (p. 455). One possibility is to consider discourse of place and the ways in which we expect young men to contend with their black male identity. At Starks, black males are "isolated collectively" in ways that call into question their style of dress and creates iconic standards for their behavior and expectations for their life.

The educational discourse, which describes the inevitable failure of African American male youth can and should be interrupted. Schools are becoming more attentive to the needs of their African American male students and attempting to act in ways to transform discourses that predict and describe their ineluctable failure. As evident at Starks Middle School, individuals seemed responsible for perpetuating (or not) certain discourses. For example, the comments, actions, and practices of literacy facilitators and other individuals did typify failure discourse. In other cases, the same literacy facilitators and individuals acted in ways that were representative of more hopeful discourses—ones that interrupt educational discourse which envisions little

[7] Refers to the images of Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Barak Obama, which hung in each Learning Community.

hope for African American male youth. At any rate, attention to how space, practice, and attitudes can perpetuate failure discourse could be the difference in shaping and mis-shaping of positive literate identities for African American male youth.

Chapter Five:

Shaping and Mis-shaping: Literacy Opportunities Captured and Lost

As a participant observer at Starks Middle School, I was afforded an opportunity that many people my age do not get to relive—I went back to middle school. I sat at a wooden desk, I copied notes from the board, and I listened, alongside students, to teachers blather about nouns, gerund phrases, fragments, and clauses. I participated in official, unofficial, and third spaces in literacy classrooms in which I was privy to conversations among students about fashion, music, neighborhood rivalry, friendships, and the latest Starks Middle School buzz. What was also apparent in these spaces among the students was an air of restlessness. In this chapter, though an illustration of students' responses and by centering their attitudes towards their literacy learning, I offer a critique of the ways in which literacy teachers presented lessons, assigned activities, and facilitated literacy engagement for African American male youth at Starks Middle school.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how African American male youth at Starks Middle engaged the practices, texts, and ideologies of various literacy classrooms/spaces. In an attempt to address what practices, ideologies, and texts extend and/or complicate notions of a literate identity for African American male youth at Starks Middle School, this chapter focuses on instances within literacy classrooms/spaces that illustrate how the students responded to the literacy opportunities provided them. Characteristics of their responses revealed that participants had little or no voice in their literacy leaning, participants viewed certain practices and expectations for engagement as having little or no purpose, and participants sought out alternative spaces (within schools) for meaningful literacy engagement.

"Why am I writing about going to outer-space?": African American Male Youth Have Little Say in Their Literacy Learning

During the months of December and January, writing formulaic essays was a literacy event (Heath, 1983) that took place at Starks Middle School at least twice a week as teachers and students prepared for the upcoming high-stakes writing exam. Teachers emphasized a five-paragraph format, instructed students to remember various acronyms, and commanded students to recite "5-7-7-7-5", in order to remember how many sentences to include in each paragraph. While observing an eighth grade Language Arts class during such a review, Mrs. Shoemaker informed students of their upcoming writing prompt:

> You are going to pretend that you are going out of space. Write an essay describing three things that you will take with you. Make sure that you have an introductory paragraph with at least how many sentences? (The class recited five). Use the three body paragraphs to describe the three items you would take with you and then write your conclusion.

William expressed his frustration with writing another essay. "I am tired of writing these essays. And why I am writing about going outer-space?" William laid his head down before he snatched a piece of paper from a spiral notebook and began to draft an essay. Other students followed suit, while Ms. Shoemaker walked around the classroom, stopping at several desks usually to encourage students to begin or to "continue writing".

The same class was then interrupted by Trenton, another African American male. He also voiced his frustration after being unable to come up with two other things he would take with him to outer-space. The only item he had written in one of the three pre-writing bubbles was "oxygen." Below is the exchange between him, Mrs. Shoemaker, and another student:

Trenton: Can we please write about something else?

Mrs. Shoemaker: What happens if we write off topic?

Trenton: Well can you change the topic?

Mrs. Shoemaker: No, Trenton. Finish your prewriting.

Trenton: Man, can't we write about what we would take on vacation, or to college, or to jail?

Student: You aint taking nothing with you to jail, believe that.

Trenton: True. (Field notes, January 12, 2011)

Trenton expressed his desire to write about a different destination, suggesting that Mrs. Shoemaker change the topic to make it relevant to his life. He suggested that students be permitted to write about what they would take on vacation, to college, or to jail. Although Trenton used sarcasm (I sensed it in the sound of his voice) when he suggested jail as a destination, his desire to adapt the writing prompt in order to make it more meaningful to his life was apparent.

During my interview with William a couple of weeks later, I asked about his frustration with the "outer-space prompt." He described, "All these essays don't make no sense. I'm tired of having to write about stuff I don't care about. She not gone grade it no way" (January 26, 2011). William also informed me that he did not write about three things he would take with him to outer-space. "I couldn't think of anything else," he told me. Instead he wrote "three reasons why he was not going to space." In his essay, he describes:

> The first reason I am not going out of space is because I am an eighth grader. It takes lots of years to become an astronaut and I don't want to be an astronaut. I want to be a football player and own my own business. (Student essay)

When I asked him about his teacher's reaction to his essay, he told me that he was informed that an off-topic paper was an automatic failure.

When I walked into Ms. Owens class, students were sitting and standing around groups of desks, which contained piles of newspapers and magazines. I took a seat across from Henry who informed me that they were looking for similes and metaphors. I watched as Henry and three other boys skimmed *Ebony, Jet, GQ, Time* and the local newspaper. Henry rubbed a page from *GQ* on his person, "This junk smells good." He passed the page to one of his friends and continued this search. "Why can't we make up our own [similes and metaphors]? This is stupid!" Henry spoke only loud enough for the people sitting near him (including me) to hear him. Within seconds of his quiet protest, Henry shouted, "Oooh, I found one!" He asked me to make sure that he had indeed found a metaphor in an ad in *GQ*.

A few minutes more into the assignment, Henry had become frustrated after not being able to locate another metaphor or a simile. He picked up part of the local newspaper and held it in front of him. "Ms. Owens, we should read this. It's about Black people," Henry had left his seat to go to the front of the classroom where Ms. Owens stood. Their exchange continued:

Ms. Owens: Have you found your three examples?

Henry: I found one.

Ms. Owens: Did you write it down?

Henry: Not yet. I think we should read this.

Ms. Owens: We are not doing that right now. Go sit down.

Henry: Man, I don't like being in this class anymore. (Field notes, March 17, 2011)

Many observations of the instructional exchanges between students and teachers revealed that students were seldom asked their opinion, or expected to discuss concepts, opinions, or

ideas. Teachers usually elicited responses related to basic comprehension questions, numbered items in their grammar textbooks, or repeating information after teachers. Although William, Trenton, and Henry all exercised agency in their literacy learning, their demands to make meaningful connections were ignored or were faced by opposition by their teachers.

One instance in which students were actually pushed to consider questions and provide their opinion revealed that students were ill-equipped to participate in meaningful discussion with each other around texts or ideas. For example, twice a week, Dex, a seventh-grader in Mrs. Naomi's class was pulled out for extra help with Mr. Dallas. Dex and five other students were expected to respond to the writing on the dry erase board, which read: "Can innocent people be convicted? Can guilty people be found not guilty? Tell me what you think!" (Field notes, February 7, 2011). After providing time for students to respond and explaining a brief background on *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, the book they would be reading, Mr. Dallas elicited responses from each of the students. Many students did not wish to share aloud, so Mr. Dallas read students' responses from their papers. Finally, he asked Dex, "So, what do you think?" Dex responded, "I don't think." Dex's refusal to respond in this literacy space compared to his regular Language Arts class with Ms. Naomi. He was not willing to participate beyond answering questions, which required limited responses. He told me after class, "(Mr. Dallas) wants us to talk too much. Why can't he just be like the rest of these teachers?"

Though the examples above exemplify instances in which students exercised a certain level of voice in their literacy learning, like in the cases with William, Trenton, and Henry, this was not always the case. In fact, several students completed assignments, without protest, even if they questioned the importance of assignments or failed to completely understand what was required of them. In very few cases did African American male students simply refused to

participate. Each instance, however, indicated that teachers and other literacy facilitators suppressed the voices of African American male youth in two ways—either by dismissing their autonomy in their literacy learning or by failing to encourage their participation in meaningful events.

Cereal Boxes and Book Reports: African American Male Youth Question Purpose of Particular Literacy Events

It was not uncommon to hear students gripe about assignments given to them in their Language Arts classes. In fact, the section above described examples of students asserting (to no avail) their voices for writing assignments that were more meaningful and connected to their lived experiences. Related to this, was the opinion that many of the ELA assignments and activities had very little purpose in their lived experiences. Participants were clear about particular activities as having purpose and benefit. Jai, David, William, Trenton, Winston, Henry, Dex, Joshua, and Michael—the participants in the study, identified learning vocabulary as an assignment that would benefit them later in life. Many of them discussed learning correct grammar as beneficial as well. However, a number of them questioned the purpose of many of assignments and viewed them as having no or little purpose in their literate lives.

During an interview with Jai, a rapper/songwriter, he talked with me about his latest assignment, which was a book report on a book he was to read independently. He chose *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis and described the assignment he would have to complete within the next couple days:

> We have to do a book report and include a summary, something about the author, and make up some questions about the book and answer them. But we have to put it all on a cereal box. What do cereal boxes have to do with book reports? (March 23, 2011)

Jai explained to me that his book report would not be on a cereal box because he questioned its purpose for having to do so. He rhetorically posed, "What's the point?"

After many months of spending time in the literacy classes at Starks Middle School, I had come to expect a grammar-focused lesson in most of the classes the majority of the time. Although lesson plans reflected an even distribution of objectives related to reading, writing, and conventions (grammar), my field notes revealed that over 75% of objectives that I recorded during classroom observations were related to conventions and grammar. Participants critiqued grammar-focused lessons during many of our informal chats as well as during more formal interviews. Michael, a sixth grader in Ms. Toney's class critiqued the activities in his ELA class and questioned the heavy grammar focus of his teacher:

> It seems like we always doing stuff we already know. Like subject and verbs. We learned that in elementary school. We correct sentences like almost everyday. I just feel like she need to move on from that. (March 23, 2011)

When talking to me about his writing assignments Trenton pointed out that:

> Ms. Shoemaker just be checking to make sure you say things in the right way. That your subjects and your verbs agree or that you got your periods and commas in the right place. She don't say nothing about what you actually wrote, like if it was good or not. Its good if you got all your paragraphs and you don't use slang. (March 23, 2010)

Winston questioned the purpose of having to read silently during his ELA class. During an observation of Winston in Mrs. Shoemaker's class, I sat in the back of the class as they prepared to read *The Barbara Walters Story* from their textbook. Students read silently and answered five questions in writing. Students were instructed to turn their papers in at the end of class. When I asked Winston about reading and answering questions, he explained to me:

> I don't like just reading to myself. I have to talk about what I read because it makes me understand it better. I just wrote anything down though because it aint no point in writing it down if we not gone talk about it. (February 23, 2011)

Jai, Michael, and Winston questioned the purpose of the activities and assignments they were participating in during their ELA classes. Although they questioned the purpose of many assignments, they completed them by making adjustments (the case with Jai) or with little or no effort (the case of Winston). Participants seemed to also want more out of their literacy experiences. As in Michael's request for his teacher to "move on" from lessons in grammar and Winston's desire to "talk" about what he read.

"Can I come in here?" African American Male Youth Used Alternative Spaces for Meaningful Literacy Participation

In between observations, during interviews, and before and after school, I would spend time in Mrs. Gilbert's office, which was a classroom used as her office, located in LC3. I was able to witness several occurrences of students getting put out of class, cutting class, and hesitating to go to class. More often than not, students' behavior, refusal to attend class, or hesitation was related to their protest of particular teachers, practices, or management in particular classrooms.

During third period transition to his Language Arts class, it was not uncommon for Winston to peek his head into Mrs. Gilbert's door. "You coming to my class today?" He would often ask. "Not today." I explained that I would be sitting in another class that day. After his look of disappointment, he asked Mrs. Gilbert to sit it her room. "Can I come in here? I don't want to go in that lady class. We not 'bout to do nothing. Please! I will be quiet. I will sit at the table and read quietly." Mrs. Gilbert encouraged him to get to class before he was late and explained to

him that she also would be doing observations. "Tomorrow, ok?" Mrs. Gilbert would sometimes allow students to sit in her class to read, complete work, or sometimes just to talk. Mrs. Gilbert said that Winston would usually get put out of Ms. Owens class at least three times a week. "She just doesn't know what to do with him," she explained.

One afternoon, I observed the last fifteen minutes of Mrs. Gilbert working with a group of students[8] who were identified by their teachers as "struggling writers." Six eighth grade students and Mrs. Gilbert sat around one of the four rectangular tables in the room. I read from the board where Mrs. Gilbert had modeled a writing activity[9] for students:

> My name is D[10]. It means the goddess of wine. Like wine, my name is sweet and tastes like purple grapes when you speak it. There are many D's in the world, but my D is special when my mom says it. Her D is cotton candy except when she is mad, then it cuts like a knife. (Jan 19, 2011)

I listened as students shared their writing with each other and Mrs. Gilbert offered praise. Once all students were done sharing, Mrs. Gilbert explained that she would try to get them at least once a week to help them improve their writing skills. "Man, I wish we could come in here all the time," said one of the two females. "Yeah, she should be our teacher," declared one of the boys as the young men as they were ushered out the door.

Jai, who was described in the previous section, also sought out Mrs. Gilbert's class/office as an alternative space to engage literacy. Because the book he had chosen, *Bud, Not Buddy*, was an "independent read," he asked if either Mrs. Gilbert or myself could help him with the book.

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[8] None of the students in the group were participants in the study. The group was comprised of two females and four males, all African American.
[9] The writing activity was entitled "My Name" adapted from the vignette from Sandra Cisneros's, *House on Mango Street*.
[10] An initial is used to maintain anonymity.

"[My teacher] said we not going over the book, but I need help and she won't help me," Jai explained to the both of us sitting at the table. I agreed to discuss the book with him because I was familiar with it. He jotted a few notes in a notebook as we talked about the characters. Jai also asked me to clarify instructions from his cereal box book report handout, which read:

> On the back of the box, you can use this space to have students illustrate their knowledge of a lesson you have studied in conjunction with the novel, or if the book is fiction, you could require students to construct a plot pyramid, being sure to use examples from the novel for each step of the pyramid. (Handout given to students, "How to make a cereal box book report")

The instructions from the handout were actually instructions for teachers. However, they had not been rewritten in order to address students. I explained that he should probably ask his teacher for clarification because I was even unsure about the "plot pyramid."

When I learned about the recording studio from Trenton, I was surprised. It was probably the one space I had not toured after being in the school for almost six months. He explained that during the after-school program the year before that some of the students learned to use the recording equipment. He asked Mrs. Gilbert, who was working in her room during our interview, if he could show me. The three of us took the stairs to the basement and walked down a long hallway to the studio which housed two Mac computers, a mixer, keyboard, and some other equipment that had been donated by Dallas Austin[11]. Trenton was very excited and began to share with me the types of things that "students could do down here." He explained:

> Man, we could record a song about the CRCT. We could have a contest where students wrote songs and whoever won could record it and we could play in on the intercom. We

[11] Dallas Austin was a local music producer.

> can record poetry or something or a play. Anything. Teachers should bring their students down here. (March 8, 2011)

Trenton's excitement to engage in meaningful literacy-centered activities was prompted by available technology in his school. Yet he had not been in the studio since the year before during the after-school program. When I inquired about the studio with teachers and other school staff, no one in the building knew how to use the equipment and as Ms. Jennings indicated, was a "waste of money."

Students responded in many ways to the literacy opportunities provided them. More often than not, students completed assignments without protest and were expected to participate in limiting ways. For example, they sat quietly, answered few questions, bubbled answers, and read silently. Duncan (2000) would refer to these "urban pedagogies" as the symbols, practices, and content with specific intentions to push adolescents of color to service industry jobs and prisons. In most cases, their literacy participation was limited to the few opportunities provided by their teachers. They wanted to engage text, discuss, and write with purpose and in ways that connected to their literate identities (which are explored further in the next chapter). Although participants had little or no voice in their literacy leaning and viewed certain practices and expectations for engagement as having little or no purpose, many of them sought out alternative spaces for meaningful literacy engagement. In these other spaces, students wrote about their names, discussed a novel, and Trenton considered ways to use available technology for meaningful engagement—practices which should be standard in any literacy space.

Chapter Six:

Shaping Literate Lives Inside Schools: The Literacy Profiles of Nine African American Male Youth

In the previous chapters, I offered a glimpse into the literate lives of Michael, Joshua, Winston, Henry, Dex, Jai, David, William, and Trenton during school hours and in their literacy classes. Chapter Four described several discourses present in the spaces that intended contribute to the literate identities of students in the school. In Chapter Five, I illustrated how participants engaged literacy opportunities within and across literacy spaces and how their level of engagement related to the literacy opportunities afforded them by literacy facilitators. The purpose of this chapter is to amplify the voices of African American male youth and present their reflections, opinions, and ideas related to their literate identities and the various discourses present in the school and the literacy opportunities provided. Then, I examine how African American male youth negotiate, transform, and/or reconstruct particular symbols, signs, and practices in order to establish and/or maintain positive literate identities—or not.

Each section is presented as a literacy profile in which each participant engaged questions about literacy participation and its influence of his literate identity. Participants also defined literacy and explained the importance of literacy in their lives. They name literacy models—that is, people in their lives who provide them with models for how, when, and for what purpose one engages in literacy-centered activities. The literacy profiles provide the space for the young men to reflect on their literacy participation, practices, and/or ideologies within and across literacy spaces at Starks Middle School.

Literate Identities of Black Youth: Negotiating, Transforming, and Reconstructing

Scholars like Awad (2007), Gordon (2009), and Osborne (1999) provide us with notions that identification with academic literacies is especially relevant to the overall academic success of African American students. However, the literate identities of African American male youth are coalesced with imposed sociocultural and sociohistorical ideas about what it means to be African American males and by the larger failure narrative that begins to plague black male youth upon entering school. Focusing on the literate identities of these African American male youth provided insight into the roles teachers, literacy facilitators, as well as literacy engagement and practice play in the shaping of literate identities for African American male youth. The profiles of the youth in this study revealed that students accepted moderate views of literacy initially and discussed more nuanced and views of literacy as they negotiated their literacy participation in other spaces (i.e. talent show, religious ceremonies). The young men had definite ideas about the purposes for literacy engagement and the roles of literacy facilitators and looked to them to provide examples for how, when, and for what purposes to engage literacy. They recognized space as a medium for receiving information about their own identities, expectations for behavior, and about their teachers' pedagogy. William, Jai, David, Joshua, Dex, Henry, Trenton, Michael, and Winston all provide information regarding the possibilities of positive literate identities for African American male youth and thus provide information regarding how teachers can direct attention to space, discourse, identity, literacy modeling, and literacy engagement—dimensions I will discuss further in the next chapter, which could change the academic trajectory of African American male youth.

"The point of school is to make us literate": The Literacy Profile of William

William exhibited a confidence that I have not typically seen in eighth graders. He was tall, athletic, and well spoken. I could see that he prided himself on the way he dressed. His dreads were neatly pulled back and held tightly by a rubber band. His burgundy collared shirt was neatly tucked into his belted khakis and he wore black basketball shoes on the day of our final interview. William played basketball and football for the school and was football captain. He was an honor student and was recently inducted in the school's Junior Beta Club—one of two eighth grade African American males in the club.

William's definition of literacy was simple. According to him, literacy was defined as "reading, writing, speaking, and being able to understand those things." He explained that rapping was not literacy, but that you had to be "literate in order to be a rapper." He also recognized that his teachers wanted him to be literate. He asserted that:

> The point of school is to make us literate. In every class we go to, from like second or third grade, we been learning to read, write and speak. In math, it's a little different, but basically the same. Teachers have us read and write about the information they want us to know. And we practice reading and writing and speaking so that we get better at it. (April 22, 2011)

William recognized the importance of becoming "better at" literacy as being to his life as a student and as an athlete. He discussed literacy as academic and personal:

> I know that I am going to have to read and all that with whatever I do. I am going to college and then maybe play football and I need to be able to protect myself from people. (April 22, 2011)

William also recognized texts, ideologies, and practices that took place at school that he identified as well as those that he did not identify with. In the previous chapter, William expressed his frustration about having to write an essay about three things that he would take outer space. He decided to write why he would not go out of space and shared with me his opinion of several writing assignments:

> I didn't like the topic. It was stupid to me. I just didn't understand why we had to go outer space and why we couldn't write about whatever. And then she gave me [an] F. I like writing about things I care about and about stuff I know. We wrote about what changes we would make to the school. I wrote that I would change the lunch and add a football class to the regular schedule. And I wrote that we should have a free period for 15 minutes. I liked that one. (April 22, 2011)

Of the two texts William was expected to produce, he identified with the one that allowed him to write about things he cared about. He continued to try to think of texts that were important to him. According to William, "We haven't read anything that just stood out. We don't really read a lot. We should. We do more work out of the grammar book" (April 22, 2011).

William considered his literate identity as positive. He describes:

> Most of it comes from just my personal connection to stuff I read on my own and I like to write about stuff that happen to me. My coach did tell me to read a book by Toney Dungee. But I haven't yet. And my coach said I was a good football captain because I could speak to them and get them hype and ready for the games. (April 22, 2011)

Reading, writing, and speaking were a part of William's literate identity and he recognized personal and academic reasons for engaging various literacy practices. For William, his positive

literate identity was a result of a "personal connection" as well as affirmation from a literacy model—his football coach.

"Some of that stuff just ain't me": The Literacy Profile of Jai

Jai was very charismatic and funny. By the time of this interview, we had become familiar because of my time at the school and our work on the school's talent show together. He and two other boys formed a rap trio and performed an original song, "I Ball," written by Jai. It was during the time of practice that we chatted, laughed, and exchanged ideas about their performance—which we decided together should be at the end because it would be well received by the crowd. Jai was very popular among his peers even though he did not play any sports and did not participate in any other school activities. He had been retained in the second grade and informed me that he was too old to be on any sports team in middle school. He could play for the feeder high school, but let me know that he was "cool" with not participating. When I asked Jai to define literacy, he sat back in his chair and ate Doritos from a bag. "You want some, Ms. Latrise?" I kindly declined and he began to talk through a sideways smile:

> Literacy. Literacy is being able to read and write and comprehend what you read. And its being able to write clearly so that other people can understand. You can't even function if you not literate in something. (May 17, 2011)

Jai explained that if a person is "literate in something" then he/she knows a subject well. He listed math, reading, and science. He finally claimed, "So, I guess you can be literate in football or sports because you have to know the language of football in order to get it" (May, 17, 2011).

When I observed Jai during his Language Arts class, he participated in answering questions related to grammar, completed assignments from handouts, and wrote essays. Outside of class, he read *Bud, Not Buddy*–the only novel he was assigned the entire school year.

According to Jai, he felt "good" about his participation in Language Arts class and claimed that "most of the time we just sit there and listen to [Mrs. Shoemaker]." He continues:

> I do my work for the most part. But some of that stuff isn't me. Like that cereal box [book report]. I just didn't understand putting information on a cereal box. One time we had to make this little flipbook thing too. I can't even remember what it was for. I wasn't feeling that either. I like talking and writing, and acting out stuff. (May 17, 2011)

Jai identified with practices that were traditionally literacy related—reading, writing, drama, however, he did not connect with activities when he was unsure of its purpose.

Outside of class, Jai shared with me that he enjoyed spending time at the studio writing and "laying down tracks." His performance at the school's talent show revealed that he was talented in writing and performing. He talks about things in his life that inspire him:

> I like to write about stuff that is related to my life. "I Ball" talks about getting money and stuff but it is also about being with my friends and being young and having fun. I write about deep stuff too. Like about my neighborhood and crime and stuff. One time I started writing about having to wear a uniform to school. (May 17, 2011)

He begins to rap:

> Blue shirt
>
> Khaki pants
>
> A pair of vans
>
> I'm out the door
>
> At the bus
>
> Hiding out
>
> The hood laughing

No more

I want to choose

A graphic T

Some baggie jeans (inaudible) (May 17, 2011)

He also told me that Lil Wayne, a rapper, was someone he looked up when it came to literacy because, "he just be using all kinds of words and being creative with his [lyrics]."

I asked Jai about opportunities to share his writing in class and he explained to me that they did essay writing and not much else. According to Jai, "we write a whole lot, but it's always essays. We sometimes write about personal stuff but it's still an essay. I would share my stuff though" (May 17, 2011).

"My religion has a lot to do with my literacy:" The Literacy Profile of David

David was in Ms. Jennings's "smart class" and was mild mannered, well-spoken, and made excellent grades. According to standardized test data from 2010, he exceeded expectations in each subject. He was the other African American male in the eighth grader who was inducted into the Junior Beta Club. David was a morning announcer and acted as the school's wellness ambassador[12].

Like Jai and William, David understood literacy to include reading, writing, and speaking. Jai considered himself "very literate" and contributed to his participation as a Jehovah's Witness. He describes how his literate identity and religion connect. According to David:

[12] The school's PE teacher appointed the school's wellness ambassador. David acted as a liaison between the students at Starks Middle and health professions in order to brainstorm how kids can become more active. As wellness ambassador, he also was in charge of hosting the school's pep rallies.

> I am a Jehovah's Witness and we do a lot of reading and speaking to people. My religion has a lot to do with my literacy. I am a part of group that give sermons at Kingdom Hall and I write my sermons. I think because I participate in that, it just makes me able to read and write better in school.

He also contributed his strong literate identity to the adults who helped him understand his religion and who act as mentors for him. According to David, "[the adults in the group] actually show us how to speak to people and deliver sermons in a way that people will understand. I learn from them. They do the things that they expect us to do." David's comment struck me because in Chapter Four, David was the student who did not know exactly why the graduation gown hung in his LC. He said, "No one has said anything about the gown. It just hangs there. I guess they want us to graduate. Makes sense."

David also discussed with me his participation around the school as also being related to his participation in his religion. He explains:

> We are taught to do service and one way that we provide service is by spreading the word. I don't really talk about my religion, but I do talk to people about behavior and acting a certain way. I also want to be an example for people. I serve by speaking on the intercom or at pep rallies, or in class. (May 11, 2011)

For David, literacy served both personal and academic purposes. His participation, although it was in an academic space, in literacy-centered activities had a personal connection to his service as a Jehovah's Witness.

His literacy models included people from the Kingdom Hall, as well as his PE teacher and his mother. He explained, "Mr. C is always reading something and my mom likes to write, so I see them doing it all the time

When I asked David about the outer space essay he had to write and other activities in his Language Arts class, he explained, "I didn't have a problem with the outer space essay. I wrote that I would take a picture of my family, my iPod, and my Bible."

"You can't look at a wall around here and not read something": The Literacy Profile of Joshua

Joshua stood at least a foot above me and was as talkative as he was tall. He told me that he played all sports. He had even played hockey at a previous school in another state. He explained to me that he thought of himself as a student athlete because his mother told him that he was a "student first, then an athlete." He couldn't play sports at Starks this year because as a sixth grader, he was ineligible and was looking forward to the upcoming season.

Joshua's mother was employed at the school as a parent liaison which made Joshua "uncomfortable sometimes" because she was always around. However, Joshua explained that his mother being at the school ensured that he did what he was supposed to. He explained:

> I have to be in class cause you never know when she gone come to see what I'm doing. I don't mind though. She don't really be in my classes like that. But my teachers know that all they have to do is call upstairs. (May 11, 2011)

Joshua's definition of literacy included reading and later in the interview he identified speaking as literacy He understood that reading was very important to his literate identity and to his life as a "student athlete." According to Joshua:

> Reading is important because you have to read in every class. And even when you not in class. You can't look at the wall around here and not read something. Quotes painted on the wall. Rules everywhere. (May 11, 2011)

When I asked if Joshua thought reading was important to his teachers he explained:

> I think it is. But most of the time don't really read like stories. We do a lot of work out of our grammar book. We don't even take our Lit books home. We did read *Surviving the Applewhites*. But I didn't really like that book. I couldn't relate to it really. (May 11, 2011)

Joshua attributed his teacher's grammar focus to the correct usage of language and added that "teachers want us to speak correctly. So speaking can be literacy too."

Joshua entrusted his teachers and his mother to help him develop a literate identity. He explained:

> My teachers teach me how to speak and read and be literate. My mom too. She is in school for a degree in Psychology and is always reading and writing papers. So I know that I need to be prepared. When I see my mom studying, I feel good about studying too. (May 11, 2011)

Although Joshua critiqued his teacher's grammar focus, like David, he entrusted adults literacy facilitators in his life (in this case, his teachers and his mom) to provide literacy opportunities to "teach" literacy. A literacy ideology—the importance of studying—was modeled by his mother. Joshua also named his science teacher as another literacy model in his life because "he was always reading interesting stuff and can tell you all kinda interesting facts. Stuff that most people don't know."

"Just cause I fail one class don't mean I'm a failure:" The Literacy Profile of Dex

Dex would only sit down with me for a few minutes. Many answers he claimed not to know or understand. When I observed him during his Language Arts class, he answered questions in one or two words, no more than what was required. He did not carry any books, folders, or book bag around with him and he usually wore his hoodie on his head. In Chapter

Four, Mrs. Gilbert explained that Dex rarely attended class and she referred to him as "criminal." He seemed liveliest when he was in fact on the halls. However in class, he was the complete opposite.

Dex did share one story with me about a teacher during the previous year. He explained that "my sixth grade Language Arts teacher told me last year that I was a failure cause I would do her work. Just because I fail one class don't mean I'm a failure" (May 17, 2011).

"We need to do more stuff like that:" The Literacy Profile of Michael

It was difficult for sixth graders to be involved in many activities at school. They were not allowed to play sports and their classes were located on one of the bottom floors. They only time they were allowed on the main floor was for lunch and after a couple food fights, sixth graders had to eat sack lunches in their classroom. I only saw Michael in his LC or when I interviewed him. Unlike the other participants, he did not seek me out. I did not see him at pep rallies, or the talent show. I did not see him walking the halls or at the football or basketball games. He was willing to share with me, however, any time I asked.

Michael had become increasingly frustrated with his middle school experience. He had a small frame, wore glasses, and each time I saw him, he looked as if he was ready to go. His frustration came from "sitting and doing nothing all day" and he talked about how his fifth grade experience was "so much better." According to Michael:

> All we do is sit and be quiet. In elementary school, it seem like we were learning. We used to read and play games and write poems and stuff. Here we don't get to do stuff like that. (May 3, 2011)

When I asked Michael about experiences in his Language Arts class that he enjoyed, he did recall a timeline that was assigned during Black History Month. He explained:

> We had to do a project on a person for Black History Month. I chose Florence Griffin Joyner. We had to find books and articles on our person and print pictures. We had to make a timeline and present it to the class. (May 3, 2011)

He continued to explain why he felt the timeline was a good assignment:

> Because we actually got to do something, research and reading. And using the Internet. We got to talk in front of the class. We need to do more stuff like that. We got a chance to find out about stuff we didn't already know. (May 3. 2011)

Michael also shared that he enjoyed reading *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series by Jeff Kenny because they were funny and that he could relate to the main character. He informed me that he was currently reading *Dog Days*. He reached into his book bag to show me, "See. Here it is. Its kinda like what I do to escape."

"She not interested in knowing what I can do:" The Literacy Profile of Henry

Once I got to know Henry, I saw three sides of him. During his Language Arts class, he came across as a bit disagreeable. He complained about his seat, or the room temperature, and was opinionated about the assignments given to him by his teachers. He would leave his seat to ask questions or to sharpen a pencil. In Chapter Five, I describe a time during his Language Arts class when he suggested that the class read an article from the newspaper he was using for another assignment. His request was dismissed and he marched to his seat frustrated.

I saw another side of Henry during his Drama class. He walked into class, turned up the radio and turned on the overhead projector. "That' my job," he explained to me. More students trickled in after him and took their seat. Mrs. Stephens walked in to a quiet class and thanked Henry for arriving on time and for "getting us ready." Henry's eyes went from the board to his paper with an intensity was not present during Language Arts. Mrs. Stephens walked around

passing out tickets to students. Henry got three; one for coming to class early and completing his tasks as a class manager, another for wearing his uniform, and a final one for completing his warm-up assignment.

Henry's final side was that of a performer. In addition to memorizing lines and acting as a part of a class project for his drama class, Henry was a singer. When he arrived to talent show try-outs, I was a bit surprised. He asked me to download an instrumental version of Usher's *Let it Burn.* When he began to sing, I was in awe. He held up the rolled up piece of paper that represented the mic, moved along with the music, pumped his fist, closed his eyes, and sang Usher's words as if they were his own.

During our interview, Henry explained that singing and performing were a part of his literate identity:

> I like doing plays and learning songs, so reading is important to me because I want to be an actor and a singer. I have to read and write and know how to speak well. I am still learning. (May 11, 2011)

I was struck by the ways in which Henry participated in the three different spaces—his Language Arts class, Drama, and talent show rehearsal. He explained to me the difference in the spaces. According to Henry:

> Well, for the talent show, I know that I have to be good and get the crowd into it, like you and Mr. Camp said. I don't want to get booed. And I like drama 'cause we actually get to do stuff. We get to act and listen to music and talk about interesting stuff. We get tickets when we do our work and wear our uniforms. She let us buy stuff out of her treasure chest every month. Like candy and chips and stuff. Man, Ms. Owens just wants us to sit down and be quiet. She not interested in knowing what I can do. (May 11, 2011)

"I like to read stuff that's interesting:" The Literacy Profile of Trenton

Trenton was an average student. He had a solid C average and could have been mistaken as lazy and uninterested. He sat in class and appeared to do his work. He was usually quiet. In Chapter Five, I describe a class period where Trenton expressed his frustration about writing about three things he would take with him out of space. After only thinking of one item, expressing his frustration to his teacher, and a brief exchange with another student, he put his head down without completing the essay.

Trenton was also an athlete who also liked playing video. His favorite game was Madden and he told me that he played it "way too much." Trenton, an eighth grader, was on the school's football and basketball teams which also took up a lot of his time. He was quite talented and boasted about being the best on the team. Others recognized this fact as well. Trenton was eager to go to high school because in middle school, "they treat you like babies." Trenton explained to me some aspects of his literate identity. According to Trenton:

> I don't like writing. We write so many essays it's ridiculous. I like to read stuff that's interesting. Like on the Internet. I read ESPN every day. I have only read one novel since I been at [Starks] and this my last year. I didn't read that book Mrs. Shoemaker gave us. I can't even find it. (May 13, 2011)

He also talked about the importance of literacy in his life as an athlete. He explains:

> Athletes have to know how to read and write and speak. They live their life in the spotlight. They have to speak on TV and do interviews. They have to be able to read so that they can be intelligent. I don't know about writing. But it's all related. (May 13, 2011)

Even though Trenton did not identify literacies related to the recording studio (i.e. composing, singing, rapping, etc.), he was excited about the available technology in his school. During an earlier interview, Trenton listed many activities that were possible for the studio. He explained to me that they still had not used the space and that he had not been back down there since he took me.

"I'm just glad I already know how to read": The Literacy Profile of Winston

Of all the participants, Winston stands out the most to me. I saw him each day I was at Starks. Mrs. Gilbert informed me that he "even looks for you on days he knows you're not coming." Winston introduced me as his mentor, or his "mama" to other students and protected me against the scrutiny of students who were unsure of why I was in their school so much. He hugged me, carried my computer bag, and/or walked me to Mrs. Gilbert's office on numerous occasions.

Winston did not play on any sports team at the school because his grades made him ineligible. He had failed two classes the last semester of his sixth grade year. He had a desire to play and wanted to be on the team so he was making an effort to pass each class so that he could play the following year.

Winston defined literacy as "having to do with reading, writing, speaking and understanding." He recognized that his day was full of instances when he had to be literate. According to Winston:

> Well I have to be able to talk to you every day and other people. We read in all our classes. We have to write our work. You have to be literate to understand simple stuff too like signs and stuff. (May 13, 2011)

When I asked him about his Language Arts class and the activities he felt connected to, he explained:

> I hate that lady class. She harass me every day. She don't like me and I don't care. We don't do nothing except if you coming in there. Every other day, we just be sitting working out our grammar books or talking. She sits at her desk. Its always dirty in there and she don't care. I'm just glad I already know how to read and stuff like that 'cause if it was up to her, we wouldn't know nothing. (May 13, 2011)

In other spaces, Winston seemed to have more meaningful literacy experiences. He talked about his literacy engagement outside of his Language Arts classroom. According to Winston:

> In science, I did a project on a black inventor and we had to research that and write about it. I looked up stuff on the Internet and [my teacher] let us go to the library to find books. I like stuff like that. (May 13, 2011)

He also added that he enjoyed talking to me about school because it provided him the opportunity to "talk and think."

Chapter Seven: (Re)Shaping Place, Practice for Black youth: Discussion and Implications for Educating African American Male Youth

It is not by accident that my research led me into the literacy classrooms of an urban middle school. It was in this space that I found my voice as a literary teacher and developed my own craft. My focus on African American male youth came later during my work in a small high school where 70% of my students were Black male youth. It is there where I discovered ways to engage African American male youth in meaningful literacy learning where fostering positive literate identities remained center. It was in graduate school that I discovered that there was a plethora of scholarship examining the failure of African American male youth, which was quite contrary to what my students and I experienced. As a result of my personal experience and the desire to examine claims of African American male youth by listening to their voices, I attempt to document their experiences in ways that offer a different side to what has become a sad story. I was led to Starks Middle School and to Michael, Joshua, Winston, Henry, Dex, Jai, David, William, and Trenton in order to continue the discussion about how we can reshape place and practice in order to foster positive literate identities for African American male youth.

Chapter Seven is a summary of the dimensions of the study, as well as an overarching discussion of the research findings with a particular emphasis on the most salient themes that emerge from the study data. Additionally, this final chapter of the dissertation seeks to highlight key implications for teacher practice and teacher education. A conclusion follows leaving the reader with recommendations for future research.

Discourse of Place and Black Male Identity

In her book, *Harlem on our minds: Place, race, and the literacies of urban youth*, Kinloch (2010) takes on the intersections of place, the literacies of young people, and race in

order to, in part, critique institutional structures, which dictate the constructions of identity. A critical examination of space is especially important within schools as it could offer some explanation to the competing discourses, which on the one hand remind Black boys of their academic inferiority and on the other attempt to foster positive literate identities. At Starks, the space was used in part to remind students of acceptable ways of being.

Morality and Behavior Teaching

The competing discourses of failure and promise at Starks Middle call into question the identities of Black male youth by promoting an ideology that focuses on their morality and behavior. African American boys, on any given day at Starks, confront symbols and images of themselves which remind them of appropriate ways of being, which are usually antithetical to the behaviors, postures, and practices of African American male youth. Black boys are what Gordon (1999) refers to as "isolated collectively" at Starks Middle School. For example, no other group is represented in the pictures that are hung on the wall. The positive images (MLK and Obama) and the negative ones (the pull and tuck sign) refer to images of black male identity in which they must negotiate and contend with on a daily basis.

In addition, when referring to the behaviors of African American male youth at Starks Middle School, the principal and teachers used language that suggested that black boys were in constant need of direction and correction. Although many have argued that schools have traditionally viewed African American male youth as not as smart or as well behaved as other students (Ferguson, 2000, Noguera, 2003), the youth in this study were still able transform negative discourse, recognize literacy models, and acknowledge that a positive identification with school could serve them well.

Academic Harassment of Black Boys

Appropriate ways of being in schools are especially oppositional to Black boy culture which has led to an academic harassment of them. Because the disrepute of African American male youth enters classrooms far before they do, they are subject to intense scrutiny for even the smallest academic and discipline faux pas. As a microcosm of society, schools subject African American male youth to similar surveillance, correction, and discrimination that they encounter (or will encounter) outside of school.

School policies, procedures, and dress codes, are especially discriminatory toward African American males in that they suffer the harshest and most apparent discipline attention and action. At Starks Middle, black boys were subject to symbols that rejected their identities as young Black boys. Signs posted around the school dismissed their way of style and dress as wrongdoing. In addition, pictures of role models reminded African American boys of appropriate models of behavior and of the type of Black male existence to aspire to. African American male youth are far more likely to encounter discourses, which are exclusively attentive to their identity and existence that makes them subject to academic harassment inside schools.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

Research on the school-to-prison pipeline documents the ways in which educational structures and practice function to move youth of color from schools to prisons (Meiners, 2007). African American male youth are especially subject to entering the pipeline because of normalizing discourse which characterizes them as thugs, delinquents, and failures in need of surveillance, control, and management.

At the heart of the academic harassment of Black male youth is the pervasive existence of school-to-prison pipeline ideology. For this study, the presence of harsher disciplinary actions for

African American male youth was not investigated. However, there were indications of an apparent school-to-prison pipeline ideology in a heavy police presence, tribunal processes, and strict policies and procedures in place to control student behavior (i.e. walking in straight lines, lining up on squares along the floor, and raids).

Place and Personnel

Mismatch of Vision

According to current scholarship on vision Turner and Mercado (2009) posit that teachers should develop their own visions of effective teaching. However, such development can only take place if teachers are supported as they" orchestrate productive literacy classrooms and pedagogy by using their own visions of practice to guide their instructional decisions" (Edwards, McMillon &Turner, 2010, p. 88), provided that teachers have the power to imagine students at the center of their literacy pedagogy and practice in order to dispel failure and passive discourses.

At Starks Middle, there seems to be a clear vision and ideology that shaped how the principal viewed education for the African American male students. However, teachers did not seem to fully accept Dr. Burdette's vision. While she was optimistic in her practices as a leader, competing discourses as well as teacher attitudes created a mismatch of vision. African American male students were referred to as slow and criminal. In addition, teacher practice exhibited a clear power dynamic in which teachers had all the power and students were disempowered.

Paternalistic Professional Development

In many schools there is a top-down approach to professional development in which "experts" are contracted in order to provide professional development for teachers. The approach

is usually paternalistic in that a person or entity is in a position of authority to restrict the freedom and responsibilities of teachers in their best interest. This model of professional development makes it near impossible to make "generative change" which Ball (2009) defines as the process developing instructional ideas based on professional development and the lives of the students in order to develop their own voices as teachers while meeting the needs of students. Such a model is especially important as we consider the literate lives of African American male youth as we attempt to enrich teacher-student relations and improve literacy learning for black males.

The Role of Literacy Models

In a recent article by David E. Kirkland (2011), Derrick, one of his participants, posits that "boys wear books like clothes" in order to express how young African American men contend with identity, ideologies, and his participation in literacy centered activities (e.g. academic reading). If I pushed the metaphor that books (and other units of literacy and literacy engagement) were clothes, and a literate identity was one's personal style, then would not the role of teacher be fashion stylist? And if anyone understands the seriousness of the fashion industry, then they know what a serious undertaking it is to style a person in the right clothes that fit that person's personal flair and identity. A teacher as a stylist would consider several aspects a person's life in order to style him so that his clothes fit his body, were modern and trendy, and made sense for his destination. In either case, a teacher or stylist is charged with styling African American boys with clothes (books, literacy engagement), which fit his identity and that had purpose.

The boys at Starks Middle School identified literacy models whom they looked to for examples of how to "dress." Many of them depended on teachers to model literacy engagement,

yet they seldom witnessed teachers engaging in meaningful literacy activities beyond grammar practice. I observed only one literacy model, Mrs. Gilbert, model writing for students. Literacy models at Starks missed several opportunities to foster the literate identities for the African American boys who were watching.

Literacy Curriculum for African American Male Youth

Scholars have published numerous studies on the best practices for teaching African American male youth (Haddix, 2010; Hill, 2009; Kirkland, 2011; Ladson-Billing, 2001; Lee, 2007; Morrell, 2004, Schmidt & Lazar, 2011; Tatum, 2009). Collectively, the recommended practices account for students' cultural knowledge, lived experiences, meaningful texts—both narrative and informational-- hip hop, popular culture, and modeling. Such practices are student-centered and culturally relevant. However, how we have come to understand the purposes of the abovementioned best practices is that they serve one purpose. In other words, culturally relevant instruction is just that and serves only to connect to the lived experiences of youth without regard for the divergent purpose, cultural distancing. In the following sections I attempt to make this clearer as I present how Starks Middle School could revise its literacy curriculum so that there is balance when engaging African American male youth for different purposes.

In the final section I discuss literacy dichotomies that have been used to describe the purposes for literacy instruction. Later, I revisit these dichotomies in order to illustrate how a more fluid view of literacy instruction can relieve the burden of teachers from having to choose one over the other and discuss how a more fluid view of literacy could improve the literacy learning for African American male youth.

Personal v. Academic

Literacy is inherently connected to many aspects of one's life. Literacy activities take place within and across many (if not all) spaces. Literacy, according to Kinloch (2010) "involves questioning our roles in the world, assuming multiple identities to consider various perspectives and experience empathy, and interpreting complex meanings of texts that may or may not include our voices, lived experiences, and truths" (p. 145). In her definition, Kinloch includes aspects of literacy that could be connected to one's personal or academic identity, or to one's personal and academic identities.

Although the distinction of personal and academic literacies provide space to talk about literacy in ways that distinguishes particular purposes for engagement, the young men at Starks Middle School talked about literacy in ways that combined personal and academic connections. In other words, many of their literacy engagement included aspects from their personal and academic identities. For the youth in the study, the two were not mutually exclusive.

Creative v. Technical

Increased testing and accountability at Starks and other schools in the nation could be to blame for why literacy instruction has become formulaic and technically focused. At Starks, writing and literacy instruction focused on improving writing and comprehension skills and grammar in order to prepare with the purpose of increasing student achievement on standardized testing. In most of the classrooms at Starks this was the case. In fact, one literacy space—Mrs. Gilbert's office/classroom—was the only occasion where creative writing was actually observed.

Student -Centered v. Standards -Centered

When standards are at the center of literacy education, students from marginalized groups experience feelings of disempowerment (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010). Like the African

American males at Starks Middle School, students are experiencing literacy practices, texts, and ideologies that are focused on skills and standards (i.e. formulaic essay writing, grammar focused lesson) as opposed to engagement that is student-centered.

Common of the best practices for teaching literacy is an inherent responsibility of literacy facilitators to take action. Amelia Coleman Brown (2011) refers to this as "driving both lanes" in which teachers can practice student-centered literacy teaching while addressing standards and accountability. Brown (2011) discusses how teachers can make "standards, assessment, instruction and culture fit together" (p. 54). Doing so can increase literacy learning and establish literacy ideologies that empower students.

Culturally Relevant v. Culturally Distant

Culturally relevant literacy instruction considers the lived experiences of students when planning literacy instruction and practices that students will engage for meaningful literacy learning and academic achievement (Winn & Johnson, 2011). In other words, curriculum and pedagogy are directly connected to the lives, customs, and ideologies that shape the lives of students. Opposite to this idea is that pedagogy and practices that are not culturally relevant are culturally distant in that they are not connected to the lives of students or they represent a set of lived experiences, customs, and ideologies of other cultures.

It is inevitable that culturally distant curriculum and instruction will make its way into our classroom. State and National standards and increased testing make it hard to ignore. In addition, culturally distant pedagogy has a noble purpose in that it prepares all students for a global society.

In light of increased testing and accountability, I would argue that literacy instruction that is academic, technical, culturally distant has its place in the classroom—that is, to increase

student achievement on standard measures like the use of standard English. However, such literacy instruction should be balanced with literacy instruction that is personal, creative, and culturally relevant, as we attempt to foster positive literate identities for African American males and other marginalized youth.

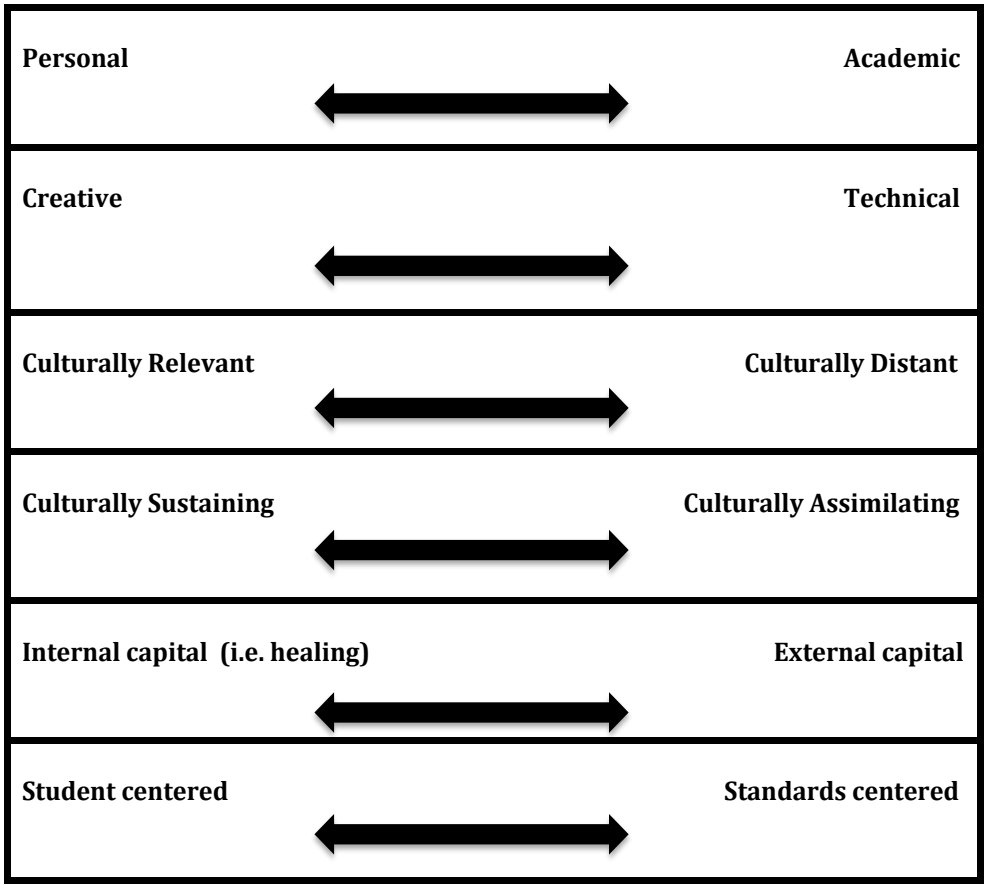
Re(Shaping) Dichotomies: Fluid and Sliding Purposes of Literacy Engagement

Scholars have used a myriad of descriptors to discuss the purpose of literacy engagement including the in- out-of-school delineation (Green, 2010; Fisher 2007; Kinloch, 2010; Morrell, 2004). For decades, scholars have described literacy practices, texts, and ideologies as belong to one of two extremes—home or school based (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Gee, 2001) and cultural (Vygotsky, 1978) or neutral (Street, 1995), especially in cases regarding the literacy education of marginalized youth. However, African American male youth in my study talked about literacy participation in fluid ways and made no distinction between their "home" and "school" literacies. Literacy practices, texts, and ideologies are far too confounded and complex to categorize as belonging to either extreme of an in and out-of-school delineation. The dichotomies we use to discuss the purposes for literacy engagement have created an either-or dynamic in which classrooms should be student-centered and not standards-centered, or culturally relevant as opposed to culturally distant. I propose a more fluid view of literacy where we can construct authentic reading, writing, and speaking opportunities for Back boys. A fluid view of literacy engagement could lead to an understanding of how classrooms could better consider the voices of black male youth, center their lives and experiences, shape positive literate identities that lead to successful academic trajectories for African American male youth.

Considering the data along with several literacy frameworks, I illustrate how the purposes for which we engage literacy can be described in terms of a literacy continuum. The

young men in my study defined literacy in very traditional, even academic ways. They identified with, and recognized, advantages for attaining academic literacies, yet insisted on literacy activities that were more connected to their lives (i.e student centered or culturally relevant). Teachers at Starks Middle often focused on literacy education that was standards-centered and technical while participants sought out spaces where they could be more creative and assert more voice. Figure 1. is an illustration of the dichotomies that are used to discuss purposes for literacy engagement. The purposes for literacy engagement are in fact sliding and fluid. The list is by no means exhaustive, yet is meant to spark new ways to consider literacy participation of youth regardless of space. The tenants of this continuum can be used to talk about literacy engagement is in fact more or less related to several purposes simultaneously. Teachers can potentially use the literacy continuum when considering curriculum and instruction for engaging youth, especially black males inside literacy classrooms. The purpose of considering literacy engagement this way is to create balance inside classrooms in which teachers can satisfy standards while centering students. In addition, it provides the space to use best practices for teaching African American students, (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lee, 2007; Morrell, 2004) while addressing curricular standards and teaching content.

Figure 1. Literacy Continuum



Implications for Literacy Teacher Education

Teachers and teacher educators should think about the ways in which we ask African American male youth to engage literacy. Practices and texts should encompass literacy ideologies with which African American male youth identify and accept—ones that fit. This is especially important to a discussion that considers the literate lives of African American male youth because with such ideologies teachers and students can confront issues of inequity manifested in society, schools and classrooms that call into question the literate lives of black youth.

Quantitative data suggest that African American male youth are failing on every literacy measure possible, yet qualitative data illustrates numerous examples of meaningful literacy engagement for African American male youth (Kirkland, forthcoming). Without careful consideration of both types of data, it would appear that African American male youth are failing at academic literacy, yet do well outside of school when it comes to literacy engagement and proficiency. So considering literacy as fluid is especially helpful as teachers orchestrate literacy instruction and practice in their classroom in order to increase literacy achievement for African American male youth.

In addition, as teacher educators train pre-service educators in pedagogy that elevates students' voice (e.g.. personal, creative, culturally relevant, student-centered), teacher educators can consider the divergent purposes of literacy instruction as well. Doing so may better prepare pre-service educators to confront the pedagogical choices they will be forced to make in the face of high-stakes testing and increased accountability.

Future Research

Further documentation and observation of literacy classroom practice for African American male youth are needed in order to evaluate how fluid definitions of literacy can change the ways in which African American male youth experience academic success. Further examination of the processes, pedagogies, texts, ideologies, and practices of African American male youth within and across literacy spaces inside schools is needed as we work to improve their overall schooling and literacy experiences. Meaningful literacy experiences inside classrooms, based on a balance model using the literacy continuum, have the potential to impact literacy teacher education as we prepare pre-service educators to teach students at the margins.

Researchers can pose questions using the literacy continuum in order to provide nuanced insights into teacher practice, student engagement, and the fluidity of literacy.

Conclusion

On its surface, school seems to have the best intentions for all students. In the case at Starks Middle School, there was some intention to disrupt the overarching failure narrative that predicts the inevitable failure of black boys. The principal and other school personnel created spaces and practice from deficit points of view without acknowledging the attitudes, stances, or ideologies of the African American male youth in the school. They were actively involved in critiquing their literacy learning and seeking out more meaningful literacy experiences. The boys in the study were not failing. They were not in need of correction or reform. Black boys are in need, however, of school spaces that support their academic and literate identities by permeating discourses of promise, which include their ideas and images of promise and hope for their own futures.

This dissertation aimed to highlight the voices of African American male youth while examining the literacy spaces they occupy within schools. An examination of school discourse, classroom practice and how both shape literate identities for African American male youth has provided information regarding the reasons why African American male youth engage (or do not engage) particular literacy practices. In addition, this study considered how African American male youth negotiated space and ideology in order to build positive literate identities despite competing discourses and unsupportive classroom practice. The ways in which African American male youth discussed their literacy engagement led to an evaluation of best practices for marginalized youth which revealed important insights to how we can reconsider purpose for literacy engagement.

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Appendix A: Consent to Participate in Research

Consent To Be A Research Participant

Title: Shaping literate identities: African American male youth, literacy, and middle school
Principal Investigator: Latrise P. Johnson
Co-Investigator: Maisha T. Winn, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE
Your child is being invited to participate in a research study on how African American male youth relate to literacy activities in their school. I am asking your child to participate because he was selected after observing his Language Arts class. Approximately 10 students will be interviewed and observed for this research study. This study is being conducted for my Dissertation research study under the direction of Dr. Maisha T. Winn.

PROCEDURE
If you agree to allow your child to participate, I will interview your child at least one time at their school for about 20 minutes. I may conduct a follow up interview after classroom observations. The questions will be about your child's participation in reading, writing, and speaking in and around school. I will tape record the interview with your consent. These voice recordings will be transcribed.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable political or social risks associated with participation in this interview.

BENEFITS
Taking part in this research study may not benefit your child personally. The information you child provide, however, will add to our knowledge about African American male literacy participation in school and add to our knowledge about how to best educate African American male youth.

CONFIDENTIALITY
I will not include your child's name in study results, but his position might be included. If your child feels uncomfortable, quotations or narratives can be left out of the analysis at his discretion. Your child will never be asked for any personal information beyond his perceptions. All research records and recorded interviews will be kept in a locked secure location.

People other than those doing the research may look at the study records. Agencies and Emory

departments and committees that make rules and policy about how research is done have the right to review these records. We will keep all records that we produce private to the extent we are required to do so by law.

CONTACT PERSONS

If you have any questions, I invite you to ask them now. If you have any questions about the study later, you may contact me at lpjohn2@emory.edu or 404.914.8848. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Maisha T. Winn, at mfishe5@emory.edu.

If you have questions about your child's rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Emory University Institutional Review Board at (404) 712-0720 or toll free at 1-877-503-9797, which oversees the protection of human research participants.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research is voluntary. You may refuse to allow your child to participate, or they may refuse to answer any questions that he/she does not want to answer. If you decide to allow your child to be in this study and change your mind, you may withdraw him/her at any time. Your child's participation or non-participation will have no negative repercussions. You nor your child will be compensated for your participation in this study.

I will give you a copy of this consent form to keep. If you are willing to allow your child to participate in this research, please sign below.

❑Please check here if you do not want your child **audio taped**. Your child may still be interviewed if permission to audio record is not granted.

_____ _____ _____

Parent's Signature Date Time of consent

_____

Participant's Name

_____ _____

Principal Investigator Date

Appendix B: Documentation of Assent from Minor Subjects

Documentation of Assent from Minor Subjects

Study Title: Shaping literate identities: African American male youth, literacy, and middle school

Subject age:_____years.

For subjects in this study who are minors, one of the following Pediatric Assent sections must be satisfied. Place a checkmark beside the method used.

1._____(<6 years) NO ASSENT REQUIRED

2._____ (ages 6-10) VERBAL ASSENT
The study has been explained to this child in an age-appropriate manner. The child has asked questions, verbalizes understanding of the information, and provides verbal assent.

_____ _____ _____
Person Soliciting Assent Date Time

3._____ (ages 11-16) WRITTEN ASSENT See attached Written Assent document.

4._____ (age 17) READ/SIGN MAIN CONSENT DOCUMENT WITH GUARDIAN
5._____ (any age) UNABLE TO PROVIDE ASSENT
In my opinion, this child cannot give informed assent.
Reason(s):_____
_____

_____ _____ _____
Person Soliciting Assent Date Time

_____ _____ _____

Principal Investigator Date Time

WRITTEN ASSENT DOCUMENT FOR 11-16 year olds

Title: Shaping literate identities: African American male youth, literacy, and middle school

We are asking if you are willing to be in a research study. This means, we will ask you and other students in your school questions related to reading, writing, and speaking in your Language Arts classes and around your school. You will also be observed during your Language Arts classes and other classes throughout the day. You can say no you don't want to do this study. Your teachers or your parents cannot make you be in the study if you don't want to. If you agree to be in the study but change your mind about it later, you can stop being in the study. The principle investigator will talk to you some more about the study during the interviews. You should ask any questions you have. You should also talk to your parents about this.

If you agree to be in the study, sign here:

_____ _____ _____

Participant Date Time

Appendix C: Contact Summary Form

Contact Summary Form

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Contact:</td><td>Date:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">Contact School:</td><td>Written By:</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Location of Transcript:</td></tr>
<tr><td>☐ Interview</td><td>☐ Phone call</td></tr>
<tr><td>☐ Observation</td><td>☐Other</td><td>Site Location:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Describe other</td><td>Site Contact:</td></tr>
</table>

What were the main issues or themes that struck you about this contact?

Summarize the information you got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions/topics you had for this contact?

Note salient, interesting, illuminating, or important things about this contact relevant to the study:

What new (or remaining target questions/ issues) do you need to consider when you make contact with this participant again?

Appendix D: Document Summary Form

Document Summary Form

SITE: _____

DOCUMENT: _____

DATE RECEIVED: _____

HOW WAS THE DOCUMENT ATTAINED? _____

Name and description of document:

Event or contact, if any, with which document is associated:

Significance or importance of document:

Brief summary of contents:

If document is central or crucial to particular contact during interview or class observation

Appendix E: Examples of Definitions of codes used in analysis

Definitions of Codes used to analyze data

Code	**Definition**
Literacy space reading (LSR)	Reading that is related or assigned in literacy spaces not related to actual LA class
Literacy space writing (LSW) i.e. poetry, journal, rap, song, essays, etc.	Writing that is related or assigned in literacy spaces not related to actual LA class
Literacy space speaking (LSS)	Speaking (orality) that is related or assigned in literacy spaces not related to actual LA class
Extrinsic Influences (EI)	Influences to participate that are without the individual (i.e. Monetary, college, parents, people, media)
Intrinsic Influences (II)	Influences to participate are within the individual (i.e. better person, self esteem)
Valued literacy (VL)	Literacy examples valued by the participants
Unvalued literacy	Literacy examples not valued by the participants
Negative Schooling Experiences (NSE)	Schooling experiences that are described negatively by participants
Positive Schooling Experiences (PSE)	Schooling experiences that are described positively by participants.
Reading in LA class (LAR)	Reading that takes place in the LA classroom (or not)

Writing in the LA class (LAW)	Writing that takes place in the LA classroom (or not)
Speaking in LA class (LAS)	Speaking that takes place in the LA class (or not)
Texts that inform ideology (IT)	Refers to any text which provides insight to ideologies about literacy, literacy development, or literacy participation
Literacy practices among African American male youth (LPAA)	Refers to the actual participation of African American male youth in school.
Literate identifiers (LI)	Information related to how participants identification with literacy was developed (D), maintained (M), constructed (C) or rejected (R).
Literacy spaces (LS)	Refers to spaces that rely on literacy participation of students (i.e. student meetings, programs, talent show, etc.)

Participant's name	Teacher/Grade/LC	Interests/other information	Descriptions from Examples included in findings chapters
Michael	Ms. Toney/6th/LC6	Enjoyed the *Diary of a Wimpy kid* series	Critiqued the activities in his ELA class and questioned the heavy grammar focus of his teacher. Identified
Joshua	Ms. Tanner/6th/LC5	Mother worked at the school Mother in school	Discourse of passivity present in this particular classroom. Identified his mother as a literacy model
Winston	Ms. Owens/7th/LC3	Connection with me. Refers to me as his mentor, ma	Questioned the purpose of having to read silently during his ELA class Teacher's opinion of Winston indicated that she either accepted the notion of failure for her students or that she had been permitted to fail her students. Discipline issues according to his teacher
Henry	Ms. Owens/7th/LC 3 (pull out with Mr. Dallas)	Singer Talent show participant	Frustrated after not being able to locate another metaphor or a simile. He picked up part of the local newspaper and held it in front of him.
Dex	Ms. Naomi/7th/LC4 (pull out with Mr. Dallas)	Very distant and quiet most of the time	Student who was apparently cutting class who hardly went to class, caused havoc on a daily basis, and that she gave up on trying "to talk to him." He was not willing to participate beyond answering questions, which required limited responses
Jai	Ms. Jennings/8th/LC1	rapper/songwriter Talent show participant	His book report would not be on a cereal box because he questioned its purpose sought out Mrs. Gilbert's class/office as an alternative space to engage literacy. Identified Lil Wayne as a literacy model.
David	Mrs. Shoemaker/8th/LC2	Jehovah's Witness was an important part of his literate identity Wellness ambassador	Didn't know why the graduation gown hung in the LC Literacy models included people from Kingdom Hall and his coach Related religion and literacy
William	Mrs. Shoemaker/8th/LC2	Football and basketball team, charismatic	Expressed his frustration with writing another essay. "I am tried of writing these essays. And why I am writing about going outer-space?" Enjoyed the essay about the changes he would make to the school. Combination of personal and academic writing. Identified his coach as a literacy model.
Trenton	Mrs. Shoemaker/8th/LC2	Average student Loved the computer read from the internet	Voiced his frustration after being unable to come up with two other things he would take with him to outer-space. Took me to the studio down in the school.