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"We're in Charge of What We're Saying, What We Discuss, What We Want to Read": A Qualitative Inquiry Into Adolescent Girls' After-School Book Clubs

Jie Y. Park
University of Pennsylvania, jiepark@dolphin.upenn.edu

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the ways in which 23 early adolescent and adolescent girls and their literacy teacher co-constructed, participated in, and experienced an after-school book club located in a school setting. The book club met biweekly to discuss a student-selected text (e.g., fiction, non-fiction, song lyrics) over the course of one academic year. Using ethnographic methods, I explored what happened in the after-school book club, and how the girls' race, gender, and class identities informed their readings of texts and emerged in their talk.

From the data I identified several critical themes and learnings. First, the girls understood, talked about, and practiced reading as deeply relational and embedded in human relationships. Social relationships, family networks, and peer groups were identified as important factors that motivated the girls to read, and that sustained the girls' commitment to reading. Second, the social aspect of book clubs—reading with others—fostered critical readings of and deeper engagement with texts. In and through reading and talking together, the girls reflected on, questioned, and debated the role of race, gender, and class. The girls also initiated and sustained conversations that reflected the ways in which they understood themselves, other people, and their worlds. As readers the girls assumed a critical inquiry stance, inquiring into and grappling with difficult social and economic realities. Third, the girls assumed a range of roles and responsibilities for forming and sustaining the book club. Lastly, the girls demonstrated their understanding of in-school and out-of-school contexts as reciprocal—i.e., that texts, social practices, knowledge and identities travel between and across contexts.

The implications emerging from this study are relevant to the work of teachers, researchers, literacy-curriculum writers, after-school program coordinators, and others committed to supporting adolescent learners in both in-school and out-of-school settings. This study can prompt educators to re-imagine and reconstruct learning environments—both in and out of school—that can engage, challenge, and inspire adolescent learners. It can also generate conversation within the education research community about the possibilities and challenges involved in studying after-school spaces of literacy learning and engagement.

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GIRLS' AFTER-SCHOOL BOOK CLUBS

Jie Y. Park

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Supervisor of Dissertation:

_____

Vivian L. Gadsden, Professor of Education

Graduate Group Chair:

_____

Stanton E.F. Wortham, Professor of Education

Dissertation Committee:

Vivian L. Gadsden, Professor of Education

Susan L. Lytle, Professor of Education

Michael W. Smith, Professor of Education

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qualitative inquiry into adolescent girls' after-school book clubs

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ABSTRACT

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Jie Y. Park

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From the data I identified several critical themes and learnings. First, the girls understood, talked about, and practiced reading as deeply relational and embedded in human relationships. Social relationships, family networks, and peer groups were identified as important factors that motivated the girls to read, and that sustained the girls' commitment to reading. Second, the social aspect of book clubs—reading with others—fostered critical readings of and deeper engagement with texts. *In* and *through* reading and talking together, the girls reflected on, questioned, and debated the role of race, gender, and class. The girls also initiated and sustained conversations that reflected the ways in which they understood themselves, other people, and their worlds. As readers the girls assumed a critical inquiry stance, inquiring into and grappling with difficult social and economic realities. Third, the girls assumed a range of roles and responsibilities for forming and sustaining the book club. Lastly, the girls demonstrated their understanding of in-school and out-of-school contexts as reciprocal–i.e., that texts, social practices, knowledge and identities travel between and across contexts.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction, Significance of Problem, Research Questions, & Theoretical Framework

Story of the Question

  Janice, a 17 year old, was labeled as reading at a sixth-grade level. She also happened to be one of three Black girls excitedly discussing the merits and flaws of the latest street fiction. Street fiction was often sold on bookstands and carts on the streets of New York City. These four girls had formed a morning book club on the bus, sharing parts of the novel they found unsettling or inspirational, and referring to characters they detested or admired. The discussions contained the girls' orientation to the world and revealed certain desires, life dreams, and fears, such as the fear of becoming pregnant or remaining poor. The girls responded to and questioned each other. As the bus neared the school stop, the girls sighed, quickly hid the books and exited the bus. For those 25 minutes, the girls had created and sustained an informal book club: they read and discussed a common text, and took up issues and areas of life that they deemed important, such as sexuality, poverty, family and education. The reading that the girls practiced allowed for the creation and sharing of real-life experiences and meaning.

  Janice was a former student of mine. Inside school walls and during class, she secretly listened to music, wrote notes to friends, and read everything except the assigned text. The students challenged, both overtly and subtly, the teachers and curricula. They had difficulty relating to curricula, which relied primarily on Eurocentric literature and failed to capture the diversity and complexity of students' lived realities and experiences (Lee, 2003). The school book closet still held tattered copies of *Ethan Frome*, and a colleague taught the novel every year to seniors. One year, another teacher added Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1985), presuming that a novel on Africa would capture the imagination of Black students. Yet the teacher knew little of students' diverse backgrounds, families, and immigration histories. Many of the students saw themselves as Haitian, Trinidadian, or Jamaican, identifying as Afro-

Caribbean, or as immigrants or children of immigrant parents (i.e., second-generation immigrants). The students held complicated perspectives on being "American" and on schooling.

Outside of school, Janice and the girls were serious and perceptive readers. On the bus, they questioned and contested the ways that men and women of color were represented, and explored provocative issues related to students' social and economic realities. There was a lot of teasing, laughter, noise, and overlapping talk. The girls exhibited a level of engagement and zest for reading that classroom teachers work hard to generate. Closely observing the girls' informal morning book club and listening to parts of the conversations, I wondered about the range of factors that might motivate adolescents like Janice to create or join informal contexts for reading and discussing texts. Is it that the texts are student-selected, or that the conversations occur outside of school, and therefore are not teacher-regulated or evaluated? Or is it that the students read and discuss texts among friends?

Rather than use a deficit perspective, thereby reinforcing assumptions about the disengagement of low-income, students of color, I consciously worked to develop a stance of perceptiveness and curiosity toward students' experiences, stories, and knowledge, and to enlarge my conception of what it means for adolescents to be literate. I began to pay particular attention to *what*, *when* and *how* students read and write. Keisha hid a copy of Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) under a Houghton-Mifflin Literature Anthology. Janice and Stacie passed a spiral notebook that held complicated tales of betrayal, woe, and heartache. Jennifer voraciously read the "classic" young adult novels, such as *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), *Forever* (Blume, 1975) and *The Chocolate War* (Cormier, 1974). The girls and even boys often took turns reading Teri Woods' *True to the Game* (1999). They took up and valued different literacy practices and texts. Unfortunately, the students' literacy practices were not always school-sanctioned, nor recognized as valid and valuable.

Janice, Keisha, Jennifer, and others taught me, a first year teacher at the time, an invaluable lesson—namely, the lesson that if interested and perceptive enough to "see" adolescents, teachers can begin to recognize the ways that students encounter and make sense of multiple texts, work to understand themselves and others, and cross multiple borders— institutional, cultural, social, and linguistic—on a daily basis.

As a result of teaching and supporting adolescent learners, I decided to pursue professional and personal work that could contribute to improving the life chances of students and the well-being of teachers, students, families, and communities. I entered a doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. There I encountered new and more expansive frameworks for understanding students' literacy practices, identities and lives. I began to ask different questions: what texts and knowledge get privileged inside schools; what learning opportunities and classroom structures exist (and do not exist) to foster student learning; what counts as literacy and to whom; and what counts as learning and knowing. I also learned that educational research is not simply a matter of formulating researchable questions, using a range of methodological tools to collect data, and analyzing the data to discover findings. Researchers must practice self-reflexivity, acknowledge positions of privilege and subjectivities, and consider issues of representing participants. They must work to challenge and change the status quo of schools, re-create schools as sites of possibility, and understand the experiences and lives of individual learners and families. Educational researchers can and must offer more than descriptions of adolescent behavior and lives; rather, they must work to both re-imagine and re-make the world, particularly schools more human and humane for students. Teaching and research are a human, relational and imaginative enterprise.

Significance of Study: Why After-School Book Clubs?

Why create and study an after-school book club for middle school girls? Book clubs have become an increasingly popular activity for both children and adults, both inside and outside of

formal educational settings (see Slezak, 1995, for a description of different book clubs). English and Language Arts teachers have used book clubs to foster students' reading engagement[1] and increase motivation. Over the past fifteen years, professional literature and conversations have offered a range of pedagogical strategies and suggestions for forming, facilitating, and maintaining classroom-based book clubs, reading groups, and literature circles (see Daniels 2002; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; O'Donnell-Allen, 2006). However, much of the attention has been on researching book clubs for elementary school students (e.g., Evans, 1996; Frank, Dixon, & Brandts, 2001; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995) and adults (e.g., Addington, 2001; Beeghly, 2005; Flood & Lapp, 1994; Long, 2003; Smith, 1996), suggesting the need for a more targeted focus on understanding the experiences and participation of adolescent readers as part of student-led book clubs.

These student-led, small-group book discussions might also be called reading groups, literature clubs, literature discussion groups or peer-led student dialogues. School-based book clubs, reading groups, and literature circles have taken on specific characteristics and features. O'Donnell-Allen defines a book club as a small group of readers that meets on a regular basis to discuss books of the members' choice (2006, p. 7). Daniels defines literature circles as "student-led small-group book discussions" (2002, p. 18). O-Donnell-Allen differentiates book clubs and literature circles. According to O'Donnell-Allen, there are both logistical and conceptual dimensions that make book clubs and literature circles different. For example, a key feature of literature circles is the use of the role sheet. Using the role sheet, each member of the literature

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[1] Engagement is understood and discussed differently across educational practitioners, researchers and policy-makers. References to reading engagement include a range of characteristics and conditions such as readers' motivation or commitment to reading, knowledge and understanding, confidence, and willingness to make sense of texts (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Wigfield, 2004).

circle takes on a different role (e.g., discussion director, connector, summarizer, illustrator, literary luminary, or vocabulary enricher). Underlying the design of literature circles is a certain conception of "reading together." That is, reading together means dividing reading to separate tasks and roles. Each reader assumes responsibility for enacting the role of facilitator, summarizer, illustrator or researcher.

McMahon and Raphael (1997) define a book club as

A small group of three to five students [that] meets to discuss a common reading, including specific chapters from longer trade books, folk tales and picture books, articles and short stories. They share personal responses, help one another clarify potentially confusing aspects of the reading, create interpretations and critiques of the texts, discuss authors' intents and so forth. (p. xii)

The work of McMahon, Raphael and colleagues focuses primarily on the elementary grades; however, the Book Club model has been projected onto and applied to middle and secondary school contexts. As useful and helpful as the Book Club model is to middle and secondary school teachers, the model, I argue, is limited. First, the authors present book clubs as a form of reading or literature instruction that is school-based and teacher-initiated. Thus, despite conscious attempts to reject the view of reading as a set of skills, features of school book clubs can actually reinforce the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1985), especially if the book clubs are used to transmit reading comprehension strategies. The purpose of book clubs, according to McMahon and Raphael, is develop students' "capabilities related to literacy" (1997, p. 21), including oral and written abilities.

Second, McMahon and Raphael (1997) discuss the importance of educating students to become members of a literate society, implying that students should be initiated *into* a singular literate society, as teachers and educational researchers might define it. However, I argue that a focus on a singular literate society elides the many ways that adolescents read, write, and make meaning. Students are already part of and navigating multiple literate societies: the society of online gamers, users of social networking sites, YouTube subscribers, teen magazine readers, romance novel readers and many more.

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Last, McMahon and Raphael (1997) state that classroom teachers are responsible for forming and implementing book clubs for students. If not the classroom teacher, an adult-facilitator or researcher structures book clubs and recruits students to participate. Very few studies have examined the ways in which students take up the invitation to construct a book club. Existing empirical studies on book clubs position adolescents as participants, and not as co-constructors *and* participants. Therefore the question persists: how do adolescents form and sustain an after-school context for reading and discussing texts? Wanting to understand better how adolescent girls co-construct, participate in, and experience an after-school book club, I invited a group of middle school girls and their literacy teacher to create an after-school club.

My invitation reflects a respect for adolescents as inquirers, decision-makers, readers, theorizers and inventors. It also reflects my commitment to taking seriously students' experiences, interests and questions; supporting student-led inquiries and conversations; designing and conducting research that involves students as participants and collaborators, and not as "objects" to be studied; and lastly, a commitment to adopting a stance of ongoing learning about, from, and with students.

Why All Girls? The Promises and Challenges of Studying Girls

While approving my study, an administrator at Harmony School—the site of the study—expressed concern that the book club was only for girls. She began discussing the "achievement gap" as it affects male and female students' literacy skills, noting that the advanced literacy classes had fewer boys than girls. The middle school girls at Harmony often outperformed the boys on state-wide literacy assessments. Heather, the literacy teacher, usually taught more girls than boys. In the seventh-grade class, there were 17 girls and 8 boys; and in the eighth-grade class, there were 12 girls and 11 boys. On the statewide reading assessment for the 2008 school year, 100% of the seventh-grade girls attained proficiency whereas 76% of the seventh-grade boys attained proficiency. Eighty six percent of the eighth-grade girls and 84% of the eighth-

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grade boys attained proficiency on the reading assessment. The school administrator implied that

adolescent boys did not read as much as girls read, and suggested, "A person at the university

really should study the literacy of middle school boys."

The administrator at Harmony is not alone in believing that boys read less than girls do.

For example, Cherland (1994) analyzed images of readers on public announcements and reading

campaigns to find that most readers featured were women. Walkerdine (1990) and others (e.g.,

Martino, 1999) argue that for boys, being seen as highly literate and as masculine are

contradictory. A number of studies suggest that schools can do more to support boys' literacy

development (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Young & Brozo, 2001). Smith and Wilhelm (2002)

provide an overview of the intersections of gender and literacy: boys read less than girls do; boys

view themselves as being less capable readers; boys value reading and literacy activities less than

girls value literacy; and boys prefer to read informational texts, graphic novels, comic books,

magazine and newspaper articles. Moje, Overby, Tysaver, and Morris (2008) found that many

adolescent girls are part of out-of-school reading groups. Given the history of book clubs, the

finding that girls are more likely to join book clubs is neither new nor surprising (Long, 2003). If

such is the case, why create an all-girls book club?

First, the stories and experiences of early adolescent girls are under-studied, often

misunderstood, and over-generalized. According to Leadbeater and Way (1996), poor girls of

color are rarely heard or seen. That argument may very well extend to all girls, irrespective of

race, ethnicity, and social class. Despite profound differences that mark the realities of many

girls and women, adolescent girls share certain experiences and understandings of the world by

virtue of gender. Inness (1998) expresses the need for research that focuses on the lives of girls,

criticizing the fact that girls are still considered very much "second-class citizens." She also

problematizes the prevalent belief that research on girls' culture is trivial or insignificant.

According to Inness, girls face the challenges and stigma of being both female and young.

Hudson (1984) and others (e.g., Bucholtz, 2002) claim that the commonly available images of and scripts for adolescence are masculine figures, such as the restless and rebellious Hamlet. It has also been argued that educational practices have traditionally privileged male points of views, stories and experiences (Sadker & Sadker, 1995). The purpose of my study was not to demonstrate that boys and girls are different readers, or to support girls' development at the expense of boys. Rather, my study reflects a deep commitment to taking seriously and understanding adolescent girls' identities, experiences, and interests (Weiler, 2001).

Second, adolescent girls often articulate the desire for spaces to breathe, relax, and laugh; explore emerging identities as young women and issues, such as gender relations; and develop a sense of personal integrity (Pastor, McCormick, & Fine, 1996). The need for an all-girl space became more apparent throughout my study. Many of the book club participants were aware of and eager to explore gender roles, notions of femininity, and responsibilities and challenges of being a girl. I posit that regardless of adolescent girls' performance on literacy-related tasks or assessments, girls exist within, and therefore must navigate a historically male-centered, public space of schools. For example, Veronica, an academically successful student and talented pianist, shared feeling self-conscious at school.

> **Veronica:** But guys, they can, well what I see is that they can act however they want. They're not always so self-conscious of how they look when they're around people. Before, but before I was like, in seventh grade and sixth grade, I couldn't run in recess because I was like, "Oh, what do I look like when I run. Like will people…" But boys, they can, like in class, if they feel like they need to laugh. (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 4.2.09)

According to Veronica, boys can "act however they want." Veronica was not the only student to articulate feeling self-conscious at school. Several girls said they felt watched and judged, and on display. Sadker and Sadker characterize boys' *in action* and girls' *inaction*. As Veronica suggested, boys can run, laugh, and act more freely than girls can. To put simply, boys are active. Gilligan (1993) describes girls' development as the story of coming to and taking up prescribed gender roles, such as the role of the cooperative, accommodating and supportive female.

Navigating a male-centered realm, women or girls might assume the "supporting role" (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006).

It is important to emphasize that the characterization of girls as inactive and passive does not adequately or accurately reflect the realities of *all* girls. Kindlon (2006) argues for a new way to understand girls—one that focuses on girls' empowerment, agency, and confidence. The alpha girls (Kindlon) are assertive, autonomous, future-oriented, collaborative, and relationship-oriented. Many of the girls at Harmony School would consider themselves alpha girls: assertive, self-assured, future and goal-oriented, and collaborative. For instance, Stella, a biracial eighth grader, was the president of the student council. She was both a junior beauty-queen, and the only female player on an all-boys baseball team. Yet Stella, according to another eighth grader, tended to minimize the fact that she is intelligent and competent, especially if she is around boys. Sue shared, "Like, Stella, she tends to act like she doesn't know things around some of the boys, so she probably wouldn't contribute as much of her knowledge." Stella illustrates that even alpha girls are negotiating and trying on the different ways of being female. Sue was not the only student to claim that the girls would behave, speak, and interact differently if boys were to be present at book club.

Several girls suggested that it is important for the book club participants to be all girls, especially if they are to honestly explore socially and culturally constructed ways of being female. During an interview, Elizabeth commented on the fact that the book club was all girls.

> **Elizabeth**: I think girls would be a lot shyer to think. Well, they won't say what they really think because boys are there, I don't think girls really say what they think when boys are around. And to me, not many girls are really friends with all the boys. So, it would be much easier for us to speak if there were just girls. Cause we all know each other for like four years, and we're all pretty close. (Interview, 10.28.08)

Many of the girls interviewed commented that it "mattered" that the book club consisted of all girls. Elizabeth was not the only student to describe girls as shy. Mary described Yolanda, Veronica and Sue as shy. During classroom observations, Yolanda, Veronica and Mary—all

eighth graders—rarely spoke during whole-class discussions. Yet the three students all spoke during book club, laughed and teased one another, debated and argued fiercely. The book club became a space for relaxing, laughing, forming relationships and friendships, and collectively exploring issues and experiences that matter to adolescent girls.

However, a focus on all girls poses challenges and prompts questions. I draw on and align with post-structural and feminist frameworks for understanding identity and gender. Rather than see gender and sex as synonymous, and see gender as immutable, I understand gender as fluid and performative (Butler, 1990). That is, individuals perform a range of gendered identities as they negotiate the challenges of everyday life. I recognize that students enact gender and gendered identities that are contextual and based on how they perceive themselves, are perceived by others, and would like to be perceived. Yet, recruiting the seventh and eighth-grade girls, I had to categorize students as biological boys and girls.

I also had to decide whether to refer to the participants as girls or young women. Inness (1998) writes that the boundaries of girlhood are ill-defined: people might use "girl" to refer to prepubescent females, or more generally to refer to adolescent females or even women. My decision to refer to them as "girls" reflects my belief that adolescent girls have different experiences, realities and cultures than adult women. Therefore, rather than impose issues and concerns of adult women onto the lives of adolescent girls, gender and literacy researchers should listen to girls and work to understand the particular challenges and possibilities of being a girl. It cannot be assumed that adolescent girls have similar realities, experiences and cultures as women (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Inness, 1998). That is, the preoccupations, needs, and experiences of girls are not the same as those of women.

The preoccupations, needs and experiences of girls necessarily differ, depending on the girls' race and class identities, family and cultural histories, and more. Thus, gender researchers face the challenge of simultaneously acknowledging girls as a single category and focusing on the

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differences among the girls (Jones, 1993). Gender cannot be treated as a "stand-alone variable" when researching the experiences and realities of adolescents (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 201). That is, relying exclusively on gender, teachers and researchers can overlook the range of students' social identities and multiple locations. For example, Pipher (1994) presented the "storm and stress" of adolescence as the *standard* narrative for adolescent girls. Pipher has been criticized for several reasons, namely for framing the girls as passive victims needing to be rescued, and thereby ignoring girls' resiliency and strength; and for focusing primarily on the experiences of White, middle-class girls. Reading *Saving Ophelia*, one wonders, whose stories of adolescence and girlhood are represented? Whose experiences are normalized and valued? The standard narrative of adolescence can exclude poor adolescents and adolescents of color, normalizing the realities of White, middle-class youth.

Furthermore, rather than treat race, gender and class as a set of "add-ons" (Luke, 1994), it is more helpful to study the intersections of race, gender, and class (Gadsden, 2007). Collins (1998) offers an intersectional analytic framework, a framework that can illuminate the diverse experiences of girls and women. Collins explains that race, gender, or economic class alone cannot explain individuals' experiences. Intersectional analysis acknowledges that race, class and gender are "intersecting systems that converge and collide and operate simultaneously" (Collins, p. 182). Such a framework resembles the approach Bettie (2003) used to study Mexican American and White high school girls at a rural California community. Bettie studied the ways in which class, race, and gender shaped female students' identity, and access to educational resources and opportunities. Hurtado (2003) also proposed integrating multiple and intersecting social identities of race, gender and class when understanding young Chicana women. Gadsden (2007) writes that literacy educators and programs need to address the complex and complicated intersections of gender, race, class, and culture and the diversity within and across different

learners and the gendered identities they assume. That is, the girls' understandings and experiences of adolescence, youth identity and girlhood are multiple and varied.

Research Questions

I focused on three main research questions: how middle school students and their teacher form an after-school book club, what happens in the after-school book club, and how adolescent girls' race, gender and class identities inform their readings of and emerge in their talk about texts. For the first two research questions, there are a number of sub-questions.

1) How do seventh and eighth grade girls and their literacy teacher form an after-school book club?

How do they co-construct and negotiate the rules, norms and routines of the after-school book club?

2) What happens in the after-school book club?

How do book club members interpret, make sense of, and talk about text?

How do they relate to and engage with one another?

How do the girls use the after-school book club to inform their in-school learning and vice-versa?

What questions and issues do girls bring to and pursue in the book club?

3) How do adolescent girls' race, gender and class identities inform their readings of and emerge in their talk about texts?

Studying a diverse group of seventh- and eighth-grade girls' constructions and experiences of after-school book clubs, I hoped to offer more rich and capacious images of how adolescent girls practice reading as social and critical; respond to, talk about and make sense of a range of texts; inquire into issues and questions that matter to them; and negotiate reading and learning together.

Organization of Dissertation

In the rest of this chapter, I offer my theoretical frameworks for the study. Drawing on two frameworks, literacy as a social, critical practice (Luke & Freebody, 1997) and social constructivism (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1988; Wertsch, 1985), I understand book clubs as a site in which adolescents can encounter, read, and produce multiple texts; enact different identities and claim social membership; offer and revise their readings of the word and world (Freire, 1987); and learn with and from others.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature on adolescent book clubs and reading groups. Existing empirical studies reflect the range and variation of adolescent book clubs and reading groups. However, they are limited for several reasons. First, the studies tend to focus on individual readers and the readers' responses as the unit of analysis. Therefore, researchers and educators need to know a good deal more about the social practices and relationships that are part of reading and discussing texts (e.g., interactions and relationships). Second, existing scholarship tends not to focus on whether and how reciprocity exists between out-of-school and in-school learning environments, and how students make sense of the relationship between out-of-school and in-school literacy. Third, not enough studies reveal the range of factors that might motivate adolescents to join after-school book clubs or reading groups. Last, very few studies have examined how students construct a book club.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology and methods of the study. I designed the ten-month long qualitative study to reflect my stance that conversations about how, why, and what adolescents read should be *with* students. In this chapter, I also introduce the adolescent girls and their literacy teacher, Heather—presenting the girls as co-constructors and co-researchers of the book club.

In Chapters 4 through 8, I discuss the critical themes and learnings that emerged from the data. In Chapter 4, I explore the ways in which the girls understood, constructed, and participated

in the after-school book club as a liminal space: an in-between place that shares characteristics of in- and out-of-school learning spaces. The girls saw the after-school book club as both an extension of school *and* an alternative space. In Chapter 5, I argue that the girls understood, talked about, and practiced reading as deeply relational. The girls read and wrote within a host of human relationships involving peers, teachers and family members. In Chapter 6, I examine the ways in which the girls assumed a range of roles and responsibilities for the book club, established norms and rituals for the group, and negotiated the challenges of forming and sustaining the book club. In Chapter 7, I present the girls as readers-inquires-theorizers. The girls initiated and sustained conversations that reflected the ways in which they understood themselves, other people, and their worlds. As readers, the girls inquired into and grappled with difficult social and economic realities, such as racism, homelessness and poverty, and violence against women. In Chapter 8, I focus on the value of reading and talking together and of generating multiple perspectives. The social aspect of book clubs—reading and talking *with* others—fostered critical readings of and deeper engagement with texts.

In the final chapter, I offer pedagogical and research implications of the study. The study's findings can guide educators to re-imagine and re-construct learning spaces—both in and out of school—that can engage, challenge, and inspire adolescent learners. I also urge educational researchers to extend and build on single-site studies of adolescents and adolescent literacy, and develop more expansive frameworks for understanding the ways that adolescents traverse multiple texts and contexts.

Theoretical Frameworks

Studies of adolescent book clubs and reading groups (e.g., Broughton, 2002) tend to use reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1964, 1968) as a framework. Reader-response theory, however, does not always acknowledge the ideological content and context of texts, or account for the social interactions and relationships among readers. Thus, for the purposes of the present

study, more generative than reader-response theory are two theoretical frameworks: literacy as a social and critical practice, and social constructivism.

Prior to the 1970s, literacy was not a prominent part of the formal educational discourse (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). As part of the public discourse, literacy was often used to differentiate literate and illiterate adults. The earliest research on reading can be credited to the field of cognitive psychology (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Cognitive studies relied on and reinforced the view of reading development as acquiring a set of discrete skills and behaviors. According to de Castell, Luke and MacLennan (1981), the language of stimulus (input) and response (output) was commonly used to understand reading, suggesting that reading was similar to processing information. Reading researchers also examined "proficient" readers to extract strategies or skills that were then taught to struggling readers (Applebee et al., 2003). These studies often used a mechanistic paradigm (Rose, 2006, p. 186) and occurred inside laboratories.

Applebee and colleagues (2003) provide a brief summary of the evolution of literacy studies: language and literacy researchers first examined reading and writing processes; then they studied literacy tasks and learning within classrooms; and more recently, they began studying reading and writing situated within a wide range of contexts, including outside of schools. These later studies rely primarily on a sociocultural framework, acknowledging literacy as a social practice—a range of socially situated activities and attitudes involving the consumption and production of texts.

Since the early 1980s, the perspectives and frameworks for studying literacy have shifted. Reading and writing are no longer conceptualized and treated as a set of free-floating skills. Gee (2000) referred to the shift as the "social" turn. What does it mean to conceptualize reading and literacy more broadly, as social? According to Street (1995) and others (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 2000), literacy is not merely a set of reading and writing skills, independent of social contexts, relationships and ideologies. Rather, literacy is situated within and varied across communities, as

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well as social, cultural and institutional contexts. People live and function amid texts, coming to

and taking up different literacy events (Rose, 1989). Literacy researchers began to focus on the

ways that people understood, valued, and practiced literacy, and to acknowledge the importance

of local contexts (Collins & Blot, 2003; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). They also suggested

that people use literacy to enact individual and cultural identities. That is, conceptualizing literacy

as a social practice, literacy researchers studied the way that individuals use literacy to position

themselves and others, frame and enact different identities, and claim social and cultural

membership.

Bloome (1985) suggested that the act of reading is always social—the way that one reads

is socially situated and mediated. Reading is a practice and process that involve readers, texts, and

contexts. Hence, reading, even readings done alone and for the self, involves a social context

(Bloome, 1985). Bloome gives the example of Sustained Silent Reading, a common classroom

event or activity. During Sustained Silent Reading, students read alone and may be asked to

journal a response after the act of reading has taken place. The students, however, are situated

within and negotiating the social context of the classroom and school. Every classroom has a

particular reading culture. Within that culture, certain reading practices, beliefs and texts are

privileged over others. The classroom reading culture influences the texts that students encounter

on a daily basis and the types of opportunities for engaging texts. It also influences the identities

that are available to students as readers and learners. According to sociocultural frameworks of

literacy, reading is an activity pursued within a specific context for a purpose (Gee, 2000). The

experience of reading depends on *what*, *where* (i.e. in or out-of school), *how* (i.e. read

individually or in a group), and *for what purposes* one reads.

New Literacy Studies also challenged the view of literacy as schooled knowledge (Street

& Street, 1991), generating a body of work on individuals' out-of-school literacy practices. The

view of literacy as schooled knowledge obscures the literacy practices that are part of individuals'

lives and communities, such as mediating family and community disputes, paying bills and understanding school or government forms (Rose, 1989), and telling children bedtime stories (Heath, 1983). Rather than seeing reading and writing as a set of cognitive skills, literacy has come to refer to multiple literacies—the many ways of reading, writing, speaking and meaning making that are varied, contextual, and part of communities, families, and ways of life. That is, literacy is seen as situated within the daily activities and lives of people; and people are recognized as having experiences that involve the consumption and production of texts. Barton and Hamilton (2000) introduced the concept of situated literacies. They argued that rather than locate literacy solely within the life of individuals, educational researchers and teachers should highlight the role of families and local communities as they give meaning to, influence and sustain literacy practices. New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton; Gee, 2000; Street, 1995) advanced the range of ways researchers conceptualize and study literacy to include a more explicit exploration of the social and cultural contexts that facilitate students' literacy learning and engagement.

Conceptualizing literacy as skills or schooled knowledge also obscures the ways in which certain groups—based on race, gender or class—have been and are denied access to literacy (Willis, 1997). If literacy is seen as a cognitive skill that can be acquired or learned at school, then the less successful student is positioned as "socially less worthy" (Cook-Gumperz, 1986, p. 34) or intellectually deficient. Such a view shifts responsibility entirely onto the individual learner, eliding the fact that schools are responsible for fostering students' literacies.

I also conceptualize literacy as a critical practice. That is, through literacy, people engage in different and deeper readings of themselves, each other, and their realities (Horton & Freire, 1990). They explore and interrogate ideas, experiences and meaning. Critical literacy supports people to develop strategies for understanding, navigating and questioning the world. I agree with the claim, "critical literacy takes the reader beyond the bounds of reader response" (Bean &

Moni, 2003, p. 643). That is, reading is not simply a matter of being able to produce

interpretations that are faithful to the written text, draw on personal experiences and knowledge to

make sense of a text, or even enter and experience a work; rather, reading should prompt people

question the status quo and taken-for-granted worldviews (Edelsky, 1999; Shor, 1999). Reading

and responding to a text, readers should consider questions such as: whose interests do the texts

serve (Luke & Freebody, 1997); and whose experiences, meanings and perspectives are

privileged or omitted (Kamler, 2001). That is, readers should "speak back" to and deconstruct the

text, particularly its representations and ideologies.

Texts are never simply words on a page. They represent a site of struggle and

controversy, a site of ongoing contestation that determines the voices to be legitimated or silenced

(Gore, 1993). Luke and Freebody (1997) also argue that all texts are motivated. The aim of

critical literacy is to work towards an awareness and development of alternative reading positions

(Luke & Freebody, 1997)—a stance of critiquing the discourses and worldviews of texts, and a

stance of interrogating the structural and ideological forces that shape individuals' experiences

and realities. Readers become aware of the systems of power and privilege, and trouble the world

as it exists. Approaching literacy as critical practice, teachers and students can explore and

question existing social, economic and political realities, and imagine possible worlds.

Critical literacy is not a monolithic theory, however. Janks (2000) offers four different

perspectives on and approaches to critical literacy. The domination perspective focuses on the

ways in which language and texts reflect and preserve social, racial and economic inequities. The

second is the access perspective. As its name implies, the access perspective argues for providing

students access to dominant forms of language *alongside* valuing and nurturing students' home

language. The access perspective is similar to the argument that it is not enough to advocate local

languages and literacies if teachers are not explicitly addressing the relationship between

language and power (Street, 2004). The third perspective, the diversity perspective, focuses on

the ways that literacy creates a range of diverse social identities for people. Lastly, the design perspective focuses on the ways that people draw upon, use, and integrate multiple texts and semiotic signs.

Critical literacy has informed teachers' theories of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001) and classroom pedagogies. Behrman (2006) reviewed the different ways that critical literacy as a theoretical framework has shaped the pedagogies of middle and secondary school teachers. Reviewing five years of research (1999-2003) on critical literacy classrooms, Behrman identified six approaches to teaching critical literacy: reading supplementary texts (e.g., works of fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels and films) alongside classroom textbooks or more traditional literature; reading multiple texts (e.g., different texts on the same topic); questioning and resisting the texts; producing counter-texts or alternative texts that represent multiple points of view; researching issues that students identify as relevant and important; and taking social action.

Conceptualizing literacy as a social, critical practice means acknowledging that adolescents use literacy to position themselves and others; perform and enact different identities; claim social membership; take up difficult social problems and issues; and develop alternative readings of the word and world (Freire, 1987). Reading, however, may not always prompt people to take up new and alternative perspectives. It is often difficult for the solitary, individual reader to problematize and interrogate a text, and try on new ways of reading (Martin, 2001), raising the question: how can readers work toward deeper or new understandings of the word/world? One response is that there must be dialogue during and after the act of reading (Freire, 1970). Through talk, people consider, articulate, and revise what they believe and where they stand on social issues (Horowitz, 1994). Freire claimed that learning is possible through dialogue: "Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (1970, p. 81). Therefore, underlying the framework of literacy as social, critical practice is the significance of social interactions and dialog.

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Book clubs both necessitate and produce social interactions around texts. Hence, also framing the girls' after-school book club is the theory of social constructivism, namely the belief that learning is a social rather than individual endeavor (Vygotsky, 1988). Social constructivism (Au, 1998; Bruffee, 1984, 1993; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1988; Wertsch, 1985) acknowledges that meaning is jointly generated among people, and that learning necessarily occurs within social contexts and through social interactions.

Social constructivism presupposes that human beings are social. The use of *social* is much broader than the notion of "companionship," and refers to the fact that people need the presence of *others* to define and make sense of experiences and events, and even make sense of the self. People exist within broader cultural, political, and material surroundings, including institutions, communities and families. Thus, social constructivist research focuses on the role of teachers, peers and family members as they influence students' learning (Au, 1998). Given that social constructivism takes seriously the view that reading and learning are relational, I paid particular attention to the role of peers and family members on the girls' literacy practices and identities as readers.

A central tenet of social constructivism is that talking is a problem-solving and meaning-making activity. That is, talk is fundamental to making sense of texts, generating meaning, and learning (Horowitz, 1994; Miller, 2003). According to Vygotsky (1988), talk is the basis of developing, sharing and revising ideas. According to Bakhtin (1986), dialog allows people, as they talk and relate to others, to re-formulate and revise initial thoughts, perspectives and knowledge. Wells (2001) posits that knowledge generation occurs in and through dialog. Hynds and Appleman (1997) also noted the significance of social interactions for adolescents' literacy learning. Smith (1988) argues that schools can do more to present learning as social and collaborative. Yet student talk is more likely to be limited or restricted in a remedial reading or special education class (Horowitz, 1994) than an advanced class.

Social constructivism understands people as interpreting texts, making meaning, and generating knowledge *through* social interactions and relationships. Rather than see "knowledge" as residing inside individuals' heads, it is seen as a product of collaboration among learners. Knowledge—knowledge of the self, of others, and of the world—is "socially constructed and contextualized" (Lunsford, 1991, p. 4). Even scientific knowledge is the product of conversations that take place at lab benches, hallways and offices. As a result of these conversations, scientists come to rethink or revise initial ideas, or more clearly articulate and defend a position (Bruffee, 1993).

Taken together, the framework of literacy as social and critical practice, and social constructivism present a way to theorize adolescent book clubs as a site for students to experience literacy and learning as social; extend, build on and complicate others' meanings and knowledge; and begin to interrogate taken-for-granted and readily available ways for reading the word and world.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Research on out-of-school literacy practices of adolescents (Fisher, 2007; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004) shows that students are reading together and forming their own informal reading groups and book clubs—conversations around a commonly shared piece of text—on the bus, over the phone and in notebooks, both paper and electronic. More recently Moje, Overby, Tysaver and Morris (2008) reported the range of reading and writing networks that students create, whether a formal book club that meets monthly or an informal group that discusses books during recess, lunch or homeroom. What are the range and variation of adolescent book clubs and reading groups? In what ways might reading groups and book clubs support adolescents' literacy learning and engagement? Several studies shed light on this question.

Research on Out of School Book Clubs for Adolescents

Hill and Van Horn (1995) studied a three-week summer book club for five middle school students (three boys and two girls) at a juvenile detention center that served incarcerated youth, ages 11 to 17. During the day, youth attended classes that followed state and district curriculum for secondary school. Van Horn facilitated the book club meetings twice a week, and each meeting lasted approximately 2 hours. The researchers wanted to study whether and how students at the juvenile detention center collaborated on group discussions, whether the book club discussions influenced students' writing, and whether the book club discussions changed students' self-perceptions and perceptions of others. They found that students looked forward to coming to book club, wrote more frequently as a result of the book club, and saw themselves and family members differently. Gender, race, class, age, and other identity markers informed students' literacy practices and beliefs. Yet the study did not explicitly address the identities of the participants as incarcerated youth. Moreover, the researchers did not fully address the last research question: that is, how literacy might help students "gain greater understandings of social

justice" (Hill & Van Horn, p. 181). Lastly, the book club met only for three weeks, raising questions concerning the sustainability of such book clubs and possible long-term benefits for youth attending the book club.

Irwin-Devitis and Benjamin (1995) also created a summer book club that met during the evenings. The researchers recruited 11 to 13 year-old girls to participate. Nine girls met to discuss the book, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl.* The researchers had selected the book for two reasons: the book is often read as part of middle and high school curricula, and it features a strong female protagonist. Irwin-Devitis and Benjamin concluded that girls used the text to explore the roles and choices available to girls, and to understand better the duality of being oneself and adhering to societal expectations for girls. To prompt discussion, the researchers generated a number of open-ended questions, and selected quotes pertinent to issues of female adolescent development. That is, the researchers did not ask participants to identify issues and concerns that mattered to them. Rather than listen to and collect the girls' emerging questions and concerns, the researchers defined the parameters of the book club discussion.

Chandler (1997) formed, facilitated, and studied a beach book club that met during the summers. For the first year, Chandler worked with and observed 17 students (10 girls and 7 boys). The second and third year, the book clubs had 37 students (10 boys and 27 girls) and 24 students (7 boys and 17 girls), respectively. Throughout the three-year study, she found that the high school students learned to listen and take seriously diverse perspectives and readings without adopting a relativist stance that any and all readings were equally valid. A limitation of the study is that salient aspects of students' identities (e.g., race, class and gender) were left unexamined.

Alvermann, Young, Green and Wisenbaker (1999) studied 20 (8 girls and 12 boys) primarily European American, middle-class, sixth to ninth graders. They met every week at a public library after school for 15 weeks. Two researchers facilitated four Read and Talk (R & T) clubs. Theorizing literacy and discourse as critical, social practice, the authors analyzed

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adolescents' talk and interactions as part of larger social and institutional contexts. The researchers wanted to explore the reasons adolescents chose to attend the R & T clubs, and the ways in which the adolescents and researchers negotiated the structure and practices of the book clubs. Interestingly, across all four clubs, the students decided that they did not need to read and discuss a common text. The authors found that students valued the social nature of the Read and Talk Clubs and urged educators to imagine possibilities for different kinds of reading instruction that can foster community among adolescents.

Research on School-Based Book Clubs for Adolescents

Book clubs also meet inside the school building—before, after, or even during school hours. Appleman (2006) studied a morning book club at a Midwestern, suburban high school. The Breakfast Book Club met every other month, totaling four or five meetings during the school year. Appleman analyzed the frequency of individual speakers and amount of adult-facilitators' talk. The Breakfast Book Club, according to the researcher, led to more than increased student motivation and enjoyment. Appleman found that the Breakfast Book Club led to a range of behaviors and practices: students offered a range of responses, including evaluative, aesthetic, descriptive and personal responses; they offered perspectives on themselves, on high school, and on life in general; students addressed and listened to each other; and students referred to the text for support. Appleman also noted that the book club prompted other students and teachers at the high school to create smaller reading communities (e.g., the all-boys book club).

Whittingham and Huffman (2009) recruited 60 middle school students at two middle schools to study the effect of book clubs on middle school students' reading attitudes. The book club met every week, before school, for approximately 25 minutes. The book club lasted for one semester. The researchers designed an attitude instrument of ten questions using a Likert-type response scale (e.g., strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, or strongly disagree). The survey was administered at the start of the semester, and then at the end. Students were asked to respond

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to statements such as, "Reading is important to me" or "Reading makes me feel good about myself." Using statistical analysis, the authors concluded that simple exposure to the book club produced positive effects on initially resistant readers. The study, however, failed to include students' perspectives on the book club and offer images of the ways that students actually experienced the book club.

According to Appleman (2006), it is also common for book clubs to occur during class as part of the curriculum. An early study on an all-girl, adolescent book club focused on The Literature Project (Miller, 1993), a 15-week, school-based program offered to 30 adolescent girls, ages 15 to 18, identified as "at risk" for academic failure. As part of the Literature Project, the girls read novels and short stories (e.g., *The Color Purple*) featuring women or girls as main protagonists. The young women met three times a week during the school day, and each class lasted for 50 minutes. The girls read the texts, and then used art, writing, role playing, drama and debate to engage the text more deeply. A limitation of the study is that the researcher did not problematize the label, "at-risk." Gadsden, Davis and Artiles (2009) urge educational researchers and practitioners to reconceptualize current understandings of at-riskness to account for socioeconomic constraints, students' ethnic and racial status, quality of students' environments and other institutional barriers that constrain students' wellbeing and learning. Another limitation is that the researcher relied primarily on surveys and scales, such as the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. She also administered a pre- and posttest of the Literature Project Evaluation Form, a survey designed to solicit the girls' attitudes toward reading, their self-perceptions, perceptions of women, and aspirations for the future. The researcher drew conclusions based on statistical analysis of the pre and post-tests, and self-concept scale. Therefore, the students' own voices were visibly absent. Lastly, the researcher did not provide any information on the identities of the 30 girls studied, although she identified both poverty and racial or ethnic minority status as contributing to the students' academic risk level.

Lapp and Fisher (2009) studied a weekly book club that was part of the official English class curriculum. The book club consisted of 24 eleventh graders. All 24 students, according to the authors, had experienced school failure and read below grade-level, and 15% qualified for special education services. Twenty three of the 24 students qualified for free lunch, approximately half spoke a language other than English at home, and 35% spoke African American Vernacular English. The researchers noted the students' linguistic and racial diversity; however, they failed to offer the number of female and male book club members. The weekly book club met during English class for 55 minutes. The students read a range of texts, including newspapers, non-fiction texts, plays and poetry *alongside* the book club novel. The researchers discovered that the students were enthusiastic participants: they analyzed the characters' behaviors and decisions, and practiced comprehension strategies, including synthesizing and comparing multiple texts. Given that the book club was school-based, the participants were given guidelines for discussing books, guidelines for moderating discussions, and a list of texts to read. The students were not given the opportunity to co-construct the book club.

Bettis and Roe (2007) explored the reading lives and identities of 47 sixth- and eighth-grade girls, and the girls' experiences as participants of school-based literature circles and discussion groups. The researchers observed the sixth and eighth grade girls' language arts classrooms, paying particular attention to the literacy event of literature discussion groups. They also interviewed the 47 students and two teachers. The researchers found that the girls used texts to understand and construct definitions of "ideal girlhood," and concluded that girls' literacy practices were integral to forming and sustaining gender identities. They also presented several profiles of the girls, including the boisterous socialite, alpha girl, nice girl, quiet thinker, and the emerging alpha girl. However, these profiles and labels (e.g., boisterous socialite, quiet thinker) fail to capture the complexity of girls' identities. That is, they cannot explain all the different subject positions that a student might occupy at any given moment.

Marshall (2004) studied the effects of faculty-student book clubs on school culture. He formed and studied two book clubs at two urban middle schools: one middle school served 1600 students, and the other 400. According to the researcher, students at both schools were culturally and linguistically diverse. Adults and students met during lunch to discuss young adult literature. It is worth noting that the book club began as a faculty book club; however, as students began to notice teachers reading young adult fiction, they asked to join the book club. Both schools' book club discussions focused on discussing and evaluating the authors' writing techniques and style; making text connections (e.g., text to self connections, text to text connections), and discussing issues and struggles facing the adolescent protagonists. Analyzing the data, Marshall also paid particular attention to the way that the book clubs influenced school culture. That is, he widened the scope of analysis to examine whether and how faculty-student book clubs influenced student-teacher and student–student interactions outside of classrooms. He concluded that faculty-student book clubs led to the following: teachers shared readings and classroom practices, thereby working against isolation and against the cultural myth (Britzman, 1999) that teachers are self-made and self-sufficient; teachers and students shared readings and practices around reading, creating a "culture of literacy"; teachers offered more young adult fiction to students, and developed a more empathetic stance toward adolescents; and lastly, administrators adopted the book club model to redesign professional development, asking teachers to read and discuss professional literature much the same way they might discuss a novel.

The most common type of school-based book club is the after-school book club. Smith (1997, 2000) studied a book club of eight sixth-grade girls at a school located in the Northeast. The book club consisted of middle to upper-middle class, European American, African American and Latina students. Over a period of six months, the girls met for a total of 17 sessions to discuss four books: *The Beggar's Ride; I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This; The Friends;* and *Phoenix Rising.* Smith generated a list of ten novels that feature a range of strong female protagonists. The

girls chose four of the ten, and met every week to discuss the novels and write letters to the literary characters. Smith (1997) presented a case study of two girls. Similar to the protagonist, one girl had recently experienced the sudden death of a parent. Another girl used the novel to reflect on the fact that she was one of the few Black students at a predominately White school. In a later work, Smith (2000) focused on the girls' exploration of *The Beggar's Ride*, particularly the girls' understanding of romance and sexual attraction. The text prompted the girls to vicariously explore situations they would not want to experience; notice and admire the strength of the female protagonist; and mingle life stories and literary response to *The Beggar's Ride*. The researcher concluded that the girls often displayed complex and ambivalent attitudes toward dating and boy-girl relationships.

Carico (2001) formed and studied a book club as part of a research study. Over the period of five months, she studied four middle school girls as they read and discussed two books, *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* and *Lyddie*. The four girls attended a private middle school. Drawing on reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1964), Carico focused on the personal connections girls made to the text and to the female protagonist, and on the girls' understandings of being female and young. Analysis of the girls' talk revealed a range of responses. The researcher saw instances of meaningful and critical talk, and occasions of talk that she identified as "unproductive or, on rare occasions, potentially destructive" (2001, p. 513). Similar to the approach that Irwin-Devitis and Benjamin used (1995), Carico offered a prompt to begin the discussion, and then guiding questions to structure the girls' talk. She characterized the book club talk as "semi-structured." Carico did introduce a different element to the book club, however. She used parts of already transcribed book club sessions for girls to reflect on previous discussion. She called these, Reflective Sessions.

Drawing on reader-response theory and poststructuralist thought, Broughton (2002) studied four sixth-grade girls as they read a novel centered on the experiences of two Mexican

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American children. The study took place at a suburban middle school that was predominantly White. According to the author, she aimed to study how the girls—all identified as "average" or "above-average" readers—performed and constructed a range of subjectivities through reading and discussing a shared text. She concluded that the girls' reexamined views of themselves and others, and interrogated assumptions and biases of Mexican Americans.

Vyas (2004) studied an after-school literature club for first and second-generation immigrant students of Asian descent (e.g., Taiwanese, Korean, Nepali, Indian and Pakistani). The literature club consisted of seven students (4 girls and 3 boys) attending a suburban public high school. The literature club met weekly for approximately one hour. It lasted for four and a half months. The researcher aimed to explore Asian American high school students' understandings and articulations of bicultural identity, focusing on interconnections of literacy and identity: that is, the ways that literacy practices both reveal and shape peoples' sense of themselves. The researcher selected the readings (poems, short stories and picture books) that focused on the lives and experiences of Asian Americans or Asians. She also chose pieces that were accessible to first-generation immigrant students. Drawing on qualitative methods, the researcher discovered that students passed judgments on characters for the ways they managed parental pressure and cultural differences. The students shared experiences of alienation, and revealed challenges of balancing the demands of school and home cultures. The strength of Vyas' study is that it focused on the literacy practices, and on the identity formations and negotiations of Asian Americans, a student population that is often overlooked. A limitation of the study, however, is that the club eventually had only three girls regularly attend and participate.

Marsh and Stolle (2006) reported on an after-school, critical literacy book club for middle school students. They focused on the experience of one focal student, Carlie, a seventh grade, White adolescent girl. Carlie was one of six members of the critical literacy book club. The book club met weekly for 15 weeks. The researcher (Marsh) analyzed Carlie's responses to the novel,

The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle. Using discourse analytic methods, the researcher concluded that Carlie advocated for treating the sexes equally, and understood that gender, as a choice, has consequences for the way people are perceived and treated. As the facilitator and researcher of the critical literacy book club, Marsh purposefully selected "redressive" texts for students. These texts featured characters that resisted gendered norms, or offered different constructions of gender. A limitation of the critical literacy book club is that the researchers had already identified gender as a primary and salient concern. That is, gender was an adult-determined area of interest. Rather than invite students to name and identify a range of concerns, the researcher limited the students' responses and engagement to issues of gender.

Research on Literacy Groups or Communities for Adolescents

A number of studies have focused on girls' reading, writing, and literacy broadly defined. Schaafsma, Tendero and Tendero (1999) formed and studied a group of eighth-grade girls, self-named TEEN (Teens Educating in the Environment Needed for teens). All 14 participants were low-income, girls of color. The girls conducted research on teenage sexuality and pregnancy: a topic that they decided mattered to girls and the community. The girls read and discussed non-fiction and fiction texts, interviewed teenage mothers, mentored fifth and sixth-grade girls on the subject, and eventually published a booklet of stories and poems on desire and adolescence. The booklet was distributed to the school and neighborhood community. According to the authors, the girls offered multiple perspectives on issues of teenage pregnancy and desire, and challenged how academics and media often represented and positioned urban, girls of color as irresponsible and immoral. Schaafsma concluded that spaces need to be made for students to work through—individually and collectively—these complicated issues.

Wissman (2007) taught and studied a writing and photography elective course for adolescent girls, age 14 to 16. Wissman designed the elective course as an "intentionally feminist and collaborative group" (p. 342). The group of 16 high school girls read and responded to the

work of feminist writers (e.g., Maya Angelou, June Jordan, and Sonia Sanchez), wrote poetry, and took photographs to create "visual autobiographies. Wissman found that the girls used poetry to reposition and rewrite themselves outside of the dominant discourse surrounding Black girls; and that the girls' writing and photographs reflected their perspectives on race, gender and other social issues.

Henry (1998) studied an all-girl reading and writing group that met weekly for over a year. The participants were African Caribbean girls, ages 14 to 15, attending an urban middle school. The researcher described the girls as "Creole-speaking, working-class, immigrant girls" (p. 234). Henry drew on critical Black feminist perspectives, and used ethnographic methods. She selected the texts (e.g., *The Diary of Latoya Hunter: My First Year at Junior High*) and structured activities for the girls, such as watching films. The girls volunteered to read aloud; made personal connections to the text; wrote responses to books; wrote on a range of topics, such as parental relationships and adults' opinions on dating; and even held peer-conferences on the written pieces. Henry concluded that the reading and writing group became a context for girls to share issues that they saw as relevant and important, explore possible underlying causes of those issues, and feel more confident at self-expression.

Haiken (2002) created and studied a girls-only creative arts and writing group that met weekly for 90 minutes for fifteen weeks. Participants were seventh and eighth-grade girls in Haiken's own classroom. The weekly sessions included journal writing, group discussions, and art activities using clay, painting, and photography. Examples of art activities included designing and creating t-shirts, constructing a collage of students' understandings of beauty and health, and sketching images of students' past, present and future homes. Haiken concluded that the group worked to raise girls' consciousness; increase self-esteem; enhance girls' abilities and willingness to communicate; and bring about the realization that girls have agency to make life decisions.

Research on Digital Book Clubs for Adolescents

The possibilities for book clubs as a genre of out-of-school literacy learning have been enhanced as the past decade has seen book clubs and reading groups appear on online, virtual spaces. Book clubs can now be organized on social networking sites, including Facebook. Through its Book Club application, Facebook users can create or join book clubs for free. On the site, they can comment or review a book or author; share related interests among book club members; and build or search a library of titles (Whelan, 2009). Scharber (2009) studied online book clubs organized for teens and preteens. The online book club was a program at a Metropolitan public library system. Each book club lasted for one week, and was organized according to gender (boys-only, girls-only), age, and types of text read. Each day, a librarian posted a question on the forum, inviting members to respond to the question, read others' comments, and discuss the book. The participants could also chat at a designated time. According to the study, students noted that the real-time chat was the best part of book club. She also analyzed the chats and concluded that the conversations focused on a range of topics, such as pets, sports and other good books. Scharber (2009) argues that online book clubs are an example of bridging "old" and "new" literacy practices—the old literacy practices of reading a literary text for pleasure, and the new literacy practice of using online forums for conversation and learning.

Summary

Book clubs and reading groups have different configurations and organizational structures depending on the context and on participants. Existing studies reflect the range and variation of book clubs and reading groups. The book clubs were organized according to gender (e.g., all-girl) or grade level (e.g., high school); met inside or out of schools (e.g., public libraries, beaches or juvenile detention centers); occurred weekly, biweekly, or monthly; involved one or more teachers; and focused on reading and discussing literature, writing, taking photographs and

more. The book clubs were organized differently, and had a range of purposes and social practices depending on the expectations of members.

Existing empirical research on book clubs is limited, however, for the following reasons: First, the studies tended to focus on individual readers and the responses of the individual reader as the unit of analysis. That is, few studies have expressly investigated the social practices and relationships that are part of reading and discussing texts. Therefore, my study was guided by the suggestion (see Alvermann et al., 1996) to focus on not only adolescents' literacy practices and identities, but also the social practices of reading, such how adolescents position each other and are being positioned; how adolescents engage and relate to one another; and how students initiate and sustain conversations. Second, the studies tended not to focus on whether and how reciprocity exists between out-of-school and in-school learning environments, and how students make sense of the relationship between out-of-school and in-school literacies. Therefore, my study explored whether and how adolescent girls used the after-school book club to inform their in-school learning and vice-versa. Third, not enough studies explored the range of factors that might motivate adolescents to join after-school book clubs or reading groups. Lastly, as is often the case, the research focused on book clubs that teachers, researchers or other adult-facilitators designed for the adolescents. Very few studies have examined how students take up the invitation to construct a book club, and what happens when adolescents are intentionally positioned as both creators and participants of an after-school book club.

CHAPTER III

Methodology and Data Analysis

Setting

The setting of the study was Harmony School, a public K-8 school in a large Northeastern city. The school is 48 percent Black, 29 percent White, 13 percent Asian, and 9 percent Latino. Approximately 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The teaching staff at Harmony is predominately White, although the principal is a Black woman.

Given its proximity to a private research university, Harmony was seen as an unusual urban public school. Several girls described Harmony as different, expressing appreciation for its resources, including a new building, computers, and competent teachers. I am aware that the term, urban, conjures images of communities that are poor and Black or Latino, and images of schools that are racially segregated, under-funded, low-performing and dysfunctional. However, I use the term for two reasons. First, the girls and their literacy teacher described the school and neighborhood as urban. The students revealed that they were very much part of the city. They contrasted urban and suburban environments, and urban and suburban students. Eve, a seventh grader, commented on the common misperception that suburban adolescents are better behaved than urban adolescents. She stated, "They're even worse in the suburbs than they are down here." Second, I use the term because Harmony School and its students are reminders that urban public schools are sites of rich learning and possibility.

According to the school website, the school building sits on a five-acre campus. The building has three floors, and the seventh- and eighth-grade literacy class can be found on the third floor. Upon entering the school building, I always noticed the sign reminding all visitors to report to the Main Office. To the immediate right of the main entrance is a station for the security officer. The first floor also has a cafeteria, library, and Atrium. The Atrium functions as an all-purpose area. It is used to host Poetry Café, Story-Telling Time or school assemblies, and hold

band and orchestra practice. The students at Harmony are required to wear uniforms: blue or white collared shirts, and dark or khaki pants. Given the dress code, many of the middle school girls paid particular attention to accessories (e.g., earrings, bracelets, necklaces, headbands and scarves), footwear (e.g., "Chucks", Uggs), cosmetics, and hair styles.

Heather's classroom is on the third floor. Heather is a 40-year old White woman. She has shoulder-length, curly brown hair that is often worn tied back. She has a youthful demeanor and casual style of dress: she often wore brown clogs, khaki pants and a sweater. Before teaching middle school, Heather taught third to fifth graders at a suburban elementary school, and then served as a literacy coach. At the time of the study, she had been teaching middle-school literacy at Harmony for six years.

Heather is one of two literacy teachers for the middle grades. She teaches the same students for three years: sixth, seventh and eighth grade. The school is partially tracked: that is, the school divides its middle school students according to their reading level. Heather teaches the advanced literacy class (i.e., students who are either on or above grade level). Mina, the other literacy teacher, teaches students tested two or more grade-levels below. I struggled with the fact that I would be working with the "advanced" students. As a student, and then later a high school teacher, I witnessed and experienced firsthand how tracking reflects and reproduces social inequities (Oakes, 2005). Poor students and students of color fill vocational education courses and special education and remedial classes while middle-class White and Asian students can be found occupying the honors and college-preparatory courses. I expressed my discomfort to Heather, who defended tracking as an arrangement that students preferred, and explained that the placement of students was not permanent. In fact, at the beginning of the school year, Caitlin joined the advanced seventh-grade literacy class, while Katherine transferred to the lower-track class. Heather also explained that she and Mina often collaborated to ensure that students were exposed to similar learning experiences and texts. For example, during the study, they worked on

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an end-of-the-year unit on Shakespeare for the eighth graders. Although I disagree with the tracking policy at Harmony and acknowledge that I was working with the "advanced" seventh and eighth graders, I posit that much can be learned from researching academically successful students from diverse backgrounds (Au, 1998; Delpit, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Entering Heather's literacy classroom, I often saw students sitting and working together. The seventh and eighth graders worked on a range of projects that combined reading, writing and research, and required presenting work to classmates. The texts of the classroom included: literature anthologies; short stories (e.g., "The Most Dangerous Game", "The Lottery"); longer texts (e.g., *The Pearl*, *Esperanza Rising*, *Before We Were Free*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Animal Farm, The Crucible*); non-fiction texts (e.g., *National Geographic*), student-selected novels (e.g., *Twilight*); and student-produced writing. A library occupied one corner of Heather's classroom. There was a colorful rug and pillows, and shelves full of plastic bins and baskets that were labeled according to genres (e.g., fiction, memoir, biography, autobiography, and informational texts), and grade-level (sixth, seventh, and eighth grade). Heather posted student work as well as motivational posters on the wall. For example, one poster read: "Don't regard any commission as unworthy of your best endeavor. You will be judged by all your work—Paul Cret."

The individual student desks were clustered together to form a group, and there were six groups. The students had assigned seating; however, the seating assignment changed after every major unit or project. Heather explained that students might be grouped according to least favorite literary genres (e.g., fantasy or historical fiction), or similar research interests and questions (e.g., immigration, slavery, poverty). She offered the following explanation:

> **Heather:** Most of them don't sit with their friends. You sit with the people that you're miserable with. That's exciting. Call each other up, figure out how to get through that patch. "I am at this part. I hate it. Tell me why I should read fantasy" Or has the same burning question, likes or dislikes. Sometimes they are in a group for a week, sometimes for four weeks. The rule is, the people in the back have to sit in the front. (Interview, 11.10.08)

Rather than sit at the teacher-desk, Heather preferred to stand or sit on top of one of the smaller student desks. She often made jokes, laughed, and shared experiences of writing papers for graduate school. She was dramatic, engaging and full of energy, and the students genuinely appreciated Ms. Heather.

Recruiting Heather and Adolescent Girls

During the study, Heather was completing her master's degree in education. In September 2006, Heather took a course on adolescent literacy, which I co-taught with a faculty member and three doctoral students. In the course, Heather was introduced to new frameworks, such as critical literacy (Christensen, 2000; Freire, 1987), critical inquiry (Fecho, 2000) and inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). She brought these frameworks and perspectives into her classroom, changing the way she conceptualized and taught literacy, and structuring different learning activities and experiences (e.g., The Culture Inquiry Project, Social Justice Project) for her students.

Prior to graduate school, she had already had considerable experience teaching literacy and coaching other English and Language Arts teachers. She was also the product of an English education program at a nearby state university. According to Heather, the year she became an education major, "Lucy Calkins had just come out. Writing workshop had just come out. Donald Graves." Teaching at Harmony, she used elements of Nancie Atwell and Lucy Calkins' Reading and Writing Workshop models, elements of inquiry pedagogy, and elements of critical literacy pedagogy. She also introduced students to the theories and language of reader-response (Rosenblatt, 1964). During one class she addressed the eighth graders, "You always wanted to tell me a summary. You really didn't understand the potential of having reader response." Classroom observations revealed that Heather did not adopt a singular approach or model to teaching literacy. She commented that teachers should be eclectic and flexible to accommodate students' different interests, concerns, curiosities, knowledge and needs.

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In January 2008, I contacted Heather and asked if she would be willing to be part of the study. Heather responded that she would be honored and was certain that many of the girls would want to be part of an after-school book club. She described the book club as "right up my alley and theirs." To enter the school site and recruit participants, I obtained approval from the school principal and the school district.

In mid-September of 2008, I visited Harmony School to meet the seventh and eighth-grade girls. Heather advised against recruiting sixth graders. She was getting to know the sixth graders, and was not sure if they would participate or be interested. Thus, only seventh and eighth-grade girls (ages 12-14) were invited to the study. I refer to the girls as early adolescents and adolescents while acknowledging that definitions of adolescence differ across historical, political, social and cultural landscapes (Levi & Schmitt, 1997). For example, Strickland and Alvermann (2004) suggest that adolescence covers ages 10 to 18; the Young Adult Library Services Association suggests that adolescence covers ages 12 to 18.

Only the girls in Heather's seventh and eighth-grade classes were invited to be part of the book club. We met outside of Heather's classroom. I introduced myself and shared the study. I referred to the study as a "school project." I explained the following: the girls would meet once every two weeks, after school; they would read a student-selected text, such as novels, short stories, poems, blogs, song lyrics, and magazine articles; Heather would facilitate the discussions, yet she was a member and participant of the book club, and not the "teacher"; the meetings would last approximately an hour and be audio-recorded. The girls were told that participation was voluntary and optional. That is, whether or not they decided to participate would not disappoint Heather or affect the grade they receive for literacy class. The girls were encouraged to ask any questions or share concerns they might have. If interested, the girls were given parent consent and student assent forms. Parents were also given a letter that explained the study. The girls were told that they could not participate unless they returned both parent consent and student assent forms.

Participants: Who Are the Girls?

Initially 22 participants returned consent and assent forms. Three months later, Molly

joined the book club, totaling the number of participants to 23 girls.

Table 1
Book Club Participants: Grade & Race

Name	Grade	Race
Amy	7	White
Casey	7	White
Karen	7	White
Caitlin	7	Black
Rebecca	7	Black
Lauren *	7	Black
Helen	7	Bi-racial (White, Asian)
Debbie	7	Asian
Jessica	7	Black
Molly	7	White
Clarissa *	7	White
Katherine	7	Black
Eve	7	White
Stephanie	7	White
Stella *	8	Bi-racial (White, Asian)
Elizabeth *	8	Bi-racial (White, Black)
Inez	8	Black
Mary	8	White
Sue	8	White
Carol	8	Black
Yolanda	8	Black
Veronica	8	Asian
Sid *	8	Black

Book club members reflect the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the school.

Of the 14 seventh graders, there were 7 White, 5 Black, 1 Asian and 1 self-identified biracial

student. Of the 9 eighth graders, there were 2 White, 4 Black, 1 Asian, and 2 self-identified

biracial students. Five students (Lauren, Clarissa, Stella, Elizabeth and Sid) attended the book club sporadically, and eventually left the study. An asterisk is placed next to those students. All names are pseudonyms.

Based on the girls' grade level and after-school schedules (e.g., baby-sitting, softball or orchestra practice, rehearsal for the school musical, Yearbook meetings), the girls were assigned to one of three book clubs: there were two book clubs of seventh graders, and one book club of eighth graders.

Table 2
Book Clubs & Members

Group	Members
Tuesday: Seventh Grade	Casey, Jessica, Lauren, Rebecca, Debbie (n=5)
Thursday: Seventh Grade	Amy, Caitlin, Clarissa, Eve, Helen, Karen, Katherine Molly, Stephanie (n=9)
Thursday: Eighth Grade	Carol, Elizabeth, Inez, Mary, Sid, Stella, Sue, Veronica, Yolanda (n=9)

Given that the seventh and eighth-grade girls self-selected to be part of the book club, and that Heather teaches the "advanced" middle school students, it might be tempting to assume that the girls were all avid readers or that they all saw themselves as "good" readers. However, data from the study suggest that the girls saw themselves differently as readers, and had varying expectations for the book club. Not every girl said that she was a good reader. The girls also saw the after-school book club as fulfilling different functions. Not surprisingly, the most often cited reason for joining the book club was to read more books. The girls, however, articulated other reasons for deciding to become part of the book club. The girls commented that they wanted to

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see friends after school and "hang out." Veronica mentioned that she had never joined an after-school activity or club before. Clarissa, a seventh grader, used to attend Harmony. A competitive gymnast, she often traveled during school hours. Therefore, she was being home-schooled for the year. She shared, "Why I'm here? Because I am no longer at this school, but I still want to make sure that I get to hang out with my friends and Ms. Heather." Clarissa felt isolated and desired the company of classmates and Ms. Heather.

Carol saw the book club as an opportunity to become a better writer. She shared that one way to become a better writer is to read more. Several girls also expressed difficulty finding engaging and interesting books, and hoped that they could get recommendations for new titles. Caitlin, a seventh grader, announced, "I'm here because I don't know how to choose books very well." Caitlin also added that she could go home later, making it possible for both parents to work overtime.

The girls described having different relationships to reading. Lauren, a seventh grader, shared, "I am not really into reading. Maybe I'll become more into reading." Eve said that she was not a "huge reader." Rebecca, another seventh grader, explained her reasons for joining the book club:

> **Rebecca**: I am trying to learn from this after-school program that I guess when I go to high school or college, I am not going to always read books that I like, so I am trying to get used to reading things that I don't like. And maybe with this group, they'll sort of encourage me to sort of find ways to enjoy the book. (Interview, 2.13.09)

Rather than see the book club as an opportunity to recommend and read books she already likes, Rebecca wanted to learn to enjoy even books she does not like. She understood the book club as not simply an enjoyable after-school activity; rather, it was preparation for high school and college. She acknowledged that students do not always like the books they read. To be successful as a high school or college student, however, one must learn to actively engage and enjoy school-assigned texts. Strickland and Alvermann (2004) agree. According to the authors, adolescents are expected to be motivated to learn difficult concepts and texts, even if on the surface they appear

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to have little relevance to adolescents' realities and interests. Discussing the reasons for joining the book club, Rebecca and Caitlin put forth reasons that were practical. That is, they expected the club to be useful. The book club could teach girls ways to select a book, enjoy reading, and prepare for high school and beyond.

Methodology and Data Collection Methods

I designed the ten-month long qualitative study to reflect my belief that conversations about how, why, and what adolescents read should be *with* students. Drawing on ethnographic and case study methods, I studied the ways in which 23 middle school girls and their literacy teacher formed and participated in an after-school book club. Ethnographic methods are particularly generative and useful for researching the ways that people understand, use, and value literacy. According to Heath (1982), ethnographic studies of language and literacy primarily involve collecting artifacts of literacy (e.g., multiple texts that people read and write on a daily basis) and generating thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of the social and cultural contexts of peoples' literacy practices. Literacy is conceptualized and studied as a series of social practices that carry different meaning to people and that are part of specific contexts. Using ethnographic methods, I worked to understand the after-school book club as a particular context for reading and discussing texts; understand the culture of reading that gets created, shared, negotiated and sustained among the girls; explore the social practices of reading (i.e., relationships and interactions) that develop and evolve among participants; explore the range of adolescent girls' literacy practices and beliefs; and generate rich descriptions of girls reading and discussing a common text.

For one academic year (September 2008 to June 2009), each of the three book clubs met 14 times. We met in a small open area near the literacy classroom. The area had four small round tables. Groups of students used the area to work on a project, and teachers held conferences or ate

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lunch. The girls sat around the table. To accommodate the larger book club, we combined and used two round tables.

I used four data collection methods: participant-observation, audio-recordings and transcription of book club discussions, semi-structured interviews, and document collection. I observed the book club meetings, keeping both fieldnotes and a field journal. Although each session was audio-recorded and transcribed, I recorded the students' verbal and nonverbal behaviors. I attempted to capture what the girls said in the form of direct quotes as much as possible. If that was not possible, I noted keywords and phrases. The keywords and phrases were helpful for later reconstructing the conversation. I also noted students' nonverbal behaviors, such as expressions, body movements, postures, and eye contact. Observations also focused on how girls interacted with and related to one another. I used a diagram to mark students' seating arrangement, noting where and with whom girls chose to sit. Oftentimes it was difficult to negotiate my desire to want to participate fully and experience the book club, and the need to capture everything the girls said and did. All fieldnotes were made on a marbled composition notebook. Afterwards, I typed the fieldnotes on a Word document.

I also kept a field journal in which I recorded general thoughts and reactions; areas and questions that would guide the next observation or interviews; and methodological and conceptual challenges and difficulties related to the study (e.g., student retention). The field journal entries were also typed on a Word document. Observation of the book clubs continued throughout the ten months, and each meeting was audio-recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed in its entirety.

Weekly classroom observations began the second month of the study. Classroom observations usually occurred on Mondays. Both seventh and eighth graders were observed for 90 minutes each. Heather taught the seventh graders (8:45am to 10:15am), and then eighth graders (11:00am to 12:30pm). The middle school students had lunch at 12:30pm. During classroom

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observations, I often sat to the side of the room, noting the physical and spatial arrangement of the classroom, students' seating arrangements, learning opportunities and activities available to students (e.g., Socratic Seminar, Independent Reading) and patterns of interaction and participation structures (i.e., who speaks when and to whom; who does not speak). I also focused on capturing the girls' literacy practices, such as the use of texts (i.e., what kind of texts are used and how), and on documenting the range of ways that the girls engaged texts and each other, and on the ways that they positioned themselves and were positioned as literacy learners. Lastly, I paid particular attention to the knowledge, questions, and interests the girls brought to school. For the classroom observations, I used a laptop computer and a composition notebook. Observing a small group of students as they worked on a presentation or project, or as they had a group conversation, I used a composition notebook to record notes. I did not want students to feel as though they were "objects" of study, and therefore under scrutiny. If students were giving presentations, I scheduled additional classroom observations for that week. Heather paid particular care to position me as an active participant, contributor, and member of the classroom community. It was not unusual for Heather to ask me to speak during class. For example, reminding seventh graders about the importance of recording thoughts and questions during and after reading, she asked, "Jie, you are working on this big, big project. Do you write down notes, thoughts, and questions?" (Fieldnotes, 12.1.08). My relationship to the students and Heather evolved throughout the year. I also attended school functions, such as the school talent show, Seussical (musical production), and eighth-grade graduation ceremony.

Throughout the ten months, I also conducted three rounds of semi-structured interviews with 18 girls. Five girls (Lauren, Clarissa, Stella, Elizabeth, and Sid) could only be interviewed once. The interviews usually took place at the third-floor meeting area, both during and after school. At the outset of the study, all the interviews were scheduled for after school. Given the girls' after-school commitments and schedules, that arrangement posed to be a challenge,

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however. Therefore, the girls were interviewed during school hours, such as lunch, homeroom, or study hall. Each interview lasted approximately 25 to 30 minutes, and was kept shorter if the girls were being interviewed during school hours. One interview lasted over an hour. It was also the only interview that did not take place inside the school building. The student had requested to meet at the university bookstore. Using a semi-structured format of interviewing, I was able to respond to and build on students' ideas, perspectives and worldviews (refer to **Appendix B** for interview protocol). I was mindful of the fact that the girls, during the interviews, were framing and presenting particular identities, and sharing literacy practices. Therefore, the interview itself was a rich literacy event in which participants were using language in meaningful ways (e.g., framing an identity, making sense of in-school and out-of-school experiences, and putting forth different ideas and theories about school, teachers and literacy).

The first round of interviews took place during the first two months of the study. The second round of interviews took place during the middle of the ten-month long study, and the third and final round of interviews took place during the last two months of the school year. The first round of interviews focused on uncovering students' school-based and out-of-school literacy practices, the girls' expectations for the after-school book club, and reasons for joining the club. Similar to the format that Luttrell and Parker (2001) used to interview high school students, the first round of interviews contained questions that prompted the students to name the different kinds of reading and writing that they do on a daily basis. The second and third rounds of interviews focused on how students were actually experiencing the book club. The girls were also asked to offer possible suggestions and recommendations for improving the book club.

Every interview was recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed. Book club meetings and student interviews were transcribed at an intermediate level of transcription detail (Rahm & Tracy, 2005). According to Rahm and Tracy, an intermediate level of transcription detail includes capturing all the words, vocalized sounds (e.g., uh huh, um, uh), and restarts and

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self-corrections. The transcripts captured students' interrupting others, talking over one another, or echoing another. The transcripts, however, did not include utterance timing or length of the girls' comments, unless there were particularly long pauses or long stretches of silence.

Heather was interviewed twice, first at the beginning of the study and then at the end of the study. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. After every book club she attended, however, we would talk for approximately 15 to 20 minutes. These conversations were not audio-recorded. Given that the informal conversations were not audio-recorded, they were recorded in the field journal immediately after the conversation took place. We discussed particular girls, commented on the girls' insightfulness and perceptiveness, and laughed at particularly funny conversations, such as the conversation on the girls' most embarrassing moments. We also discussed the courses she was taking at graduate school. Heather provided additional knowledge about the girls—knowledge that would not have been available based on book club meeting transcripts, classroom observations, and interviews. The conversations also focused on how Heather was experiencing the book club. However, Heather did not attend a significant number of book club sessions because she was taking two courses at the graduate school. Across the three book club groups, there were a total of 42 meetings. Heather was present for 19 of the 42 meetings. I began my study by asking how adolescent girls and their teacher form and experience an after-school book club. However, the girls' teacher was not a regular member and participant of the book club, and became less present throughout the study.

I also collected documents and artifacts, particularly student work. The seventh and eighth graders' projects were photographed. I also collected school-wide flyers and brochures.

Are you Korean? Why did you pick this as a topic?: Negotiating researcher positionality

As researcher, participant, and one of the adult-facilitators of the book clubs, I found the suggestion that the researcher become "as unobtrusive as possible" (Carspecken, 1996) to be

problematic, if not impossible. It obscured my various positioning and repositioning as researcher and book club member.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) offer four possible positions available to the qualitative researcher: complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer. I entered the site as a participant-observer, negotiating the way I positioned myself vis-à-vis the adolescent girls and Heather (e.g., when talking to and working with adolescents, in what ways might I be exercising authority as the adult researcher; how am I an insider and/or outsider to the teacher and girls by virtue of my race, age, gender, or class position; how does my stance change the way I look at and understand adolescents). I was sensitive to how I might be perceived by students, teachers and parents, and how I might interpret and thereby (re)present the adolescents. Researching *with* adolescents, not simply on or about them, I took a learner and listener stance, listening to adolescents as they shared experiences, ideas and perspectives, and revealed parts of themselves.

Ladson-Billings writes, "My students and colleagues have a right to know where I am positioned." (1996, p. 250). I believe that it is responsible and ethical for the researcher to reveal where and how she is positioned. No researcher can ever be a detached and value-free instrument, and no analysis or interpretation is ever objective. Researchers' values and beliefs, and intellectual and personal autobiographies inevitably shape what they observe and study. Yet, I was uncertain as to when, where and how much of myself—my subjectivities, identities, and ideas—to reveal and share. I also wanted the focus to be on the girls, and less on the researcher. However, the girls taught me that research is a human enterprise—that fundamental to research is forming and sustaining human relationships. Forming relationships involved sharing my ideas and thoughts about books and the world. It also involved revealing who I am and why I was there at Harmony School. Veronica asked if I was Korean and whether I had a Korean name. Katherine, a seventh grader, wondered, "Why did you pick this [after-school book clubs] for a

topic?" At an interview, Inez asked, "What types of books do you like to read?" It is often assumed that the role of the researcher is to elicit participants' perspectives and draw out their stories. The girls, however, elicited and drew out my stories and identities, thereby keeping me very much *inside* the study. In other words, although they were "researched", they took a stance similar to that of a researcher.

The students knew that they were part of a research study, and that the discussions were being audio-taped. They were aware of the digital recorder that sat at the middle of the table. They took turns ensuring that the tape recorder was functioning. At one book club meeting, Stephanie announced that the battery was low, wanting to ensure that no data was lost. At another book club meeting, Stephanie asked,

> Date: 11.13.2008
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Stephanie, Caitlin, Helen, Amy, Karen, Katherine, Eve, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Stephanie**: Are you recording? Cause this might be crucial here.
> **JP**: This? I am recording.
> **Caitlin**: Are you going to hear it?
> **JP**: Yeah, it's just me, unless you guys want to hear it.

The girls were invested in and committed to helping me with my "paper." The girls expressed curiosity toward the data collection process, particularly my fieldnotes. At the last book club, I asked the girls to write reflections on being part of the book club. Veronica, an eighth grader, asked, "Are you going to be using this [student writing] in your paper?" (Transcript, 6.4.09) and wanted to know the length of my dissertation. Mary, glancing at my fieldnotes one day, made the following observations: "You sometimes write the letter; sometimes the full name." That comment prompted me to explain my system of note-taking, mainly that participants whose names start with the same letter had their full names written in the fieldnotes.

Adolescents as co-researchers: Girls' advice on qualitative research

The girls also positioned themselves as co-researchers. They offered advice and

suggestions on the design of the research study. Katherine, a seventh grader, asked, "So next time

when you do this, do you think you will try a boy group too?" (Interview, 6.10.09). She then

elaborated on the way to design a study that included both adolescent boys and girls:

> **Katherine**: There's a boy's group and a girl's group, and you have them for a couple of
> weeks. Each separate for a couple of weeks. You have a list of books that each of them
> pick and you bring it to both of them. And if there is anything they both decided on, then
> they can both read it together.

Katherine presented a research design that involved two groups: one group of all girls, and one of

all boys. Each group would get to select a text to read; however, if both groups happened to select

a common text, then the boys and girls could read and come together for a discussion. Rebecca,

another seventh grader, suggested that the two seventh-grade book clubs meet to share

experiences and trade book titles and recommendations.

> **Rebecca:** I was thinking about combining the two groups, and then we can maybe talk
> about, cause we really don't know the books that they read. And just talk about, um. Like
> we can talk about, maybe, who read what before and what did they think of the book and
> stuff like that**.** (Interview, 5.27.09)

Rebecca was not suggesting that the two seventh-grade book clubs read the same text. Rather, she

was proposing that there be an occasion for seventh graders to talk across book clubs. That is, the

girls would meet and tell one another the books they have been reading. The girls also suggested

ways to improve the book club, such as creating online spaces for students to blog or establishing

a buddy system so that if one member was absent, the buddy would be responsible for sending a

reminder email.

The girls did not explicitly give advice on conducting qualitative studies; however, they

offered valuable advice and insight, insight that could benefit any qualitative researcher. For

example, they offered insight on ways to "read" and interpret the data. During an interview,

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Jessica, a seventh grader, offered a few words of advice on analyzing data and writing the dissertation. She said,

> **Jessica:** I think you should write about how seventh grade girls at Harmony in Ms. Heather's classroom can read and talk about it [books] so fluently and express their minds, just letting it all come out so easily yet still get to the point. (Interview, 2.11.09)

According to Jessica, the study should be read and understood as a highly contextualized description of a group of seventh graders at Harmony School, and not as a description of all female adolescent readers. That is, a researcher cannot make claims that are generalizable across contexts. The researcher can only attempt to offer knowledge that is local and context-specific. Jessica illustrates that the girls did not assume that they could speak for the experiences of all adolescent girls, or even all the adolescent girls at Harmony School.

The girls put forth tentative understandings and critiqued universal truths. If, as Jessica seems to suggest, the girls at Harmony School cannot speak for or represent the experience, realities, and worldviews of all girls, what is the degree to which the experiences and perspectives of these 23 middle school girls are representative (or not) of the experiences and perspectives of early adolescent and adolescent girls? How much or little can a researcher actually know about the life experiences of one person, let alone the lives of 23 individuals? According to Amy, "It's kind of hard to, from the conversations we have in the book group, you probably couldn't tell everything about us. You probably wouldn't be able to tell much. Just a little bit" (Interview, 3.15.08). Taking seriously the girls' advice and recommendations, I did not presume to know everything about the girls' experiences, identities, and literacy practices: after all, the book club was only one part of the girls' lives. As Amy reminded me, I was working to know "just a little bit" about the 23 girls.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and recursive. After multiple readings and cataloging of available data sources, I did a focused reading of the fieldnotes and transcripts of the book club

discussions; student and teacher interviews; and, fieldnotes of classroom observations. I noted patterns and regularities, identifying ways that data could be chunked and coded. Rather than focus solely on the individual reader and the responses of that individual reader as the units of analysis, I chose to look carefully at the girls' interactions, conversations, and relationships across the academic year.

Codes were inductively generated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to capture the range and variation of what emerged from the data. For each primary data source (e.g., book club transcripts and fieldnotes, interview transcripts, fieldnotes of literacy class), I developed a set of codes (see **Appendix C** for the codes). The coding process was inductive; however, my research questions and theoretical frameworks informed the analysis. That is, guided by the theoretical framing and research questions, I identified what was important and relevant data for the purposes of the study. Each code was also counted to determine its relative incidence and frequency. For example, emerging from both book club transcripts and literacy classroom fieldnotes were teacher and students' comments on symbols or symbolism. I identified and counted all the data segments that shared the code "symbols."

According to Seidel and Kelle (1995), codes can be thought of as a heuristic device for further discovery (p. 30). Re-reading the data using the codes yielded categories: references to students' own literacy practices in and out-of-school (e.g., reading habits and preferences, writing journals); references to friends and family members' literacy practices; references to in-school assignments, projects, and tests; references to popular culture (e.g., movies, songs, television shows); responses to literary texts (e.g., inter-textual connections, text-self-connections, symbolism and symbols, character analysis); evaluations and critiques of books; disagreements or different perspectives among participants; comments and perspectives on themselves; comments and perspectives on other people; comments and perspectives on social, political, and economic realities; negotiations related to text-selection; roles and identities available to reading group

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members (e.g., leader, facilitator, question-poser, friend); instances of establishing and negotiating the norms and rules for the group; disagreements between and among participants; descriptions of the book club (e.g., "open," "free," "fun," "loose," etc).

I also relied on narrative analysis techniques (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Goodson, 1995; Riessman, 1993). The girls told stories to (re)present and make sense of personal experiences. Transcripts of book club discussions revealed many instances of girls telling stories or "first-person accounts of experience" (Riessman, 1993, p. 17). Broadly, narrative was identified as any spoken or performed text that offered an account of an experience or series of experiences. According to Coffey and Atkinson, people naturally tell stories to recount experiences and events, and to make sense of painful, confusing or traumatic events. For instance, many of the girls told stories of parents' divorce, depression and family members' deaths; accounts of social alienation, loneliness and rejection; and stories of prejudice. The girls' stories were analyzed for content, meaning and purpose, and particular vocabularies or rhetorical devices (e.g., metaphors, analogies, visual imagery). Embedded in the girls' stories and their readings of texts are their ways of seeing, believing, and being. Wortham (2001) suggests that people use words that "'taste of' or 'echo with' social locations and ideological commitments" (p. 127). Therefore, narratives can illuminate and surface the assumptions, biases and beliefs, and social locations of the teller. Hence, I coded for and paid particular attention to subjective, normative-evaluative, and identity claims (Carspecken, 1996) that emerged during the book club discussions. Prompted by the text and/or by their peers, the girls made statements about the way the world should be (normative-evaluative claim), their social, cultural and historical locations (identity claim), and the fears, desires and feelings that a text invoked (subjective claim). For example, prompted by the novel *Speak,* several seventh graders made identity claims about being a girl, and being popular (or not), or reading *Mick Harte Was Here*, three seventh graders—Helen, Caitlin and Amy—offered

subjective claims, expressing sadness for the protagonist whose younger brother dies in an accident and fear for the safety of their own siblings.

Salient and relevant data segments were copied onto a new word-document. For those selected segments, I generated a range of possible meanings for the data. Coffey and Atkinson refer to the range of possible meanings as "pools of meaning" (1996, p. 31). The "pools of meaning" acknowledge the range of possible interpretations and meanings for each speech act or event.

As part of the data analysis, I examined each of the three book clubs separately, and then analyzed data across the book clubs, thereby working to understand how themes, ideas, and issues resonated (or not) across the different book club groups. There were differences and similarities across the three book clubs, as there were differences and similarities among members of the same book club. Inquiry on different book clubs, I argue, led to more robust, complex, and nuanced understandings of adolescents' experiences of and perspectives on the book club. An intentional and systematic analysis of whether and how data from one context resonate across other sites can also lead to building "theoretical generalizability" (Fine, 2006, p. 98).

Data were triangulated using multiple sources of data, including interviews, transcribed book club conversations, observation data, and documents and artifacts (e.g., class projects, student writing). Creswell (1998) also recommends three ways to ensure verification: extensive time in the field, thick descriptions, and a close relationship to the participants. I also asked participants for clarification whenever necessary, and asked each girl to articulate what she hoped to communicate to adults who might read the study. Rather than mere data validation techniques, these were part of doing research *with* and for adolescents.

More challenging than verifying the data, however, was representing the degree of complexity and sophistication with which the girls read and discussed texts, and writing a narrative nuanced enough to reflect the girls' multiple perspectives, identities, and lived realities.

The following five chapters explore the salient themes and findings that cut across all three book clubs. The next chapter focuses on the ways in which the girls constructed and experienced the after-school book club as a liminal space that straddled the worlds of school and out-of-school.

CHAPTER IV

What Kind of Space is an After-School Book Club?

Adolescent literacy research represents a wide range of work, including work that considers adolescents' use of literacy to navigate multiple spaces, and ways that literacy practices shift and change depending on the spaces youth inhabit (e.g., Mahiri, 2004; Moje, 2000). Such work also pays particular attention to the ways that youth understand themselves *as part of* the multiple worlds of school, community, family and peer groups, and virtual worlds.

Heather, the girls' literacy teacher, referred to the book club as a particular kind of "space." She commented, "The space is so important for the girls." How did Heather and the adolescent girls perceive and experience the "space" of an after-school book club? In this chapter, I address the ways in which the girls and their teacher understood, constructed, and experienced a particular context for reading and discussing texts: after-school book clubs. I was interested in understanding whether the girls and Heather understood and constructed the book club as an extension of school or an alternative space; and whether the after-school book club afforded the girls and Heather different possibilities for reading, interacting, acting and being. I learned that the after-school book club became a liminal space—the space between in and out-of-school worlds. As such, the book club was a space that was both similar to and different from school.

"It's Kinda Like School, But Not Really": After-School Book Clubs as Liminal Spaces of Literacy Learning and Engagement

The book club became a generative site to explore the ways in which students might understand and construct after-school spaces. The girls met after school, yet inside the school building. Also, present during the book club meetings was the girls' literacy teacher, Heather. Teachers and other students often interrupted the book club meetings to ask questions or make comments on the particular text the group was reading. The janitor would often the vacuum the third

floor as the girls met for book club. Below are fieldnotes taken during the first five minutes of the

seventh graders' Tuesday book club:

> The security officer rings the bell, announcing the end of the school day. Students appear
> to have been waiting for the sound of the bell. They pour out of classrooms anxious to
> leave the school building [5 minutes have elapsed]

> Jessica, Casey and Debbie are present for the book club meeting. Once again, the group is
> small. Rebecca is absent, although she had recommended the novel, Schooled. There is a
> predominant peace symbol on the front cover of the novel. Omar, an eighth grader, walks
> past the table. He looks at the girls and the copies of Schooled. He comments, "Awesome
> book, about hippies."

> The girls begin to discuss the novel. Jessica begins the discussion, offering that she really
> enjoyed the novel. She said that the novel had "certain lessons." Before she can continue,
> however, Aaron, a seventh grader, passes the table. Casey stops Aaron and has a side-
> conversation concerning the talent show. Aaron asks Casey whether she got accepted to
> perform at the talent show. He adds that he thinks everyone got accepted. Casey stops the
> conversation and apologizes to Jessica ("Sorry Jessica"). As Jessica tries to speak again,
> Mr. Smith, the science teacher, passes the girls. He is holding a stack of science papers.
> The girls had just taken a science test. Mr. Smith tells Debbie that she got a "92" and
> says, "Nice job." He looks for Casey's test and says that she got a 100. He cannot find
> Jessica's test, but promises her that he has not graded it yet. (Tuesday Seventh Grade,
> Fieldnotes, 4.21.09)

The fieldnotes reveal the movement of students and teachers, and the bustle and energy that

characterize hallways at the end of a school day. The presence and flow of teachers and

classmates, the talk of talent shows and science exams, and even the physical structure of the

school building itself served to remind the girls of school. Yet, the girls also saw and constructed

the book club as existing outside or beyond school. For example, it became important for the girls

to be able to wear "normal" clothes to the book club meetings. They did not want to wear school

uniforms. Given parents and school administrators' concerns for the girls' safety, it was not

possible for the girls to leave and then return to school for the book club meetings. Also, the girls

wanted to be able to turn on cellular phones that had been kept off or on silent during the school

day. A few of the seventh graders sent and received text messages during the book club.

Katherine, a seventh grader, made a case against writing responses to the books. She said, "No, I

don't really want to write a summary because this isn't homework or anything." Katherine did not

want the book club to resemble school. She implied that she does not write responses if she is reading a non-school text outside of school, and sees writing summaries as a school-literacy practice.

Data from the study illustrate that many of the girls constructed and experienced the book club as a liminal space. A liminal space is an in-between place, a place that is neither one nor the other, but both (Turner, 1967). The after-school book club shared characteristics of in-school and out-of-school learning spaces, and allowed for a co-mingling of school-like practices and non-school like activities (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Dimitriadis, 2008). Turner writes that the "coincidence of opposite processes and notions […] characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal" (1967, p. 99). The after-school book club shared characteristics of both in-school and out-of-school learning spaces, yet was unlike either.

To illustrate the ways that the book club was constructed and experienced as a liminal space, it is important first to define liminality. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, liminal refers or pertains to the threshold. Turner (1967) first introduced the term, liminality, to refer to the "betwixt and between" stage that adolescents—neither children nor adults—occupied. Many others have drawn upon and revised these initial ideas on liminality. For example, Bettis and Adams (2005) and Jewett (2005) draw on a spatial or geographical understanding of liminality to illustrate the complex construction of *spaces* that children and adolescents inhabit. Bettis and Adams, and Jewett offer the examples of school hallways and school buses, respectively, as liminal spaces. Liminal spaces themselves challenge strict binaries (e.g. inside/outside, in-school/out-of-school, official/unofficial).

Turner (1967) and others (Turnbull, 1990) have identified certain characteristics of liminal spaces. First, liminal spaces allow for fluidity, a movement of people and ideas. As such, they are seen and experienced as more open and free, and less regulated and controlled. Second, liminal spaces are sites of transformative possibility (Turnbull, 1990). That is, liminal spaces

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allow people to try on different ways of being, understanding, and believing. Third, liminal spaces are sites of uncertainty, complexities, and contradiction (Turnbull, 1990). Lastly, liminal spaces are sites of play and playfulness (Bettis & Adams, 2005).

I discovered that the girls created an after-school book club that was both like and unlike school. Rather than reify the in-school and out-of-school divide, the girls constructed and occupied a liminal space. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I present findings on *how* girls experienced the book club as both similar to and different from school, and on *how* the book club took on characteristics of a liminal space.

Making Sense of a New Context: What's Say-able, Do-able, and Read-able in an After-School Book Club?

Adolescents know the norms and rules of an environment, whether it is inside or outside of school. However, the after-school book club was a new context for all participants involved. That is, most of the 23 girls had never been part of a book club. Therefore, I witnessed the range of ways in which they tried to make sense of the possibilities and constraints of the space. During the initial book club meeting, one girl asked, "Are we just reading and talking, or do we get like writing assignments and stuff?" Attempting to make sense of the structure of and expectations for the book club, she applied the framework of school. That is, she wondered whether the book club would be more or less like school, and whether students would be given writing assignments.

In another example, the eighth graders wondered whether they could read texts that contained profanity:

> Date: 10.08.2008
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Carol, Veronica, Mary, Elizabeth, Yolanda, Sid, Inez, Sue, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Carol**: I have a question about the content of the book. What if it has curse words in it?
> **Veronica**: It [*Blood and Chocolate*] does.
>
> **Carol**: Oh it does?
>
> **Mary**: We're mature
>
> **Elizabeth**: *Go Ask Alice* had curse words.

Go Ask Alice was part of the classroom library. Elizabeth offered it is an example of a text that contains curse words, yet is teacher-approved and school-sanctioned. Therefore, *Go Ask Alice* was presented as a useful gauge for determining whether or not a text is "appropriate." Many seventh and eighth graders often considered the appropriateness of a text, accounting for the situational context that the text might get read and discussed. Stephanie, a seventh grader, recommended that the group read, *Ms. Pettigrew Lives for a Day*. She characterized the book as "kind of inappropriate. It has curse words in it" (Transcript, 3.5.09). Recommending a novel, Helen, also a seventh grader, said, "It [novel] might be a little bit inappropriate. Yeah, it might be really inappropriate" (Transcript, 12.11.08). Describing the text, Helen used the word, inappropriate, three times. Helen and Stephanie were reading these texts outside of school. Therefore, describing the texts as inappropriate, they were saying that the texts are not suitable *for* school. Caitlin, another seventh grader, shared that she was surprised to learn that *Speak*, a novel that the book club read, was a "high school senior book." She met a high school senior reading the novel, and thought, "I am in seventh grade, and we're kind of reading this book. But I was really shocked that a senior was reading that book and I was reading it too" (Transcript, 3.05.09). The Tuesday, Seventh-Grade group predicted that *Flowers for Algernon* would contain "inappropriate" parts. Casey stated, "That's exactly what I thought 'cause when I went to get the book, this isn't in the kid's section."

Amy expressed surprise and even discomfort at the type of questions some of the girls decided to address and discuss. She shared, "Some of those questions are questions you ask your Mom or at sleepover. Not in a book group. It's just a little out of place" (Interview, 3.15.08). The comment reflects Amy's awareness that the book club, although an after-school activity, takes place inside the school building, and that Ms. Heather, the girls' literacy teacher, is present at the book club meetings. Given that the students were asked to imagine and construct the book club, Amy and other book club participants worked to understand and negotiate the say-able, do-able,

and read-able within the book club. The girls often questioned and (re)defined the boundaries of the book club.

"If I See Ms. Heather, I Automatically Think School": The Presence of School Literacy Practices and Beliefs

Wanting to establish the book club as a different space, all three book clubs decided not to raise hands to speak. However, as Yolanda observed and noted, "Sometimes people are still used to raising their hands" (Interview, 12.15.08). The girls had adopted and internalized certain ways of behaving as students, such as raising hands to speak. The book club met biweekly for an hour. The number of hours spent inside school walls was significantly greater than the hours spent at the after-school book club. Therefore, the influence of school cannot be minimized. Students and teachers enter spaces of learning—even out-of-school spaces—carrying deeply ingrained images of and scripts for school. As social actors, teachers and students have recognized roles and identities, such as student as "good reader" or teacher as "knowledgeable expert."

During an interview, Veronica, an eighth grader commented, "Well, if I see Ms. Heather, I automatically think school 'cause she's our teacher." Veronica said that she always sees Ms. Heather as a teacher. The presence of Heather shaped how the girls experienced the after-school book club as an extension of literacy class. I identified instances in which the girls displayed school literacy practices, such as drawing on certain conventions and language for discussing literature. Bloome (1985) suggests that if students are asked to do a similar task lesson after lesson, year after year, they develop certain ways of "doing" reading (p. 139). According to Applebee, Langer, Nystrand and Gamoran (2003), the rules for classroom literature discussions include using appropriate literary terminology and using the text for support. Adolescent students are introduced to and expected to enact certain scripts for discussing and responding to literature.

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Below, Veronica revealed the range of ways that students are expected to engage and respond to literature. She said:

> Ms. Heather nailed it into our minds that we cannot write summaries, 'cause that would be third grade. Anyone can write a summary. Are you inferring, are you reading between the lines, are you synthesizing, and um, are you visualizing the characters in your mind, are you questioning the characters and are you questioning the author, are you making connections, like text to text, text to self, text to society, text to nature—all those connections. (Interview, 10.24.08)

Teachers are integral to forming students' attitudes and practices as readers (Hynds, 1997). According to Veronica, Ms. Heather structured the reading culture of the classroom—the beliefs and practices around reading and responding to texts—and encouraged students to adopt certain ways of reading and responding to literature. Veronica listed the interpretive moves she and other students were taught and expected to make during and after reading: making inferences, synthesizing, visualizing characters and events, questioning the characters or author, and making text connections (e.g., text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-society, and text-to-nature connections). She used the word, "nailed" to signal that Ms. Heather repeatedly taught students not to write mere summaries. Writing summaries, according to Veronica, is not recognized as a sophisticated way of responding to literature. The seventh and eighth graders also adopted the discourse of reader response theory. For instance, the students referred to taking an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1984). Casey, a seventh grader, commented that she tended to read "aesthetically and stuff like that" (Transcript, 10.20.08). It is important to note here that the book club conversations did not magically happen. Had Heather not expanded the girls' repertoire for making sense of and discussing literature, the book club conversations would have been different.

Across the book clubs, the girls offered salient themes and symbols for the books, visualized the characters, compared the author to other writers, identified difficult and confusing passages (e.g., "I read it, but it was really confusing"), questioned the authors' source of inspiration, and commented on the way the book was written, such as its style and language. For

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example, Stephanie commented on the way that *The Secret Life of Bees* was written and offered a

character analysis of Lily:

> Lily, she's kind of a sad person. And usually when characters are sad people, they're kind of like boring. It's the same thing over and over again. They're just rolling around in their sadness. While Lily is really like, thinking about it and she's actually doing something, you know. Usually sad characters are just stupid. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 11.13.08)

It can be inferred that as a reader, Stephanie had encountered a number of sad literary characters.

Stephanie made the case that Lily is unlike most "sad" literary characters, and then characterized

Lily as reflective and active. Jessica, a seventh grader, compared John Steinbeck to E.B. White,

Langston Hughes and Julia Alvarez. She said that all four authors were descriptive.

Jessica also paid particular attention to symbols as she read. Below are transcripts of

three different book club sessions. The Tuesday, Seventh-Grade group read *Flowers for Algernon*

at the November meeting, *Basket of Flowers* at the December meeting and *The Little Prince* at

the February meeting.

[Transcript #1]
Date: 11.25.2008
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Tuesday
Members present: Rebecca, Jessica, Casey, Debbie, Jie

Jessica: When he said that Alice had a knife, um, Rose had a knife, Norma had a knife. I think the knife was actually a symbol somehow

Casey: What do you think it meant though?

Jessica: I don't know. That he's being pushed out, like, he's being forced out with a knife, I guess.

Rebecca: So a symbol of, "Get out and don't come back."

[Transcript #2]
Date: 12.09.2008
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Tuesday
Members present: Rebecca, Jessica, Casey, Ms. Heather, Jie

Jessica: There is a lot of symbolism

Rebecca: So he wants his daughter to, um, well, sort of be like the flowers.

Casey: Hey, maybe we can make a flower-chart for this book. Like, write down what each symbol means.

[Transcript #3]
Date: 2.10.2009
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Tuesday
Members present: Jessica, Casey, Debbie, Jie

Jessica: I think it has a lot of symbolism

Casey: It does. And maybe the men he saw on the different planets. Where he saying, "Well, they are all serious." Or they're all lazy. Or even the geographer was lazy. "Well, I don't explore, but people explore for me."

Each book club meeting was devoted to discussing a different novel; however, Jessica offered almost identical comments on symbols. The first transcript conveys that Jessica was thinking aloud, trying to both remember the female characters and understand the significance of the knife. Casey asked Jessica to articulate the meaning of the knife. Therefore, rather than merely declare that the knife is a symbol, Jessica had to explain that the knife represents Charlie being "pushed out." Rebecca reframed the interpretation of the knife, and said, "So a symbol of, 'Get out or don't come back,'" signaling that Rebecca was listening carefully and closely to Jessica, and taking seriously other members' interpretation. The second transcript shows Rebecca proposing that the flowers symbolized the female protagonist. The third transcript shows Casey suggesting that the men on the different planets stood for adults. Casey also argued that the author of *The Little Prince* was using the men to criticize adults for being serious and lazy.

All three conversations show that the seventh-grade girls, particularly Jessica worked to arrive at an understanding of the symbol. In Ms. Heather's literacy class, Jessica was encouraged to recognize and analyze symbols. She learned that narratives contain symbols, and that readers were responsible for unearthing the specifically literary qualities (e.g., symbols, images, themes) of a text.

The seventh graders are discussing the ways that fiction and non-fiction texts are different. Fiction, according to students, portrays emotions, features a protagonist and antagonist, and has symbols. Heather agrees, "Narratives are multi-layered because of the

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symbolism. And you need to be aware of that. As you go into high school, if you go into the text not expecting symbolism, or not looking into more than one layer, you are going to miss out." (Seventh Grade, Fieldnotes, 1.21.09)

It can be inferred that Heather's students were taught to identify and name symbols during literature discussions. Therefore, the girls brought to the after-school book club the language of literary interpretation and response. The girls' ways of discussing texts after school often paralleled the ways they discussed texts during school.

"We Sort of Got Off Topic Though": Liminal Spaces as Supporting Students' Multiple Ideas and Questions

However, I also identified many instances in which the girls behaved, spoke, interacted, and responded to texts differently during the book club than they did during literacy class. The eighth graders teased and addressed one other sarcastically and playfully, saying "Shut up" or "You suck."

Seeing the book club as more free, open, and personal than literacy class, the girls engaged and discussed the texts differently. The content and tone of the book club conversations often did not resemble the content and tone of literacy class discussions. For example, reading and discussing *Speak*, the seventh grade girls expressed desire for boys and romantic relationships, questioned sex education and birth control, and commented on the immaturity of boys. At a later book club meeting, Karen said, "Remember our conversation from last time? […] That's probably. It's something you would not expect girls our age to have conversations about" (Transcript, 3.15.09). Karen's comment echoes the argument by Horowitz (1994) that everyday conversational topics of adolescents (e.g., friendships or peer groups, popular culture, parent and family conflicts, teachers and schools), albeit rich, rarely surface during classroom communication, and may be unfamiliar to adults.

Analyzing the issues and topics discussed during book club, I found that the girls were more willing to go "off-topic" during book club discussions. The girls referred to and described

any talk that was not directly related to the text as "off-topic." Researching an all-girl, adolescent book club, Carico (1996) documented a number of challenges related to facilitating book clubs. One challenge, according to the author, was instances of girls discussing or wanting to discuss other books or non-related issues. I did not see instances in which girls discussed other texts or seemingly irrelevant issues as a problem, however. I argue that the off-topic talk involving non-related issues often enriched and complicated the conversations. I do not wish to idealize the girls' off-topic conversations, nor suggest that *all* off-track comments were insightful, provocative, thoughtful or even useful. There were comments that focused on soft socks, candy consumption, Oprah Winfrey, trips to the mall, and amusement parks. However, many of the "off-topic" discussions involved multiple texts (e.g., novels, television shows, music and film), surfaced the girls' observations of the world, and revealed their experiences, stories, and curiosities. These discussions also worked to deepen the girls' understanding of other book club participants.

I did not interrupt the girls or attempt to redirect the conversation. I quickly discovered that several girls tended to self-regulate and regulate others during the book club discussions, re-directing any conversation they felt was off-track The two excerpts below show that the girls monitored themselves and each other. The first conversation occurred among the Tuesday, seventh graders discussing *Secret Life of Bees*, and the second conversation occurred among the eighth graders discussing *We All Fall Down.*

Date: 11.13.2008
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
Members present: Stephanie, Clarissa, Helen, Karen, Katherine, Caitlin, Eve, Ms. Heather, Jie

Stephanie: We sort of got off topic though.

Tara: Yes we did. Sort of.

Clarissa: Yes we have. Stephanie, what were you going to say?

Stephanie: Uh, Nothing. It's not on topic. Um, well I can say something about the book. I can really imagine the pink house, but I can't imagine the honey house.

Helen: I know it's really small.

Stephanie, Tara, Clarissa and Helen were discussing the decision to cast Dakota Fanning for the role of Lily, the protagonist of *The Secret Life of Bees*. They then compared the novel and movie. Stephanie was the first person to mention that the discussion got "off topic," and Tara and Clarissa agreed. Clarissa did not stop there, however. She invited Stephanie to speak: "Stephanie, what were you going to say?" Here, Clarissa asked a question for the purpose of continuing the conversation. Stephanie could have stopped after saying, "Nothing. It's not on topic." Yet she made a discursive move to re-direct the conversation. Stephanie presented a challenge she was experiencing as a reader ("I can really imagine the pink house, but I can't imagine the honey house"), offered a new topic or question that the book club could discuss, and altered the path of the discussion to focus once again on the book.

The second excerpt is part of an eight-grade book club meeting on the novel, *We All Fall Down*.

Date: 4.30.2009
Book Club: Eighth Grade
Members present: Mary, Yolanda, Inez, Veronica, Sue, Jie

Mary: In *Twilight*, they're like mostly White in that book.
Yolanda: Except for the what-cha-ma-call its.
Inez: Except for the Indians
Yolanda: Rainforest people
Veronica: Oh my God. The new werewolves are so pretty
Mary: I know. I am sorry I brought up *Twilight.*

Veronica and Sue were discussing the race of Buddy and Jane, protagonists of *We All Fall Down*. After deciding that Buddy and Jane are White, Mary made the comment that *Twilight* also has predominately White characters. Mary remembered to add that she was commenting on *Twilight* the novel, and not the movie. Inez and Yolanda offered the fact that there was a group of non-

White characters. Then Veronica began describing the new werewolves, prompting Mary to apologize for introducing *Twilight* to the conversation. Both transcripts illustrate that students possess an internal compass for gauging whether they are on or off-topic. They are extremely sophisticated navigators of the terrain of a discussion, and use a range of discursive strategies (e.g., asking questions, offering new ideas and questions, or acknowledging that the conversation is off-topic) for the purposes of re-directing talk.

Members of the Tuesday, Seventh-Grade book club often made comments such as, "Going back to reading books. You know, this is a book club, I thought we could talk about books" (Tara, Transcript, 11.13.08); "Well, one thing about the book" (Helen, Transcript, 11.13.08); and "Back to the book" (Clarissa, Transcript, 11.13.08). These comments are examples of topic resumption markers (Rahm & Tracy, 2005). That is, the girls said "Back to the book" or "Going back to reading books" to ensure that they returned to the book.

Observing a middle school classroom, Hynds noticed and commented on the students' tendency to feel guilty for pursuing divergent ideas and questions (1997, p. 45). Rebecca, a seventh grader, offered one explanation for students' hesitation to go off-topic:

Rebecca: Ms. Heather, she doesn't really like her literacy time being interrupted.

JP: What do you mean by that?

Rebecca: She don't like to, she, like sometimes when we get off-topic, I think she feels like we be trying to not do work. (Interview, 5.27.09)

Students constantly "read" teachers and the classroom context, becoming aware of teachers' expectations. Teachers, according to Rebecca, might see moments spent off-track as students' attempts to avoid work or interrupt classroom instruction. Teachers might discourage off-topic conversations for the sake of keeping students on-task. Students come to learn that they should follow a singular track rather than pursue a range of ideas and questions. I agree with Horowitz (1994), who argues that teachers of adolescents need more knowledge on the nature and type of "talk *surrounding* the texts*"* (p. 532). I also began to wonder how teachers can learn to identify

off-topic comments that have the potential to generate productive and engaging conversations, and pursue those comments *with* students. How can teachers build on and value students' divergent responses?

Much of the off-topic talk involved instances of the girls discussing popular culture texts, particularly movies. For example, the eighth-grade girls were discussing the novel, *The Soloist*. Mary commented on and shared the fact that Steve Lopez, the protagonist and writer of the novel, struggles to be a supportive friend to Nathaniel Ayers. Mary suggested that Steve Lopez wants Nathaniel "to be, like, recovered. But he [Steve] does not want to be a part of it." Inez recommended watching the movie version, announcing that the film is scheduled to be released soon. The girls excitedly shared that they had seen the preview for the movie the night they watched *He's Just Not That Into You.* The discussion continued, and the girls offered a range of divergent responses, such as commentary on Robert Downey Jr. and Jamie Foxx—two actors playing the roles of Steve Lopez and Nathaniel Ayers, respectively. The girls then offered a critique of the movie *He's Just Not That Into You.* Rather than merely summarize or evaluate the particular movie, the girls spoke back to and challenged the absence of people of color. The eighth grade girls—Asian, White and Black—offered a perceptive reading of mainstream media and visual texts for excluding people of color.

Date: 3.12.2009
Book Club: Eighth Grade
Members present: Mary, Carol, Veronica, Sue, Yolanda, Jie

Mary: There were no Black people

Carol: There was no diversity or anything (Mary: Yeah). It's kind of messed up

Veronica: There was one Asian.

Mary: Yeah, yeah

Carol: I just saw one Asian. And one Black guy, I think. But they were homosexuals.

He's Just Not That into You focused on the ways that a group of men and women navigated dating, romantic relationships and marriage. Carol was able to recognize that the gay Black and

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Asian men were not central to the narrative of White, heterosexual couples. The girls articulated a desire to see more films that reflect racial diversity. The brief detour that the girls took to discuss the movie revealed the girls as critical and perceptive viewers, consumers of popular culture, and adolescents trying to make sense of adult-relationships. Through off-topic talk, the girls drew on and connected multiple texts, including books, film, and even the text of students' own lives. Therefore, the conversations resembled a "web that has multiple points of entry, connections, and foci" (Hume, 2001, p. 161). These web-like conversations are often difficult for teachers to follow. It was challenging, yet illuminating for me to *follow* the progression of the girls' conversations to try to understand how students take up ideas, offer new issues and texts, and re-direct the conversation.

"You Can Share More Opinions More Freely": Enlarging the Scope of Conversations

The book club expanded rather than limited the boundaries for discussion. Many of the girls characterized the book club as free and open. Stella, an eighth grader stated that school is "not as open." Casey stated the following:

> It's [book club] more free and open. You can share opinions more freely. You don't have like a set thing. You don't have to talk this, this and this. It's more of a random, "Where will it take me" path. And in school, it's more of a, "Ok. You're going to do this. And that's how it's going to work." (Interview, 10.20.08)

The metaphor of traveling a path or road often gets invoked to describe learning. Journey as a metaphor for learning might mean that students can travel a teacher-created path or chose one among many routes, each route offering a different learning experience. If learning is seen as journey, then the role and responsibility of the teacher can be to provide the necessary tools needed to navigate the texts, walk alongside the students as a more knowledgeable guide, or dictate the path students need to take. Casey used the metaphor of a path (e.g., "where will it take me" path) to theorize learning. She described the book club as a "more random, 'where will it take me' path' and school as a "set" path. Casey is a perceptive and astute reader of schools and

its curriculum. She suggested that school learning is often linear (Fain, 2004). School learning, therefore, can be likened to traveling a singular, teacher-created path. Casey suggests that teachers often choose and decide on a path for students, and students comply. A teacher announces, "Ok, you are going to do this, and that is how it's going to work" and learners have to "talk this, this and this." Going off-track is discouraged and seen as a distraction. The book club conversations, however, were not "set," teacher-regulated, or evaluated. Rather than travel one path, the book club members encountered a range of ideas, texts and questions. They abandoned a path to pursue a different and new one. The girls experienced moments of surprise, puzzlement, wonder, frustration and insight.

Karen described the book club as offering an opportunity to "talk about things relating to the book instead of specifically talking about the book" (Interview, 12.17.08). Karen differentiated talk on issues *related* to the book and talk *about* the book. Talking *about* the book might mean identifying and discussing its literary qualities, such as symbolism, genre, style, and characterization. Karen implied that texts invite readers to think and talk about a breadth of related issues and questions. A text is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Its significance and meaning morph depending on the reader and on the context of the reading experience. For example, the Tuesday Seventh-Grade book club was discussing *Schooled*, a fictional account of an ex-hippie teenager adapting to the "real-world." The girls commented that the protagonist had long hair, similar to a male eighth grader at Harmony. According to the girls, people often believed the student to be a girl, and he was even called the "three-letter word." Casey elaborated, "It's three, six letters long. It starts with 'f' and rhymes with 'bag'" (Transcript, 5.5.09).

> Date: 5.5.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Tuesday
> Members present: Jessica, Casey, Rebecca, Jie
>
> **Jessica**: And he told me that he was really. He said it's not even funny because he doesn't like how he gets treated by his own family.
>
> **Casey**: That is sad. That's depressing

Jessica: Seriously.

Jessica and Casey disapproved of the homophobic comments directed at the eighth grader. Classroom observation data did not reveal any explicit discussions on sexuality or homophobia. Heather was not present during the particular book club meeting. I was rendered speechless by the mention of the "three-letter word." All too often, English and Language Arts teachers and curricula fail to address certain issues and topics, citing the need to preserve neutrality and objectivity. It is "safe" to avoid the manners of being, valuing and believing, and easy to deny personal prejudices and biases, and inclination for cruelty, violence and selfishness.

Unlike the discussions that took place during literacy class, many of the book club conversations contained and focused on "real life problems" (Rebecca, Interview, 2.13.09) such as racism, homophobia, and homelessness. Sue, an eighth grader, made the following comment:

> **Sue**: You can say whatever you want to say and it is fine. It doesn't have to be, um, in school, a certain topic you have to think about. It just has to be what is important to you. (Interview, 5.18.09)

Sue suggested that the after-school book club was qualitatively unlike literacy class. Rather than explore a topic that a teacher has deemed relevant, book club members pursued issues and questions that they found important. Karen, a seventh grader, explained that book club members get to "decide on the questions." She added that the girls "get to answer the question instead of the adult supervising, asking us questions or telling us the answer." Too often teachers ask the questions and/or offer the answers. Sue, Rebecca and Karen all offer valuable insight to teachers, making the case for viewing students' lives and interests as central to the curriculum, for making learning relevant to "real-life problems," and for taking seriously students' questions, curiosities and interests.

Sue, an eighth grader, described the book club as offering an opportunity to share "what they're really about" (Interview, 5.18.09): the girls' out-of-school interests, experiences and identities they could not share during school hours. Sharing and listening to a wide range of

stories, experiences and interests, the book club members came to new and different understandings of one another. Studying all-women book clubs, Long (2003) concluded that "excursions into the personal […] are a valued aspect of reading group discussions" (p. 108). The adolescent, after-school book club was no exception. The girls expanded the scope of the conversation to include the girls' interests, desires, and ambitions. Amy, Caitlin, Jessica and Veronica shared that they had strong religious upbringings, and that religion shaped the way they acted and approached the world. Helen, Jessica, Lauren, and Stephanie were vocal supporters of Barack Obama, and discussed the significance of electing the first U.S. President of color. The girls, Heather and I learned *from* and *about* one other—our relationships with parents, sibling(s) and friends; immigration histories and family stories; religious and political leanings; perceptions of school, schooling and teachers; and, much more.

Transcripts across all three book clubs illustrate the breadth of the book club conversations. The girls pursued multiple ideas, issues and questions, creating conversations that were complex and inter-textually rich, and conversations that contained their stories and experiences. I learned that teachers should not be so quick to dismiss all students' off-topic conversations as irrelevant and random.

"Our Teacher Is Equal with Us": The Multiple Positionalties of Ms. Heather

Liminal spaces allow a person to try on different ways of behaving, being, and relating to others (Turnbull, 1990). Heather had to negotiate the fact that she was simultaneously the girls' teacher and a book club participant. At the first seventh-grade meeting, she shared,

> **Heather**: The reason why I'm here is now I get to show you that random side of me. As your teacher, I am in a different space with you, and now I get to share my thinking and thoughts about texts that you get to choose with me, as a member, but you are as much, you know, able to choose them and to hear what you have to say. (Tuesday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 10.07.08)

Heather worked to exist differently within the liminal space of the book club—as a fellow book club member, avid reader, woman, friend, and teacher. For example, she decided that she would

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not contribute to selecting the texts. She wanted the girls to choose. During an interview, Heather shared, "It's exciting to just be part of the group, not in charge of the group." Heather offered embarrassing memories of adolescence and narratives involving first boyfriends and parents; she asked the girls to explain parts of the novel she had not read yet. She revealed—indirectly and directly—a wide range of identity positions. She participated and responded to the texts as a graduate student, teacher, former adolescent, heterosexual woman, and daughter of working-class parents. Responding to *The Secret Life of Bees* and commenting on the similarities between her own adolescence and Lily's, she said, "I remember not having things that others had and wishing that I did, and felt ashamed for shopping at Marshalls" (Transcript, 11.13.08). She shared feelings of shame, and revealed family and personal histories.

Heather did not attend over half of the book club meetings. Across the three book clubs, she was present for 19 of the 42 meetings. Analysis of the 19 transcripts revealed several instances in which Heather assumed the stance of literacy teacher. For example, the Tuesday, Seventh-Grade club met to discuss *Flowers for Algernon*. Heather offered both comments, reproduced below:

> **Heather**: Jessica brought up a point that really was interesting, that when we get further in the book I hope that you write that down so that we can talk a little bit more about it.

> **Heather**: Now that we've had this discussion, we've sort of touched on so many of the points and to go back, it might make more sense. And then after we have the next conversation, then go back and read that [preface of the novel]. (Tuesday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 10.21.08)

Heather made particular recommendations, urging the girls to keep a written record of ideas and thoughts on the novel, and to revisit and reread parts of the novel that they found difficult or confusion. The comments offer a brief glimpse of Heather taking on the stance of the literacy teacher and more knowledgeable expert.

To further complicate the positionality of Heather, she was new to many of the book club texts. She had never read *The Host*, *Dateable*, *Bones* or *A Basket of Flowers*. It is common

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practice for teachers to teach books that they have already read and mastered (Appleman, 2006). Appleman writes, "The teacher has read the book multiple times while all other participants (the students) are encountering the text for the first time" (2006, p. 27). Such unequal knowledge does not lead to "good" conversations (Appleman, 2006). Studying two adult book groups, Smith (1996) noticed equality among members as a salient theme. Reflecting on that particular finding, he argues that students rarely get to witness how teachers might struggle to make sense of difficult texts and arrive at interpretations. Heather and I were reading the texts *with* the girls. Heather often did not complete the readings. During a book club meeting on *A Basket of Flowers*, Jessica announced, "I got it. A basket of flowers. The whole basket of flowers represents Mary. Am I right?" Heather admitted that she had not yet read the book. A month later, she still had not finished the book. She also did not finish *The Host* or *Bones*. Rather than teach texts she had already read, Heather was reading alongside the girls.

The girls were trying to "read" Heather. Rebecca, a seventh grader, commented, "It sort of feels like, well everybody in the group, we're all friends" (Interview, 5.27.09), and Sid, an eighth grader, elaborated: "Our teacher is equal with us. There's no teacher" (Interview, 11.12.09). Data from the study reveal the different ways that the girls saw and positioned Heather. Heather was seen as both book club member and teacher. I posit that the after-school book club became a site for Heather and the girls to take up and enact a wider range of subject positions and identities than the ones available during school hours. The next two sections address the girls' multiple subjectivities and identities.

"I Know How to Act in School": Language, Identities, and Knowledge Valued in Schools

Bettis and Adams (2005) suggest that people shift identities according to the spaces they inhabit. Sense of location is important to understanding and displaying the self. Jessica shared the following:

Date: 4.21.2009
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Tuesday

Members present: Jessica, Debbie, Casey, Jie

Jessica: I do. I know how to act in school.

JP: What does that mean?

Jessica: I do! Like you don't act like a goofball in school.

According to Jessica, she is aware that there are ways that students are expected to behave at school, namely that they should not act like a "goofball." She understood school norms, and spoke and behaved accordingly. Veronica was also "very aware" that schools value certain ways of speaking, believing, behaving and interacting:

> **Veronica**: In school, like, you can't, there's a lot of things you can't say. You have to, not that I'm not polite or anything. But in front of friends you can, if you, if you're really angry about something, when you talk to friends, you can curse if you're really angry or upset about something, but in school, you have to be very aware of what you say. (Interview, 10.24.08)

Students, according to Veronica, might feel censored. Outside of school and beyond the purview of classroom teachers, Veronica cursed if she was really upset or angry. She also expressed excitement, frustration and anger. Yet even if she cursed, she was never irresponsible or disrespectful. During literacy class, Veronica rarely spoke. She positioned herself and was positioned as the "shy," "calm" and "good" student who listened to Heather, followed classroom rules and norms, and worked to be recognized as diligent and intelligent. If she spoke, it was usually during small-group discussions or presentations to the entire class. The multiple identities of Veronica—as Chinese American, adolescent girl, knowledgeable consumer of American and Asian popular culture, and daughter of immigrant parents—remained largely invisible during literacy class.

Like Veronica, Debbie, a seventh grader, rarely spoke during literacy class. She was the oldest of three girls and had attended Harmony School for eight years. It was often difficult to know Debbie, for she did not speak much during book club. During a book club meeting on the novel *Schooled*, Debbie critiqued the way that schools make students feel watched and trapped:

Debbie: I don't know. School makes feel trapped. I can't do anything.

Jessica: Exactly. Sometimes I just feel like, I wish there was a huge trampoline on the bottom and then you just jump off.

JP: Why do you feel trapped in school?

Debbie: Cause there's always someone looking over you. And you're being watched. (Tuesday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 4.21.09)

The words "trapped" and "watched," and the desire that Jessica expressed of wanting to "jump off" signal that many students perceived schools as highly regulated and controlled. Debbie and Jessica were academically successful students. They were seen as well-behaved, respectful and polite. Adolescents such as Jessica, Debbie and Veronica held complicated views on the purposes of education and schooling. They were hopeful for the future, and optimistic that education would lead to fulfilling career and adult lives. Yet they saw school as an institution to be endured. Jessica and Debbie were not the only ones to share that they felt watched, and even trapped. Other students also believed that they were being carefully watched and monitored. Yet many students still found ways to challenge and rebel against school rules. Beyond the gaze of the teacher and principal, students used cell phones to send text messages and access social networking sites, passed notes during class, and chatted on Yahoo Messenger using school computers.

At a Thursday, Seventh-Grade book club meeting, Katherine pointed to a camera mounted on the ceiling and wondered if the school security officer was going to listen to the girls' conversation on boys and sex. Foucault (1977) describes one way people are disciplined: they are placed inside an enclosed and segmented space, and observed constantly. He then goes on to make the argument that prisons are designed to reflect such a model of discipline. Harmony did not have metal detectors or a crew of school safety officers. The classroom doors were always open. There was no obvious and visible resemblance to a prison. Therefore it was surprising to hear the girls say that they felt trapped and watched at school. Heather revealed that the security

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cameras actually do not work. The cameras exist to make students believe that they are being monitored.

It is not insignificant that Jessica, Veronica and Debbie are all girls of color. For Debbie and Veronica, English and another language are spoken outside of school. Schools privilege a certain way of speaking, acting, and behaving. Debbie and Veronica are aware of the knowledge, norms and language that are valued inside schools. Observing a Punjabi community, Gibson (1987) concluded that immigrant students refused to abandon the home culture and languages. Veronica, similar to the Punjabi students, still exhibited the mannerism and behaviors that guarantee academic success—the strategy of 'accommodating without acculturating' (Gibson, 1987).She played the game of school; yet outside of school, she spoke Mandarin. Debbie, however, did not speak Khmer.

> **Debbie:** At home, we speak English, 'cause my little sister and youngest sister, but they don't really know Cambodian. So my parents try to encourage us to learn that language, but we sometimes just block it away because at school we're so used to learning English. (Interview, 10.23.08)

Navigating a site that privileges English (i.e., school), Debbie decided to use English. The use of English, albeit convenient, leads to the gradual loss of the home language, and even alters family relationships. Debbie negotiated the conflicting demands of family and school culture. Veronica and Debbie provide a brief glimpse of the borders—linguistic and cultural—that adolescents cross on a daily basis (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998).

"I Love Hyori and Boa": Liminal Spaces as Supporting Girl's Multiple Identities and Subject Positions

As a liminal space, the book club allowed the girls to try on and enact a range of identities. The girls were not merely "students": they were girls, adolescents, daughters of working or middle-class parents, girlfriends, and more. The context of the book club allowed for the girls' multiple subject positions and identities to emerge—identities that normally did not surface during official school hours. Data from the study indicate that after-school and out-of-

school spaces, including virtual ones, support a wider range of identities than school classrooms, and that classroom structures and curricula need to be expansive enough to accommodate students' multiple subjectivities.

To understand better the girls' identities and enactment of identities, I relied on poststructuralist frameworks. Post-structuralist frameworks reject the notion of an essential self— a core identity that remains constant. According to Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), peoples' sense of selves are fluid and shifting—not stable, fixed or rigid. Post-structuralists draw on the concept of subjectivities rather than the notion of a singular identity, and see people as "moving subjects" (Ellsworth, 1996) rather than frozen (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Durham (2004) frames adolescents as social shifters and experimenters, suggesting the futility of using static labels to "capture" the fluidity of adolescent identities. Post-structuralist theories also frame individuals as constituting and constituted by various discourses (Yagelski, 2000), such as the discourses of race, ethnicity, class, gender, adolescence and sexuality. Through discursive practices, adolescent identities get constructed, practiced, rejected, transformed and even "re-mixed" (Maira, 1999, p. 33). It also made sense for me to draw on post-structuralism because it paralleled the girls' own sophisticated understandings of identity. The seventh graders were reading and discussing the novel *Speak*, speculating on the way Melinda, the protagonist, might have dressed.

> Date: 3.5.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Caitlin, Helen, Eve, Amy, Stephanie, Katherine, Molly, Karen, Jie
>
> **JP**: Do we really send out an image of who we are by what we wear?
>
> **Helen**: It's sort of like your first impression
>
> **Eve**: I think it's who we are in the moment.
>
> **Amy**: Or who we want to be.
>
> **Stephanie**: Maybe it's, by choosing what we wear, we're choosing what we want people to see us as. Not exactly who we are, but who we want to be seen as.

Rather than argue that people have an identity that is singular and fixed, the girls proposed that identity is who people are *in the moment* (i.e., identity as temporal and situational); who people want to be (i.e., identity as desired or invented); and how people want to be seen and perceived by others (i.e., identity as relational). Eve, Amy, and Stephanie offered nuanced understandings of identity, reminding educators and researchers not to oversimplify and make general claims about students' identities. They also suggested that people use certain linguistic and cultural tools (e.g., dress, language) to perform an identity. If identity is performative, then adolescents might be revealing only the identities that they want to share. That is, educational researchers are able only to see, hear and take note of what adolescents choose to make public.

Veronica revealed a range of identities during book club. Yet based on classroom observations alone, it would have been difficult to see all the different subject positions Veronica took up and "re-mixed." She was the oldest daughter of immigrant parents, American-Born Chinese, adolescent girl, high-achieving student, pianist, voracious reader of fiction, consumer of popular culture, and member of multiple online communities. She posted videos on YouTube, enjoyed playing an online game called Audition, and visited chatrooms and social networking sites, such as Facebook. She read manga, watched anime and Asian dramas, and listened to Korean and Japanese pop. It was during book club conversations that Veronica revealed and shared facets of her complex personhood.

During the year the girls had the unique opportunity to meet a group of women to discuss *The Soloist.* A colleague of mine proposed bringing together her all-women book club and my all-girl book club. The all-women book club met monthly to discuss both fiction and non-fiction books. All 23 girls were invited to the event, and seven eventually attended: Mary, Veronica and Yolanda; Katherine, Karen, Casey and Amy. There were three eighth graders, and four seventh graders.

The inter- and cross-generational conversation took place on a spring night. The group

met at a location near Harmony School. The women provided pizza, beverages and snacks. The

adult book club consisted of young, professional women. There was an epidemiologist, journalist,

city planner, community organizer, medical researcher, and graduate students.

The talk among the girls and women focused on the sense of responsibility that Steve

Lopez feels for Nathaniel Ayers, the homeless, schizophrenic musician, and turned to individuals'

experiences and struggles helping a friend. Reproduced are fieldnotes taken during the

intergenerational book club meeting:

> Veronica is first to share the difficulties of helping a friend. She mentions a friend and schoolmate, Ling. According to Veronica, Ling is not a fluent English speaker or writer. She says, "Sometimes she [Ling] comes over. She has to do her Daily Writes [an assignment that Mina, the other literacy teacher asks the students to do everyday]." Veronica reviews the Daily Writes and corrects Ling's grammar. Ling often says to Veronica, "My writing sucks." Veronica shares that she and Ling will be attending different high schools next year. Veronica will move to a different state and Ling will attend one of the city high schools. Veronica expresses great concern: Who will help Ling? Will she be ok in high school? Veronica confesses that she tries to be a good friend to Ling, yet Ling makes that very frustrating. She gets upset when Ling keeps "taking about the negatives." Veronica can only respond, "You have to think you can do it."

> The women present at the intergenerational book club nod understandingly as Veronica continues to speak. There is a pause. Jill, one of the women, shares the story of supporting a friend through an unhealthy romantic relationship. Corrine, another woman, describes having to motivate a friend to go running on Saturday mornings. Corrine concludes that to be a "true friend" one has to set aside personal interests. Mary pauses for a moment before speaking. She takes a deep breath. She says that she can speak to the experience of receiving friends' help. She confesses that she would not have "made it" through middle school without friends. Her parents were getting divorced and both were depressed. She would begin to cry during class. (Fieldnotes, 3.18.09)

Veronica felt responsible for the other Chinese students at Harmony. She wanted Ling to do well

and feel confident as a student. The story surfaced Veronica's identities as a second-generation

Asian American, Mandarin and English-speaking bilingual, peer tutor, and friend. As an Asian

woman, I recognized Veronica's narrative as one shared among many Asians and children of

immigrant parents—a complex narrative that involves different gender roles for boys and girls,

importance of modesty, self-discipline and hard work, and a sense of responsibility toward family and community. Phelan, Davidson and Yu (1998) identify additional values common to Asians: "allegiance to the family, striving for a 'good name', love of learning, respect for others and adults, age/gender appropriate behavior" (p. 54). Veronica was highly disciplined. Last year, she made weekly visits to the library and borrowed five books per visit. She kept a daily schedule as a time-management tool. After school, she headed home to practice piano and finish homework. I did not observe the seventh and eighth-grade literacy class everyday. However, not once during my weekly observations of the literacy class did I note Veronica draw upon and openly discuss the experiences of being Asian American, a child of immigrant parents and bilingual.

During one of the book club meetings, Veronica announced, "I love Boa. I love Hyori" (Transcript, 6.04.09). Boa and Hyori are both popular Korean female singers. She also shared the fact that she watched Korean television shows, namely soap operas. She listed a number of Japanese and Korean celebrities, suggesting extensive knowledge of East Asian popular culture and revealing a range of literacy practices, including reading manga, listening to Asian music, watching Taiwanese and Korean television series and Japanese anime, and reading viewer comments online. Veronica commented, "And the boy in *Boys before Flowers* [a Korean television show] is much cuter than Rain [a popular Korean male singer and actor]" (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 6.04.09).

Heather expressed surprise to see Veronica giggle and blush, and excitedly discuss "cute" boys. Veronica, according to Heather, is always "so serious." Analyzing the book club transcripts, I counted the number of times Veronica commented on cute boys. For example, the eighth grade girls were sharing thoughts on the movie version of *Twilight.* The conversation below focused partly on the character of Laurent.

Date: 1.29.2009
Book Club: Eighth Grade
Members present: Veronica, Mary, Sue, Yolanda, Ms. Heather, Jie

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> **Veronica:** He [Laurent] was so cute

> **Mary**: But I thought that fit the part. I didn't know that

> **JP**: Who?

> **Veronica**: He had like dreads. He had like abs and like muscles. And his chest was open, and I was like, Oh my God!

Veronica drew upon the discourses of gender and attraction to put forth an identity as a heterosexual girl. I was struck by the last comment, which focuses on the male actor's physical attributes such as his abdomen and muscular body. Her exclamation, "Oh my God" conveys surprise, excitement, and curiosity. If a text involves and positions its readers, then Veronica responded to the text of *Twilight* as an adolescent girl "practicing" for romance (Stanley, 2004).

Veronica also brought to the group knowledge of digital texts and popular culture—the material artifacts and texts that constitute youth culture. For example, she introduced the eighth-grade group to Nigahiga: two Japanese American adolescent comedians. Nigahiga produces and posts comedy videos on YouTube. The Nigahiga channel is reputed to be the most subscribed YouTube channel of all time. The comedians have parodied and rewritten television commercials, popular songs, and movies (e.g., *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, and *Titanic)*. Veronica had read a number of *Twilight* fan pages and online discussion forums, and shared that most users write comments such as, "I love Edward" or "I love Jacob." Therefore, an important space that allowed Veronica to occupy multiple identity positions as adolescent, adolescent girl, and Asian American is the virtual space, including online discussion forms and social networking sites. On Facebook, she was known as "Veronica: 方玮玮"

On virtual spaces, she used a different set of discursive practices than the ones she used during literacy class or even during the after-school book club. Using Facebook, we had exchanged several messages on the subject of Korean television series. Veronica recommended the website, www.mysoju.com. The website offers its users a library of Korean, Japanese and

Taiwanese dramas and movies. Veronica was starting a new Korean drama series. She sent me the message below:

> "Won't load because it's too late **:<**
> I'll start tomorrow. I'm reading some of the comments online, and everyone says the same. "I cried every episode" WTF? I hate bad endings...but I want to try this one. Haha.

First, she relied on emoticons **(:<)** to convey feelings of disappointment. Second, she used the phrase, "WTF." Veronica did not say or write "WTF" during literacy class or during book club. However, outside and after school, she shrieked and giggled at the mention of cute boys and actors, cursed if she was angry and wrote "WFT," posted home videos on YouTube, spoke and wrote Mandarin, and listened to Asian music. Through a range of literacy practices and identities, Veronica was situated within the youth cultures of United States and East Asia, and therefore can be seen as a cultural border-crosser. There is not enough data to conclude if Veronica kept certain identities hidden, or if the classroom structure did not allow for these identities to surface. Bucholtz (2002) urges researchers to acknowledge and work to understand the fluidity of adolescents' identities—the particular ways that adolescents negotiate identities that are specific to the contexts of home, school, peer groups, work and cultural spheres. Emerging as a critical issue for classroom teachers is the need for learning environments that can acknowledge, build on, and value students' complex personhoods.

Learning in Liminal Spaces: Adolescents Connecting In- and Out-of-School Learning

At the outset of the study, Heather wanted to learn whether and how book club conversations inform students' school-based literacy learning. Mahiri (2004) and others (e.g., Fisher, 2007) have studied out-of-school literacy practices, arguing that adolescents are sophisticated, competent, and motivated users of literacy. Yet, American middle and secondary school students are often described as largely passive and disengaged (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). Students are described as listeners, note takers, and recipients of knowledge (McDonald, 2004). Even high-performing students are merely playing the academic game well, adopting the

mannerisms and behaviors that guarantee academic success (Intrator & Kunzman). Intrator and Kunzman write that students feel connected to the curriculum to the extent that they can pursue high grades. Put simply, many students find school-based reading and writing necessary yet irrelevant and boring, whereas out-of-school literacy is engaging and personally meaningful.

Researchers and teachers alike continue to ponder the gap separating adolescents' out-of-school and in-school literacy practices. Moje, Overby, Tysaver and Morris (2008) offer several possible reasons: it could be that classrooms are failing to engage students and build upon students' interests; it could be that adolescents see schooling as irrelevant to navigating the worlds they inhabit and value outside of school; or it could be that the different arrangements of school, home, community and peer group make the transfer of literacy skills across contexts difficult, if not impossible; or it could be a combination of all three. Few studies have examined whether and how reciprocity exists between in- and out-of-school spaces of literacy learning, suggesting the need for increased attention to the relationship between out-of-school and academic literacies. That is, how might students' out-of-school experiences inform in-school learning, and vice-versa? How do students understand the relationships between out-of-school and in-school literacies?

The book club conversations revealed the potential of after-school spaces to enrich in-school literacy learning. The book club participants demonstrated that reciprocity exists between out-of-school and in-school literacies. The students illustrated that out-of-school literacies are not irrelevant to academic literacies: that is, the students used the after-school book club to inform in-school learning, and vice-versa. The girls referred to, continued, and built on their work from their literacy class in the after-school space. Conversely, they referred to, continued and built on the work from the after-school space in their literacy class. This finding supports the argument that Kirkland (2006) made, namely that "a great deal of what happens in school is born beyond it. Likewise, much of what gets enacted out of school results from what happens inside it" (p. 10).

Many of the adolescent girls saw schools as sites of learning and engagement, and complicated the in- and out-of-school binary. They drew upon and used literacies traditionally categorized as "out-of-school" to negotiate the demands of school learning. That is, students' out-of-school lives, experiences, and literacy practices permeated into the classroom.

Of the 14 seventh graders, 11 drew upon and referred to the texts they were reading for the after-school book club in a class project. For literacy class, the seventh graders had to read five books outside of class. The students kept a reading journal for all five books. They wrote a daily response that was at least one-paragraph long, and each paragraph had to have six to eight sentences. For the project, the students had to make connections across at least three of the five books, identifying the commonalities or similarities among the texts. The girls had to then "creatively" present the commonalities. The girls asked Ms. Heather if they could use the after-school book club books for the class project. Heather agreed. The photographs illustrate the various ways that the girls drew on and integrated the book club texts.

Below are photographs (photographs 1-6) of the seventh graders' projects. Casey had used a three-tiered bookshelf (photograph 1) to represent the three books she selected.

Photograph 1
Charlie Gordon's apartment in *Flowers for Algernon*

Each tier represented a different book: *Flowers for Algernon*, *Jack's Black Book: What Happens When You Flunk an IQ Test*, and *Journey to Topaz: A Story of the Japanese-American Evacuation.* Casey was part of the book club reading *Flowers for Algernon*. For the class project, she had written, "I had been discussing with my book club that Charlie's emotions were not as advanced as his intelligence. Charlie was definitely smarter, but his emotions were that of a boy" (photograph2).
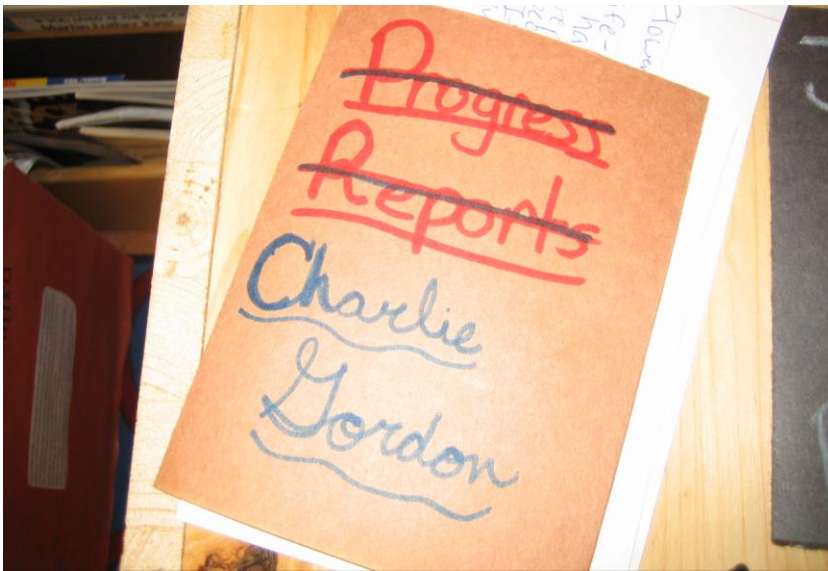
Photograph 2
Charlie Gordon's progress report

Here, she referred to the discussion that took place during the after-school book club, and used it to inform her class learning.

Lauren, Jessica, and Rebecca—members of the Tuesday, Seventh-Grade book club—also used *Flowers for Algernon* for the same project. Lauren included the progress reports of Charlie Gordon as part of the class project (photograph 3).
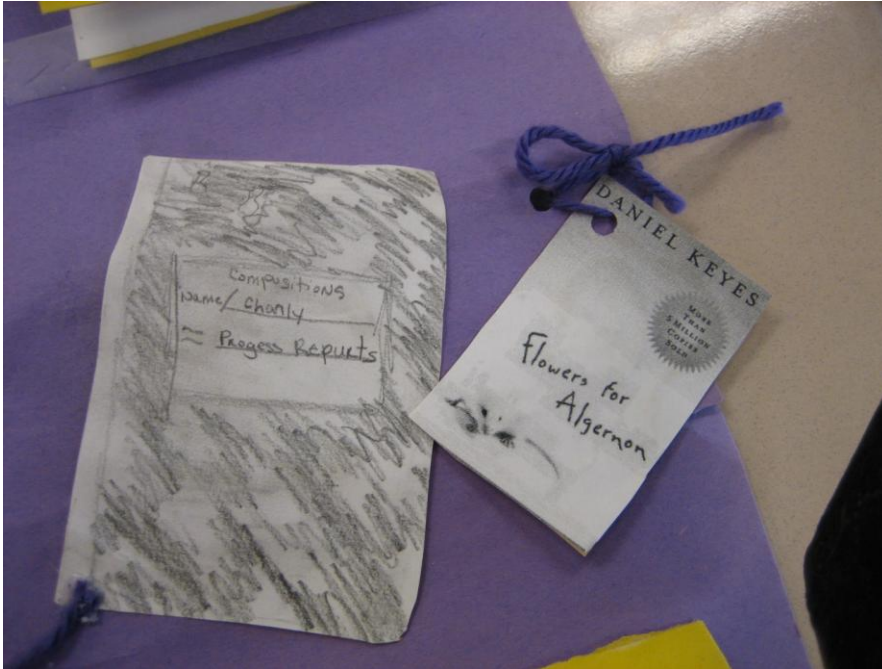
Photograph 3
Cover of *Flowers for Algernon* and progress reports

Lauren drew on and incorporated specific ideas that the book club members generated. For

example, the book club had related *Flowers for Algernon* to the movie, *Forrest Gump*. Jessica,

Lauren, Rebecca and Casey compared Charlie Gordon to Forrest Gump. During book club Jessica

said, "See, I am trying to connect the two stories in some way" (Transcript, 11.25.08). The girls

debated the ways that Charlie and Forrest were similar and different. Lauren used these ideas for

the class project and drew a line connecting *Forrest Gump* to Charlie Gordon's progress reports

(photograph 4)

Photograph 4
Lauren's project: Connecting *Flowers for Algernon* and *Forrest Gump*

Rebecca also connected *Forrest Gump* and *Flowers for Algernon*. She announced at a book club

meeting:

> **Rebecca:** For my project, I connected *Flowers for Algernon to Forrest Gump*. Because I thought that Charlie reminded me of Forrest Gump. I think he was a little slow. I think Charlie might have been. He had a lower intelligence. I thought Forrest Gump's story was funny and sad and good—all at the same time. And that reminded me of Forrest Gump. (Transcript, 11.25.08)

Amy and Stephanie —members of the Thursday, Seventh-Grade book club—used *The*

Secret Life of Bees for their project. Amy sewed a small quilt, and Stephanie built a dollhouse.

Stephanie had made a doll of Lily, the female protagonist of *Secret Life of Bees* (photograph 5).

Photograph 5
Stephanie's *Secret Life of Bees* doll house

Lily is sitting on top of a bed. On the ceiling, there are bees swirling, and the doll is peering out a window. Stephanie explained that she wanted to represent the importance of the bees as symbols, and convey that literature is a window that offers a glimpse of the outside world. During literacy class, Ms. Heather had introduced to the seventh graders the language of "literature as window or mirror." Stephanie had adopted that language. She also made sure to give Lily black hair, reflecting a particular book club conversation on the hair color of the protagonist. Amy constructed a small patchwork quilt. Each square showed a salient object that represented the novel (photograph 6). For *The Secret Life of Bees*, Amy decided to use grits.

Photograph 6
Amy's *Secret Life of Bee*s quilt

Amy was drawing on the girls' lengthy book club discussion on grits: the girls described grits as "hardened oatmeal." As punishment Lily is forced to kneel on a pile of grits. Reading the novel, Helen said that she could almost feel the texture of the grits. Eve said that she actually felt grits and they were "so hard, like little tiny rocks." For the project Amy drew on and extended the book club discussion on grits. She decided to use grits for the project. Amy argued that the grits represented the fact that Lily had led a "hard" life before running away and finding happiness at the Pink House.

The eighth-grade girls also used the after-school books for literacy class. Of the nine eighth graders, six included *Alanna: Song of the Lioness* in their Literary Protagonist Project. For this project students had to find similarities and connections among at least five literary protagonists. According to Heather, the project is intended to make students enter the psyche of literary protagonists, make inter-textual connections, and identify ways that seemingly different protagonists might relate. The project included three components: a thesis statement or statement

succinctly summarizing the connection among the protagonists; a visual representation or

drawing of the protagonists; and a longer, written description of each protagonist. A few

examples of the girls' thesis statements are: "They all wish for something" or "They are all

motivated by something and overcome a huge challenge."

Yolanda used *Zlata's Diary*, *Hang a Thousand Trees with Ribbons* and *Alanna: Song of

the Lioness* and wrote the following thesis statement: "The protagonists are struggling to be

themselves." She drew the protagonists to resemble manga or anime characters (photograph 7).

For instance, Phyllis Wheatley has unrealistically large eyes, exaggerated pupils, blunt bangs and

a heart-shaped face reminiscent of Japanese animation figures. Yolanda and Veronica are both

avid consumers of *Ruroni Kenshin*, a Japanese manga series about a fictional assassin and

protector of people. Yolanda drew on her out-of-school texts and literacy practices (e.g., reading

manga and watching anime) to inform her in-school learning.
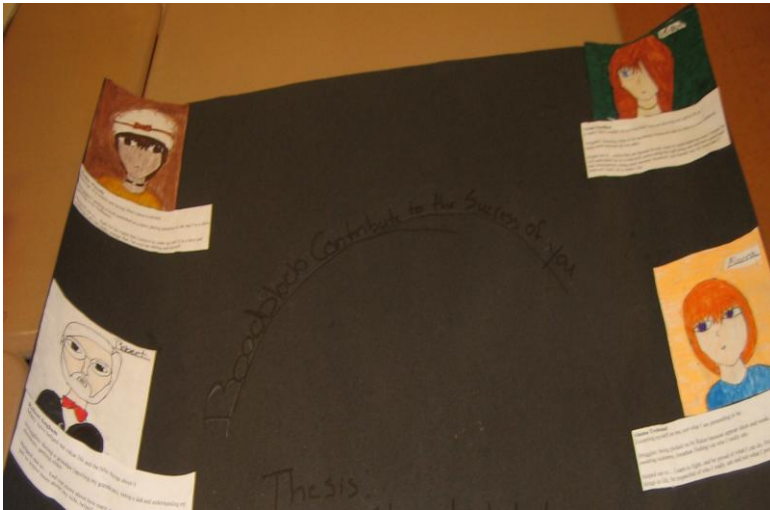
Photograph 7
Yolanda's Literary Protagonist Project

Mary (photograph 8) used *Zlata's Diary*, *Hang a Thousand Trees with Ribbons*, *Alanna: Song of

the Lioness, Twilight, and The Diary of Anne Frank.* She wrote the thesis statement, "Love can

get you through anything," and added that "love" does not have to mean romantic love or love for

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another person. For Alanna, it is love of fighting and defending people; for Phyllis and Anne

Frank, it is love of writing; for Bella, it is love of Edward; and, for Zlata, it is love of peace. She

drew a tree that holds a heart to represent the importance of love for the five literary protagonists.

Photograph 8
Mary's Literary Protagonist Project

The book club texts appeared as a salient part of the girls' literacy activities and learning

throughout the year. Amy used *The Soloist* for the Word Study Project. Seventh graders were

asked to record words—words that they were drawn to, words that they found interesting,

confusing or different, and words that they wanted to learn and study—during and after reading.

The students had to provide a definition and visual representation of the word. Amy selected the

words, flamboyant, glower and isolated (photograph 9): words she encountered reading *The*

Soloist for the after-school book club.

Photograph 9
Amy's Word Study Project

Students referred to book club texts and conversations during literacy class. Conversely, they also referred to school literacy events and texts during book club. Thus there was movement of ideas and knowledge across in-school and after-school contexts. The eighth graders spent a significant portion of one book club meeting discussing the statewide reading and writing assessment. Mary shared that one of the prompts for the writing exam asked students to explain the advantages and disadvantages of being an adolescent. The eighth-grade girls might not have had the opportunity during literacy class to discuss the writing exam and share responses. Hence, Mary, Inez, Yolanda, Sue and Veronica used the book club to share and listen to the different ways they understood the prompt and approached the essay. Mary argued that being seen as "mature" has its advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is that maturity means increased expectations. Discussing the particular literacy event of writing an essay for a standardized assessment, the five girls and Ms. Heather also shared writing practices, such as the practice of writing outlines or a list of the supporting evidence. They also revealed and explored certain writing beliefs, such as the belief that a paragraph must consist of at least six sentences.

Date: 2.12.2009
Book Club: Eighth Grade
Members present: Mary, Inez, Yolanda, Veronica, Sue, Ms. Heather, Jie

Mary: And I tried to do more sentences than six every time. Actually, for the second prompt, I had seven sentences for each paragraph.

Inez: I had to divide one cause for one of them 'cause I had like sixteen sentences. I didn't mean to do that, so I had to like erase my whole thing and write it again, but as a different paragraph.

Heather: When you really get into a topic, sometimes sixteen sentences paragraphs happen. It's more about, when you start to get more comfortable with, like, the topic. And you know the purpose of a paragraph. Sometimes paragraphs will be a little bit longer. This is just to get you realizing that two sentences are not ok.

The conversation focused on the content of the essays (i.e., the disadvantages and advantages of adolescence). The girl also shared certain aspects of the writing process, such as setting an outline, identifying examples, and realizing that the outline and final essay might be different. The book club conversation surfaced the girls' writing practices and beliefs, such as forming paragraphs that are at least six-sentences long. Inez had to divide a sixteen-sentence long paragraph. It is interesting that Heather used the moment to deliver a short lesson on writing. She assured Inez that a sixteen-sentence paragraph might be appropriate, and reminded the girls that a paragraph should have a "purpose."

During book club, the girls also referred to and discussed school-assigned texts such as *Animal Farm* and *The Pearl*. The seventh graders were reading *Animal Farm* for literacy class. Casey made the following announcement to the after-school book club members.

Casey: If anybody was confused for *Animal Farm* on who was supposed to be what, I have some papers that I found on Wikipedia for who was supposed to be what. (Tuesday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 6.11.09)

Casey initiated a conversation on *Animal Farm,* and the girls used the book club to explore the text as an allegory. Casey offered insight on the historical figures (e.g., Stalin) that different animals were supposed to represent.

Like many adolescents, Casey used and valued a range of new technologies and websites, such as Wikipedia, iMovies, Garageband and YouTube. They relied on instant messaging, text messaging and social networking sites to extend school learning. For example, several seventh graders used Facebook for completing science homework.

> **Molly**: The first time she had Facebook, she was writing to Tara about homework and there were other people looking at it, and she didn't want them to know because they can tell Mr. Smith [science teacher] that they were doing their homework together.

New technologies make it possible for literacies to travel across space, further complicating the supposed dichotomy between in-school and out-of-school spaces (Schultz & Hull, 2008). Through new technologies, girls realized and experienced firsthand the "transcontextualized and transcontextualizing potentials of literacy" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 337). Brandt and Clinton see literacy practices as circulating, traveling and enduring across contexts: school, work, families and communities. Many of the girls used text messaging or Facebook to discuss homework, and relied on YouTube to see other students' interpretations of a school-assigned text.

Summary

Studying an after-school book club, I witnessed the ways in which social context[2] shapes how adolescent girls approach, experience and respond to a text, how they see and position themselves as readers, and how they understand the purposes for reading. I argue that the social context either enlarges or limits the options for how students can engage texts, what they can say about them, and how students can interact with each other. To put simply, contexts of literacy

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[2] Twenty five years ago, Bloome (1985) wrote, "All reading events involve a social context" (p. 134). Erickson and Schultz (1997) understand social context to mean an "interactionally constituted environment" (p. 22). That is, context does not simply refer to the physical setting (e.g., classroom) or to the people (e.g., students). Rather, context gets constituted as a result of individuals' social interactions and relationships within a given environment. It is the social practices, relations, and interactions that constitute contexts.

learning and engagement matter, and literacy cannot be researched and written about outside of the spaces in which students take up, enact and engage with literacy.

I documented and analyzed how the girls and Ms. Heather understood, constructed and participated in an after-school book club. As a result, I learned the following: the after-school book club became a liminal space –that is, a space between in and out-of-school worlds, a space both similar to and different from school. Hull and Schultz (2001) discuss the tension that after-school programs must address: whether and to what extent after-school spaces should resemble school-like organizations, or establish themselves as "alternative" sites of learning. However, the study's findings suggest that an after-school space can be both—both a school-like organization and alternative site of learning. As a liminal space, the after-school book club allowed for a co-mingling of in-school and out-of-school literacies and practices.

I also learned that the girls were already adept at navigating and connecting different spaces of learning. According to Dimitriadis (2008), movement back and forth across sites is part of adolescents' lives and culture. Entering the space of the after-school book club, the girls brought school texts and school-learned and sanctioned ways of engaging and responding to texts. They also brought to the book club a range of social practices, knowledge, texts that are part of adolescents' out-of-school lives. Rather than see in-school and out-of-school spaces of learning as disconnected, the girls understood the different spaces as intertwined and reciprocal, reminding educators and researchers that spaces are porous. The girls offered more nuanced understandings of literacy learning and contexts, namely the idea that learning and literacies travel across contexts.

I argue that knowledge of students' perspectives and experiences of a range of social contexts is fundamental to designing generative sites of learning, and understanding their pedagogical potential. Thus, rather than assume that adults can offer after-school or out-of-school sites learning that are engaging, motivating and challenging, researchers and educators

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first need to know a good deal more about how and why students participate in a range of spaces, and how students construct and shape these spaces.

CHAPTER V

"My Friends, They Got Me into These Books": Significance of Social Relationships and Peer Groups in Nurturing Adolescent Girls' Literate Lives and Identities

Research on motivating and supporting adolescent readers (Atwell, 1998; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) and on adolescents' literacy practices (Alvermann, 2008; Gee, 2003; Moje, Overby, Tysaver & Morris, 2008) suggests the importance of friendship groups and social networks to engaging adolescent readers and writers. Over 20 ago, Alvermann (1987) offered suggestions on supporting adolescents' reading lives. She summarized that students are more likely to read texts based on peers' recommendations and evaluations; students must be made to feel capable and confident as readers; and students must exercise agency and feel ownership over the decisions they make as learners and human beings. Young people also respond positively to time for in-depth discussions, and opportunities to share interests and goals (Alvermann, 2008, p. 10). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) concluded that male students preferred to read together, and were more likely to read texts that could generate conversations among peers. Long (2003) argues that for adult readers, social isolation decreases readership, whereas social involvement increases motivation to read. Eve, a seventh grader and book club participant, suggested that the claim is true for adolescent readers as well. She said, "Once I am able to get into a book and talk to other people about it, I like it a lot more" (Interview, 2.11.09).

In this chapter, I explore the different ways in which the girls understood, talked about, and practiced reading as deeply relational and embedded in human relationships. Social relationships, family networks, and peer groups were named as important factors that motivated the girls to read and that sustained the girls' commitment to reading. The recommendations of friends or family members often prompted the girls to read a book or try a different genre. Many of the girls were aware of and knowledgeable about peers' reading preferences and practices. They could name the specific titles, authors, or genres that other students were reading. I

witnessed the girls encouraging one another to try new and different literary genres, and supporting one another to be persistent readers.

"I Want To Join Your Conversation": Reading to Form and Maintain Friendships

The claim that adolescent girls read to maintain friendships can be supported using the case of Mary, an eighth grader at Harmony. Mary had shoulder-length blonde hair and freckles. She wore skirts and dresses more often than other eighth-grade girls, and usually sported two silver bangles. Mary, the middle child of three, had attended a very small private school before transferring to Harmony. She aspired to become an artist, and possibly a scientist. Mary studied the effects of SSRI medication on anxiety, and entered a citywide science fair. She was one of few students who began the school year not having read Stephenie Meyers' *Twilight.* She expressed a preference for reading historical fiction and texts that focused on the real lives and experiences of other people, such as biographies. At the outset of the study, she shared that she reads two chapters every night. Initially reluctant to read *Twilight*, she decided to read the novel after Veronica and Yolanda, two fellow eighth graders and friends of Mary, insisted that Mary try the book. Mary stated, "They [Veronica and Yolanda] like the vampire books and mysteries and stuff. And they wanted me to experience it too."

Friends' recommendations often prompted the girls to read a text that they might not have read otherwise. Casey acknowledged, "I'll take a lot of recommendations. Like, I'll be like, "Oh, hey, have you read any good books lately", and I'll be like, "Oh yeah there's this one book" (Interview, 10.20.08). The girls exchanged book recommendations and even the actual books themselves. For example, during the study, three eighth-grade girls, Veronica, Yolanda and Mary, decided to designate one locker as a lending library: each girl would contribute books that others could borrow. Yolanda contributed the *Vampire Academy* series to the library.

I learned that the girls were knowledgeable about peers' reading preferences. Mary was aware of and able to identify friends' reading preferences. She knew the genres that Yolanda and

Veronica usually read. During an interview, Stella, another eighth grader, commented that Carol preferred horror, and Veronica enjoyed reading books by Avi. Although Rebecca and Stephanie were not friends, Stephanie had introduced Rebecca to *Schooled*. Rebecca then recommended *Schooled* to the Tuesday, Seventh-Grade book club. Book recommendations circulated and reached different students and peer groups.

Why might Veronica and Yolanda want Mary to experience *Twilight*? Studying reading groups that formed throughout Texas during the mid-1990s, Long (2003) credits the popularity of book clubs and reading groups to the "human desire" to join conversations and belong to environments that allow for discussion. During one of the book club meetings, Carol, an eighth grader, was seeking another person to discuss the movie, *Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

> Date: 3.12.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Carol, Mary, Veronica, Sue, Yolanda, Jie
>
> **Carol**: You want me to tell you?
>
> **Veronica**: No
>
> **Carol**: I would love so much to talk about it with someone.

Carol speaks to students' desire to relate to others: to offer a perspective and discover the perspectives of others. Katherine, a seventh grader, shared the reasons for deciding to join the after-school book club:

> **Katherine**: Well, 'cause, well usually when I read a book, I don't really get to express it or anything. Cause when I am reading something, like also you do this in movies, when you watch TV or do anything like read, you have to have somebody around you to like laugh, to like tell them about it, and laugh at what's in the book. And so, sometimes when I am reading, I am like laughing to myself, without the book club. (Interview, 6.10.09)

Katherine expressed the need for another person or persons to share readings. Stella shared that she and Carol discussed the popular television show *One Tree Hill* during homeroom. She said,

"We'll be like, 'Oh my Goodness. I can't believe this happened.' We talk about what we think is going to happen next" (Interview, 10.28.08).

Carol and Katherine suggest that people need to communicate and share the way they are experiencing a text—whether the text is a book, movie or television show. To put simply, they need to be part of a conversation. During the second-round of interviews, Veronica, an eighth grader, shared the following story:

> **Veronica**: Like one of my best friends, Mary. Every day, me and Yolanda would talk about *Twilight*. And laugh about it, or cry about it. Well, not really cry, but you know. But just express our feelings about *Twilight* and all the other good books that we like. So we all sit at a table, so she [Mary] would always stare at us, like "What are you talking about? Can we talk about something else?" But every morning, I would talk about it and every day, we told her, "You should read it. Your sister owns the whole series. You should read it." And she's like, Ok, I want to join your conversation. So she went home and she read like the first couple of chapters and she fell in love with it. (Interview, 2.18.09)

Similar to how Mary knew the literary genres that Veronica and Yolanda liked, Veronica and Yolanda knew that Mary's older sister owned the entire *Twilight* series. It is also significant that Yolanda and Veronica offered a range of emotional responses to *Twilight*. They would laugh or cry over the novel. Egan (2008) argues that adolescents are drawn to texts that provide emotionally charged images. The girls' enthusiasm and excitement led Mary to become curious, and wonder, "What are you talking about?" Initially, Mary attempted to change the topic of these daily conversations; however, as Veronica and Yolanda continued to discuss *Twilight* and other vampire novels, Mary faced two choices: read *Twilight* and join the conversation, or feel excluded. It was the desire to "join the conversation" among friends that prompted Mary to read *Twilight*. The particular finding resembles Finders' (1997) claim that literacy is fundamental to maintaining friendship groups, especially among girls, and Moje and colleagues' (2008) argument that adolescents use literacy to enter and situate themselves within social networks and peer groups.

Mary read to be part an informal reading group that consisted of Yolanda and Veronica. Mary also acknowledged friends as valuable sources of knowledge on books. During one book club conversation, Yolanda announced that Stephenie Meyers was writing a new novel, *Midnight Sun*. Mary sat listening intently, and then said, "I only learn from you guys what things are" (Transcript, 2.26.09).

"My Friends Would Always Tell Me to Read Other Books": Supporting Positive Identity Development of Adolescent Readers

I also found that peer groups and friendships are integral to the girls developing positive identities as readers. Veronica and Yolanda were more than book peddlers. They also showed Mary different ways of reading and relating to texts. During an interview, Mary said, "My friends would always tell me to read other books, but then I would say that's too long or that's too fantasy or something" (Interview, 4.24.09). Mary often said that she only read realistic fiction. This was seen across many of the girls: they expressed a strong preference for one literary genre, identifying as readers of fantasy or romance novels, for example.

According to Mary, she might refuse to read a book on account of its length or genre. However, three months after being introduced to *Twilight*, Mary had finished the novel and was reading the second novel of the series, *New Moon*:

> **Mary**: But then like Yolanda and Veronica, they got me into these books [….] I had small books. I would read 20 pages each night. I finished it in two weeks. Now I am staying until past 12 reading it because they got me into that habit. (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 2.12.09)

Yolanda and Veronica introduced Mary to new and different genres, and to new ways of engaging texts. Rather than read 20 pages each night, she adopted a new practice of reading: she started devoting more hours at night to reading. Mary had assumed that Yolanda and Veronica were "better" readers based on the fact that it took less time for the two girls to finish a novel. However, Mary learned that they simply read more each night. Mary acquired the habit of

reading more each night as well. She also adopted a different stance toward reading: she was more willing to take seriously friends' recommendations and perspectives on novels, and try unfamiliar and different genres, such as fantasy or horror.

Bones was an example of a horror novel that Carol, a member of the eighth-grade book club, introduced to Mary. It became pivotal text for the eighth-grade girls. Mary identified reading *Bones* as a transformative experience:

> One book that really changed me was *Bones*. Before I came to the book club and read *Bones*, the only books I read were realistic books about people's lives. I didn't read crazy, wild and violent books. I didn't read scary books. After I read *Bones*, I became open to read new kinds of books. I wanted to experience with the different genres. (student writing)

Mary initially refused to read *Bones*, explaining that she did not want to be scared. Yet, she took the chance to read an unfamiliar genre and realized that she enjoyed the novel. Completing the *Twilight* series and *Bones*, Mary began to articulate a sense of self-efficacy. She started to believe that she was capable of reading and understanding any type of text regardless of its genre or length. Mary illustrates the importance of adolescents experiencing success as readers. Veronica also named *Bones* as the most memorable and influential book that the girls read. She wrote, "I was also very happy to read it because it changed my best friend. Mary never really dared reading scary books, but when everyone voted on the book, she decided to give a try" (student writing). Commenting on the way Mary changed as a result of reading *Bones*, Veronica expressed care and affection for Mary. Cherland (1994) argues that reading and sharing romance novels was a way for girls to demonstrate care and affection for one another, and maintain friendships. Similar to the girls Cherland studied, the eighth-grade girls borrowed and traded vampire novels (e.g., *Vampire Academy*) and watched *Twilight* together.

Throughout the ten-month study, Mary adopted a positive identity as a confident and enthusiastic reader, and expressed enthusiasm for trying new genres. She stated, "This year with me, with books for me, is way different than last year. I read so many different books, and I've

gotten hooked on them. I just read them, any book" (Transcript, 2.12.09). She is aware that she

has different reading practices or habits, and beliefs. She has a new and changed self-perception

as a reader. During the February book club meeting, she announced:

> Date: 2.12.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Members present: Mary, Inez, Yolanda, Veronica, Sue, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Mary**: I am into any book right now. I'm like "Give me a book!"
>
> **JP**: That's a great attitude.
>
> **Heather**: I know, Mary. How can we find a bottle, put that in there and sell it
>
> **Mary**: Like, like cause before, I was like "No" to any book. And now I'm like, "Ok."

Mary became more open to literary risk-taking. Heather wanted to bottle such enthusiasm,

motivation, and engagement. Heather and other literacy teachers are likely to agree on the value

of supporting students to read and appreciate a range of literary genres. According to Mary and

the middle school girls, friendships and relationships are fundamental to leading a literate life.

Data from the study suggest that girls are motivated to read and then persist in reading if they

know that they will have to discuss the book among friends, and if they feel supported and

affirmed throughout. The girls never evaluated peers' reading abilities: the girls perceived

everyone as being capable and competent. If a book club member did experience difficulty or

refused to read further, she was encouraged not to be afraid. Trying to explain the way Mary

initially resisted *Bones*, Veronica said, "Because you [Mary] never read a book like that [*Bones*].

Like, you're not afraid anymore" (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 6.4.09). Throughout these

conversations, Veronica never once suggested that Mary was not skilled enough to read a novel

like *Bones.* It is significant that both seventh- and eighth- grade girls never described a book as

being too difficult or "above reading level" for any book club member, and they never positioned

other girls as struggling or less-than-proficient readers.

"'Cause My Dad was the One Who Wanted to Read it with me": Family as Social Context for Literacy Engagement

The girls understood and practiced reading as relational, and as part of social networks, friendships and families. More than half of *all* book club discussions included references to girls' family members—parents, siblings, grandparents and cousins. A common assumption is that as peer groups become increasingly important for adolescents, the role and influence of family decline. Takanishi (1993) challenges the popular opinion that most adolescents reject parents, family members, and other adults. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) and other researchers of adolescents (see Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998) present a more holistic approach to understanding adolescents and adolescence. The researchers avoid frameworks and methodologies that "compartmentalize" adolescent lives (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, p. 3). The limitation of such frameworks and methodologies is that peer groups, family and schools actually do not exist and operate independently of one another. Book club discussions and interview data illustrate the various ways that family members (e.g., grandparents, parents, siblings) shaped the girls' literacy practices and beliefs, and were seen as valuable resources.

The seventh- and eighth-grade girls identified and named peers, teachers and family members as influencing the ways they engage texts. Data from the study suggest that family was an important social and cultural context for literacy learning and engagement (Gadsden, 1998 and 1999). I learned that mothers, fathers, siblings and grandparents fostered girls' literacy practices. Hence, it is more appropriate to focus on family members as opposed to parents, and pay attention to the diverse range of family structures and types (e.g., two-parent households, extended families that include grandparents and cousins, single-parent households, blended families, step families, etc.).

The Thursday, Seventh-Grade group decided to read *The Secret Life of Bees* based on the fact that two girls' moms had read the novel. Eve was the first student to recommend the book. She then added,

> Date: 10.16.2008
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Caitlin, Clarissa, Eve, Helen, Karen, Katherine, Stephanie, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Eve**: I haven't read it yet, but my mom and a couple of my neighbors read it, and they really fell in love with it. Um, it's about this girl who runs away and finds these people who take care of her.
>
> **Stephanie**: Yeah, my mom read it, so I have a copy.

It is apparent that Eve had heard a group of adults discussing the book. Eve had not read the novel yet; however, she knew enough to offer a basic overview of the plot. Helen, a seven grader, read several novels based on the recommendation of an older brother.

Family members offered more than book recommendations. Dads would read the same novel as the daughters. Parents also directly supported the girls' school-based literacy learning. For example, Mary shared that her dad reads all the writing she does for literacy class. The latest piece he read was a research paper on slavery. He did not merely edit the paper and correct grammatical errors; rather, he used the writing as an opportunity to talk, both engaging Mary on the ideas of the paper and contributing additional knowledge. Mary said that she had found research on light skinned slaves working indoors, and darker complexioned slaves working the fields. Her dad offered the hypothesis that the light skinned slaves may have been slave masters' children. The eventual research paper represented the collaboration between Mary and her dad. A writer does not work alone: underlying the written piece are the conversations the writer had about her work with other people.

Mary's dad also read *Twilight* and discussed the novel with his oldest daughter, Mary's sister who was a high school senior at the time of the study. Reading and discussing texts—texts broadly defined—were part of many girls' family lives and cultures. Carol and her older sister

disagreed on the literary quality and merit of *Twilight*. Carol claimed that she did not understand the appeal of the book and found it to be "overrated." Karen and her grandmother were reading two fantasy series, *Joust* and *Acorna*. According to Karen, she knew that her grandmother was enjoying the series. Jessica recommended *A Basket of Flowers* to the book club based on her mom's recommendation. During book club, Jessica shared that she and her mom had discussed the novel:

> **Jessica:** I talked about it with my Mom, and we were talking about the book, *Basket of Flowers*. And I was like, "Mom, you should have read this book. *Summer of my German Soldier*." And she was like, "Ok!" And she didn't know I was so interested in books, And then I was like, "Seriously, this is an awesome book." And my Mom was like, "Ok." (Tuesday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 11.18.08)

Having read *A Basket of Flowers* at book club, Jessica had a "shared" text with her mom. Wanting more conversations about books, Jessica recommended that her mom read *Summer of my German Soldier*. Talking about books, Jessica's mom had the opportunity to discover and re-see her daughter as an interested and engaged reader.

Amy, whose parents are divorced, would read aloud parts of *Speak* to her mom. At an interview, Amy shared, "When I was reading *Speak*. I was like reading it constantly, like in the car. And my Mom was like, 'You really like that book.' So I started reading parts of it to her, and we were talking about that" (Interview, 3.15.09). For both Jessica and Amy, books prompted conversations with family members. Amy also read a non-fiction book, *Dateable*, with her dad.

> Date: 4.23.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Caitlin, Molly, Stephanie, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Amy**: We read it separately and then we go and talk about it. It's a little awkward. Well like, it wasn't awkward because the first couple of chapters didn't have anything like awkward to talk about. They were about boys, and it was about relationships, but like, I was reading ahead because I can't stop reading it because I was like, "Oh my Gosh, I really need to read these things before I make any mistakes." Um, so I read ahead. Some of it is a little bit inappropriate (Girls laugh). Stuff that I wouldn't want to talk to my Dad at all, but I guess we'll just skip over that part.
>
> **Caitlin**: Why don't you read it with your Mom?

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Amy: Cause my dad was the one who wanted to read it with me.

Recommending *Dateable* to the group, Amy shared that she and her dad would each read the book independently and then come together for a discussion. Amy assumed that they would "skip" any uncomfortable parts related to sex. It is interesting that Caitlin immediately wondered why Amy was reading the book with her dad, considering the subject matter of the text. The girls discussed the roles of dads as much as they did the role of moms. The dads influenced the girls' literacy practices and beliefs

Each family had its ways of shaping and supporting the girls' literacy. Gadsden (1998) suggests that literacy practices, beliefs, and expectations are part of family cultures. Certain literacy practices (e.g., reading and editing a school assignment) may be more common to White, middle-class families than to immigrant families. Amy's dad read a teen-advice book and discussed sex, dating, and boys. Karen's dad introduced Karen to graphic novels such as *Watchmen* and Mel Brooks' movies. Veronica spoke Mandarin with her grandmother. They had a ritual of watching Taiwanese television shows together. Hence the girls' literacy practices reflected the cultures and linguistic resources of the family. Family as a social and cultural context informed the girls' understandings and experiences of literacy.

"I've Been Going Online to Look for Peoples' Opinions of Books": Relating to Readers on Virtual Spaces

The girls also related to readers and writers whom they have never met. That is, they formed relationships on virtual spaces and engaged texts as part of online communities. For example, Carol, an eighth grader, said that she read online reviews of *Octavian Nothing* to help make sense of the novel. She identified with one reviewer, an adolescent, who commented that it took multiple babysitting "gigs" to finish *Octavian Nothing*. Carol had joined an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) of readers. Knowing that other adolescents were probably reading

the same text, Carol used technology to access other readers' experiences and interpretations of the text.

> **Carol**: Lately, I've been going online a lot to look for peoples' opinions of books. 'Cause for the summer project, we had to read *Octavian Nothing*, and I wanted to know what other people thought of it. And it was, and I actually thought it was the exact same way I was feeling towards the book. [….] I read a review of the book, and you can't, it's hard to stay with it. I can't sit down and read it for like an hour, like I can with other books. I had to take a break . Yeah, the girl online said, she says, "You don't know how many bike rides, babysitting gigs and all the activities I had to do just to finish the book." (Interview, 12.15.08)

Octavian Nothing was assigned to the eighth graders for summer reading. Summer reading is usually done independently. Hence, it made sense that Carol would need to seek people online. Many of the eighth-grade girls also described the experience of reading *Octavian Nothing* as confusing, frustrating and hard. Hence, Carol needed access to other readers' ideas, perspectives and interpretations. She came across one review that mirrored the way she experienced the novel. Carol found the novel difficult to read for a prolonged length of time. The reviewer mentioned the number of bike rides, babysitting jobs, and other activities it took to finish the book. Carol stated that was the "exact same way I was feeling towards the book." Carol knew that there were other readers experiencing the same text. Wanting to relate and connect to others, she joined an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) online of readers. Gere (1997) writes, "Multiple and widely distributed copied of the same text create the possibility of a new form of imagined community" (p. 21). Carol wanted to know the way other readers navigated and made sense of the same texts. Carol was able to access readers' experiences and interpretations of the novel.

During school hours the girls could not access YouTube, MySpace or Facebook. The administrator and teachers' assumption was that these websites are not "academically" relevant. Sid, however, used YouTube to explore a school text, the short story "The Most Dangerous Game":

> **Sid**: I know like one time, recently, we were reading "The Most Dangerous Game" in school, in literacy. And I looked it up on YouTube. And they made a video. A couple of

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people made a video. There's this one, this teenage boy made a video. It started off really good, but then they started getting really silly and inappropriate. (Interview, 11.12.08)

Sid used YouTube to research the ways that other adolescents might have interpreted and enacted the narrative. Sid was not the only student to "look up" school texts online. Reading *The Crucible*, Stella used YouTube to "look up some stuff. The characters and how it turned out." She was seeing the ways that the text had been interpreted and adapted.

Social networking sites, such as Facebook or GAIA, are an integral part of girls' social relationships and interactions. The girls related to other readers and writers on virtual spaces. Many of the girls relied on new technologies to share readings and experiences of texts. The girls visited and used certain sites for the purposes of discussing texts; extending school-learning; relating to other readers and writers; and maintaining friendships. More than half of the participants had cellphones and used Facebook. Caitlin sent Amy a text message as she was reading *Mick Harte*. On the message, she wrote, "This book is so sad. Why did you make me read it?" (Interview, 2.13.09). Veronica wrote me the following message on Facebook:

> I just finished WAFD today and gave the book to Elizabeth. Mary and I both agree that the ending was disappointing :(Well talk about it tomorrow!" (Veronica, personal communication, 5.13.09)

Rather than use the full title of the novel, *We All Fall Down*, Veronica used WAFD. Mary and Veronica agreed on the ending of *We All Fall Down*, yet Veronica wanted to talk more. Discussions of books occurred online and during lunch. Talk of books circulated the school hallways.

Talking "Literacy" During Lunch: Literate Talk at Harmony

Veronica shared that she, Yolanda and Mary discussed books during homeroom. Literate talk often occurred beyond literacy class. Studying the conversations and social experiences of adolescents after school or during lunch, Eder (1995) reported that girls primarily gossiped. That is, the topic of girls' conversations centered on the lives of other girls. However, I observed that literate talk—that is, talk that involves the girls' literacy practices and texts (e.g., viewing and

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commenting on YouTube videos, reading teen magazines, writing stories for family members, watching television shows and movies, using Facebook or GAIA)—was part of girls' everyday interactions and talk.

Analyzing interview data and transcripts of book club conversations, I learned that the girls' talk outside of class and school was not always mindless gossip; rather, the talk was full of texts—literature, anime and manga, movies, music, and television shows. Casey, a seventh grader, shared the following during an interview:

> **JP**: So when and where do you talk about it [books]?
>
> **Casey**: Sometimes during lunch, recess, when we can. When we just drift off at our conversations, even when we're not supposed to, by accident, may I repeat, by accident. And then also, like outside of school when we see each other, go over to each other's house, sleepovers. It's kind of cool to kind of think, "Oh My Gosh," getting other peoples' opinions on the books you've read. It's like, "I loved it. How did you like it?", and the next person was like, "Worst book I ever read." And then they state another book, and there's this whole other topic. (Interview, 10.20.08)

It is interesting that Casey added the emphasis, "may I repeat, by accident," demonstrating an awareness that students are not supposed to be discussing other books during class time. Casey suggested that the conversation may not be a long or comprehensive analysis of one book. Rather than be confined to discussing a set, predefined topic, the girls mentioned other books and changed topics, fluidly moving across texts. Sharing perspectives on books is, according to Casey, "kind of cool." Karen shared that she and Katherine discussed *Mick Harte*. She said,

> **Karen**: I kept going on about how I cried so much, I had to get a hug from my parents. I think it was on our way to literacy or on our way from. It was definitely in-between classes, before or after literacy. (Interview, 2.11.09)

Given that the conversation occurred during passing period, it could not have lasted longer than five minutes. Yet Karen was able to comment on the strong emotional response that the novel provoked. Reading was not the only topic of conversation among adolescent girls, however. Stella shared that she and other eighth graders discussed parents, boys, friends, teachers and

school. She described the girls' talk as centered on "what's bugging us." She added that the girls try not to gossip to avoid "drama."

Casey and Karen challenge the stereotype that girl-talk outside of school, and talk during lunch or recess is mostly gossip or mostly focused on boys or clothing. It is easy to generalize the content of adolescent talk. For example, during a classroom observation, Heather addressed the eighth graders: "I don't want to hear cafeteria talk in 317 [the room number]. Do you want me to come talk literacy with you in the cafeteria?" She also told the girls during a book club meeting, "I'll always say, Talk to your friends outside. This is 90 minutes of literacy time" (Seventh Grade, Transcript, 4.23.09). These generalizations obscure the varied interests, literacy practices and texts that are part of adolescents' talk. The girls talked "literacy" during lunch, class, and sleepovers.

Caitlin and the seventh grade girls were reading *Mick Harte Was Here* (Park, 1996). The novel prompted Caitlin to approach Amy.

> **Caitlin**: In Ms. Heather's class, she [Amy] had the book in her hand, and I was like, "I finished it." She's like, "Wow." Then I was like, "It made me cry." And she's like, "Yeah, me too." (Interview, 2.13.09)

Caitlin announced that she had finished the book. The announcement conveyed a certain sense of pride. Caitlin and Amy learned that they both cried as they read *Mick Harte*. It is also significant that the interaction occurred during literacy class. Via text messaging and email, the girls "talked" to one another as they read *and* after they read.

"And Yet, We Found This Odd Type of Unity": Forging New Relationships and Understandings

Casey, Veronica, Yolanda and Mary were all part of informal reading groups that met during lunch, recess or homeroom. These informal reading groups existed long before the girls decided to become part of an "official" after-school book club. Mary stated, "We were our own book club because Yolanda and Veronica would read *Twilight*" (Transcript, 3.18.09). In what

ways, if at all, did "official" after-school book club enrich the girls' reading practices and lives?

First, the book club, I argue, generated more and different conversations. The girls might

approach a fellow book club member—before, during or after literacy class—to discuss a book

and share responses. They might have a pre-book club conversation as a way to prepare for the

actual meeting. Karen commented, "Mostly I talk to Katherine on the days that we would be

having the book club. We're kind of preparing ourselves to talk about stuff" (Interview, 2.11.09).

Second, the book club became a site for story-telling, supporting one another, forming new

relationships and friendships, and learning to become better friends. I found that the practice of

reading and talking together nurtured the girls' friendships.

Interview data reveals that the girls felt closer to one another as a result of the book club.

Reproduced below are students' comments on the effect of book clubs on friendships.

> **Sue**: I've learned a lot about my friends because of this. I didn't know that Veronica liked
> vampire books so much. I mean, I've seen her reading those books, but I didn't know she
> loved them so much. And I actually have gotten closer to Veronica. We've been talking
> about different things. Now that I know more about her, she's learning more about me.
> So just kind of brings me together with them, letting me know what they're really about
> on a more, not in school basis, on the outside. (Interview, 5.18.09)

> **Katherine**: And it also helps you become better friends in the book club. If you weren't
> really necessarily friends outside the book club, they actually get to know you a little bit
> more, from what your thoughts about books and how they thought you were. Because,
> because nobody thought I was like a book addict or anything before, but now they, I think
> they know how my thoughts are and how I think and everything. (Interview, 6.10.09)

Sue and Katherine suggested that they discovered new facets of other girls' identities, particularly

the girls' identities as readers. Sue learned that Veronica is an avid reader of vampire novels.

Katherine believed that the other seventh graders now knew that she is a "book addict." Sue also

suggested that friendships are reciprocal. She stated, "Now that I know more about her

[Veronica], she's learning more about me." The girls used the space of the book club to

acknowledge and celebrate one another's accomplishments. They congratulated Jessica for being

selected for a prestigious summer science camp. The eighth graders celebrated Mary for winning

third place at the citywide science competition.

Peer groups support and nurture adolescents' reading. Conversely, the practice of reading

and talking together nurtures and sustains friendships. Karen and Eve articulated that the book

club allowed the girls to discover mutual interests, and develop new or different understandings

of one another.

> **Karen**: Most of us are people that we don't really talk to, but when we're in, and sometimes we still don't talk to each other that much outside of it, but when we're in the group, we talk to each other as comfortably as if we've been the bestest of friends since the day we were born. So it's kind of amazing. (Interview, 2.11.09)

> **Eve**: Like, some people I don't talk to as much. Like I won't ignore them, but I won't talk to them as much, but in book group, I just feel like I can talk to them a lot. And it doesn't matter where they're from or who they hang out with. We all come together and we all seem like we've been best friends forever. (Interview, 2.11.09)

Karen acknowledged that many book club participants did not talk to each other during official

school hours. That is, outside the book club, not all of the girls were friends. However, entering

the space of the book club, the girls shared life stories, experiences, and perspectives on a range

of issues, and supported one another to tell these stories. One day, Stephanie announced, "Me and

my boyfriend broke up." Katherine responded, "You're too good for him." They listened and

responded to stories of hurt, loneliness, disappointment and loss. Stephanie hugged Molly after

Molly shared that she felt marginalized and lonely at school. Reading and talking together after

school, the girls experienced a level of comfort, familiarity and trust; and treated one another as

"bestest" of friends. Eve was interviewed the same day as Karen. Similar to Karen, she described

the book club participants as being "best friends." The book club afforded Eve the opportunity to

talk and relate to a diverse group of girls. Eve implied that the context of the book club made it

easier for the girls to talk to everyone regardless of popularity status or cultural background.

Eve and Karen admitted that they might not talk to certain girls during class. Eve made sure to add that she does not ignore people. Interview data revealed the reasons the girls chose not to speak during class. Rebecca and Molly, seventh graders, offered a similar explanation:

> **Rebecca**: Like I really don't like talking aloud in front of a whole group of people. There's a lot of people in my literacy class that I am still not like comfortable around. I wouldn't say certain things to them. (Interview, 5.27.09)

> **Molly**: In Ms. Heather's classroom, it's, you don't really feel that comfortable giving out personal stuff because there is people, some people that you don't know as much [….] Like I don't really share that much in Ms. Heather's class. (Interview, 2.11.09)

The girls could not have been more different. Rebecca was already going to parties on the weekends and dating. Molly was not allowed to be date, preferred playing board games, and babysat. Rebecca appeared to be an extrovert, and Molly the introvert. Yet both girls did not feel comfortable sharing ideas and speaking among a large group of classmates. Notwithstanding the classroom activities designed to create a sense of classroom community (e.g., group projects), neither girl felt comfortable speaking during class and speaking to everyone.

The girls also offered the explanation that they were shy. Mary explained that Yolanda and Veronica were "pretty shy people." She also described Sue as shy. Stella named Sue and Yolanda as shy and quiet. Classroom observation data revealed that Yolanda, Sue and Veronica rarely spoke during class discussions. Yet the girls' book club conversations were often animated and noisy, full of laughter and shrieks (e.g., "Oh my God"), and moments of simultaneous and overlapping talk. For one hour, the girls related to one another differently—more comfortably and intimately. I posit that the girls formed new and different relationships than the ones available during school hours. Stephanie wrote the following:

> We were a group of teenage girls who may or may not have been friends, had very different backgrounds, and, most importantly, completely different tastes in books. And yet, we found this odd type of unity—a book club. (Student writing)

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It is important not to idealize the book club as permanently reconfiguring the girls' friendship groups. A select group of girls continued to be "cool" and "popular." Molly commented that these girls worked to uphold the image and status of "popular" girl. The book club participants did not develop friendships overnight. Yet they worked to develop new understandings of one another. Katherine, a seventh grader, did not belong to any of the "popular" peer groups. During a book club meeting, she admitted to feeling not accepted among other girls. Book club shifted the way Amy and Katherine interacted:

> **Katherine:** And, well, Amy. I don't know about her. I think we're not really friends, but if I ever have, if me and her don't have our friends around. When the seventh graders went on the trip, Amy had nobody to eat lunch with so she came upstairs and ate with us. And then we actually had stuff to talk about, and she knew what I was like, and I knew what she thought, what she was like and what she thought about, so I had things to relate and talk about. (Interview, 6.10.09)

Katherine and Amy did not belong to the same peer group. Amy wore the trendiest clothes and shoes. She was an active Facebook user and reported receiving and sending approximately 200 text messages a week. Katherine did not have a Facebook account or phone. She preferred reading manga and watching anime over shopping. During school, Katherine and Amy did not usually talk to each other. Katherine commented that she and Amy might be more likely to talk if there were no other girls around. Such an observation echoes the comment Molly made on the importance girls attach to upholding a certain image and status within school. Teachers and students probably saw Katherine and Amy as an unlikely pair to eat lunch together. However, reading and talking together, Katherine and Amy were developing new understandings of one another. That is, they "actually had stuff to talk about." The book club afforded the girls an opportunity to forge new relationships, even if those relationships did not always lead to friendships.

A few girls decided to be part of the book club to establish new friendships and maintain existing ones. Stella explained that she joined the book club to get to know certain classmates

better. She said, "I guess, some of the girls who are in this club. I don't know them as well, so it's kind of a new experience for me to get to know them" (Interview, 10.28.08). Stella was not the only girl to express a desire for new friendships and better relationships. Both Lauren and Rebecca saw the book club as an opportunity to become a better friend and peer. Rebecca stated, "I hope to learn how to interact better with others, and learn more about everybody" (transcript, 10.06.08). Rebecca wanted to learn different ways she can engage and relate to people. The girls wanted to be better readers *and* friends.

The book club was a space for girls to breathe, relax, laugh and be playful. Mary shared that the girls "laugh a lot and stuff." She later wrote that the book club was a "fun experience." Stephanie asked at the end of one book club meeting, "Can we stay a little bit more?" (Transcript, 3.05.09) The girls laughed, read and discussed books.

Summary

During the month of April, Ms. Heather wrote the following statement on the whiteboard: "Learners first. Friends second." Ms. Heather was not averse to the idea of collaboration. Yet she still saw friends as distracting and counterproductive to learning. Rather than see sociality and learning as mutually exclusive, educators, I argue, should begin to see students' peer groups and social networks as valuable resources to be drawn on and mined. I learned that friendships and peer groups supported girls' reading practices and identities as readers. Conversely, the practice of reading and talking together sustained and nurtured human relationships. The book club provided a diverse group of girls, not necessarily all friends, "shared" texts to experience together. These "shared" texts, I suggest, created new relationships and deepened existing ones.

I witnessed how the girls relied on friends for book recommendations, encouraged one another to try new and different genres and authors, and supported one another to adopt different identities as readers. They had intimate knowledge of friends' reading habits, preferences and beliefs. Lastly, they created and joined informal contexts outside and beyond the classroom to

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discuss texts. Many of the girls sought others to share interpretations and exchange ideas. Many of the girls expressed that they crave conversations among peers, and that they might already be reading and discussing a range of texts (e.g., movies, television shows, books, songs and song lyrics), before and after-school, and during homeroom, lunch, or even class. These informal reading groups existed long before the girls formed an "official" after-school book club.

The girls practiced, valued, and desired reading that is relational. Why might students recommend books to friends and want to discuss books? Miller (1988) provides a helpful framework for understanding the "human desire" to share experiences and relate to other people. According to Miller, people seek to share meaningful experiences. In doing so, they are asking to be heard and understood, and to feel affirmed and valued. The book club participants listened and related to one another, sharing readings and stories. These connections supported the girls as readers, students, and people.

Adolescent girls shared that they want to connect and relate to other readers and writers, and showed the ways in which peers, family members, and invested adults nurture adolescents' literate lives and identities. Therefore, it would have been impossible to research the literacy practices and beliefs of one student without understanding the role of friends, peers, teachers and family members, for people do not read and write inside vacuums. They read and write within human relationships, and as part of groups and communities. There are challenges to creating and sustaining such groups and communities, however. All relationships, even among like-minded peers, involve negotiations of power. In the next chapter, I discuss more fully the challenges of the book club, and the roles and responsibilities that the girls assumed as participants and co-constructors.

CHAPTER VI

Constructions of the Book Club: Roles, Responsibilities, Rules, Ownership, and Challenges

The girls sometimes referred to the book club as "Ms. Jie's book group." However, who "owned" the book club? The teacher or researcher exercises varying levels of control and ownership of the book club. It is more common for a teacher or other adult (e.g., researcher) to design and develop a book club than it is for students to construct a book club. However, in this study I invited the adolescent girls and their literacy teacher to co-construct the book club. The concept of "co-construction" has become widely used with a range of expectations attached, suggesting the need for more targeted studies that can offer rich images of how co-construction and negotiations *actually* happen among readers.

I found that each of the three book clubs approached the task of constructing the after-school club differently. Each club developed its own method for selecting a text (e.g., voting, drawing names), and established norms for structuring the conversations (e.g., turn-taking, raising hands). The Thursday Seventh-Grade group decided to spend the first 15 minutes on Sharing Time. During Sharing Time, participants offered interesting knowledge of themselves (e.g., pet peeves, favorite book genre and titles, embarrassing moments, most disgusting food). The group also named itself Secret Life of Literate Girls—after *Secret Life of Bees*, the novel they were reading at book club. The Tuesday Seventh-Grade group decided on Inspirational readers. Each book club developed its own tone and rhythm, and its own set of rules—explicit and implicit—for organizing and sustaining conversations.

In this chapter, I explore how the book club participants took up different roles and responsibilities, established norms and rituals, and negotiated the challenges of forming and sustaining the book club. The book club became a generative site for seeing adolescents as problem-posers/problem-solvers, decision-makers, negotiators and architects of an after-school space for literacy learning.

Roles and Responsibilities: Responsibility to be Supportive, Respectful, and Confidential

Casey commented, "Don't just say, 'Hey, we have a community.'" Casey suggested that the label of community should not be used indiscriminately to refer to any group or configuration of people. Communities are not created spontaneously or haphazardly. They require thought, planning, and participants' willingness to contribute and assume different roles and responsibilities. Thus, to understand how adolescent girls constructed and participated in after-school book clubs, I identified and analyzed the roles and responsibilities they assumed.

Data from the study reveal that the girls brought texts to read; prepared discussion questions for book club meetings; posed questions for different purposes, including asking for clarification and eliciting other members' perspectives; and encouraged other girls to join the conversation. Jessica prepared discussion questions for the book club. She said, "Before we come to the group, in homeroom, I would look over the book and like think about questions in my head. That's why I would come in and ask questions" (Interview, 2.11.09). Stephanie and Lauren worked to speak and interrupt less. Aware that they are talkative, Stephanie and Lauren tried not to dominate discussions. Lauren stated, "I just want to say, I like to interrupt people. It happens. I'll try to control it." Stephanie would ask, "Am I talking too much?" or "Did you still have something to say?" Part of being a responsible book club member, according to Stephanie and Lauren, was listening to others. All three book clubs agreed on the importance of being considerate and respectful.

In the next section, I focus on four primary responsibilities assumed by the girls: responsibility to support each other; responsibility not to "ruin" the book; responsibility to acknowledge and respect other members' cultural and religious backgrounds; and lastly, responsibility to keep secret the stories and experiences that get shared at book club.

"I need help to get into it": Responsibility to support each other

Alvermann argues that self-efficacy is the most essential element to overcoming challenging tasks (1987, 2002). Encountering an unfamiliar genre or complicated novel can be frustrating to a reader. How can students be encouraged to persist? Analysis of data from the study suggests that the girls took on the responsibility of supporting each other to navigate and make sense of challenging texts.

The eighth-grade book club had started reading Stephenie Meyers' *The Host* (2008), a complex and lengthy science fiction novel. At the start of the session, Sue announced, "I need help to get into it [*The Host*]." Mary responded, "Ok, We're in." Mary used "we" to signal that helping Sue is a collective and collaborative effort. A significant portion of the discussion was spent encouraging Sue.

Date: 2.12.2009
Book Club: Eighth Grade
Members present: Mary, Inez, Yolanda, Veronica, Sue, Ms. Heather, Jie

Sue: I don't understand what I am reading. I just, I read it and two pages later, I don't remember what I read because I am not reading.

Mary: But what about the book, like you read some, what about that do you find not interesting?

Sue: Like it hasn't gotten exciting for me yet.

Yolanda: 'Cause it's not exciting. You're too little in the book.

Mary: Wait. What's happening?

Sue: Around here.

Mary: What's happening? Read it, Out loud. Please

Inez: "The electric bell rang, announcing another visitor to the convenience store."

Mary: Oh! I remember that. She, so you haven't got to the good part yet

Sue: (interjecting): Yeah I haven't.

Mary: You're at the part where she's like, living her life, boring life right now. She's about to go.

Inez: Yeah

Mary: It will get more exciting if you read more. You are at the beginning.

> **Inez**: You're like right at that point. Right there, it says Turn.
>
> **Mary**: It's going to happen real soon. Like in the next chapter.

The conversation reflects the ways that the girls asked for support and assumed the responsibility of helping each other through a book. Rather than dismiss Sue's confusion as unimportant, the girls offered support. For instance, stating, "You're like right at that point," Inez encouraged Sue. Yolanda tried a different approach. Stating "'Cause it's not exciting. You're too little in the book," Yolanda affirmed Sue's confusion and frustration with the novel. In other words, according to Yolanda, Sue has good reason to find the book unexciting or uninteresting. The girls each assumed a different role: Inez cheered Sue, Yolanda offered affirmation, and Mary assumed the role of question-poser. She asked, "But what about the book do you find not interesting?" The question is authentic: Mary expressed a genuine desire to understand the reasons Sue found the novel uninteresting. Mary also encouraged Sue to articulate those reasons. Mary then made an important move. To be able to support Sue, the book club should know what part of the novel Sue was reading. Hence, Mary asked Sue, "What's happening?" and Inez began to read aloud. Mary ensured that the book club members were—literally and figuratively—on the "same page" as Sue.

As many classroom teachers can attest, it is hard work to encourage students to enter a text and sustain interest. The girls offer teachers valuable insight on the type of assistance or support that works for students. First, the book club members did not force Sue to adopt their positive views of *The Host*; instead, they encouraged and asked questions to get a better sense of Sue's confusion with the novel. They also did not ostracize Sue for not having the same level or degree of understanding or enthusiasm for the novel. They did not evaluate her comments as wrong or incorrect. Establishing rules for the book club members, Rebecca said, "Not to make anyone, like, make them feel like their ideas are bad."

At the next book club meeting, Sue expressed a different stance toward *The Host*. The context for the following conversation is that the girls were discussing the fact that Elizabeth, a fellow book club member, did not like the book.

> Date: 2.26.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Sue, Mary, Yolanda, Veronica, Jie
>
> **Yolanda**: I know Elizabeth doesn't like the book. She's on page 62.
>
> **Sue**: I get mad at that because you have to read up until Tucson, Arizona.
>
> **Yolanda**: She's like, "I don't like the book." You're not even there!
>
> **Veronica**: Page 62. It's so early.
>
> **Yolanda**: I know, that's what I told her.
>
> **Mary**: You have to stick with the book.

Two weeks ago, Sue had asked the book club for help, sharing that she was confused. The other members encouraged Sue to continue reading. It is evident that Sue took the girls' advice, continued reading *The Host*, and eventually enjoyed reading the novel. Rather than abandon a confusing book, the girls worked *through* and *with* the text. As Mary succinctly stated, "You have to stick with the book." Recommending the novel to the book club, Veronica anticipated the other girls' resistance to the novel.

> Date: 1.29.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Veronica, Mary, Sue, Yolanda, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Veronica**: Yeah, but guys, like don't give up at the beginning. I am serious.
>
> **Maya**: Okay (exaggerated sighing).
>
> **Veronica**: See? It's getting interesting. It's not about aliens and parasites.

Would Sue have persisted in reading *The Host* had she read the novel independently of the book club? It is difficult to say. What makes students "stick with a book"? Persistence requires belief in oneself as a reader, and belief in the text (i.e., belief that the text will make sense). Persistence is built through peer-support and encouragement. The eighth-grade girls encouraged each other to persist, and convinced each other that the book is interesting and worth reading.

"We're not allowed to spoil the end": Responsibility not to ruin the book

Yolanda and Veronica often finished reading the text before others did. Given that the girls were not required to read a set number of pages every two weeks, and that they had different reading practices, it was likely that one or two of the girls would finish a book before others. This posed a particular challenge for the book club. Mary, an eighth grader, wondered, "But what if someone is really a slow reader, and like everyone is finished by the next meeting, but they're not?"(Transcript, 10.08.08). The girls, however, thoughtfully navigated and negotiated such situations.

For instance, conversations such as the ones below were not uncommon. Both conversations were part of the Thursday Seventh-Grade book club meetings. They occurred at different points of the year.

[Transcript #1]

Date: 11.13.2008
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
Members present: Amy, Caitlin, Eve, Helen, Karen, Katherine, Stephanie, Ms. Heather, Jie

Stephanie: Ok, has anyone not read like the first, um, ten to twenty pages?

Tara: I haven't started it.

Clarissa: Has anyone besides me actually like finished the book?

Ms. Heather: I am on my second, well, actually, third reading of it. I've read the whole.

Stephanie: I saw you just starting it.

[Transcript #2]

Date: 2.19.2009
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
Members present: Amy, Clarissa, Caitlin, Eve, Helen, Katherine, Molly, Stephanie, Ms. Heather, Jie

Amy: How about we go around a circle and say what page we are on, and what's going on. Ok. I'll go first. I finished.

Clarissa: I kind of don't have the book, so I really didn't read anything.

Caitlin: I am at 92.

Helen: […] I need to get a copy of the book. They ran out at the book store.

Amy: Caitlin, what's going on where you're at?

The second exchange among Amy, Clarissa, Caitlin and Helen took place during the seventh graders' meeting on the young adult novel, *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). Amy assumed the role of leader and facilitator, addressing both the group and individual students, such as Caitlin: "Caitlin, what's going on where you're at?" The eighth graders also had similar conversations. Reading *Alanna: Song of the Lioness*, Mary asked the book club participants, "Did everybody finish it?" and Yolanda addressed the group, "Raise your hand if you didn't finish the book" (Transcript. 11.20.08).

The challenge was for the girls not to "ruin" the book for others. Across the three book clubs, the girls were careful not to reveal or discuss the conclusion. For example, the same seventh-grade group debated whether to reveal the fact that Melinda, the protagonist of *Speak*, had been raped at a party. Katherine announced, "We're not allowed to spoil the end."

> Date: 2.19.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Clarissa, Caitlin, Eve, Helen, Katherine, Molly, Ms. Heather, Jie

> **Karen**: Yes, I want them to tell us what happened to her at the party. I don't like being kept from secrets. I don't like surprises.

> **Stephanie**: I think we should only tell if everyone feels comfortable with this.

> **Gwen**: I know that we talked about it before.

> **Stephanie**: Yeah, I did that. That was my fault. I am bad at not spoiling books.

The girls eventually decided that they could openly discuss the rape of Melinda. According to Stephanie, knowledge of the rape would not "spoil" the story for other readers. She later stated, "I don't think it really affects the storyline."

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Below, the eighth graders were reading *The Host* and similarly debated whether they could discuss the conclusion.

Date: 2.26.2009
Book Club: Eighth Grade
Members present: Sue, Mary, Yolanda, Veronica, Jie

Mary: Sue, can I talk about the end?

Veronica: No don't. You are going to ruin it.

At another book club meeting, Veronica asked, "Let's talk about it [*We All Fall Down*]. Wait, have you even started it?" (Transcript, 4.30.09). The girls' concern for not spoiling the story for others suggests that they are adopting more of an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1964) as readers. Taking an efferent stance means reading a text for the purpose of taking away information; taking an aesthetic stance means reading for the purpose of experiencing and living through the text. Mary and Veronica recognized that reading can be a pleasurable experience and consciously avoided disclosing any information that could ruin that experience for other readers.

If one of the members missed a meeting or did not complete the reading, she made sure to ask other members for a brief overview. For example, Carol had not prepared for the book club meeting on *The Soloist*. She asked the group members, "Can you guys like keep me up, can you tell me what's it about?" (Transcript, 3.12.09). It was not uncommon for the girls to make such a request. For example, Katherine, a seventh grader, wanted a summary of the book, *Dateable*.

Date: 6.11.2009
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
Members present: Stephanie, Molly, Casey, Katherine, Caitlin, Amy,
Ms. Heather, Jie

Katherine: Before we start, can you kind of summarize what happened so far cause I wasn't here.

Stephanie: It's not a novel. It's like an instruction book

Casey: It's like a "Try to be" guideline kind of thing

Stephanie: About dating.

Knowing that they might not have the same knowledge and understanding of the text as the other members, Katherine and Carol took the initiative and asked for summaries. Asking for updates and summaries, both girls were positioning the other members as knowledgeable readers and valuable resources. The girls rarely relied on Heather for "answers." Rather, they would give Heather summaries of the book club discussion if she was late to the meeting. For example, Heather was late to one of the seventh-grade meetings on *Speak.* As Heather approached the book club, Eve announced, "So what we're doing is, we're sharing what we thought happened."

"It's about God. I was just wondering if you guys mind": Responsibility to be respectful of peoples' beliefs and backgrounds

The girls also assumed the responsibility to be respectful of other members' beliefs and cultural and religious backgrounds. For instance, Amy had introduced *Dateable* to the Thursday Seventh-Grade group. *Dateable* is a non-fiction book that offers adolescents advice on dating. The book is interesting for several reasons: its intended audience is both male and female readers, and the authors write openly of Christian values as they relate to teenage dating. For instance, the authors advocate abstaining sexually and keeping oneself pure for the "Maker." Introducing the book to the group, Amy did not mention the fact that the book had religious under- and overtones. However, she did state that a youth-group pastor had recommended the book. As Amy read aloud chapters of *Dateable* to the group, she often paused at parts that explicitly mentioned or referred to God.

Date: 5.21.2009
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
Members present: Amy, Helen, Molly, Stephanie, Casey, Ms. Heather, Jie

Amy: Now let's look at this from the [Pause]. Should I still read that or

Molly: I don't care.

Amy: Do you guys care? It's about God. I don't care, I was just wondering if you guys mind.

Stephanie: No, I don't mind.

Amy: (Continues reading) Now let's look at this from the spiritual side. God knows that if we get too caught up in chasing, catching, and hanging onto a crush, then we stop growing.

Farber (1995) notes the deep discomfort that teachers experience as they must make sense of the relationship between schooling and religion. Religion, however, appeared as central to the lives of many girls. For example, Amy, Caitlin, Jessica and Veronica discussed how they had had strong religious upbringings, and how and why religion was an important part of family relationships and histories. Knowing the other girls' different religious backgrounds (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), Amy asked Helen, Molly, Stephanie and Casey whether she could continue reading. The girls were constantly "reading" each other. For example, reflecting on the experience of reading *Dateable*, Stephanie, a seventh grader wrote the following:

> What made the book club such a learning experience for me was that you had one girl who brought a more introverted, I guess you could say "nerdy" view to the table, as opposed to another girl, who was pretty bubbly, and whose values were strongly influenced by her Christianity. (Student Writing, Stephanie)

Stephanie did not name the specific girl; yet, it can be inferred that the "pretty bubbly, Christian" girl is Amy, and that the "introverted, nerdy" girl is a description of Stephanie. According to Stephanie, the girls' varied religious and cultural beliefs, and even different reading preferences were valuable to the book club. Rather than see different personalities (e.g., bubbly and introverted) and religious beliefs as a complication or obstacle, Stephanie suggested that multiplicity of perspectives, experiences, and values is fundamental to learning. That is, difference should be embraced rather than feared or suppressed.

"We keep what we say to us": Responsibility of confidentiality

The book club was simultaneously a contact zone and safe space. The next section will focus more explicitly on the ways that the book club was a contact zone. In this section, however, I argue that the girls desired and constructed a space in which they felt safe to share ideas, experiences, and stories.

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Safe spaces of learning have been conceptualized and discussed differently. For instance, Cochran-Smith (1995) argues that an over-emphasis on safety can "eliminate conflict to the point of flatness, thus reducing the conversation to platitudes or superficial rhetoric" (p. 546). According to hooks (2003), conflict can lead to new thinking and growth. Students grow as a result of interrogating taken-for-granted ways of thinking, believing and valuing. It is "safe" to avoid discussions of personal prejudices and assumptions. Safe does not have to mean neutral, value-free or flat, however. Safe spaces can be spaces of respect, trust and honesty. Students can feel valued and respected, and therefore better able to share vulnerabilities, take intellectual risks and interrogate—individually and collectively—ways of being, valuing and believing.

The girls constructed and valued the book club as a safe space. The safe space was created and sustained as a result of the girls agreeing to do the following: be open (i.e., offer experiences, thoughts and ideas to the group); and keep book club conversations confidential. According to Weis and Carbonell-Medina (2000), confidentiality allows people to reveal experiences that otherwise would not have been disclosed. The seventh and eighth-grade girls needed assurance that they would not become subject to gossip or judgment. The girls saw the book club as a space to share personal and family stories of pain, embarrassment, or abuse. For example, the Tuesday Seventh-Grade club was reading *A Basket of Flowers*, a coming-of-age, morality tale. Jessica shared the story of a family member being sexually abused. Before sharing the story, she said, "I am asking you guys to keep this here," reminding the other girls to keep the family story confidential and private.

Jessica, one of the more quiet seventh graders, was vocal and expressive during book club. Jessica also revealed—in and through conversations—different facets of her upbringing, identity and life: she was born and partially educated in Barbados; she saw herself as a "floater", and therefore not belonging to a particular peer group; she aspired to become a pediatrician; and

she was part of a large family, and at any time, she and 15 other relatives could be sharing the house. Rebecca was taken aback to see Jessica so open.

> **Rebecca**: Our club is about, we talk about not just the book, we can also put things on the table that are, um, sort of personal, but we keep what we say to us.
>
> **JP:** Were you surprised at how personal people were?
>
> **Rebecca**: Sort of, yeah. Because Jessica, she's really. She keeps things to herself. She really don't say much.
>
> **JP:** And what do you think about that?
>
> **Rebecca**: I like it, but I can kind of respect how she wants to keep things private and 'cause there's things that I sort of regret telling people. (Interview, 2.13.09)

According to Rebecca, Jessica usually "keeps things to herself. She really don't say much." It is also telling that Rebecca described the club members as both "putting things on the table" and "keeping what we say to us." Openness and confidentiality are inextricably related: that is, openness cannot exist without the promise of confidentiality. In order to be open, girls needed assurance that they could reveal secrets and stories. The girls asked that the stories be kept within the book club and among the book club members. Rebecca implied that she has had to face negative consequences for being open—i.e., the consequence of becoming the subject of gossip. The lesson that Rebecca learned is that it is better not to divulge certain experiences and stories to people.

Jessica was not the only student to share stories that might be seen as embarrassing, painful, or "risky." Mary revealed both parents' mental health histories, and the fact that her mother was on anti-anxiety medication. Clarissa shared a poem she had written to process her grandfather's death. She shared details of seeing her grandfather on a breathing tube after undergoing surgery for lung cancer. Eventually, he died of pneumonia. She could not be at the hospital, so she composed the following poem.

> **Clarissa**: Of course you know I love you. It's obviously true. And if you don't already know, I am going to miss you. I wish you could stay with us. It's hard to let you go. But I

know it's best for you. So I'll go with the flow. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 11.13.08)

It is also worth noting that Clarissa, as part of the poem, added a link to a Mariah Carey song called *Bye Bye*. Molly, a seventh grader, shared the desire to belong to a group of friends.

Date: 6.11.09
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
Members present: Stephanie, Molly, Casey, Katherine, Caitlin, Amy,
Ms. Heather, Jie

Molly: You guys don't know how hard that is for me because

Caitlin (interjecting Molly): It really is hard.

Molly: If you guys just start talking about something, and I don't even know what you're talking about, then, I'll feel left out. And I felt that before, and I don't want to feel that.

Katherine: I always feel that.

The three girls were willing to be vulnerable: Molly shared that she had once experienced isolation, and never wanted to feel such loneliness again. Katherine commented that she always feels "left out." Caitlin also repeated twice that it is difficult to form friendships and become part of a group. Willing to be vulnerable and open first, Molly made it possible for Caitlin and Karen to share similar experiences and feeling.

The girls articulated needing an environment in which they could be open and not fearful of becoming the subject of school gossip. The book club became such an environment. During the last book club meeting, Stephanie, a seventh grader, declared:

Stephanie: I think it's important […] I think it's important to have something where you can just talk, that it will really be confidential because you can trust in your friends, but not as much as [….] Well, I think it's important to have something that's like confidential. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 6.11.09)

Ironically, the fact that the seventh graders were not all friends made it easier for Stephanie to talk, share, and trust that they would keep the book club conversations confidential. Rebecca recognized that it was risky to reveal oneself and "put things on the table." Such recognition might account for the way the girls valued each other and the stories told at book club. The girls' honesty, vulnerability and trust were humbling and inspirational. They shared stories of parents'

depressions and divorces, of family members' deaths, and stories of love, disappointment and

loss. During one book club meeting, the seventh-grade girls debated the value of different sex

education programs, and discussed teenage pregnancy, and condoms. As the girls were getting

ready to leave school, they wondered the following:

> Date: 2.19.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Members present: Amy, Clarissa, Caitlin, Eve, Helen, Katherine,
> Molly, Ms. Heather, Jie

> **Stephanie**: Are you going to include this in your, um.

> **Katherine**: Are you going to listen back to this tape too?

> **Stephanie**: Don't put our names on it.

Stephanie did not want the girls' names to be made public, and she wondered whether the

particular discussion was going to be included in the study. Throughout the study I recognized the

possibility that information shared during book club meetings might not be kept confidential. The

girls signed a contract promising to keep everything that gets said and shared at book club

meetings private. Yet I could not help wonder, who was I to write about and make public the

girls' lives and stories? Moreover, what is private, especially in the age of weblogs and

cellphones that blur the boundaries separating the public and private, when seemingly "private"

texts are made available for public 'gazing'? Adolescent lives are increasingly scrutinized,

commented on, written about and made public. There is an absence of critical analysis on the

ways that adolescent students, particularly poor students and students of color are subject to the

gaze of researchers and policy-makers. What was I doing in asking the girls to disclose their lives

and experiences? What were *my* responsibilities—as a researcher, educator, book club participant

and woman?

Challenges and Complexities of After-School Book Clubs

Facilitating and studying the Read and Talk Clubs, Alvermann and colleagues (1999)

identified a number of challenges they encountered, including adult-facilitators' reluctance to

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exert authority, long silences among participants, norms for turn-taking and participation, the extent that students have internalized schooled ways of reading and discussing books, and the process of text selection. The challenges I encountered while researching and participating in the book clubs are both similar to and different from the ones named by Alvermann and colleagues. In the next section, I focus on the challenges of forming and sustaining the book club: the messy process of text selection; influence of school cliques on the relationships between and among book club participants; and student retention.

"What if somebody picks a book and you thought it was kind of stupid?": Complex and complicated process of text selection

Appleman (2006) offers several criteria for text selection. She recommends that book club organizers and facilitators choose literature that is current; playful or enjoyable; controversial, and therefore able to generate rich conversations and disagreement; and appealing to adolescents and adults, both male and female. She argues that teachers and other adult-facilitators have the responsibility for developing and applying criteria for choosing books *for* adolescents. A review of the literature on adolescent book clubs reveals that the teacher or researcher selects the books for students to read (for an exception see Alvermann et al., 1999). It is also common for the teacher or researcher to generate a list of texts and ask students to select the text. The students' input, albeit acknowledged and valued, does not determine text selection.

The adolescent girls at Harmony nominated and selected the texts they wanted to read. Early on the study Heather said that she did not want to select the books. The girls recommended and nominated fiction and non-fiction titles, song lyrics, poems and movies. Expanding the traditional understanding of text involves including teen-magazines (McRobbie, 1991); school yearbooks (Finders, 1997); hip-hop lyrics (Alim, 2007; Jocson, 2006), television programs (Trainor, 2004), movies and visual images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996); religions or cultural

icons (Cowan, 2004); and websites (Bruce, 2002; Ito, 2008; Vasudevan, 2007). The seventh- and eighth-grade girls developed a process for text selection, and chose books (for) themselves.

The process of text selection is necessarily messy. Book selection involves negotiations among book club members and reveals "readers' social and personal worlds—full of non-literary preoccupations, interests and yearnings" (Long, 2003, p. 115). The girls brought different histories as readers, idiosyncrasies, desires and interests to the process of text selection. Each girl had different preferences and identities as a reader (e.g., good reader, slow reader, "book addict"). Therefore, it is not surprising that participants wanted to read different books.

The girls offered and then had to sort through a range of possible genres and titles. The girls established ground rules at the outset of the text-selection process. The Thursday Seventh-Grade group agreed not to read any book that was part of a series. Stephanie later qualified the rule: "Sequels are allowed, but only if they make sense by themselves." The group also decided that they would vote to ensure fairness. Another rule was that they would only read paperback books and books that cost less than 50 dollars. The girls offered other ideas for selecting books to read. Helen and Stephanie suggested that the book club read a different genre each month. The eighth-grade book club also decided to nominate books, compile a list, and then vote. The girls agreed to read the book that received the most votes. The Tuesday Seventh-Grade group adopted a different method. Initially, the group drew names, and the person whose name got chosen was responsible for selecting the text. The girls expressed excitement that they were relying on chance. However, they eventually abandoned that method, citing that it was unfair. They took turns to select a book for the group. The Tuesday Seventh-Grade group, however, never voted.

The girls anticipated the challenges of the text-selection process. Helen wondered,

Some people want to read *Harry Potter*, some people want to read *Clique*, and some people want to read, like, I would want to read again, *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*. Yeah, it's a really good book. But, what if someone picks books, like I used to like *Gossip Girl*, if somebody picks a book, and you thought it was kind of stupid? (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 10.02.08)

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Implicit here is the range and variation of titles adolescent girls like to read. That is, they do not all read, *Clique*, *Gossip Girl* or even Harry Potter. Helen also acknowledged that readers' preferences and tastes change and evolve. According to Helen, she outgrew *Gossip Girl* and now prefers to read books like *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time.* She wanted to read a classic and suggested *Emma*. Helen also recommended *Spot of Bother* to the book club. The same author wrote *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* and *Spot of Bother*. The girls often read multiple texts by the same author. Having read *Twilight,* the eighth graders voted to read Stephenie Meyer's other book, *The Host*. All readers judge and evaluate books. Middle schoolers are no exception. Hence, Helen posed the question: what happens if and when a book club member makes the casa for a book that others find "stupid"? How do the members reconcile these differences and reach an agreement? Katherine proposed one solution: regardless of the number of votes, the group should not read a text if one member strongly opposed it.

Below is a table that shows the titles of texts selected and read for each book club.

Table 3
Book Clubs & Texts Selected

Group	Members	Texts Selected[3]
Tuesday Seventh Grade	Casey, Debbie, Lauren, Jessica, Rebecca	*Stupid Girls, Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes, 1968)*; A Basket of* Flowers (von Schmid*,* 1755); *Little Prince* (Saint-Exupéry, 1943); *The Soloist* (Lopez, 2008); *Schooled* (Korman, 2007)
Thursday Seventh Grade	Carol, Elizabeth, Inez, Mary, Sid, Stella, Sue, Veronica, Yolanda	*Alanna: Song of the Lioness* (Pierce, 1997)*, Bones* (Burke, 1999)*, The Host* (Meyer, 2008*); The Soloist* (Lopez, 2008)*; We All Fall Down* (Cormier, 1991)
Thursday Eighth Grade	Amy, Caitlin, Clarissa, Eve, Helen, Karen, Katherine, Molly, Stephanie	*Secret Life of Bees* (Kidd, 2001)*, Mick Harte Was Here* (Park, 1995)*, Speak* (Anderson, 1999)*; The Soloist* (Lopez, 2008) *Dateable* (Lokadoo & DiMarco, 2003)

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[3] Refer to refer to **Appendix A** for brief summary of each text

Worth noting is the range and variation of texts. The titles include literary classics (e.g., *Flowers for Algernon, Little Prince*); contemporary bestsellers (e.g., *Secret Life of Bees*); young adult novels (*e.g., Alanna*, *Speak*, *Schooled*, *The Host*); and non-fiction (*e.g., Dateable*). The girls read and preferred a range of genres, such as science-fiction, fantasy, suspense/mystery, self-help/advice and song lyrics. There was no overlap of texts across the three book clubs. However, all three groups read *The Soloist* based on my recommendation. I selected *The Soloist* for several reasons. First, I planned for the girls to meet an all-women book club and discuss the novel. As part of a citywide reading campaign, different reading groups and communities were reading the book and hosting discussions. Second, Rebecca suggested that it might be interesting and beneficial for the three book clubs to read a common text. *The Soloist* was the only text that the girls did not select, and they "talked back" to the selection. Across the book clubs *The Soloist* was cited as the least interesting and most boring book. Many of the girls did not finish the book.

The process of recommending, sorting through and eventually selecting a text was often messy and complicated. There are no fool-proof formulas for predicting the reading preferences of adolescents. Blackford (2004) interviewed 33 racially, socio-economically, and geographically diverse girls (ages 8 to 16), investigating the girls' views on and experiences of books and other media (e.g., movies). She concluded that the girls expressed a preference for stories of difference. That is, the girls preferred texts that bring the reader to move beyond the self (i.e., texts that featured protagonists and/or revolved around a plot that was unlike the girls' own lives and experiences). The middle school girls at Harmony, however, read a range of texts—historical fiction, realistic fiction, fantasy, romance novels, manga and graphic novels. For example, Helen found young adult novels featuring female protagonists limiting. She critiqued the novels' generalizations of adolescents as troubled or moody, and narratives that focus on dating, peer pressure or parental conflict. However, Stella preferred "stories about other girls, their problems and how they solve it." Stella appreciated the problem-solving quality of young

adult literature. That is, young adult fiction offers possible solutions to the difficulties of adolescence and girlhood. Literature, according to Stella, is a means of understanding the actions and lives of others, and thereby understanding the self.

The girls also related to literary protagonists *within* and *across* gender and ethnic lines. For example, Rebecca, a Black seventh grader, was as likely to recommend *First Part Last*, a young adult novel about the experiences of a Black teenage dad, as she was to recommend *Schooled,* a novel about the trials and tribulations of a White, ex-hippie adolescent boy. My finding is not new. Tatum (2008) studied 3000 middle and high school students, asking each adolescent reader to name a text that he or she found meaningful and memorable. Adolescents, according to Tatum, relate to a range of literary protagonists, even those that do not share the readers' own gender and ethnic backgrounds.

The girls' reading preferences were fluid and evolving. That is, the genres and stories they found meaningful changed as the girls encountered new texts and experiences. Helen used to read *Gossip Girl* (Von Ziegesar, 2002). Now she sees the series as "stupid." Yolanda and Veronica used to read and re-read the book *Black Sheep*. It was once the girls' favorite book. Yolanda admits that now the book is "not that great." Last year Jessica was introduced to *The Summer of My German Soldier* (Greene, 1999). She did not enjoy the novel and eventually abandoned the book. One year later she read the book. Jessica named *The Summer of My German Solider* as a favorite, describing the novel as the "awesomest book ever." Sue hypothesized that she would have appreciated *The Giver* had she read it as a fifth grader, and not as a third grader.

Having read *Alanna: Song of the Lioness* two years earlier, Veronica recommended the novel. However, Veronica saw and read the novel differently.

> **Veronica**: 'Cause one thing I noticed about *Song of the Lioness* is, I guess I really liked it two years ago. And two years ago, my mind has changed completely. And now when I read it, it seemed kind of baby, not babyish, but it didn't really seem. I read like a chapter of Yolanda's book, and the words were like all big, and I was like, "Wow." Like two years ago when I read it [*Song of the Lioness*], it was like one of the best things to ever happen to me. It was like the best book. And it was, now, when I read. It's still good. I

just think that, compared to two years ago, it's not. Cause I read other stuff too, like I'm comparing. (Interview, 10.24.08)

How an adolescent thinks about a book depends on where, with whom, and when she reads it. How Veronica perceives *Alanna: Song of the Lioness* has changed. Mentioning the large print size, Veronica implied that the book does not seem sophisticated. She saw the book—albeit "still good"—as no longer the best book she has ever read. The more Veronica reads, the more she is able to compare the literary merit of different books, and work towards developing a system for ranking and evaluating books. Veronica still found the experience of re-reading *Alanna: Song of the Lioness* valuable and worthwhile. Re-reading is "going to let you notice how much your mind changes over time." Rather than arrive at new or different interpretations, people can see that they have evolved as readers. Veronica offered a compelling analogy of watching a child develop. She said that it is more difficult to detect visible growth if one sees the child everyday. However, if the person were to see the child after several months or even a year, she would more easily notice the changes. Re-reading affords people the opportunity to develop deeper or different understandings of the text *and* more importantly, different understandings of the self as reader.

Documenting and analyzing the book clubs' process of text selection, I gained an understanding of adolescent girls' varied, evolving, and unpredictable preferences for texts. Listening to the girls as they offered book recommendations, I wondered about my assumptions of adolescent girls' reading preferences and practices. I assumed that adolescent girls would prefer young adult fiction and romance novels; and that adolescent girls of color would want to read texts featuring non-White protagonists. Why might educators assume that urban adolescents prefer hip-hop lyrics to Harry Potter? Assuming students' interests, identities, and knowledge, literacy educators and researchers might constrain the range of texts and learning opportunities for adolescents (Schultz & Hull, 2008). Moje, Overby, Tysaver and Morris (2008) urge researchers and educators to pay particular attention to the types of texts offered to adolescents, interrogating *how* and *why* texts are offered students. Data on the girls' reading preferences point

to the limitations of manuals for selecting classroom texts or texts for classroom libraries. There is no formula for predicting the types of texts, genres, or stories that engage adolescent readers.

"You're going to neglect someone's point of view": Book club as contact zones

Two of the three book clubs decided to read the texts that received the most votes. Voting, these groups decided, would be fair. Mary suggested, "We should vote to make it fair." The suggestion prompted the eighth-grade girls to compare the book club to a democracy. They wanted a democratic space, and Carol commented that she did not want the book club to be "like tyranny." The Thursday Seventh-Grade group also agreed to vote. Eve suggested that they vote on the books. Clarissa added, "I agree with Eve. We should do a vote because then we all get a say" (Transcript, 10.16.08). Notwithstanding the girls' attempts to be democratic and fair, there were instances of girls feeling unfairly treated, ignored, or marginalized. Not every book club conversation or interaction was friendly or respectful.

At times the after-school book club became a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) as girls questioned and challenged one another, and tried to negotiate and revise the norms of the group. All relationships, even among students, involve negotiations of power. For example, the eighth-grade group had finished reading *Alanna: Song of the Lioness*. Carol suggested reading *Bones*, a murder mystery. One of the rules for the group was to take seriously every book recommendation and value different perspectives. The other girls, however, ignored Carol's book recommendation, prompting Carol to confront the group:

> Date: 11.20.2008
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Carol, Inez, Elizabeth, Stella, Yolanda, Veronica, Sue, Sid, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Carol**: I feel like it's going to continue that you guys are going to neglect someone's point of view.
>
> **Inez**: We're going to work something out.
>
> **Mary**: No, we decided that at the beginning that we weren't going to ignore anyone's point of view.

Carol: But you did it.

Mary: How did we do it?

Carol: I feel as though it's going to keep going

Inez: Then we'll work it out again, just like how we did now.

Carol: I feel like you guys aren't open to new things though.

The incident narrated above is a "telling case" (Mitchell, 1984) of a contact zone (Pratt, 1991). Carol expressed concern that certain group members will continue to marginalize or neglect certain members' points of view. Rather than merely criticize or place blame, Carol wanted to raise awareness among the group members. It is evident that Mary engaged Carol, requesting more information, and that Inez was assuming the role of the mediator. The exchange also suggests that the process of collaboration involves negotiations of power and authority. Carol was asking, who gets to speak, and whose ideas, perspectives, and opinions are deemed more valid and meaningful?

One common, mistaken assumption is that a club involves a group of like-minded peers, and that every member is equally free to contribute and participate (Howard, 2001). Any space, however, is composed of human relationships, and human relationships invoke and re-inscribe power differentials (McDowell, 1999; Sibley 1995). Even among students, asymmetrical power relations determine the voices that get heard, and the ideas that get privileged. Hence, one must be mindful of the unequal distribution of power among students (Howard, 2001; Trimbur, 1989). Within a classroom or school, how is power distributed among students? That is, what makes some students more powerful than others?

"It's not a clique. We just happen to be friends": Popularity, cliques and book clubs

Leaving the classroom and entering the space of the book club, the girls carried over statuses as "cool" or "popular" girls, and the power that those statuses afford adolescents. To begin to understand the different peer groups and alliances, and the power differentials among the girls, one must understand the social hierarchies at Harmony School. According to students,

there were two "popular" seventh-grade peer groups: one group consisted of Black girls, and included Lauren and Rebecca. The other popular group was more racially diverse, and included Eve, Stephanie, and Helen. The girls claimed that both groups were equally popular. Students identified Lauren as the leader of the all-Black group. The girls also named Lauren as the trendsetter: Lauren was the first to wear Converse Chuck Taylor shoes to school, causing the entire seventh grade class to follow. The girls named Eve as the leader of the other group. Eve had brown hair and blue eyes, and was, according to Molly, "competitive, flirtatious and very athletic." Eve played softball, soccer and rode horses. The third option available to the seventh-grade girls was to be a "floater"—a person who belonged to and navigated multiple friendship groups. These girls were generally well-liked and respected. Then there were girls trying to become part of a popular group.

The seventh graders discussed and troubled the concept of cliques as it related to the novel they were reading. *Speak* prompted the girls to discuss issues of friendship, cliques and popularity. Using the book, the seventh-grade girls compared descriptions of the high school cafeteria to the cafeteria at Harmony School. They also acknowledged the complexity of adolescents' social world: students shifted alliances, formed new friendships, and gained or lost visibility and status. Interestingly, the girls who belonged to the popular group did not see the group as a clique.

> Date: 6.11.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Caitlin, Casey, Katherine, Molly, Stephanie,
> Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Casey**: It's not a clique. We just happen to be friends.
>
> **Stephanie**: I don't like the concept that my little group of friends is a clique because cliques are exclusive and people feel left out. The thing is, if someone wanted to be friends with us, we would totally let you in Molly. If you would just, just come up to us, and be like, "Hey." And we'll be like, "Hey, Molly."

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Aware that cliques are seen as exclusive, Stephanie resisted that particular label being placed on the group. According to Stephanie and others, anyone could be part of the group if she desired to do so. Close attention to the way Stephanie addressed Molly, however, reveals that the group still has the power to grant or deny membership. That is, the "we"—the group—gets to ultimately decide to "let in" Molly. The group does not extend invitations; rather, the girl desiring membership must approach the group. The girls outside of the "clique" simultaneously desired acceptance and were critical of its exclusionary practices.

> **Molly**: And after class, we didn't even talk. It's like Eve's trying to protect her image. It's like, if I am her friend, I am going to make her image worse. That's what it seems like. She's not even wanting to be my friend.

> **Caitlin**: Molly, everyone has that problem. To get into that clique. We both have the same issue. (Thursday Seventh Grade, 6.11.09)

It is worth noting the vulnerability and honesty of the girls. Molly expressed deep hurt that Eve did not want to be friends, and Caitlin openly admitted to wanting and trying to become part of the "popular girl" clique. I posit that the social hierarchy that defined girls' status at school did not disappear during book club. That is, the girls' status at school influenced the way they experienced book club. It also affected the ways they related to and positioned other members.

Data from the study suggest that girls had more or less voice and power as book club participants. Stephanie and Amy often took on the role of the discussion-facilitator or leader. It was not unusual for Stephanie to designate students to speak. Once she said, "You [pointing to Katherine] can go ahead. You can just, yeah, someone start" (Transcript, 12.11.08).

The unequal distribution of power and status was most visible among members of the Thursday Seventh-Grade book club. Certain girls' perspectives and ideas were more valued than those of others, causing several girls, including Karen to feel frustrated and marginalized. Karen was a seventh grader and part of the Thursday group. She had brown hair and freckles, and wore glasses. Observations of the literacy class revealed that Karen did not belong to an established

peer group. Given the option to work alone or collaborate on class assignments, Karen always worked alone. She spent recess reading alone. On a warm spring day, the seventh and eighth graders were outdoors for recess. The Black seventh grade girls stood close together, talking. The eighth grade boys and girls were playing tag-football on the field, chasing one another and yelling. I saw Karen sitting on a bench reading a book.

Offering reasons for joining the book club, Karen said, "I'm here because, most of you know, I'm a book fanatic. Um, and that is a bit of an understatement." The comment provoked Eve and Amy to look at each other, sigh, and then look away. Later, the book club was reading *Secret Life of Bees*. Karen wanted to be reminded of the way that the novel ended. She asked, "Does Lily stay at the Pink House?" Clarissa exhaled audibly and responded, "Duh."

On multiple occasions Karen recommended *Mad Kestrel* and then *City of Embers*. However, none of the other girls considered these texts for book club. During an interview, Karen commented that she would like to change the way that books get selected. She stated,

> **Karen:** This is kind of little self-centered, but I would kind of change what we are reading sometimes, and how my books seem to never get chosen because either they are too long, or they're just not something people are interested in. (Interview, 2.11.09)

Interestingly enough Karen did not consider "popularity" as a factor that influenced text selection. Karen hypothesized that the other girls vetoed the books based on the fact that they were too long, or were not an interesting genre. Karen was part of the same book club as Stephanie, Amy, and Eve: three girls identified as the "popular" seventh-grade girls. The popular girls' book recommendations were more valued than the input of other book club participants. Amy and Stephanie had recommended four of the five books that the group read. Was it mere coincidence that Amy and Stephanie were also identified as the most popular seventh graders? Was it mere coincidence that the recommendations of Karen, Katherine and Caitlin were never selected?

The girls navigated complex social relationships and friendship hierarchies, challenging the essentialist view that all girls and women are cooperative and act on principles of relatedness

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and equity (Gilligan, 1993). Noticing the power differentials among the girls, I wondered whether and how I might address the fact that certain students' perspectives were valued while others were being ignored. If I observed a student trying to articulate an idea or offer a perspective, I would interrupt the discussion and say, "What did you want to say?" The book club became a site of power negotiation, and student inclusion and exclusion. Ensuring that students do not feel marginalized or excluded requires more than simply encouraging students to voice themselves and "speak up/out" (Maher, 2001). Maher (2001) also warns that simply encouraging students to share experiences and voice themselves is to encourage the more privileged voices. Teachers cannot simply empower students, for power cannot be handed over to students as if it were a property or object (Thompson & Gitlin, 1995). Power must be understood as relational, as situated within, and enacted and sustained through human relationships (Thompson & Gitlin, 1995). Furthermore, as Calderwood (2000) argues, there is no list of proven practices that can guarantee to promote a sense of community. Did the book club change and reconfigure student relationships and disrupt the social hierarchies at Harmony, or did the book club reflect and reinforce the hierarchy? I argue that both happened. Membership in the book club prompted the girls to develop new ways of understanding and relating to one another. However, these new relationships were not enough to alter the social hierarchies that separated the girls at school.

What happened to Clarissa and Sid?: Challenge of student retention

Another challenge and difficulty of the after-school book club was member retention. The girls were not required to attend book club. Given that participation was voluntary, membership was fluid and attendance fluctuated. Molly joined several months after the start of the study; and five girls (2 seventh graders, and 3 eighth graders) left the study completely.

Participants, according to McIntyre (2007), should view participation as a "choice, not an imposition" (p. 15). Here McIntyre is describing participatory action research. There are

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characteristics and features of participatory action research that also apply to qualitative,

ethnographic-focused studies, such as an emphasis on learning the ways that people experience

and navigate social spaces and on questioning traditional researcher-researched relationships.

McIntyre also reminds researchers about the importance of remaining flexible, open-minded, and

willing to embrace the unknown, uncertain or unexpected. Such flexibility is integral to research.

Attendance was presented as a choice. Participation was unpredictable and changed

depending on girls' after-school schedules and lives: school projects, musical rehearsals, softball

practice, Yearbook and Student Council Meetings, and babysitting responsibilities. Girls and

Heather would leave and rejoin the book club. Clarissa, a seventh grader, stopped attending and

left the study. Given that she was home-schooled, she was less connected to the seventh graders,

and therefore received fewer reminders to attend book club. A competitive gymnast, she was also

auditioning to be part of a circus troupe. It became increasingly difficult for Clarissa to attend

book club regularly. Heather did not attend all of the book club meetings. She missed most of the

February, April, and May meetings. She was writing a portfolio for graduate school, and taking

courses.

Sid also stopped attending. For the spring she was part of the school musical, Seussical.

She also admitted that she stopped reading for book club. She needed to read *The Killer Angels*—

a 400-page Pulitzer Prize novel chronicling the battle of Gettysburg—for Social Studies class,

and could not commit to finishing *The Host*, especially given that the novel was 500 pages long.

She explained the decision to leave the book club:

> 'Cause I have to keep remembering that like it's not just for fun. I am in a group. So I
> have to make sure that I read the book at a certain time, and I have to make sure that I can
> discuss with my group, and acknowledge the fact that I am with other people and I got to
> take responsibility too. I have to bring ideas to the table cause it's for you, and I signed
> up for it. I had to take responsibility to get the reading done.

It is easy to see the girls' absences as a sign of irresponsibility: the assumption might be that the

girls are not committed enough to the book club, or that they are not responsible enough to finish

the reading. Sid presents a different perspective, however. She wanted to be responsible and "bring ideas to the table." Hence, she would rather leave the book club temporarily and join later. She was not finishing the books and not contributing to the conversations, therefore violating the rules of the book club. It is also worth noting the particular comment, "I have to bring ideas to the table cause it's for you," revealing the ways that she felt a sense of responsibility to the researcher and research project.

The fluid and varied participation of girls raises both pedagogical and research questions. Pedagogical questions include how after and out-of-school school programs can sustain student interest, participation, and engagement and how classroom teachers and practitioners can reframe participation and choice for students; and methodological questions relate to how data on absent participants get integrated (or not) and analyzed (McIntyre, 2007).

Summary

The study's findings fall into two categories. The first category focuses on the range of responsibilities assumed by the seventh and eighth-grade girls. The second category speaks to the tensions and challenges of creating and sustaining after-school, student-centered book clubs. The study's findings reveal the complex process by which adolescent girls developed and participated in an after-school book club, thereby contributing knowledge about the ways in which students create and experience student-created, after-school spaces. These findings, I argue, are important to understanding after-school reading groups because they offer insight on how co-construction of a group and negotiation between and among adolescents *actually* happen. I also suggest that the complex and messy process by which adolescents might develop and participate in book clubs remains understudied because students are usually initiated into adult-designed book clubs and reading groups.

Studying the construction of book clubs composed of everyday, adolescent readers, I learned that most of the girls assumed different roles and responsibilities (e.g., preparing and

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posing questions, supporting each other to continue reading a difficult text, ensuring that other girls attended the book club meeting, promising to keep other girls' stories secret), and established routines and rituals for the group to ensure sustainability.

They also addressed and tackled a number of challenges, including the process of text selection or the power differential that existed among girls.

Given the ability to design and co-construct the book club, adolescents took up the responsibility and made thoughtful and sophisticated decisions, suggesting that adolescents are capable of creating and maintaining generative spaces of learning. That does not mean the teacher must relinquish all decision-making capacity, and become passive. Rather, the teacher takes on the responsibility to structure opportunities for students to share knowledge and cultural and linguistic resources. Research on learning spaces and organizations that motivate and inspire youth (e.g., Hull, 2003; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993) has identified the importance of adult and adolescents' collective participation and collaboration. That is, the adolescents are involved as co-constructors and collaborators, working *alongside* invested adults

More often than not, students are assessed on the ability to follow teacher directions. Rarely are they given the opportunity to decision *what* gets read and *how* the discussions will occur. Most of the 23 girls were active constructors and participants of the book club, substantially shaping the structure, organization and content of the book club discussions. The next chapter focuses on the content of the book club discussions, including social issues and questions that the girls explored. It also provides rich images of the ways in which the girls engaged the written texts and each other, thereby working to produce different and deeper responses to texts.

CHAPTER VII

Adolescents as Readers-Inquirers-Theorizers: Reading as/for Critical Inquiry

Karen commented that the after-school book club should not be seen as simply "people coming together in a circle, holding their books and saying, 'Can you believe this character did that?' or 'I wonder why this character did that.'" Karen described the book club conversations as less focused on identifying literary qualities or analyzing characters, and more on exploring issues and questions that matter to the girls. Rebecca, a seventh grader, commented that the book club discussions addressed "real life problems."

However, during literacy class the girls tended to discuss the importance of symbols, identify the features of non-fiction and informational texts, infer themes of a novel, perform parts of novels, generate thesis statements based on research, learn new vocabulary, and respond aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1964). The literacy class discussions often focused on students' readings of and questions related to literary texts. For example, discussing "The Lottery," Sue, Inez, Veronica, and Eli (an eighth grader boy) questioned the village lottery system:

> **Sue**: I didn't get the lottery
> **Eli**: Maybe it's a means to control population
> **Inez**: By killing one person a year?
> **Veronica**: Was there religion in this? (Eighth Grade, Fieldnotes, 11.17.08)

The group discussion shows the four eighth graders expressing confusion; posing questions; offering a possible hypothesis and interpretation (e.g., "Maybe it's a means to control population"); and questioning and challenging one another (e.g., "By killing one person a year?"). The eighth graders were focused primarily on trying to understand the rationale for the village lottery system. The students focused on making sense of the short story. Heather positioned the students as active meaning makers, de-centering the teacher-figure as authority. Introducing the short story, "The Lottery," she announced the following:

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> What happens in literature class is that the teacher becomes the expert. Here is what the answers are. You miss out on the fun of literature. This grappling. These discussions. These misinterpretations. It's like a puzzle. And I want you to feel comfortable in not having the answers right away. That's what Shirley Jackson wants. (Eighth Grade, Fieldnotes, 11.17.08)

Using the word "grappling", Heather suggested that literature is supposed to generate questions, wonderment, uncertainty and discomfort, and prompt discussions. Misreading and missed readings are part of reading literature. Rather than emphasize the "answers," Heather privileged the grappling, and stressed the importance of communicating and sharing ideas. The students felt comfortable asking questions and even offering misinterpretations. Interview data reveal that all 23 girls knew that people read and interpreted literature differently. The girls explained that these divergent interpretations were inevitable given that every reader has different experiences, knowledge and backgrounds.

The after-school book club conversations showed the girls as serious and committed readers of literature. They debated the effectiveness of a particular writer, analyzed character motivations and behaviors, and discussed the value and merit of the text. Analysis of the book club transcripts revealed that most girls were also sophisticated readers of the world (Freire, 1987). Appleman (2006) and others (e.g., Moje et al., 2000) acknowledge that students are reading and making sense of the multiple worlds they encounter, inhabit, and navigate on a daily basis. Adolescents continually read social situations, physical environments, spaces, images (e.g., billboard advertisements) and people. As book club participants, the girls explored and questioned the role of race, gender and class, and initiated and sustained conversations that reflected the ways they understood the world and understood other people. Fine and Weis (1998) also identified the ways that the youth challenged public representations of low-income, people of color, and invented new identities based on resiliency. The study's findings support the argument that most youth are capable of social critique (Weis & Carbonell-Medina, 2000).

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Reading as/for Critical Inquiry

The book club discussions reveal that the girls did more than approach the books as though they were bundles of facts and literacy characteristics (e.g., symbols, themes, figurative language). Reading was not simply a matter of extracting knowledge of the text, or even offering textually-grounded interpretations. Rather, the girls "took hold" (Kulick & Stroud, 1993) of the written texts, using the text to better understand the self, each other, and the world. They connected to, reflected on, and critiqued both written texts and the texts of lived realities. Book club participants drew on a range of texts and on each other to explore a range of social issues and questions. I argue that the book club became a site for the girls to experience reading as a form of critical inquiry—that is, reading that enables people to know, believe and see the world differently.

If the girls initiated and sustained talk on critical issues, what was my role in the book club? More broadly, what is the role of the adult in a space that is student-centered and student-led, and to what extent are the critical inquiries student-initiated? How prevalent was adult talk? Analysis of book club transcripts reveals varying degrees of explicit facilitation and question-posing. I often said, "Ok, someone explain to us"; "Why do you think that?"; "What do you mean by that?"; "Any last comments about the book?"; and "People have any other thoughts?" The prevalence and type of adult talk differed across the three book clubs. The Thursday Seventh-Grade group had the most students. It also had the greatest number of student-initiated questions and student-student interactions. The Tuesday Seventh-Grade group had the least students, and the most adult-initiated questions.

Ms. Heather and I did not set an agenda for the book clubs, write discussion questions or impose participation frameworks, allowing the girls to bring *their* interpretations, questions and interests to the group. Describing the structure of the book club, Karen commented, "We get to decide on the questions and we get to answer the question instead of the adult supervising asking

us questions or telling us the answer." I positioned myself as a participant. However, as a researcher I wanted to elicit and understand adolescents' theories of their world. Hence it would be disingenuous to claim that I never raised questions or prompted the girls to inquire into issues of race, class and gender.

The rest of the chapter explores the different ways in which the girls assumed a critical inquiry stance (Fecho, 2000, 20004; Lytle et al., 2010). Inquiry is a stance toward experiences and ideas (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Lytle, 1995): a willingness to wonder and ask questions, to see and understand differently, and to generate knowledge, both individually and collaboratively. Inquiry is also a willingness to interrogate assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of believing, valuing, seeing oneself and the world. According to Horton and Freire (1990), "good" readers understand and approach reading as a form of inquiry. Reading and talking become modes to see and understand the word and world anew, a quest for understanding.

I posit that the girls were readers-inquirers-theorizers of the word and world. Like reading the word, reading the world involves: noticing and gathering evidence, making and revising assumptions, reaching and abandoning initial readings, asking questions of the self and each other, and attempting to make sense of puzzling and uncomfortable moments. Reading and discussing the texts, the girls shared perspectives on race and racism, explored the complexities and possibilities for being a girl, and expressed desire for wanting to help less fortunate people and lead more humane lives. They did not see discussing books and discussing life as mutually exclusive: they were tackling and trying to make sense of the text, self, and world.

"They're Really Racist. They Believe in Stereotypes and Stuff ": The Salience of Race in Girls' Talk

Documenting a racially diverse middle school, Jervis (1996) discovered that students' questions and experience of race were often unaddressed. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), discussions of race and racism are often marginalized. Cochran-Smith acknowledges that race talk can be seen as "unsettling" (2000). Explicit attention to race and racism has been

described as "unleashing unpopular things" (Britzman, 1992). Educators (e.g., hooks, 2003) have

commented on the consequences of addressing issues of race and racism: chaos, confusion, guilt

and resistance.

However, two of the three book clubs openly discussed race. The girls offered different

perspectives on the relevance or irrelevance of race, shared experiences of encountering racism,

and argued that certain books or films lacked people of color. The eight graders expressed

surprise that the film version of *Twilight* portrayed Laurent as Black.

> Date: 1.29.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Veronica, Mary, Sue, Yolanda, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Mary**: I didn't know that he was going to be Black.
>
> **Veronica**: He was Jamaican
>
> **Mary**: He was Jamaican? But in the book it didn't say he would be. It said that vampires were pale and stuff, but then also, it said that vampires that were like not pale. They were a different, from Egypt and stuff. They didn't say he was from Jamaica or something. They didn't say that.

It is not clear whether Laurent was actually supposed to be Jamaican. However, Veronica

assumed that Laurent was Jamaican based on the fact that he had dreadlocks. Mary stated that the

book did not explicitly identify Laurent as Black. She also noticed that none of the characters

were given racial descriptors; instead, the characters were described as "pale" and "not pale."

According to Mary, the "not pale" vampires were Egyptian. Analysis of book club transcripts

reveals that most discussions of race occurred *after* girls visualized book characters or actors. The

transcript below is part of an eighth-grade book club meeting on the novel, *We All Fall Down*. As

can be seen, Veronica was trying to visualize the character, Jane:

> Date: 4.30.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Mary, Yolanda, Inez, Veronica, Sue, Jie
>
> **Veronica**: I want to get the appearances down. I can't imagine both of them. Is Jane tall, middle, shortish?
>
> **JP**: I don't know. What do you guys think?

Veronica: Are they, they're both White.

Reading researchers and teachers (e.g., Beers 2002) have identified a number of different strategies that proficient readers use to access texts: activating prior knowledge, asking questions, determining importance, synthesizing, monitoring for meaning, and visualizing. The girls often shared ways in which they visualized literary characters, offering details on hair and eye color, body type, height, weight and even levels of attractiveness. The girls wanted to "see" the characters and events of the story, and therefore discussed characters' physical features, including skin color. The girls' purpose for visualizing was more than to practice a strategy. Rather, visualizing was one way for the girls to engage a text and exercise imagination.

The Thursday Seventh-Grade group discussed the importance of race. The discussion occurred immediately *after* the girls visualized the protagonists of *The Secret Life of Bees*. The girls imagined the appearances of each protagonist: Lily, Rosaleen, and August, Mary and June, three Black sisters and residents of the Pink House. The seventh graders agreed that it was difficult to imagine the actress Dakota Fanning as Lily. They commented that Lily was supposed to be a brunette, yet Dakota Fanning was blonde. Imagining Rosaleen, Helen said that Rosaleen was "big, like really big." The comment on Rosaleen prompted a discussion on race.

> Date: 12.11.2008
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Clarissa, Eve, Helen, Karen, Katherine, Stephanie,
> Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Karen:** What's really weird is that in the beginning of the book when Rosaleen was living with Lily and T-Ray, I kept for some reason imagining her as White when I remember that she was specifically Black, but when they move in with August, May and June, I keep remembering that Lily is specifically White, not Black [….] I have a hard time imagining separate skin colors with people who are living together.
>
> **Amy**: I felt kind of bad for Lily, because even though skin color is not an important thing, she probably still thought about it a lot because it was a big issue back then. She probably felt out of place a lot of times, and I would have too.
>
> **Clarissa**: Yeah, it's like in that period, it's like skin color was a big thing. But if it was like now, it would be fine. Like, it would be like, "Oh so what?"

Amy: I mean now it wouldn't be a big deal because of skin color, but not all Black people are like this, but like some people, some African American people, they have a different way of living. They talk different, they put their hair different. I would also feel out of place that way.

Helen: Are you done?

Amy: Yeah.

Helen: Ok, I was just going to say, I find it disturbing that racism is still really apparent. People are all like, it's better, but… The other day, my brother was on the trolley, and this group of kids were making fun of him because he's biracial. Oh you don't even know what you are […] It's really weird. My brother was like, I've never been that angry before at people.

Heather did not ask the girls to discuss race as it related to the novel and/or to the girls' lives. That is, the girls both initiated and sustained the discussion. To sustain the conversation and ensure that they were not interrupting, the girls asked each other "Are you done?" The girls' comments on race reflect the complex and contradictory belief that skin-color both matters and does not matter. Amy, a White student, tried to imagine the way Lily might feel living among Black women. She claimed that skin color is not important; yet, she was aware that race can make a person feel like an outsider, and that race influences the ways that a person might relate to a group of people. She claimed, "I would also feel out of place that way." Moreover, Amy challenged, yet also perpetuated generalizations of Black Americans. She stated, "Not all Black people are like this"; and then added, "African American people, they have a different way of living." Karen, also a White student, presented a particular view of a world that is segregated. She stated, "I have a hard time imagining separate skin colors with people who are living together." Karen is speaking to the ways that race has been used to classify and separate people. Clarissa, a White student, echoed Amy and stated that skin color is not important.

Clarissa, Amy, and Karen presented a narrative of racial progress, namely that race is not as salient an issue today as it was during the 1960s. Karen offered the following comment:

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> **Karen:** I thought we had gotten over the race problem years ago when Black and White people actually be able to acknowledge that we are all, we are all capable enough of being equally intelligent and believing that neither of us are superior, I thought we had taken care of all that. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 12.11.08)

There was a tendency to historicize the issue. That is, Amy, Clarissa and Karen tended to see "skin color" as an issue of the past, and not a present-day reality. However, Helen, a biracial seventh grader of Asian and European descent, challenged Amy, Clarissa and Karen. She offered an oppositional story (Goodson, 1995), disputing the narrative of progress and offering a different perspective. Goodson (1995) categorizes stories as either stories of domination or oppositional stories: oppositional stories represent the experiences of traditionally silenced groups or an individual, and give voice to the less powerful. Helen told an oppositional story. Acknowledging that racism still exists, she challenged the dominant view of color-blindness. She was also the first student to name the "issue of skin color" as racism. Drawing on personal experience, or rather, the experience of a family member, she argued that racism still exists.

Katherine, a Black girl, shared the story of taking a family trip to upstate New York. She noticed a pedestrian walking faster, and even running.

> **Katherine**: And there is the White guy, turned to my uncle and looked back at his car, and then my uncle went closer to go to the store that he was going to, and then he [pedestrian] ran into the store, and faster. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 12.11.08)

It is not insignificant that Katherine named the race of the actors involved—that is, the fact that the pedestrian was a "White guy." It was obvious to Katherine that the pedestrian behaved differently once he saw a Black male. Listening to the story, Karen hypothesized that the pedestrian was "probably expecting [the] uncle to any minute to bring out a gun and mug him." Katherine added, "Probably because he [uncle] was just Black." Both Karen and Katherine offered these comments matter-of-factly. Narrating the event, Katherine expressed neither sadness nor anger. Karen and Katherine explored reasons for the White pedestrian's behavior and

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demeanor. They both evoked a prevalent stereotype concerning Black men as dangerous. Karen said people have stereotypes of Black men:

> **Karen:** My grandmother, she sees all people who are in jail at the moment, like especially juvenile delinquents, she actually sees them as like Black men. I don't know why because it could be anybody in there. It just makes me sad that my grandmother thinks that way. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 12.11.08)

Karen expressed complex views on race. She believed that people were "over the race problem years ago." She also believed that anyone can be a juvenile delinquent. Yet she was aware that people viewed Black men as dangerous or criminal. Katherine and Karen suggested that race shapes the way people are perceived.

The girls offered different theories on the relevance of race. For Clarissa and Amy, skin color does not matter. For Helen and Katherine, skin color affects the way people are seen and treated. They articulated the notion that racism exists and race matters. It is significant that Helen and Katherine are girls of color. As girls of color they experienced and understood the world differently. As Bruner (1991) argues, individuals' theories and knowledge of the world are never "point-of-viewless" (p. 3). The book club discussion reveals that each of the girls' realities and identities—as biracial, Black or White—influenced the way they read literary texts. That is, readers' multiple social identities inform the way they experience and understand texts. Therefore even seemingly "personal" readings of and responses to texts reflect readers' historical, cultural and social identities (Dressman, 2004; Sumara, 1996).

I witnessed how the girls of color and biracial girls offered more complex understandings of racial and ethnic identity than the White students. Studying a group of fifth graders reading and discussing *Maniac Magee*, Enciso (1997) reaches a similar conclusion. According to the researcher, the students of color appeared more aware of the implications of racial identification than White students. Helen, a self-identified biracial student, said,

> **Helen**: There's Black people, and there's White people. What happened to everybody else? I guess there weren't as many different cultures as that time as there are now, but I was thinking about, it's not Black and White. People can't smash everything that's not

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Black and White into this gray area. And it's like, no, 'cause there's a difference. And then one other thing. There can be racism within a race. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 12.11.08)

Helen felt that other racial and ethnic groups, as neither Black nor White, became relegated to the "gray area." Saying "There's Black people, and there's White people," Helen was speaking to fact that conversations on race relations have focused on Whites and Blacks as prominent players, and other racial groups as spectators (Hacker, 2003). Interestingly enough, the seventh graders' discussion on race never referred to the experiences of Asians or Latinos. Helen also offered a view of culture as changing and evolving. As a biracial student, Helen felt that the conversations on race should be more expansive to reflect the experiences of *all* people, including Asian and biracial students.

Seventh and eighth graders often used the words, "skin color", to mean race. Understanding skin color and race as synonymous, the girls saw racism as similar to judging and excluding people based on hair color or other observable physical characteristics. During an interview, Mary, a White eighth grader, shared a childhood memory of attending a predominately Black elementary school, and befriending a Black classmate:

Mary: My school. Actually, my old school was basically all African American. It was me and my brother. My family were the only White people. My Mom always reminds me that when I was younger, I had a friend that was African American and her dad had said something to her because I was White. She told me about it one day. My dad doesn't want me to hang out with you because you are White, and I was like, I am not White. I am peach. (Interview, 4.24.09)

Mary also acknowledged that everyone—depending on interactions, relationships, past experiences and family upbringing—takes a different stance on the relevance (or irrelevance) of race. Mary shared that she has friends of all races, Asian, White and Black.

The girls also conflated racism, stereotyping and prejudice. That is, the girls understood racism as individual acts of meanness and prejudice, and not invisible systems conferring power and privileges to a group (McIntosh, 1988). Amy, a White girl, offered an image of a racist.

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Amy: Like um, I know this is not good, but some of my relatives are racist. On my dad's side of the family, they're like, kind of like rednecks, so they don't really get out into the world that much. They're kind of in their own world, where they live, and they don't really know that much about that kind of thing. They're really racist. They believe in stereotypes and stuff. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 12.11.08)

Amy presented a theory on the cause of racism. She hypothesized that racism is the product of ignorance and isolation. Trying to understand the racist rednecks, Amy said, "They [relatives] don't really get out into the world that much." Stating at the outset "I know this is not good," Amy suggested that she is unlike the "other" racist relatives. Amy, Mary and Clarissa referred to the importance of upbringing and environment. Explaining that she does not see color, Mary said "That's how I've grown up." Clarissa shared, "Because some people, their parents are racist so they're racist. But I was raised to be color-blind." The girls' perspectives on race often mirrored parents' beliefs and discourse on race. According to the girls, parents were the primarily responsible for educating children on race. Data from the study suggest that many of the girls had inherited parents' worldviews and scripts for understanding and discussing race.

The Thursday Seventh-Grade book club meeting on *Secret Life of Bees* illustrates the messiness and riskiness of inquiry. The inquiry surfaced the girls and family members' assumptions, values and beliefs, and made public the "texts" of the girls' lived experiences. I learned that the seventh graders discussing race and racism occupied a range of positions, including empathy, resistance, wonderment, curiosity, judgment and confusion. That finding extends and complicates studies that have explored adolescents' understandings of race and racism. For example, Beach (1997) studied the ways that eleventh and twelfth-grade students and college students responded to multicultural texts. The study revealed that students resisted the texts: they failed to show empathy, reacted defensively or uneasily, and avoided discussions of racism. The students were more likely to resist if the texts challenged the status quo of White privilege. Beach presents a way of understanding students' responses as either engagement or resistance. However, more helpful than using a binary classification of students as either engaged

or resistant is to recognize students' multiple positions and perspectives on race and racism. The multiple positions, I argue, better reflect students' different experiences of navigating a racialized society, and students' varied and complex beliefs on race.

Analysis of the Thursday Seventh-Grade meeting on *Secret Life of Bees* also reveals that the girls were engaged, offered perspectives on race and racism, and were willing to understand others' realities and worlds. They told stories of harassment on the trolley; revealed family prejudices; and shared experiences of encountering prejudice and racism. The students' own lives became important "texts" to be shared and discussed. I agree with Kamler (2001) and others (e.g., Kincheloe, 2004) who understand individuals' lived realities as "texts" to be interpreted, interrogated and deconstructed. Kincheloe (2004) recommends that teachers view "students as living texts" to be understood. Christensen (2009) argues that all students—regardless of reading ability, level or skill—have questions, knowledge, and perspectives to share. Drawing on the texts of lived experiences, the girls made race-talk personal. That is, discussions of race and the implications of race were rarely abstract; rather, the girls referred to personal experience to provide particular examples. I argue that the girls' experiences and stories became important "texts" that were read *alongside* the written, literary texts of the book club.

The girls' own racial identities shaped the way they saw themselves and each other. The eighth-grade group was reading Robert Cormier's *We All Fall Down* (1993). Central to the novel is the relationship between two high school students, Buddy and Jane. The novel, and the fact that most the eighth graders had received high school acceptance letters, prompted the girls to share perceptions of high school. Veronica was moving to the suburbs to attend high school. There she worried that she would have to "compete" against other Asian students.

Date: 6.04.2009
Book Club: Eighth Grade
Members present: Mary, Sid, Veronica, Yolanda, Jie

Veronica: Yeah, that's what my Mom says. There's going to be a lot of competition.

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Yolanda: For what?

Mary: How does Chinese people equal competition?

Veronica: Because, I don't know, like. People from China. All the math, they've learned it before.

Mary: Is that why you're good at math?

Veronica: No, I wasn't born in China. I was born here.

Mary: Then technically you're not Chinese.

Veronica: Yeah I am.

Yolanda: You are Chinese American.

Mary: Nuh huh. If you're not born in China, then you're not Chinese.

Yolanda: She's Chinese American, like I am African American.

JP: Then what is she?

Mary: She's American.

Veronica: Do I look American?

Mary: What does "American" look like?

Yolanda: You're Chinese American

Mary: American is when you are born in America. I am just saying, like, like if you are born in America, then you're American. If you're born in China, you're Chinese. Wherever you are born, that's what you are. She's not really Chinese. She wasn't born in China.

The exchange among Veronica, Yolanda and Mary shows the ways in which the girls were positioning themselves and being positioned (e.g., Veronica positioned herself as Chinese and was positioned as "American" and Chinese American); taking up and articulating different ideas of ethnic identity; exploring the intersections of citizenship, ethnicity and belonging; surfacing assumptions and stereotypes about cultural groups (e.g., "Asians are good at math"); questioning taken-for-granted ways of understanding people and the world (e.g., "What does American look like?," "How does Chinese people equal competition?"); and lastly, expressing awareness that people of color get labeled ("I am going to be labeled Chinese"). It is interesting that Veronica, an Asian eighth grader, put forth stereotypical images of Asian students as academically competitive, revealing that even cultural "insiders" can hold and perpetuate stereotypes. The power of stereotypes is such that Asians and Asian Americans begin to internalize the image of

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Asians as competitive. The girls also wondered about who gets considered an insider or outsider, and who gets considered "American." Is it citizenship, skin color, language? The girls' discussion addressed the complex and complicated intersection of ethnicity, national identity and citizenship. Veronica was a U.S. citizen, yet did not identify as American. The girls discussed and adopted hyphenated identities, such as Chinese American or African American.

Yolanda identified and positioned Veronica as Chinese American. Veronica later shared that she prefers the identifier, American Born Chinese (ABC). Why might Veronica use American Born Chinese, and not Chinese American? It could be that Chinese American is a more encompassing, and therefore less specific label. Chinese American can describe individuals born in China yet reared in the United States (i.e., 1.5 generation immigrants). American Born Chinese refers to a particular subset of Chinese Americans: individuals of Chinese decent who are born in the United States. Veronica said that she is Chinese. However, she is also not like the "people from China," suggesting that even within an ethnic group (e.g., Chinese), there exists diversity and differences. Chinese people might differ based on immigrant status, place of residence, primary language used (e.g., Cantonese, Mandarin, English), religion, education level, and social class. Helen problematized a Pan-Asian identity, thereby presenting a sophisticated understanding of race, ethnicity and culture. She commented,

> **Helen:** My brother works at this Japanese restaurant that's owned by Korean people, and they, the Korean people who work there, will make fun of him because he's Japanese, and he found that like Chinese people don't like Korean people. But they're generalized in one thing. (Transcript, 12.11.08)

Helen challenged the tendency to group all Asians together, and suggested that among Asians and Asian Americans, there are divisions and hostilities based on histories of war and colonialism. The Pan-Asian identity served to mobilize different ethnic groups and create a collective identity based on shared contemporary experiences due to race (Takaki, 1989). Lowe, however, warns

against the tendency to obscure the "particularities and incommensurabilites of class, gender and national diversities" (1996, p.63) that characterize Asians and Asian Americans.

Race, according to Veronica and other girls of color, shape the way they perceive each other, and the way they are perceived. The girls openly acknowledged and saw people as raced. Consider a few of the nicknames for the eighth-grade girls. Veronica had multiple nicknames including Lil' Eyes, Sushi, Chopsticks and Flapjack. She said that Flapjack referred to the fact that she was "yellow." Carol, a Black eighth grader, was known as Brown Cow. According to the girls, no one takes offense at these nicknames.

> Date: 6.4.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Mary, Sid, Veronica, Yolanda, Jie
>
> **JP**: Were you offended by that?
>
> **Veronica**: No, no, no.
>
> **Mary**: Nobody's offended by it.
>
> **Veronica**: We identified on our own that that's going to be our name. But then they started calling me Sushi.
>
> **Mary**: Nobody gets offended by it because it's not mean or anything
>
> **Veronica**: We don't mean to be insulting. It's just like our codename in school. It's funny.

It is interesting that students both give themselves and are given these nicknames. Dance (2002) argues that such racialized nicknames and metaphors (e.g., Twinkie, Oreo, Banana, Lil' Eyes) reflect the tendency to code people based on color and thereby reify racial stereotypes. Rather than see the girls as reifying racial stereotypes, I understood the practice of giving the self and others racialized nicknames as one instantiation of the "reality of a racialized society" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48).

Race was more than a subject for intellectual debate or discussion. Race was lived and experienced. The girls existed within and navigated a racialized society. Race talk also occurred, often surreptitiously and beyond the gaze of the teacher. It occurred inside school, before and

after literacy class, as students entered the classroom or prepared to leave the classroom. Race

became a salient issue as the eighth graders discussed the high schools they would be attending.

The excerpt below is taken during the first three minutes of the eighth grade literacy class:

> The eighth graders enter the classroom, sharing latest updates on high school acceptance letters. A few students have received multiple acceptances, and others have yet to hear any news. There is an air of excitement, energy and anxiety. The students appear conversant and knowledgeable, discussing various options (e.g., private, magnet and charter schools). A group of four boys enter the classroom. Heather is at the whiteboard. The boys seem to know already that Elite High—the most selective high school—had accepted Jonah, the son of African immigrants. Mark expressed disbelief that Jonah was accepted to Elite. He said that he was going to attend Creative Arts High, a school for performing and fine arts. Christian, a Black student, responded that Jonah was accepted based on the fact that he is foreign and "African." Mark added that Elite does not need anymore White kids or Asians. Heather turns to address the class. Most students are ready for class. The boys stop talking.

> [Personal Note: Is Christian implying that Jonah had been accepted as a diversity case, and not based on individual merit and accomplishments? I wonder how Mark arrived at the conclusion that Elite High does not need or want more White or Asian students. It is probably true that White and Asian students are overrepresented at Elite. Heather was not aware of or privy to the boys' conversation. However, how could educators foreground and present these issues as part of the curriculum?] (Fieldnotes, 4.13.09)

Veronica was planning to attend a suburban public high school; yet she and others wanted to

attend Elite High. She said, "That's really hard to get into, and they have enough Asians, so they

don't accept you even if you have high scores." Data from the study suggest that 12 to 14 year-

old girls are aware of and develop theories on the role of race as it influences life options, such as

the high school one will attend.

"Because Flirting Is Fun, and Guys Are Clueless": Navigating the Complex Terrain of

Adolescent Girlhood

Heath and McLaughlin's study (1993) on inner-city youth and effective community

organizations suggests that adolescents develop their own theories about the role of race, ethnicity

and gender in their daily lives. Analysis of data from the study suggests that gender—specifically

the different and often contradictory ways of being a girl/woman and of relating to boys/men—

was an area of particular interest to the book club members.

The Thursday Seventh-Grade group was reading a young adult novel, *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). It was not unusual for the girls to use part of the book club meeting to read aloud parts of the text. Reading aloud was one way to ensure that all participants had a "shared" text to refer to and draw on during the discussion. That is, it was a strategy that allowed everyone, even if they had not finished the novel or had less knowledge of the plot, to contribute to the conversation. Throughout the study, all three book clubs read aloud at least once. The Thursday Seventh-Grade group decided to read aloud one chapter, "A night to remember." Amy read the chapter. The girls debated whether Melinda thought the word, "no" or actually said, "no" to Andy during the rape. Katherine posed a question to the group: "What would you do if you were in the same place as [Melinda]?" The question generated the conversation reproduced below:

> Date: 2.19.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Clarissa, Caitlin, Eve, Helen, Katherine, Karen, Molly,
> Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Amy**: I wouldn't let that boy go near me.
>
> **Helen**: I guess she was drunk.
>
> **Stephanie**: I don't understand. Like, it said like the beer was worse than cough medicine. I don't understand why she would like keep on drinking it.
>
> **Molly**: Yeah, to Katherine's question, I don't think I can go through that cause I would take better care of myself.
>
> **Stephanie**: Yeah, definitely.
>
> **Molly**: Yeah.
>
> **Karen**: If, for some reason, I was ever in that situation, as soon as he would ask that question, no matter if I knew what he was talking about or not, I would have kneed him right in that area.
>
> **Clarissa**: But her brain wasn't really working.
>
> **Eve**: But I think, it's, we try to say what we would do in that position. As much as we can say, "This is what I would do." I think that that's probably not what we would do in the end. It's so hard. I don't know. I've never, (**Clarissa**: obviously). But it's got to be so hard. She stops speaking, so it obviously is saying that she's, it's not as easy as we can make it sound like.

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The girls attributed responsibility to Melinda, citing that she was drunk. They also positioned themselves as "good" girls, articulating the expectation that girls/women should take better care themselves to avoid sexual violence. Many of the girls claimed that they would have behaved and acted differently than Melinda. Helen later added that she would not attend a barn party "in the middle of nowhere." The girls also would not drink, nor would they go near Andy.

Karen claimed that she would have kneed Andy. Helen expressed admiration and respect for Melinda for "fighting back" (Transcript, 3.05.09). Studying a sexual education program at an urban magnet high school, and analyzing the discourses of school-based sex education curricula and classes, Weis and Carbonell-Medina (2000) argue that girls/women are often positioned as victims, and are taught to avoid provoking males. Many of the girls in the study, however, did not see themselves as passive victims to men. They saw themselves as more agentive and empowered. Caitlin later challenged the tendency to place responsibility entirely on women. She stated, "All the pressure is put on girls. I hate that. We have to worry about everything." She suggested that girls should be able to attend a party and not worry that they might get sexually abused.

The discussion reflects girls' belief in taking care of themselves, and their belief in self-determination and assertiveness—that is, the belief that girls are in charge of their own bodies and lives. The girls also tried to understand character's motivations and decisions. They wondered about the factors that prompted Melinda to attend a barn party. Amy was more understanding of Melinda. She suggested that Melinda saw the party as an opportunity to become popular. Helen challenged the girls, "You all want to go to a barn party so that you can be popular? You want to go to parties and drink?" (Seventh Grade, Transcript, 3.05.09). The girls blamed the men for inflicting violence on women. However, they also commented that women are responsible. The girls articulated contradictory and conflicting beliefs. That is, women and girls are both responsible and not responsible for sexual violence. Eve urged other girls to take a stance of

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empathy. She challenged the book club members' claim that they would defend themselves against rape. Eve reminded the girls that they should not reach quick and easy conclusions and render judgment on Melinda, given that none of the girls experienced such violence. Yet she disapproved of women and girls wearing revealing clothes.

> Date: 3.5.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Clarissa, Caitlin, Eve, Helen, Katherine, Karen, Molly, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Eve**: And you dress like that on purpose, then it's your fault.
> **Helen**: Then you had it coming.

The girls saw and positioned Melinda as a "regular" 13-year old. They hypothesized that she was wearing jeans and a regular t-shirt, "not even that tight." They also positioned Melinda as naïve and unaware. Eve said, "I don't think she realized what was going on." Therefore, Melinda should not be held responsible for the rape even if she did drink.

Analysis of the book club transcripts on *Speak* revealed the complex and oftentimes contradictory ways that girls understood and talked about gender roles and femininity—i.e., ways of being a girl/woman, options available to girls/women, and ways of relating to boys. Members of the Thursday Seventh-Grade group believed that girls should be both assertive and modest. They believed that girls should not go near boys, yet be flirtatious. They desired to be popular, yet were aware of the risks of attending parties. They can look cute, yet should avoid wearing revealing clothes. The girls knew that they were worthy, valuable, and full of potential, rejecting the belief that girls should work for boys' affirmation. Yet the girls admitted that they enjoyed boys' attention. Amy confessed, "It feels good when he tells me I am pretty, and it feels good when he says, 'you're really fun to be around'" (Transcript, 5.21.09).

The girls' complex gender beliefs and attitudes were transmitted and reinforced through texts. Reading and discussing *Dateable*, the seventh graders explored the role of girls as flirts and the value of flirting:

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Date: 6.11.2009
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
Members present: Stephanie, Molly, Casey, Katherine, Caitlin, Amy, Jie

Stephanie: Molly, you need to learn how to, like, how to tell a guy you like them or you're interested in them. I just think it's so important for you to learn. 'Cause I really sucked at flirting and I still do. I'm just getting better than I was.

Molly: But if you really like a guy, then why can't you just show your true feelings, why do you have to flirt?

Stephanie: Because flirting is fun, and guys are clueless?

Amy: It makes guys like you more when you flirt. I am really good at telling when guys like me.

Casey: Amy, you're good with guys

Caitlin: I know, right?

Casey: You're like the professional over here.

The girls saw flirting as fun and playful, as a way of controlling boys. The girls continued to read and discuss *Dateable*. During the month of May, the girls revisited the potential benefits and dangers of honestly revealing romantic feelings for another person.

Date: 5.21.2009
Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
Members present: Amy, Helen, Molly, Stephanie, Casey, Ms. Heather, Jie

Molly: I think they can take advantage of that 'cause like I went through that, and like the person did take advantage of that. Boys, they just tell like, if you tell them you like them, they'll just tell everybody else. That's what they're like.

Amy: I think it's good to tell them that you like them. It's like, if you don't put yourself out there, then they're never going to know and nothing ever happens and you're just wasting your time.

Feminists may argue that the girls are performing the traditional gendered and heteronormative script of girls/women seeking the attention of boys/men (Christian-Smith, 1990; McRobbie, 1991). However, I understood these conversations as examples of girls encountering, trying on, and questioning the available scripts for girls. Stephanie and Amy encouraged Molly to adopt a different script—one that positions Molly as more assertive and expressive. Amy urged Molly to

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take action rather than wait for boys. Stephanie also presented flirting as a skill that can be learned and practiced, and less as an innate ability, thereby suggesting that femininity is performative. According to Cameron (1998), girls learn to display and perform femininity as they navigate a range of contexts and relationships. Understanding femininity as performative means acknowledging that girls might perform an identity that is context-specific, and based on how she perceives herself and is perceived by others (Crawford & Unger, 2003).

Members of the Thursday Seventh-Grade group agreed that *Dateable* was enjoyable and informative. Even Lauren, a member of the Tuesday Seventh-Grade group, was reading the book. However, the girls also critiqued the authors' perspectives on dating and gender roles, and questioned the use-value of advice books.

> Date: 5.21.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Helen, Molly, Stephanie, Casey, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Stephanie**: But just like one part in the book kind of upset me a little bit. I am sorry, Amy. It says, yeah, it was talking about the butterfly feeling. I don't necessarily believe that it's love.
>
> **Helen**: Yeah, I don't, like, some advice books. I think, they shouldn't, it is sort of your experience to find on your own. You shouldn't have it explained for you cause you learn more going through.
>
> **Casey:** Yeah, and there are no exact answers.

The girls offered a theory of learning, advocating for learning that is experiential and active. People do not learn reading or memorizing a book, or following advice. To learn people must participate and take action. Helen said, "You shouldn't have it explained for you 'cause you learn more going through." It is also interesting that Stephanie apologized to Amy. Considering that Amy had recommended *Dateable*, Stephanie did not want to criticize the book, and thereby possibly offend Amy. The conversation illustrates the girls' ability to critique the genre of self-help books, and recognize the limitations of advice books. Casey said, "There are no exact answers," suggesting that there is no manual that can prepare individuals for the complexities of

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life, such as human relationships. The girls knew that texts do not contain absolute and irrefutable truths. They raised questions about who wrote the text, for whom the text is intended, and whose perspectives and experiences are represented. Reading *Dateable*, Helen asked "Is this written by a guy?" Rather than viewing the authors as experts, the girls saw the authors as presenting one of many views on dating and relationships.

The girls were critical "readers" of boys and of gender norms and rules. The conversation reproduced below illustrates the ways that girls read, questioned, and critiqued different gender rules for girls and boys:

> Date: 1.27.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Casey, Jessica, Lauren, Rebecca, Jie
>
> **Lauren**: That's what I hate. Because my brother. I have a nephew. So my nephew is 8 and my brother is always like, "Oh he can have a girlfriend." I am like, "Ok."
>
> **Rebecca**: I know
>
> **Lauren**: And I can't have a boyfriend. I said, I am 13. He's like 5.
>
> **Rebecca**: I know
>
> **Lauren**: How can he have a girlfriend? That's not even cool. That's so sexist.
>
> **Rebecca**: But then it's like. That don't make sense because then you are leading your son off to somebody else's daughter.

Claiming that she is 13, Lauren seemed to suggest that age, and not gender alone, should determine whether one can date. She argues that she is held to a different standard than boys, and that is sexist. Lauren challenged the tendency to apply different standards for judging girls and boys, problematizing the commonplace belief that 'boys will be boys.' Initially Lauren said that her nephew is 8, and then later said, "He's like 5." Lauren made an intentional rhetorical move to emphasize the absurdity of the double standard. She is 13, yet she cannot have a boyfriend. The nephew can have a girlfriend, however. During the conversation, Rebecca supported Lauren. Rebecca repeated, "I know." Rebecca also suggested that how parents rear and educate their sons

have implications for the lives of girls/women. Parents, according to Rebecca, should remember that boys/men interact and form relationships *with* girls/women.

Several girls described parents and older brothers as overprotective. The ways that girls and girls' bodies are (over)protected was a salient theme that resonated across all three book clubs. The seventh graders discussed how the female body and bodily functions were seen as grotesque. The girls shared that they were made to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed for menstruating. Stephanie said, "I hate it when people are like, 'Ewwww. You got your period.'" Katherine commented, "Everyone's like, 'Oh my God. She got her period.'" Given the emphasis on girls' bodies, it is not surprising that many of the girls experienced pressure to look attractive. Pipher (1994) argues that adolescent girls must survive a "girl-poisoning culture" (p. 12). According to Pipher, many girls develop eating disorders (e.g., anorexia, bulimia) and have unhealthy body images. Pipher has been criticized (see O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Shandler, 1999 for critiques), mainly for failing to capture how adolescent girls question and resist societal expectations to look, speak and behave a certain way. That is, not all girls are powerless to the pressure to be thin and beautiful; and not all girls have unhealthy body images or low self-esteem.

Members of the Tuesday Seventh-Grade group simultaneously accepted and critiqued the prevalent message that girls need to be thin. The girls dieted, yet rejected the notion that they should look like Barbie dolls. Lauren was a tall and thin Black seventh grader. She was strikingly beautiful: she had shoulder-length hair that was worn straight, and an easy, wide smile. She often accessorized the school uniform, wearing designer-label shoes and jewelry. She aspired to become a fashion designer, and admitted that people have suggested that she pursue modeling. Lauren brought to book club a copy of the song lyric, *Stupid Girls*. Lauren first described the song as relating to the "different, like the girls in the world, and the image they project for

younger girls, and like Barbie and all that stuff." Introducing the actual lyrics to the song, Lauren

said:

> Date: 10.07.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Tuesday
> Members present: Casey, Debbie, Jessica, Lauren, Rebecca, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Lauren**: It's called *Stupid Girls*. It's by Pink, and it's about, basically about the theory about what a girl should be, and just like, how she has to be artificial and kind of like a Barbie doll.
>
> **Casey**: (laughs) Out of proportion Barbie Doll.
>
> **Lauren:** Yeah. And like, but Pink was saying that's the total opposite of that. She likes to play football, she likes to play sports. There should be a fair chance. There shouldn't be a stereotype that girls should be like a certain way.

Lauren offered the song lyrics to the book club, thereby transforming a product of popular culture

(e.g., film, song, etc.) into a resource. Enciso (1997) argues that a cultural product becomes a

cultural resource if it enables the reader, listener or user to explore, interrogate and gain deeper

understanding of the world. Across the three book clubs, participants integrated and interwove

literary texts, movies, songs, and personal stories. Many of the book club discussions resembled a

tapestry of texts. Much of the middle schoolers' talk was deeply inter-textual. They drew on

songs or films to make sense of a literary text or life experiences. Lauren used a song and object

(Barbie Doll) to explore and critique societal standards for feminine beauty.

Lauren saw *Stupid Girls* as trying to deconstruct gender stereotypes and advocate for

equal opportunities for men and women. She claimed that there should be a "fair chance" for

women to pursue different life options (e.g., playing football) and lead positive lives. There are

many ways that girls can exist and live; and stereotypes, according to Lauren, limit girls' choices

and potentials. Lauren also showed a certain awareness that gender issues affect girls/women of

the world. She implied that women have a responsibility to project healthy and positive images

for the younger girls. Describing the song, Lauren said, "And the image *they* project for younger

girls" (emphasis added). 'They' can refer to the media or society-at-large. It can also refer to

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older women and other girls, suggesting that women/girls are responsible for caring and supporting one another.

It is also interesting that Lauren referred to Barbie. The song, *Stupid Girls,* actually does not mention Barbie at all. The insertion of Barbie signals the ways that Lauren was re-writing the song lyric and creating a new text. Lauren saw Barbie as a cultural product that represents and reinforces societal standards for feminine beauty. Casey critiqued the ways that a Barbie doll is "out-of-proportion." Hence, Casey knew that Barbie dolls have an unreal and unhealthy body. Through critique of Barbie, the girls took a product and transformed it into a valuable resource. However, the girls were not oblivious or immune to the message that girls need to be thin and beautiful. Several girls worked to reconcile the contradiction that it is unrealistic and unhealthy to look like Barbie, yet desirable to be thin. Casey critiqued Barbie yet joined Weight Watchers. She carried a small notebook and recorded the number of calories consumed daily. She also refused the book club snacks. Casey was not alone. Other girls often read the nutritional information on the back of snack boxes and packages, commenting on the number of calories or fiber content. Veronica was on a diet. Stephanie discussed the importance of being "mindful" of food. Stephanie also preferred photocopies of the books, saying that it was easier to take to the gym. The girls responded differently to the pressure to look attractive.

The girls used the space of the after-school book club to understand the ways that they would respond to rape, to urge other girls to be more flirtatious, to laugh at "clueless" boys, to express curiosity and ambivalence toward dating and boys, and to critique the double-standard that exists for boys and girls. They explored the challenges of and potential for being a girl, and interrogated the perception and treatment of girls/women. The girls had to reconcile the fact that they simultaneously accepted and questioned socially constructed and appropriate ways of being female.

"Some Kids Can Be Really Smart and Nice To Other People": Deconstructing Stereotypes

of Adolescence and Adolescents

The girls also challenged the representations of youth and adolescents as reckless, irresponsible and immature. The seventh graders' discussion on *Speak* focused primarily on the rape of Melinda, and on high school life and cliques. Stephanie challenged the way that the novel represented and positioned teenagers. She referred to the "stereotypical teenager."

> **Stephanie**: Um, that's the part that really annoyed me. At least the stereotypical teenagers that are in books or TV shows and stuff. Like they're like stuck up, and irresponsible, just like rude. And they don't care about anyone besides themselves. That really made me angry. Not that the book was bad, but that the teenagers in the book were really terrible. (Tuesday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 3.5.09)

Given that she had recommended *Speak* to the book club, Stephanie made sure to include the comment, "Not that the book was bad." The girls generally agreed that novel was interesting and powerful. Stephanie was able to offer a compelling critique of the novel, however. She offered an emotional response to the text and its representation of teenagers ("That made me really angry"); critiqued other books, television shows and the media for depicting adolescents as selfish and uncaring; and expressed disbelief and confusion that teenagers could be so callous and cruel.

Adolescents are often seen as a problem (Lesko, 2001). The troubled, angst-ridden, rebellious and emotionally volatile adolescent appears as part of movies, fiction, public discourse and even educational programs. Yolanda referred to the negative public perception of adolescents. She shared the following

> **Yolanda**: I guess that sometimes people think that 13-year olds are mean, violent and vicious. They can't always just think that they know everything about kids, just because a certain group of them. Like some kids can be really smart and nice to other people instead of just mean and stuff. (Interview, 12.15.08)

According to Yolanda, an adult cannot possibly know every adolescent, and therefore should not judge an entire group of people. Such generalizations and stereotypes can obscure the fact that adolescents are empathetic, hopeful, and ethical beings (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Yolanda would agree. She said that thirteen-year olds can be and are "really smart and nice" to others.

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Given the opportunity, adolescents have a great deal to say and offer to adults. Katherine, a seventh grader and Yolanda's younger sister, said,

> **Katherine**: I think that adults, they'll probably think children, little girls don't really have that many things to say about books, and they probably won't share that many things cause they're little, they don't really know anything, like we were talking about race one time. (Interview, 6.10.09)

It is interesting that she used the phrases "children" and "little girls." Labels like "children" or "little girls" minimize the intellect of adolescents, and position adolescents as less-than-adults. Katherine challenged adults' (mis)perception of middle school students as mindless, immature or self-centered.

The young adult novel *Speak* generated conversations on the pressures and responsibilities of being a girl, and revealed the girls' desires for and ambivalence toward boys and dating. It also prompted the girls to reconsider how they might be treating other people. Reading *Speak*, Amy learned,

> **Amy**: Like I've never been an outsider, and it was good to see it from another perspective, and be like more caring, and um, like I realize that some of the things that I do might hurt other people, so I've tried to stop doing that as much. (Interview, 5.18.09)

According to Amy, she has always been and is an "insider." The experience of reading the novel did not eliminate cliques or the social hierarchy that defined the girls' status at Harmony. That is, certain girls continued to be seen as insiders or outsiders. However, Amy realized that she could be hurting classmates, and vowed to be more caring and sympathetic. Amy imagined existing as a social outcast, as a high school girl raped at a party, or as a homeless person. She realized that she should be different toward other people—less petty and more caring. Rather than appear indifferent to or callous toward other girls' feelings, Amy revealed the desire and struggle to be a better person—more compassionate, generous and empathetic.

Stephanie wrote, "Through book club, I realized that there were many other perspectives besides my own, and how important it was to consider them when making my seemingly not-so-

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important decisions" (student writing). Stephanie realized that even the "not-so-important" decisions can significantly affect other people. She suggested that she is learning to take seriously other perspectives. Adolescents are capable of considering and valuing the lives of others. Probst (2000) argues that the adolescent reader is focused on the self. The girls, however, understood the self *in relation* to others. They grappled with the principles of human duty and responsibility, and explored the possibilities and challenges of being more caring and generous toward others. They also realized that each person might react differently to the same situation and arrive at different judgments. The next section focuses on the girls' exploration of homelessness, poverty and class privilege.

"When I See That Kind of Stuff, I Feel Like Ashamed That I Can't Do Anything":
Exploring Issues of Homelessness, Poverty, and Privilege

All three book clubs read *The Soloist*, a non-fictional account of the friendship between a reporter and homeless musician. The book naturally generated conversations on homelessness and homeless people. The three book clubs wondered about the causes of homelessness. Initially, many of the girls assumed that the homeless were addicted to drugs or alcohol, or lazy.

> **Rebecca**: I feel like, sometimes I don't feel bad for homeless people because, it's like, they put theirself (sic) in their own situation. If they would have, I don't know. Some people may be homeless because, maybe, they couldn't find a job after they got out of high school. Why didn't they make it their job to do good in high school and try to go to college or try to get good grades and become successful. A lot of people here, they're just wasting their time. I know, well, a lot of boys here who I already can see going to a neighborhood high school. They're not getting into a really good high school. (Tuesday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 3.31. 09)

Rebecca was not the only student to articulate the myth of meritocracy, namely the belief that there are ample opportunities for social and economic advancement, and that *everyone* can succeed if he or she tried hard enough. Karen declared that homeless people need to "help themselves. They need to pick themselves up." Rebecca also articulated the importance of education. That is, the more educated one is, the more likely that the person will become

successful. Similarly, Molly, a seventh grader, would see a homeless person holding a newspaper and wonder, "Maybe they didn't do so good in school, and maybe they regret it."

Molly, Rebecca and Karen saw success as the product of individual motivation and diligence, and failure as the absence of those characteristics. According to Rebecca, she can already identify male students destined to attend neighborhood high schools. Many of the girls believed that education leads to social and economic advancement. Hence, the importance of literacy and schooling became salient themes throughout the girls' discussion on homelessness and poverty. Rebecca, the daughter of a hair-stylist, did not believe that "class position is destiny" (Langston, 2006, p. 122). That is, she was going to attend a "good" high school and college, and become successful. Caitlin said,

> **Caitlin**: My Mom always taught me to stay in high school and stuff, and like, don't drop out when I can. If you drop out or something, like I don't know if I told this to any of you guys, but 7th grade is like my life. It controls my future, because 7th grade helps you get into a good high school, and high school helps you get into a good college. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Thursday, 4.23.09)

Caitlin and Rebecca challenged the view of adolescents as present-oriented and irresponsible. Discussing the way that seventh grade can shape college and career options, the girls demonstrated that they are strategic and future-oriented, envisioning a pathway that could bring success. That is not to suggest that the girls were grade-obsessed, or "playing the game of school." Given the school district and its high school admissions system, it was reality that seventh grade was an important year. Seventh-grade performance largely determined if the girls would attend a neighborhood school or a selective high school. The girls were also perceptive enough to know that high school could either limit or expand options for college.

Seeing poverty and homelessness as the result of individual deficiencies obscures larger, structural, systematic inequities. None of the girls acknowledged that homelessness was due to social and economic problems. However, Jessica questioned the common assumption of homeless people as ignorant or uneducated. She offered the theory that a homeless person might have lost a

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business: "All the money was invested in the business and it just went away" (Tuesday Seventh

Grade, Transcript, 2.24.09). Several girls referred to adults' views on the cause of homelessness.

The adults adopted the discourse of meritocracy, and introduced the girls to the idea that laziness

is the cause of homelessness. Carol, an eighth grader, shared:

> **Carol:** My stepdad is like, if they, um. He kind of phrases it, if they have all this time to
> sitting there, they could be getting a job, getting their life together, kind of. But
> sometimes it's not that situation. (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 3.12.09)

She challenged the perspective that homeless people do not take initiative to seek employment

and simply "sit there." She claimed, "But sometimes, it's not that situation." Many of the girls

were mature and thoughtful enough to realize that not every homeless person is lazy and

irresponsible. Rather than taking homelessness as a taken-for-granted reality, the girls seriously

questioned the causes of homelessness. The exchange among Veronica, Mary and Yolanda

occurred at an eighth-grade book club session:

> Date: 3.12.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Carol, Mary, Veronica, Sue, Yolanda, Jie

> **Veronica:** How did they become homeless?
> **Mary**: Yeah.
> **Yolanda**: Money. They lose money or lose their job.
> **Veronica**: Yeah, but then, but suddenly, just one day, they just go on the streets and sit
> there? They start living there?

Homelessness is often attributed to the loss of money or employment. Veronica was not satisfied,

however. She wondered whether and how people suddenly start living on the street. She seemed

to want to understand the process—how people become homeless, and whether people have

options and resources other than living on the streets.

The girls posed other difficult questions. These questions often did not have easy

answers, and surfaced the girls' assumptions, values and beliefs.

Veronica: I have a question. If you were like walking with your, uh, friends and you saw this homeless guy or girl getting beat up, would you try to stop the fight?

Carol: I would call the police, and throw something and run.

Mary: Carol, that doesn't make sense.

Carol: I would. I would throw a rock. I would call the cops, then throw something, and then run.

Veronica: What if it's a gang and just you?

Carol: Still throw something.

Mary: What if they go after you?

Carol: Then throw something and then run.

Yolanda: What if they saw you?

Carol: No, I would hide. They wouldn't see me. I would call the cops. (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 3.12.09)

According to Bruner (1986), literature presents dilemmas and hypothetical situations. Reading *The Soloist,* Veronica introduced a specific scenario that involved violence against a homeless person. Reading *Speak,* Katherine posed the hypothetical situation of being raped at a party. I saw the girls as problem-posers and solvers (Freire, 1981). The eighth graders explored the implications and consequences for different actions, such as throwing a rock or calling a police officer. For students to discuss and contemplate the range of options for action, they must consider a specific action rather than rely on generalities or abstraction (Edmiston, 1998). Mary, Veronica and Yolanda added details to complicate the scenario, such as the fact that the perpetrators are a gang. Carol was adamant that she would call the police and run, rather than simply be a bystander and ignore the situation. Mary shared that she would less likely defend a stranger than a friend or classmate. The girls acknowledged that it is difficult to take action even if they want to and even if they believe it to be right. They also admitted that it would be difficult for people to sacrifice personal safety to defend another person.

Veronica and Mary suggested that people might decide not to intervene and protect a homeless person based on fear or unwillingness to sacrifice personal safety. According to the

girls, they also did not know the best way to approach and engage homeless individuals. It is often difficult to implement good intentions, and act on the desire to help people. Mary shared, "I've seen homeless people talking to the wall. But I don't know what to do. I don't know. Do I go up to them? What do I do? So I don't do anything" (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 3.12.09). Several minutes had passed, and Mary offered a similar comment.

> **Mary:** I always, when I see that kind stuff, I like, I feel like ashamed that I can't do anything.
>
> **JP**: What do you mean?
>
> **Veronica:** Yeah, I just, I tend to try to stay away
>
> **Mary:** Cause like, I don't, usually I just walk away, but I feel ashamed because I want to do something (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 3.12.09)

Mary repeated that she was ashamed for walking away. Later she said again, "So I want to help, but I don't know how" (Transcript, 3.12.09). Mary delivered these comments one after another, telling and retelling the other book club members that she felt ashamed for not helping the homeless. A number of seventh and eighth graders said that they wanted to help. However, uncertain as to whether and how to help the girls usually chose to walk away.

Even if girls did not arrive at the best way to approach and help homeless people, they interrogated prior assumptions and beliefs concerning homelessness. They began to see homeless people differently, recognizing the humanity of homeless men and women. Amy had visited a shelter for women as she was reading *The Soloist*.

> Date: 4.23.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Caitlin, Molly, Stephanie, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Amy:** Yeah, I was, there was a period of time when, a couple of weeks ago, I was thinking about homeless people a lot. I was reading *The Soloist*, and my dad, me and Haley [younger sister] were volunteering at a women's shelter.
>
> **JP:** What was that experience like Amy?
>
> **Amy:** Well, I learned that they're not that weird. Well, some of them are, but they're mostly normal. They just, like, got into some trouble. Like they were some that, some are stinky. Some have teeth missing, but most of them were chilling.

JP: Did you talk to them? What did you do there?

Amy: Not really. I wasn't really sure how to interact with them, so I didn't. I helped my dad do stuff around the place, like. We helped set up a bed, but we didn't do much. Well I didn't. Haley helped serve dinner.

Reading the novel and visiting the shelter, Amy realized that people become homeless for a range of reasons, including mental disabilities and difficult situations. Observing homeless women, she learned that not everyone is on drugs or uneducated. She said that they were mostly normal and "chilling." She reminded the group that they should not generalize all homeless people. The girls should not assume that homeless people choose to be on the streets or are on drugs. Amy was "reading" the homeless women as she was reading *The Soloist*. I argue that the word-world was informing each other, and deepening the way Amy understood both. *The Soloist* informed the way she "read" the homeless women and shelter; and observations of the homeless women informed the way she read *The Soloist*. It is interesting that Amy minimized the actual "help" she provided. She said that she did not do much. Mary and Amy belonged to different book clubs: Mary was an eighth grader, and Amy was a seventh grader. Yet they echoed one another and offered almost identical statements. Amy also admitted, "I wasn't really sure how to interact with them." Drawing on *The Soloist* and on book club conversations, Amy was able to see homelessness and homeless people differently, recognizing the inherent complexity of the lives and stories of homeless women.

Heather was present for the seventh graders' discussion of *The Soloist*. Amy had shared, "I wasn't sure how to interact with them." Building on that particular comment, Heather shared a similar ethical quandary.

Ms. Heather: I am at Ritz Square [an affluent area of the city], and approached by a homeless person. Sometimes I wonder, should I go get them a hot dog, are they hungry? You know, I don't want to give them money because I don't want to have them go and get alcohol because, you know. So, I really, I wonder about that too. I want to have a role here. I want to do something. Um, it's one of those things, as an adult, you grapple with the idea. Amy, what you said was poignant. I wasn't quite sure what to say or how to interact. Even as an adult, I know that for myself, I want to do the right thing, but

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sometime wouldn't know what that would be. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 4.23.09)

It is interesting that Heather repeated that she is an adult. Heather used words like "wonder" and "grapple" to signal that even adults experience moments of unease and uncertainty around homeless people. She made visible the fact that adults struggle to make decisions. That is, she is not the expert or authority. She said that it is often difficult to decide on the actions one should take. She admitted: "I was not quite sure what to say or how to interact." She was not indifferent, however. She wanted to help the homeless and take responsibility: she stated, "I want to have a role here." Heather revealed the ways that she was thinking *through* a complicated issue, suggesting that taking the "right" action is never straightforward or easy. Heather and the girls were pursuing an exploration of ethics.

Edmiston (1998) argues that the purpose of discussing ethics is not to arrive at the "right" way to approach an issue. A discussion of ethics also does not aim to correct students' viewpoints or lecture students on the "right" way to address a situation (Edmiston, 1998). The girls explored and complicated the boundaries separating right and wrong, good and bad. Having read *The Soloist*, the eighth graders debated whether they would ever steal food if they were homeless.

Date: 4.30.2009
Book Club: Eighth Grade,
Members present: Inez, Mary, Sue, Veronica, Yolanda, Jie

Inez: That's stealing.

JP: But if you weren't going to get caught for it, would you d do it?

Inez: I wouldn't do it.

Mary: No, I wouldn't do it.

Sue: I would do it. Especially think, if you had like a little sibling that you actually liked (girls laughing). Yeah if you were both hungry, and you wanted food and you needed food.

Mary: But still, there's like. There's better ways to get money or to just get food.

Yolanda: Like how?

Sue declared that she would consider stealing food. Inez and Mary were categorically opposed to stealing, claiming that theft was wrong. Sue complicated the case, adding that the girls would be stealing food for a younger sibling, and that both were hungry. As ethical beings, the girls explored and made sense of—individually and collectively—the complexities that undergird individuals' decisions and actions.

The seventh-grade girls complicated seemingly easy solutions to homelessness, such as directing homeless people to shelters. Stephanie claimed that homeless shelters are overcrowded and often unable to accommodate everyone. She drew on the movie *Pursuit of Happyness* for support:

> **Stephanie:** And also, with these homeless shelters with these beds and stuff, that's good, but you know, I saw the *Pursuit of Happyness*, I saw that movie. And like, the homeless shelters, they have to wait in lines all day and when they get in, only a quarter of the people get in. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 3.19.09)

A month after Stephanie referred to *Pursuit of Happyness*, Caitlin also mentioned the film. Rather than see homeless shelters as safe havens, Caitlin saw numerous problems and dangers of homeless shelters, including violence among residents and "crazy stuff."

> Date: 4.23.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Caitlin, Molly, Stephanie, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Caitlin**: Have you guys seen *Pursuit of Happyness?*
>
> **Stephanie**: I saw that. It was an intense movie.
>
> **Heather**: Oh yeah, with Will Smith. Mm hm.
>
> **Caitlin**: And homeless people, they don't want to go to shelters because fights break out, crazy stuff happens.

Stephanie said that there needed to be more homeless shelters, disagreeing that there are enough shelters and debunking the myth that all homeless people choose to stay on the streets. Caitlin suggested that the quality and overall safety of the shelters needed to be considered as well. Both comments served as reminders that shelters are not the panacea to poverty or homelessness.

Stephanie also discussed and reminded the group that there are layers of poverty—that is, there are homeless people, and there are those on the "brink of being homeless." Traveling to Costa Rica, she witnessed scenes of poverty. She stated,

> **Stephanie:** There were more people who had homes, but the homes were just like, pieces of tin. And I don't remember how I am going to relate this, but yeah. They are just like so many people who are just at the brink of being homeless. That not only should you help homeless people, or mentally ill people, but you should help those on the brink. (Transcript, 3.19.09)

The daughter of upper-middle class Jewish professionals, Stephanie had a range of out-of-school experiences and opportunities for intellectual and personal enrichment, such as attending summer camp and traveling abroad. She was planning to travel to Europe after graduating middle school. Visiting Costa Rica, she gained a deeper and more nuanced understanding of poverty, and became more "wide-awake" (Greene, 2001) to social divisions outside of the United States. Inez, an eighth grader, was asked to comment on the homeless people of Nigeria.

> Date: 4.02.2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Inez, Mary, Veronica, Yolanda, Jie
>
> **Mary**: Well, talk about the homeless people in Nigeria.
>
> [Overlapping talk]
>
> **Veronica**: So about Nigeria. What, (interrupted)
>
> **Inez**: There's just so many homeless. They are lowest of low, and middle class, which I was in because of the embassy, and then the upper that has like a lot of land. But I guess there's so much poor that the government can't take care of all of them. There's not a lot of space in Nigeria for each person. (Eighth Grade, Transcript, 4.2.09)

Mary extended the initial invitation to Inez to share experiences of Nigeria. Veronica reinforced the invitation. The daughter of an American engineer working for the U.S. government, Inez attended a foreign school usually reserved for the children of diplomats, U.S. Embassy employees, and wealthy Nigerians. Given the connection to the U.S. Embassy, Inez said that she was middle-class. It is striking that Inez described the homeless people as belonging to the "lowest of the low," signaling that there are differences even among the lower class. That is, there

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are gradations of poverty. Inez explained that upper-class status among Nigerians is given to landowners. Inez seemed to suggest that the source of poverty might be the scarcity of land, and the inability of the Nigerian government to care for all its citizens.

The seventh- and eighth-grade girls' discussions demonstrate that the girls were very much aware that a classless society is a "myth" (Langston, 2006, p. 120). They were not blind to class divisions even among classmates at Harmony. The students at Harmony were required to wear uniforms. There were few exceptions, such as the day students had to take school pictures. The girls hypothesized that the school-uniform policy existed to make it difficult for students to discover peers' class status. No one would be teased or made to feel different based on the clothes they wore and could afford. Langston (2006) argues that schools reflect class divisions. Notwithstanding the school uniforms, students were still able to differentiate the wealthy and poor students. Veronica identified a few poor students. Mary added that those students wear the same clothes to school.

A number of girls also acknowledged that they were privileged. Many identified as middle-class, and acknowledged the privileges of being middle-class. Stephanie told the story of sitting at a nail salon, looking across the street and witnessing a group of homeless teenagers. She stated, "This sounds like I am really stuck up or something, but, um, I was getting a pedicure once" (Seventh Grade, Transcript, 3.19.09) and continued the story. Caitlin said,

> **Caitlin**: I feel bad for them [homeless] 'cause they can't afford the stuff that we get daily. And, like, most of us have cell phones and iPods and stuff, and they don't even have dinner. I feel kind of spoiled and stuff. (Thursday Seventh Grade, Transcript, 3.19.09)

It is not only that the girls have access to material goods, such as food and iPods; they also have the luxury of having certain life-choices and options, such as attending summer camps. Recognizing that they are privileged, the middle-class girls expressed feeling bad. They also tried on and took the perspective of a homeless person. For example, Carol initially stated that she did not feel sympathy for homeless people begging for change. She then immediately qualified that

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statement: "*But* it really sucks though. I know full that if I was in their situation, I would want the full, I would want anyone to give me money and help me." The use of "but" signals that she was offering a different perspective: if she were homeless, she would want monetary support and help. Taking on the position or perspective of a homeless person, Carol humanized the issue of homelessness and took a more empathetic stance.

The middle-class girls expressed appreciation for the many privileges they had. Caitlin said she and others act like "spoiled brats." Langston (2006) argued that middle-class guilt or anger is not helpful, and neither is passivity nor denial of class privileges. She writes that a more generative approach is to take action and work to share privileges, whether time or money. The girls at Harmony were action-oriented. Amy visited a shelter for homeless women. Sue convinced Stella, the student body president, to organize a clothing drive at school. Caitlin, whose parents are missionaries, often went shopping for homeless shelters and attended Bible study for homeless men and women. Girls such as Amy, Stella and Caitlin saw themselves as related to other people—people who are not family members, friends and classmates. That is, the actions they take impact the lives of other people. Discussing the issue of homelessness, the girls were not condescending or patronizing. Adults, according to Casey, saw homeless people as dirty and at worst, dangerous and homicidal:

> Date: 2.24.2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Tuesday
> Members present: Casey, Jessica, Debbie, Jie

> **Casey**: The adults I know discourage talking to homeless people because they think they're going to pull out a gun and shoot you. My dad would be like, "Why do you want to talk to them?" And then my Mom would be like, "Ewww. Don't go near them."

The girls articulated a desire to care for others and the world. They also acknowledged that being more generous, empathetic and compassionate may not be so easy. There were challenges and complexities, such as not knowing how to approach homeless people, or being scared and afraid of them. As a result of reading and talking about *The Soloist,* the girls made sense of and arrived

at different understandings of homelessness; posed problems and explored different options for action; presented sophisticated perspectives on poverty; and explored together what it might mean to take social responsibility. The girls were working to become socially aware, caring and compassionate, and exploring various conceptions of "good" and "right."

What Counts as Learning? What Learning Counts?

Katherine, a seventh grader, was not part of the advanced literacy class. Below she described her class:

> **Katherine:** In literacy class, you don't really express your feelings about the book that much. And, and. And it doesn't ask you what you think about the book. And anything, except for in the book club, you actually ask people what you think about the book (Interview, 6.10.09)

Katherine reminds educators that *all* adolescents—regardless of "reading ability"—have thoughts and feelings about books, and value opportunities to express those thoughts. Even at the "best" of schools, many students, particularly those deemed "struggling" are positioned as recipients of knowledge rather than critical inquirers. Teachers might see the possibilities of using critical inquiry to support adolescent learners, yet believe that "below-proficient" readers need to learn reading comprehension strategies and literacy skills. However, I agree that "educators of adolescents must go beyond merely transmitting the curricula if they hope to influence students' thinking more deeply" (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 8). Moreover, I argue that reading as critical inquiry prompted the girls to think more deeply and facilitated learning about the word and world. To present the case of critical inquiry as facilitating learning, I need to address what counts as learning, and what learning counts.

I understand learning to mean more than asking questions, posing problems or possessing knowledge and information. Learning involves shifting perceptions to see different possibilities. Smith (1988) sees learning as a "consideration of alternatives" (p. 62). Learning leads to knowledge that is relevant to peoples' local contexts and daily lives. That is, learning traverses across academic disciplines and content areas, and transcends classroom and school walls.

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Learning is the ability to draw on and use multiple texts, and identify the interconnectedness of

texts, including the text of students' own lives. Learning occurs as students confront difficult

questions that may or may not have solutions, consider diverse and conflicting interpretations,

and interrogate assumptions. Reflecting on *The Soloist*, Amy shared the following statement:

> **Amy**: This book has kind of opened up my perspective on homeless people. Um, before,
> when I saw a homeless person, I thought it was their own fault that they were homeless,
> and that it's usually them because they weren't responsible with their money or they were
> on drugs or um, they just did something bad and mistreated themselves. And that's why
> they're on the street. And now I realize that that's not always the case. Like some of them
> are, like, have mental illnesses and some of them are, some of them do do drugs, but
> some of them are just like in a hard spot. It's not just the drug. (Thursday Seventh Grade,
> Transcript, 3.19.09)

Reading the book and visiting a shelter for homeless women, Amy was introduced to different

stories and images of homelessness. These images destabilized Amy; brought to surfaced her

initial assumptions that homeless people were "bad," on drugs, and irresponsible; prompted Amy

to interrogate these assumptions; and offered new and more complex ways of understanding

homelessness, including the intersections of mental health and homelessness. Amy's initial

perspectives were challenged, and then expanded and enriched—an opening and deepening of

ideas. To put simply, Amy was learning.

> Stephanie wrote a piece on the value of the after-school book club.

> We talked about a lot of different topics, not just what was in the books—we went from
> racism to sexism, and then, with a book titled, Speak about a girl who was raped but felt
> as though she couldn't say anything, we came to peer-pressure.

Stephanie named racism, sexism and peer pressures as the topics the book club explored. She

mentioned that the discussions involved "not just what was *in* the books." The girls used the text

to explore social identities and options available to girls and young adolescents; discuss and

debate difficult social and economic issues; propose and revise theories of race, gender,

adolescence and identity. Karen shared, "Although we're all technically kind of young, we know

a lot about what's going on; what adults are thinking, what's happening in the world." Many of

the girls read, wrote, talked, and built knowledge about complex social issues, and recognized that lived experiences and realities can be questioned, and then re-imagined.

Summary

I learned that book club participants were open and willing to take an inquiry stance. Several girls spoke of adolescents' need and desire to pursue questions and issues that they find compelling, meaningful and relevant. The girls revealed that they are constantly formulating and reformulating understandings of the world, and drawing on these ideas to navigate new contexts and situations. Therefore, Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) among others (e.g., Smith, 1988) see adolescents as theorizers. I argue that the seventh- and eighth-grade girls were readers-inquirers-theorizers. Theories are often seen as abstract, and therefore not relevant to *real* life and *real* people. Yet Molly described the book club conversations as deeply personal and real. Discussing and sharing theories of race, gender, adolescence and homelessness, the girls drew on the personal, including life experiences, family histories, and cultural and social identities. The girls illustrated the role of the personal on the very meanings people make of the world.

I observed that the girls did not arrive at definitive conclusions or try to resolve the "problems" of the world. The girls' ideas were not neat or tidy; rather, the conversation contained the participants' multiple and varying beliefs, and divergent perspectives. Rather than recite pre-formulated ideas and truths, the girls put forth, with varying degrees of certainty, their assumptions about the world and about human behavior. It was *real* critical literacy: messy, complex, and full of contradictions. Many of the girls' comments on race, gender, or poverty revealed that individuals can perpetuate and challenge stereotypes. I also observed that reading for/as critical inquiry supported the girls' reading and learning of literature. Freire makes the compelling argument that it is irresponsible of the literacy educator to abandon classical literature (1987, p. 9), and that literacy educators must work to foster students' intellectual, analytic, imaginative and critical faculties. The girls analyzed characters, offered visualizations of texts,

identified symbols, and evaluated the use-value and literary merit of texts. They worked to understand the texts, critiqued authors' representations, identified the moral or lesson of the story, compared one author to another, made predictions, and expressed appreciation for the authors' techniques and style. I learned that literacy can be made more meaningful, relevant and powerful if students are encouraged to take up a critical inquiry stance and practice "powerful ways of reading and writing" (Luke, 1998, p. 307).

I argue that many of the book club participants took an inquiry stance: that is, they were committed to communicating worldviews and experiences; making public individual assumptions; raising questions and issues that are personally relevant; and generating new and different knowledge of the self, others, and the world, and deepening understanding of literary texts. I also argue that teachers must work to expand and deepen students' perspectives on texts and on people and the world, rather than simply change students' behaviors or transmit knowledge. However, I make these arguments with two caveats. First, one must be careful not to over-generalize the power of literacy to liberate. Participation in the book club did not liberate the girls. That would suggest that I saw the girls as oppressed and helpless, and therefore needing to be rescued. Drawing on my own experiences as an immigrant woman of color, I understood and experienced firsthand the debilitating effects of treating female students as singularly oppressed, marginalized or silent. I did not assume to know everything, nor did I take on the role of rescuer. The girls were already perceptive and sophisticated readers of the word/world. Second, I am aware that the 23 girls were not unwilling to read, and were already enthusiastic readers being given the opportunity to engage with texts and one another in an after-school context.

All students can benefit from opportunities during the school day and after school to take up and cultivate a stance that supports them—in dialogue with others and multiple texts—to see themselves and the world differently. In the next chapter, I discuss more fully how book club

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members reshaped knowledge of the word and world in and through dialog, and make a case for

the possibilities of students reading and talking together.

CHAPTER VIII

The Possibilities of Reading and Talking Together: "You Can Think About the Book in a Different Way Than You Would if You Read it Alone"

The pedagogical practices and culture of middle and secondary schools often position adolescents as solitary, individual readers. Two adolescent girls narrate a "typical" English, literacy class:

> Right now, we are reading the *Great Gatsby*. Usually we have to answer a question about the book. And, we have to connect it to a part of our lives or part of history that we are learning, and after like ten minutes or five minutes, we finish and then, people volunteer to read their answers. (Interview Transcript, 3.9.07)

> What you do is, you, in my literacy class, after you like read something, like those Trophy books, which we don't really do anymore, we have to take all these quizzes and everything about them. (Interview Transcript, 6.10.09)

These comments affirm the findings by Applebee and colleagues (2003) on the absence of "open discussion" in middle and high school classrooms. Applebee and colleagues analyzed 64 middle and high school classrooms across five states. Open discussion, defined as more than 30 seconds of conversation among at least three students, averaged 1.7 minutes per 60 minutes of instructional time (Applebee et al., 2003). Across schools, reading and writing are often positioned as individual endeavors, and meaning is viewed as the property of the individual student. As the girls' comments suggest, few opportunities exist for students to share and discuss readings. Students are more likely to be asked to generate a response and then share. One girl refers to reading quizzes. Consider a reading quiz or essay exam that asks students to demonstrate knowledge of a text. Shared readings and writing are most likely to be considered cheating.

Reading has been commonly understood as a cognitive task, an "in the head encounter" with texts (Collins & Blot, 2003). Meaning was commonly thought to be the product of individual reader-text interactions. Such an individualist and private view of reading can be attributed to a number of sources, including the history of reading. Reading research, according to Lankshear and Knobel (2003) and others (e.g., Rose, 2006), emerged out of cognitive

psychology, especially the 20th century reading experiments Edward Thorndike. These cognitive studies often examined the performance of individuals on reading and writing tasks out of social contexts, or explored the ways that proficient readers and struggling readers were different, attempting to extract pedagogical implications (Applebee et al., 2003). The emphasis on literacy as an individual ability or skill can also be attributed to the advent of print technology (Yagelski, 2000). Yagelski posits that print technology made possible "interiorization" (p. 150)—that is, people could read silently and independently, rather than depend on others or rely on oral language. The focus on the individual can reinforce the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1985), namely the belief that literacy is a set of reading and writing skills that can be attained through individual efforts.

The idea of the individual reader and writer has permeated and shaped school-based literacy instruction. Katherine shared,

> **Katherine**: And we have reading logs. We read a book for half an hour or 45 minutes each day and write a summary about it. Seven sentences about summarizing the book, and seven sentences or more, describing how you are related to the book or what you thought about those parts. (Interview, 6.10.09)

The girls were expected to read outside of class and respond to the text through writing: That is, they were asked to summarize and then record the ways that they experienced or connected to the book. However, the students read and wrote alone. Katherine added that the teacher might ask students to share individual responses during class. The teacher reinforced the belief that responses to texts belong to individual readers.

The focus on individual readers has also shaped literacy and reading research. Consider the number of studies that examine female readers' response to and interpretations of literary texts (e.g., McRobbie, 1991; Trousdale, 1995; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). Christian-Smith (1990) studied adolescent girls' reading practices and beliefs. A reading survey was given to 75 girls, and a subset of the girls were interviewed and then observed during class. The researcher was interested to see the different ways in which the girls positioned, engaged and interpreted

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romance novels. The study is one example of many that explore how female readers approach and make sense of texts. The researchers have a similar methodological approach: they record and analyze the responses of *individual* girls, and examine the ways that girls make sense of the codes or messages of the text.

Thus, questions remain about what actually happens when a group of adolescent girls read and discuss a common text. Book clubs and reading groups have been described as possible sites of personal and social transformation. Offering several examples of reading clubs (e.g., White-women book clubs at the end of the U.S. Civil War), Twomey (2007) argues that reading clubs have allowed women to exist outside of the dominant masculinist discourse, and re-imagine the social world. However, how and to what effect actual, everyday adolescent girls talk about books in an after-school context is understudied. In this chapter, I offer rich images of girls' *collaborative* inquiry into texts, and argue that inquiry is made more powerful through dialog in which meaning is communicated between and among individuals. In the next section, I offer examples of girls' collaborative engagement in Ms. Heather's literacy class. Then I turn to the girls' experiences of reading together and talking in the after-school book club.

"You Are Going To Go On a Journey": Classroom Structures and Activities for Collaboration

Ms. Heather saw collaboration and community-building as integral to literacy learning. Every classroom teacher understands collaboration differently, therefore creating different classroom structures for students to collaborate. Heather offered a range of opportunities for students to share perspectives, inquire together, and draw on each other for knowledge. These opportunities extended beyond mere group work or projects. For example, Heather often asked seventh and eighth graders to begin a "Journey":

> Heather announces, "You are going to go on a Journey. Meet with four or five people. And with those four or five people, talk about what you have, what questions we should bring to the class. What is it that I am grappling with? What are some of the things I want to discuss? Because this is a springboard for The Crucible." (Eighth Grade, Fieldnotes, 11.17.208)

On a Journey, students sought other classmates to share responses, and noticed that individuals have divergent and shared interests and questions. Students were exposed to a range of ideas. During a Journey, the classroom resembled a dance floor as students approached one another, took on different thought-partners, and exchanged ideas. The Journey was an opportunity for interacting, and for talking and listening. Observing the classroom Journey, I wondered whether and how the Journey deepened, expanded or challenged students' initial thoughts and stances. The other phrase that students and Heather used frequently was "Mix and Mingle" (Fieldnotes, Seventh Grade, 3.06.09). It was not uncommon for Heather to remind students that they should "Mix and Mingle" rather than seek friends to collaborate. She posed the rhetorical question, "Do you think it would be better if you worked with 'Comfort Zone' people or if you 'Mix and Mingle'"? Molly described Mix and Mingle as an opportunity to hear other students' perspectives and form relationships, even friendships.

The students also worked together to reach consensus. As a pre-reading activity for *The Animal Farm*, Heather asked eighth graders to explore individual understandings and definitions of power, and then to generate a collective definition. The groups were each given a piece of chart paper. Each group presented the perspectives of individual group members, and offered a "group" definition—an agreed upon and shared definition—of power.

> **Stella**: It's kind of the general idea of someone in control over another. You always have to listen to the boss or something bad will happen to you.
>
> **Carl**: What I think of power is monarchy, high ranking and ownership.
>
> **James**: Selfishness. People with people tend to be selfish because they don't care about what people need."
>
> **Group**: Our whole group came together on one definition of power that we all agreed on. When some people get to use power they usually abuse it for wrong reason, which causes trouble. Like they say, "With great power comes great responsibility". (classroom artifact)

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The group definition presumably represents the negotiations that took place among Stella, Carl and James. As such, the definition reflects individual and collective understandings of power. The shared definition did not seem to highlight the perspective of one student over that of another. It is difficult to know, however, the nature of students' interactions *via* a written product. How and what might have Stella, Carl and James contributed? What were the areas of disagreement and differences?

Rather than have an entire class read the same text, Heather allowed students to choose among several titles. The seventh graders could read either *Before We Were Free* (Alvarez, 2004) or *Esperanza Rising* (Munoz Ryan, 2005). Heather then asked students to identify the ways that these texts were similar and different. However, few students expressed a preference for reading the same text as classmates to comparing the experiences of reading different books. Debbie said, "Usually in the classroom, we are paired up with people who aren't reading the same book and we talk about it, how they're alike" (Interview, 10.23.08). Debbie explained further that the book club participants are "reading the same thing, and we have different thoughts on it." Inez also believed that the conversations are made richer and more interesting if people are reading a shared text.

"You Can Think About the Book in a Different Way Than You Would If You Read It Alone": Value of Reading and Talking Together

I agree with the claim that the experience of reading *with* and *for* others is different from reading for oneself (Christian-Smith, 1990; Dressman, 2004; Long, 2003; Sumara, 1996). More specifically, it has been argued that the solitary reader is less likely to problematize and interrogate the text, and try on new ways of reading (Martin, 2001), for the reader lacks access to diverse and conflicting perspectives. Thus, it is not enough to assume that reading will somehow lead to deeper or new understandings of the self and social reality. For example, studying female adolescents' individual responses to romance fiction, Christian-Smith (1990) argues that solitary

readings often did not lead to adolescent girls becoming critical consumers of romance novels. The girls tended to internalize traditional images of heterosexual romance and femininity. Christian-Smith concludes, "Reading was done without meaning communicated between students [….] This practice militated against what is perhaps the *most important* aspect of learning from reading, that is of making sense of books through discussion with others"(emphasis mine, p. 116). Similarly, Stanley (2004) found that the girls read romance novels quietly to themselves. That is, romance reading was a "private, individualized act" (p. 174). Recognizing the significance of reading together, Christian-Smith writes that the girls' individual readings worked against the communicating, sharing, building and complicating of meaning. According to Christian-Smith, the *most important* aspect of reading might be making sense of books *through* discussion.

Entering the space of the after-school book club, the girls were agreeing to share readings or communicate meaning. Asked to explain the concept of "reading together," Rebecca offered an insightful comment: "Um, that when, like when we share our ideas, we don't call it, I guess, I don't know how to say it, we don't call it, 'She took my idea' or 'She took their idea'" (Interview, 5.27.09). According to Rebecca, the girls were not possessive or territorial of ideas. The students did not "own" the readings, interpretations or knowledge, nor did they read for the benefit of the individual. Rather, they engaged the texts and each other.

However, what happened when girls responded to the texts and each other? That is, what happens when meaning is generated and communicated between and among readers? Analysis of after-school book club transcripts reveals several benefits of students' reading together and discussing a text. First, a number of girls could no longer read as quickly as they desired. They had to stop reading once they reached an agreed-upon page or chapter, and then come to book club to discuss the part they had read. The discussion led the girls to read the remaining pages of the text differently. Second, the girls generated multiple and even conflicting interpretations, and arrived at different or deepened understandings the text or the issue being discussed. Third, the

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girls interrogated the ways that they and others might be reading the word and world. The girls questioned the interpretive lens that others brought to the book group. The rest of the chapter focuses on explaining more fully each of the benefits of reading together.

"But When I Am On My Own, I Don't Have To Stop. I Can Just Keep Reading and Reading": Pausing To See the Text Anew

Studying a group of high school teachers reading literary fiction, Sumara (1996) found that the teachers began to reconceptualize reading as dwelling (e.g., pausing, re-reading) rather than moving *through* a text. It is not unusual for students to believe that a person is a "good" reader based on reading speed or number of books.

Casey commented, "I go through books very fast [....] When I am on my own, I don't have to stop. I can just keep reading, reading and reading" (Interview, 10.20.08). There is value to 'reading, reading and reading'—that is, voraciously consuming a novel or being an insatiable reader. There is also value to pausing periodically to discuss the book, however. It was the book clubs' practice to read a set number of chapters or pages for each session. It took an average of six weeks for the girls to complete reading a long text. Casey and others like Veronica could no longer "read, read, and read." They had to stop and pause and reflect. Therefore reading together has the potential to generate more careful and dedicated readings (Sumara, 1996). The girls were aware that they would be offering and sharing readings of the text. Such awareness changes the way people read and experience reading (Sumara, 1996). Casey was not the only one to read and experience the text differently. Molly offered an insightful comment that the significance of the text changes once it is read together. She said that the experience of reading together makes the text "more special" (Interview, 2.11.09).

There were also actual instances of girls changing the way they approached the text and reading the remaining pages differently. They were seeing the text anew. The eighth graders'

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initial discussion of *The Host* changed the way Sue approached the novel; and girls' initial

discussion *of Bones* changed the way Mary engaged and experienced the text.

Debbie said, "And then with reading and discussing about it, it can lead onto other things,

and you can think about the book in a different way than you would if you read it alone."

Reading alone, a reader is less likely to have access to multiple and different perspectives. Unless

a reader intentionally seeks others for dialog, she is limited to her own thoughts. Debbie implied

that discussions can lead to explorations of ideas and issues, and that these explorations support

readers to consider see the book differently.

"I Could See Their Perspective": Surfacing Multiple and Conflicting Perspectives

The book club discussions surfaced a range of perspectives and ideas. It is often

presumed that there is value to mining individual students' multiple readings, interpretations and

perspectives, and using multiple perspectives as a resource for teaching and learning. The goal of

surfacing students' multiple perspectives is not limited to the proliferation of more ideas,

however. Rather, the goal of surfacing multiple perspectives is to foster deeper and more critical

readings of texts.

Hume posits that multiple perspectives are integral to inquiry and knowledge generation,

and that multiple perspectives are more easily generated through dialogue (2001, p. 160). The

conversation among Mary, Yolanda and Inez is cited as a telling case (Mitchell, 1984) of girls'

encountering and negotiating conflicting ideas and perspectives. Mary and Yolanda openly

disagreed

> Date: 4/30/09
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Mary, Yolanda, Inez, Veronica, Sue, Jie
>
> **Mary**: You can go to a shelter. There's food there. There's people out there that would
> buy you something to eat.
>
> **Yolanda**: But sometimes you never know
>
> **Mary**: That's why you ask

Yolanda: But people do ask and they get ignored

Mary: You go to a homeless shelter

Yolanda: What if you don't like it? Sometimes homeless shelters run out of food.

Mary: I guess some people might not want to go to the shelter.

Inez: Another reason, maybe, they don't want someone to help them because it will make them like they're vulnerable and they need somebody to actually help them.

Mary: Yeah some people are afraid. They want them to think they can take care of themselves.

Bruffee (1993) argues that students tend to enter classrooms, carrying individual preconceptions as well as the belief that those preconceptions are right. Encountering different and often conflicting meanings, students are more likely to reconsider initial stances and perspectives (Bruffee, 1993). Mary was adamant that homeless shelters could offer food, and that people would buy food for the homelessness. Yolanda challenged Mary. She claimed that homeless people ask and are ignored. She also suggested that homeless shelters may not have enough food, or that homeless people might prefer not to visit shelters. Yolanda continued to probe Mary. Yolanda challenged Mary to consider the possibility that homeless people are ignored and marginalized. Mary initially took a stance of certainty. She said, "You can go to a shelter" and then repeated, "You go a shelter." However, the perspectives that Yolanda offered prompted Mary to pause and reconsider. She acknowledged, "I guess some people might not want to go to the shelter." Rather than insist that people can and should seek the shelters, Mary realized that people might be afraid of appearing helpless. According to McIntyre (2007), people come to new realizations as they agree, disagree, debate, and challenge and are challenged. Discussing *The Soloist*, Mary began to recognize the complexities of the issue of homelessness and reconcile multiple points of view.

"Older Women Have the Same Thoughts as Us": Meeting an All-Women Book Club

There was one discussion of *The Soloist* that was unique. It was an inter-generational discussion among women and adolescent girls. 23 girls were invited to participate, and seven attended: Mary, Veronica and Yolanda; Katherine, Karen, Casey and Amy. Eight women attended. The women were primarily White, middle-class professionals including a medical researcher, epidemiologist, journalist, community organizer, and several graduate students. Katherine cited the intergenerational book club as a memorable experience. Katherine described the intergenerational book club as an opportunity to gather perspectives beyond those of the seventh graders.

> **Katherine:** Except for that book, I only saw like the people in my group's perspective, except for when we went there, I could see their perspective, and see not just, oh, a group of young girls and see if like older women have the same thoughts or how different their thoughts were (Interview, 6.10.10)

There was diversity among members of the Thursday Seventh-Grade book club. Katherine commented that she only has access to fellow book club members' perspectives. The intergenerational book club was an opportunity to encounter even more perspectives and thoughts. Katherine also realized that a group of "young girls" and a group of older women could have similar and different thoughts. The women offered a set of issues and questions that the girls alone would not have explored, including the intersection of racism and homelessness; lack of policies and statues to protect mentally-ill patients; and decision-making capacity of schizophrenics. The women held different views. Several women argued that Nathaniel—a schizophrenic—should be forcibly sent to a shelter. Others disagreed.

The intergenerational book club occurred on Wednesday. On Thursday the seventh graders met to discuss *The Soloist*. Listening to the perspectives of the women, Amy began to see the issues of homelessness and mental health differently.

> Date: 3/19/2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Molly, Caitlin, Stephanie, Katherine, Ms. Heather, Jie

> **Amy**: Last night we were talking about, um, there were two people. Two groups of people who think that, one group thinks that they should make it optional to be in a homeless shelter, for these mentally ill people, and also there's also another group of people who think that homeless people should be forced, like if they're mentally ill. I am not really sure which one is right.

It is clear that Amy was paying careful attention as the women spoke. Listening to other readers' viewpoints, Amy developed a deepened understanding of homelessness *and The Soloist.* A "deepened" understanding acknowledges the complexities of an issue and encompasses multiple points of view. She referred to the competing perspectives that the women voiced. Taking a stance of uncertainty, she claimed that she was unsure whether one approach is better than the other. That is, she now sees the issues of homelessness and mental health of homeless people to be complicated and multi-faceted.

"But Is That Like a Stereotype?": Interrogating Meaning and Knowledge

Tinder (1980) distinguishes two modes of inquiry: inquiring about and inquiring with. The book club afforded both modes. Book club participants explored—individually and collectively—a range of issues and questions they found meaningful, relevant or provocative. The book club discussions illustrated that inquiry *about/into* an issue is made more meaningful and richer through dialogue—that is, through inquiry *with* others.

Through reading together and dialogue, the girls' initial ideas were questioned and challenged, leading to different and deepened understandings. Martin (2001) argues that it is not enough for a reading group to surface various interpretations of a text; rather, readers must work together to interrogate the very frameworks and interpretive lenses that give meaning to the word and world. The girls' interpretations of texts and worldviews became public and open to interrogation.

Two book club meetings are particularly salient cases of the girls questioning the interpretive lens that they and others brought to the "word" and "world" texts. The first is the

Thursday Seventh-Grade meeting on *The Soloist*. Molly shared the way she saw and understood homelessness.

> Date: 3/19/2009
> Book Club: Seventh Grade, Thursday
> Members present: Amy, Molly, Caitlin, Stephanie, Katherine, Ms. Heather, Jie
>
> **Molly**: When I look at a homeless person, sometimes I think that they might come from Africa and they only had enough money for the plane ticket and then they don't have any money left for a living.
>
> **Caitlin**: That's weird.
>
> **JP:** Why do you think that?
>
> **Molly:** I don't know. It just. It just comes up in my mind. Or some of them may even be orphans that never paid attention in school. Orphans, yeah.
>
> **Caitlin**: Molly, you come up with the wildest statements.
>
> **Stephanie:** Maybe since it just like comes into your mind, and it's not like something that you think about a lot, maybe you think about it, just like on a psychological point, if you think about it, like, you might just want to make up that they came from Africa and they didn't have enough money to buy the plane ticket, just because you don't really want to think about what's actually happening to them.
>
> **Molly:** Yeah. That's a part of it.

Observations of the girls' literacy classes suggest that Initiation-Response-Evaluation (Cazden, 1988) was a common classroom participation structure. Initiation-Response-Evaluation or IRE describes a verbal exchange that involves teacher-initiated question, student response, and teacher evaluation (Cazden, 1988). Students play a guessing game, and the goal of the game is to read the mind of the teacher; the teacher usually offers a one or two-word evaluation, such as "good" or "yes." The after-school book club participants challenged typical IRE participation structures. The conversation among Molly, Caitlin and Stephanie revealed that students assumed the roles of question-poser and responder. They also evaluated others' ideas. The girls demonstrated willingness to question and modify initial thoughts and perspectives. Rather than see ideas as fixed truths or irrefutable facts, they recognized and accepted that ideas are meant to be challenged, modified, and tested. The girls were theorizers: Molly offered a narrative she had

constructed to explain the cause of homelessness. According to the narrative, homeless people were African immigrants, and they had enough money only to pay for the airfare to immigrate to the United States.

The narrative is interesting for several reasons. First, Molly, a native of Albania, immigrated to Germany and then the United States. Therefore she may have been drawing on personal and familial experiences of multiple immigrations. Second, creating a narrative to explain the past and current lives of the homeless, Molly may have been trying to humanize these individuals and assume a less judgmental stance. Third, seeing and naming the homeless people as African immigrants, she indirectly referred to the intersections of race and class. She did not explicitly mention Whiteness as privilege and power, nor did she offer statistics on the rates of homelessness for Blacks and Whites. Yet she wrote a story of an African immigrant. Bruner (1991) argues that the experience and memory of human affairs take the form of narratives—for instance, there is an expectation that events have a beginning, middle and end. Molly had created a narrative of African immigrants to make sense of the world she was seeing—a world that most likely included Black homeless men and women.

Stephanie questioned Molly, specifically the interpretive lens that Molly uses to understand homelessness. She also attempted to explain the way Molly views homeless people. She said,

> **Stephanie:** You might just want to make up that they came from Africa and they didn't have enough money to buy the plane ticket, just because *you don't really want to think about what's actually happening to them.* (emphasis mine)

People construct narratives to explain the world. They also fabricate and tell stories to avoid accepting the world as it exists. That is, people might prefer to construct and tell narratives that are comfortable: stories that reflect and perpetuate familiar norms. For Molly, it is safer to believe that homeless people are Africans or orphans, for she is neither Black nor an orphan. It is safer to believe that homelessness is a temporary situation--that is, that the people spent the money on

plane fare. It is safer to believe that homeless people are outsiders or foreigners, and not 'insiders.' It is interesting that Stephanie said, "Maybe since it just like comes into your mind, and it's not like something that you think about a lot," suggesting that such a way of thinking might be automatic for Molly.

Reading and meaning-making can become routine. Students can internalize habitual ways of reading and interpreting—i.e., ways that reproduce 'comfortable' readings. Bruner suggests that readers can develop nearly automatic interpretive routines (1991) and begin to overlook contradictions. People might notice details that confirm already existing thoughts and ignore the rest, or they might recognize the contradictions, yet not change the way they see the world (Entman & Rojeki, 2000), prompting the question—if readers practice habitual and "comfortable" ways of reading and sense making, how can they take up alternative reading stances? How can readers become more aware of taken-for-granted ways of reading and sense-making?

The study's findings suggest that students—*in* and *through* dialogue—challenged each other to rethink the "lenses" they used to read literary texts and the text of the world and others' lives. Lens is often used as a metaphor for a paradigm. A paradigm is defined as a set of assumptions, concepts, and knowledge that shapes the way one makes sense of reality (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). According to Brooks and Brooks, a paradigm—similar to a lens—can both structure and limit individuals' thinking and perception. Paradigms can illuminate, clarify and magnify. It can also distort and exclude. An individual might begin to question and eventually even change the lens if it can no longer account for the world. According to Brooks and Brooks (1993), such paradigmatic shifts are usually an internal process. These shifts, however, also occur as a result of social interactions and dialog. It was the dialog that prompted Molly to rethink the ways she views homeless people as Africans or orphans. Listening to Stephanie, Molly agreed, "Yeah, that's part of it." Critical inquiry can help students become more aware of the fictions they

create and use to understand the world and other people. Essential to critical inquiry is social interactions and dialog.

The second example is from the Eighth Grade meeting on *All Fall Down*. The girls had decided that Jane and Buddy, the protagonist of the novel, were White. For the next several conversational turns, the girls discussed *Twilight*, particularly the predominance of White characters. The girls returned to the novel, and Sue shared that she was not surprised to learn that Buddy was White.

> Date: 4/30/2009
> Book Club: Eighth Grade
> Members present: Sue, Inez, Mary, Yolanda, Veronica, Jie
>
> **Sue**: It makes sense for Buddy in this thing to be White. The boys, cause you can just see them. White boys, a lot of times, they try to find different ways to rebel, especially when they come from good homes. They try to find a way to rebel, and it ends up becoming a problem. And it kind of sounds like, these boys here, it sounds like they [interrupted]
>
> **Inez**: But is that like a stereotype?
>
> **Sue**: No, I know a lot of White boys that are like that
>
> **Mary**: Sometimes you can tell if people, in a book, when they explain how they act, you can tell.
>
> **JP:** Really? Like what?
>
> **Mary**: I don't know. It's just like how, like, *In the Darkness* it was called. *Somewhere in the Darkness*. You could tell he was Black. But in this book, like how he acted. I don't know. It was strange. You could tell. I don't know how to tell it. But for this book, some kids, I don't know.
>
> **Sue**: Really depends on how they talk.
>
> **Yolanda**: But I thought Laurent was Black. Laurent, in *Twilight.*
>
> **Mary**: In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that book we're reading, I thought they were, um Black. But they're White.
>
> **Veronica**: Me too. And then I saw the movie. Because of how they talked, and just, I don't know
>
> **Yolanda**: That's 'cause of the country. Like Alabama. My grandma lived in Alabama.

The girls referred to and drew on multiple texts: films (e.g., *Twilight)*, literary fiction (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Somewhere in the Darkness),* and family histories and personal experiences

(knowledge of white male adolescents). They commented on the different lenses they used "read" the race of literary characters.

Sue was reading Buddy through a particular lens—a lens that she developed as a result of knowing "a lot of White boys." The fact that she, a White adolescent girl, knew many rebellious White boys shaped how she read Buddy. It made sense, according to Sue, Buddy was White. She added, "I kind of see him like my cousin. Like tall and always drugged-out looking." Inez challenged Sue, wondering whether Sue was stereotyping White adolescent males. Sue disagreed and said that she knows many White boys similar to Buddy. She also elaborated and hypothesized that the privileged and "proper" White adolescent boys are more inclined to rebel. Analysis of book club transcripts—transcripts of the Tuesday seventh-grade group, Thursday seventh-grade group, and Thursday eighth-grade group—revealed that the word, stereotype, was mentioned four times. Yet the particular conversation on *We All Fall Down* was the only instance of one student suggesting that another student was relying on stereotypes to understand people. The discussion illustrates *how* girls viewed and understood people, both real and literary characters—do they rely on stereotypes, as Inez suggests?

According to the girls, they rely on certain markers and signifiers to determine the race of literary characters. One marker they use is speech. Sue stated, "It depends on how they talk." Mary said that she could tell the protagonist of *Somewhere in the Darkness* was Black based on the way he behaved. The challenge of relying on the way people talk is that individuals' geographic locations (e.g., country or areas of the U.S. such as the South) account for linguistic variation. Mary shared that she was learning the ways that other girls "think things through." That is, each person was making visible the thought processes and assumptions underneath the readings. Therefore, the eighth grade girls were doing more than trying to determine the race of literary characters. Together the girls explored how they come to understand people, grappling with what they know about people and how they come to know people.

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Summary

From the data, I learned the ways in which book clubs afford the space and opportunity for readers to inquire with others. I learned how inquiry into a text or issue or can be made more powerful through dialog. Reading and discussing a text, the girls put forth and encountered a range of interpretations and perspectives; arrived at different or deepened readings of written texts and social issues; and questioned the ways that they and others read the word-world. I argue that it was the dialog among readers—dialog during and after the act of reading—that prompted many students to rethink the ways they understand the word and world.

I also argue that the teaching of literacy and literature needs to be reconceptualized, and go beyond reader-response based pedagogies. An influential pedagogical model used in middle and secondary English and literacy classroom, reader response (Rosenblatt 1964, 1968) changed the way teachers conceptualize and teach reading: teachers began to recognize that readers use past experiences, insight and imagination to interpret a text (Rosenblatt, 1964). However, reading is more than drawing on personal experiences to make sense of a text or making connections to the text, or entering and experiencing a work; rather, reading should generate new ways of understanding the self, others and the world. Reading transforms knowledge, deepens awareness and understanding, and shifts social relations. Therefore, an alternative to reader-response pedagogies, I argue, is critical, collaborative inquiry-based pedagogies

"Personal" readings shape the worldviews of individual readers one at a time. Reader-response pedagogies can also reinforce reading as an individual and private practice (Dressman, 2004; Long, 2003; Rogers, 1997). Dressman suggests that Rosenblatt positions readers as "highly autonomous beings" (p. 40), each reader pursuing a personal connection. However, these readings, I posit, should be shared among individuals. Encountering different and even conflicting perspectives, a reader is likely to be challenged, and therefore prompted to take up new ways of reading and understanding. Therefore, I suggest that more important than the

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individual readings of texts are the conversations about texts (Dressman, 2004). Emerging as a

critical theme is that critical inquiry is facilitated and supported by dialog.

I want to make the case for classroom pedagogies and practices that both draw on and

foster critical and collaborative inquiry. I resonate with the following claim:

> We want students opening to one another, opening to the world. We want them to be concerned for one another, as we learn to be concerned for them. We want them to achieve friendships among one another. (Greene, 1993, p. 18)

I also believe that English and Language Arts, and literacy educators are particularly well

positioned to support students opening to the world and opening to one another. Reading and

discussing a common text, many of the girls "opened" to one another—forming new relationships

and deepening existing ones, and initiating and sustaining dialog. They also "opened" to the

world, exploring a range of social issues and personal responsibilities to the world. In the next

chapter, I present the salient dimensions or features of the after-school book club, and suggest

that these dimensions should be part of classroom spaces, especially if educators hope to "open"

students to the world and each other.

Summary, Implications for Practice and Research, and Closing Considerations

Summary of Findings

The National Council of Teachers of English issued a policy research brief on adolescent literacy (2006), expressing concern that over 8 million students in grades 4-12 read below grade level. The brief goes on to suggest that many middle and high school students are "increasingly under-literate" (p.2) and under-prepared for the challenges of the 21st century. I argue that characterizations of adolescents as under-literate or lacking complex literacy skills need to be questioned. Research on students' out-of-school literacies (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004; Moje, 2000) has documented the range of out-of-school literacy practices of students, showing the ways in which adolescents negotiate and make sense of texts beyond school hours and outside of school walls. Therefore, I agree with Luke and Elkins (2000), who suggest the need to re/mediate adolescent literacies (see Gutierrez et al., 2009, as well). Re/mediation, unlike remediation, signals the need to redesign and restructure the instructional conditions of middle and secondary schools rather than "fix" the students. Thus, structuring learning opportunities that challenge, inspire, and motivate *all* adolescents is among one of the most salient challenges for educators, administrators and policymakers.

My study of an all-girl, after-school book club has implications for re/mediating classroom practice and pedagogy, and supporting teachers of adolescents to adopt more expansive frameworks of literacy and reading, to reconceptualize pedagogy, and to redesign classrooms. Part of redesigning classrooms involves identifying the dimensions of different learning contexts (e.g., virtual spaces, after-school or summer programs, neighborhood centers, youth organizations) that support student literacy engagement and learning (Egan, 2008; Hull & Schultz, 2001). Therefore, rather than offer a summary of the major findings of the study, I want to reframe and recast the findings by discussing what I identified to be the salient dimensions of

the after-school book club. I argue that the 23 adolescent girls constructed and experienced the after-school book club as a space of collective participation and distributed expertise; student agency; knowledge generation and inquiry; relationship-building; and openness. I argue that these dimensions can and should be part of classroom spaces.

Collective participation and distributed expertise

In the present study, responsibility for creating and maintaining the book club was distributed among the girls. As participants, students took up different roles, such as offering book recommendations and sharing copies of the book. One girl also prepared discussion questions for book club meetings. If they had not read the book, they asked each other for summaries. A few girls worked to speak less and listen more. Together the girls decided on and enacted the following principles: responsibility to support each other to read difficult texts; responsibility not to "ruin" a book; responsibility to respect different cultural and religious backgrounds; and lastly, responsibility to keep the book club discussions confidential.

Collective participation changes the way knowledge is constructed and shared, and the way participants are positioned as knowledge-generators and experts. Thus, expertise was distributed among the girls: all book club participants were positioned as possible knowers and learners. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) and others (e.g., Alvermann 2008) have discussed the appeal of sites such as Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia that allows its users to collectively and collaboratively construct texts and meaning. Any user can add and edit information on the site, challenging the view of knowledge as fixed, static and centralized. These spaces afford users an opportunity to share, interrogate and generate knowledge collaboratively.

The book club participants offered knowledge to the group, and sought and valued other members' knowledge. Discussing *The Soloist* and issues of mental health, Mary shared knowledge on the effects of SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) medication. Veronica was an expert on popular culture and youth culture of the United States and East Asia. She

introduced the group to Nigahiga videos on YouTube and to Stephenie Meyers' new books and other books on vampires (e.g., *Vampire Academy*). Stephanie, a seventh grader, was the expert on domestic and international politics. During Sharing Time, she showed the girls a bookmark she had made of Oscar Arias, explaining Oscar Arias' accomplishments and reasons for admiring the Costa Rican president. She also offered knowledge on the debates surrounding Health Care reform and other policies of President Obama. Clarissa was knowledgeable of various non-profit organizations and micro-loan programs, mainly KIVA. She encouraged the other seventh graders to visit the KIVA website. During an interview, Sue explained that the book club members teach each other *through* books, and that every person has knowledge to contribute.

The book club members took seriously one another as resources and sources of knowledge. Teachers do not have, and are not likely to have all the experiences they need to become experts on popular and youth culture, on the range of issues and texts that matter to adolescents, and on adolescents' visual, virtual and performative literacies. The book club offers a different conceptualization of teacher responsibility: responsibility to create and structure opportunities for students to share different knowledge, cultural and linguistic resources, and literacies.

Student agency

Inez said, "For school, we actually need somebody to tell us what to do." More often than not, students are assessed on the ability to follow teacher directions. Students rarely get to decide on *what* gets read and *how* the discussions will occur. Edelsky (1991) argues that literacy gets reduced to an exercise if someone else, usually the teacher, decides on the purpose and nature of the literacy event. For Edelsky, a reconceptualization of literacy necessarily entails re-positioning students as agents. Student agency has been discussed widely and differently across educational practitioners and researchers. McIntyre (2006) defines student agency as the "active, ongoing participation of students" (p. 630). That is, students are part of the development and

implementation of teaching and learning experiences. Kincheloe (2004) offers a more general understanding of agency as the capacity to shape and control life-decisions.

The girls were agents—active constructors and participants of the book club—substantially shaping the structure and content of the book club discussions. Describing the book club, Stephanie wrote, "We made our own rules about discussing the books." Several other girls credited the appeal and success of the book club to students' sense of ownership.

Inquiry into "real-life problems"

Monaghan and Saul (1987) write, "Society has focused on children as readers because, historically, it has been much more interested in children as receptors than as producers of the written word" (p. 91). However, as book club participants, many of the girls were neither passive recipients nor mindless consumers of texts. They did not read for the purposes of acquiring knowledge of the text or extracting content; rather, they used to text and each other to inquire into and grapple with issues of race, class and gender. Many of the girls initiated and sustained conversations on how to live together, and what kind of people they want to be. They also responded to, questioned, and interrogated the texts.

One seventh grader said that the book club members explored "real-life problems." The "real-life problems" included homelessness, racism, sexism, parental expectations and conflicts, and peer pressure. The girls shared the ways that they read other people (e.g., boys, adolescents, adults, teachers, homeless people, and individuals of different races). They used literacy for a range of purposes beyond reading and writing words, such as claiming social membership, enacting different identities, making meaning at the personal, social, and cultural level, and gaining a deeper or different understanding of the world. As critical inquirers the girls read to make sense of human behavior; understand and respond to social and economic realities; and lead more informed, responsible and humane lives.

Notwithstanding the sociocultural and critical perspectives that inform adolescent literacy research, narrow conceptions of literacy as reading, writing, speaking and listening skills continue to influence educational textbooks, federal, state and district literacy standards, and literacy curricula. However, literacy educators must do more than teach reading comprehension strategies

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or skills. They must design spaces for adolescents to experience reading as a form of critical inquiry, for adolescents to experience reading as having meaning and purpose beyond school.

Identity

Identity was an important area of inquiry for the girls. The girls used book club discussions to explore who they are and who they want to become (and do not want to become). According to Egan (2008) adolescents are drawn to exploring issues of identity. Caitlin, a seventh grader, announced, "All this year I've been trying to figure out which group I should be friend with, and it was really hard" (Transcript, 6.11.09). She also said, "It was really hard to find myself" (Transcript, 3.05.09). Several seventh graders discussed perceptions and experiences of being "popular."

The eighth graders explored and reflected on racial, ethnic and gender identities. Veronica identified as an American Born Chinese, yet was positioned as American and Asian American. Yolanda identified as African American. Helen self-identified as biracial. As an Albanian citizen, Molly realized that she existed as an outsider to the eyes of Germans. The girls tried to understand and articulate the intersections of ethnicity, belonging and citizenship.

Discussing identity, the girls inevitably referred to and described "other" people. Identity is relational (Weis & Carbonell-Medina, 2000). That is, understanding students' identity constructions involves understanding the ways that students relate to and position others. For example, conversations on the challenges and possibilities of adolescent girlhood included multiple references to boys—e.g., the ways that girls and boys are different. Another example, many of the girls assumed and enacted the identity of 'good' student. To identify as a good student, the girls often discussed the "other" students. These "other" students did not listen to teachers and were eventually going to attend a low-performing high school. Inez never specifically named these students; yet the eighth-grade girls seemed to know the students Inez was describing. Inez implied that "good" students—unlike the ones she described—listened to teachers, paid attention during class, and participated. Stephanie announced that she was called a "nerd." The seventh graders saw the social identity of "nerd" as positive. Bucholtz (1998) found

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that a nerd identity among high school girls was not a stigma, and that nerdiness was a valuable resource for girls. Important to most of the 23 girls was the "good student" identity. The girls shared images of "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) that consisted of going to college, pursuing professional degrees, and leading meaningful lives as scientist, artist, pediatrician and fashion designer.

The girls resisted and rejected certain identities. Caitlin, a seventh grader, was visibly distraught during a book club meeting. She shared that she had been called a snitch. A classmate had cut a lock of Caitlin's hair during class. Caitlin did not report the classmate to the principal; yet she was still called a snitch. The girls also resisted being seen as a member of a "clique." A student could be an insider or even popular. However, it was undesirable to belong to a clique. Cliques, a student explained, are exclusive.

A significant portion of the book club discussions focused on the girls' exploration of identities: identities they desired, feared, or rejected; identities that were imposed upon the adolescents; and identities that the adolescents worked to create.

Relationship-building

Takanishi (2003) argued that middle and secondary schools must be structured for adolescents to form and experience secure relationships. According to Elizabeth, an eighth grader, meeting people, talking to friends and building relationships are the "point" of schools. Elizabeth suggested that she could easily be home-schooled; however, she chose to attend school to meet friends. She added, "To me, school is where you meet all your friends at" (Interview, 10.28.08).

The appeal of school seemed to be that they could meet friends. Learning, according to Elizabeth, can occur outside of schools and classrooms. For example, students can learn at home and be home-schooled. Amy announced, "Friends are pretty much the most fun part about school" (Transcript, 3.05.09). Elizabeth and Amy echoed the finding that schools, particularly middle and secondary schools are friend-ship based societies (Cusick, 1973).

The after-school book club was understood and valued as a site for reading and discussing texts, and for supporting one another, forming new relationships and friendships,

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"hanging-out," and learning to become better friends. Rebecca, a seventh grader, commented, "It sort of feels like, well everybody in the group, we're all friends" (Interview, 5.27.09),

Openness

The history of American schools has emphasized uniformity, standardization and homogenization (Tyack, 2007). A primary objective of schooling was socialization: molding students to eventually contribute to society and to the workforce (Tyack, 2007). All too often schools and teachers work to ensure that students, especially students of color, and working-class and poor students are adopting dispositions that are "appropriate"—punctuality, obedience, compliance to authority and silence. McIntyre (2006) argues that adolescents of color increasingly attend institutions that work to ensure "system maintenance and safety" (p. 629). Earlier, Eccles and colleagues (1993) posited that pedagogical practices are often used to control, and not inspire students. Accustomed to conforming and obeying authority, and performing repetitive tasks at school, students have fewer opportunities to be innovators, creators, and problem-solvers. Egan writes that the purpose of education should be to "enlarge individuals' potentials as much as possible" (2008, p. 276).

Harmony School offered its middle school students a range of academic and extracurricular opportunities. The girls were part of enrichment classes, including photography, math games, debate, or computer graphic design. They took trips to Gettysburg, Washington D.C., the local skating rink, and the public library to hear a prominent young-adult novelist speak. The computer lab and classroom doors were open to students during and after school. Yet several girls commented that school was not as "open" as the book club. Analysis of the girls' comments on and descriptions of the book club revealed that girls saw the book club as more "open," "free" and "loose" than school. Five other participants expressed similar sentiments. Sid, another eighth grader, stated "We get to express everything. It's more free." Casey, a seventh grader, described the book club as "more free and open"; Amy, a seventh grader, said, "There's a lot more freedom. It's more funner than school."

An eighth grader described the book club members, and not the space of the book club, as "free and open." She added, "We laugh a lot and stuff." The connection is simple. Schools and

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classrooms need to be open for students to feel open—to display different identities and subject positions, share thoughts *and* feelings, express curiosity and uncertainty, take personal and intellectual risks, and laugh. The girls understood and defined "openness" differently. Stella commented, "In school, it's not as open. I mean, by eighth grade, we feel kind of open. But this is full blown out, don't be afraid to say what you want to say, nothing is wrong." Stella spoke to students' fear of being wrong, and being evaluated. Stella understood "openness" to mean willingness to reveal feelings and thoughts, a quality of being unreserved.

Carol offered a detailed description of the book club:

It kind of feels more, um, more free, like, loose. Not as much as rules, no boundaries really. Well, boundaries of course. But not much of a school environment going on. More of a hanging-out environment. And in class, I don't want to get in trouble so I just listen. (Interview, 5.27.09)

A free and open environment, Carol suggests, does not mean an absence of boundaries. Carol initially stated that the book club did not have any boundaries. Then she revised the statement, "Well, boundaries of course." Any social organization or context has boundaries. It is also interesting that Carol assumed a listening stance to avoid trouble. Listening can be an active form of participation, and is necessary for learning. However, the way Carol described listening suggests that students might choose to sit and listen than actively engage and challenge the teacher and classmates. Inside schools, students' behavior, talk and identity performances are closely monitored and regulated. Hogan and colleagues (2000) found that students are more willing to explore, experiment, and take risks if the teacher is not constantly monitoring the students. Molly commented that the most enjoyable aspect of the book club was everybody feeling comfortable enough to "just say things out loud." The book club offered students the latitude to think aloud; to try on different identities and subject positions; and to pursue a range of texts, ideas, issues and questions.

Implications for Pedagogy and Practice

Many of these dimensions (e.g., student agency, distributed expertise, collective participation, relationship-building) have been written about elsewhere to describe spaces that engage adolescents (see Fisher, 2007, for poetry and spoke-word cafes; Hull, 2003, for a

community-based, youth program for writing and producing digital stories; Cammarota & Fine, 2008 and McIntyre, 2006, for youth participatory action research projects; and Lankshear & Knobel, 2006 and Alvermann, 2008, for virtual spaces such as Wikipedia, social networking sites, and online gaming sites).

Increasingly, the spaces that students value are virtual ones, and the texts that they read and produce are multimodal. Therefore, researchers and educators have argued for the need to bridge the "old" and "new" literacies. One example of such bridging, according to Scharber, is online book clubs. Scharber (2009) studied teenagers and pre-teenagers' experiences and learning as part of online book clubs. Scharber understands the "old" literacy practice to mean reading literary texts for pleasure, and the "new" literacy practice to mean using online spaces for conversation and learning. Scharber, however, does not identify the particular dimensions of the "new" literacy practices that appeal to adolescents, nor does she explain how "new" literacies change the ways that students encounter and take up texts; relate to others; and produce knowledge. Therefore, Gadsden (2008) makes the important argument that bridging the old and new requires a conceptual and epistemological shift for educators and students. That is, it is not enough to give every student a laptop computer or hold online forums unless there is a shift to the way students experience learning, generate knowledge, and relate to one another.

The abovementioned dimensions are less likely to be found during the official school hour and inside school walls than during after-school hours; however, that does not need to be the case. I argue that classrooms should be spaces of distributed expertise, collective participation, student agency, humane relationships and openness, and that teachers' pedagogies should be inquiry-based.

Middle or high school teachers might see student-led and student-centered book clubs as not practical or even possible given the conditions of *real* classrooms and realities of standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing. The implication of the present study is *not* that book clubs are a "best-practice" proven to engage and transform all readers, independent of the particular learners and teacher, and independent of local contexts. Rather, the study has broader implications. It offers a different framework for reconceptualizing and constructing learning

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spaces—inside and outside of schools. Teachers can begin to see classrooms as sites of possibility and students as inquirers, theorizers and problem-solvers. Fine (2006) introduces the concept of provocative generalizability: the extent to which a study "provokes readers […] to rethink and reimagine current arrangements" (p. 98). Therefore this study has implications for expanding and enriching teachers' perceptions of the potentialities of middle and secondary-school classrooms, of adolescent girls, and of literacy and reading pedagogies. The study also suggests the importance of teachers' looking critically at their own classrooms—namely the organization of the learning space; nature of student-student relationships and student-teacher relationships; texts available to students; and opportunities available (or not) for students to encounter and experience "powerful ways of reading and writing" (Luke, 1998, p. 308).

Middle or high school teachers might also see the 23 adolescent girls at Harmony as *nothing* like the students they teach and support everyday. The girls at Harmony were sophisticated and "strong" readers. Ms. Heather described the girls as curious and eager to learn. I am aware that I recruited and studied a subset of the "advanced" literacy students at a reputable public school. I believe that there is value to researching the talents and successes of students of diverse backgrounds (Au, 1998; Delpit, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994), thereby adding knowledge on adolescents' potentialities and talents. Research on the experiences and perspectives of successful students, especially students of color, adds knowledge that can reframe public schools as sites of rich possibility for learning and engagement, and expand educators' views on adolescents as perceptive, insightful, and thoughtful. In the next section, I offer more research and policy recommendations that emerged from the present study.

Implications for Research

        Qualitative research on after-school and out-of-school programs

Adolescent literacy policy statements and middle school reform initiatives (see Jackson, Davis, Abeel & Bordonaro, 2000) make several recommendations for improving middle schools. The recommendations include extending learning beyond school hours and outside school walls through after-school programs. Because students spend 80 percent of their time out of school,

how and where they spend that time has significant implications for improving literacy outcomes for adolescents (Miller, 2003).

Spielberger and Halpern (2002) reviewed literacy programs for children, and concluded that the most successful and engaging programs involved literacy activities that are personally meaningful and useful, culturally and linguistically relevant to participants, and combined seriousness and play. Less research is available on after- and out-of-school programs for adolescent learners. More systematic research is needed to understand the dimensions of after-school programs for adolescents that lead to sustainable engagement and learning.

Hull and Schultz argue that after-school programs experience a tension—the tension to become "school-like organizations, serving essentially as arms of classrooms" or "alternative sites for alternative learning" (2001, p. 601). After-school programs can offer participants academic, social, or recreational activities (Fashola & Source, 1999). Decisions concerning the purpose, function and organization of after-school programs must be based on qualitative research that documents the learning opportunities offered to adolescents; includes students' experiences of and perspectives on such programs; and, accounts for students' expectations for the program. Such qualitative research can contribute to existing scholarship on after-school and out-of-school programs that relies primarily on experimental design, and evaluates the effectiveness of the programs using pre-test/post-test and student achievement gains (see Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001; Fashola & Source, 1999; Hammond & Reimer, 2006, for a review of evaluation studies of structured after-school programs).

Research on fluidity of literacy practices & multi-site research studies

Fundamental to any discussion of books clubs, whether school-based or out-of-school, is a focus on contexts. Adolescent literacy cannot be studied and written about outside of the contexts of literacy practices. The present study reinforces the idea that literacy researchers can contribute to existing scholarship on the meaning and significance of social contexts on student learning.

From my research with early adolescent and adolescent girls participating in an after-school book club, I witnessed students' transitions between in-and after-school learning contexts,

and movement of texts, social practices, and knowledge. I agree with Cole (1995) who reminds researchers that it is dangerous to approach context as a container that has rigid or fixed boundaries. Such a conceptualization of context ignores the movement of social practices, texts and knowledge across contexts. I also agree with Greene (2000) and Dimitriadis (2008) who urge educational researchers to focus on the movement of adolescents across contexts, and on the fluidity of literacy practices and identities. In my study, I observed the girls navigating multiple spaces and contexts (e.g., family, peer groups, classrooms, and out-of-school spaces, including the after-school book club). Dimitriadis (2008) writes that it is the "movement back and forth between sites that increasingly defines our lives and cultural landscapes, and must, therefore define our research agenda with urban youth" (p. 99). However, literacy educators and researchers' efforts have tended to focus on students' experiences in one setting (e.g., school), and less on students' participation across multiple settings (Lee, 2003).

Thus, emerging from the data as a research implication is the need for multi-site studies that follows students as they experience and navigate the contexts of schools, neighborhood, families and communities. What capabilities, beliefs and literacy practices do students carry across the many spaces of family, peer groups and school? Rather than conceptualize and study learning as taking place *either* inside *or* outside of schools, researchers must generate knowledge on the ways that multiple sites of learning are related (or not) for adolescents, raising questions about the conceptual and methodological frameworks that exist and/or must be developed for understanding the fluidity of adolescents' literacy practices and identities.

Research on adolescents as part of families and peer groups

The book club participants revealed the many ways that reading was practiced and experienced *within* a host of relationships. Friends, teachers and family members influenced the type of texts the girls are likely to have access to and actually read. They also shaped the ways that girls engage texts, and understand the purposes and goals for reading. Therefore, it would have been impossible to fully understand the literacy practices and literate lives of any one of the 23 girls *without* knowing the literacy practices of the girl's family members and friends. Even a case study of a single reader or learner must account for the meaning and significance of friends,

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teachers, family members and other adults. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) introduce the concept of ecology, and recommend that researchers and educators focus on relationships (e.g., peer, teacher-student, and family relationships).

Family was named as an important social and cultural context that informed the girls' understandings and experiences of literacy. The book club participants referred to friends and family members' literacy practices and belief, reminding researchers of the limitations of researching adolescents as autonomous beings, independent of families, social networks and peer groups.

Implications for Policy

The passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has prompted many school districts and schools to turn to after-school programs as a way to supplement students' school learning and offer academic programs designed to increase reading and mathematics scores (Harty, Fitzgerald, & Porter, 2008). The 21st Century Community Learning Centers Initiative—a federal funding source for after-and out-of-school programs—supports programs and services for academically 'at-risk' students, students attending high-poverty and low-performing schools, and limited English proficient learners. After-school programs' focus on remediation and drop-out prevention is not new, however. Eccles and Templeton (2002) argue that after-school programs have been positioned as a possible solution to the problem of school disengagement and dropout. The current policy conversations on after-school program do not interrogate the source of disengagement: quality of schools and other institutional barriers that constrain student learning. Rather than structure *more* after-school spaces that resemble school, educational policies need to consider the ways that schools can be redesigned to reflect students' interests, curiosities, and strengths; and reflect the complexities of the "New Times" (Hull, 2003; Luke, 1998): a "globalized economy, the emergency of new, hybrid forms of identities, and new technologies that are transforming print texts" (Luke, p. 306).

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Spielberger and Halpern (2002) among others (e.g., Hartry, Fitzgerald, & Porter, 2008) have suggested that a significant number of literacy-focused, after-school programs are designed for elementary grades. The policy implications of the present study are as follows: increased support for developing, implementing, and studying after- and out-of-school programs for *adolescents*; reframing the policy conversation on after-school programs to address institutional barriers that constrain students' learning and wellbeing (Gadsden, Davis, & Artiles, 2009); and policies at the local school and district-level that supports schools and teachers to accommodate physical and intellectual spaces—during the school day—for a range of purposes (e.g., social, recreational, academic).

Closing Considerations

One of the adolescent girls authored the title of the dissertation. Describing the book club, she said,

> We're in charge of what we're saying, what we discuss, and what we want to read, everything of our interest. And um, like we get to, we create everything. It's developed by us. (Sid, Interview, 11.12.08)

The girls decided on the text and content of discussions, and established participation norms and structures for the group. Nothing was ever predictable or known, including Heather and the girls' attendance. The uncertainty was at times uncomfortable and anxiety-producing. Yet, because I consciously worked at *listening* and *following* the girls as they told stories and pursued divergent ideas, issues and texts, I learned about them as readers of the word/world, book club participants, students, adolescents, and as human beings in the world—friends, granddaughters, daughters, sisters, and girlfriends. The girls initiated and sustained conversations that reflected the ways in which they understood themselves, other people, and their worlds; explored personal and social responsibilities to the world, and enacted their cultural, racial and gender identities. I learned about myself as a reader, educator, and beginning qualitative researcher.

There are questions that persist, however. A limitation of the study is that it did not include opportunities for girls to write. Reading, writing, and talking are fundamental to understanding and generating knowledge. That is, writing is also a mode of inquiry (Richardson, 1994; Stock, 1995). The girls, however, resisted the idea of writing, citing that writing would remind the book club of school. Therefore, little is known about girls' identities and practices as writers; and whether and how writing would have altered the girls' experiences of and participation in the after-school context.

The girls were invited to recommend and read any "text." I realize that such an invitation can lead to an easy conflation of books, films, YouTube videos as texts. I am also aware that broadening the traditional definition of texts to mean written, visual, and other expressive genres has been both embraced and questioned, particularly as concern mounts over the rate of literary reading over the past 20 years (NEA, 2004). Scholars and researchers across academic disciplines and fields (e.g., English, education, philosophy) have discussed the potential of literary texts to prompt readers to raise particular kinds of philosophical questions; explore possible ways of being and living; and imagine new possibilities for the self and world (see Bruner, 1991; Greene, 2001; Iser, 1978; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996). The majority of book club texts were literary, prompting questions about the relationship between literature and literacy, about whether literary texts provoked different responses and stances among the girls than song lyrics or non-fiction texts, and about what counts as a "good" interpretation of literature.

Lastly, the girls demonstrated an understanding of in-school and out-of-school contexts as reciprocal—that texts, social practices, knowledge and identities travel between and across contexts. The girls complicated the simple 'in-school/out-of-school' dichotomy. That does not mean that the girls did not have out-of-school literacy practices and texts, however. These practices included playing online games (e.g., Audition, Sims), taking personality and dating

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quizzes on Facebook, and sending friends hyperlinks to shopping websites. Hence, the question of what counts as productive similarities *and* differences (Alvermann, 2008) between adolescents' in- and out-of-school literacies is an area for further inquiry.

I was reading about adolescent literacy and adolescent readers, but more importantly, I was reading and talking *with* them. Luke (1998) argues that research should be *with* students and communities, not simply about them. Adolescents recognize research that takes seriously students' experiences, interests and questions; and research that involves students as participants and collaborators. Referring to the semi-structured interviews, Stella commented, "I feel like adults are always trying to boss you around. They don't take time to get to know you like this (referring to the interview). This is kind of cool" (Interview, 10.28.08).

As a researcher, I learned with and about 23 girls. I do not presume to have captured fully the complexity of the girls' experiences of and perspectives on the after-school book club. A dissertation tells only one story of many possible stories. What should be included in the story, according to the girls?

> **JP**: *So you know how eventually I am going to be writing this long paper about us. What do you think people who read this should know about the book club?*
>
> **Molly**: I think people should know they can learn about just everything, the world with their books.
>
> **Eve**: One of the most important things is how different we all are from each other, and we don't all come from the same place (Eve, seventh grader)
>
> **Helen:** I think they should know that we are all very different people who come from very different background and stuff.
>
> **Clarissa**: Well, the Thursday group, pretty much everybody in it, I've known to be, they get good grades, they don't really mess up in class. I think it would be different if it was people who weren't really the best. Like, if they didn't understand as well, or if they didn't behave as well, I think it would be completely different. (Clarissa, seventh grader)
>
> **Veronica**: I think that readers should know how we change other peoples' minds, how we get different people to read books they don't particularly like.
>
> **Sid**: I would say like, we have minds of our own. We know what we're talking about. Some of us know what we're talking about. Like we really understand. We're not naïve.

Appendix A

Flowers for Algernon (Keyes, 1968)
        Charlie Gordon becomes the research subject for an experimental surgery intended to increase human intelligence. Three months after the surgery, Charlie has an IQ of 185. As he becomes more intelligent, however, he has difficulty sustaining any human relationships. Charlie discovers that the experiment is flawed.

A Basket of Flowers (von Schmid, 1755)
        Mary, the daughter of a gardener, is described as pure, humble, compassionate and religions. Amelia, the daughter of a wealthy landowner, gives Mary a dress. The friendship incites the jealous of Juliette, Amelia's maid. A valuable ring belonging Amelia is discovered missing. Juliette seizes that opportunity to accuse Mary. Mary is imprisoned for the crimes. Eventually the lost ring is recovered and Mary is exonerated.

The Little Prince (Saint-Exupéry, 1943)
        The narrator, a pilot, has landed in the Sahara Desert. As he is repairing his plane, he meets the little prince. The book centers on the dialogue between the pilot and little prince. The little prince describes his journey from planet to planet, where he meets adults who symbolize some aspect of adulthood.

The Soloist (Lopez, 2008)
        The Soloist is a true story about the relationship between Steve Lopez and Nathaniel Ayers, a homeless musician with schizophrenia. The story focuses on the friendship between the two men, and on Lopez's attempts to help Ayers move off Skid Row and play his music. Rather than depict an ideal image of friendship, Lopez details the disappointments and setbacks, and questions his own motives for helping Nathaniel.

Schooled (Korman, 2007)
        Capricorn , a 13-year old boy, lives on a farm commune with his grandmother, Rain. However, when Rain is hospitalized, Cap is taken by a social worker and must live in the "real" world. Capricorn has never watched television, tasted pizza, or attended a public school. The novel centers on Capricorn's trials and tribulations as a middle school student.

Alanna: Song of the Lioness (Pierce, 1997)
        To train as a warrior and become a knight, Alanna pretends to be a boy. Alanna enters as a page in the royal court. Soon she draws the attention of many, including the crown prince. The novel focuses on Alanna's life in the royal court, her friendships with other knights-in-training, and her attempts to keep her gender a secret.

Bones (Burke, 1999),
        Journalist Irene Kelly accompanies an investigate team that is looking for the victims of serial killer Nicolas Parrish. The team brings along Nicolas Parris so that he can help identify the graves of the victims. However, a grave explodes and most members on the team are killed. Irene manages to survive the explosion and escape, but so does Nicolas Parrish. Most of the novel focuses on events after Irene's escape. She returns home and continues to work on finding Nicolas Parrish.

The Host (Meyer, 2008*);*

In this science fiction-romance novel, an alien race, called Souls, takes over Earth and its inhabitants. Wanderer, a Soul, is inserted into the human body of Melanie Stryder. However, Melanie is not willing to give up her mind and memories. Wanderer must deal with Melanie's memories of Jared (Melanie's lover) and Jamie (Melanie's younger brother). Wanderer eventually finds Jared and Jamie, who are living among a group of rebel humans. The novel focuses on Wanderer/Melanie's relationships with Jared, Jamie and other humans living in the cave.

We All Fall Down (Cormier, 1991)

This novel begins with four teenage boys vandalizing a home. Karen Jerome comes home to witness the vandalism. The boys push her down the stairs, and she goes into a coma. Jane Jerome, Karen's older sister, meets and falls in love with Buddy, who happens to be one of the vandals. Buddy is also an alcoholic. The novel also has a subplot that involves a character named, "The Avenger." The identity of The Avenger remains a mystery for most of the novel. Jane eventually discovers Buddy's involvement in the vandalism and leaves the relationship.

Secret Life of Bees (Kidd, 2001*),*

The Secret Life of Bees is about a 14-year-old Lily who lives with her father, T-Ray and nanny, Rosaleen. The novel is set during the 1964 and beings with Rosaleen who must leave town for defending her new right to vote. Lily takes the opportunity to go with her. They head to Tiburon, South Carolina, where they find three middle-aged Black sisters, August, June and May Boatwright. August, June and May, makers of Black Madonna Honey, take in Lily and Rosaleen. Lily works in the honey house and finds happiness.

Mick Harte Was Here (Park, 1995*),*

The narrator of the novel is Phoebe, an eighth grader, whose younger brother (Mick) dies as a result of a bicycle accident. The novel focuses on the individual and collective pain and recovery of Phoebe's family members. The author also reminds readers of the importance of wearing bike helmets. Towards the conclusion of the novel, Phoebe speaks at a school assembly on bicycle safety.

Speak (Anderson, 1999)

Anderson's young adult novel centers on the experiences of Melinda Sordino, a teenager who chooses not to speak. She is hiding a secret about what happened at an end-of-summer party. In art class, she is given a project in which she must draw a tree. Melinda learns to find strength and comfort in her art. As the novel progresses, she befriends David Petrakis, her lab partner.

Dateable: Are you? Are they? (Lokadoo & DiMarco, 2003)

The authors of *Dateable* offer advice to adolescents about dating, sex, and communicating with their latest "crush." They argue that because teen relationships never last, adolescents should not invest themselves so much emotionally, physically and spiritually. The text includes sidebars, quizzes, and checklists.

<center>**Appendix B**</center>

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: For Students

First round:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself (age, siblings)

- How long have you been at this school?

- Describe a typical day in school for me. Walk me through what you do in your literacy class.

- What do you read (both in and out of school)?

- How do you decide what to read?

- What do you write (both in and out of school)?

- Outside of school, how do you spend most of your time?

- Do you like to go online? What do you usually do online?

- What do you think makes a good reader?

- What are the reasons for joining the after-school book club?

- What are your expectations?

- Do you ever read the same book or text (websites, movies, magazines) as your friends? Do you ever discuss what you read afterwards?

- So at this school, you are in Ms. Heather's literacy class. So I noticed the word, literacy is used. The teachers use, the students use it. When people say literacy to you, what does that mean?

- If you were talking to adults, what are some of the things they should know about what it means to be a 12-year old girl.

Second round:

- Tell me a little bit about how you are experiencing our book club so far.

- Why do you thinks students see or read the same books differently?
- If a new student came to this school and was thinking about joining our club, what would you tell her?

- How did your parents respond when you informed them of your decision to participate in the literacy group?

Third-round:

- What do you like most about our time together?

- Is there anything that you would like to change about our group? Do you have any recommendations for improving the book club?

- If you were giving recommendations to a teacher who was interested in forming his or her own after-school book club, what would you tell him or her?

- If you were going to select a teacher to lead a group like ours, what qualities would you look for?

- Name one or two moments from our time together that stand out in your memory? Why were they memorable or important?

- Would you consider being part of another book club in the future?

- Eventually I am going to be writing this long paper about the book club. What do you think are the two most important things people should know about what we're about, and about what we've been doing?

Exit Interview Protocol
These questions will be asked to students who decide to leave the after-school club.

- What are the reasons for your decision to leave the after-school book club?

- Name one or two moments from our time together that stand out in your memory? Why were they memorable or important?

Individual Interview Protocol: For Heather

Round 1:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself (age, background)

- How long have you been at this school?

- What are your hopes and expectations for the after-school book club? What were you trying to make happen in this space and why?

- Have you been a part of any reading and/or writing groups? Book clubs? Briefly talk about your experiences.

- What were the challenges and frustrations of facilitating and leading the group? What were the rewards?

- What would you do differently as a teacher-facilitator? If you were giving recommendations to a teacher who was interested in forming his or her own after-school literacy group, what would you tell him or her?

- What does it mean for you to read together? In what ways, if at all, are collective and communal readings important?

- What are the reasons for your decision to lead and facilitate this after-school book club?

Round 2:

- Tell me a little bit about how you are experiencing our book club so far.

- Name one or two salient or critical incidents from the book club conversations. Why were they salient or important?

- What does it mean for students and teachers to create a reading community in school?

- What changes, if at all, did you observe from the students throughout the year?

- How else can literacy educators create spaces or opportunities for students to engage in social and critical readings both in and out-of-school?

Book Club Discussions Codes

Description/descriptor of book club:
- Free
- Personal
- Open
- Different
- Fun
- Hanging-Out
- Snacks/Can eat

Parents:
- Parents' literacy practices
- Students' relationship with parents
- Parents' beliefs
- Parents' practices

Sibling (brothers, sisters)

Family Members
- Grandparents
- Cousins

Text-based comments
- Comments about literary characters (protagonists)
- Visualizing characters
- Evaluation of book (liked book/did not like book)
- Lesson/moral of the story
- Comparison between the book's author and another author
- Symbols
- Summarizing book
- Predictions
- Questions about the book (What genre?)
- Text to Text connections
- Text to Self connections
- Critiquing the book (What was problematic about book?)
- Comments about genre

School
- Other teachers/class
- Projects
- Literacy class
- PSSAs
- School-assigned books
- What happened in school

- Comments about classmates

Outside of School
- YouTube
- Facebook
- Writing
- Going to the public library
- Sports practice
- Gaia
- MySpace
- Text messaging

Discursive "moves" (interaction; participation structure)
- Apology
- Agreement
- Disagreement
- Questioning each other
- Teasing/Joking
- Introducing new/different topic
- Topic resumption marker (bringing talk back to the discussion)
- References to previous discussion
- Reading aloud text
- Mentioning/going back to text for support
- Statement characterized by uncertainty, "I think…"

Book recommendations
- Recommending a book
- Appropriate text
- Inappropriate text

Boys
- Comments about boys
- Difference between boys and girls
- Ways to relate to boys
- Boyfriends (number of boyfriends, desire for boyfriends, describing boyfriends, revealing identities of boyfriends)
- Identity claims: (Girlfriend, "professional")
- Normative-evaluative (the ways girls should be with boys)
- Subjective claims: (How boys make them feel: "It feels good when he says…")

Sex
- Questions about sex
- Reference to birth control
- Researcher's comment about sex
- Researcher's question to girls

Dating
- Rules about dating

- Views on dating
- Advice to other girls
- Researcher's comment about dating
- Researcher's question to girls

Race
- Girls' personal experiences or stories
- Girls' beliefs (color-blind, racism exists, race as color)
- Subjective claims ("It makes me sad to see/hear")
- Normative-evaluative ("Should be color-blind")
- Teacher beliefs
- Researcher beliefs
- Identity claims (bi-racial, Asian, African American)
- Upbringing/Family
- Families and Relatives

Homelessness:
.
- Questions about homelessness
- Comments about poverty/class
- Comments about their class positionality (e.g., "We're spoiled brats")
- Social mobility
- Ways girls can help
- Pursuit of Happyness
- Homeless shelters
- Observations of homelessness
- Researcher's comments about homelessness
- Identity claims ("I am privileged")
- Subjective claims ("I am ashamed" "I am scared")

School:
- Friendship groups
- Looking ahead at high school
- Importance of education
- Cafeteria
- Cliques

Popular culture
- Clothing
- Objects (ipod)
- Music
- Movies
- Television shows
- Celebrities
- Manga

- Twilight

References to out-of-school events
- School dance
- Musical
- Fieldtrip

Religion
- References to girls' religion

Interview Codes

Identity
- Age
- Grade
- Adjectives (shy, calm)
- Former schooling experiences

Out-of-school activities
- Sports
- Baby-sitting
- Piano
- Television
- Homework
- Talk to friends/Hang out with friends
- Library

Literacy practices
- Reading (magazine, books, newspaper)
- Watching television
- Watching YouTube
- Writing (poems, short stories, emails/letters)
- Keeping a Journal
- Talking to parents
- Facebook or MySpace
- Playing online games

Description/descriptor of book club:
- Free
- Personal
- Open
- Different
- Fun
- Hanging out

Parents:
- Parents' literacy practices

- Students' relationship with parents
- Parents' beliefs
- Parents' practices

Sibling (brothers, sisters)

Family Members
- Grandparents
- Cousins

Comments about school

Classroom Observation Codes

Teacher explanation of task (directions, due dates)
- Expectations
- Expectations for student behavior
- Expectations for student work

Teacher Humor

Teacher evaluation
- Praise, acknowledgement
- Disciplining students

Teacher questions to students

Teacher comments on literacy/definitions of literacy

Teacher mini-lesson
- Writing
- Grammar
- Reading (e.g., identifying features of non-fiction)
- Purpose of literature
- Differences between fiction and non-fiction
- Elements of narrative

Teacher references to "high school" expectations

Student questions to teacher

Student questions to classmates

Student response and comments

Student behaviors (e.g., head down on desk)

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Interruptions (other teachers' interruptions, phone calls from main office)

Seating arrangement

Descriptor of students' appearance
- Race
- Gender
- Physical characteristics (height, hair color)

Types of texts in class
- Reader's notebook
- Writer's notebook
- Free-choice novels
- Classroom library texts
- Literature Anthology

Instructional activity/opportunities
- Group presentations
- Independent Reading
- Independent Writing
- Sharing/Celebrating Student Work
- Independent work
- Group Conversations
- Computer Lab
- Socratic Seminar
- Journey
- Mix & Mingle

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