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LITERACY AND IDENTITY: REFLECTIONS OF SIX AFRICAN

AMERICAN MALES IN AN ADULT LITERACY PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This multiple case study explored how the literate experiences of six African American men influenced their perceptions of and engagement with a community-based adult basic education and literacy (ABEL) program in a large northeastern city. The theoretical framework included a social practices view of literacy and a constructivist view of identity. Narrative analysis, specifically Riessman's (2008) dialogic/performance approach, served as the analytic and interpretive lens. This study presents a socio-historical view of the men's literacy experiences beginning with early schooling and concluding with their presence in the ABEL program.

The findings indicate the men's literacy experiences in early schooling, society, and the ABEL program influenced their perceptions of and engagement with the program. First, their early schooling and ABEL program experiences show that the social context greatly influenced the choices they made about academic literacy and learning. Second, the men participated in the program to fulfill social roles, to be considered qualified for unemployment, and to negate the deficit construction of their literate identities formed in early schooling. Third, their positive experiences in the program enhanced their self-concepts and encouraged them to believe in their abilities to succeed, thereby encouraging them to stay with the program.

This research project contributes to adult basic education and literacy, literacy and identity, and K-12 scholarship by demonstrating the significant role identity played in the men's literacy experiences and the choices they made about literacy development. It also adds to the nascent research on African American men, provides a nuanced view of their reasons for joining ABEL programs, demonstrates how literacy can inform the perception and enactment of gendered identities, and presents a counter-narrative to theories of African American men's resistance to learning. The men's narratives tell stories not only about themselves and their communities, but the society in which we live.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Awakening

My interest in exploring African American men and adult literacy is the result of

seemingly disconnected moments and unanswered questions. Between 2002 and 2004, I

volunteered as an adult literacy tutor at an adult learning program in a large northeastern city. I

encountered two African American men in their late teens who were working toward the

acquisition of a General Educational Development (GED®) diploma. One student had been living

on the street since the age of eight and was now living in a shelter. During his time at the literacy

center, he discovered he had an affinity for math, passed the GED test, and received a college

scholarship. The other student was a gifted writer who had dropped out of school. He also passed

his GED and went on to college while tutoring at the program. We co-taught a math class

together. I was amazed by the rapt attention he received from the other students who were around

his age. There was a measure of mutual understanding that seemed anchored in similar

experiences and understandings which I had not tapped into.

After meeting these two gifted young men, I wondered about the undiscovered gifts that

were lost to other men and women and to their communities. They brought to my remembrance a

Bible verse that continues to reverberate in my mind: "Much food is in the tilled land of the poor,

but they are those who are destroyed because of injustice" (Proverbs 13:23 (Amplified Bible).

During my graduate program, a number of moments confirmed the direction of my

interest. During my second year, I picked up a newspaper and saw headlines stating that 60% of

African American males serve jail time. Another headline stated that African American males

were dropping out of school at a rate of 45%. In the business world, my focus was on client

service and making money. I am sure these topics took center stage in the news before, but it was the first time that I *saw* them. I wanted to understand the issues associated with African American males and education, yet I felt somehow disconnected from it. In my middle-class, West Indian world, jail and dropout were topics seldom discussed.

I read *A Critical Discourse of Family Literacy Practices* by Rebecca Rogers for a family literacy class, which led me to question my long held assumption that if you just work hard enough you will progress and improve your life. Rogers' case study of an African American family demonstrated the power of hegemony in constraining the efforts and opportunities of those who are marginalized. Even those with the best intentions can contribute to the marginalization of others because they are unaware of how structural forces shape their world views, their interactions with others, and how people live their lives.

More recently, I returned to the program to attend a book launching event where the students shared their writings with family and friends. At the end of the event, I was approached by a Jamaican immigrant who looked to be in his mid-twenties. He was angry. He thought the students' presentations ignored societal structures that negatively shaped their lives. He wanted to know why no one talked about why he as a Black male felt a sense of inferiority since arriving in the United States. Although the students were making progress in the program, he thought they were blind to the realities of their situation, and the program did nothing to correct it. His assessment was based on a cursory view of the program, yet his questions and anger remained with me. As a Black Barbadian American, his comments resonated with my own experience of coming to the United States and recognizing that I was considered "less than" because I was Black. And although I have felt the ramifications of that in my daily lived experience, I must also acknowledge that being female and of foreign birth have often afforded me preferential treatment over those of native birth.

Beyond research on recent high school dropouts, African American men's experiences in adult basic education are minimally represented. Participants attend adult literacy programs to bring about change in their lives. If we as adult educators are unfamiliar with the lives of those we serve, how can we expect to engage them?

Problem and purpose statement

Literacy and identity mutually constitute each other and are therefore influential factors in adult literacy program participation, yet this relationship remains under explored in adult basic education theory and practice (Collins & Blot, 2003; Gee, 2008; Rogers, 2004). Literacy is a social construct underpinned by values and perspectives that define individuals as certain types of persons, and is used to mediate the distribution of goods and services. Adult learners also use literacy to support particular identities and so approach literacy with aspirations and expectations that shape how they define, engage with, and use literacy.

A prominent theme in the adult literacy literature is the prevalence of stop out (intermittent participation), drop out, and non-participation. According to the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, roughly 90 million adults in the United States have low literacy skills, yet less than 8% are served by existing programs (Quigley, 2000; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). In 1995, the U S Department of education estimated that the dropout rate reached as high as 80% (Amstutz, 2001). The National Center for Study of Adult Learning and Literacy puts the average at 60% (Beder, 1991). These concerns are certainly not unique to the United States; the challenges of adult literacy participation are voiced in Western and developing countries' discourse on education (Agnaou, 2004; Friedrich, Jelllema, Haq, Nalwoga, & Nessa, 2003; Harrington, 2008; Terry, 2004).

Although perspectives vary as to what literacy is, the causes and consequences of illiteracy, program approaches and their benefits, the acquisition of literacy is generally recognized as a necessity of the 21st century. Its importance is anchored in the perceived

consequences of literacy as critical to social and economic progress. In the popular media and political arenas, literacy is necessary for the eradication of social ills such as poverty, crime, and unemployment, as well as competitive global positioning through an educated workforce (Bridgeland, Delulio, & Morrison, 2006; Sum & Harrington, 2003). Alternately, social justice proponents envision literacy as a pathway to individual and collective empowerment for the poor and marginalized through participation in democratic processes, critical assessment of existing social structures that contribute to their oppression, and collective action and resistance (Freire, 1970a). Interestingly, both perspectives connect lliteracy in varying measure to the alleviation of social ills. Consequently, adult educators and researchers have sought to identify and address barriers to participation in adult education programs.

Generally speaking, there are three discourses that underpin the perception and practice of literacy in the United States. The functional or skills view is the primary discourse in which funding policies and practices are situated. Proponents conceive of literacy as the acquisition of neutral skills that will generate individual and social development. They interpret the correlation between poverty and illiteracy from a deficit perspective while overlooking institutional and social constraints that deter progress for marginalized groups. By promoting literacy skills as the key to economic progress in a meritocratic and democratic society, they perceive adult literacy learners to be morally and intellectually lacking and responsible for their destitute circumstances (Quigley, 1997; St. Clair & Sandlin, 2000).

In contrast, the sociocultural view (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2000; Street, 1984) draws attention to the social and cultural structures that shape the access and outcomes of literacy and recognizes adult literacy learners as active agents who possess a wealth of experience that inform their learning. The critical view incorporates this perspective but sees literacy as political and therefore a conduit for social change (Bartlett, 2008; Freire, 1970b; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Advocates contend that poverty is the cause of illiteracy due to inequitable and unjust structural

barriers that limit access. Learners demonstrate resilience and agency in the pursuit of literacy despite daily challenges. However, some versions of the radical perspective also position learners as unconscious supporters of the hegemonic systems that oppress them, requiring a focus on critical skills and collective action (Freire, 1970b).

In a review of adult basic education and literacy programs, Wikelund, Reder and Hart-Landsberg (1992) found the lack of resources and the quality of existing programs were primary inhibitors to the adult literacy campaign initiated by the Department of Education in 1990. The second factor and focus of this study, enhancing service quality, underscored the need for more nuanced approaches in meeting the needs of a diverse population. Similar to other studies (Fingeret, 1984; Flannery, 1994; Guy, 2005; Sheared, 1999; Sissel, 1996; Sparks & Peterson, 2000), Wikelund, et al (1992) found that a narrow research agenda, dissonance between the values and goals of program providers and participants, and the confounding of literacy and schooling on the part of all stakeholders negatively influenced service provision.

Over the last 25 years, researchers and adult educators have increasingly acknowledged that literacy is not just the acquisition of neutral skills but a social practice, alerting us to the influence of identity and culture on learner participation. New Literacy Studies (NLS) research has demonstrated that literacy is shaped by the values of all stakeholders, is multiple in form, and is mediated by power relations (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). Participants engage with literacy for specific purposes based upon certain expectations (Rogers, 2003). Adult educators and literacy sponsors (Brandt, 2009)[1] also have assumptions about the purposes, practices, and benefits of literacy. Within the context of adult basic education (ABE), the values and expectations of literacy sponsors, adult educators, and

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[1] Literacy sponsors are "agents, local or distant, abstract or concrete, who enable, support, teach, model, recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy and gain advantage by it in some way….who want our literacy as much as we do…[and]…are catalysts of change around literacy and the source of the ideological accumulation and congestion that grows up around it" (Brandt, 2009, p. xiii).

learners intermix in a power-relations dynamic that often obscures learner-identified values, purposes, and needs.

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act funds about 41,000 adult education providers, including community, junior and technical colleges, high schools, libraries, and community- and faith-based organizations. The GED Test was created in 1942 for returning veterans to demonstrate the knowledge and skills associated with a high school diploma so they could pursue college and vocational goals. Today, ABE represents a diverse population consisting of high school dropouts, immigrants, and returning adult learners, most of whom are of low-socioeconomic (SES) status with a minimum age of 16 (depending on the state). Of the 2.3 million students enrolled in federally funded programs in 2008, 850,000 were between the ages of 16 and 24; 1.1 million were between the ages of 25 and 44; and 400,000 were 45 years and older. In terms of racial and ethnic composition, 43% were Latino, 26% were White, and 20% were Black (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Federally funded adult education programs include three types: adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). ABE serves participants who have an eighth grade or below reading level. ASE serves those who have reading and math levels between ninth and twelfth grades and are focusing on getting their GED, whereas ESOL serves those who are learning English. The latter now represents the largest segment of adult basic education and literacy programs at 45%, ABE is second with 41% and ASE is third with 14% (U. S. Department of Education, 2011). In the United States, the high school diploma and the GED certificate have become the institutional means for identifying the literate individual and a common requirement for job placement. For the purpose of this study, ABE and adult literacy are used interchangeably.

The role of learner identity in the acquisition, meaning and uses of literacy is well documented for women (Bartlett, 2008; Carmack, 1992; Gibson, 1996) and adolescents (Camitta,

1993; Godley, 2004; Wortham, 2006) but African American men are minimally represented. Fifty-three percent of African American males drop out of school (Holzman, 2010), making them likely candidates for adult basic education, yet they are underrepresented in these programs (Denny, 1992). Early schooling experiences influence their perception of, and participation in, adult basic education programs (Belzer, 2004; Quigley, 1992; Rogers, 2004; Schwartz, 2010). Beyond the works mentioned here, adult education scholarship has paid scant attention to what these experiences are and how they mediate the learner's engagement with adult literacy programs.

The burgeoning literature on academic achievement and the struggles of marginalized groups to maximize their full potential within the public education system clearly evinces the multiplicity of factors involved. Within the socio-historical framework of race relations in the United States, the experiences of African American males in the school system and society have been and continue to be shaped by the intersection of race, class, and gender. Legacies of racism and prejudice have led to an uneven distribution of resources, access, and opportunities as well as the perpetuation of negative stereotypes (Brandt, 2001; Darling-Hammond, Williamson, & Hyler, 2007; B. Hammond, Hoover, & McPhail, 2005). The characterization of African American males as having behavior problems and limited intelligence often inform school policies and student-teacher interactions (Ferguson, 2000; Tatum, 2003).

African American males have been positioned as "at risk" for all sorts of negative trajectories and disproportionately tracked into special education (Ferguson, 2000; B. Hammond, Hoover, & McPhail, 2005). Furthermore, the devaluation of African American culture and identities in the school system has contributed to disaffection, resistance, and dropout (Fordham, 1996; Giroux, 1983; Price, 2000). Therefore, the cultural differences and experiences of African American males in the socio-historical context of race relations in the United States cannot be

captured under the prevalent models of White middle-class masculinities and experiences (Flannery, 1994; Isaac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001; Jackson II, 2006).

Research on participation has been primarily quantitative centered on barriers to participation and the characteristics and motivations of learners (P. Cross, 1981; Hayes, 1988; Metzer, 1997; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). However, since these models and studies do not address the quality of participation nor illuminate adult learners' varied experiences (Flannery, 1994; Isaac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001), they provide a limited knowledge base for addressing the needs of a diversified population. In addition, participation research has focused more on enrollment than the degree to which students are involved in the program and take ownership of their learning (Bagnall, 1989).

Research on African American men and adolescents indicates that an understanding of the relationship between African American men and literacy requires the following: an exploration of the unique construction of a pathologized African American male identity in the public sphere and the school system (Fordham, 1996; Jackson II, 2006; Tatum, 2003), an adoption of a socio-historical framework that takes into consideration the legacy of slavery and racism (Darling-Hammond, Williamson, & Hyler, 2007; McPhail, 2005; E. A. Peterson, 1996), and the recognition of the intimate connection of race, class, and gender (Cuyjet, 2006; MacLeod, 1995; Price, 2000). Since a foundational tenet of adult education is the incorporation of learner experiences as resources for learning, the lacuna of research on African American men in adult literacy programs implies that their needs may be overlooked in pedagogical and curricular approaches. Therefore, research on African American men and how their identities influence their engagement in ABE is crucial to enhancing and maintaining their participation (Noguera, 2003; Sheared, 1999).

Study focus and research questions

In this multiple case study (Stake, 2005), I explored how the literate experiences of six African American men influenced their perceptions of and engagement with literacy and with an ABEL program. I approached my research from a sociocultural perspective, drawing upon a social practices view of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1984) and a constructivist conception of identity (Gee, 2000-2001). The social practices view of literacy exposed the contextual factors of literacy acquisition and development that might otherwise be obscured by a skills framework. In addition, a constructivist view of identity complemented the social practices view of literacy, and alerted me to the negative and positive identities literacy competency generates through social structures, power relations, and interactions.

My research questions were: 1) How do African American men who participate in an adult basic education and literacy program describe their literacy experiences? 2) What aspirations do African American men believe participation in an ABEL program will help them achieve? 3) What literacy and educational experiences do African American men perceive to be influential in shaping their literate, cultural, and gender identities? 4) What experiences inside and outside the ABEL program do African American men perceive to hinder or support their literacy goals?

Methods

The research was conducted in a large northeastern city between April and June 2010. Criterion and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) were used to select six African American men aged 21-64 who were enrolled in a church-sponsored ABEL program for a minimum of five months. Three were at the GED level and three were at the low literacy level. Data sources included 16 interviews and 19 hours of participant observation. I used narrative analysis, specifically Riessman's (2008) performance/dialogic approach, as my interpretive and analytic strategy. Narrative analysis is suited to unveiling the individual construction of experiences and

their related meanings, and to discerning subtle changes in identity; however, Riessman's approach also assumes the influence of historical, interactional, institutional, and cultural contexts in the construction of narratives.

Findings

I argue that the men's early schooling experiences combined with their adult literacy experiences, influenced their perceptions of and engagement with ABEL programs. The men's narratives indicate that their literacy experiences in early schooling and in society positioned them as deficient, and excluded them from full participation in the class community and society. Their early schooling environments were sites of alienation, forcing participants to make choices between physical and psycho-social safety and academic progress, ultimately leading to attrition. I use the phrase "leaving school early" as opposed to "dropping out" because the latter implies intentionality, whereas the participants were either taken out, pushed out (Fine, 1991), or left of their own volition.

For some participants, the deficit construction of their literate identities formed in early schooling was strengthened by their literacy experiences in society. Their interactions with society demonstrated they were considered ineligible for social goods such as gainful employment, promotions, and respect. Some of the men found that their ex-felon identities outweighed the value of the GED certificate. Yet, all the participants averred the value of the GED certificate in conferring the identity of the "qualified." Their literacy experiences also influenced how they enacted their literate, gender, and cultural identities, and thus their self-perception as literate, gendered, and cultural beings. Aspirations to fulfill social expectations and to claim particular identities such as the good provider or qualified employee motivated the participants to enroll in the ABEL program.

The men's experiences in the ABEL program fostered nascent proficient literate identities and positively affected their self-concept. Despite structural and personal obstacles, a

caring environment, supportive student-teacher relationships, and evidence of academic progress encouraged the men to believe in their ability to reach their goals. Their narratives demonstrate that literacy and learning are intimately connected to the construction of identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wortham, 2006) and, more specifically, to the negating and claiming of particular identities. The men's stories are also social artifacts showing that the stratified conditions of society and the "economies of literacy" - the interconnection of literacy sponsors and the economy (Brandt, 2009) - constrain literacy access and outcomes for the marginalized. Overall, the findings stress the importance of identity in literacy access, development, and outcomes.

This study contributes to adult literacy theory and practice in primarily two ways. First, it adds to the nascent body of research on African American men in ABEL programs. Second, it highlights how literacy as a Discourse (Gee, 2008) and literacy experiences influence the construction of gendered identities, thereby shaping the men's motivations for enrolling in ABEL programs. Because of the incorporation of early schooling experiences, this study also contributes to K-12 research on student attrition by offering a nuanced understanding of attrition from the student perspective of identity protection (rationales for school disengagement were anchored in self-protective strategies). The goal of this research project was to provide insight into the literacy experiences of African American men with the purpose of promoting their increased and sustained participation in ABEL programs. Therefore, this research is useful for practitioners, adult educators, and researchers.

This dissertation is organized accordingly. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature and chapter 3 discusses the research design. Chapters 4 through 6 present the findings in somewhat chronological order. In Chapter 4, the men's early schooling experiences are organized around reasons for leaving school early. Chapter 5 covers their literacy experiences in society and their motivations for enrolling in the ABEL program, and Chapter 6 explores the supports and obstacles that influenced the men's perception of and engagement with the program. Chapter 7

reviews the key findings, providing theoretical and practical implications, as well as suggestions

for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

I used Blumer's (1954) idea of a "sensitizing concept" to gain a "general sense of reference and guidance" (p.7) concerning the factors that contribute to African American men's experiences with literacy and ABEL programs. The bodies of literature referenced in this chapter include sociological and psychological theories of identity, masculinities scholarship, New Literacy Studies (NLS), African American males and academic achievement, and adult education participation research.

This chapter is organized accordingly: 1) a discussion of identity and literacy; 2) a socio-historical exploration of African American experiences with literacy acquisition and education; 3) a brief overview of participation research; and 4) a review of the main points and how they contribute to my theoretical framework.

Identity

Identity is a combination of personal (ego) and social (collective) identities consisting of past and present experiences, as well as future aspirations and expectations, and is subject to change by social and cultural factors such as the large-scale effects of globalization or participation in a new setting that devalues and promotes the enactment of particular identities (Brandt, 2001; Ferdman, 1990; Gee, 2000-2001; Hall, 1997). These aspirations and expectations are shaped through symbolic interaction, which holds the following premises: 1) individuals respond to things based upon the meanings they attach to them; 2) these meanings are fostered through interaction with others; and 3) they are mediated by individual interpretation (Blumer, 1969, as cited in Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Therefore, I support a constructivist view of identity that recognizes the influence of African American culture and the larger society in the

aspirations and expectations of African American men and the identities they seek to create and support through literacy acquisition and development.

Identity and social identity theories

Overview

Little distinction has been made between identity and identification in adult education literature. Identity refers to individual characteristics and identification refers to a person's alignment with a particular group (Reicher, 2004). This distinction is useful in understanding how discourse, social structures, and agency contribute to and inform African American men's perception of and engagement with literacy. Drawing upon the concept of symbolic interaction, identity theory (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) focuses on the relationship of the individual to society and seeks to explain behavior through the negotiation of multiple role identities that are shaped through interaction between self and society. It incorporates identity salience, which states that there is a hierarchical order to role identities although contextual factors may belie the self-perceived importance of that role. In other words, an increased level of commitment leads to increased role performance, resulting in a greater expression of a particular identity; however, situations can limit that expression. For example, unemployment restricts a father's ability to function in the role of family provider, but it does not negate his perception of the importance of that role. As a behavioral construct, identity salience suggests that an individual is likely to display behavior that aligns with his or her degree of commitment, which can be interpreted as the relative importance of that identity to individual self-concept.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) focuses on systemic influences (e.g., school, media, and culture) that explicate how roles are internalized. Self- conception theory (Turner, 1982) is a key component that shows how the individual aligns himself with a particular group through the appropriation of normative group behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes. Social identity shapes values, norms, and beliefs (Reicher, 2004) and is enacted as a "combination of

thinking, feeling, doing, talking, and belonging" (Wenger, 1998, p.56). It should be noted here

that commitment to group ideals is also subject to identity salience (W. E. Cross, 1991; Stryker &

Serpe, 1994). For example, the identity of father or husband may take precedence over the

identity of the literate individual and so limit the time and involvement in pursuing a GED

certificate. Alternatively, identities are also discursively and institutionally assigned, which

individuals and groups may resist due to negative economic, social, and political outcomes

(Crenshaw, 1991; Jacobs & Potter, 1998).

  I agree with Stets and Burke (2000) that the combination of both identity and social

identity theories has potential for eliciting a more comprehensive understanding of identity and,

concomitantly, of how African American males engage with literacy to foster certain identities.

In particular, social identity theory focuses more on the influence of power in the construction of

identities and personal identity speaks to agency and non-essentialist notions of identity. The

bottom line is that we see ourselves through the eyes of others (Dubois, 1953; Holstein &

Gubrium, 2000). It is through interaction that we are recognized and recognize ourselves to be

certain types of people (Gee, 2000).

  Agency determines whether a person will align with or reject ascribed identities. Ahearn

(2001) described agency as the "culturally constrained capacity to act" (p. 7); however, an

individual can push beyond cultural restraints when s/he encounters discourses that expand

his/her mental schema (Bakhtin, 1981; Bamberg, 2004). An individual's desire to act, overtly or

covertly (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Giroux, 1983), and the successful completion of the action to

effect a change in circumstances are often mediated, or rather, strengthened by others who are

employing the same action (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). So the presence of

other African American males in an ABEL program may encourage persistence as they work

towards similar goals of bringing about change in their lives. Based upon the interplay between

agency and cultural scripts, I align with McCarthy and Moje's (2002) and Gee's (2000-2001)

conceptions of identity and the self, which assert that identity is a relational product (a result of relationship) that is grounded in recognition, negotiated in interaction, and subjected to change. The self is made up of many identities that are linked to history, culture, language or experience. In the historical context of the United States, race (primarily phenotype) has been a principal identity marker for African Americans as a group. I will briefly discuss its implications in the next section.

Racial identity

Racial identities are socially constructed group identities supported by morally defined characterizations of good and bad that are used for social control and the distribution of society's goods and services (Omi & Winant, 1994). The historical context of slavery and its remnants of racism and the disenfranchisement of African Americans contribute to the construction of both dominant and marginalized identities in the United States. Racial identity is primarily based in skin color, obscuring variations in ethnicity and mixed heritage. Physical identifiers are usually the first stage of recognition, though often complicated by mixed heritage.

The Black referent usually connotes the inclusion of the African Diaspora with its varied ethnic, educational, and experiential contexts. However, researchers such as William Cross (1991) argue that Blackness is not simply a primordial characteristic but a worldview. In other words, an individual is not born Black but becomes Black through the conscious investment and participation in Black culture. Whether ascribed or claimed, race as a "social construct and signifier" holds social, political, and economic implications that shape daily lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 8). Therefore, race relations must be considered a constituent factor in the construction of African American male identities and their experiences with literacy. I use the term African American in this study as an inclusive connotation for those who are of African descent and were born in the United States.

Gender identity

Gender is a social construct shaped by culture (Butler, 1988; Jackson II & Dangerfield, 2004) which is here defined as non-static group norms, values, beliefs, language, and ways of being that contribute to a general world view. Acknowledging variations in individual responses, culture provides a "tool kit" for "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986, p. 277). Masculinity then is "a configuration of practices around the position of men in the structure of gender relations" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 843) and "a way of being that is co-extensively and relationally validated by the community" (Jackson, 2006, p. 133). However, the cultural context of African American men and the socio-historical nature of race relations in the United States indicate that African American males cannot be captured under White male generalizations (Harper, 1996; hooks, 2004; Hunter & Davis, 1994; Jackson II & Dangerfield, 2004). In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1953) Dubois illuminated this difference:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,— this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self….He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (p. 9)

This struggle underpins African American men's conceptions of masculinity (Hine & Jenkins, 1999; Jackson II, 2006). Common conceptual categories of masculinity include independence, responsibility, spirituality, self-development and community (W. P. Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Hunter & Davis, 1994; Jackson II, 2006). Nevertheless, the hegemonic[2] conception

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[2] Connell (1996) describes hegemonic masculinity as a form that is "culturally dominant in a given setting," highly visible, and admired, but not accessible to all men (p. 209). Hegemony refers not only to the power that constructs the hierarchy of masculinities but also its "expression in the privilege men have

of masculinity, in particular, the enactment of manhood is framed around employment and being a good provider (Hunter & Davis, 1994), yet the persistent promulgation of negative stereotyping in society and limited employment opportunities hamper African American men's ability to fulfill the dominant view of masculinity (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Pager, 2008).

Concepts of manhood and masculinity also vary by class and age (Casenave, 1984; Hunter & Davis, 1994). In a study on African American men's perceptions of manhood, Hunter and Davis (1994) found that participants 30 years and older had a more expansive understanding of manhood. The provider role was dominant among the working class while the role of husband was central to those of the middle class. Also masculinity, spirituality, and measures of financial security were more salient. Economic status influenced the ranking of conceptual categories because it was a primary means of fulfilling the expectations of manhood. In other words, because the middle class-men had already achieved some measure of economic security, other expressions of manhood were dominant, whereas the provider role was central to the working class because of the continuous struggle to fulfill the role.

Research on low-income men suggests that limited economic opportunities constrain their ability to be good providers, resulting in a rejection of mainstream values and alternate conceptions of masculinity (Anderson, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992; Wilson, 2008). The literature primarily characterized them as derelict in familial responsibilities and prone to hyper-aggressive behavior. Early causal theories pointed to cultural deficits (Moynihan, 1965; Rainwater, 1966; Rodman, 1963), but more recent theories suggest that these counterproductive

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over women" (p. 209). In addition, the setting can be local (e.g., communities, institutions), regional (state), or global (transnational arenas) (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), suggesting the possibility of conflicting masculinities and different hegemonic masculinities depending on setting. Although some have critiqued the definition and description of "hegemonic masculinity" (Flood, 2002; Hearn, 2004), it draws attention to the privileging of ideologies and practices that maintain social control, and therefore helps articulate the power relationships between hegemonic and marginalized masculinities and the individual struggle of fulfilling conflicting conceptions of masculinity.

responses to exclusion were a means of protecting their masculine identities by avoiding the family environment or establishing alternate concepts of manhood (Anderson, 2008; Jackson II, 2006; Schneider, 1999). However, research on barriers to the good provider role problematized this one-dimensional construction of low-income, urban, African-American males. The prominent view of the good provider as solely economic provision obscured alternate means of provision such as guidance and caregiving (Gadsden, Wortham, & Turner III, 2003; Ray & Hans, 2001; Waller, 1999).

Together these studies demonstrate that gender and class are significant identity markers that shape African American male experiences. Nevertheless, technological changes, lost of manufacturing jobs from the inner-city, and requirements for higher levels of education have strengthened the connection between academic achievement and employment (Anderson, 2008; Brandt, 2001, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Consequently, gendered roles and expectations are intimately linked to literate identities, thereby influencing how learners resist, approach, or embrace literacy (Gadsden, 2007). In the next section I will discuss the basic theoretical foundations of literacy and their relevance for identity construction.

Literacy

Any conversation about literacy must begin with a definition of what literacy is and what literacy does because these notions determine how policies will be designed, what approaches will be used, the type of assessments that will be employed (Bartlett, 2008), and, ultimately, the construction of learner identities. Second, an understanding of literacy requires exploration of the historical factors that contribute to its current structure and embedded values (Graff, 1995). The discourse of what literacy is falls along two veins of thought: the autonomous model, which conceives of literacy as neutral skills with universal consequences, and the ideological model, which presents literacy as a social practice diverse in form, use, and results (Street, 1984).

These concepts are foundational to the functional, sociocultural, and critical views of literacy that inform the structure and implementation of programs today, and that position adult learners as certain types of people. Literacy, in its most basic form, is imbued with cultural meanings that allow for common understanding and use. Over time, these understandings and uses change due to technological and social change (Brandt, 2001; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). As African American men enter adult education programs, they encounter perspectives and values about the purposes and benefits of literacy that may align or conflict with their own.

Defining literacy

Literacy is a constantly changing, abstract term that is molded by time, societal changes, and cultural context (Brandt, 2001; Collins & Blot, 2003; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993). The smallest defining feature of literacy is the literacy event, "an occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (Heath, 1983, p. 93). More recently, Papen (2007) expanded the definition by highlighting agency and power. She described a literacy event as "a change in a person's ability to be part of any relevant actions, to control the interpretation and use of any writing that is involved, and to use it to her own benefits and interest, whatever they may be" (p. 177). Literacy not only involves skill knowledge but also the ability to use those skills in diverse situations to accomplish specific purposes. Her study demonstrates that moving from the margin to the center of a literacy event requires adult learners also to be knowledgeable about the discourses of power within a given environment. For example, although the participants in her study employed their new literacy skills to fill out the application to be proprietors of a tourist agency, they lacked the knowledge to converse effectively with industry officials to be approved for the type of agency they desired.

In addition, Papen's study draws attention to the significance of oral competency, a topic seldom discussed in adult education literature, even though it is often used as an identity marker

(Camitta, 1993; Gee, 2008) and research participants commonly reference it as a benefit of literacy (Bingman & Ebert, 2000; P. M. Campbell, 1994; Prins, 2005). I suggest that this disregard for oral competency is due in part to the conflation of literacy with writing, a subtle validation of written over oral literacy that carries the vestiges of the literacy thesis. The latter posited that writing, particularly the Greek alphabetic script, was a driving force in the development of technologically advanced societies (Goody & Watt, 1963).

Phrases such as "orality and literacy" (Guerra, 1998, p. 41) or "oral and literate modes of communication" (Baynham, 1993, p. 294) set up a dichotomous relationship, in contrast to the intertextuality of literacy (the influence of speech on written text and vice versa) espoused by NLS (Besnier, 1993; Guerra, 1998; Heath, 1993; Papen, 2007). The collapsing of literacy and written communication in some of the literature on literacy maintains the oral-written dichotomy, thereby devaluing communities with strong oral cultures and the complexity and skill involved in their oral communication. Furthermore, focusing only on reading and writing as the literacy event excludes other goals adult learners have for acquiring literacy. Literacy as a language, whether written or oral, implies competence for participation in particular situations (Camitta, 1993; Gee, 2008), thereby functioning as an identity marker - a means of inclusion or exclusion.

Literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984) incorporates the literacy event but provides a larger frame of reference in capturing the social and cultural meanings that shape the event - the ideological foundations that cause us to view and use literacy in certain ways. The ideological nature of literacy is also evident in its metaphorical definitions (Guerra, 1998; Quigley, 1997; St. Clair & Sandlin, 2000). It has been described as social capital (Mahiri & Godley, 1998), freedom (Freire, 1970a), and currency (Brandt, 2001), among others (see Guerra, 1998, for an in-depth study of the ideological underpinnings of literacy metaphors). I define literacy as the acquisition of contextually defined skills of reading, writing, numeracy and orality that are informed by the "values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships including, awareness of literacy, constructions

of literacy, discourses of literacy, how [learners] talk about …and make sense of literacy" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7.)

NLS conceives of literacy as a social practice, multiple in form, shaped by culture and power relations with varied consequences. It provides an analytical tool for exploring how African American men use literacy to construct particular identities and establishes schooled literacy as a cultural construct with attendant ideologies, practices, and institutions. The strength of NLS lies in its interdisciplinary approach that seeks to capture a multifaceted understanding of literacy using research from cognitive psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, educators and linguists. NLS theorists brought to the forefront previously silenced identities and literacies and demonstrated that literacy learners are not passive but approach literacy with experiences, goals, and values. Their scholarship disputed that literacy per se produced the large-scale cognitive, economic and social development claimed by the literacy thesis (Agnaou, 2004; Bartlett, 2008; Gibson, 1996; Papen, 2007; Scribner & Cole, 1981) and demonstrated that the literacy thesis privileged a Eurocentric worldview, devalued local knowledge, and obscured the influence of sociocultural factors and power (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Street, 1984).

In their analysis of the discursive and metaphorical meanings of literacy in political discourse, St. Clair and Sandlin (2000) point out that illiteracy is not a measure but a metaphor that constructs the illiterate person as deficient. Illiteracy, they contend, is a metaphor for "African American, female, stupid, low-income, and lazy" in family literacy discourse (p. 51). Quigley's (1997) earlier overview of the history of literacy concurs, but points to the African American male as the public symbol of illiteracy. In addition, the perception of African Americans devaluing literacy has resulted in interventionist strategies focused on changing individuals and home environments and a political rationale that blames the low-income while ignoring social and economic factors that constrain progress (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2000).

The Moynihan Report (1965), which was an internal executive report sponsored by the Lyndon B Johnson administration on African American poverty, reiterated this thesis. While acknowledging that racism created structural barriers to resources and opportunities as evidenced in the high unemployment of African American men, the report focused on the necessity of individual and cultural change to address the 'pathology of the ghetto.' Although this theory has been vigorously challenged (Gould, 1999; Mizell, 1999; Staples, 1971), it continues to permeate the political and social discourse of literacy.

Similarly, Quigley (1997) points out that studies like the National Adult Literacy Survey were intended to capture the general state of literacy, yet excluded the values, motives and aspirations of adult learners. Therefore, it provides a vacuum for policy makers to apply their social and political perspectives to the causes of illiteracy. It is not surprising, then, that low literacy is synonymous with low intelligence and the acquisition of schooled literacy is seen as the means for individual and social progress. NLS recognizes that it is not the individual alone but social structures that mediate between the individual and social progress. Political and social discourses influence adult educators' perceptions of and interactions with learners as well as how learners view themselves as literate individuals. Consequently, the social significance of literacy must be seen as a factor in the construction of adult learner identity.

Literacy and identity

Literacy has always been about identity, ascribed and appropriated (Collins & Blot, 2003; Graff, 1995; Quigley, 1997). In all the formal, informal and non-formal ways we engage with literacy in all of its forms, in the varied domains of life, we employ cognitive processes, social practices, and symbolic tools (Cerulo, 1997), all of which are elemental to constructing, enacting, and projecting identity. I draw heavily upon NLS research in expounding the relationship between literacy and identity.

Literacy learners approach their involvement in ABEL programs through a cultural lens that shapes their purposes, aspirations, and expectations of literacy acquisition (Ahearn, 2001; Bartlett, 2008; Ferdman, 1990; Sparks, 2002). The practice of literacy provides a sense of affirmation and promotes collective identity and community (Besnier, 1993; Camitta, 1993; Guerra, 1998). For example, Camitta (1993) found that African American high school students in Philadelphia used vernacular literacy in the institutional setting of the school to affirm their culture. The practice of vernacular literacy[3] served to affirm the students' identities, allowed them to express their 'inner selves,' gave meaning to their lives and experiences, and formed relationships through collaboration (p. 242). Similarly, Guerra (1998) and Besnier (1993) showed how letter writing was used to strengthen familial bonds and social networks.

For others, the adoption of particular literacies is a transition toward or confirmation or negation of particular identities. In Mahiri and Godley's (1998) study of a college student who had lost her ability to write, they found that she used writing to divorce herself from negative stereotypes by distinguishing herself as a Mexicana instead of an 'illiterate Chicana.' In losing her ability to write, she began to lose the sense of self she had used literacy to acquire. In studies by Rockhill (1993) and Rogers (2003), the participants acquired literacy to feel better about themselves. As one participant noted, her purpose for attending the program was "to be somebody" (Rockhill, 1993, p. 156). These studies show that moral and social values are attached to literacy and that by its acquisition an individual can to be recognized as a different type of person - a better person.

Adults return to ABEL programs for a variety of reasons, including becoming better parents, acquiring more knowledge, and moving up the socio-economic ladder. Based on a survey

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[3] Camitta (1993) describes vernacular literacy as "that which is closely associated with culture, which is neither elite nor institutional, which is traditional and indigenous to diverse cultural processes of communities as distinguished from the uniform, inflexible standards of institutions" (pp. 228-229). For more in-depth discussions of vernacular literacy, see Barton (2010) and Maybin (2007).

of 323 low literacy learners, Beder and Valentine (1990) found that self-improvement, family responsibilities, job advancement, diversion, educational advancement, and economic need were primary motivations for attending adult education programs. Denny's (1992) study of African Americans in New York City showed that the participants were motivated because they wanted to help their children with school work and be good role models. These studies are representative of other studies that show adult learners use literacy to support and acquire positional (social status) and role (e.g. father) identities. On the other hand, literacy has unexpected consequences such as disruption of social networks and alienation of cultural heritage among the young (Ahearn, 2001; McEwan & Malan, 1996; Valdés, 1996).

Consequently, literacy development and identity construction are inextricably linked (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Cerulo, 1997; Gee, 2000), often requiring the negotiation of identities when participants cross cultures (Ferdman, 1990; Heath, 1983). Scollon and Scollon (1981) found that different worldviews underpinned the discourse patterns of the Athabaskans and mainstream Anglo-American and Canadian English speakers. For Athabaskans, English literacy acquisition meant a change of identity because it meant acquiring social practices and world views that contradicted their cultural beliefs. Heath's (1983) ethnographic study of Black and White middle-class and working-class communities in South Carolina showed that the forms of interaction and the social practices and codes of White, middle-class students aligned with the school system, providing them an advantage. However, the strong oral culture and literacy practices of the low-SES Black children, with their attendant meanings, interactions, responses, and linguistic structures, placed them at a disadvantage, requiring the adoption of White, middle-class practices in order to progress.

These two studies illustrate the multiple nature of literacy and the ways in which a particular literacy practice is anchored in social meanings associated with the setting in which it occurs. In addition, Heath (1983) called attention to schooled literacy as a cultural practice in

demonstrating its alignment with the home practices of the White middle class. Other studies confirm the cultural dissonance non-mainstream groups experience in the school system and its impact on academic achievement (Kersten, 2007; McLaughlin, 1994; Orange & Horowitz, 1999; Tatum, 2006; Welch, 1988).

As a social institution, the school system continues to be instrumental in the establishment and maintenance of positional identities in society. Educators knowingly and unknowingly participate in a political process that socializes children for adult roles. From the inception of the school system, tracking has been used to maintain a stratified society (Collins & Blot, 2003; Oakes, 2005). Tracking involves the assignment of students to particular knowledge content based upon the student's ascribed trajectories. Therefore groups in the bottom social strata are given enough education to support the existing social structure but not enough to question and fight for change (Graff, 1995).

These studies highlight the institutional practices that ascribe particular identities, however, the ideological model of literacy emphasizes that these power structures also foster resistance. Adult learners attend when they are ready to engage with literacy and may build defenses against any form of education that threatens their identity and personal way of thinking, behaving, and reacting (Denny, 1992; Illeris, 2003). In a study by McEwan & Malan (1993), the older women of Tenergate and Zola (two settlements in the Eastern Cape of South Africa) did not believe these skills were useful in maintaining their culture, which they believed was their primary responsibility. However, they thought literacy skills were important for helping their children find jobs in the city. This was also corroborated in a study by Quigley (1992), where African American adults made the conscious decision not to obtain their GED diploma because of negative schooling experiences, yet firmly believed in their children's need to acquire an education. In the next section, I attend specifically to research on African American males and how their identities influence their educational experiences.

Academic biography and the socio-historical context of African American males

With its focus on power, resistance, and agency, a social practices view of literacy provides a frame for exploring the socio-historical experiences of African American men's engagement with literacy as members of a marginalized community. The academic biographies of African American men are diverse; however, there are certain socio-historical experiences that have affected their daily lived experiences. Literature on African Americans and academic achievement indicates that understanding the relationship between African American males and literacy in the context of the United States requires: 1) a socio-historical framework that takes into consideration the legacy of slavery and racism; 2) the construction of a pathologized African American male identity in the school system and society; 3) the use of adaptive and protective behaviors in response to negative stereotyping; 4) and the intimate connection of race, class and gender.

Socio-historical context

Historically, literacy has meant oppression and liberation for African Americans (V. J. Harris, 1992; E. Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McPhail, 2005; E. A. Peterson, 1996). During slavery, the acquisition of literacy was a crime that exacted harsh penalties yet, many sought to acquire literacy. The Bible was the primary resource for learning to read and therefore served to counteract the common belief that African Americans lacked intelligence. Christianity provided a coping strategy, a means of spiritual salvation, and hope for a better life (Brandt, 2001; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The church was central to the spiritual and secular well-being of the African American community, promoting principles of community uplift and freedom through self-help, education acquisition, and political action (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). As previously mentioned, orality and spirituality continue to be central components of African American culture (Daniel & Smitherman, 2004; Watson, 2006) and, to varying degrees, a constituent factor of African American men's identities (Jackson II, 2006; Watson, 2006).

In the civil rights era, literacy was seen as the means for becoming a full citizen. The church, freedom schools, and the Black press became primary sponsors of literacy in the face of prolific institutional, social, and physical opposition to African Americans' attainment of civil rights (Brandt, 2001; Stevens, 1988). Literacy was used to exercise power by withholding or providing access to it and shaping how it was valued (Collins & Blot, 2003; Goffman, 1959). Limiting access to literacy was instrumental in the Euro-Americans' campaign to control the distribution of resources and to perpetuate the physical and mental enslavement of those of African heritage (Karenga, 1983). The dominant group perceived African Americans' acquisition of literacy and education as a challenge to power, while for African Americans, it meant freedom, full participation in society, and the negation of stereotypes purporting limited intelligence and inability to learn (V. J. Harris, 1992). Though progress has been made, continued discrimination, economic disenfranchisement, the struggle for equal education, and the unequal benefits of education continue to be central issues in the African American community in the 21st century. The gap between what literacy is supposed to do and what it actually does influences African American perceptions of literacy today.

Early schooling experiences and academic achievement

Early academic experiences influence how adult learners perceive and interact with literacy (Belzer, 2004; Quigley, 1992; Rogers & Fuller, 2007). The voluminous literature on academic achievement and the persistent disparity between White students and students of color chronicles various causes and solutions. Research on early school preparedness suggests that the trajectory for high and low achievement begins before a child enters school. The literature indicates that middle-class children are better prepared to enter school and are more successful in school than low-SES children (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2001; Lonigan, 2004). Deficit theorists or culturalists (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2001; Lonigan, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 1994) point to individual and environmental factors such as limited intelligence and motivation,

poor parental support, inadequate family structure, improper role models, and community opposition to education. Therefore, corrective programs and initiatives are focused on individual and cultural change (Gadsden, 2004; St. Clair & Sandlin, 2000).

The prevailing view that academic underachievement is due to low-SES and non-mainstream families' lack of literacy practices and low value of education has not been informed by contradicting research, as Auerbach (1989, 1995) argues in her review of ideologies underpinning family literacy approaches. Multiple literacies research challenges the deficit model by showing that there are a variety of literacy practices in the homes of low-income and non-mainstream families, and parents, regardless of their educational level, generally support the academic development of their children. For example, Purcell-Gates' (1988) study of a random sample of 'well-read-to' children included welfare and one-parent families. Low-SES and non-mainstream families integrate diverse literacy practices into their daily lives (Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), which are often different from White middle-class literacy practices upon which schooling is based (Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2003).

These studies indicate that different parenting and literacy practices reflect different cultural experiences, resources, and opportunities instead of a devaluation of literacy and education. Consequently, the deficit view obscures families' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) —"the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (p. 133) —that children bring into the classroom. African American children's complex linguistic skills are often unrecognized and seen as indicators of cognitive underdevelopment instead of being a resource for developing schooled literacy (Gee, 2008; Michaels 1981, 1991).

Structuralists (B. Hammond, Hoover, & McPhail, 2005; M. D. Harris, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1992) move beyond a focus on family strengths to argue that the hegemonic structure of society supports a classist, racist system that restricts opportunities for the marginalized to

progress economically and academically, resulting in negative environmental conditions such as poverty, inadequate school resources, under-qualified teachers, lack of a culturally relevant pedagogy, and negative stereotyping of African American males, all of which influence student-teacher interactions and school policies. Therefore, political, social, and economic change in society and the school system as its microcosmic entity would create better opportunities for academic success. Generally, theorists fall along a continuum between culturalists and structuralists. I agree with Giroux (1983) and Noguera (2003) that the relationship between agency, cultural frames, and social structures must be considered when analyzing the conditions and factors of low academic achievement.

Two focal points of low academic achievement literature for African American males are the importance of cultural identity and the construction of African American male identities. Both are manifested in the curriculum, school policies, student-teacher interactions, and student responses to their sense of alienation within the school environment (Ferguson, 2000; Tatum, 2003; G. Thompson, 2002). The importance of culture in academic achievement literature refers to the dissonance between African American culture and White middle-class culture as evidenced in the experiences of African American males in the context of schooling (Delpit, 2006; Tatum, 2006). This is compounded by the negative construction of their identities in the school system and society, which often results in adverse consequences (Blanchett, 2006; Ferguson, 2000; Fordham, 1996; Tatum, 2003). Experiences within school can either ameliorate or exacerbate the challenges students, especially those in adverse circumstances, face.

The curriculum, school policies and student teacher interaction support a valorization of White middle class values often omitting or negatively representing African American culture (Blanchett, 2006; Fordham, 1996). Because African American males are taught from elementary school to think negatively about themselves and their culture, they need to have 'enabling texts' that will build resilience in the context in which they are vulnerable (Tatum, 2003). The texts

currently used in the school are not relevant to their daily experience and thus disempower instead of equipping them to overcome their challenges (Tatum, 2006, p. 47).

Sociolinguists note that the hegemony of school literacy places African Americans and other non-mainstream students with different home literacies at a disadvantage because they have the extra challenge of learning school-approved methods of interaction and literacy practices (Gee, 2008; Heath, 1983; Qualls, 2001). In addition, the assumed neutrality of standardized testing overlooks the biased content that is framed according to dominant group experiences. In other words, when test questions and examples are based upon White, middle-class experiences, non-mainstream children's unfamiliarity with those experiences can lead to poorer results than their White counterparts (M. D. Harris, 1992; Murphy, 1997).

Furthermore, IQ and standardized testing have historically been used to categorize students according to low and high potential, thereby setting trajectories that shape intellectual development and consequential positions in society (Bronwyn, 2006; Caruthers, 2006). Of primary importance here are the deleterious effects of using one type of test as a measure of varied intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and potential future accomplishment (Rogers, 2003). As structuralists have asserted, tracking and labeling create the identities they are supposed to reflect (G. Thompson, 2002). Children are pigeon-holed into low levels of performance through low expectations and low levels of instruction, which fosters an identity of academic incompetence among peers and teachers.

Stereotype threat

Stereotype threat is a term used by Steele (1997, 1998) to describe the fear of affirming negative stereotypes that result in poor academic performance on standardized tests. However, I use it here to imply harm associated with the inculcation of stereotypes. Attrition and problematic student-teacher interaction are evident across all groups of students, but the specter of racism accounts for the differentiating element for African American males. In her study of 59 narratives

of teachers, administrators, and community leaders, Caruthers (2006) found that African American children were stereotyped as lazy, unintelligent, and needing to be controlled and managed more closely than other children. Generally, African American male students are stereotyped in the school system as having behavior problems, lacking intelligence, and "at risk" for all sorts of negative trajectories (B. Hammond, Hoover, & McPhail, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 2003). In society, the African American male is stereotyped as violent, sexual, and lacking intelligence (Hopkins, 1997; Jackson II, 2006; Rome, 2004). In his historical review of the Black male image, Jackson links the current stereotypes of African American males in the media and society at large to depictions from the slavery era.

The "at risk" discourse and the pathological characterization of the African American male in society influence teacher expectations, perceptions, and interactions with these students, ultimately shaping the construction of their identities (Ferguson, 2000; Gee, 2000-2001; G. Thompson, 2000). The high percentage of detentions, suspensions, and special education assignments among Black male students reflects the impact of stereotyping (Blanchett, 2006; Ferguson, 2000; G. Thompson, 2002). Oppositional behavior is often conflated with lack of intelligence, hence the disproportionate assignment to special education. Ferguson (2000) found that students internalized the negative stereotypes and enacted the associated, often oppositional, behaviors that characterize those identities. Negative experiences create a sense of disaffection with the academic environment resulting in students' gravitation to outside environments and peers that validate them (Finn, 1989). In the following section I take a closer look at two types of student responses to the school environment.

Adaptive and oppositional behaviors

Central to the discourses on high school academic achievement and African American male identity is the use of adaptive and oppositional behaviors as counteractive measures to an alienating environment and the contestation of identities (Fordham, 1996; Giroux, 1983; Lundy,

2003). Adaptive strategies promote individual progress through the system yet carry a negative connotation of cultural negotiation in that African Americans must leave behind some aspects of their cultural identities in order to succeed academically. For example, Fordham (1996) and Price (2000) found that high achievers chose covert means of resistance by succeeding in the school system and thereby negated deficit stereotypes.

Because academic success is aligned with dominant group perspectives, success requires identity negotiation (Jackson II, 1999). If the educational system is based on White middle-class values, then the utilization of the cognitive processes, social practices, and symbolic tools necessary for success implies an enactment of that particular identity. However, academic success does not automatically dictate decreased significance of cultural identity but rather the acquisition of code switching and mode switching abilities necessary to walk in two worlds.

In contrast, research on oppositional behavior offer three perspectives. The first construes oppositional behavior as a political statement of cultural affirmation but also maladaptive in its hindrance of individual success. Students overtly challenge instances of perceived bias, seek validation from peer groups, and distance themselves from the school system (Fordham, 1996; Howard, 2008). The second perspective positions oppositional behavior as the internalization of school sanctioned identities where students accept the identities that are ascribed to them through school discourses and practices (Ferguson, 2000).

The third and more entrenched perspective is that oppositional behavior is due to a cultural response anchored in the socio-historical realities of racism. This is rooted in the oppositional culture theories put forth by John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham. Ogbu's (1992) cultural ecology theory asserts that African Americans' response to racism has socialized their children to academic failure due to mistrust of the school system and a belief in the unequal benefits of education. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) also contend that some African American students reject academic progress to avoid accusations of "acting white" by community members.

These theories have been and continue to be highly contested as deficit theories supporting the culture of poverty theory (Gould, 1999; Lundy, 2003). Detractors have shown that the cultural ecological theory deemphasizes or ignores structural factors, presents an essentialized view of culture as a static entity, and does not adequately account for variations in student perceptions, behaviors, and academic achievement (Foster, 2004; A. L. Harris, 2006; A. L. Harris & Robinson, 2007).

Dropping out

Although one-third of students do not graduate from high school (Greene, 2001), students of color, particularly males, are disproportionately represented. For example, *Yes We Can: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males* (Holzman, 2010*)* shows a national dropout rate of 53% for the 2007/2008 cohort. More alarming, states like Florida and New York had dropout rates of 63% and 75%, respectively. Dropping out is a process (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2001; L. Campbell, 2003; Finn, 1989; Rumberger & Lim, 2008) influenced by many of the aforementioned factors in this chapter. In a review of 203 published articles covering 25 years of research on dropout, Rumberger & Lim (2008) found that: 1) There was more than one contributing factor to students' decisions to drop out; 2) factors were both internal and external to the school; 3) contexts (e.g. home, school, and community) mattered; 4) and dropping out entailed many experiences over time. The literature on school attrition shows that contributing factors, though interrelated, can be divided into personal characteristics contributing to low academic achievement and structural factors such as school effects and community environment.

Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson (2007) captured these factors in a quantitative study of 196 high schools for the academic years 2000-2001 and 2001 to 2002. In order of strongest relationship to dropping out, the authors found academic failure, school attendance, maladaptive behavior leading to suspensions, poverty (as reflected in the inequitable distribution of resources and qualified teachers in the school system), and student ethnicity (increasing percentages of

students of color correlated with higher dropout rates) to be the main factors. Low academic achievement leads to retention, which has been strongly associated with dropping out of school (Jimerson, 1999; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). A biography of school failure can foster disengagement from school (U S Accounting Office, 2002). In fact, Finn's (1989) two-tier psychological model of frustration-self-esteem and participation-identification shows a pattern of poor performance reduces the students' sense of competence, and the lack of positive experiences decreases their sense of belonging and attachment to the school.

In addition, a growing body of research in urban settings conveys that the policies, practices, and social environment of the school push students out by creating a caustic setting (Fine, 1991; Riehl, 1999; Schwartz, 2010; Tuck, 2009).These studies highlight the impact of negative student-teacher, student-staff, and peer relationships on attrition. They also suggest that reasons for leaving school early may shift in prominence depending on the demographics of the school. In the following section I will review research on African Americans in ABEL programs.

African American men in ABEL programs

In contrast to the expansive literature on African American males in K-16 there is minimal research in the area of adult basic education and literacy. Generally, most studies focus on diverse groups, and to a lesser degree on women and African Americans. Two themes arising from the empirical and theoretical studies are the influence of early schooling experiences on adult learners' perceptions and responses to ABEL programs and the importance of a culturally relevant pedagogy.

In a study of 20 low-literate adults in Pittsburgh, Quigley (1992) found that although they believed in the value of education for their children the participants chose not to attend ABEL programs because of negative schooling experiences. Similarly, in a focus group of African American adult learners in New York City, Denny (1992) found shame, negative early schooling experiences, and the belief that they would not receive comparable education benefits

as their White counterparts held greater resonance with the men, and were counted among their reasons for non-participation.

Early schooling experiences also inform how adults engage with literacy programs. A key finding of Rogers' (2004) study of 15 adults working toward there GED diploma is that learners bring negative views of their literate abilities and "discourses of learning" from past experiences into adult education (p. 295). In a later study Rogers and Fuller (2007) showed that an awareness of the adult learners' past schooling experiences, or what she referred to as "histories of participation," was useful in creating counter-narratives that fostered increasing levels of confidence in their ability to succeed.

Another study drew attention to present needs and the desire for community as reasons for choosing a particular type of program. In an examination of African American motivations for attending church-based adult education programs, Isaac et al. (2001) found support in facing personal challenges, family togetherness, and familiar cultural settings were factors not reflected in other studies on adult learner motivations. These three factors suggest a need for community and may speak to needs that are not being met within the adult education environment.

Although andragogy espouses the importance of learner experiences as sources for learning, it draws upon a narrow range of experiences and fails to recognize the influence of structural barriers that shape access and attainment of goals. Sheared (1999) pointed to the framing of learner experiences within a vocational and social context that ignored the lived experience of people of color, whereas Brookfield (1984) drew attention to andragogy's disregard of social justice. A culturally relevant pedagogy (Guy, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1992; E. A. Peterson, 1999; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007) that captures the daily lived experiences of African American men is conducive to increased participation. Sheared (1999) described this as the incorporation of their "polyrythmic realities" – their experiences based upon the intersection of race, gender, and class. This calls for including students' sociocultural perspectives and experiences in the

curriculum, providing material that is relevant with demonstrative benefits, acknowledging different ways of knowing, giving students voice, adopting a reflective approach, and engaging with Afrocentric literature. This study speaks to the importance of understanding the "polyrythmic realities" of African American male experiences. As Noguera (2003) pointed out, comprehending the construction of African American male identities is crucial to understanding their relationship with literacy and education.

Similar to the aforementioned studies, Schwartz's (2010) ethnographic study on engaging young African American males in an urban adult literacy program highlighted the influence of early schooling experiences on the participants' engagement with the program, as well as the importance of a learner-centered approach and a community environment in maintaining that engagement. Specifically, she identified positive affective relationships, interior and exterior spacing (allowing space to heal internally and constructing comfortable physical space), and learner-centered and self-directed activities as crucial factors in gaining and sustaining engagement. In the next section, I briefly review adult learners' motivations for attending programs and the factors that inhibit participation.

Participation in ABEL programs

Adult basic education and literacy programs experience high levels of inconsistent attendance and dropout, resulting in an emphasis on recruitment and retention (Amstutz, 2001; Beder, 1991; Beder & Valentine, 1990). Research on participation has been primarily quantitative centered on the characteristics of learners and motivations and deterrents to participation (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Hayes, 1988; Metzer, 1997). Models have been based to a great extent on White middle-class samples drawn from the continuing education segment (Isaac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001). In addition, the focus has been on numerical presence instead of engagement in ABEL programs.

Studies on deterrents to participation usually indicate one or all of the following barriers originally proposed by Patricia Cross (1981) and Darkenwald and Merriam (1982): situational (inhibitive life circumstances such as lack of money, home responsibilities, etc.), institutional (program practices and policies that limit participation), dispositional (learner attitudes and perspectives that inhibit academic progress) and informational (knowledge of learning opportunities). For related studies see Beder (1990), Hayes & Darkenwald (1990), and King (2002).

Motivational scales such as Boshier's Education Participation Scale (EPS) and Darkenwald's Adult Attitudes toward Continuing Education Scale (AATCES) are widely used to assess learners' reasons for participating in adult education programs. A concern about such studies is the assumption that attitudes predict participation and that learners are fully aware of their motivations. The prevalence of these studies gives credence to the assumption that non-participation is due to a lack of motivation, but motivations are not so easily discerned (Illeris, 2003), nor are attitudes unmediated predictors of behaviors (Quigley, 1992). Key motivational factors identified in these studies were enjoyment of learning activities, importance of adult education, and intrinsic value of adult education.

In contrast, studies of adult learners with limited economic resources suggest different experiences and priorities. For example, Beder and Valentine's (1990) survey of 323 low literate adults identified self-improvement, family responsibilities, diversion, literacy development, community/church involvement, job advancement, economic need, educational advancement, and urging of others as motivational factors. Similarly, Metzer's (1997) study of 158 returning students found that they were motivated by the need for a better job and quality of life, parenthood, a sense of educational lack, and encouragement by others. These findings suggest that class and education shape adult learner goals and perceptions.

These studies define participation as merely being present or showing up. They did not address how the intersection of race, class, and gender influenced how learners were involved in and exercise control over their learning in ABEL programs. Bagnall (1989) offers a tripartite concept of participation that is useful in explicating different levels of participation. Involvement is defined as learner's active engagement "with important elements of or processes in the adult education event," whereas control refers to the extent to which the learner is "acting to control the educational event…(e.g., its content, goals or outcomes)" (p. 253). Although the learner must be present to be engaged in the teaching-learning process (p. 253), the quality of that engagement influences presence. Adult learners who lack a strong connection eventually drop out (Perin, Flugman, & Spiegler, 2006; Smith, 2006). In the following section I recap the main points of the chapter and review my theoretical framework.

Chapter summary

In a critical review of adult education, Imel and colleagues (2000) observed that a generalized view of the learner obscured diverse learner experiences. Although progress has been made toward including the experiences of various social groups, we still know very little about African American males in adult literacy programs. The few studies on African Americans in adult education suggest three themes: the influence of early schooling experiences, the importance of a culturally relevant pedagogy, and the desire for community.

Research on African Americans and education indicates that a functional or skills view of literacy tends to exclude factors that contribute to their decisions about literacy. In addition, their early schooling experiences may inform our understanding of their engagement with ABEL programs. Furthermore, their experiences in the school system and society demonstrate that their identities shape how they are perceived and treated on interpersonal and institutional levels.

Consequently, my theoretical framework draws upon NLS because it allows for the exploration and identification of both individual (learner agency) and structural (e.g., cultural,

institutional, societal) factors in the access and outcomes of literacy. Furthermore, a constructivist view of identity draws attention to the interconnectedness of literacy and identity, in particular, the ways in which relationships and literacy practices construct identities.

Chapter 3

Research Design

In seeking to explore the relationship between literacy and identity, I investigated the experiences of African American men who participated in an ABEL program. Specifically, I sought to understand how their literacy experiences influenced their perception of and participation in ABEL programs utilizing a multiple case study approach with narrative analysis as my analytical and interpretive strategy. A multiple case study allowed for the examination of the participants' individual experiences while affording opportunities for collective analysis that identified key themes across the corpus (Stake, 2005). In addition, narrative analysis (Mishler, 1999; Riessman, 2008) was an apt tool for discerning how the participants made meaning of their literacy experiences while connecting them to particular identities.

A combination of case study and narrative analysis lends itself to a more comprehensive picture of the participants while providing supplemental data that not only complemented the stories they told but helped to build connections to social factors. Consequently, I utilized this research strategy to address the following questions:

1) How do African American men who participate in an ABEL program describe their literacy experiences?
2) What aspirations do African American men believe participation in an ABEL program will help them achieve?
3) What literacy and educational experiences do African American men perceive to be influential in shaping their literate, cultural, and gender identities?
4) What experiences inside and outside of the ABEL program do African American men perceive to hinder or support their literacy goals?

As a subset of narrative inquiry, narrative analysis eschews the epistemological and ontological perspectives of positivist thought recognizing multiple truths and the subjective quality of research. Therefore it can serve as an emancipatory purpose in presenting counter

narratives that attack commonly accepted stereotypes (Ruthellen, 2007). Participants often narrate experiences where "there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society" (Riessman, 1993, p. 3). Narrative analysis can be referred to as a discrete segment of discourse, a lengthy portion of an account given during an interview, or a life story (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). The function of narrative is

> To provide meaning and coherence to and perspective on experience and one's social traditions, construct a person's knowledge, including a person's sense of self and identity, produce an organizing principle for human action, alter the person's way of thinking about events, and/or sense of identity (Smith, 2000, p. 328)

Narrative analysis is best suited to my study because it analyzes how individuals make meaning of their experiences. It uses stories as data and analysis, recognizes the interactive nature of the interviewer-interviewee relationship, and acknowledges different ways of knowing (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008). Its differentiating characteristic is the focus on how and why the story is sequenced in a particular manner.

I drew upon Riessman's (2008) dialogic/performance approach because it allows the privileging of narrator voice, puts forth language as constitutive of reality and identity, acknowledges the interactive nature of relationships in the co-construction of identity, and assumes the importance of context - the physical, interactional, institutional, historical, and cultural factors that inform the content and structure of the narrative. In addition, it brings together aspects of structural and thematic analysis that unveil individual meanings within themes, and that display the co-construction of identity, while placing narratives within a contextual framework. Drawing upon the Bakhtinian (1981) view of the dialogic environment as multi-vocal, meaning the interactants of a given conversation bring cultural discourses and the voices of others into that engagement, the private and public environments become critical sources for interpreting the narrative.

Although the dialogic/performance approach operates from the perspective that society and culture are written on the life of the individual, it draws attention to agency in the presentation of self. As participants narrate their experiences with literacy and its associated meanings, they construct identities in the stories they tell. The concept of performing identity does not take away its authenticity but acknowledges nuanced aspects of identity: the sense of self that the participant desires to convey (Goffman, 1959) and the self that is anchored in convention (culturally sanctioned ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving) (Butler, 1988). With this analytic approach, the researcher not only focuses on the content and structure of the narrative, but who is telling the story, and why it is told in a particular way. A constructivist view of identity, a social practices view of literacy, and the premise that meaning is culturally framed and produced in interaction (Bruner, 1990) call for such an approach.

Research site

The research site was a church-sponsored ABEL program located in a large northeastern city. It was funded and staffed by a local church but served the community. The program provided free classes to over 1000 students, an ethnically diverse population with high percentages of Black and Latino participants. Except for a small paid staff, it was primarily supported by a large pool of volunteers. The program's mission as noted on their website was to "empower and transform lives one at a time…through education in the context of community." There were morning and evening sessions on Mondays and Thursdays with an average of twelve students per class. Each session lasted for three hours. The morning session ran from 10:00am to 1:00pm and the evening session from 6:00pm to 9:00pm. The program provided ABEL classes (GED preparation, pre-GED, beginning literacy, and ESOL) and life skills training including, but not limited to, career development and computer classes. The latter were conducted one day a week. The program also established partnerships with businesses and colleges to facilitate the transition to employment and higher education.

The program had a strong religious orientation. Before each session, students and staff gathered in one of the large classrooms for announcements and prayer (optional activity) before dispersing to their classes. In particular, they prayed for God's help to improve their academic skills. Each class also prayed individually at the end of each session for group concerns, protection (some of the students lived in high crime areas), and help with homework. This activity is noteworthy because some of the participants perceived it as an indication of care and concern for their well-being. In addition to the monthly schedule, the program provided a life skills handout addressing ways to handle difficult life situations. Tutors often used these handouts in reading and discussion activities encouraging students to share their experiences on the given topic. Each session included a half hour segment called Sustained Silent Reading where everyone (staff and students) read a book or article of their choice.

My reasons for choosing this site were based on access and sampling needs. First, my role as a former tutor helped me to gain access to the program quickly and to establish rapport with the students. Some of the staff and students I knew before were still there and to some degree mediated the openness with which other students responded to me. Second, the program's high percentage of Black men increased the likelihood of finding study participants.

Recruitment strategy & sampling

I used a combination of criterion and snowball sampling to garner information-rich cases that "yielded insights and in-depth information" (Patton, 2002, p. 230). My initial recruitment plan was to place an ad in the program's weekly newsletter and present the study at the beginning of each morning and evening session; however, upon arrival I found the weekly bulletin had been changed to a monthly calendar. Thus, my primary means of recruitment was announcing the study at the beginning of each session and meeting with interested students in the hallway to provide additional details and get contact information. At the beginning of each session, the director introduced me as a former tutor who was at Penn State doing research and needed

participants for a research project. She directed interested students to speak with me in the hallway. My script followed this basic form:

> I am seeking African American men who were born in the United States, have been enrolled at the [program] for at least three months, and are interested in sharing their early school and adult learning experiences at the [program]. Those who are interested, please see me after or before class in the hallway or library for more details.

Since I only acquired three potential participants from that approach I added another strategy.

The second recruitment strategy was to position myself at the sign-in desk to speak with African American male students who came late. I introduced myself to them as a former program tutor currently doing a Penn State research project, and outlined the criteria as noted above. During the first week, the advanced students were taking the practice GED test. Therefore, I waited in the hallway and spoke to them after they finished the exam. Many of the students I spoke with were from the West Indies and Africa; nevertheless, I was able to connect with three additional participants. The staff also played a role in recruitment by identifying those students they knew were native to the United States. I also spoke to men who arrived early and were sitting in the classes but this strategy did not provide any participants. With the combined approach, I recruited nine participants by the end of the second week.

Despite their initial interest, three of the men chose not to participate in the study. Two did not return my calls to schedule an interview and the third failed to make the initial scheduled interview. Of note, these men were in their twenties and were the youngest of the group. A fourth participant, who was also in this age group, dropped out after the first interview and did not return to the program. Based upon her relationship with him, his tutor expressed surprise at her inability to reach him and his failure to contact her concerning his absence. Although there may have been extenuating circumstances associated with the disappearance of the fourth participant, the fact that four of the five participants in their twenties decided not to participate may indicate lack of trust, and the need to build familiarity and rapport with program members prior to data collection.

I noted in my field notes that "I noticed the younger men were less trusting and unwilling to participate" (April 8, 2010). The following quote from Mike, the fourth participant who dropped out of the study, supports this idea when he compared the outsider to someone not to be trusted:

> Because it's like—well it depends on who you meet though, it's like alright, well I meet you now. It's like—it's not like someone from the hood and we are just chilling in the hood…. It's like you meet a different person in the hood and it's like basically, okay, it's about money or the person wants to spend time with you or just kick back and probably smoke a blunt [joint] or just talk about how their day is going or whatever. Then it's like a new person coming out of nowhere. It's like okay um gotta watch this dude. It could probably be the police or stuff like that.

Although my past relationship to the program provided access to a certain extent, it appeared not to have mitigated the lack of trust among the younger population. I did not seek an additional participant due to limited funding and time. The final sample included six participants: three from the morning session and three from the evening session. A small sample allowed for in-depth, multiple interviews and analysis.

Participants

The participants reflected the wide age range common in ABEL programs. They ranged in age from 21 to 64 and had attended the program for at least five months. They were native to the United States except Mike who was two years old when his family emigrated to the U.S. Their literacy levels ranged from low literacy to GED. These men provided 'information-rich cases' that captured a diversity of experiences, perceptions, aspirations, and self-concepts. As Baddeley & Singer (2007) note, narratives at each phase of the lifespan reflected the narrator's unique personal concerns but never in isolation from interpersonal and sociocultural contexts. Five of the men were unemployed, four were fathers, three were at the GED level, and three were at low literacy levels. A more detailed description is shown in Table 3.1. The pseudonyms used in this study were chosen by the participants. The locations and people mentioned by the participants were also given pseudonyms.

Table **3-1**: Participants

Name	Age	Grade left school	Time in program	Literacy level	Employment status	Children
Mike*	21	11	5 mos.**	GED	Unknown	?
Mr. E	29	IEP***	1 yr.	Literacy2	Unemployed/ Disabled	0
Junior	38	11	1.7 yrs.	GED	Unemployed	4
Ice	55	3 or 4	5 mos.	Literacy1	Unemployed/ Disabled	4
Raymond	56	7	2 yrs.	Literacy1	Unemployed/ Disabled	1
Roddy Rod	64	10	2 yrs.	GED	Unemployed	4

*Participant did not complete the 2nd and 3rd interviews
**In the program longer but specific time not available
***Individualized education program (IEP) diploma for students with a disability

Mike

Mike was 21 years old and single at the time of the interview. He was born in Barbados. His parents emigrated to the United States when he was two years old. He has a brother who is seven years older and attending college to get a medical degree. Unlike the other participants in the study, he lived in the same neighborhood "all of his life" and knew "everybody." His father worked in security and his mother was a registered nurse; however, when his parents first arrived, they had limited financial resources. His mother worked as a home attendant and his father worked as a cook in a local restaurant. Mike dropped out of school in the 11th grade because he chose full-time employment.

Mike was very aware of the impact of poverty. He said it made life "hard" for him. Mike made a distinction between the slums and his neighborhood, describing the latter as "suburbhood" because of the "houses, plants, and trees," but he observed that poverty was still there. In addition, he stated his neighborhood was "gang populated" relating it to a social system that survived by indoctrinating young boys and girls into gang membership ("a generation thing"). His brother was a former member of the Crips. Mike resisted conscription into one of the gangs by forming his own group. Like his brother, Mike placed the "gang mentality" behind him and

sought to move forward with his life. He had been attending the program for at least five months and was preparing to take the GED exam. For Mike, acquisition of the GED certificate was the first step to owning a clothing store.

Mr. E

Mr. E was 29 years old and also single. He was born in Chicago and was placed in the foster care system. He has spinal bifida (curvature of the spine) which confines him to a wheel chair. After a disrupted adoption, Mr. E was adopted by his current parents when he was 11 years old. He has four brothers and one sister. Mr. E had a very strong sense of himself as "a person with a disability" and greatly valued his "circle of support," including family, friends, program staff, and his service coordinator.

He liked elementary school because of the sense of community he felt there but his appreciation for school gradually declined as he progressed through junior and high school. Mr. E described high school as "too much" for him due to the physical (concerns about his ability to escape in an emergency situation), social (disruptive students and large classes), and academic (inability to keep up with class assignments) structure. Consequently, he transferred to an alternative high school in 10th grade. Mr. E received an IEP diploma and a supportive network beyond school that helped with housing and job placement, but he discovered the colleges he applied to would not accept his diploma. Therefore, he enrolled in the program to acquire his GED certificate. His long term goals were to attend college and become a social worker. At the time of the interview he was at the Literacy 2 level.

Junior

Junior was 38 years old and a single non-custodial father of four children, ages 16, 12, 10 and 6 years. He was born in Savannah, Georgia but moved to the northeast when he was in the second grade. He grew up in a single parent home with a younger brother who was 32 years old at the time. His mother was a corrections officer. Junior described his early life as "constantly just

moving." In fact, he lived in the same area as Mike for a short period of time before moving to the south end of the city.

In high school alone, Junior attended three different high schools. He described himself as having a "learning problem" and being held back a couple of times, unlike his brother who was an 'A' student. Yet, both did not finish high school. Junior became involved with the gang culture in the eighth and ninth grades, stopping out of school twice during that time. He described his community and school as a "big fight thing." His decision to complete his schooling was waylaid by a gang attack, negative student-teacher interactions in the new school he was transferred to, and incarceration the summer before he was to begin the 11th grade. At the time of the interview, junior was unemployed, had been in the program for 17 months, and was at the GED level. Like Mike, he eschewed the past and sought a better life. To him the GED meant "change" and better access to jobs; however, he was very aware that his felony record greatly limited his options.

Ice

Ice was a 55-year-old divorcée with four children and six grandchildren. He described himself as coming from a poor but close family and as someone who "moved around," living in different locations in the city. Ice was the third of twelve children (eight brothers and three sisters). His mother took care of home responsibilities. He described his father as a good father who provided for him but was not around much. Some of Ice's siblings finished high school and others did not, but he spoke often of his brother who was a district leader, an unpaid elected official who works on behalf of his political party at the county level.

Despite his family's urging to stay in school, Ice dropped out of school when he was in the third or fourth grade because of bullying. He became addicted to drugs and alcohol but became drug-free to take care of his four children. His wife was also on drugs at the time. Ice survived by working "off the books," which he said paid well sometimes. His parents and older siblings filled out applications for him, but he was adept at hiding his low literacy skills from his

younger siblings, his children, and his friends. Nevertheless, he encouraged his children to stay in school and they all graduated from college.

At the time of the interview, Ice was on disability due to a back injury and was receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI). He had been attending the program for five months and was at the Literacy 1 level. Ice wanted to be able to answer his grandchildren's questions and planned to return to work to save money for his children and his mother. To him, the GED certificate meant "better jobs, better life."

Raymond

Raymond was 56 years old. He and his wife were separated and they had one daughter and granddaughter. Raymond also grew up in a low-income family and was the youngest of 12 children. His mother worked as a nurse at a nursing home and his father worked on the train tracks. He described himself as being very close to his parents and having few friends. He had a deep sense of the deprivations of poverty describing himself as not having "a child's life" and having a "hard" life. He lost six siblings through drug addiction, murder, and other health complications.

Raymond left school in the eighth grade, considering it a waste of time. He had been promoted without learning to read. His mother had taken him out of school in the seventh grade for the same reason but he returned realizing he needed reading skills to get better paying jobs. Like Ice, Raymond's family helped him fill out job applications; other times he relied on the kindness of strangers. In response to his parents' death, Raymond spiraled into three attempted suicides, drug and alcohol abuse, and incarceration.

At the time of the interview, Raymond had been on parole for three years and was managing three transition homes for recent parolees on a volunteer basis. His aptitude for math and his observation of the previous manager, as well as assistance from the program facilitated execution of his responsibilities. Raymond enrolled in the program because he wanted to learn to

read, desired to read to his granddaughter, and hoped to obtain a porter position that was contingent upon his ability to read. For Raymond, learning to read and eventually acquiring his GED certificate would be a "dream come true."

Roddy Rod

Roddy Rod was 64 years old, divorced, and the father of four children. He also grew up in poverty and was the second of 15 children. His father was a Chinook Indian. Roddy Rod's physical appearance reflected his mixed heritage. His father worked in sanitation and his mother was a housewife. Because he was the second eldest, he was required to take care of his younger siblings leaving him little time and space to study. When Roddy Rod was 15 years old, he and eight of his siblings were placed in orphanages because of an unhealthy home environment. When he was 18 years old, he returned home but had to live periodically with his grandmother because of limited space in his mother's apartment.

Roddy Rod left school in the tenth grade. Like Raymond, he had been promoted without learning how to read or write. The teachers gave him the option of joining the armed forces or being expelled from school, but Roddy Rod was not accepted into the army because he had flat feet. He got married when he was 19 and took great pride in how well he provided for his family despite his limited literacy skills. He learned to read and took self-development courses that helped to offset the "handicap" of his low-literacy skills in the job market. Nevertheless, following his second divorce and other life stressors, Roddy Rod experienced 20 years of depression, signing himself into an asylum, and spending some time in prison.

At the time of the interview, Roddy Rod was on parole and living in one of the homes Raymond managed. He described himself as coming a "long way" referring to the many obstacles he overcame in his life. With a positive view of the future, Roddy Rod looked forward to acquiring his GED certificate as a personal accomplishment, public recognition of his achievement, and freedom to try new ventures he would have previously avoided.

Data Collection

Data collection took place over three months (April to June 2010). The ABEL program, which had been in existence for 7½ years and at one point had provided free classes to 3000 students with 125 staff members (primarily volunteer), suddenly closed its doors in early June. Although I was able to find alternate sites to conduct my interviews, the closure limited the number of observations I conducted, and the collection of documents related to goal sheets and grades. Based upon conversations with students and staff, the economic downturn and era of accountability that equates progress with the number of GED diplomas achieved each year forced the closure of the donation-funded program.

The primary data sources were three sets of interviews loosely based upon Seidman's (1998) interview structure (see Appendix 1 for interview guide). The first set of interviews focused on the past (early schooling experiences), the second on their present experiences in adult education programs, and the third on the meaning of those experiences. However, I allowed space for the participants to convey their stories in their own unique way as they moved back and forth between past and present experiences and future aspirations. The interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended for full expression of the participants' experiences, values, and beliefs. In the subsequent interviews, I began with clarification questions from the previous interviews. This often led the participants to recall events they had not previously mentioned. After the last set of interviews, I made follow-up calls to address any final questions and to check on participants' well-being since the closing of the center.

The interview questions were very general. For example, in the first round of interviews I began by asking the participants to describe what school was like instead of targeted questions about literacy experiences. My purpose in doing this was to unearth what they considered significant by giving them space to tell their story of early schooling experiences. Drawing upon Barton and Hamilton's (2000) definition of literacy as extending beyond technical skills and

"involv[ing] values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships including peoples' awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy, discourses of literacy, how people talk about it and make sense of [it] (p. 7), my guided questions also explored the relationship of school, family, community, and society to the participants' understanding of the importance of literacy and education. As research has shown, knowledge of past experiences is important for understanding the present situation of adult learners (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Belzer, 2004; Quigley, 1992; Rogers & Fuller, 2007).

 The second round of questions dealt with similar themes except in the current context of ABEL programs. The guided questions were framed around their likes and dislikes of the program, positive and negative experiences, expectations and aspirations associated with their goals for program participation, and factors that supported or hindered achievement of those goals. The third round of questions asked participants to compare past and present experiences and changes brought about by being in the program. However, the interviews did not always follow this order since I allowed participants to narrate the stories as they saw fit and then followed with questions not covered in their narration. Riessman (2008) points out that narrative inquiry requires giving up control and sharing power as the researcher "follow[s] participants down their trails" in the formulation of their stories (p. 24). Participants made links between past and present experiences and future goals. In so doing, they displayed identities they appropriated to negate or affirm ascribed identities. Since cultural scripts influence how we view and interpret the world and express meaning (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Gee, 1991), I asked the study participants to express themselves creatively using music, poetry, art or photography to describe what being able to read or having their GED certificate meant to them. They all chose a song.

 Secondary data sources included class observations and document analysis. I conducted two classroom observations for five of the participants because one participant did not return to the program. As noted earlier, classes were scheduled twice a day and two times a week. Students

were encouraged to attend at least two three-hour classes a week. These classes provided opportunities to observe how participants talked about literacy, interacted with peers and teachers, and engaged in literacy activities. Document analysis was limited to program handouts and the lyrics of the songs the participants used to describe their experiences and aspirations. The sudden closing of the center prevented analysis of student portfolios.

Combined, these data sources helped to elicit conversations about African American men's aspirations and expectations, to highlight key themes, and to identify discrepancies and contradictions. In some instances, the observations clarified some of the comments the participants made in the interviews. Each participant received a $20 Metrocard for participating in the study. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a transcriptionist. I then edited them after repeated listenings to include non-lexical interactional content (my responses, pauses, silences, expressive sounds, and actions) in acknowledgement of the co-authored construction of the narrative (Riessman, 2008).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began during field work as I reflected upon observations and interviews making connections to theories, raising questions, and identifying prevalent themes. Upon completion of my field work, I used NVivo software to inductively identify key themes in each participant's narrative and across the corpus by means of open coding, focused coding, and the writing of integrative memos that highlighted links within and across data sets (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This process confirmed and expanded upon some of the themes mentioned in my field notes. For example, in my reflections after the first round of interviews, which dealt with early schooling experiences, I wrote, "The themes that have arisen so far are poverty, and surprisingly, bullying" (April 15, 2010). The latter was unexpected because it was not identified as a factor in the research on student attrition for African American males.

Defining narratives and discerning meaning

The second stage involved repeated listenings and readings of the transcripts to ascertain how the participants structured their stories to make sense of their experiences with literacy acquisition and development (Riessman, 1993). The underlying purpose was to privilege the voice of the narrators. The uniqueness of each person was evident in the way they constructed their stories, the content of their stories, and the interpretations and responses to their situations. The first step was to identify the boundaries of their narratives.

Defining narratives

As a conveyor of experience and identity, personal narratives are commonly understood as stories with organizing structures primarily characterized by sequence and consequence in the relation of past events. They often have a beginning, middle, and ending with variations of temporality, structure, spatiality, and reality (Gee, 1986; Labov & Waletzky, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008); however, recent research such as the uncompleted story in chaos narratives (Frank, 2010) and projected or near future events in small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2006) push for an expanded definition of narrative structure.

Some of the men's narratives aligned with the classic short story model (Labov, 2006; Labov & Waletzky, 2003) in which sequencing (temporality) and evaluation of past events were central. They included the elements of orientation (provides basis for understanding the story), complicating action (the situation or crisis), evaluation (the significance of the story), resolution (how the situation is resolved), and coda (a statement ending the narrative or returning the listener to the present). Others aligned with the long episodic narrative (Gee, 1986) where coherence was constructed topically.

Indeed, it was my struggle to make sense of the seemingly disparate events Junior connected in his narrative that drew me to Gee's (1986, 2011) poetic structures as an analytical tool. The poetic structures approach to analyzing narrative is based on the structures of

spontaneous oral language having as one of its resources the rich oral culture of African

Americans. The narratives are restructured into idea units, stanzas, and sections or parts. Each

line represents an idea; each stanza is a group of lines representing a theme, location and

character; and stanzas are gathered into larger thematic units or sections. I combined both

approaches because in some instances the way in which the story was told did not support a break

into stanzas.

My search to find an analytic method followed Riessman (1993, 2008), ultimately

leading to a narrative structure "of embedded narrative segments within an overarching narrative

that includes non-narrative parts" (1993, p. 51). This approach was useful in identifying smaller

narratives within larger narratives thereby discerning a larger plot or theme that might be

overlooked by just focusing on short stories. Conversely, the short stories were often significant,

indicating poignant moments in time that marked the participants' psychological and physical

selves. As Riessman (1997) points out, "the way individuals craft their tales including the

narrative genres they select, carry crucial interpretive understandings" (p. 157). Since each

narrative was unique in its construction, an a priori determination of where the story began and

ended would have compromised its integrity. In this way, the men's experiences were privileged

because the meaning was drawn from the narrative structure (Riessman, 1993). Yet, in the very

act of defining the boundaries of these narratives I contributed to the interpretation and meaning

of the story (Riessman, 2008).

Discerning identity

The second step in understanding how the participants made sense of their literacy

experiences was to identify the identities they connected to these experiences. As Riessman

(1993) notes, individuals "construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim

identities and construct lives" (p. 2). To perceive the identities the participants constructed in their

narratives I examined how they identified themselves by the identities they claimed, the identities

ascribed to them, and how they positioned themselves in relation to others. I linked my interpretation to textual features using Fairclough's (2003) concept of modality as a means of displaying identity construction, O'Connor's (1994) theory of the variant uses of "you" while indexing the self, and Gee's (2011) seven building tasks of language (see below).

Fairclough notes that "what people anchor themselves to in texts is an important part of how they identify themselves" (p.164). In other words, people demonstrate what is important by the level of their commitment. Modality is a clause or a sentence that establishes "what the authors commit themselves to in terms of truth or necessity" (p. 219). It is the range of positions between complete support and total rejection. Modality involves attitudes, judgments, commitments, and stances and is identified by a variety of modal markers. For example, the deontic modality "got to," indicating necessity and obligation, appeared often in the men's narratives in relation to the choices they made.

O'Connor (1994) showed that "I" signifies an agentive self, whereas "you" implies three possibilities: a "generic you" in which the speaker is distancing himself from the situation and at the same time indicating it is a shared or common experience or position; an "involving you" in which the speaker involves the listener in the experience as a participant; and a "self-indexing you" in which the speaker addresses the past self in the incident he is relating. In general, the three types of "you" tend to fall within evaluative or speculative statements. The "generic you" was useful in identifying situations or stances the participants thought were common experiences. For example, Junior declared, "So it's like if you're not paying attention in class you're going to disrupt the class."

From a performance perspective, I also asked questions of the narratives such as what event the men enacted and what identity they sought to convey. Drawing upon Goffman, the performance/dialogic approach assumes the narrator presents a preferred self – the person he wants the listener to recognize him as being. For example, Raymond and Roddy Rod enacted

events that presented them as compromised and wounded learners. Riessman (2008) and O'Connor (1994) note that the enactment of an event draws the listener into the experience through the reliving of the event and serves as a persuasive linguistic device; nevertheless, I suggest that it also registers significance in drawing upon events that have marked the participants' physical and/or psychological selves.

Linking institutional, cultural, and societal influences

The third stage of analysis and interpretation was to explore the narrative and environmental context, identifying "underlying propositions that make talk sensible, including what is taken for granted by listener and speaker" (Riessman, 2008, p. 61). Narrative analysis posits that the individual life carries the markings of external forces that enable and constrain the expression of his or her identities and the interpretation of his or her experiences (Riessman, 1993; Tsai, 2007). Therefore, I analyzed participants' narratives to ascertain contributors to the ways in which participants linked experiences, beliefs, and particular identities to literacy choices.

Gee's (2011) seven building tasks of language sensitized me to the ways in which the men interacted with society in making meaning of their experiences: 1) *significance* (the value and meaning of something) was identified through repeated words, phrases, and experiences as well as speech intonation; 2) the *types of activities* they described doing and desiring to be involved in as well as those they chose to avoid; 3) the *types of identities* they enacted, rejected or desired to appropriate; 4) the *sorts of relationships* they had or sought to have; 5) their *perceptions of social goods* (what they desired or thought was important to have) and the ways in which these mattered to them; 6) the *connections and disconnections* between past, present, and future, people, things, etc.; and 7) the *systems of knowledge* and ways of knowing that were privileged in particular settings. These building tasks of language also identified subtle changes in values, beliefs, and behaviors that connoted changes in identities and meaning structures.

A focus on institutional, cultural, and societal influences required an awareness of *when* and *where* the narrative took place, that is, the setting of the interview and the story being told. Some of the questions I asked of the narratives included: What were the social norms and cultural pressures associated with being a certain type of person or fulfilling a particular role? Which experiences support the participants' ideas of truth and reality? How did particular environments influence participants' experiences and perceptions of their experiences? What was considered assumed knowledge and therefore not stated? What was accomplished by the enactment and dramatization of certain stories, and what were the underlying purposes of the narratives, for instance, to provide information or persuade? How did my identities influence what was said and not said? These types of questions informed my understanding of influential factors such as life stage, learning environment, changes in society, and researcher involvement in narrative construction. As Riessman (2003) notes, "settings and relationships constrain what can be narrated and shape the way a particular story develops" (p. 4).

The researcher-narrator relationship

In some capacity, identity markers and our individual experiences position us as insiders and outsiders in relation to the experiences of others (Merriam et al., 2001). Insider status carries the assumption of shared experiences and understandings (Bruner, 1990) requiring that we, as researchers, be mindful of inherent biases in our interpretation. The outsider status heightens the possibility of misrepresentations but sensitizes us to taken-for-granted understandings (Banks, 1998). In addition, the dialogic/performance approach assumes that the interactive nature of the researcher-narrator relationship contributes to narrative content. The depth and quality of information the narrator conveys is based upon a level of trust and not simply a signed consent form (Craig & Huber, 2007).

My identity as a former volunteer at the program and a member of the church increased my rapport with the participants. The students, staff, and participants treated me as a staff

member. While waiting for participants or classes to start, I sometimes took attendance and assisted with office work such as stuffing envelopes, editing poems for the next student publication, and grading practice exams. These activities most likely supported the students' view of me as a staff member even though they knew I was no longer tutoring at the program. My participation in these activities provided a means for giving back to the program and the students.

Who the participants perceived me to be shaped the identities they sought to present and the content of their narratives (Coates, 2003; Goffman, 1959; Riessman, 2008). For example, my religious and gender identities were noted in the interview. Junior stated that he "knew the true meaning of respect," so he avoided certain behaviors in the presence of church folk. He also chose not to mention particular lyrics of a rap song because he thought they were inappropriate at the time. Both he and Raymond apologized when they swore in the interview. On the other hand, five of the men, at various points, made reference to their Christian beliefs. The Christian foundation of the program, its church affiliation, and our shared faith may also have highlighted or promoted the expression of that identity (E. Peterson & Langellier, 2007). The participants also spoke about hip hop culture and geographic locations without additional explanations, assuming that I understood or knew what they were talking about; however, my identity as a middle-class, transplanted Barbadian woman limited my understanding of their experiences and vernacular language so that on several occasions I requested explanations of their statements.

My educational background also mediated our interactions. More than once Raymond asserted that he wanted to be able to read with ease like me and that he felt capable of doing the interview because of the progress he had made in reading. Roddy Rod, on the other hand, sought to present himself as well-read in the interviews stating that he was afraid to talk to college-educated people until he learned enough to converse with others on a variety of topics. This awareness of educational difference may have been one of the reasons the men provided unsolicited explanations for not finishing high school.

Riessman (2008) stated that researchers "wear their identities like tortoise shells" (p. 139). I entered the interview process with the prominent identity of researcher and the "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1954) of existing research. The latter fostered expectations of the topics I thought participants would talk about. I considered myself an insider to the realities of race relations as a Black person in the United States and so I expected the men to raise the topic in their narratives. Except for Junior, who displayed a heightened sense of his racial and ethnic identity, the men did not mention the topic. When I specifically asked questions about being Black men in the United States the men appeared to distance themselves from the topic through vague and generalized responses.

Could the silence on race stem from assumed knowledge where the participants did not think it was necessary to discuss the topic? The literature and my experiences had sensitized me to middle- class experiences as entry points for talking about race. Could the entry points for talking about race and the way race is discussed be different for African American men living in urban poverty? Lareau's (2003) ethnographic study on social class and childrearing gives credence to this possibility. She found that the Black middle-class family in her study spoke differently and expressed a higher degree of concern about the impact of racism in their lives than the low-income Black family (pp. 134-135). Alternatively, I pondered whether race was an uneasy topic because of racism's de-powering construction of African American male identities. Ultimately, situations such as these demonstrated to me the importance of a reflective practice that questions the social position in which the research questions are anchored as well as the basis for interpreting what is said in the interview.

Data quality

For narrative analysis, methodological issues include control, representation, voice and rigor. The criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1986) are: 1) academic rigor, which refers to credibility and transferability; and 2)

authenticity, which relates to the fair "presentation of different value and belief systems" (p.79). First, I used member checking to address authenticity through follow-up questions generated by reading the transcripts. Keeping in mind that we lose shades of authenticity with each level of abstraction (Riessman, 1993), my purpose was to present the research in a manner that as closely as possible retold the narrator's story and the associated meanings. Second, in line with the structural component of the dialogic/performance approach, I provided support for my interpretations by linking them to features of the text, drawing primarily upon Gee (2011), O'Connor (1994), and Fairclough (2003). This is evident throughout the presentation of the findings. Third, themes across participant data sources and multiple interviews also add credibility to the findings. Fifth, I discussed how my positionality influenced the interpretation and analysis of the story. As Ruthellen (2007) avers, "the researcher's self, with its fantasies, biases, and horizons of understanding is the primary tool of inquiry so self knowledge and self reflection are necessary" (p. 545). Consequently, it was important to bracket my assumptions by not assuming common interpretations and asking definition and clarification questions.

Besides my advisor's feedback, I employed peer debriefing which provided additional critical perspectives (Andrews, 2007; Y. Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I solicited feedback from four graduate students in education and gender studies. I met twice with an African American male graduate student. He read segments of the transcripts, I documented his interpretations, and we discussed the similarities and differences of our interpretations. In addition, I discussed my findings with three female graduate students who provided valuable insights into race and gender.

In terms of transferability and authenticity, I provided a rich presentation of participants' sentiments in their own words. This not only provided detail for the readers to make their own assessments but also privileged the voice of the narrator. At the same time, I was aware of the negative stereotypes confronting African American males. I struggled with the decision to present their words as said or to restructure them grammatically to direct the focus away from how they

spoke to what they had to say. Ultimately, I chose to retain their vernacular using parenthetical explanations because they were their words and in the act of making changes I devalued them.

In addition, I presented the dialogic context through 'framing' the narratives so that others can assess the 'fit' of my analysis or apply the study to other situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 77). Although positivists question the relevance of small studies, their detailed focus uncovers nuances and variations that might be missed by larger studies, and they have a history of advancing the knowledge base of scientific disciplines (Flyvbjerg, 2004, quoted in Riessman, 2008). Finally, I took copious notes of my research strategy and process and kept a record of inferences and analytic procedures.

Limitations of the study

Limitations of the study include in-group diversity and site selection. The participants were skewed toward the older population. Also, they were unemployed and single at the time. Life stage and age inform adult learners' reasons for enrollment, as well as their perceptions of past experiences and the prominence of particular events in their stories. As mentioned earlier, the younger men were reticent about being interviewed. This suggests that future research in this area should consider trust building strategies to facilitate research participation. In addition, former program participants were not included in the sample, so the findings reflect the perspectives of those who had a primarily positive experience with the program. Nevertheless, their views point to programmatic aspects that may foster participation and persistence. Furthermore, since the site was a church-sponsored program, some of the men's experiences as well as program strategies and resources have limited transferability to federally-funded and other community programs. Despite these limitations, the men's perceptions of supportive and disruptive program components can inform ABEL program educators of valued programmatic components and suggest areas of improvement.

Presentation of findings

The dialogic/performance approach requires the researcher's "active presence" to be evident in the construction of the narrative. Certainly, the questions that I asked influenced the revisiting and construction of the men's experiences, and my verbal and non-verbal reactions influenced the depth of expression and content of their narratives. Meaning "does not reside in a speaker's narrative, but in the dialogue between speaker and listener(s), investigator and transcript, and text and reader" (Riessman, 2008, p. 139). Accordingly, my analysis of the participants' narratives is included in the presentation of the findings. I included the questions that generated the narrators' responses except in situations where it was a lengthy episodic narrative or Raymond's uninterrupted narration of his life experiences with literacy (six pages of single-spaced text).

Also, I did not strictly adhere to the skeletal structure provided by Gee, but included pauses and non-lexical or expressive utterances where I thought it was significant, and punctuation for readability. The topic and stanza headings indicate my understanding of the construction of their narratives. In addition, I identified instances in which my identities or responses contributed to the construction of the narrative beyond the utterance (e.g., uhm and ok) that indicate a listening audience and encouragement to the narrator to continue. Furthermore, in line with the dialogic/performance approach, I made my analytic strategies explicit and anchored the findings in societal, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Chapter 4

Early Schooling Experiences

The social and the academic environments converged to influence the participants' schooling experiences and their sense of self in relation to literacy and educational attainment. Indeed, the social environment pre-dominated their recollections of academic life and played an important role in how they understood their early schooling experiences, the choices they made, and their perceptions of the value of education. Relationships with peers and teachers, support systems, and home and community environments carried different weight, sometimes supporting and at other times opposing each other.

The findings indicate that obstacles in the school, community, and home environments and the men's responses to them deterred their progress. In particular, the men framed their early schooling narratives around low academic achievement, student-teacher interactions, and bullying, peer pressure, and gang violence. They identified one or more of these factors as the primary cause for dropping out of school. In addition, the men placed their experiences against a backdrop of poverty, which, to varying degrees inhibited their academic progress, subjected them to ridicule, and informed their sense of self and perceptions of educational attainment.

Although participants' early schooling experiences covered four decades, they were surprisingly similar, indicating the continuity of certain aspects of schooling that contribute to dropout despite school reform projects. All of the men used negative descriptors (e.g., torture, nightmare, crazy, struggle, hurt, shame) to qualify their schooling experiences, yet invariably each one constructed an identity of the student who desired to progress academically but was waylaid by extenuating circumstances. They revealed that dropping out was not simply due to

dislike for school or learning but rather a response to an alienating environment. The participants either dropped out or were pushed out (Fine, 1991).

The men's stories offer insights into the relationship between academic and social disengagement and early school departure. This chapter is organized according to the primary reasons the men gave for leaving school. In so doing, I draw attention to situations that mediated the men's responses to literacy and classroom engagement and the potential they hold for informing learner engagement with ABEL programs.

Low academic achievement

The burgeoning literature on academic achievement and the struggles of marginalized groups to maximize their full potential within the public educational system evince many complex factors. Five of the six participants told stories of learning difficulties, including four who were placed in special education classes, and three who described themselves as having a "learning problem." The men framed their narratives of low academic achievement around parental mobility, early caregiving, lack of academic support from teachers and family members, and the school environment. Two men specifically identified low academic achievement as the primary reason for their early school departure. In particular, they pointed to residential mobility, early caregiving, and social promotion as setting them on the trajectory of academic failure.

Residential mobility

Although transfers into better school systems can produce positive results, residential mobility often leads to learning disruptions that negatively affect academic progress (Rumberger, 2003). Smith, Fien, and Paine (2008) found that reading performance increased for students who stayed in the same school from kindergarten to second grade, compared to those who came from other schools during that time. Also, students who experience high mobility tend to have lower scores on standardized tests, drop out at higher rates than less mobile peers, and are more likely to be poor, African American, and from families that do not own their own homes (U. S.

Accounting Office, 2010). In addition, Rumberger (2003) found that 45% of African American fourth graders had changed schools at least twice. The early schooling experiences of the participants reflect these findings. Five participants moved at least three times during their K-12 experiences, which likely contributed to their academic progress. However, student mobility occurred most often as a result of parental relocation, secondly by student request, and least often by school request.

Raymond

Raymond, who attended three schools in two years, concisely captured the psychological and academic challenge of coping with a new environment:

Excerpt 4.1

[Transcript 1: Topic - changing schools]
Interviewer: You said you were only there for a couple of days?

Raymond: My mother was moving.   stanza 1
              So that's what really hurt me-
              she was moving.

              I made all of these friends and what not   stanza 2
              and doing a little bit good in school
              and she moved me somewhere else
              like I had to start all over again.

The move "hurt" Raymond socially and academically because he had made friends and was doing better in school. He often used the word "hurt" to describe experiences associated with literacy. In fact, he summed up his early school experiences as "hurt and shame." Although Raymond was at this school for a short period of time he was an active participant in the classroom, serving as class monitor. He described this experience as "really good" and the teacher as someone who "pushed" him to do better. Linguistically and experientially, moving was central in this narrative. Raymond mentioned moving three times, connecting it to the painful experience of loss and starting "all over again." The import of moving in this narrative is further

demonstrated when contrasted with later narratives in which Raymond constructed loner and deficit literate identities. This was the only public school in which he narrated positive relationships with teachers and peers and presented himself as "part of" the classroom community.

Junior

Similarly, Junior connected parental mobility to his academic progress but used it as a core theme in the trajectory of his academic life. The sequential pattern of his narrative implied that Junior saw a causal link between residential mobility, low academic performance, and later gang involvement. The following segment references the first part of that causal relationship. Junior's narration of residential mobility began in response to general questions about where he grew up. He recalled he was "always moving, moving constantly" and had never finished a semester in the same school until his mother moved from Georgia to the northeast. Junior concluded this caused him to be held back in first grade when he was in Georgia:

Excerpt 4.2

[Transcript 1: Topic – difference between schools]
Interviewer: So what was it like in school? So what was different about the school besides like the structure and the height of the buildings?

Junior: The school?   stanza 1
               It was a'ight if I remember
               School was okay.

               [Part 2: Low academic progress]
               [Part 2A: Grade retention]
               It was probably like the second grade   stanza 2
               the second or third grade.
               There was one grade
               I forgot I got left back in
               I think it was the first grade.
               'Cause like I said
               I was like moving constantly.

               [Part 2B: Behind on school work]
               So it was like if the teacher had like a um-   stanza 3
               some homework packages or whatever

and studying
and everybody up and all o' that [other students on par with class work].
It was really like I was behind
because I was moving to different schools.

[Part 2C: Finishing the school year]
When I came up here during the summer time   stanza 4
it was like start fresh.
We did finish over here.
We finish over here
and then we moved
and then we went to another school.
So it's like finish the school year
and then we moved.

Junior used this narrative to explain his low academic performance, clearly linking grade retention and being "behind" with frequent moves. He perceived moving to the northeast to be a new chapter in his academic life because it was the first time he finished the school year in the same school. Junior thought it "was the rent or maybe it was the job" that caused his mother to move often. His assessment of his mother's economic situation aligned with research showing that the need for affordable housing promotes frequent moves among low-income families (Crowley, 2003; Schafft, 2006).

Somewhere between the second and fourth grade (he was not sure), Junior was identified as having a learning problem and placed in special education classes, or what he referred to as "resource classes." Junior connected this learning problem to retention in seventh and ninth grades, exclusion from classroom activities, and subsequent enrollment in a "delinquent" high school:

Excerpt 4.3

[Transcript 1: Topic – Attending a delinquent high school]
Interviewer: So that makes that-so it's called a delinquent school? So what makes that-

Junior: It's not a delinquent school,   stanza 1
but it's just like-

[Part 2 – Junior high school]
[Part 2A: The learning problem]
Matter of fact when I was in IS 123   stanza 2
and junior high school, a'ight [alright]
no-
I got left back in the seventh grade and the ninth grade.

So when I was um-

The reason why I got left back   stanza 3
because I had like this-
I have this learning problem.
So it's really like at the time barely reading,
I was really barely, barely reading.

[Part 2B: Not paying attention in class]
So it's like if you were not paying attention in class,   stanza 4
you're going to disrupt the class.

[Part 2C: Learned to cut school]
But I went to Castle Hill-   stanza 5
I mean IS 123
and it was like seventh to eighth.
So it was like really were it started at.
You got that freedom, "Oh snap, I can cut!"

[Part 2D: Rejected by schools]
So when I was in 123.   stanza 6
I applied for schools
*****[school]. [4]
I applied for ****[school].
I was in the band
and was playing an instrument.

So they didn't accept me.   stanza 7
So who knows?
So that's where I was at.
At Castle Hill.

The halting start at the beginning of the narrative suggests an interruption in the flow of

thought and a redirection in his thinking. Junior thought it was necessary to explain why he went

to the "delinquent" school he had previously described as a place for students other schools did

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[4] Name omitted to protect confidentiality (****).

not want. The order of the sub-sections of the narrative shows a process of disengagement from the classroom. Junior began by explaining he had a learning problem that delayed his academic progress. His acceptance of the disabled learner identity is seen in his correction of the verb tense, indicating a past and present identity (Part 2A, stanza 1). For him, the proof of his disability was found in the fact that he was "barely, barely reading" although he was in junior high school. In addition, he was retained in the first, seventh, and ninth grades. Junior presented himself as a student who had difficulty acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the classroom community of practice (Wenger, 1998), thereby excluding him from constructing a positive literate identity in relation to this community.

Consequently, he found other things to do that disrupted the class, ultimately leading to truancy. Linguistic markers also suggest a narrative strategy of distancing. Junior switched from the first person 'I' to the third person or general 'you' when speaking about the student who disrupts the class (Part 2B). He did not want to be seen as a student who disrupted the class. His narrative evinced a struggle between his preferred and perceived student identities. For example, in the second interview conducted a few weeks later, I asked him who he was referring to in this stanza and he replied he was speaking of other students. Yet, a month later, in our third interview he reflected upon past schooling experiences and the path his life had taken, and blamed himself for not paying attention in class. Using the modal verb phrase "you're going to" also suggests the expectation of a given result or a truth statement based upon situated knowledge (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2011; Halliday, 1994): "a student who was not paying attention in class would disrupt the class."

His gradual move away from the classroom took a turn toward truancy beginning in the seventh grade. That was where "it all started," Junior asserted, referring to his move away from the classroom to the street, from deficient literate identity to proficient fighter, and from exclusion to inclusion (stanza 4). Equating his awareness of truancy to "freedom," he utilized that

knowledge to escape an environment that daily reminded him he was inferior. Junior's sequential construction of the narrative suggests his awareness of low academic achievement and cutting school as causes for being rejected by the schools of his choice, though he seemed unwilling to specifically state the connection.

Both Raymond and Junior's narratives demonstrate how residential mobility can set a trajectory of low academic achievement beginning in the early years of schooling when foundational knowledge and skills critical for continued academic success are acquired (Baydar, Brooks-Gunn, & Furstenberg, 1993; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Stanovich, 1986). These foundational weaknesses can continue into adult life if not corrected (Meisels & Liaw, 1993). The narratives also forecast the interplay of poverty, power relations, and participants' responses to them as mediating factors in their academic progress.

Early caregiving

Family-related reasons are also commonly cited in student attrition literature, with boys more likely to support the family by going to work while girls attend to caregiving responsibilities (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Predictors of low academic achievement point to lack of literacy practices in the home and limited family support for education (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2001; Lonigan, 2004); however, few studies have examined how children's early caregiving responsibilities may contribute to dropout. 'Parentified children' are child caregivers who take on excessive responsibilities of managing the home or taking care of family members to the detriment of their own developmental needs (Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, 1997). Undue home responsibilities can detract from the time and energy needed for schoolwork (Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998) and may encourage perceptions of the student as an unmotivated learner.

Roddy Rod

Roddy Rod's story provides insight into the relationship between caregiving and slow academic progress. His narratives of literacy experiences were framed around limited time. He

was the student who "didn't learn very much" in school because of familial responsibilities. As the second eldest of 15 children living in urban poverty, he was required to help his mother care for his siblings. In the following segment, Roddy Rod juxtaposed academic progress with the caregiving responsibilities of his family:

Excerpt 4.4

[Transcript 1: Topic – not learning much]
Interviewer: When you say much later you started going to school-when did you start?

Roddy Rod: Much later-   stanza 1
                I mean I-
                I went to public school and junior high school,
                but like ah
                I kind of dropped out at the-
                in the-
                like the 10th grade [*cough*]
                Excuse me.
                And um
                I mean I didn't learn very much.

                [Part 1: Family care]
                I just wasn't, you know, for some reason-   stanza 2
                coming from a big family
                and being the oldest of a big family
                kind of like there was more care.
                There wasn't enough you know
                time to kind of sit down
                and actually study and stuff.

                I mean although my mother   stanza 3
                I guess wanted us to have the education.
                There really wasn't the-
                the [p^5] strictness to get it.
                And being the second oldest
                of other younger brothers and sisters
                just never left enough time to do it.
                So-

A common pattern in Roddy Rod's narration was the use of halted speech and elision as he struggled with answering particular questions to construct the preferred identity of the

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[5] Short pause [p]

educated person. For example, in this excerpt he chose not to state the age he started attending

school, which was "much later" than the average age (stanza 1). Also, he said he "kind of

dropped out" in the tenth grade, using the narrative device of hedging (Fairclough, 2003) to

indicate his lack of commitment to the dropout identity. This is later substantiated by Roddy

Rod's assertion that the teachers encouraged him to leave school. In addition, like most of the

participants he found it necessary to explain *why* he did not finish school, even though the

question was not specifically asked.

His approach suggests a desire to avoid or downplay certain aspects of his schooling

experiences. This may be due to the shame many adult literacy learners experience in a society

where literacy is a social expectation (Bartlett, 2007; Beder, 1991; Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin,

2005; Prins, 2008) and the desire to present himself as an educated person in light of his

awareness of my graduate student status. Roddy Rod later confided he was afraid to speak to

college students until he educated himself on a variety of subjects to converse comfortably with

most people. In fact, he declared that his ability to speak well greatly compensated for low

literacy skills in the workplace (transcript 2). Accordingly, his narrative approach shows a

conflict between the low-performing learner identity represented in the narrative of early

schooling and the preferred identity of the educated person he sought to enact throughout the

interview.

Roddy Rod built the theme of the unwilling participant in his academic failure by

revealing the conflict between the student and the caregiver identities. His home responsibilities

took precedence over his academic development because there was "more care" and not enough

time to study (stanza 2). He repeatedly connected limited time to caregiving. Although he lived in

a two-parent home, Roddy Rod presented his mother as the sole authority figure who delegated

many of her responsibilities to the older children (3rd stanza). Omitting his father from the

narrative served to exclude him from the caretaking aspect of the home, in line with Roddy Rod's

later voiced perceptions of parental roles. Roddy Rod averred he and his older sister were "the parents." His narration exhibited the concerns of many social workers with the early caretaking responsibilities and the developmental challenges of 'parentified children' (Early & Cushway, 2002; Jurkovic, 1997), in this case, delayed literacy development. Roddy Rod noted on many occasions that he "loved to read" and "carried a bag all the time that just had books and stuff," but struggled with comprehension, spelling, writing, and math. School was difficult because he had "a problem learning or being able to retain the information." As he explained, he did not have the time or the place to study, resulting in limited academic progress.

Social promotion

Social promotion[6] is the practice of promoting students through the school system without benefit of mastering the skills required to proceed to the next grade level. This, along with retention, has been used by schools to deal with children who are deficient in academic skills. Social promotion was popular in the 1960s and '70s until the National Commission on Excellence in Education's 1983 publication, *A Nation at Risk,* led to the resurgence of retention because of political and public outcry over public school students' low academic achievement (Frey, 2005; Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Roddy Rod and Raymond attended public school during the late 1950s to 1970s. Their narratives reflect the prevalent school policies of the era and offer insight into their understanding of the immediate and long-term effects of social promotion.

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[6] Although there are few studies on social promotion, its appearance in Clinton's 1998 State of the Union Address (Frey, 2005) and the U.S. Department of Education's (1999, p. 6) description of social promotion as a "hidden problem" in schools attest to its prevalence. Extensive research on retention indicates it does little for remediation, contributes to dropout, and reflects a disproportionate representation of African American males (Jimerson, 2001; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; C. Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). The few studies that included a comparison of social promotion offered mixed results and no information concerning percentages of African American males that have been pushed through the system (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, & Egeland, 1997; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Westbury, 1994).

Roddy Rod

Teachers responded to Roddy Rod's learning difficulties by either placing him in remedial classes or advancing him through the system without reaching appropriate competency levels. He thought the teachers who assigned him to remedial classes "tried to help as much as they could," unlike the other teachers who promoted him. In his school narratives, Roddy Rod constructed two identities: the "good kid" with learning difficulties and the "class clown." In the following excerpt, he used ventriloquation[7] (Wortham, 2000) to give voice to the teacher's rationale for social promotion, to position himself in relation to the teacher, and to add credibility to his presentation of self as a "good kid."

Excerpt 4.5

[Transcript 1: Topic – Learning Problems]
Interviewer: Did the teachers-did the teachers help at all?

Roddy Rod: No.   stanza 1
It was kind of like,
"oh, he's just a clown.
He doesn't want to learn this stuff."

[Part 2: Social promotion]
So you know back then they kind of like pushed you up,   stanza 2
pushed you through.
"He's doing all right, okay.
He's a good kid.
He's not trouble.
Just push him along," you know,
which didn't help me.

But I mean   stanza 3
how many times can you leave somebody back, you know?
You'll be 92 years old sitting up in the first grade [*laugh*].
92 years old sitting in the first grade.
That doesn't help either, you know.

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[7] Relying on the Bakhtinian concept of multivoicedness, Wortham (2000) describes ventriloquation as "an author 'speaking through' a character by aligning or distancing himself from the character," and through their speech assigning them a social position (p. 132). Wortham further notes that in so doing, the author evaluates the character and his/her relationship to the character while evincing the value systems of the culture in which s/he lives.

The teachers were the authority figures who "pushed" him through the system because they considered him to be a "good kid" who was not interested in learning academic knowledge. He was deemed the class clown. In the second stanza he began with a temporal frame, indicating that social promotion was a common practice. He indexed teachers as a social group, giving voice to their beliefs and practices as he understood them. Roddy Rod evaluated their actions as not beneficial, yet he expressed the hopelessness of retention in addressing his academic needs when he stated he would be "92 years old and still in first grade" (stanza 3). In so doing he voiced the conundrum of the retention debate: neither social promotion nor retention alone effectively addresses the remedial issues of low-achieving students (Frey, 2005; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; C. Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

In contrast to the teachers' assumption of disinterest, Roddy Rod provided another reason for claiming the clown identity:

Excerpt 4.6

[Transcript 1: Topic – Learning Problems]
        [Part 3: Choosing the clown]
Interviewer: I noticed you used the term clown, so was it that you were having fun?

Roddy Rod: Yeah, yeah,   stanza 1
                        I mean I-
                        I-
                        I took it to the next level
                        because if you're struggling
                        what do you do?

                        Do you just sit there and cry   stanza 2
                        or do you sit there
                        and try to clown your way through?
                        So you usually clown your way through
                        or you're the bully all the way through
                        one or the other

                        so-   stanza 3
                        I didn't choose to be the bully.
                        I chose to be the clown,
                        so you know,
                        when you make people laugh they're happy

and they'll leave you alone [*laugh*].

As the "struggling" student he did not have the skills or knowledge to participate in class activities, Roddy Rod saw three options available to him: "sit there and cry," be the class clown, or be the bully, and he chose the class clown (stanzas 1 & 2). His view was similar to Junior's in that the student who cannot participate in classroom activities will disrupt the class. The choices they made were not in relation to their teachers but to their peers. Adopting the bully or the clown identities provided avenues for the participants to interact with their peers from positions that did not identify them as inferior or open them to ridicule. Roddy Rod learned, "When you make people laugh they're happy and they'll leave you alone" (stanza 3). This statement alludes to bullying incidents that made schooling a "nightmare" for him.

Ultimately, Roddy Rod left school in the tenth grade at 17 years old. He refused to use the term "dropping out," which would imply an intentional act. The teachers gave him two choices: join the military or be put out of school since he was near the age of 18. So he reasoned, "the choice was theirs [teachers], it wasn't mine." Of the tenth grade he said he "just didn't know enough to be actually there." Roddy Rod left school with limited literacy skills and low self-esteem, hoping that enlistment in the army would give him "more self confidence and a lot of other things" he was "lacking at that particular time." He made sense of his low academic achievement by framing it against the expediency of caregiving responsibilities that resulted in learning problems not effectively remediated by the school. He was the student whose experiences were constrained by the authority figures in his life (e.g., mother, teachers), just as he was the "good kid" with learning problems who appropriated a clown identity to cope with the deficit construction of his literate identity and to protect himself from peers' verbal assaults.

Raymond

Like Roddy Rod, Raymond entered school late (age 7) and was promoted without acquisition of appropriate skills. Unlike Roddy Rod, however, his recollections were vivid and often filled with pain and anger. The primary identity he constructed was that of the student who wanted to learn but was let down by the system. A word count showed 26 mentions of his desire to learn to read. In response to my question of where he grew up, Raymond narrated six single-spaced pages (transcript) of uninterrupted text encapsulating his lifetime experiences with literacy. He recalled seeing the yellow school bus and wanting to go to school with the other students. At his request, his mother sent him to school, although they did not have money for school attire. In the following excerpt Raymond summarized his early schooling experiences:

Excerpt 4.7

[Transcript 1: Topic - going to school]

	[Part 1: Skipped through classes]	
Raymond:	And as I started growing up in school	stanza 1
	what they [teachers] was doing was	
	instead of 'em teaching me how to read and write	
	they'd skip me in classes.	
	From the second grade to the third	stanza 2
	they'd skip me.	
	And not knowing how to read	
	and don't know what's going on	
	I go to the fourth grade and the fifth grade.	
	I went all the way up to the seventh	
	not knowing how to read.	
	[Part 2: Taken out of school]	
	So what happen is that um I just-	stanza 3
	my mother just stopped me	
	from going to school completely,	
	you know, so therefore	
	I don't-didn't learn how to read	
	and write and what not.	

Raymond contrasted teaching to social promotion in which teachers used the latter as a substitute for the former (stanza 2). This statement cuts to the heart of the argument he constructed throughout his narratives: teachers are suppose to teach. He was passed from the second to the seventh grade without learning to read. Consequently, his mother took him out of school. The last sentence of the third stanza denotes a change in Raymond's literate identity. In changing from the present tense to the past tense he identified himself as a literate person because he learned to read at the adult learning program.

The narratives Raymond enacted were primarily student-teacher interactions that provided evidence for his argument that the teachers failed to do their jobs and in so doing positioned him to be excluded from the classroom and society. He used these narratives to demonstrate the ways in which he was demoralized as a student to the point of total disengagement. Raymond viewed social promotion as a result of the teacher's perception of him as a space holder instead of a student who needed and desired to learn to read:

Excerpt 4.8

[Transcript 2:   Topic – social promotion]

Interviewer: Like what did they [teachers] say? Do you recall anything they said to you in terms of your reading?

<div style="margin-left:3em">

[Part 2: Teacher explanation –needing space]

Raymond: Miss Green, Miss Green said-   stanza 1
my teacher's name was Miss Green.
She said you did beautiful and what not
and I said, "Well what did I do?
I'm not doing anything beautiful
when I still don't know how to read."

I always be straight up with them.

I said, "Be honest and let me know.   stanza 2
Am I reading?"
[The teacher said,] "No!"
I asked her, "Why did y'all move me up a notch and what not?"
[The teacher said,] "They need the space."

</div>

They needed the space   stanza 3
so they moved me up
instead of pushing me back,
making me think
and making my family think
I'm being promoted.
That hurted me more.

I wasn't supposed to get promoted or move up.   stanza 4
I was supposed to go back.
They just took on theyselves to move me up.

Yes, she needed the space   stanza 5
for the next class coming or what not.
So basically I was taking up space and what not
and I was not satisfied with that, you see?
I wanted to learn how to read
like *any*[8] other child, you understand.

[Part 2A: Not part of society]
Right now I feel that I'm part-   stanza 6
not part of society
because of my reading ability
and public school had a whole lot to do with it, you know.

Instead of them doing their job   stanza 7
they just moved me up
and just passed me and what not,
like, like it's all right,
like I know how to read, you know.

In the retelling of this conversation with his third grade teacher, Raymond enacted the

story and then evaluated its significance by placing it within a societal context. He characterized

the teacher as unconcerned with his learning and as seeking to deceive him about his academic

performance. Raymond stepped out of the story to let me (the audience) know that he "was

always straight" with teachers. His interjection at this point differentiated himself and the teacher,

which helped to construct his character as the honest student who was concerned about learning

while unveiling the teacher as dishonest in her evaluation. To him, it was less painful to be kept

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[8] Italicized words indicate participants' emphasis.

back than to be given the illusion of making progress. The teacher's response suggests that social promotion was not necessarily concerned with a student's social well-being as commonly espoused in the literature, but with simply moving students through the system.

Throughout his story Raymond framed social promotion as substitution for teaching and a disservice to him. Using deontic phrasing ("supposed to"), Raymond declared that the teachers were obligated to retain him if he was not at grade level. They "hurt" him because they failed to fulfill their obligation to teach, denying him the opportunity to learn to read like other children. Here Raymond contrasted his experience with other children in which he was the one lacking. This exemplifies a pattern of identity construction he used, reflecting exclusion and isolation. In the fourth stanza, he absolved himself of all responsibility by declaring, "they [teachers] took it on they selves to move me up." Raymond's anger was palpable as he related the story. He blamed the school system's practice of social promotion for his marginalization in society because, as he later explained, "society knows how to read."

Raymond responded in two ways to being in a class he was not academically prepared for: "I just get up and I'd leave or I'd just sit there and I mope." He considered being in class a waste of the teacher's time and his because it was not beneficial to him. Raymond related that his mother went to the school the next day when he explained why he was home early. His report card refuted the prior teacher's statement that he "was doing good." In anger, his mother took him out of that school and sent him to another school, but he was moved up again, indicating a common practice in the school system. In fact, Raymond shared that his older sister was also socially promoted, but his sister learned to read at home because his mother hired a tutor. Unfortunately, there was not enough money for Raymond to get similar support. Although his mother encouraged him to "keep trying' and "not give up," his efforts produced few results and a great deal of frustration. He surmised his bad temper came from his fruitless struggles to learn how to read. Social promotion positioned students such as Raymond and Roddy Rod for

continuous failure because they lacked the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in higher classes (W. Owings & L. S. Kaplan, 2001).

The men's narratives convey that circumstances beyond school mediated their academic performance, setting them on trajectories for academic failure. Residential mobility and family caretaking disrupted class time, restricted study time, and limited the acquisition of literacy skills necessary for academic success. Their situations were exacerbated by school systems that were ineffective in remediating their academic deficiencies. Schools in urban poverty areas are often beset by large classes and student differential knowledge bases, which constrain teachers' abilities to meet the needs of all their students (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Lacking the skills necessary to participate in the classroom community, participants disengaged from the classroom through truancy and adopting identities such as the class clown. The actions of authority figures in their lives directly and inadvertently affected the participants' academic progress. The next section will focus on how some participants perceived student-teacher relationships as contributors to their early school departures.

Student-teacher relationships

The student-teacher relationship figured prominently in the participants' early schooling experiences. This is not surprising since teacher quality, student-teacher ratios, curriculum, and student-teacher interactions influence students' academic progress (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Positive student-teacher relationships foster a sense of competence and security, good student relationships, and academic gains, whereas conflictual relationships detract from such outcomes (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). All of the participants recalled a teacher or staff person with whom they had a positive relationship, despite their general perception that teachers did not care and were only interested in the "paycheck." On one end of the spectrum, Mike had a very positive view of teachers, confidently asserting, "They loved me, that's all I can say." He recounted instances of encouragement and guidance. At the other end of

the spectrum, Junior and Raymond pointed to student-teacher relationships as the primary reason for early school departure. A common theme in their stories was feeling devalued by teachers.

Junior

Junior left school in the ninth grade and then had to leave again before he started the eleventh grade. In this section I will focus on his ninth grade departure, which would more appropriately be referred to as 'stopping out' (Belzer, 1998), since he intended to return to school. In response to a gang assault in which he was seriously injured, his mother sent him back to Georgia. Junior explained that his mother thought it would be better for him to go to school there because he would be away from the gang violence, but "*it wasn't better*." Although his time in Georgia was brief, it left a lasting negative impression and interrupted his schooling for over six months.

Junior began the lengthy narrative of his Georgia experience by emphatically announcing, "*I didn't like it*." He constructed a story of alienation in which northern manifestations of his African American identity were not welcomed by teachers, and his responses to them resulted in detention. Junior's experiences also demonstrate the social disconnect that can occur when students move into a new school environment. In the following excerpt he introduced detention as his reason for not liking the school, but went on to build a lengthy narrative explicating its circumstances:

Excerpt 4.9

> [Transcript 1: Topic – dislike for Georgia school]
> Interviewer: Okay what did you not like about it?
>
>   [Part 1: Detention]
> Junior: Let's see.   stanza 1
>   Ah, detention.
>   I had never been in detention.
>
>   [Part 1A: Racist town]
>   So it was like I'm back in a racist town.   stanza 2
>   So it was like a lot of Blacks

and the Black people,
they were white inside,
but they were Black outside.

And then, you know,
it's like it was different.

[Part 1B: Mixed school]
Yeah, it was a mix,   stanza 3
a mixed school,
white and Black.
Yeah, it was a mixed school.

[Part 1C: Getting into trouble with teachers]
Especially   stanza 4
it was after I got in trouble a few times
and they [teachers] said we don't like New Yorkers.
I said, "Yeah, we don't like you either."
So it's detention.

So I was tired of the school   stanza 5
and I was tired of like
definitely um the teachers and all of that.

    Junior perceived that racism was the cause of his frequent detention assignments. He described the Black teachers as "white inside," interpreting their actions as reflecting the racial biases of white members of the community. Here Junior alluded to the expectation of support he did not receive from the Black teachers. This was substantiated in later comments in which peers alerted him to Black teachers he should be wary of and his contrasting identification of himself as someone who defended his people even if he did not know them personally. This excerpt framed how Junior understood and presented his experiences in Georgia: his conflicts with teachers were racially charged constraints against expressions of his identity. He validated his belief through ventriloquation, using the teacher's voice in a regional prejudicial statement, to denote his status as an outsider who was unwelcomed by the authority figures in the school: "We don't like New Yorkers" (stanza 3). The result was detention for responding in kind. Junior admitted he was

placed in detention "a lot," hence the sentiment that he was "tired" of the school and the teachers (stanza 4).

In the next excerpt, Junior provided further evidence of the teachers' "racist" attitudes toward him, in this case, their response to northeastern expressions of his African American identity:

Excerpt 4.10

[Transcript 1: Topic - Dislike for Georgia school]

Interviewer: Alright, so tell me a little bit about it-because you said you were tired of the teachers. So did they say what in particular-what they did not like about New Yorkers or –

	[Part 2: Things the teachers didn't like]	
Junior:	Certain things.	stanza 1
	I had my hair twisted.	
	Teachers didn't like it.	
	You know like-the-the-the knots and all that?	
	[Part 2A: African style in the Northeast]	
	So if you grew up in that era in '88s	stanza 2
	or probably like '87 with the Africa-	
	African medallions and all o' that.	
	That was the style *here* [northeastern city].	
	[Part 2B: Georgia-dislike for hair style]	
	There [Georgia] they just like,	stanza 3
	the teachers they didn't like it	
	and I had my hair locks and all of that.	
	[The teacher said,] "You need to comb your hair.	
	It's not appropriate at the school."	
	I was like, "Yo, it's my hair.	
	I ain't care what you think!"	
	I still kept it	
	you know what I'm saying?	
	So it was really a big difference.	
	It, it was really funny.	
	[Part 2C: Analogy of not fitting in]	
	Like ah that comedian Will Smith.	stanza 4
	When he left Philadelphia	
	and went out there to Bel Air	
	that's the look 'at-	

> It was like, wow!   stanza 5
> He's really not fitting in here.
> He's doing his own style.
> He's doing his own thing.
> So that's how it was with us,
> So-

Wearing hair locks (dreadlocks) and African medallions demonstrated his solidarity with South Africans and his identification with the Back to Africa movement of the 1980s (stanza 2). Once again he used the teachers' voices to show that they did not consider his outward demonstration of social identification. In both excerpts Junior resisted attacks to his identity (stanza 3). He drew upon the character of Will Smith from the sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* to help describe the cultural conflict he experienced and his determination to stay true to his identity. This popular 1990s sitcom depicted a Black teenager's transition from Philadelphia to Bel Air to escape the violence of the street and his negotiation of the resulting cultural disconnect.

Similarly, Junior described himself as someone who was "not fitting in" to the new environment with its social expectations that made his sense of self-expression objectionable. In contrast to the teachers' perspective of his grooming, Junior considered himself a decent dresser: "See I was never the type of person to wear my pants down on the ground. So I was always decent. So the way how I conduct myself was in the decent mode…" As Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) have shown, dress is a means of enacting identity. In addition, research suggests that Junior's experience was not unique (Morris, 2005) and that dress codes produced a great deal of frustration for some students because "they reflect a deep misunderstanding of how young people create meaning and live it" (Garot, 2010, p.46).

Furthermore, Junior recalled that the teachers stereotyped him as either a drug dealer or robber because he wore trendy clothing. He declared, "I had my own money. I purchased my own stuff." He observed the teachers' narrow view of him did not allow for an alternate conclusion, he "had to be A [drug dealer] or B [robber]." This experience reflects Anderson's (2008) and Gunn's

(2008) assertion that African American males have been stigmatized with criminal identities in the public eye, thus shaping expectations and interpretation of their actions. In the following excerpt, Junior expressed how teacher responses made him feel like an "outcast":

Excerpt 4.11

[Transcript 1: Topic - Dislike for Georgia school]
Interviewer: So you said the teachers didn't like I guess the way that you were or-

[Part 3: Feeling like an outcast]
Junior: Yeah, a Black principal,   stanza 1
                  no,
                  a Black assistant principal
                  and this White principal.

                  And then it was like,   stanza 2
                  I really felt outcast and all of that,
                  even though I was popular.
                  Me and my bother
                  we was popular.

                  But it was like all eyes are on you   stanza 3
                  and you felt uncomfortable.
                  So it was like, you know what?
                  I don't have time for this.
                  That was it.

His encounters with authority figures in the school made him feel like an "outcast," which he contrasted to his popularity with the students (stanza 2). In other words, he was accepted by his peers but not the school authority figures. The popular kid was a primary identity Junior constructed in his high school narratives. In Georgia, his popularity was due to trendy clothing, whereas in the northeast it resulted from his fighting prowess and basketball team membership. Contrasting his peer relationships to that of the teachers may have been used to "save face" (Goffman, 2005) in light of the objectionable identity teachers gave him. Being an "outcast" meant discomfort in his surroundings due to continuous surveillance, which he described as "all eyes are on you." The discomfort he felt led to an evaluation alluding to his early departure: "I don't have time for this."

Junior used an analogy of the "battle of the bands" to illustrate his adversarial relationship with the teachers. The Battle of the Bands is a competition between bands from historically Black colleges and universities celebrated in the 2002 movie *Drumline*. Junior positioned himself on one end of the field and the teachers on the other end of the field. The music the other band was playing (the teachers' interactions with him) told him he did not belong there. He said, "Right then and there I knew I was in the wrong school." Junior's response to the sense of alienation he felt was to disengage. He left school, drove, and maintained trucks to finance his trip back to the northeast. Junior summarized his experiences during those three months as the "treatment of hell." His experiences support Wortham's (2006) theory that the meanings of local behaviors are mediated by local expectations and that sociohistorical identity models, local models of identity, and reoccurring events helped to construct Junior as a certain type of student.

Raymond

Placement in classes Raymond was not academically prepared for fostered situations that attacked his self-esteem and contributed to the construction of a deficit literate identity. He described his classes as places where he did not get help. However, his recounting of sixth grade experiences evoked the strongest emotions and depicted student-teacher interactions that pushed him into withdrawing from classroom involvement:

Excerpt 4.12

[Transcript 2: Topic: student –teacher relationship]
Interviewer: So then what about-you also mentioned and maybe I misunderstood, but you said something about-that the teachers picked on you or talked about you?

                    [Part 1: Bullying]
Raymond: Um I had-   stanza 1
                    what's this lady's name?
                    Miss Smith.
                    I don't know her first name.
                    I know her last name.
                    It was in 263 [school number].

This lady used to *pick* on me all of the time.
Even though-

Like when you go to school   stanza 2
you got to go in the school yard and line up.
You play around for awhile
but when the bell ring you got to line up and go in.

Miss Smith called me all kinds of names.   stanza 3
I mean like, "You stupid.
You dumb," and what not.
That's when they were strict.

I mean this lady,   stanza 4
she low-rated [belittled] me so bad
that I asked my mother to take me out of school,
you understand
my pride was in the way.

If I would've went in the school,   stanza 5
sat down at my desk and
I knew the kids were going to tease me.
"Hey stupid, hey dummy" when I get there.
It hurted me.
So what I did,
I shut down.

I know that a professional teacher   stanza 6
shouldn't be doing that there and what not
'cause they know that she can shut a person down like that
and that's what she did to me.

The labels assigned by the teacher were also used by the students, creating a hostile

environment. They undermined Raymond's literate identity by characterizing him as "stupid" and

"dumb" (stanzas 3 and 4). Usually bullying is seen as an interaction between peers but in this

instance Raymond aligned the teacher with the students and positioned her as the instigator and

primary abuser. He described her as "low-rating him so bad" that he asked his mother to take him

out of school (stanza 4). Cornell and Bandyopadhyay (2010) describe bullying as the "act of

repeatedly humiliating a weaker person" (p. 265). It can be physical or verbal aggression or social

exclusion (Olweus, 1991).

Within the school environment where the literate identity is primary, Raymond did not have access to resources to provide some sense of self-validation, and his mother could not take him out of school at that time. Earlier in the interview, Raymond explained that his "pride" was "all he had" and that he "depended on" it to survive in the classroom. Forced to stay within that environment, he adopted a protective strategy in which he disengaged from the classroom, or as he said, "shut down." In this segment he continued to build his argument that the teachers' failure to teach caused his academic failure. Here he constructed the identity of a student who was battered into silence, characterizing the teacher as unprofessional and effectively debilitating his ability and desire to learn in the classroom. Based upon the various schools he attended, Raymond stated his experience was not a unique or isolated one. Although his mother spoke with the teacher, he observed that the teacher did not change her approach; therefore, he concluded school was not for him. In the following excerpt he described shutting down:

Excerpt 4.13

        [Transcript 2: Topic – student-teacher interaction]
                [Part 2: Shutting down]

Raymond:	So I said, you know what,	stanza 1
	this is not for me.	
	This is not for me.	
	I still went like my mother told me,	stanza 2
	but I didn't pay attention.	
	I'd fall asleep or I'd do something.	
	I'm writing or I'm drawing	
	instead of doing my work.	
	I'd always go home with homework.	
	I'm shut down.	stanza 3
	I don't ask, "How do you do this here?"	
	I don't understand it.	
	That was the best way to do it.	
	But for me,	
	I went and asked nobody.	
	If I can't do it on my own,	
	you can't help me.	

> Even though that's what she's there for   stanza 4
> is to help me
> But when she called out my name and what not.
> I just shut down and didn't bother with it.

Raymond continued to attend school at his mother's bidding, but disengaged from the classroom. He explained that his mother did not understand the pain the teasing caused, and tried to encourage him by telling him "names don't hurt you" and "just to stick with it and don't worry about it." He became the "space holder" the third grade teacher had described him to be. He no longer participated or sought to participate in the classroom (stanzas 2 and 3). For him, shutting down was "the best way" to deal with an alienating environment. This approach could be misinterpreted as confirmation of the stereotypical characterization of laziness and dislike for learning so often associated with young African American males (Caruthers, 2006). Acknowledging that it was the teacher's responsibility to help him, he would not, could not ask for help because he was "shut down." Raymond's experiences support Lewis' (1953) contention that "the social significance of literacy may become a most potent cause of illiteracy in that a child's awareness of his inferiority exacerbates his difficulties and retards his progress" (p. 98).

Raymond was promoted to the seventh grade and still could not read. In frustration, his mother took him out of school with the intention of teaching him herself, but she did not have time to teach him due to work and the caregiving responsibilities of 12 children. Subsequently, Raymond started working at local businesses (deli, supermarket) and quickly discovered that if he wanted to get a better paying job, and one with benefits, he needed to learn how to read. He said "I made my own choice" and returned to school. However, he was socially promoted to eighth grade. Raymond's last experience with public school teachers was one of rejection, as noted in this reflection: "They just pushed me. They just left me there. I'm not learning how to read." He was 17 and never finished eighth grade.

Junior's and Raymond's experiences highlight the impact of student-teacher relationships on student performance and dropout. They depict the role of teachers in establishing an environment that can promote or inhibit opportunities for learning. Both stories speak of exclusion, alienation, and an awareness that the teachers did not care about them. Consequently, Junior and Raymond presented disengagement as a protective strategy for an unwelcoming environment in which their identities were attacked and deflated. Although the participants made the decision to leave, there were school effects (Lee & Burkam, 2003) that encouraged them to leave. Junior, Raymond, and Roddy Rod represent students who were "pushed out" (Fine, 1991; Riehl, 1999; Schwartz, 2010) of the public school system. In the next section, I address the role of peer relationships in early school departure.

Bullying, gang violence, and peer pressure

Five of the six men stated that adversarial relationships with peers made attending school difficult. In fact, they pointed to bullying and peer pressure as primary reasons for their dislike of school. Ice, Mike, and Junior specifically identified either bullying, peer pressure, or gang violence as the cause for leaving school early. The men told stories of disruptions in school time and threats posed to their emotional, mental, and physical well-being, thereby compelling them to claim particular identities and respond in particular ways. Despite the increasing awareness of the deleterious effects of bullying over the last twenty-five years, its occurrence as a result of gang violence has been minimally explored (Vaillancourt, McDougall, Hymel, & Sunderani, 2010). Typically, in low-income urban areas, peer pressure and gang violence are most often subsumed under the assumption of endemic violence.

Ice

Ice spent the shortest time in school of all the participants, dropping out in the third grade. In response to the question of why he stopped going to school, he provided two interrelated reasons: a car accident at age 10 that made it difficult for him to study and student "teasing"

because of deficient reading skills. Ice constructed a preferred literate identity that negated his

known identity of school drop-out. His unsolicited explanation of *why* he dropped out in the third

or fourth grade suggested an awareness of the stigma and negative characterization of dropouts as

students who don't want to learn. He explained that his limited academic progress was not his

choice but due to a brain injury. Ice juxtaposed academic achievement with his health. He

legitimized his decision to drop out by drawing upon his mother's advocacy (transcript 1). When

he explained studying gave him headaches, she told him "health come first."

Noticeably, Ice omitted leaving school in the third grade and opted for an explanation of

dropping out in the first adult literacy program. By paying attention to what is omitted or

unexpected helps to discern how narrators construct their stories and make meaning of their

experiences (Riessman, 2008). This omission helped him to construct the identity of the good

student who must sacrifice academic achievement for his health and well-being. In part 3, Ice was

the persistent and motivated learner who refused to give up "his dream of learning to read." In so

doing, Ice distanced himself from the negative stereotype of the dropout.

In response to a follow-up question addressing his third grade departure, Ice stated the

second reason for his early school departure was bullying, or as he called it, "teasing":

Excerpt 4.14

> [Transcript 1: Topic - dropping out/teasing]
> Interviewer: So how long did you stay in school? You dropped out in the third grade?
>
> Ice: Yeah, yeah, yeah,   stanza 1
>   'cause I used to get teased
>   and I'm not a violent person
>   and I didn't want to get into fights over it.
>
>   When my mother used to take me to school   stanza 2
>   I would wait until they left
>   and then I would go out the back door.
>
>   The crossing guard would bring me back home.   stanza 3
>   They would try again the next day
>   and they had to bring me home again the following day.

Yeah.

The youth officer said I couldn't go to jail   stanza 4
because I was too young.

Three times in the interview Ice described himself as "not a violent person" which required leaving school to avoid fights (stanza 1). He claimed who he was by declaring who he was not (Coates, 2003, p. 22). The last line of the stanza indicated his expectation that staying in school would have resulted in some type of altercation. Later in the interview, he explained that children could "be evil with the teasing," and since he did not "want to hurt anyone" or be hurt by anyone he stayed away. Ice added that he knew how to fight, as though answering an unspoken assumption that he might have been afraid to fight. He used avoidance strategy instead of retaliation, although retaliation tends to be more common among boys (Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010). By declaring his ability to fight, Ice presented himself as an agentive, non-violent child who made a conscious decision to protect himself and others, instead of a victim or object of intimidation where power lay with the other students. In other words, he juxtaposed academic progress with his safety and that of other students, providing validation for dropping out of school. Assigning his mother and the crossing guard roles as authority figures that repeatedly placed him in a situation he sought to escape implied either their oblivion to his plight or their inability to help him. Consequently, he provided his own protection and resolved his dilemma by truancy (stanza 1).

Ice explained that the students labeled him "stupid" because of his reading difficulties, which were exacerbated by the car accident, but he used his math proficiency to build up his learner identity. He proclaimed the other students could not tease him about math. Ice told stories that displayed his proficiency, such as finishing an exam in fifteen minutes because "it was too easy" and calculating answers to math problems in his head. In reference to the latter, he stated the teachers were "amazed" that he "could do that without reading." These stories detracted from

his reading deficiency, thereby continuing to promote the identity of the capable student while negating the "stupid" identity ascribed by his peers. In both stories Ice framed the choices he made about academic achievement against the backdrop of the situations he confronted and his perceived options at the time. The immediate needs of health and safety outweighed literacy development. Ice described his early schooling as torture. At age 10 or 11, shortly after the accident, he dropped out of school without learning how to read.

Mike

Mike was the youngest participant. His narrative of early school departure was constructed around gang violence, peer pressure, and a very deep sense of the limitations of poverty. When asked, "at what point did you leave school," Mike provided a lengthy temporal narrative beginning in eighth grade and concluding with his presence in the current literacy program. For him, psychological, social, and physical survival meant "carrying yourself in a certain way." In the larger narrative of dropping out of school, Mike interwove two smaller narratives: "peer pressure" and "the people who came into the school to start trouble," that required him to establish identities of the "fly dresser" and the group leader. These coping strategies allowed him to safely attend school but resulted in school displacement and eventual drop out.

The sub-narrative of gang violence and group leader identity took precedence in Mike's recollections of junior high school. Mike's rejection of a gang's invitation to join their group resulted in threats against his life. Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" political mantra of the 1980s and 1990s to avoid drugs and violence ignored the relationship of power that often resulted in harsh consequences. Mike took two protective measures. First, he called upon his brother and neighborhood friends for support in a fight that resulted in a near-death injury to his brother and home-schooling until high school. Second, he formed his own group for protection. In the following excerpt Mike summarized his early schooling experiences:

Excerpt 4.15

[Transcript 1: Topic - Describing school]
Interviewer: …If you were talking to someone who was not um familiar, you know, with the school experience here in the United States, how would you describe what it was like for you?

Mike: School?   stanza 1
             Growing up in school is basically like, yeah,
             you gotta go to school
             and you gotta to do your thing in school.

             [Sub-topic: peer pressure and gang violence]
             But then it's like the peer pressure   stanza 2
             and like the people that comes to the school.
             And like people that don't even go to the school
             will be in your school.
             I mean just to beef [start a fight] with you
             and trying to rob people and stuff like that.

             So it's like you just gotta make your own little group.   stanza 3
             You feel me?
             Just to overcome all of the other stuff that's around you.
             That's about it.

Mike oriented us to his schooling experiences by reminding us that as an adolescent he was required to go to school and do his school work (stanza 1); however, he faced the dilemma of doing so while confronting peer pressure and violence (stanza 2). Consequently, he concluded that to go to school and protect himself ("overcome all the other stuff") he must form his own group (stanza 3). His use of the conjunction "but" suggests an oppositional or counterproductive relationship. In addition, he used the deontic modality "gotta" three times, indicating necessity or constrained options (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2011).

Mike described his school as not "a real good school" and his neighborhood as historically "gang populated," where blocks were controlled by different gangs. In claiming the identity of group leader, he presented himself as the "decent" kid who must adopt the code of the street (Anderson, 1999) to avoid being a repeated target for violence. Mike also identified himself as a "good student" who was "always concentrating" on his school work, but once the bell rang

he had to be aware of his surroundings and "be tough." He did not have the luxury of being in a

private school and "secluded from everything" or being like his teachers who "could escape it and

go back to their nice little neighborhoods and quiet." As he bluntly stated, "I can't do that. I've

gotta live here!" In fact, Mike showed his approach was effective in declaring he had done

"enough stuff to get respect" so he "did not have to worry about anything." Respect meant he

could go to school without having to prove himself to his peers by fighting (Garot, 2010;

Schneider, 1999).

Mike's response demonstrated situated knowledge, aligning with research showing that

African American adolescents in low-income urban areas learn to adopt such strategies as

protection against being attacked by or conscripted into a gang (Anderson, 1999; Garot, 2010;

Schneider, 1999). What is said and not said reveals the narrator's assumptions about the way the

world works (Gee, 2011). Mike expected I would be familiar with the societal expectations of

schooling for children. Likewise, as a Black woman who was familiar with the area in which he

lived, Mike assumed I shared a common understanding of the way his world worked.

Consequently, he did not find it necessary to explain why he was obligated to attend school or

why having his own group would help him to "overcome" the challenges he faced.

Paying close attention to Mike's omissions also showed an absence of mediation by

authority figures. One might expect that altercations in school would result in the involvement of

school authorities; however, Mike's narrative indicated that was not the case. He said, "school

safety was not even trying to get involved in it [investigate the fight]," and so "we gotta take it

into our hands." The requirement to form his own group reflected his expectation that he would

not receive help from authorities, a belief and experience that have been documented by other

researchers (Anderson, 2008; Gunn, 2008). When asked to provide a one-word description for his

early schooling experiences, Mike said "struggle." He described this period as the most difficult

time in school. Although gang violence resulted in being home schooled until high school, it was not the reason Mike left school.

Peer pressure to be a certain type of person was fueled by ridicule and fostered Mike's desired and claimed identity of the fly dresser, and consequent employment leading to early school departure. He learned from elementary school that his lack of "nice shoes and nice clothes" made him a target for ridicule. Mike described his peers as "fly level," meaning fashionably dressed. They made fun of him because he was not similarly attired. He emphatically stated, "I can't-*I don't like that* [being ridiculed]*, you feel me? It's like, *no!"* His emotionally charged response to the recollection of those experiences and the use of the historical present (Riessman, 2003) showed the experience had affected him greatly. In fact, he invoked his present circumstances to refute the past. He spoke of his vast wardrobe of fashionable clothing that, paradoxically, gave him the freedom to wear less fashionable clothing. He said, "I could afford to put those on and still be fresh [acceptable and highly approved by others] and feel comfortable" because he knew he could silence his peers by a change of clothes.

Mike acquired his vast wardrobe by making choices about working and going to school. To negate his peers' ridicule, Mike began working at age 16. He said, "I wasn't the type of person to keep looking for handouts and stuff like that. I like to go and earn my money." His need for more money resulted in longer work hours, declining grades, and the conscious decision to drop out of school in the eleventh grade. He noted that the immediate benefits of having money outweighed the possible future benefits of education: "I found that money was more important than school." Money afforded opportunities to move beyond the limitations of poverty:

Excerpt 4.16

[Transcript 1: Topic – dropping out]

Interviewer: Did it affect how you saw yourself in any way when you kind of made-when you made that decision to just leave?

Mike: I mean I was happy.   stanza 1
I wasn't mad that I left school
'cause you could always go back to school
You feel me?

[Sub-topic - the benefits of having money]
So it was like I got the money now   stanza 2
and I could go and take my shorties [girlfriends],
I could take my girlfriend here, there.
I could go and do this.
I could do that.
I'm not stuck on the block.
You feel me?

So [p]   stanza 3
I see it like if you are getting money [p]
You're not really in the neighborhood like that anymore.
You're out there making moves.

Your mindset is like,   stanza 4
yo, I'm not-
how can I put this? [p]
When you getting money you-
you could-
you don't have to stand on the corner anymore
and just look all stupid.
Like just stand on the corner
and like you're wasting your time or something like that.

You're just everywhere.   stanza 5
Like you're seeing new things
and meeting new people
and stuff like that.

Mike indicated that he did not have any apprehension about leaving school because he knew he could always return, suggesting there were other things he considered more important (stanza 1). His happiness in leaving school was connected to his increased ability to harness the benefits of making money. Having money supported his masculine identity because he was able to take his girlfriends out, and it freed him physically and mentally from the confinement of the neighborhood (stanza 2). He used the modal verb "could" five times in this narrative, indicating that money gave him the ability to do things he could not do before. Mike showed the type of

person he desired to be by contrasting himself to the men in the neighborhood. Money gave him the identity of someone who was doing things and going places instead of standing on the "street corner looking stupid." The latter reference alluded to the primarily unemployed men standing on street corners (Anderson, 2003) and the distancing of himself from those who represented poverty. Having money afforded Mike the identity of someone who was admired: "People would be like, 'Yo, I wish I was you.'" The men standing on the corner were an indication of his future. Having money allowed him to envision more than the limitations of his neighborhood and refute that portended future identity. The immediate benefits of money outweighed the future benefits of school, despite the advice of his parents to stay in school.

Mike made sense of his experiences and choices by framing them within the context of poverty. A word count showed that Mike mentioned money 45 times in the interview. In comparing himself to the teachers he observed that they could leave but he could not. Mike said that his life was "hard," and when asked, "what made his life hard, he said, "It's just the poverty. It's all around me and stuff like that." Academic achievement did not insulate him from the gang violence of his neighborhood, the ridicule of his peers, or the limitations of poverty but forming his own group and making money did. Poverty informed his perception of the value of education and the importance of claiming particular identities. Escaping the immediate impact of poverty led to his decision to leave school and work full time. Mike's narrative provides a nuanced perspective of why adolescents leave school to seek employment. It is not simply to earn money for the family or to have money per se but to gain what they think money affords.

Junior

In this section I focus on Junior's eleventh grade departure, which he linked to his popularity and reputation as a fighter beginning in the ninth grade. Junior depicted his community as a "big fight thing" in which he was an active participant. His first high school move was an "emergency transfer":

Excerpt 4.17

[Transcript 1: Topic- emergency transfer]
Interviewer: …what was the last school you transferred-

Junior: I wasn't going to school in the ninth grade.   stanza 1
                    I got left back in ninth grade again.
                    So it was like I was out there fighting
                    and we all fighting.

                    Until the one year   stanza 2
                    I said, "You know, mom, I want to go to school."
                    I got jumped and cut up out there,
                    you know what I'm sayin?'
                    So I got cut here
                    and I got cut here
                    and I got cut over there [*pointing to scars on his hands, arms, and the side of his face*].

                    So it was like the teacher said, "Do you know what?   stanza 3
                    I'm going to send you way across town
                    over by the St. Mary's Bridge."
                    The principal said that.

                    So me and my brother went there ever since.

Junior orients us to the narrative by telling us three things about himself: he was not going to school, he was a low-income performing student who had twice been retained in the ninth grade, and he was a participant in the gang culture of his community (stanza 1). The phrase "we all fighting" referred to the common practice of fighting in the school and community he had described earlier in the interview. Junior stated that his intent to focus on his academic life was waylaid by a gang assault that left scars clearly visible today (stanza 2). Unlike Mike's and Ice's experiences, the principal intervened and transferred him to a school across town for his safety.

Like Mike and Ice, Junior connected school safety to academic progress. He asserted that his height and fighting ability intimidated others and protected him. He was 6'4" and the second tallest person in the school. He explained, "Nobody would've bothered me. They saw that I stood up on my own." In other words, he did not back down and thus "earned" respect by his actions. In

fact, on two occasions he contrasted gaining respect with the undesired identity of the "person they're going to beat up." He declared that was the person no one wanted to be. For Junior, his defensive strategy did not result in dropping out but allowed him to progress academically.

Considering his expressed liking of Dalton high school and commitment to academic achievement, I was surprised by his early school departure. He constructed a protracted and seemingly disjointed narrative, requiring me to ask him four times over two interviews why he left school. Without specifically stating the cause, Junior alluded to incarceration because of an altercation that hospitalized a student. His evasive strategies and omissions suggest an awareness of the stigma associated with incarceration and an undesired identity he sought to conceal. Although he was involved in the fight, he categorically denied being the one who struck the injurious blow. From his perspective, his incarceration was the result of a convenient answer to close the case. His school departure narrative was constructed to persuade the listener of his innocence by pointing to his participation on the basketball team, his popularity and well-known prowess as a fighter, the identity of the other person who could only be identified by a nickname, and the convenience of being in the area during the summer. In this segment he concluded his case by showing, as in earlier statements, that his priorities were getting an education and being on the basketball team:

Excerpt 4.18

> [Transcript 2: Topic - Leaving school]
> Interviewer: So still back to my question why did you leave?
> Junior: Because of that incident.
> Interviewer: Oh the one with the kid who got hurt on the-
> Junior: Yeah.
> It was the incident.
>
> [Sub-topic – getting his education]
> Because I-   stanza 1
> because I was going to school.
> I really was going to school, you understand?
> I was doing my homework,
> you know what I'm saying?

Come home
and me and my brother was coming home
and I was really doing my homework,
you know what I'm sayin'?

[Sub-topic – popularity/fighting]
You got a popular guy in the school   stanza 2
and then you got like two girls fighting over one
you know what I'm sayin'?
Like nah
you ain't bothering her.
Here's my jacket, [gave his girlfriend his jacket to wear]
boom! [an expressive term to reinforce what has been said or done]
You go to school,
boom!
You understand?
So it was like a lot of people was hating on her.
So I made sure that
yo, she went school
and I came to school.
So I was really like,
I really, really was going to school.
I was going to school.
I was getting my education and all of that.

[Sub-topic: Basketball team]
The coach (?)[9] said, "Yo,   stanza 3
why don't you play sports with us
and be on the team?"
Nah
some of the guys said nah,
he ain't playing no sports on this team,

[Sub-topic – the incident]
But like, you know, I said   stanza 4
when the eleventh grade come up
and I had just left the 10th
that September I would've been in the 11th
when that kid got beat up and jumped.
I was like wow.
So it was crazy.

Without stating that he was incarcerated, Junior identified the incident as the reason he

did not go to the eleventh grade. He continued to demonstrate his "commitment" to school, using

---

[9] Inaudible words (?)

several narrative strategies such as repetition to indicate significance, the adverb "really" to stress that he was telling the truth, and the distinction between going to class and doing homework to show the extent of his commitment (stanza 2). Junior enacted the identity of the committed student by not only attending school and doing homework but also ensuring his girlfriend went to school. His brother and girlfriend served as witnesses to his academic activities.

Here Junior continued to build his identity as a "popular guy." His fighting ability engendered his popularity and supported his masculine identity. First, he described himself as a "popular guy" who girls fought over. Second, the symbol of his jacket as protection against being harassed by other students indicated his well-known reputation as a fighter and gave credence to his earlier contention that his fighting ability allowed him the freedom to go to school without being harassed. In addition, the jacket was a reflection of his masculine self in demonstrating his ability to protect his girlfriend through the power he wielded.

Junior concluded the segment by distancing himself from the student who was injured and the incident although he stated earlier that he knew the student and was involved in the altercation. Junior was now the observer, the witness to the event, expressing amazement at the turn of events and evaluating the outcome as not making sense. In this last narrative strategy of distancing he preserved the identity of the committed student and heralded his innocence as the wrongly accused perpetrator. Paradoxically, the fighter identity that he connected with his academic progress was also the identity that prevented him from completing school.

Ice's, Mike's, and Junior's stories convey the importance of school safety and community resources as influential factors in academic success. They juxtaposed safety with academic progress. Whereas the older men used avoidance, the younger men employed retaliation, bespeaking a cultural truth that avoidance was not safe. The latter's defensive strategies allowed them to attend school in relative safety but ultimately led to disruptions in school time. Community resources shaped where they lived and the range of choices they perceived available

to them. The participants made decisions based on the survival Discourse of their environment. Here I utilize Gee's (1999) definition of Discourse as an "identity kit" that dictates "how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (p.1). Five of the six participants made connections between poverty, clothing, and how they were evaluated and judged by others. Their experiences show that poverty positioned them as targets of ridicule and demonstrate that clothing is an identity marker that shapes how a person is perceived and treated by others. The ability to defend one self and to wear stylish attire was cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) the participants recognized as necessary for surviving the school and local environment.

Chapter summary

The participants' narratives indicate that analysis of low academic achievement among African American males must employ a broad view of literacy that captures power relationships (teacher-student, parent-child, peer-peer), students' beliefs and values, and available resources and opportunities. The men' stories demonstrate how the interplay of school effects, community and home environments, and individual responses can engender early school departure. First, the men made sense of their early schooling experiences by juxtaposing academic progress with inhibitive circumstances such as residential moves, family care, negative student-teacher interactions, peer pressure, bullying, and gang violence. They highlighted situations beyond their control that placed them on trajectories of low academic achievement while constructing identities of compromised students.

Second, the participants responded to these circumstances based upon limited resources and the options they perceived available to them at the time. The men adopted identities and behaviors as protective and defensive strategies to address the challenges they faced, which ultimately led to early school departure. Third, their behaviors did not directly reflect the value they placed on education. The immediate needs for social, physical, and mental safety displaced literacy and schooling as their primary objectives. Ultimately, the men's stories give alternate

perspectives to actions that at first glance appear to confirm the characteristics of the recalcitrant African American male student. In so doing, the men counteract widely circulating negative models (Wortham, 2006) of African American male identity. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the men's involvement with society influenced them to attend adult literacy programs.

Chapter 5

Literacy as an Identity Marker

Technological advancements and economic shifts shape literacy requirements, values, and uses, which in turn shape social role expectations (Brandt 2001, 2009). What society values is evidenced by the rewards and penalties associated with literacy (Brandt, 2009; Lewis, 1953; Street, 1993). As the men became more involved in society they realized that academic competence was crucial to social competence and enhanced employment opportunities. In other words, the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) vested in local identities had little or no value in society, requiring the men to appropriate society's valued identities. In this chapter I address two research questions: 1) What aspirations do African American men believe participation in an ABEL program will help them achieve? 2) What literacy experiences did the participants perceive to be influential in shaping their literate, cultural, and gender identities? These two questions are intricately connected because social expectations shape how literacy is valued and the purposes for which it is used.

In this chapter, I argue that low literacy skills and the lack of a high school diploma or GED accreditation were identity markers that informed the participants' motivations to enroll in the ABEL program. Lewis (1953) observed, "To be illiterate is to be stigmatized as being at the wrong end of the social scale, to be deficient, sub-normal – or at the very least, in the humanized language of our time – underprivileged" (p. 160). To varying degrees, the men internalized society's ascription of them as deficient and unqualified, resulting in feelings of shame. As a social practice, literacy is underpinned by values, expectations, and beliefs (Bartlett, 2007; Barton

& Hamilton, 2000; Collins & Blot, 2003; Street, 1984), and therefore has consequences for how adults with low literacy skills are perceived and treated.

The findings indicate that the participants' low literacy skills limited their access to employment. They also show that the men sought literacy development for functional and psycho-social reasons and that their literate identities were intimately intertwined with other identities, thereby influencing their perception of and ability to enact them. The relationship between literacy competence and life stage social expectations and responsibilities placed literacy as a recognized necessity in their adult lives.

The organization of this chapter is as follows: The first section reviews how the men made sense of their work experience and its alignment to the literacy discourse of necessity. The next section discusses the other identities the participants sought to enhance or enact through literacy development, and the last section recaps the chapter's main points.

Employment

Concurring with existing research (Beder & Valentine, 1990; J. P. Comings, 1999), job placement was the most cited reason for enrolling in the ABEL program. The men expressed awareness that literacy and a GED diploma were necessary for gaining employment and promotions, while presenting counter-narratives that questioned the value of the GED credential. Their experiences add another dimension to the body of research weighing the symbolic and lived value of the GED credential (Murnane, Willett, & Tyler, 2000; Tuck, 2009). The men spoke about the relevance of time to their literacy experiences, their perceptions of the value of literacy, and their responses to literacy. For example, the participants discovered the value of being recognized as literate in their late teens and early twenties when they sought to be economically independent and to be proficient providers for their families. The older participants, Roddy Rod and Raymond, contrasted the past and the present, noting that in the past good jobs were readily available without needing a high school diploma and now for the most basic types of jobs a high

school diploma or equivalency was required. As Brandt (2001) observed, societal developments change the conditions, requirements, and benefits of literacy.

Raymond

Raymond provided the most basic example of the connection between literacy skills and employment. He realized from his teen years that his inability to read had excluded him from better paying jobs with medical coverage. In various ways he described himself as "struggling" and life as "hard." For example, he used the metaphors "hanging by a string" and "praying the string don't pop" to describe the tenuousness of his situation. As Raymond reflected on his inability to get a "decent job," he recalled that he knew "from when he was small" that not knowing how to read was going to be a problem, but he did not realize how "bad" it would affect him as an adult. At the time of the interview Raymond was 56 years old and on disability, but looking forward to working in the local hospital as a porter. His family helped him fill out job applications but he admitted that some of what they wrote was not true. In the following excerpt he described applying for the porter position:

Excerpt 5.1

[Transcript 1: Topic - Applying for a job]
Interviewer: Then you said, too, that you have like-there's another job waiting for you or-

[Sub-topic: Friend's help with application]
Raymond: Yes there is.   stanza 1
                      I put in a application.
                      A friend of mine
                      helped me fill out an application
                      for ***County hospital as a porter-
                      a maintenance man.

[Sub-topic: Interview –can't read]
                      And uhm   stanza 2
                      I went there for an interview.
                      I sit there
                      and I told 'em,
                      "Well, I needed help filling my application out
                      I can't read."

[Sub-topic: Hiring contingent on ability to read]
The dude name is Thomas   stanza 3
and he told me when I get it-
"When you learn how to read,
I have a job for you.
Right now I cannot hire you
'cause there's so many chemicals
that you're going to be dealing with."
He says, "As soon as you learn how to read
you come right back.
I'll hold your application in my desk."

[Sub-topic: motivation to learn to read]
So I'm pushing real hard.   stanza 4
I'm pushing real hard.
I'm pushing real hard, you know.

In this instance, Raymond's friend helped him fill out the application for the porter

position; however, he was forced to disclose he could not read because he had to complete an

application on site (stanza 2). This was one of many incidents in which Raymond was forced to

unveil his low literacy skills. Possibly, Raymond applied for the job because he thought it was a

position that did not require reading, just transporting loads as he has done in the past, but the

reading requirement disqualified Raymond for the position (stanza 3).

The potentially discouraging situation turned into one of hope, fortifying his desire to

learn to read. Using the voice of the interviewer, Raymond explained that reading was a

requirement because of the chemicals he would be transporting; therefore, he was unqualified for

the job (stanza 3). He began and ended this stanza with the interviewer's promise of a job once he

learned to read. In so doing, he added credibility to the promise while signifying its importance to

him. Using the coordinating conjunction "so," Raymond indicated that the interviewer's promise

resulted in his expending great effort to learn to read ("I'm pushing real hard"). It was situations

such as these that continued to strengthen Raymond's marginalized identity, formed in early

schooling, that he was "not part of society" because of his inability to read. Although literacy

brokers (Weinstein-Shr, 1993) such as his family and friends were useful in navigating society, they were only useful to a certain point.

Mike

Mike's narrative captured not only the practical, but the symbolic meaning of literacy. He described the GED certificate as a "piece of paper that says you're qualified." At 21, Mike connected the increased significance of education in his life to three things: his aspiration to be an entrepreneur, his parent's economic mobility, and the job application process. Mike aspired to start his "own clothing line" and realized he needed an education to do so. While working at the restaurant for which he dropped out of school, Mike discovered he did not want a "dead end job." Money had been his primary motivation, but now he wanted more than just to bring home a paycheck. In the following excerpt, Mike drew upon the improved economic status of his parents and job application requirements in making sense of the relationship between literacy and employment.

Excerpt 5.2

[Transcript 1: Topic: Significance of education]
Interviewer: So what did you learn from your parents about the importance or significance of getting an education?

[Part 1: Parents' Success]
Mike: Just looking at my parents now.   stanza 1
            It's like they're doing good.
            They got the good jobs
            and stuff like that.

[Part 2: Mike - Application process]
[Sub-topic: Felonies]
And basically every time   stanza 2
you go to fill out an application-
I'm glad I don't have no felonies
or nothing like that.
You feel me?
No Fs or nothing like that on my report.
So that's one thing
about filling out an application
I'm happy about.

[Sub-topic: Need diploma or GED]
But then it's like   stanza 3
do you got a high school diploma or a GED.
That's the next thing.

[Part 2A: Mike - Maturity]
So basically I'm getting older now   stanza 4
and my parents are not going to be here forever,
so I got to make my own life.

And so I got to go to school   stanza 5
and get my education and stuff like that.
Get my papers right
and I'm good.

Mike framed this narrative around "doing good" or making economic progress beginning with his parents and ending with himself. He explained how his and his parents' lived experiences contributed to his understanding of the value of literacy and its placement in his life as an immediate need. In the first line of part 1, Mike used a temporal reference "now" to position his parents' economic progress within a particular time frame. His mother, who started out as a home attendant, went to college and became an RN. His father no longer worked at a restaurant, but in security. Comparing Mike's description of his parents who could not afford to buy him nice things when he was in school [chapter 4] to the parents who were now "doing good" because they had "good jobs" indicates that the evidence of their lives carried greater weight than their earlier encouragements to stay in school. Their changed lives against the backdrop of poverty affirmed a positive relationship between education and economic mobility.

In part 2, Mike drew upon his own experiences applying for jobs. He used the temporal frame "every time" to indicate the frequency with which he encountered questions about past criminal activity and school completion. His repeated use of emotive phrases "I'm glad" and "I'm happy" in declaring he did not have any felonies to report convey the importance of this factor. Mike later explained this was an undesired identity because "people judge you on how your

records is looking. If your background is dirty they're not going to want to hire you." This truth

he learned from the experiences of his friends who lost jobs once their felony backgrounds were

discovered. Mike used the letter 'F' for felony, which is synonymous with failure in the academic

environment, and now appears to symbolize the same in the social environment.

While Mike avoided the first barrier in the application process, he was unable to avoid

the second barrier: the lack of a high school diploma or GED credential. In part 2A, he

acknowledged this need in making a connection between his transitions into adulthood, economic

independence, and getting his education. Mike asserted that once he acquired his GED certificate

or, in his words, got his "papers right," he was "good," implying he would be situated to advance

economically. Here Mike began to build his identity of the young adult who must meet the social

expectations of economic independence. He continued to build on this theme as he drew upon the

growing awareness of the relationship between education and economic progress among other

young men in his community. In the next excerpt Mike showed that his changing perspective was

part of the transition into adulthood experienced by those around his age.

Excerpt 5.3

[Transcript 1: Topic - Significance of education/community perspective]
Interviewer: Okay. So we talked about your parents. So like your community and your
homies [friends] and like the people around you in the community, what have you heard
them say ah about, you know, the importance of education? Does it matter?

[Part 1: Everybody is going to school]
[Sub-topic: Maturity]
Mike: Now everybody is like really getting older   stanza 1
and starting to open their eyes [new awareness].
Everybody's going to school.
Everybody's going to school now.
Yeah, everybody's going to school.

[Sub-topic: Friends with jobs]
'Cause my other dude [friend]   stanza 2
he trying to get his car-
he got his car dealership license.
So he's starting to make his own business
doing car dealerships and all of that stuff.

My other son [friend]
he's doing body technician
and fixing cars
so that's going to line up real good.

[Sub-topic: Becoming qualified]
Everybody's just trying to go to school   stanza 3
and just trying to get that piece of paper
saying like yeah I'm qualified for this.
So yeah.

In the first stanza, he pointed to maturity as a factor in the increased significance of

literacy. Mike connected "getting older" to gaining new knowledge or wisdom ("starting to open

their eyes") resulting in the action of returning to school. He used repetition in each of the stanzas

to emphasize that members of his community were returning to school and "everybody" to

convey the pervasiveness of that focus. He also used the temporal term "now" suggesting this was

not so in the past. Mike began by stating everybody's going to school (stanza 1) and concluded by

explaining they wanted to be considered "qualified." Between the first and the fourth stanzas, he

provided examples of his friends who were also seeking to establish themselves economically.

They were either employed or had received licensing for entrepreneurship. The structure of the

narrative indicates that despite these accomplishments the GED credential was required to deem

them "qualified" to society.

In identifying the GED credential as a "piece of paper" that had meaning for others about

his capabilities, Mike positioned the GED as a tool for his purposes and not as an indicator of his

self-worth. At the same time, pursuit of the GED credential also showed how the literacy

Discourse shapes expectations and individual motivations and actions (Gee, 2008). Mike's

framing of the need for a GED certificate evinces a power relationship between literacy sponsors

(employers and the state) and individuals that is mediated by a system of qualification (standards

and practices). Although Mike rejects the deficit construction of his identity, he must comply with

the system that labels him so to gain access to social goods.

Beyond the lived experiences of himself and his community members, literacy TV commercials affirmed the link between education and economic progress. Mike's detailed recollection of two literacy commercials and his expectation that I had seen them indicated they were aired with relative frequency. He recalled that they encouraged people who had not graduated from high school to get their GED credential if they wanted "to get the money" and get their "careers popping." Although Mike maintained he believed the message of these commercials, he challenged their *only-way* assumption. He declared "you could always get money," but the question is do you want "legit money" or "dirty money." The latter referred to the underground economy flourishing in low-income urban areas that provides an alternate means of economic support for those excluded from the formal employment structure or relegated to low-wage, unstable employment (Anderson, 2008; Fine, 1991; Venkatresh, 2009). Nevertheless, Mike affirmed on more than one occasion that he wanted to make money legitimately so he could fully take advantage of the benefits money afforded. For Mike, getting his GED credential was the first step in continuing to make money and using it to support his aspirations of entrepreneurship and economic independence.

Junior

Junior's narrative evinced the limitations of the GED credential. He formulated an underlying theme of exclusion in which his identities were barriers to gainful employment. He centralized an ongoing struggle to bring about positive change in his life. At the time of the interview he was 38 years old and unemployed. In this excerpt Junior revealed that the lack of a high school diploma or GED credential could label an employee unqualified for a promotion.

Excerpt 5. 4

> [Transcript 2: Topic – How society views drop-outs]
> Interviewer: For my next question how do you think people in society think of people who don't have their GEDs or their high school diploma?
>
> [Subtopic: Contingent value of GED certificate]

Junior: Oh you can never tell.   stanza 1
         If you need a job you can tell.
         If you need a promotion you can tell.
         Some contractors request it [GED or high school accreditation]
         and some contractors don't.

         [Subtopic: Denied promotions]
         If you are just trying to better yourself   stanza 2
         and you want an extra promotion,
         if you don't have it [GED or high school accreditation]
         then it's a tough break.
         You got to face the breaks.
         That's it.

         [Subtopic: Restricted earnings]
         Instead of you making   stanza 3
         $45,000 to $60,000 a year
         you're going to be stuck
         Making $23,000 and $27,000 a year.

Junior drew upon his experience as a construction worker to explain his understanding of

what society thought of people who had not acquired a high school diploma or GED

accreditation. However, he did not use the personal "I" but the general "you," indicating a truth

statement or the experience of many. In the first stanza he asserted it was in looking for a job or a

promotion that an individual discovered the importance of the credential because some

contractors requested it and others didn't. In other words, how people treated him indicated what

they thought about him. He presented the job and the promotion as needs whose fulfillment was

contingent upon whether an employer requested a credential or not. In contrast, in the second

stanza, Junior presented the promotion as a "want" for the purposes of "trying to better" himself.

He distinguished this promotion from the one mentioned in the first stanza by using the modifier

"extra." In this instance, he described the lack of accreditation as a "tough break" that relegated

the individual to making less than half of his potential earnings.

Obtaining the GED credential was Junior's short-term goal because it conveyed to

society that he was qualified. It also supported his long-term goal to acquire employment as a

traffic enforcement officer or a driver for the city-supported transportation system for the elderly.

Yet, the benefit of GED accreditation was tapered by limited job options for ex-felons:

Excerpt 5.5

[Transcript 3: Topic – the meaning of the GED]
Interviewer: So when you think about getting this GED and what that means to you, like I guess the doors that open to you, um-

	[Part 1 – Benefits of GED]	
	[Sub-topic: Pride in GED]	
Junior:	The doors,	stanza 1
	it goes both ways.	
	With a GED	
	you could be proud with yourself.	
	Then when the company asks you for a diploma	
	you can be proud and say yes.	
	That's one.	
	[Sub-topic: Closed door]	
	The doors still-	stanza 2
	If you have a criminal background	
	the doors are still going to be closed	
	no matter what if you got a GED	
	or a high school diploma or what.	
	Because why would I hire you	stanza 3
	and you got a criminal background	
	and this person right here	
	doesn't have a criminal background,	
	but no GED or high school diploma?	
	So I prefer to have this person besides you.	stanza 4
	I don't know if you're a murderer.	
	I don't know if you're a robber.	
	I don't know if you are a hustler.	
	I don't know if you carry guns	
	or you're a thief or whatever.	
	So it's a big difference.	
	[Sub-topic: Access]	
	So doors are still closed	stanza 5
	until you find something like,	
	word, [to impress favorably]	
	somebody left the key outside.	
	It's come on in.	
	Word, you set up here	
	or you set up there.	

> So there's opportunity
> but the doors are still closed [a little laugh].

Using the metaphor of opportunities as doors he had constructed earlier, Junior explained that the doors swung both ways and the direction was based upon the type of person you were deemed to be. He presented the GED certificate as a source of pride in being able to provide it when asked by employers. Hence, his statement inferred that the certificate's absence produced shame, as experienced by many adult literacy learners (Bartlett, 2007; Prins, 2005).

Yet, the benefits of the GED accreditation were mitigated by Junior's identity as an ex-felon, supporting Mike's apparent relief in not having a felony. Using ventriloquation in the second and third stanzas, Junior invoked the voice of the employer in displaying why the doors of opportunity swung shut. He positioned the employer as a risk manager who must choose between two identities: the individual without an academic accreditation and an ex-felon with accreditation.[10] He declared this was a "big difference." The GED certificate implied you had the basic qualification for the job and the criminal record implied you were not to be trusted. Pager (2008) astutely noted that the criminal record is a credential whose power "lies in its official and legitimate means of evaluating and classifying individuals," thereby regulating access and opportunity across a variety of domains (p. 73).

Junior's penchant for using metaphors was again evident in stanza 4 in which he described access and opportunity as someone leaving the key in the door and allowing him a place within. He was not the owner of the key. He profoundly spoke to the issue of power relationships and structural poverty - those who are in power set the standards for eligibility and access to social goods. In sum, one credential (GED certificate) opened doors and the other

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[10] Pager (2008) found that criminal records reduced call backs by 50%, with Whites having a 17% call back rate and Blacks having a 5% call back rate.

credential (criminal record) closed them unless the gatekeeper, the employer, saw fit to leave "the key in the door."

Even in employment situations where a GED accreditation and a criminal record were not concerns, the power wielded by the in-group could dictate who was hired and who was not. Junior showed how his identity as a non-union worker obstructed access to construction work. He observed that the prohibitive cost of union dues and licensing made it difficult to attain membership. In this instance, Junior contended that the union held the key to the door of opportunity by pressuring employers concerning who they can and cannot hire. So although the identities of high school dropout and ex-felon were not inhibitive in this context, the identity of the non-union worker served to limit access to employment. As Junior concluded, "the door is still closed."

Although he did not mention his racial identity as factor, research indicates that the construction industry has historically limited minority access to jobs (Balatti, Black, & Falk, 2006; Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; Royster, 2003). Furthermore, African American males generally have reduced access to jobs, as shown by Pager's (2008) study in which the percentage of call-backs for Black men without a criminal record was equal to that of White men with a criminal record. It is possible that Junior's ex-felon and non-union identities were more salient at the time of the interview because he had to identify himself as an ex-felon each time he applied for a job, and he had recently applied for a job at a construction site that separated applicants by union status. Alternatively, Junior may have assumed that I was aware of the employment challenges African American men encounter, and thought it unnecessary to discuss the racial barrier. Nevertheless, Junior was encouraged by the knowledge that he could work for the city as a driver for the elderly or as a traffic enforcement officer. It "opened up doors" that gave him the

"opportunity to reach for goals" and "move forward with his life [transcript 2].[11] At the time of the interview, he was preparing to take the commercial driver's license test. The significance of taking the test was captured in the following words: "I'm going out there for that [CDL] to survive." The stark reality of his limited options evoked regret for not being a better student and acquiring a criminal record. As a result of his experiences, Junior encouraged his sixteen year-old son to stay in school because "you need it [high school diploma]. No matter what, you still need it. You still need it." Despite the other identities that restricted his access to employment, Junior averred the necessity of having a high school diploma. Its importance lay in certifying an individual as eligible for employment or promotion.

Roddy Rod

Roddy Rod's narrative draws attention to some of the ways in which adults circumvent the restrictions of low literacy skills. Similar to the other participants, Roddy Rod believed the demarcation of low literacy skills placed him at a disadvantage in society. He described it as a "handicap," yet his narratives reflected the identity of overcomer. He spoke more often of what he was able to accomplish than what his low literacy skills prevented him from doing. He declared, "I survived on what I had." Thus, his work narrative was constructed to prove, through various examples, how he "managed" despite his limited writing ability. At the time of the interview he was 64 years old and volunteering at a legal aid clinic. In the following excerpt Roddy Rod related how he overcame the "handicap" of poor writing skills:

Excerpt 5.5

> [Transcript 1: Topic – Things he succeeded at]
> [Part 3: Being a good conversationalist]
>
>   [Sub-topic: Things he succeeded at]
> Roddy Rod: Some things I've succeeded   stanza 1

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[11] Since the 1980s states have increased the number of jobs inaccessible to ex-felons (Travis, 2005).

I would say decently with.
Done decently, you know.
I was always able to manage,
take care of my family
and, you know, to do well.

[Sub-topic: Poor writing skills as a handicap]
With the education that I have   stanza 2
not able to-
I'd say write at the particular time,
read fairly well,
but not able to write.

So that handicap was always,   stanza 3
"Oh well you can't write good enough."
That held me back
wherein there was places and things
that I could've done.

[Sub-topic: Conversing well as an asset]
Learning to be able to talk to people of different-   stanza 4
That helped me to be, you know-
to stand out.
To do better.
To kind of like get
where I need to be, you know.

So I learned to be able to talk   stanza 5
to anybody and everybody.
That just got me where
I um needed to be.
I enjoyed it.

This segment was part of a lengthy narrative in which Roddy Rod narrated how he overcame difficulties in his life. In the first stanza, Roddy Rod used the term "decently" to establish his success in taking care of his family and doing well. He repeated "decently" twice as though affirming the truth of the statement to himself and to the listener, which he then confirmed by stating he was "always able to manage" taking care of his family and to "do well." This he later described as the ability to move out of a bad neighborhood and to provide better living circumstances for his family than his parents did for him. Here we begin to see the link between

literacy and gender in the enactment of the good provider identity, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

In the second and third stanzas Roddy Rod described his writing deficit as a handicap that prevented him from going places and doing things. But in the fourth and fifth stanzas he declared he overcame the limitation through his ability to converse well with people. It helped him to "stand out" from and "to do better" than those who did not have a high school diploma or GED credential (stanza 4). He averred on three occasions (stanzas 4, 5, and 6), that his conversational ability got him "where he needed to be." Notably, he did not refer to the skill of reading, even though he "educated" himself by reading, but rather to the skill of speaking as an important asset in gaining employment.

Roddy Rod contended that speaking well and behaving appropriately were buffers against the negative constructions of identity associated with being a high school dropout. He asserted he knew as a fact, "it is what comes out of your mouth" that makes a difference in how people treat you and what they expect of you, recalling people's amazement when he told them he only finished tenth grade. Again alluding to his own experiences, he asserted, "as long as you act well and speak well," it can reduce the barriers associated with not being credentialed and contradict the negative stereotypes of African American males. Roddy Rod's sentiments echo adult literacy learners who recognize the importance of verbally representing themselves well (Balatti, Black, & Falk, 2006; Bingman & Ebert, 2000; Prins, 2011) and middle-class African American males who see education as a buffer against racism (Diemer, 2002).

Roddy Rod also used the strategy of multiple accounts (Linde, 1993) to demonstrate that although one "needs" a high school diploma or equivalency one can "do well" without it if one has tradable skills. Capturing the tension between the literacy discourse and his experiential knowledge, he noted, "I didn't have to do it on their terms. I did it on my terms." He also used his brother as an example of someone without a high school diploma or GED accreditation who had

done well. Roddy Rod presented his brother as a home remodeler and hospital worker, who had "done quite well" without a "lick of education," and had acquired an adeptness at avoiding situations that displayed his literacy deficiency. His skills paved the way for his employment.

Roddy Rod recognized the "need" of having an education. He also acknowledged that time and critical events in history had placed literacy on "the pedestal of having." For example he noted that now a diploma or equivalency was needed to work at McDonalds or Burger King. It was not that the job had changed but the requirements for being hired. He also pointed to an increased state of surveillance resulting from the September 11, 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center that now required "having all sorts of papers to move around." So the requirements of literacy were a reflection of the times in which he lived. As Roddy Rod observed, "It's not necessarily that you're going to do more, but you definitely have to know more," allowing that education was needed "to get a job of a certain caliber" such as engineering.

All the participants echoed the necessity of the literacy discourse in relation to employment, yet their daily lived experiences challenged the compulsory nature of the discourse as well as its espoused value. Their stories indicate their belief in the importance of a high school diploma or GED credential in moving forward economically but they also conveyed there were other ways to make money within the local economy without having a GED certificate. In terms of value, Roddy Rod's narrative demonstrated that tradable skills and good communication skills can compensate for lack of a GED credential.

Conversely, Junior's narrative conveyed that an ex-felon identity and non-union membership trumped the value of a GED certificate by reducing his chances for employment. On a larger scale, Mike captured the ideological underpinning of the GED credential as "a piece of paper" that conveyed a "qualified" identity to society, whereas Roddy Rod recognized the restructuring of society made literacy acquisition a necessity. As Brandt (2009) has argued, the entanglement of the economy and literacy shapes "systems of access and reward for literacy

learning, for setting the material and ideological conditions in which literacy can be pursued and practiced, and for creating upheaval in those conditions " (p. xiv). Beyond societal requirements, these men sought literacy and the GED credential for other reasons. The next section will address how literacy influenced their perceptions and enactments of particular identities.

<center>**Connecting literacy to other identities**</center>

The men perceived literacy development as a resource for strengthening their gender, cultural, and literate identities. Themes related to family provision, independence, self-sufficiency, and self-development were evident in all the narratives and aligned with traditional conceptions of masculinity and manhood. The primary theme for gender identity was enacting the role of the good provider. For cultural identity the main theme was self-knowledge, and for literate identity the central theme was literacy independence and development to enact particular roles. The men's stories captured the struggle to meet social expectations. They shared experiences in which their low literacy skills detracted from their ability to enact certain roles, thus contributing to a deficit sense of their identities. In this subsection, I organize the narratives according to themes by drawing upon the experiences of various participants.

Gender identity

The good provider continues to be a central component of manhood (Christensen & Palkovitz, 2001; Roy, 2004) despite earlier claims to its encroaching demise due to women entering the workforce (Bernard, 1981). Four of the six participants connected literacy to being a good provider for their families. While masculinity scholarship tends to focus primarily on the economic aspects of the father as good provider, the men's stories provided more nuanced perspectives. For example, Raymond and Ice spoke of educational involvement, Mr. E and Ice constructed the good provider as sons providing for their mothers, and Roddy Rod primarily aligned with the traditional focus of economic support.

Raymond

Raymond connected his low literacy skills to his sense of inadequacy as a father, his dependency

on others, and his social isolation. First, he thought it prevented him from giving knowledge and

wisdom to his children. The following excerpt is part of the six-page uninterrupted text from the

first interview in which he chronicled his life experiences with literacy. Prior to this segment

Raymond described past traumatic incidents in his life, concluding that his life was "hard." He

used the metaphor of an "egg scrambled in a pot" to depict the quality of his life. Raymond then

transitioned into the present, identifying current situations that made his life difficult. In the

upcoming excerpt, he discussed his restricted ability to meet the needs of his children.

Excerpt 5.6

     [Transcript 1: Topic – Life is hard]
     [Part II: The present]

	[Subtopic: Fathering – no wisdom/knowledge]	
Raymond:	Yes even my children-	stanza 1
	I love 'em	
	but I can't do nothing for 'em.	
	I give 'em yes,	
	but what they want I can't	
	'cause I don't have it.	
	They want to understand.	stanza 2
	They want the wisdom and knowledge.	
	I can't sit here	
	and give it to you	
	'cause your father don't have it.	
	Your father want it,	
	but he don't have it.	
	Once I get it,	
	it's a different story.	

Raymond began his narrative by declaring his love for his children and his inability to

provide what they wanted, and ended it by indicating that once he acquired what they wanted

they would have it also. Raymond evinced a strong sense of deficiency in his fathering role.

Although he acknowledged his love for his children and his economic provision for them, he

repeatedly used verbs indicating his lack ("can't do" and "don't have") to meet their needs. What he gave them appeared to be outweighed by the wisdom and the knowledge he believed he was unable to provide.

Raymond moved from "telling" to "living" his story in the second stanza. He changed from using the personal 'I' to the social identity of father and shifted his focus from the interviewer to his children, directly expressing to them his desire to meet their needs. This reflects another aspect of multivoicedness in which the narrator speaks not only to the present audience but to invisible audiences or ghosts of his experiences (Wortham, 2001). For Raymond, learning to read would give him access to the knowledge and wisdom he believed fathers should pass on to their children.

His limited reading skills also restricted the academic support he wanted to provide to his granddaughter:

Excerpt 5.7

> [Transcript 1: Topic: Daily living without reading]
> [Part I: Reading to his granddaughter]

Raymond:	And I have a granddaughter.	stanza 1
	One day my granddaughter	
	asked me to read a book to her.	
	I sat on the couch and I cried	stanza 2
	because I couldn't-	
	I didn't know how.	
	She asked why I was crying	stanza 3
	so I had to sit there	
	and tell her the truth:	
	Grandad don't know how to read.	

Raymond's emotional response as well as his unsolicited repetition of the story in the second interview indicates the poignancy of this incident. In fact, he indicated his granddaughter was a primary motivation for attending the adult literacy program. Once again he expressed his

inability to provide knowledge, in this case, to his grandchild (stanza 2). Raymond could have avoided telling her the truth, but he felt obligated ("had to") to tell her why he could not read to her. The poignancy of this moment may have been greater for Raymond because he had taken on the fathering responsibilities for his granddaughter and wanted her to go to college.

Although his low literacy skills inhibited his ability to help her in this area, Raymond found other ways to support her academically through attending parent-teacher meetings, buying her books, and providing a computer uploaded with activities to improve her literacy skills. He shared that when his granddaughter asked him to read to her his "whole life just dropped," and thus, he had something "to prove" to himself and to society. Here he alluded to the social expectations of fathers providing for their children, his internalization of those expectations, his failure to meet them, and his goal to fulfill them through literacy acquisition. Reading to children is a social expectation that is considered necessary for children to progress academically. In contrast to the discourse of mothers as the primary educators of their children, Raymond saw it as his responsibility to contribute to the academic well being of his granddaughter.

Similarly, Ice, who was 55 years at the time and also on disability due to a back injury, pointed to his six grandchildren as a motivation for learning to read. Previously, he used his brother and his own experiences to demonstrate that one could find work without education, yet he asserted that, "you still need education," which prompted me to ask why education was necessary if he could survive without it. He said he wanted "to be there" for his grandchildren. Being there, he implied, entailed being able to respond to his grandchildren's questions rather than avoiding or being unable to answer them. Ice had successfully kept his low literacy skills hidden from most of his family and friends.

Raymond's and Ice's experiences depict a new dimension of provision for these men as grandfathers. To provide for their grandchildren they needed to acquire reading skills. It was no longer enough to tell stories; they needed to read stories. The narratives show that the children

were the initiators of the literacy event or situation in which knowledge was requested. Both men did not know how to read and therefore did not read to their children. So whether it was literacy practices in which the children's parents or teachers read to them, we can infer that the social expectations of what people do with literacy informed the children's expectation of their grandparents.

Roddy Rod

In contrast to Raymond, Roddy Rod found validation in being able to provide for his family economically. Despite his low literacy skills, he continued to position himself as an overcomer. He got married at 19 years, had two daughters shortly thereafter, and held two jobs to provide for his family. He said, "I felt like I wanted more, but not having the time to go and get it. What was I going to do? You make the best of what you got and just keep on going [*pause*] as a man [laugh]." Here Roddy Rod voiced the expectation that men are supposed to sacrifice for their families and to thrive in difficult circumstances. He worked in a variety of businesses and organizations such as department stores, restaurants, hospitals, and the printing industry. Roddy Rod believed that the "ultimate goal" of a good father was "to do the best he can for his family."

In connecting literacy to providing for his family, Roddy Rod displayed the psychological trauma he experienced as a low literate, young husband and father. The "handicap" of his low literacy skills was a great source of mental and emotional stress, which he listed as one of the factors that led to his later depression. In the larger narrative context of the obstacles he overcame, Roddy Rod spoke of 20 years of depression that took him to "the bottom" of his life. He identified the realities of having a family at a young age and the insecurity of his ability to provide for them as one of the contributors to his depression. In this excerpt he voiced those concerns:

Excerpt 5.8

[Transcript 1: Topic – Overcoming obstacles]

[Part 5: Depression]

[Subtitle: Stress-low literacy skills and family provision]

Roddy Rod: I did take care of the family   stanza 1
with very little education.
You can read,
but, you know, it's like
wow, when are you going be able to write?
How are you going to be able to manage, you know?

I've held down   stanza 2
like I said
various different jobs.
You know, I did half way decent at them.

Okay.   stanza 3
It really wasn't easy,
very scary,
very, you know, unsure of myself
a lot of times
saying, "Wow, how am I going to do this?
How am I going to manage?
How am I going to take care of children?
And da da da [continuing questions of a similar vein]
and just on and on and on,-

Roddy Rod began with the personal "I," asserting that he did "take care" of his family,

but then distanced himself by utilizing the third person, and questioned himself as to when he

would acquire literacy proficiency and how he would provide for his family. The fact that he had

"little education" caused him to question his ability as a good provider, which he answered in the

second stanza by stating that he did fairly well at the various jobs he held. In the third stanza

Roddy Rod expressed the fear and insecurity he felt during that time. He used "very" to indicate

the extreme degree of those feelings and "a lot of times" to show their persistence. He ended the

stanza by performing or acting out his insecurity in rehearsing the litany of questions that plagued

him. Despite these concerns Roddy Rod, on several occasions, related his success in overcoming

his "handicap" of deficient writing skills. The proof was his ability to provide for his family.

Supporting his earlier statement that he "survived" on what he had, Roddy Rod used the word

"managed" 12 times in relation to providing for his family. He found jobs that did not require writing skills, sometimes working two jobs at a time. He eventually worked in the printing industry for 30 years.

Roddy Rod continued to build a picture of managing by assessing himself as doing "fairly well" while being the sole provider for a family of four (stanza 2). For him, doing "fairly well" was living in an apartment instead of one room and providing food for his family (stanza 3). The significance of this comparison was that when he was 18 he was living in one room with his mother and four siblings. So in comparing his economic status with that of his parents, he confirmed his accomplishment as a good provider. For Roddy Rod, a good father "looks for the betterment within himself to make his family better than his family [how he grew up]," and thus the progress continues with each generation.

Mr. E and Ice

Both Mr. E and Ice presented the good provider from the perspective of sons providing for their mothers. Although Mr. E had enrolled in the program to get his GED certificate to attend college, an underlying impetus to get his education was awareness of his mother's low literacy skills. She dropped out of school to help her parents provide for the family. He said, "I want to be able-something if she doesn't know, I want to be able to tell her and, you know, and us share the information. So I want her to be able to look to me…" Mr. E was concerned with knowledge provision while Ice was concerned with economic provision:

Excerpt 5.9

> [Transcript 2: Topic – short term goals]
> Interviewer: …So your short term goal is to learn how to read?
>
> Ice: How to read.   stanza 1
>   Get my GED.
>   And start to keep money in the bank.
>
>   [Subtopic: Providing for family]
>   I put money in the bank   stanza 2

for my kids, my mother and everything
'cause I got a lot of brothers.

[Subtopic: Siblings on drugs]
My mother had eleven kids   stanza 3
and the children(?) was still very active
and they like to just stay at my mother house
and don't pay rent.
They just move from here to there
still using drugs.

[Subtopic: Past life as drug user]
I was bad.   stanza 4
I was like that, too.
I changed my life around.
When I was the bad one
I wasn't the one
my mother could depend on.

 [Subtopic: Now the good son]
Now when I get my food stamps   stanza 5
I go and I buy her food.
She thought I couldn't be this good.
I told my mother I am NA.

The first stanza shows a progression in actions and accomplishments beginning with Ice's

short term goal to learn to read. He does not specifically state that he is seeking employment to

save money. The omission reflects the assumption of the literacy discourse that acquiring a GED

certificate leads to employment. In the second stanza, Ice revealed that these actions were

generated by his aspiration to provide for his children and mother. Using causal phrasing he

linked his aspiration to the fact that he had many brothers who were drug users and did not

financially support their mother (stanzas 2 and 3). In the next two stanzas he compared himself to

his brothers. He described himself as a past drug user who was "bad" and who his mother could

not depend on (stanza 4) whereas, now he was the "good" dependable son who bought her food

(stanza 5). These moral ascriptions speak to the social expectations of grown sons providing for

their mothers. Ice explained that "NA" referred to "No drugs, no alcohol, no cigarettes." In this

redemptive narrative (McAdams & Bowman, 2001), Ice's short term goal was to develop his literacy skills to enhance his ability to economically provide for his mother.

The men's stories show they used literacy development to increase their capability to enact father and son roles. Their stories also demonstrate that literacy informed their self-perceptions through their ability or inability to fulfill society's expectations of them as fathers and sons. Most notably, literacy also influenced the children's interactions with their grandparents and what they expected of them.

Cultural identity

Raymond, Roddy Rod, and Junior also associated reading and education with self- and cultural knowledge. The following excerpt is part of Raymond's uninterrupted text from the first interview, which was preceded by the story in which his mother took him out of school in the seventh grade. Raymond expressed a weak sense of his cultural identity when he recalled observing his older siblings practicing the reading skills he did not have. He said "I wanted to do that. I wanted to learn about where I am at or who am I or what not, you know." Raymond thought that being able to read would give him access to knowledge about himself. He despaired, "I don't know my people. All I know about is Africa. Black people come from Africa. That's all I know." This type of knowledge he was unable to provide to his children and, there was no one in his family he believed he could turn to for that knowledge. Raymond sought to improve his cultural knowledge through reading:

Excerpt 5.10

[Transcript 1: Topic – Reading in the park]

Raymond:	Well I was in the park one night-one day	stanza 1
	and they asked what I'm reading.	
	I said I'm trying to read	
	about Martin Luther King.	
	[The lady said] "Oh I can sit here	
	and tell you a lot about him?"	
	[Raymond replied] "Please sit down.	

Tell me."
She sat there
and told me what grade-
what school he went to and what not.
When he first wanted to be the president or whatever,
you understand what I'm saying?
How he got assassinated and what not.
I-I heard all of that from her.

[Subtopic: Difficulty remembering]
But all of that's faded away.   stanza 2
Do you understand what I am saying?
I can't hold nothing in my head
and that's-
that's my problem, you know.

Raymond's struggle to read, noted by the phrasing "I'm trying," was obvious enough to precipitate the offer to tell him about Martin Luther King, Jr. The choice of reading material indicated his desire for cultural knowledge that was stymied by his low literacy skills. Although the woman in the park told him about Martin Luther King, Jr., he complained that "it all faded away" because he forgot what he learned. Raymond demonstrated an awareness of history as a resource for building a strong cultural self.

Roddy Rod used a similar theme in voicing his concerns about young African American males. Within the larger narrative of proving that how one speaks and acts can compensate for low literacy skills, Roddy Rod expressed concern over the seeming misdirection of young African American males due to the influence of rap artists, among other things. He contrasted the youth today with men of purpose like Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Obama, complaining that "Black men have come so far" and that young men were unaware of "the struggles" they've been through. Roddy Rod thought they needed "to read certain books" like The Learning Tree[12] that would give them a historical perspective thereby, fostering a commitment to advancement.

---

[12] An autobiographical novel by Gordon Parks about growing up in the 1920s and 30s whose film version was inducted into the National Film Registry because of its historical and cultural significance.

Junior associated self- and cultural knowledge with reading, but in a slightly different way. More than the other participants, Junior depicted a prominent cultural identity, primarily evident in his stories of early schooling, and his identification with the social movement against apartheid and with early rap artists.[13] Unlike Roddy Rod, he pointed to those rap artists as making the connection between education and culture and education and economic success. In fact, Junior credited early rappers with encouraging him "to use his mind" and stay in school so he could achieve his dreams. Raymond, Roddy Rod, and Junior's narratives depict the connections they made between reading, historical knowledge, and a strong cultural identity; however, Raymond presented a less robust cultural identity because, unlike the others, he was unable to adequately utilize reading as a resource.

Literate identity

Literacy as independence

All of the participants connected education to independence and self-development in their narratives. While all focused on economic independence through employment, Raymond in particular drew attention to literacy independence. In constructing the identity of the struggler, Raymond told stories of how low literacy skills made him dependent on others and underpinned his desire to be an independent literacy user. In the following excerpt, Raymond centered his need to read among family dependency and condemnation for lack of self-sufficiency:

Excerpt 5.11

[Transcript 2: Topic – struggling]

	[Subtopic: Reliance on family]	
Raymond:	I mean I have had people in my family	stanza 1
	fill out applications for me and what not,	
	do my résumé for me and what not.	

---

[13] Rap music began as a dissenting voice to the social injustices of the day particularly those experienced by African Americans (Chang, 2005; Kitwana, 2003).

[Subtopic: Self-condemnation]
That's something that I should be doing.   stanza 2
What they're putting down there is not true.
Some of it's not true,
but some of it is.
I have to do my own.

[Subtopic: Literacy competence as independence]
Suppose they go to California or somewhere   stanza 3
and leave me here by myself.
Who's going to do it for me then?
That's why I need
to learn how to read,
that's why.
Do it on my own.
I don't have to ask people to do this
or do that there or what not.

[Subtopic: Condemned by society]
They [people] do it for me.   stanza 4
[They say] "You know that boy.
He 56 years old
and don't know how to read and write.
What the hell wrong with 'im?"
I understand that.

Raymond's dependence on his family to fill out applications violated his perception of

men as independent, invoking the theme of self-help (stanza 2). He pointed to the impermanence

of their support and his desire for self-sufficiency as reasons for developing literacy proficiency

(stanza 3). Raymond framed literacy as a necessity, using deontic phrasing in the first and second

stanzas to indicate obligation ("I have to do my own") and necessity ("I need to learn how to

read"). His family members' unavailability exposed him to the reproach of others who expected

him, as an adult, to have appropriate literacy skills. He ventriloquated the voices of other literacy

brokers in conveying society's view of him as defective: something was "wrong" with him

because he was 56 years old and did not know how to read and write (stanza 4). Raymond's

internalization of societal expectations for being literate was captured in the last line in which he

expressed understanding of society's judgment.

The next two stories elucidate the daily lived experiences that influenced Raymond's self perception as a man and father that regularly fed his desire for literate independence. The following story was embedded in the larger narrative of his life difficulties. His low literacy skills resulted in dependence on his daughter, reversing the role of parent and child and causing him pain and shame:

Excerpt 5.12

>   [Transcript 1: Topic – Life is hard]
>   [Part 2- The present]
>
>   [Subtopic: Getting a driver's license]
>   Raymond: Sometime   stanza 1
>   like my daughter took me
>   to the motor vehicle
>   to get a non-drivers license.
>
>   She had to fill the paper out for me, you know.   stanza 2
>   She actually had to fill the paper out.
>   She said, "Dad, you really can't read?"
>   I said, "No baby, daddy can't read."
>
>   She said, "Sign your name here."   stanza 3
>   I signed it like a little boy.
>   (p) Things like that hurts.

In acquiring a recognized form of identification, Raymond needed his daughter's help, not as a witness, but to do the paperwork, resulting in the revelation that he did not know how to read. His daughter's question denoted an expectation that he would know how to read, as well as skepticism and surprise that he didn't know how to read (stanza 2). Raymond evaluated his writing ability stating that he "signed like a little boy" (stanza 3). This statement captured the poignancy of this incident for Raymond: His low literacy skills detracted from his identity as a father and a man, and reduced him in that moment to a "little boy." He then paused and evaluated the experience as one that brought him pain. Raymond's stories reflected the deeply felt sense of inadequacy his low literacy skills produced.

Raymond's dependence on others was a constant reminder that he needed to learn how to read. Riding the train provided daily reminders of the literacy practices he lacked such as reading train directions or reading the newspaper. He positioned himself as separate from the other people on the train because they were reading newspapers, a demonstration of their literate ability, whereas he was trying to decipher signs and asking directions. This description of his experience echoed his perception that "society knows how to read," but he did not. In other words, literacy as a practice was reading newspapers, and low literacy as a practice was asking questions. Raymond explained that he spent "most" of his life dependent on people's assistance to get to his destinations. These incidents strengthened his sense of isolation, dependency, and deficit literate identity.

Literacy as personal accomplishment

All the participants except Mike considered literacy development and the acquisition of the GED credential a personal accomplishment. Mike perceived it as strictly a requirement. At 64 years, Roddy Rod's primary motivation for getting the certificate was personal accomplishment. He described it as "one big step…[to] put a notch in my life and just say 'oh, you know, you've accomplished this, you've accomplished that'." The GED accreditation would give him the "confidence" to "venture off into better things" he would not have tried before. This hinted at a latent deficit literate identity although he sought to present himself as an educated person throughout the interviews.

Roddy Rod described himself as someone who "always" wanted to "advance" himself and considered literacy development to be an integral part. He was also inspired by the idea that others would recognize his accomplishment, symbolized in walking across the stage at graduation. Roddy Rod referred to this as the "ultimate situation." His presentation of self denoted a contradiction in that he sought to present an agentic self who found alternate ways to succeed, but desired societal affirmation in the public recognition of his accomplishment.

Literacy as eligibility for college

   Unlike the other participants, Mr. E., who was 28, transferred to an alternate high school in the tenth grade, graduating with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) diploma at the age of 21. He conveyed a proficient literate identity, often using "I can" statements; however, a close reading of his narratives suggested his perception was fragile, and contingent upon family, friends, and teachers' verbal confirmations of his ability to succeed. His path of personal development and reason for attending the adult education program were to go to college to become a social worker. In the following excerpt Mr. E responded to my puzzlement about his need to be in the current program in light of his high school degree:

Excerpt 5.13

   [Transcript 1: Topic – IEP diploma]
   Interviewer: …'cause usually after you have your degree you don't need to be here. So how come you're here now?

   Mr. E: Because the IEP diploma   stanza 1
       is what's stopping me
       from going to any college
       here in ***[city].

       'Cause once you have that diploma   stanza 2
       and you have that seal on it
       and you give it to them [college administration]
       because they need all of this
       and if they see that seal on it
       they say, "No we can't take this.
       You have to go through the GED program."

   Mr. E's diploma was not recognized by college institutions. The diploma, which was supposed to be a door to employment and higher education, became a hindrance to his pursuit of a college education. Mr. E explained the "IEP diploma" prevented him from attending "any" college (stanza 1) because the college administration staff could not accept diplomas with IEP seals (stanza 2). Therefore, he took their advice and entered a GED program. The colleges he applied to were literacy sponsors that required the levels of literacy represented by the GED

certificate and the high school diploma. In ventriloquating the college admission staff, Mr. E used ability phrasing ("we can't") to show that the staff was subject to policies that shaped their response to IEP diplomas, and concomitantly that the IEP diploma identified Mr. E as an unqualified applicant. His experience gives credence to concerns raised by state directors of special education programs that employers and post-secondary institutions may consider the alternate diploma as substandard, thereby limiting opportunities for its holders (Johnson, Stout, & Thurlow, 2009).

Literacy as support for other social identities

For some of the men literacy development within the program enforced other social identities and enhanced their abilities to function effectively. For example, both Raymond and Roddy Rod saw literacy development as necessary for enhancing their Christian identities. It would allow them to participate in the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) by reading the Bible and taking Bible study classes. Raymond's story exemplifies that connection:

Excerpt 5. 14

[Transcript 1: Topic – Academic achievement]

	[Subtopic: Enhancing Christian identity]	
Raymond:	But I know it's not me	stanza 1
	and it's not Jane [tutor].	
	God is doing it in my life.	
	'Cause I asked God,	stanza 2
	"Father, *please* teach me how to read."	
	I go to church *with a Bible*.	
	What's the sense of going to church with the Bible	
	if you don't-can't read the Bible?	
	And it bothered me.	
	And now I know how to get to Luke,	stanza 3
	and how to get to John,	
	and Hebrews, and all of that.	
	I know certain scriptures and what not,	
	so-	

This story diverged from Raymond's other narratives because it demonstrated how literacy development strengthened the enactment of his Christian identity. He began by crediting God with his academic progress (stanza 1) explaining that it was a response to prayer (stanza 2). Here Raymond made a case for why learning to read was important by connecting it to his Christian identity: he goes to church but cannot read the Bible. Raymond corrected himself by changing "don't" to "can't read the Bible," indicating that not reading the Bible was due to inability, not unwillingness. Also, his use of the term "troubling" suggested that the cultivation of this identity was important. In the third stanza, Raymond demonstrated his academic progress in stating that he was now able to find chapters in the Bible and knew certain scriptures. At the same time he confirmed that his prayer was being answered. The significance of reading scripture will also be seen in the next chapter as Raymond drew upon it to negate the negative construction of his literate identity.

Roddy Rod perceived the GED certificate as opening "other doors" and opportunities to do other things, including attending Bible study and becoming a member of the church, which he planned to do after obtaining the certificate. He thought it was too difficult to do both at the same time. Also, acquiring the certificate would allow him to take on additional responsibilities at the legal aid clinic (e.g., writing up summaries of client situations in a manner others would be able to understand, gaining more understanding of the law, and enhancing his computer skills). In addition, acquisition of the GED certificate was a confidence builder:

Excerpt 5.15

[Transcript 2: Topic – Long term goals for GED accreditation]
Interviewer: Is there anything else um that you are thinking that this would be a stepping stone to that comes to mind?

[Sub-topic: GED as stepping stone]
Roddy Rod: Yea, defin-   stanza 1
            well I mean a stepping stone towards,
            I guess anything else that I want to do.
            Because now I would kind of be more prepared

to write or to do other things
that would lead off,
where in before I would be hesitant to do them
and say, "Oh well, maybe my writing isn't up to par.
I can't do this because of that
and you know the math or whatever."

So it definitely puts other things [p] in perspective   stanza 2
as well as, you know, in your path
to say, "Okay I can go here now.
I can go there now."
I've decided that when these things come across
I don't have to, you know, shun 'em
because I feel like
oh, you don't have enough education to go seek 'em.

In this narrative Roddy Rod contrasted his past and present literate selves where the latter was agentive and competent due to literacy development. In the first stanza, Roddy Rod described having the GED certificate as a "stepping stone" to "anything else" he wanted to do. Because of his literacy development he was "more prepared to write" and willing to do things he was "hesitant" to do before. It was also a confidence builder and a source of personal freedom which Roddy Rod depicted with ability- or agentive words ("I can," "I've decided," "I don't have to," stanza 2). In sum, his progress toward the GED certificate strengthened his self-perception as a literate individual and encouraged a positive future outlook. He said, "I see myself going up rather than going back down or not going anywhere or just sitting around and waiting for nothing to happen….a lot of future perspectives."

The men's stories demonstrate that their literate experiences contributed to how they made sense of their gendered, cultural, and literate identities. Their low literacy skills produced a sense of inadequacy and psychological stress in fulfilling their roles as fathers, specifically in the areas of economic and educational support. Also, their grandchildren's expectations encouraged two of the men to learn to read. Some of the men perceived literacy skills as essential for self- and cultural knowledge. Literacy development enhanced their enactment of other identities,

positioned them to take on new opportunities, and heightened their self-perception as literate individuals. Although I presented the identities as separate entities, they were interconnected. For example, Raymond's literacy development would not only enhance his identity as a capable adult learner, but also provided the skills to read about his cultural history, which he could then convey to his children and grandchildren. Conversely, the other identities were gendered in that the men's narratives were underpinned by conceptions of masculinity as independent, self- knowing, and pursuing personal development.

Chapter summary

The men's stories serve as concrete examples of how literacy as an identity marker can position low-literacy adults as deficient and ineligible for social goods such as gainful employment, promotions, and respect. Their ability to meet social expectations was limited by their low literacy skills, contributing to their aspirations and expectations for attending the adult literacy program. All the men voiced the necessity of having GED accreditation, but for some, their identities as ex-felons mitigated its value. They attended the program for gainful employment, family provision, and college preparation; however, their stories align with Brandt's (2003) argument that literacy learning is not just an individual choice but a response to technological and social changes that dictate valued levels of literacy.

The men's literacy experiences also influenced how they perceived their gender, cultural, and literate identities. Literacy as a social practice affected their ability to enact particular roles. Consequently, low literacy skills detracted from their self-efficacy as men, fathers, and adults. Reading skills were crucial to meeting the expectations of their grandchildren, providing wisdom and knowledge to their children, gaining self and cultural knowledge, acquiring independence, and promoting self-development. Primarily, the men aspired to be good providers offering nuanced perspectives as they linked literacy development to fulfillment of that role. Life stage, age, and time contributed to the salience of particular aspects of their identities.

Overall, the men's narratives speak of exclusion, struggle, and resilience against the backdrop of restricted job opportunities. Also, the men depicted the GED certificate as a rite of passage necessary to access certain social goods. In addition, the men saw themselves through the eyes of society, and to varying degrees, aspired to be good providers for themselves and their families, and to be seen as educated individuals (Prins, 2011). The next chapter will highlight the men's program experiences, particularly the factors that informed their perceptions of and engagement with the program.

Chapter 6

Supports and Hindrances to Achieving Personal Goals

The men's daily lived experiences motivated them to enroll in adult literacy programs because they aspired to be good providers for their families, to gain access to better employment, to attend college, to learn to read, and to acquire the GED credential, and thereby escape the shame and consequences of being considered illiterate. As in their early schooling experiences the men identified internal and external situations that either hindered or supported their academic progress. Participation and persistence in ABEL programs has been and continues to be a main concern and research focus for adult literacy theory and practice (Beder, 1991; J. P. Comings & Cuban, 2007; Hayes, 1988; King, 2002; Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Consequently, this chapter addresses the research question: What experiences inside and outside of the ABEL program did African American men perceive to hinder or support their literacy goals?

The participants had attended at least one adult literacy program prior to the one in which the study was conducted. Hence, they incorporated incidents from those programs, sometimes referencing early schooling experiences, as they made sense of their adult literacy learning experiences. The findings indicate that, in most cases, the participants' adult learning experiences were a positive contrast to their early schooling experiences, and fell within the same dimensions of influence such as student-teacher relationships, academic achievement, learning environment, personal concerns outside the ABEL program, and peer relationships. Overall, the men told stories of a caring environment, a path of academic progress, and a desire to persist in the face of obstacles, including subject matter difficulties, interruptions in school time, and program policies. As expected, the men cited the closing of the program as the main source of discouragement.

This chapter is organized into two sections. The first section presents factors the men identified as promoters of academic achievement that motivated them toward achievement of their goals. The second section explores the challenges the men confronted and their responses to them, and the third section reviews the chapter's main points.

Encouraging factors

In general, the participants described more positive experiences in the program than negative ones. The most frequently cited sources of encouragement were the caring atmosphere of the program and the supportive student-teacher relationships. The men also pointed to evidence of academic progress and a variety of motivational factors that encouraged them to stay with the program, and to believe they would achieve their goals.

Caring environment

All the participants thought the staff and tutors cared about them, and considered this crucial to their presence in the program. Both Mr. E and Junior referred to the "friendliness" of the people. Ice said he knew he was in "the right place" from the first day because they prayed for him, and his tutor gave him advice about how to succeed in the program. Roddy Rod appreciated the supportive environment of the school. He said, "There's people here that want to see you get it. And I-I like that." Raymond and Mr. E noted there was "love." Prayer and constant encouragement were repeatedly noted by the participants as indications of the staff and tutors' concern for them. They were also the key distinguishing features between the current program and the previous programs the participants had attended.

As a church-sponsored program, individual and corporate prayer was part of the program structure. About half an hour before each session two staff members or tutors were available to pray for student needs individually. At the beginning of each session, staff, tutors, and students (who were interested in doing so) gathered together to pray for the collective needs of those represented, with particular focus on student progress. Some of the men faced challenging

circumstances and deemed this an important source of support. Although Mike was only available for the first interview, he also referred to prayer and others' concern for him as crucial to overcoming his early schooling challenges. Mr. E, who had been in the program for two years, captured the sentiments of the participants when he explained "the love of God" as his number one encouraging experience within the first few of weeks of being in the program:

Excerpt 6.1

[Transcript 2: Topic - First couple of weeks in the program]
    [Part 1: Love of God]
Interviewer: And how was that [love of God] displayed?

    [Subtopic: Prayer]
Mr. E: Prayer.   stanza 1
    Prayer.
    Uhm every night-
    Every time we come through the doors
    they're always encouraging us.

    [Subtopic: Someone to talk to]
    You know there are always one-on-one prayer.   stanza 2
    You know you could always speak to someone.
    You could always speak to the tutor.
    You could always speak to the person in charge
    and they would always encourage you.

    [Subtopic: Updated on program happenings]
    Uhm they will always tell you things   stanza 3
    that are going on, you know.
    They will always keep you posted.
    This is what's going on.

    [Subtopic: Managing student conflict]
    Uhm if you always had a problem with someone   stanza 4
    you went to that person first, you know.

    [subtopic: Love –taking time with you]
    Uhm but it was just the love.   stanza 5
    It was the love.
    It's the love.
    All around love.
    They-they take their time with you
    to sit down and explain things to you.

In using the term "the love of God," Mr. E drew upon a religious institutional script to express what he saw in the program. He was a Christian and a member of the church that oversaw the program. The scripturally based term "love of God" was regularly used in the program. Mr. E spoke as a representative of the student body, using the collective pronouns "we" and "us" and the general "you" when he identified aspects of the program that made him feel valued. In addition, his repetitive use of "always" demonstrated a standard practice of interacting with the students in a supportive way. In the first stanza, Mr. E's repetition of prayer signaled its importance to him, and his reference to nighttime showed he attended evening sessions. While establishing the frequency of prayer ("every night" and "every time"), he linked prayer to the staff's constant ("always") encouragement. Mr. E followed a similar format in the second stanza beginning with prayer and ending with encouragement, while noting in between, the availability of people to speak with. In so doing, he linked encouragement to talking to and praying with someone. Four of the five participants pointed to prayer as a source of encouragement.

In the remaining stanzas, Mr. E addressed other community aspects of the program such as being informed of program happenings (stanza 3) and managing peer conflicts (stanza 4). By inserting these segments, Mr. E implied the ways students interacted with or treated each other were influenced by the program initiatives. In the fifth stanza, he stressed through repetition that the overall character of the program was "love," connecting it in this instance to the tutors "taking their time" to explain things to students. The program elements Mr. E highlighted were reflective of the two components he identified as important in an academic environment: being part of a community and having "a circle of support" (transcript 1). This atmosphere of care not only established an appreciation among the participants for the program but also set the background for their relationships with their tutors.

Student-teacher relationship

In comparing early schooling with the adult learning program all of the men, except Mike, thought the teachers in the early schooling environment did not care about them. In fact, Raymond saw this as the primary difference between his past and present learning experiences: "What I see is the difference is that the teachers back then didn't really care. Being here now it's a whole different outlook. The teachers do care. They are more concerned of the students than anything." For Junior, his past teachers, except for a few, did "not put much effort into it [teaching]." Ice perceived early schooling as a place where "nobody took time" with the students and those who struggled academically "were put to the side." Mr. E thought the teachers did not "push" the students as much as they could have. Conversely, the five participants held their current tutors in very high regard, crediting their academic progress and appreciation for the program to their interactions with the tutors.

When asked what they liked about the program, the participants cited the tutors, often using the same characteristics to describe them (e.g., encouraging, caring, and taking time with the students). In general, the participants used the term "push" or a synonym to indicate the tutors' high expectations for them. This positive definition contrasted with early schooling experiences where Raymond and Roddy Rod used it to describe social promotion, which moved them to higher grades without having acquired the equivalent academic knowledge. In this excerpt Roddy Rod captured some of the most cited tutor characteristics in his reasons for liking the program:

Except 6.2

> [Transcript 2: Program likes]
> Interviewer:…What would you say that you like about the program?
>
> Roddy Rod: What I like about the program
>   is that they are patient with you.
>   They do, you know,
>   try to encourage you.

> They do try to push you ahead,
> and try to, you know, like-
> don't want you to give up.
> Don't want you to give in
> to feelings of "I can't do this."
> So that's what I like about the program.

These supportive teacher characteristics - "patient with you", "trying to encourage you," "push you ahead," "not wanting you to give up" - aligned with Roddy Rod's identity construction of the struggling student. Similar to the other participants, he used the general "you" instead of the personal "I," suggesting these interactions were a common practice instead of an isolated student-teacher relationship. Here Roddy Rod used the phrase "push you forward" to indicate moving you toward graduation.

However, some of the other men described pushing as uncovering their potential. For example both Mr. E and Raymond described pushing as doing "something new." Their tutors encouraged them to participate in the program's tri-annual essay contest and the annual publication of student writings. The men categorized their accomplishments as encouraging experiences. Participation in the essay contest was particularly significant for Raymond because he won second prize; he had never written an essay or won anything before.

In another example of "pushing" Raymond relived the special moment when he read five lines independently for the first time as part of the class reading activity:

Except 6.3

[Transcript 2: Topic – Pushing]
[Part 2c: Reading in class]

	[Subtopic: The first teacher's approach]	
Raymond:	The first teacher	stanza 1
	had everybody read at the same time.	
	[Subtopic: The second teacher's approach]	
	Jane [tutor] did it different.	stanza 2
	Each one would read a page by yourself,	
	another whole page,	

and [Jane said] "I will tell you when to stop."
Jane would give everybody the paper.
And, oh Lord, she would have to pick me.
[She said] "You go first."
I said, "Do I have to go first?
[Jane said] "Go first."
And I read it.
And I wanted to cry
because I got five lines right.
She said, "I told you.
You are just holding back
like you don't know how."

[Subtopic: What teachers need to do]
No.   stanza 3
She pushes me.
That's what I believe
every teacher in ***[city]
needs to do.
Push your students.
Don't hurt them.

Raymond oriented us to the difference in teacher approaches as the crucial basis for the

story. The tutor's high expectations helped Raymond to move beyond his fears and realize the

progress he had made. As he seamlessly transitioned into his interaction with the tutor, Jane,

Raymond expressed consternation internally and externally at the prospect of reading by himself,

and being the first one to do so (stanza 2). Reading five lines without mistakes evoked the

emotive response, "I just wanted to cry," indicating the significance of this moment as a "dream

come true." This event carried great import for Raymond's self-esteem and self-efficacy as a

learner when placed against the backdrop of negative early schooling experiences, and a

desperate desire to read that was underpinned by a lifetime of exclusion and shame. Raymond

saw himself from the tutor's perspective as he concluded the event with the tutor's affirmation of

his ability to read.

His purpose in telling this story was not only to convey how the tutor pushed him, but to

illuminate what teachers need to do for their students (stanza 3). The contrast between "pushing"

and "hurting" students implied a reference to early schooling experiences he previously described

as "hurt and shame." The men's stories illustrate how the tutors encouraged the men to believe in

their capabilities as literate individuals, and to excel beyond their perceived limitations.

The second component of the student-teacher relationship was taking time with the

students to make sure they comprehended class material. Raymond observed "I see something in

here. I see that, yeah, this is the place. I could learn here. They take their time with you and what

not." Mr. E noted his tutors were "very caring." When he was absent they called to see how he

was doing and inquired if he had any problems with the homework. Junior described teachers

taking time with students as "putting effort into it," while Ice approached it from the perspective

of "reinforcing" what he learned:

Excerpt 6.4

[Transcript 1: Topic – First couple of weeks in the program]
Interviewer: …When you first started here-if you were to describe what it was like those
first couple of weeks-because you said before you went to those other programs, you
know-

	[Subtopic: Liking the teacher]	
Ice:	I liked it from day one	stanza 1
	because of the teacher.	

	[Subtopic: Reinforcing what you learned]	
	She always took you back to that step	stanza 2
	to reinforce what you learn.	
	And I like that.	
	And she still does it.	
	And I like that.	
	I like that.	

	[Subtopic: Pushing you/Taking time with you]	
	She does push you	stanza 3
	but not too hard.	
	She takes her time.	
	What you don't know (?)	

	[Subtopic: All the teachers do it]	
	As a matter of fact	stanza 4
	I say that about all the teachers here.	
	All the teachers here do that.	
	When Paula's not here	
	I get a substitute.	

> They all work like that
> so I guess they all do that.

Ice's interactions with the teacher greatly contributed to how he perceived the program. Aligning with Quigley & Uhland's (2000) statement that the first three weeks are critical for retaining adult learners, Ice responded to the researcher's question by stating what he first liked about the program: his teacher's reinforcement of what he learned. He then explained that reinforcement meant taking time to review what had been taught. Through declarations such as "I like it" and "she still does it" (stanza 2), Ice repeatedly expressed appreciation for the teacher's strategy and the consistency with which she employed it.

Ice also credited his tutor with finding balance between pushing students and taking time to make sure they learned the material (stanza 3). Use of the contrastive conjunction "but" and the adverbial phrase "too hard" suggested that Ice thought excessive pushing was not good. Mr. E and Roddy Rod's narratives indicated that this could lead to frustration. Based upon his experiences with substitute teachers, Ice observed that all the teachers in the program had a similar approach. This teaching style was a source of encouragement because it helped him learn by bridging current knowledge to new knowledge. Ultimately, the teachers' high expectations and student-centered approach were crucial factors in the men's literacy development.

Academic progress

Unlike early schooling where the men spoke of academic failure, they related stories of academic progress. Referencing the results of previous Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE), both Ice and Mr. E said they saw a "big difference" in their academic performance since attending the program. Despite ongoing challenges with math, Roddy Rod observed, "I found that I am already somewhat above what I was when I came here." He added, improvements are "all I look for," referring to the "dents" he made in math as opposed to "leaps and bounds" of progress. Overall he thought he had improved "three fold." Raymond started the program with a third grade

reading level and had progressed to a fifth grade level. He emphatically declared, "I *learned* how

to read here. Not the way I *want* to read but I learned how to read here."

Junior had been attending the program intermittently for seven years and was preparing

to take the GED exam. He drew upon his understanding of a math problem to demonstrate his

progress:

Excerpt 6.5

[Transcript 3: Topic: Changes due to the program]
Interviewer: Oh okay. Where you are right now in terms of your-like the math and the
reading-you have also seen a progression there as well?

[Subtopic: Solving a math problem]
Junior: Oh yeah.   stanza 1
                 All you got to do is pay attention
                 to the um-the um questions
                 and read the questions
                 and pay attention to the math.
                 If you don't know the math
                 that's it.

                 [Subtopic: Solving Pi]
                 It took me fifteen minutes   stanza 2
                 just to break down the pi.
                 When I looked at the pi
                 it was like, "Wow!"
                 I was at work.
                 I was like, "Wow!
                 How you do you this pi?
                 How do you do this pi?"
                 I'm looking at the pi
                 and I'm like, "How you do this pi?"
                 And I was at work too.
                 I'm like, "Wow!"
                 Sit right here.
                 Fifteen minutes looking at it
                 and just reading it.
                 I broke that pi down
                 and I got to school the next day
                 and I was like, "Word!
                 Let me show you how to do this."
                 It was like a big change.
                 All you got to do is put a little E [effort] into it.
                 And then you got it.

Junior began his story with an abstract explaining the first steps students needed to take when solving a math problem, demonstrating that he had internalized the commonly espoused advice of the tutors. However, he added the caveat that if the student did not know the math he would be unable to solve the problem. "That's it" captured the finality of his assessment. In contrast, Junior presented himself as the knowledgeable committed student who through persistence solved a math problem (stanza 2). The repetition and first line positioning of the time it took him to solve the problem ("15 minutes") indicated that was the significant part of the story. The construction of the narrative imitated the process of the literacy event. His repeated questions reflected his 15-minute contemplation of the problem and so took up the majority of the story. He announced half way through the story that he was at work. In a classic Labovian narrative (Labov, 2006) this information would have been conveyed at the beginning of the narrative; however its presence here suggested an afterthought of relative importance, supporting his identity of the diligent student who did his homework.

Junior concluded the event by repeating the time needed to solve the problem and the sharing of his acquired knowledge with his classmates the next day. He evaluated his experience as a "big change" that resulted from effort ("E"). Notably, he used the same phrasing to describe good teachers who helped him to understand class material. Junior's statement also indicated his recognition of the important role he played in his own success. This perspective was voiced by all the participants. In telling this story, Junior demonstrated that learning required effort. The new knowledge represented a "big change" between the beginning and end of the story. In this story learning for Junior meant change. The desire and struggle to understand class work was a common theme among the men. Some of the men described academic progress as going backward in order to go forward.

Retention

Retention is usually viewed in a negative light, and therefore not considered a source of encouragement. Yet, some of the men thought it was a necessary step toward academic progress. For example, Mr. E received a low score on the language segment of the TABE test and had to switch to another tutor. He was upset because he had developed a "real closeness" with his previous tutor, but understood that the staff wanted to make sure he "caught everything." He rationalized, "You have to go back in order to go forward." Roddy Rod also echoed the same truth in expressing his desire to be placed in a lower math class, but was constrained by school policy, which would not allow him to do so until the next semester. Raymond presented a different situation than the other men. He reached the grade level on the TABE test that indicated he should be promoted to the next class level, but was advised by his tutor not to do so:

Except: 6.6

[Transcript 1: Topic - Learning to read]

	[Part 1A: Retention]	
Raymond:	Now alright I passed the test here	stanza 1
	a couple of months ago	
	and I was going to the next grade.	
	Jane sat me down and say	stanza 2
	well she don't think that	
	I should go to that grade yet.	
	[Jane said] "You stick with me"	
	and what not.	
	I agreed with her.	stanza 3
	I say "Well I don't think I'm ready	
	to go to another grade yet	
	'cause my reading ability	
	is not where it should be at," you know.	
	So she kept me in this class	
	that I'm in now wi' her.	
	And I noticed what my reading is like today.	stanza 4
	I read two pages.	
	I felt so proud of myself	
	and what not.	

I wanted to go to the bathroom
and let a tear out and what not
and thank God.

The tutor's response diverged from the norm and so made the story worth telling. Thus, Raymond oriented us to the story by establishing his academic achievement and expected result of going to the next grade (stanza 1). He did not present the tutor's reason for advising him to stay at the current grade level, but agreed with her because he thought his reading level "was not where it should be" (stanzas 2 & 3). Raymond presented himself as an agentive person who made decisions about his literacy development, unlike early schooling and a prior adult education program in which he was promoted without appropriate skills. He affirmed the wisdom of his decision in light of the progress he made using emotive expressions such as pride, tears, and thankfulness that conveyed the depth of meaning of his achievement (stanza 4).

His tutor's approach was unconventional, especially in the age of accountability where programs are pressured to demonstrate outcomes and move students through the system (Sparks & Peterson, 2000). Retention encouraged Raymond because of his increased reading proficiency. On noting his progress, Raymond asked rhetorically, "Why would I leave this school and to go somewhere else when I am learning?" Instead of incidents of shame and deficiency, as in early schooling, he was accruing experiences that fostered increased proficiency and pride.

Peer tutoring

Four of the men drew upon peer tutoring as examples of academic progress. The stories they told placed them in positions of sharing knowledge, as demonstrated by Junior's story, (Excerpt 6.6). Both Raymond and Ice perceived peer tutoring as an opportunity to "give back" by sharing what they had learned with others, while affirming what they knew. Raymond tutored his classmates in math and Ice tutored the new students coming into his class. The upcoming excerpt is the continuing story of Ice's determination to learn to read and how sharing his knowledge with others encouraged him:

Except 6:7

[Transcript 1: Topic – Pursuing his desire to learn to read]

Interviewer: …Okay so that's why you said when you were grown you kept trying and ended up here, so like-

                           [Part 2: The current program]
                           [Subtopic: Liking the program]
Ice: (?) something kept me from coming here.   stanza 1
                           I said, "No, I'm giving this a shot."
                           It's like the best place I ever had.
                           I like the way they teach.

                           [Subtopic: Being close to students]
                           Even though some of the people   stanza 2
                           from my class moved on
                           I'm close to some of them
                           that are still there.

                           [Subtopic: Teaching others]
                           I'm close to the new people that come in   stanza 3
                           and don't even know their ABC's
                           and I know something to teach them.
                           So I feel good about myself
                           that I can teach them something.

As stated in the first stanza Ice mentioned a few times throughout the interviews that he was determined to overcome the obstacles that hindered his enrollment in the current program. He repeatedly expressed his appreciation for the teaching approach he found there. In part 1 of this narrative, Ice recalled with apparent frustration that the teachers from a previous program told him they could not help him because his reading level was too low. It can be inferred, then, that his exuberance about the program as "the best place I ever had" was anchored in his comparison to the previous experiences.

Ice constructed the second and third stanzas to communicate his sense of community and to position himself academically. The use of the adverb "even though" suggested that the relationships Ice's lost because classmates were promoted was somewhat eased by his closeness to remaining and new students. He had not progressed enough to advance with his classmates, but

he knew enough to teach those who knew less than he did. Peer tutoring was a resource he used to

strengthen his literate identity ("I feel good about myself") and help others along the way. The

men's awareness of their academic progress in addition to other motivational factors fortified

their confidence in their ability to achieve their goals.

Other motivational factors

Peers, family and friends, and religious beliefs were most often cited by the men as

additional sources of encouragement. Four of the five men noted that other students' progress

persuaded them to believe they could do the same. For example, Roddy Rod said of Raymond,

"Wow, if this guy can come this far I might as well go ahead and do it and do what I got to do."

The men also spoke of family and friends who motivated them by example and encouraging

words. Raymond shared that his older brother Willy taught him by example that doing homework

was necessary for academic success. Mr. E repeatedly drew upon his "circle of support" (e.g.,

mother, pastor, friends, and program staff) as a resource for fostering a competent literate

identity. And for Roddy Rod, the prospect of the graduation ceremony as public recognition of

his accomplishment was a key motivation.

The men also used their Christian faith as a motivational and counteractive force against

discouragements and the construction of deficit literate identities. They credited God with

sustaining them through difficult times and their awareness of God's continued support as a factor

in their continued presence and successful completion of the program. For example, Raymond

used his Christian faith to counteract the assignment of a learning-disabled identity:

Excerpt 6.8

> [Transcript 1: Topic – Missing his reading ability]
> [Part C: Learning disability]
>
>   [Subtopic: Told he has a reading disability]
> Raymond: Right now they say   stanza 1
>   I have a reading disability.
>   I'm not going to learn.

[Subtopic: Choosing to persist]
But I'm not going to stop.   stanza 2
I'm not going to stop
just because *you* say I'm not.
God tells me something different, you understand?
I'm going to go by God's word
and not your word.

[Subtopic: Evidence of reading achievement]
So I see little things I can read.   stanza 3
Like little words I can read, you know.
So if I could read that there,
it'd get better.
Just take my time, you understand?
Rome wasn't built in one day.
Rome was not built in one day.

[Subtopic: Faith that God will help him]
I know my Father [God] said   stanza 4
"Whatever I ask for in Jesus' name,
I shall receive it in the name of Jesus Christ."
But it's not going to be on my time.
It's going to be in God's time.
And He's using Jane and them to do that, you know.

[Subtopic: Expectation that his efforts will be rewarded]
And I'm a good student.   stanza 5
I have patience.
I could wait, you know.
Something's going to come out of it.
So you know that's it.

Raymond made the argument that he was able to learn despite others' claims to his defective cognitive abilities. He used the first stanza to state the claim that he refuted in the remaining stanzas. Raymond did not identify who specifically diagnosed him as unable to learn, but he adamantly rejected it by declaring repeatedly that he was not going to stop learning to read. He chose to align with a contradicting authority: "I'm going to go by God's word and not your word" (stanza 2). In other words, he saw himself through God's eyes which positioned him to refute contradictory claims. Raymond enacted confronting those who had labeled him speaking

directly to them as he rejected their diagnosis. In this instance, "you" was not general but referred to the person(s) being addressed.

In the third stanza, he offered evidence of the "little words" he knew as indicators of greater achievement ("it'd get better") with time ("Rome was not built in a day"). Raymond provided additional evidence through the explication of "God's word" and its application to his life by referencing the scripture verse, John 16:24, which states that his prayers will be answered (stanza 4). He established a relationship with God as his father ("My father") implying the provision of what he needed, in this case, his tutor, Jane. In the final stanza, he concluded his case by identifying ownership of the characteristics necessary for success: he was a "good student" and he had "patience," hence his expectation that "something's going to come out of it." Raymond's Christian identity was central to his determination to continue in the program because it negated his reading-disabled identity and gave him hope of future success. The use of his religious faith to overcome struggles reflects the historical reliance of African Americans on spirituality as a source of strength (Chatters, Taylor, Jackson, & Lincoln, 2008; E. Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Teti et al., 2012).

Personal Commitment

Despite the many sources the men identified as influential to their academic success, they were cognizant of the pertinent contribution of their commitment. A basic indicator the men used as an example of taking ownership of their learning was doing the homework assignments. The five men spoke of doing their homework, some struggling more than others. For example, Roddy Rod and Mr. E spoke more often of struggling to comprehend subject matter and finding time to do homework. In contrast, Junior, Raymond, and Ice presented proficient learner identities. As shown earlier, Junior used a homework event to show that "effort" was required to understand class material.

In addition, as part of Raymond's nightly routine he looked up meanings of words in the dictionary, learned the definitions, and wrote them down to be quizzed by his tutor the next day. He explained, "She [Jane] push me and I have to push myself." Consequently, he also set aside 6:00-7:30 to study each night and bought children's books to read at the suggestion of his tutor. In fact, during our first interview he announced he was going to buy a book to take home so he could practice reading and also study for his upcoming test.

Ice explained that he followed similar advice from his tutor:

Excerpt 6.9

        [Transcript 1: Topic – Orientation]
        [Part 2: The lecture]

        [Subtopic: Don't be ashamed of learning]
Ice: Paula gave me a little lecture   stanza 1
        which I listen to when she said-
        saying that, "you here to learn.
        It's nothing to be ashamed of.
        They're people older than you
        that are trying to come back to school.

        [Subtopic: push yourself]
        And whatever book they give you   stanza 2
        once you take it home
        if you got free time
        always push yourself to do more."

        [Subtopic: Doing extra work]
        I took that into consideration   stanza 3
        Me and another guy in my class named Patrick,
        me and him,
        we ahead of the class.
        We take the book home
        and we do extra work.
        So they on page 12
        and I'm on page 19.

Ice noted in the first and third stanzas that he listened to his tutor's advice not to be ashamed of learning and to "push" himself to go beyond the assigned homework. As a result, he and a classmate were "ahead of the class" because they did "extra work" (stanza 3). Raymond also showed that he was more advanced than his classmates.

The men saw themselves as valued, capable individuals through their interactions with the program staff and tutors. Their narratives demonstrated that a caring environment, teaching strategies that provided a balance between pushing students and taking time to make sure they understood the material, and evidence of academic progress provided positive experiences that bolstered their literate identities, and with other motivational sources, strengthened their commitment to successfully complete the program. However, the men also told stories of discouraging situations that complicated or in some way hindered their academic progress.

Discouraging factors

The men related experiences from prior and current adult education programs. Hindrances to academic progress included program structure, subject difficulties, and interruptions in school time. While program structure was conducive to academic progress, in some instances, the men thought it was also a hindrance due to program restrictions, limited session schedules, and inappropriate class assignments. Subject difficulties were based in the ongoing struggle to comprehend class material, which fostered low self-efficacy and concerns for future success. Stories of school time interruptions included health problems, work schedule, and program closure. Despite these difficulties the men vocalized and demonstrated a determination to reach their goals. All the participants mentioned the closing of the center as the most prominent discouragement at the time. Roddy Rod cited more factors than other participants, projecting a strong identity of the struggling adult learner.

Program structure and restrictions

Limited session schedule

Three participants complained about the limited class sessions. They preferred classes five days per week instead of two days per week. At the time of the study, the program had recently experienced administrative and programmatic changes that reduced class time from three sessions per day three times per week to two sessions per day two days per week. The men's

main concern was the length of time between class sessions. Mr. E thought that more classes kept

his mind "expanded" and "open" to the subject matter because of the frequent interaction between

homework preparation and class activities. Raymond feared that he would not retain what he

learned, reflecting his concern about the learning disability he described as a "memory block."

In accordance with the others, Roddy Rod thought two sessions a week was not

beneficial for him. It did not facilitate learning because it was "just too crammed" with trying to

put a year's worth of course work into less than six months. He explained that more days allowed

more opportunities to obtain information and answers to questions. In addition he was concerned

that during the wait period between classes he might forget or lose interest in a question he had.

Inappropriate class assignment

As in early schooling experiences, Roddy Rod and Raymond encountered inappropriate

class assignments. For Roddy Rod, this occurred in his first and current adult education programs.

In the current program, he portrayed the adult learner who had progressed academically but was

overwhelmed by his classes. Although he desired to be placed in a lower math class, program

policy required that he remain in his current class until the following semester. In this excerpt

Roddy Rod described his response to feeling overwhelmed. The question was initiated by a

conversation about his academic struggles following a participant observation (May 6, 2010,

fieldnotes):

Excerpt 6.10

> [Transcript 2: Topic – Overwhelmed by classes]
> Interviewer: Alright. I want to-our conversation on Monday. I just want to go back to that a little bit, 'cause you were talking about the challenge with math, and that sometimes it's really becoming a little too much, and then with that pressure you wanted something that's a little more suited in terms of moving backwards to another class for math.
> > [Subtopic: When forward is overbearing]
> Roddy Rod: Right.   stanza 1
> > Yeah.
> > I-I just say
> > it's-it's definitely better
> > to sometimes go backwards

rather than to go forward.
Because forward sometimes becomes overbearing [too difficult]
and if you, you know-if you over-

[Subtopic: Letting everything go]
I'm the sort of person if it's too overbearing   stanza 2
I find I tend to leave everything.
I tend to like throw my hands up
and let everything go by.

[Subtopic: Preferring to go backwards]
So I'd rather than throw up my hands   stanza 3
and let everything go by,
I would rather go backwards
to some degree you know
as far as class wise.
If it means just being above
an intermediate group you know
then that's fine, you know, for me.

[Subtopic: Everything is not hard]
I mean then it will make other things   stanza 4
that are more even level for me
then, you know, I could kind of like-
the juggling is not so hard.
It's kind of like this is easy
and that's the hard part.

Now it's not-   stanza 5
everything's not hard.
I'm not trying to juggle everything.
And then, you know, so- [p]
it just seems to work out for me anyway.

In this presentation of self (Goffman, 1959), Roddy Rod started with the resolution to his problem and followed with a rationale based in his disposition. He declared it was sometimes better to go backward than to go forward because going forward could become overwhelming, and his response to being overwhelmed was to disengage (stanzas 1 and 2). His use of the term "overbearing" did not apply to personality types as is the standard meaning, but to the sense of feeling overwhelmed. Disengagement is central here. He described it in three ways: "leave everything," "throw my hands up," and "let everything go by," invoking themes of surrender and giving up (stanza 1).

However, Roddy Rod preferred being placed in a lower class to disengaging from the program (stanza 3). But in stating his preference, he also implied the power to carry it out did not lie with him. He saw managing his class work as a "juggling" act that was too difficult to maintain. Therefore, being moved to a lower class would "work out" for him (stanza 4). During the class observation (May 6, 2010) preceding the initial conversation, the substitute tutor told Roddy Rod that his absences contributed to his falling behind in class, but it may also have been a reflection of his frustration, and an indication that he was disengaging from the class. In fact, he described his brain as always "fried to a frizzle" at the end of class. Roddy Rod encouraged himself with the thought that he just needed to get through the semester because "it's going to get better."

Roddy Rod's first adult education program presented a different but nonetheless frustrating situation. He was assigned to the wrong class for six months before it was discovered:

Excerpt 6.11

> [Transcript 2: Topic – First adult education program]
> Interviewer: Wait so this GED program you were in, you were in the wrong class?
>
> Roddy Rod: Yeah, they had me in the wrong class.
> They told me at the *end*.
> They say well-
> when it was time to take the test.
> They said, "Oh, Mr. Rod you was in the wrong class."
> "*Are you kidding me?*
> *For real?*
> Just let me take a test for what I was in.
> What, you know, if-if I advanced in these things."
> They said, "No, we can't even let you take it."
> I'm like [smacked his hands together to indicate immediacy of departure] out of there.

Here Roddy Rod was the student who had been wrongfully treated by the system. His vocal emphasis on "end" draws our attention to the time he was notified. He did not have the option to switch to the appropriate class because it was exam time. His consternation at the news was followed by a plea to take the test to see how much he had "advanced," but it was denied.

While he could not recall the specifics of the test or the reasons the staff gave, it was a poignant experience that still evoked emotion in the telling. On the two occasions he referenced this incident, he expressed difficulty in understanding the staff's reasons for not letting him take the test.

Roddy Rod constructed the story to show why he did not complete the program, highlighting the two situations that informed his decision. He walked away thinking it was "such a big waste" of time because he had no evidence that the six months in the program were beneficial to him. Roddy Rod's comments suggested that he may have used a cost-benefit analysis in choosing to drop out of that program. A student who finds that the cost of program attendance (e.g., time and energy) outweighs its benefits (skill development) may choose to discontinue the program (Beder, 1991). In both stories, Roddy Rod presented himself as an adult learner with limited power to acquire his objective.

A third form of inappropriate class assignment was Raymond's prior experience in a mandated prison adult education program. The teacher promoted him from literacy level one to literacy level two without acquisition of needed skills. He explained that although he could answer the questions she read from the book, he could not read the book himself despite attending classes five days a week for over a year. Raymond described this experience as "another push off" he "had to go through." He queried, "I mean, why would you put me somewhere that is more advanced than I am, you know? You're just throwing me out there and that's the way I felt. That's the way I felt." The telling of this event evoked feelings of rejection reminiscent of his early schooling experiences of social promotion. In assessing the benefit of his attendance in the program, he observed, "Nothing came of it." Noticeably, a year of attending classes five days per week that were too advanced had little effect, whereas attending a class at the appropriate level two days per week led to academic achievement (Excerpt 6.6).

Program restrictions

In this final example of how program policy can foster discouragement, Ice recalled his

experience at a prior program which rejected him because of his low literacy skills. He had

attended the program before, but dropped out because of headaches. When he returned, a new

program had taken its place and did not provide services to low level literacy learners:

Excerpt 6.12

> [Transcript 1: Turned down by adult education program]
> > [Subtopic: Turned down due to reading level]
> > I tried again at Interboro.   stanza 1
> > I was told at the third floor
> > that I wasn't at their reading level.
> > They told me
> > I was at the third or fourth grade reading level.
> > So they turned me down.
> >
> > Something kept me from coming here [current program].
> >
> > [Subtopic: Not good enough]
> > And I kept getting turned down   stanza 2
> > when I was trying so hard
> > to learn how to read.
> > I kept being turned down.
> > You're not good enough.
> > We're not able to help you.
> >
> > [Subtopic: Teacher's responsibility]
> > You're supposed to be a teacher.   stanza 3
> > You're supposed to help me wherever I'm at.
> > You try.
> > They had me read like two or three sentences
> > and told me they can't help me.
> >
> > [Subtopic: Determined to read]
> > Something kept me from coming here [current program].   stanza 4
> > but I was determined to read
> > so I kept trying to follow it.

This is a narrative of rejection and frustration as shown in repetition of phrases like "I

kept being turned down" and "they can't help me." Ice seemed unaware that adult programs vary

in their target populations. He understood their refusal to enroll him in the program because of

low literacy proficiency (stanza 1) as an indication that they did not consider him "good enough" and beyond their help (stanza 2). He also interpreted their rejection as obstructing his efforts to learn how to read. His use of the past continuous passive tense ("I kept getting turned down" and "I kept being turned down") suggested that he contacted the program on a number of occasions. Ice's frustration was also due to the unmet expectation that teachers were "supposed" to help him learn regardless of his literacy level, or at the very least "try" to help him (stanza 3).

Twice he referred to obstacles blocking his participation in the current program. Nevertheless, Ice averred his determination to read and his active pursuit of it. In the third interview he stated that the rejections "discouraged me not to try no more, and I say no, no, I'm not going to let it keep me down no more neither," leading to his participation in the current program. This narrative provided additional insight into Ice's appreciation of the current program where he received the help he needed and made progress. Roddy Rod's, Raymond's, and Ice's narratives showed how unmet student needs can lead to frustration, limited academic progress, and eventual disengagement. They also raise questions about how the discourse of accountability may conflict with learner needs, particularly in the area of teaching to the test and the availability of resources for low literacy learners, as ABEL programs seek to fulfill funder requirements for demonstrated outcomes (Sparks & Peterson, 2000) .

Subject matter difficulties

Mr. E and Roddy Rod cited the ongoing struggle to comprehend math as a source of discouragement. Roddy Rod described math as "very hard" and being at "a loss sometimes" about how to solve the problems. Mr. E stated that listening to students' conversations about GED test content increased his fear that he was incapable of passing the exam. He said focusing on their comments "will make me nervous and make me want to drop out, and that's what I'm trying not to do. I'm trying to stay on the high road not the wrong road." Thus, he addressed his concern by refocusing on the present and encouraging himself accordingly: "So I always tell

myself I can do all things." Like Raymond, Mr. E used scripture (Philippians 4:13a)[14] to help counteract his fear of inadequacy.

Roddy Rod and Mr. E also expressed a need for one-on-one support, which Mr. E seemed to receive or utilize more than Roddy Rod. For example, Mr. E stated that in seeking help from others in the program he was able to comprehend the material. Conversely, Roddy Rod stated he did not want to impose on the tutors beyond their standard time because they were volunteers; yet, he voiced a need to regularly spend more time with them to get "more of an accomplishment" out of his efforts. He acknowledged that this approach was not the most advantageous in helping him to move forward: "I kind of let things go by. And, you know, I suffer a lot of the times for it." Consequently, Roddy Rod settled into an expectation of struggle embedded in the belief that he would eventually achieve his goal: "I'm going to struggle but I'm going to make it." In fact, his need for additional help informed his perception of good teachers, whom he described as staying behind to give students individual attention.

Roddy Rod also linked his academic challenges to teaching styles. He had a number of tutors during his two years in the program, and considered teacher changes a disadvantage because he learned better with some teachers than with others. Junior also noted that teaching styles made a difference in his comprehension, although he did not describe it as a program discouragement. Their experiences hinted at the common concern about teacher turnover in ABEL programs (Belzer, Drennon, & Smith, 2001) and its impact on student progress. Especially for weak areas, Roddy Rod stated, "I just find some of them don't suit my [p] purpose sometimes." The teachers were not able to provide the additional help he needed, but he was cognizant of the limitations they faced. Roddy Rod observed that while some teachers do stop and go slower, that's not always possible because they have "like six months to a year to get you out

---

[14] Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (New King James version).

of here. So, you know, they have to kind of keep up, you know. If more of the group is advanced then they have to push right along just like a regular school." Similar to early schooling experiences, program policy was not geared towards the needs of struggling students.

Roddy Rod also linked his academic difficulties to class structure. Both he and Mr. E preferred to work in small groups as opposed to individually in one large group session. In fact, all the participants appreciated the opportunity to work with other students. Roddy Rod thought pairing a strong student with a weak student would be beneficial; however, he cautioned that the benefit of peer-tutoring was subject to the teaching style of the tutor. In general, he was "hoping" he "wouldn't run out of patience" before he understood the material well enough to take the GED exam. Roddy Rod's repeated references to himself as "old" indicated that he was very aware of his age, and the limited time available to him.

In addition, Roddy Rod considered "time a challenge" because there was "not enough time to study." He said, "Anytime I get enrolled in something, it seems like there's always something that comes along and kinda jams into it." Roddy Rod was referring to "other things crowding out" study time, as well as not having a place conducive to studying. He lived in the same transition home[15] as Raymond, but described it as offering little privacy or quiet time for study. Notably, not having the time or place to study were the same obstacles Roddy Rod identified in his narratives of early schooling.

His earlier experiences fostered an underlying expectation of encountering obstacles. He observed, "They [the obstacles] kind of lie dormant in your brain. Not until you get there you say, "Oh geez, there we go again…. just hoping I guess, that it would be different, but it's not. That's

---

[15] Transition homes are also referred to as half way or three-quarter houses and are usually linked to a drug rehabilitation program. They provide lodging for parolees, recovering drug addicts, and the homeless. Though funded by city and state agencies, common concerns include minimal regulation, licensing, and housing violations (e.g., overcrowding and evictions). A parolee's freedom is contingent upon their ability to be either employed or have a place of residence. For more information on parolees and housing, see Arden (2012) and Bradley, Oliver, Richardson, and Slater (2001).

the challenge." He sought other places to study around the city, but noted that the effort

sometimes reduced his motivation to study, and often served as an escape from his home

situation. Although he perceived the accomplishment of his GED certificate as something he must

do himself, he also expressed the desire to have others around him who could encourage and

motivate him when necessary. Yet, he described himself as a "loner" who held friendships in the

program loosely and sought minimal support from his family because he did not want to be

"needy." Mr. E's and Roddy Rod's narratives show that while limited academic progress foster

discouragement, personal characteristics also influence how participants perceive and utilize

available resources. Roddy Rod's narrative, in particular, shows that teaching styles influence

student comprehension.

Interruptions in school time

Health problems

Ice, Raymond, and Mr. E dealt with medical issues that sometimes kept them away from

the classroom. Ice was on disability with a back and leg injury and had a heart attack two months

before the first interview. Mr. E had regular medical appointments and the move into his own

apartment required coordination of scheduled visits with his home attendant and staff. Following

program staff advice, he took a semester off to settle into his apartment. Besides asthma,

Raymond described the other ailments with which he struggled:

Excerpt 6.13

[Transcript 1: Topic – The place where I learned to read]
[Part 3: Commitment]

[Subtopic: Gratefulness for the program]
(p)The [name of program] really did something for me, you know. stanza 1
It turned my life around
and I'm grateful.
I'm very grateful.
That's why I try not to miss no days.

[Subtopic: Health problems]

See I'm a diabetic   stanza 2
and I have high blood pressure and high cholesterol
and I just found out that my kidneys was swollen.
So that's why I missed a couple of days.

[Subtopic: Wanting to be in class]
But *even then* I was coming here   stanza 3
and they'd send me back home.
I tell them no I want to be here.
I want to be here
'cause this is where *I say*
I was born again at.
See I learned here
and I want to be around people
that pray for me all of the time.
It's [*sound of frustration*] they still sent me home.

In the midst of talking about his academic progress Raymond inserted this segment,

which positioned his health issues as obstacles to the goal of learning to read proficiently. He

introduced the topic by explaining why he was grateful to the program, thereby establishing why

he was committed to the program. It turned his "life around"; consequently he did not want to

miss the benefit of being there (stanza 1). Raymond then lists the health issues that caused him to

be absent (stanza 2). In the final stanza he affirmed his commitment by relating he attended the

program while he was ill, emphasizing his desire to attend through repetition, and providing the

reasons why he wanted to be there: academic achievement ("I learned here") and a caring

environment ("pray for me all the time").

With apparent frustration Raymond mentioned twice that the staff sent him home

obstructing his goal to be in class. His determination to be there may also have been due to the

limited class schedule and fear of losing what he had learned. Raymond's health challenges are

not unique. In a men's health crisis report sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation, poor African

American men were more likely to have diabetes and some forms of cancer than any other group

in the United States (Rich & Ro, 2002). Disproportionate representation in social categories such

as poverty, incarceration, unemployment, and discrimination undermine their health (Williams, 2003).

Work schedule

Work schedules are commonly referenced barriers to consistent attendance; however, Junior was the only participant who mentioned work as a current cause of inconsistent attendance. Roddy Rod juxtaposed family responsibilities with advancing himself, noting that academic learning should have been a "bigger factor," but was not due to family responsibilities. No longer encumbered by family responsibilities, he focused on self-development. He was now close to retirement age, while Junior was 38 and the other men were on disability. This suggests that life stage shapes the stories that are told and their significance within the overall narrative. For Junior, attending class was contingent upon his work schedule. He had been attending the program inconsistently since 2000, juggling work and class time. At the time of the interview, he was unemployed and had been attending the program consistently for about 19 months.

Excerpt 6.14

> [Transcript 1: Topic – Length of time in the program]
> Interviewer: Okay so 2000 you were here [current program] and how long did you stay?
>
>
>
>   [Subtopic: Work/school conflict]
> Junior: It was-it was funny   stanza 1
>   because every GED program that I was in
>   I found myself committed to
>   but then I had to go out there and work.
>   So I really wasn't coming-
>   like working with the hours and all of that.
>
>   So it was like   stanza 2
>   if I'm going to the GED program
>   in the morning time
>   I'm working in the afternoon.
>   So now they [work] switching me
>   wherever how it goes
>   and like I couldn't make one,
>   but I had to do the other, you understand?
>   So it was like you know what-

Like for the night program.   stanza 3
I found a job at the night time
and I left the school alone.
I found a job, left school, found a job.

[Subtopic: Back in the program]
Okay now cool,   stanza 4
now I'm not working.
So now I find myself
into the GED program, you understand?
So that was it.

[Subtopic: Retaking the test]
Yea, I took the test years ago.   stanza 5
I took the test years ago
and the only thing is
I failed it by three points.
Two on the math and one on the writing.
So it's like I took it before.
When it came to the year 2000
all of the test scores had to be wiped out.
So-

Again Junior appeared to be responding to an unspoken question of why he had not

acquired his GED yet. He asserted the identity of the committed student by declaring that he was

"committed" to "every GED program" in which he enrolled (stanza 1). By juxtaposing his

program commitment to his work schedule, he explained the contradiction of inconsistent

attendance while establishing the primacy of work. In the second and third stanzas he further

explicated how his attendance choices were driven by his work schedule. Junior showed that

power relations ("so now they switching me") dictated, or at least, constrained the decisions he

made about literacy development. Accordingly, Junior showed in the fourth stanza that

unemployment gave him the freedom to return to the GED program. He used the last stanza to

show that he was very close to acquiring the GED certificate, but forces beyond his control

delayed his success. Junior stated that he had failed the test by "three points," but would now

have to retake the entire exam because his old scores were no longer valid. The revision of the

GED test in 2002 lengthened program time for some adult learners because they were required to retake the test according to new specifications (Tyler, 2005)

Program closure

As shown throughout the previous sections on encouraging factors, the participants greatly appreciated the program and the tutors, so it was not surprising that they were upset by its sudden closing. Prior to notification of the closing, Ice and Junior could not recall any discouraging experiences. Junior stated that he was "kind of upset because the tutors was doing such a good job." Ice noted, "I'm going to miss the teaching 'cause I like the way Paula- 'cause she always goes back to reinforce what you learn." He acknowledged that he would be anxious starting a new program, but he was most upset because he had gotten "close" to two other students. He hoped when he found a new program they would be able to join him. Likewise Mr. E also missed the sense of community. He said, "I'm heart-broken because that's like family to me. Because you know any time you were not in a mood to speak you always got this friendly smile, or "Hi, how are you doing?" The men's statements corroborate research indicating that supportive relationships are an important outcome for ABEL participants (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009).

Roddy Rod and Raymond expressed dismay at the closing of the center for similar reasons, but they also saw it as a pattern in their lives of obstructions to their academic development. Roddy Rod described the closing of the center as "the most discouraging thing right now," making it easy for him to give up since he had "tried it three times and it didn't work." He added, "Now I can say to myself, "Let it go. [laugh] It's not going to happen." I can convince myself, talk myself into saying, "you don't need to go back. Don't worry about it." As Roddy Rod stated earlier, his past literacy experiences birthed in him the expectation that something would obstruct his goals. In addition, the closure removed a primary motivation for staying in the program. He repeatedly mentioned his aspiration of walking across the stage at the graduation

ceremony in public recognition of his achievement. In reflecting on the closure, Roddy Rod

related it to the first GED program, indicating a feeling of betrayal by the system.

Likewise, Raymond connected the past to the present in showing a pattern of obstruction

to his desire to learn to read:

Excerpt 6.15

[Transcript 2: Topic – Blocked Progress]

[Sub-topic: Demoralized by schools]
Every school that I go to   stanza 1
they shoot me down.
I don't learn.
But when I start learning a couple of words,
something happens to the school.

[Sub-topic: ABEL program like past schools]
Like this school here,   stanza 2
the ***[ABEL program].
Like I was telling Ms. Jane.
I say, "It's just not fair.
I mean every school I went to,
it's the same thing.
The same thing.
She say, "What you mean the same thing?"
They shut down
or I can't go back to that school or whatever.
I just learn a couple of words
and I'm feeling good about myself
and then the school shuts down.
I'm right back to the point one.

[Sub-topic: That's reality]
That is the way it is.   stanza 3
That's the way it is.
It hurts.
I can't let it get me down.

In this narrative of learning experiences, the closing of the center ignited recollections of

past similar experiences that demonstrated a configuration of blocked aspirations. He used the

continuous present clause, "every school I go to," to show a pattern of discouragement, limited

achievement, and blocked progress (stanza 1). The first stanza served as the abstract for the

remaining narrative. He linked his early schooling experiences to the closing of the program with the comparative phrase "like this school here "(stanza 2). Raymond turned the narrative into a moral tale of injustice, stating "it's not fair" and reiterating the circumstances of the first stanza. The last four lines of the second stanza show why Raymond continued to equate literacy acquisition and development with pain. He associated academic achievement with increased self-esteem ("I'm feeling good about myself"), both of which were lost with the closing of the center because he was "right back to point one."

In his evaluation (stanza 3) he settled into the acceptance of painful reality with the resolve not to be discouraged. Accordingly, Raymond stated that he asked his parole officer to look for another location because he was not going to give up: "I'm not going to stop. I cannot stop. I got to keep pushing on. I got to. I was weak then and I'm strong now." In distinguishing the past from the present, he declared his determination from a position of strength.

Most of the challenges the men faced dealt with structural issues such as program policy and work schedules. The men's narratives showed how power relations hampered their aspirations as they struggled to move beyond the expectations of daily lived experiences. In addition, poor health and academic struggles complicated the men's achievement of their goals. The men persisted in the program and would most likely have continued had it not closed. Except for Ice, who had been enrolled for five months, the other participants were there for a minimum of 18 months unlike the 3 month average of adult education programs. This attests to the commitment of the participants despite the challenges they faced. In a follow-up call in March 2011, only Junior and Ice were attending ABEL programs. In locating a new program, they will once again need to acclimate to a new environment, adjust to different teaching styles, and forge new relationships with teachers and peers.

Chapter summary

  In general, the participants' adult literacy narratives reflected positive learning experiences. First, the frequent references to an environment of care fostered by the staff and the tutors indicate that this component of the program was significant to the men and their willingness to continue within the program. Second, student-teacher interactions, such as giving regular encouragement, taking time to make sure students understand class material, and "pushing" the men to experience new levels of achievement strengthened the men's literate identities and fortified their belief in their ability to succeed. Inspiration from those who had advanced or acquired their GED, as well as encouragements from family and friends were motivational factors; however, the men were very cognizant that their success also required personal commitment.

  Aligning with extant research on the importance of spirituality among African American men (W. P. Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Isaac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001; Jackson II, 2006; Watson, 2006), the participants used their religious beliefs as a coping and counteractive resource against feelings of inadequacy and the assignment of a deficit literate identity. Certainly, the religious underpinnings of the program supported the religious script the men used to make sense of their experiences and to see themselves from a position of strength.

  Some men struggled more than others. Aside from the closing of the center, limited access to the program, health problems, and to a lesser degree academic struggles and work schedule were noted as discouragements in the current program. As the men drew upon past experiences, they juxtaposed academic progress with structural barriers that exposed the influence of power relationships in their literacy development. In addition, their narratives conveyed that life stage contributed to situations and topics that took precedence, such as the varying effect of their work schedules on program participation. Furthermore, factors inside and outside of the ABEL program, both those within and beyond their control, affected how they perceived and

engaged with the program. Overall, the supportive aspects of the program outweighed the negative and provided a welcoming environment that recognized the daily lived experiences of the participants. In other words, their experiences demonstrated the importance of a supportive environment in promoting academic progress and capable literate identities.

Chapter 7

Conclusion and Implications

The literacy experiences of the African American men in this study influenced their perceptions of and engagement with ABEL programs. Their schooling and adult experiences informed their reasons for enrolling and staying with the current program. The men's narratives show that 1) their lifetime experiences with literacy included overcoming traumatic experiences, limited support and resources for literacy development, and resilience in pursuing their literacy goals; 2) societal expectations and the deficit construction of their identities informed the men's aspirations for enrolling; 3) the men's literacy experiences influenced their perception and enactment of other identities such as father and Christian; and 4) positive experiences in the ABEL program fostered nascent proficient literate identities that encouraged the men to believe in their ability to succeed despite the obstacles they encountered.

The men's experiences indicate that a social practices view of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1984) and a constructivist view of identity (Gee, 2000; 2000-2001) are crucial theoretical frameworks for expanding our understanding of African American men's literacy experiences because they capture the institutional, cultural, and societal factors that impinge upon literacy acquisition and development. In addition, the findings suggest that an awareness of learners' academic biographies can help adult educators provide meaningful learning opportunities.

The influence of the social context

The significance of the social context in the choices the men made about literacy was evident in the structure and content of their narratives. First, the men framed their literacy experiences within a social context. Thus, they viewed academic literacy and other areas of their

lives as interconnected. Second, the contrast between the men's early schooling and adult learning experiences demonstrate that the learning environment contributed to either academic failure or success.

Five of the six men pointed to the hindering effects of poverty in early schooling (e.g., early caregiving, parental mobility, gang violence, limited economic resources) and the impact of peer and student-teacher relationships. The men used a variety of negative descriptors to capture their early schooling experiences, juxtaposing physical and psycho-social well-being with academic progress. In the face of low academic achievement, bullying, and adversarial student-teacher relationships, they adopted protective strategies (e.g., shutting down and leaving school) and claimed identities (e.g., class clown, group leader, and fly dresser) based upon their perceived available options.

This finding offers an alternate perspective to theories of African American male students' resistance to learning, and aligns with Jackson II's (2006) theory that the productive and counterproductive behaviors of African American males are responses to threats to their identities. Noticeably, five of the men identified bullying as a primary or contributing factor in their decision to leave school early, and four participants displayed deficit literate identities that they carried into the ABEL program.

Porter, Comings, and Cuban (2005) contradict this finding, showing that early schooling experiences did not affect participation, and suggesting that those who were most negatively affected by early schooling experiences were non-participants. Quigley's (1997) study of non-participants in Pittsburgh supports that hypothesis; however, studies by Rogers (2004), Belzer (2004), and Schwartz (2010) align with the current study in showing that adult learners carry the experiences and deficit literate identities formed in early schooling into adult education. The proficiency level at which students leave school may inform their self-perception as adult learners. Unlike the other participants, Mike, who left school in the eleventh grade, described

himself as a "good student," and rejected the deficit literate identity ascribed to adults without a high school or GED diploma.

In contrast to early schooling, the men conveyed very positive learning experiences in the ABEL program, although they continued to face personal, institutional, and social challenges. Their frequent mention of the ABEL program's "caring" environment suggests its importance to them. They also conveyed nascent proficient literate identities and increased self-esteem, citing teachers' encouragement, high expectations, "taking time" with them, and concern for their general well-being as contributors to their progress in the program. In addition, the men expressed the belief they could reach their goals and the desire to stay with the program.

The prominence of student-teacher relationships in the men's narratives suggest these relationships shaped the men's understanding of their academic performance in early schooling and the ABEL program, and the decisions they made about literacy development. They show that teachers have a central role in setting the classroom environment to make it comfortable for students to learn. These findings indicate that the learning environment can either promote or inhibit learning. They align with research showing that an alienating and unsafe school environment, instead of a dislike for learning, contributes to the high rate of minority student early school departure (Fine, 1991; Schwartz, 2010; Tuck, 2009).

Positive student-teacher relationships foster a sense of competence and security, good student relationships, and academic gains, while conflictual relationships detract from such outcomes (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Croninger & Lee (2001) found that supportive student-teacher relationships reduced dropout by 50%, had a positive effect on peer-peer relationships, and were especially beneficial for socially disadvantaged students. Also, Cassidy and Bates' (2005) found that the implementation of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2003) at an alternative high school was effective in retaining students deemed at risk for drop out by other high schools.

Although these studies are based on high school samples, they illuminate the participants' appreciation of the ABEL program and support the study findings. The stark contrast between the men's early schooling and adult learning experiences was based in their relationships with teachers and to a lesser degree with peers. The men valued the ABEL program because it was a learning space in which they felt "comfortable" and "cared for." They repeatedly spoke of this aspect, citing follow-up calls when absent, constant encouragement, and prayer for immediate needs as evidence of teacher care. Nodding (1984) notes that for an ethic of care to be effective, the teacher must demonstrate care and the receiver must recognize they are being cared for and respond to it. This ethic of care is helpful in elucidating Isaac, Guy, and Valentine's (2001) finding that African Americans more than other groups identified support for coping with personal challenges as a reason for attending church-based adult education programs.

Because inner-city African American males have encountered and are encountering exclusion and alienation in early schooling and society, the findings suggest that adult educators should establish a "comfortable" environment that fosters a sense of community and supports their identities as African American men. A student-teacher relationship anchored in an ethic of care promotes trust and co-operative learning (Noddings, 2003; Schwartz, 2010). This calls for a critically reflective practice (Brookfield, 2005) that questions adult educators' perceptions of and interactions with African American male students that might be influenced by widely circulating negative models of African American male identities (Wortham, 2006). In addition, to provide resources that can help African American men counteract the negative effects of schooling (Case & Hunter, 2012; Rogers & Fuller, 2007; Schwartz, 2010) , adult educators not only need to be aware of their daily lived experiences, but also their academic biographies. Considering the high percentage of African American males that leaves school early, future research might examine the ways in which ABEL programs can mitigate the negative effects of early schooling.

Identity management through ABEL program participation

The men's aspirations for program participation were influenced by societal expectations. Their literacy experiences conveyed to them that society perceived low-literate learners and those lacking high school accreditation as deficient and ineligible for certain social goods such as gainful employment, promotions, and respect. Although leaving school early addressed immediate needs of psycho-social and physical safety, the men's interactions with society as adults positioned literacy acquisition and development as immediate needs. Brandt (2009) observed that "economic changes create immediate needs for students to cope with gradual and sometimes dramatic alterations in systems of access and reward for literacy learning that operate beyond the classroom" (p. 64). A historical view shows that literacy, or the lack thereof, has been intricately involved in the construction of social identities (Bartlett, 2007; Brandt, 2001; Collins & Blot, 2003; Lewis, 1953; Mahiri & Godley, 1998; Wortham, 2006), and as a social practice it negatively marks those who fail to meet the expected level of competency. The participants either internalized the literacy discourse, resulting in shame because of their low-literacy skills or pride because of increased skills and the expected acquisition of the GED certificate.

In accordance with research on motivations for enrolling in ABEL programs (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Bingman & Ebert, 2000; P. Cross, 1981), the men cited employment, family responsibilities, personal development or achievement, and community or religious involvement. However, life stage and age also played a role in their decisions. For example, Roddy Rod, the oldest participant (64), listed personal achievement as his primary reason, in contrast to his first adult education program, where he enrolled because of his responsibilities as a young father and husband. The men averred the necessity of developing literacy proficiency and obtaining the GED credential due to their experiences of exclusion from better paying, stable jobs with benefits and promotions, and their awareness of the increasing value of literacy. In sum, the GED accreditation afforded the identity of being "qualified."

Yet they also told stories that problematized the widely held assumption that GED accreditation leads to better employment. Two of the participants showed that identities mediate access to employment. Aligning with studies by Pager (2008), Royster (2003), and Kirschenman (1991), the men's stories demonstrated that ex-felon identities drastically reduce chances of employment due to employer bias. In addition, state laws have reduced the type of jobs accessible to applicants with criminal records. Although not specifically mentioned by the participants in this study, race continues to be a barrier for Black men due to negative stereotyping as unintelligent, lazy, and criminally inclined (Bertrand, 2003; Pager, 2008, Wilson, 1996). The exclusion of certain types of persons is legitimized in the literacy practice of completing applications in which, as one participant noted, they always ask if you have a criminal record and high school or GED diploma. This continually reminds them of their ascription as deficient individuals.

Motivations for employment were intricately connected to their gendered identities and informed by life stage responsibilities. Although the five men who cited familial responsibilities connected literacy development to better employment options, two of them also connected literacy development to fulfilling educational responsibilities to their grandchildren, a seldom noted dimension of provision. The research on African American men shows that the good provider role is a central component of masculine identity but its conception and enactment are shaped by class, race, and age (Casenave, 1984; Diemer, 2002; W. P. Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Hunter & Davis, 1994). Low-income Black men are commonly stereotyped as negligent in meeting their familial responsibilities because of restricted opportunities to provide for their families (K. Harris & Marmer, 1996); however, the findings support Roy's (2004) study that the provider role is a strong component of their conceptions of manhood and is enacted in various ways based upon their life circumstances. In addition to becoming good providers, the men sought to acquire economic and literacy independence, gain personal advancement, and become

more involved in community and religious life. These desires align with commonly mentioned categories of African American conceptions of masculinity and manhood such as provision, autonomy, responsibility, and community and religious involvement (W. P. Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Hunter & Davis, 1994; Jackson II, 2006).

The men's narratives support Brandt's (2009) contention that although adult learners take up literacy development and acquisition for their own purposes, the "economies of literacy" (p. 64) influence their reasons for enrolling. The men's low literacy skills and lack of a high school or GED diploma limited their access to social goods, positioning literacy acquisition and development as a means of survival, and therefore as an immediate need. In addition, maturity and the desire to fulfill social roles fostered the aspirations the men brought to their engagement with the ABEL program. However, they also brought the knowledge that their identities influenced the outcomes of their engagement, especially as it relates to job access. Participation in ABEL, then, entailed not just the acquisition of academic skills, but also the claiming and negating of identities.

These findings provide a nuanced perspective of the participants' reasons for enrolling in the ABEL program, and in so doing may help adult educators generate ideas for additional learning opportunities. The narrow focus on employment as men's purpose for enrollment may obscure or hinder the use of strategies to support other areas of their lives. For example, mothers are usually seen as the primary educational support for their children; however, fathers' interest in the educational well-being of their children, as custodial and non-custodial fathers, indicates that adult educators can link their interest to educational goals while providing resources that will help them in this area. A recent study by Roy (2004) showed that low-income African American men who have had little success in finding employment turn to "caregiving" and "being there" as alternate ways of providing for their children.

Increased links between student needs and program resources can heighten adult learners' perceptions of the program's value, and thereby enhance their involvement and learning experiences. Future research might explore how adult educators can support the varied purposes for which African American men enroll in ABEL programs, in particular, how the gendered nature of these programs may facilitate or hinder learning opportunities. In addition, the presence of adult learners with criminal records suggests an exploration of how ABEL programs are meeting the needs of this population. The social positions of the program participants influence how they approach, resist, and embrace literacy and ABEL programs (Gadsden, 2007). Consequently, an awareness of adult learners' lived experiences can help teachers discern how to help students.

The interconnection of identities

The men's narratives also showed that their literacy experiences influenced their self-perceptions as literate, cultured, and gendered beings. To varying degrees, five of the men evinced internalization of the literacy discourse that positioned them as deficient. Early schooling incidents (e.g., being retained in classes, not understanding class work, and being labeled "dummy") and exclusion from jobs due to lack of educational qualifications, as well as inability to undertake common literacy practices (e.g., reading travel directions) combined to promote the men's deficit literate identities. The three low-literacy participants encountered greater frequency of such situations in various life domains such as home, church, and public offices where reading or filling out forms are required.

Conversely, the men drew primarily upon their experiences in the ABEL program as indicators of their growing literate proficiency. The men referred to their Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) reading and math results, peer tutoring, and situations that demonstrated their increased knowledge. Two participants thought their improved literacy skills enhanced their Christians identities because they now participated in reading the Bible. They also thought their

skills expanded their capabilities for community service. Experiences such as these positively affected the men's self-perceptions as literate individuals.

The men's literate abilities affected their perception of and engagement with their cultural and gendered identities. Three men saw reading as a resource for building their cultural identities through historical knowledge of topics such as African history and the fight for equal rights in the United States; however, one participant perceived his limited literacy skills as inhibiting self- and cultural knowledge. Consequently, he presented a weakened cultural identity. His low literacy skills also detracted from his self-perception as a good provider because he was unable to convey knowledge and wisdom to his children.

Although the lack of a GED certificate and low literacy skills were barriers to gainful employment, only two participants expressed a connection between their deficit literate identities and reduced efficacy as providers. One participant, however, asserted that the skill of "speaking well," acquired through reading, reduced effects of negative stereotyping associated with his racial identity (e.g., unintelligent and uncooperative), thus providing him with employment opportunities that other low-literacy African American men did not receive. In general, the men did not express employment barriers in relation to their racial identity, despite the large body of research that confirms a connection. Possible reasons include, but are not limited to, the influence of the environment in which the interview was conducted and researcher identity.

Supports and hindrances to reaching program goals

Positive aspects of the program outweighed the obstacles the men encountered, and informed their willingness to stay in the ABEL program. Their experiences in the program demonstrated the importance of a supportive environment in promoting academic progress and capable literate identities. First, the men's repeated references to an environment of care fostered by the staff and tutors suggest that this component of the program was significant to the men and their willingness to continue in the program. Second, student-teacher interactions such as giving

regular encouragement, taking time to make sure students understand class material, and "pushing" them to experience new levels of achievement strengthened the men's literate identities and fortified their belief in their ability to succeed.

Other supportive resources included encouragement from family and friends, inspiration from students who had advanced through the program, and spirituality. Aligning with research on the importance of spirituality among African American men (W. P. Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Watson, 2006), the participants used their religious beliefs as a coping and counteractive resource against feelings of inadequacy and the assignment of a deficit literate identity. Despite their supports, the men recognized that success required a cooperative effort. Thus, they also held themselves accountable for their success.

As in early schooling, the men faced many structural and personal challenges that affected their engagement with the program. They made choices about literacy in light of their immediate circumstances such as stopping out of school when work hours conflicted with class time and attending class while ill because a job offer was contingent upon their ability to read. Health problems and limited school hours were the most cited hindrances prior to the closing of center. All the men referred to the sudden closing of the center as the main source of discouragement. The participants mentioned a sense of community and the teachers as program components they will miss; however, two of the older participants perceived the closing as another instance of barriers in their lifelong struggle to develop academic literacy.

A comparison of their early schooling and adult literacy experiences indicates that many of their challenges stemmed from poverty, which limited access to and resources for literacy acquisition and development, and ultimately deferred their hopes and dreams (Brandt, 2009; Lareau, 2003; Wilson, 2011). Parental moves, social promotion, limited ABEL program hours, and the center closing show that some obstacles to literacy development were beyond the participants' decision-making power, and that institutional and social sources of power mediate

between aspirations and achievement. Nevertheless, the men's lives tell stories of resilience in their ongoing pursuit of literacy. Five of the participants stated their determination to continue, and two had already found other adult education programs when I spoke with them in 2011.

These findings align with earlier studies showing similar supports and hindrances (Bingham & Ebert, 2000; Comings & Soricone, 2007; Quigley, 1997). For example, Comings et al. (2007) categorized supportive factors as relationships, goals, teacher and fellow students, and self-determination, and hindrances as life demands, relationships, and poor self-determination (negative thoughts). The participants' academic biographies indicate a pattern from early schooling of having to choose between academic progress and immediate needs.

Although the participants appreciated the program, it is useful to examine situations they considered discouraging because over time they may lead to negative perceptions of the program and eventual disengagement. Adult educators can enhance adult learners' program experiences by regularly reviewing the alignment of learner needs and program policies and structure (Quigley, 1997). For example, two participants spoke of inappropriate class assignments that engendered frustration and limited their progress. Research shows that small classes are more suited to meeting the academic needs of some adult learners (Beder & Medina, 2001; Quigley, 2000). By collaborating with program participants to reduce negative aspects of the program while enhancing the positive components, adult educators can foster program experiences that support participants' well-being and encourage their achievement of established goals. Future research might examine supports and hindrances using a more diverse sample, including former program participants.

Theoretical implications and future research

This study expands research on adult basic education and literacy, literacy and identity, and high school attrition. First, it addresses the void of African American men's experiences in the literature. Second, it provides a more nuanced view of men's purposes for joining ABEL

programs; and third, it shows how literacy as a social practice contributes to men's perceptions and enactments of the good provider role, as well as the changing expectations of grandfathering among low-literacy populations.

In terms of literacy and identity research, the study shows that the salience of the literate identity can inform how men perceive and enact gender and cultural identities. It adds to masculinities scholarship by providing a nuanced perspective of the good provider through the lens of literacy, thereby drawing attention to non-economic dimensions of support.

This study also contributes to the scholarship on K-12 students. First, Raymond's and Roddy Rod's narratives contribute to the debates on retention and social promotion by illuminating their understanding of these practices and the long-term effects in their lives. Though they are many studies on retention, there are few studies on social promotion, despite the U. S. Department of Education's (1999) assertion that it is a "hidden problem" (p. 6).

Second, this study provides a more nuanced perspective of reasons for disengagement and early school departure, and implies areas for future research. The men's narratives indicate the use of protective strategies and the claiming of particular identities to deflect or negate deficient constructions of their identities. They present a counter-narrative to theories of African American male students' resistance to learning by showing the underlying purpose of their disengagement was identity protection. Similarly, the effects of early caregiving (e.g., reduced time and energy for school work and absenteeism) can encourage the perception of a student as an unmotivated learner. Consequently, further research in the underexplored relationship between early caregiving and low academic achievement and dropout is needed.

African American men who enroll in ABEL programs seek to change their lives. Despite the ongoing challenges they face, they have a hope anchored in the resilience born of past struggles. Their stories expand our understanding of the lived experiences African American men bring into the ABEL environment, as well as program components that can promote success.

Overall, their narratives demonstrate the crucial role identity plays in literacy acquisition and development.

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Interview Guide

Research Questions

1) How do African American men who participate in adult basic education and literacy programs describe their literacy experiences?
2) What aspirations do African American men believe participation in an ABEL program will help them achieve?
3) What literacy and educational experiences do African American men perceive to be influential in their literate, cultural and gender identities?
4) What experiences inside and outside of the ABEL program do African American men perceive hinder, support or change their perceptions of what literacy means to them?

Interview Questions

Background information

1. Name
2. Date of birth
3. Place where you grew up
4. members of household (childhood)
5. members of household (current)
6. parents schooling and occupation
7. current occupation/past occupations
8. schools you attended
9. grade you were in when you left school, year
10. year you started program

Early Schooling Experiences

1. Think back to when you were in school, from pre-school or kindergarten all the way through high school. Tell me what school was like for you?
    a. Probes: some things that happened that stand out in your mind; who was involved; where and when did they take place; who was involved; What were you thinking at that time? How did you feel about yourself? How did you feel about yourself as an African American boy? How did you feel about yourself as a student.

2. You mentioned you left school when you were in (grade), could you tell me more about what led you to drop out of school?
    a. Probes: circumstances, how did you feel about that? What did your family say? What did your friends say?
3. Who were the most influential people in your life in school?
    a. What are some things they said or did that stand out to you?
4. If you could choose one word to describe your early school experiences what would it be? Why?

Family, Community and Society

5. Describe your experiences outside of school (before school, after school, on vacation, holidays)?
    a. Probes: things you did alone or with friends, family; conversations – with whom, topic, where; things you saw in the community; home life – activities i.e. types of reading, writing, rapping
6. What did you learn from your family about the meaning and significance of literacy/education? Your community? The larger society i.e. TV, radio, newspapers, movies, magazines
7. Do you recall any disconnect or conflicts between what you learned or experienced in school and what you learned in your community?
8. Talk about what it was like to be an African American male in the US.

Participating in Adult Basic Education and Literacy program

9. What were your reasons for enrolling in the program?
10. Probes: who or what situations? What level when you started? First program? Short term goals? Long term goals? How long have you been in the program?
11. Think back to when you first started in the program, what was it like?
    a. Probes: Describe some of the experiences you had within the first couple of weeks. What were you thinking? Feeling? Which ones were encouraging? Which ones were discouraging?
12. Tell me the types of activities you do in the program?
    a. Reading, writing, speaking, group study, individual, homework; which ones you like, dislike
13. What do you like about the program? Dislike?
    a. Describe some experiences that make you feel that way?
14. What do you want to be able to do when you leave this program?
    a. What will this help you to do better

15. Since you have been in the program, describe some of the experiences have shaped how you see yourself and your future?
    a. Probes: reading level, literate activities outside of class, what people have said to you

Support and Hindrances

16. What are some challenges you face in reaching your goals?
    a. Probes: school environment, subject difficulty, job responsibilities, subject difficulty, relationships, community?
17. Talk about some experiences you have had that have encouraged you to keep coming? Discouraged you?
18. Is there anything you see around you that makes it difficult for you to believe that the GED will lay the foundation for what you want to do? Encourages you?

Overall

1. How would you compare your experiences in early school to your experiences in the program?
    a. Probes: how would you describe yourself as a writer, reader then versus now? What was the most important to you then vs. now? What advice would you give to teachers/tutors then vs. now?
2. Describe any changes you have seen in yourself since being in the program?
    a. Probes: activities you do that you did not do before, don't do anymore or do more of (reading, writing, speaking)? Interact differently with family, friends? Feel differently about yourself and what you can accomplish?
3. How do you think getting your GED will help you as an African American male?
4. If someone were to do a movie of their life how would they describe where you are now and where you see yourself in the future?
    a. Probes: Who would you be? What would you be doing?
5. What does the term literacy/education/ getting the GED mean to you?
    a. Has that meaning changed over time?
6. Sometimes people express themselves find it easier to express themselves more creatively, so in which way would you like to express those sentiments?
    a. Poetry – spoken word, rap
    b. Drawing or painting
    c. Taking pictures (camera provided)
    d. A piece of music followed by your oral or written interpretation of how it relates to you.

Questions for creative expression

7. When you were creating this piece what were you feeling or thinking?
8. What is going on in this piece?
9. What does this piece say about you?
10. What does this piece say about what literacy means to you?

Vita

Brendaly Drayton

EDUCATION

Ph.D., Adult Education (August, 2012). Pennsylvania State University, University
    Park, PA

Specialized Training (2009): Course in College Teaching, Schreyer Institute for
    Teaching Excellence, Pennsylvania State University, University Park.

B.A., Liberal Arts (1984). Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant – The Office of Graduate Research and Education,
Pennsylvania State University, University Park (Jan. 2011).

- Coded survey responses from 125 students in the College of Agricultural
  Sciences Co-operative Extension study on their experiences and the future of
  Agricultural research using NVivo software
- Collaborated with three team members on the creation of a code book for the
  project

Research Assistant – Spencer Foundation grant, "Poor women's involvement in
community-based adult education: Consequences for social networks, social
support and mental health." PI: Esther Prins, Pennsylvania State University (Aug.
2009 – present).

- Administered surveys and conducted in-depth interviews with women learners
- Conducted participant-observations of classroom and program activities
- Analyzed qualitative data from 44 participants in 7 programs using NVivo
  software
- Collaborated on and participated in conference presentations and papers

Research Assistant – Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy,
Pennsylvania State University, University Park (Sept. 2009 – Aug. 2011).

- Updated the Goodling Institute online Annotated Bibliography of Research in
  Family Literacy by reviewing current literature on family literacy and writing
  annotations

Research Assistant – Center for Rural PA grant, "Use and Impact of GED distance
learning options on student outcomes." PI: Esther Prins, Pennsylvania State
University (Jan. 2009 – May 2010).

- Assisted in the design of interview protocols, conducted the pilot study and
  subsequent phone interviews with 16 distance learners and 8 staff members in 8
  programs , analyzed qualitative data using NVivo software, analyzed qualitative
  data using NVivo software, and participated in the presentation of the final
  report.
- Collaborated on and participated in conference presentations and papers