

1-1-2016

# Understanding The In-School Literacies Of African American Males Through A Sociocultural Paradigm: Implications For Teacher Professional Development

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**UNDERSTANDING THE IN-SCHOOL LITERACIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
MALES THROUGH A SOCIOCULTURAL PARADIGM: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

by

**AARON M. JOHNSON**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School of

Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2016

MAJOR: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Approved By:

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Advisor

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## DEDICATION

*This work, which represents my undying passion to help Black boys succeed in school and in life, is dedicated to:*

*My mother, Lila Humphrey, and grandmother, Annie Belle Humphrey (posthumously), my very first reading teachers; my wife, Tiffany Johnson, my best friend and the love of my life without whom this work would not have been completed; my daughters, Kailyn and Aminah, who make me want to be a better man; my son, Blake, whose passion for reading gives me impetus to inspire other boys to engage in literacy; and to all of the other young Black males who have lost their lives, who continue to struggle socially and economically against a non-conforming dominant culture, and whose masculinity is constantly misread in the ongoing pursuit of equity, freedom, and justice.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge and thank God for blessing me with the passion, endurance, and grit to continue going, even when I wanted to stop. My prayers and the prayers of my family helped me to persevere. I stand in awe at the amazing things that God has done and continues to do in my life. I would like to thank my family for their patience, love, support, and understanding of all of the times that I had to miss an event or gathering because I was reading or writing. Toward the end, my son said to me, “When are you going to finish this PhD?” It is my hope that the countless hours that I spent in front of a computer or the time that I spent reading any number of texts, that I have served as the archetype of an African American male participating in literacy.

Thank you to each one of my extended family members who constantly made me explain my research (I became really good at explaining it in a way that people could understand) and the process of earning a doctoral degree. I never thought so many people would want to call me “Dr.” even before I earned it.

I would like to thank my committee chair and adviser, Dr. Gina DeBlase, for pushing me in my writing and analysis. You took a writer of poetry and turned him into an academician. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Michael Owens, Dr. Katherine Crawford-McKinney, and Dr. Robert Smith. The expertise of the members of my committee members in their fields helped me to write a well-rounded dissertation.

Dr. Owens, you made me always consider how I would make the theoretical foundations of this research more pragmatic.

Dr. Crawford-McKinney, you stepped in just at the right time to help me continue and complete this project.

Dr. Smith, your expertise in the field of history helped me to link the historical events relating to the experiences of African Americans in this country to current academic and social experiences.

Dr. Feathers, your knowledge of ethnographic research helped me to ensure the generalizability of my results. Also, thank you for trusting me and arranging for me to teach my first graduate class. Even though I could not use the data from the class in my dissertation, it served as a great experience.

Dr. Karen Tonso, your understanding of the marginalization and disenfranchisement of underrepresented populations in academia is unfounded. I am eternally grateful to you.

Dr. Jacqueline Tilles, the time that I spent with you when you served as my adviser, helped to guide my research interests. I hope that I have made you proud.

Thank you Dr. Len “Dr. Redo” Kaplan and Dr. Donald Marcotte (both posthumously). The both of you were experts in your field and made this Black man who was born and raised in inner-city Detroit believe that he could actually participate and excel in this endeavor.

Dr. Jay Marks, your constant encouragement and positive attitude helped me to keep going. Thank you for letting me complain to you. Thank you for opening your professional domain to allow me to complete this research. You are a wonderful friend and colleague. None of this could have been possible without your support. Also, thank you to the staff at Oakland Schools whose help and support made this project possible.

Dr. George Heitsch and Dr. M. Jon Dean, thank you for your constant encouragement, editing, and understanding when I took time off work or missed board meetings to read, write, or finish up course work.

Dr. Tera Shamey, thank you for editing and looking for comma splice, sentences ending with prepositions, and dangling modifiers.

Thank you to Mignon Hayes, my teacher, my mentor, and my confidant. You truly helped me to connect to school, texts, and you helped me to develop a love of the English language. You are a gifted educator and wonderful person.

I would like to thank Dr. Sam Cherian. Dr. Cherian, you helped to save my life. You are a good man and I would not have healed without your counsel, advice, and commitment to God.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Tiffany. You taught me how to love and forgive, the two greatest gifts that you could have ever given me. You are the best person I know. Without your support these last few years, I wouldn't have made it. You have been my friend, my confidant, my senior editor, my Chief Idea Officer, and my biggest fan. I wish I could thank you more. I will spend the rest of my life showing you how grateful I am.

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## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. (King, 1964)

I was raised in Detroit, Michigan, a city that was and continues to be plagued with crime, homelessness, a deteriorating public school infrastructure, and dilapidated housing and other building structures. At one point, all three major automobile companies had their headquarters in Detroit and it was the epicenter of a bustling metropolis. Although there are a number of great things about Detroit of which I am proud, the aforementioned characteristics, among others, have had a drastic effect on the education of all students. As I will explore in detail later in this chapter, for young African American males living within the city limits and the region, the impact that the surrounding economic and social environment has had on the literacy development of these young men has been particularly harsh.

### **Background of the Study**

I grew up in a neighborhood where the popular thing to have was a moped with an expensive sound system. I wanted a moped so badly. My parents and grandparents did not have the money to purchase one for me, but they also knew that the mopeds were the tools of the drug dealers in my neighborhood. Young African American boys who were members of a drug gang, used the mopeds to transport drugs around my neighborhood and into adjacent neighborhoods. My parents and grandparents kept a tight reign on me and were concerned about my whereabouts, especially during the summer months. My family engaged me in constructive activities to the extent that they could afford it. I attended a magnet school across town from the 3<sup>rd</sup> through the 8<sup>th</sup> grades, rather than

attending the nearby neighborhood elementary and middle schools. I attended a nationally recognized magnet high school rather than the nearby neighborhood high school.

The neighborhood high school I would have attended was a school that was plagued with violence and drug trafficking. I often stayed in the house to read or practice my instrument rather than hang with many of my peers who participated in the local drug trade. I was only allowed to communicate and associate with certain people. There were several houses on my street that were deemed dope houses and I was given strict orders to stay away from, and out of those houses. However, many of my close friends did not have the same support. My best friend, who lived directly across the street from me, fell victim to the pull of the drug gang. He often bragged about the money that he was making, and was going to make, because of what higher-ranking members of the drug gang had promised him. While my interests were focused on school, reading, playing academic games, being first-chair cello in my school orchestra, and playing Police Athletic League basketball, he spoke about smoking marijuana, selling crack cocaine, and the large amounts of money that he had the potential to make.

The next time I saw my one-time best friend after the ninth grade, was when I was an assistant principal at a high school in a nearby school district and I searched for him on the state's felony offender website. There was my friend, a convicted felon whose picture was on the Internet for all to see. His image was a testimony to me that literacy had the potential to save lives. I have always been large in stature and as a large elementary, middle school, and high school student, I was often teased for focusing on academic endeavors. I was often told that someone my size should be playing sports



rather than the violin or cello. While some of my friends may have been known for participating in nefarious activities when I was young, I was known for walking home from the bus stop with a violin case, a cello, or a backpack packed with books.

As I stared at the picture of my friend on the computer screen wearing an orange jumpsuit, I had an epiphany; literacy saves lives. I had spent countless hours in my room, reading novels, reading encyclopedias, and writing. My friend's image reminded me about what I had once read in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* about how Douglass himself discovered the importance of literacy. At one point, Douglass, a child born into slavery, was learning how to read from his slave master's wife. After his slave master learned of this, he addressed his wife about the issue and Douglass overheard the conversation. The slave master told his wife that if she taught young Frederick how to read, he would never want to be a slave.

As the information on the state offenders' website stated, my friend was serving time in prison for possession and sale of narcotics. I had compared the prison time my friend was serving to the slavery to which Douglass referred. For Douglass, a life without literacy represented slavery of the mind and a life of literacy provided the freedom. Viewing my friend's image reinforced for me that participating in literacy and literate behavior was a path to freedom. Literacy had kept my mind focused on academic endeavors and out of trouble. As I stared at the image of my friend, I wept. I wept for the countless numbers of African American males who had fallen victim to the lure of the drug trade. I wept for the African American males who were victims of senseless violence at the hands of their peers or the police. I wept for the young man who drew a gun on me when I was ten-years-old while playing baseball on my school playground,

placed the barrel at my temple, and told me to remove my shoes. I wept for those whose masculinity had been misread by the dominant American culture and who were forced into a life absent of the promise that literacy could provide.

In the U.S. Department of Education's 2008 report, *A Nation Accountable: Twenty-Five Years After a Nation at Risk*, it was cited that only 25% of the students living in Detroit who attended public schools graduated on time (p. 11). The report that preceded *A Nation Accountable*, which was entitled *A Nation At Risk*, was released in 1983. *A Nation At Risk* was a report produced by joining the Commission on Educational Excellence and the U.S. Department of Education. In 1983, the Commission of Educational Excellence reported that approximately 40% of the nation's minority youth were functionally illiterate (p. 11). The 2008 report by the U.S. Department of Education cited that, literacy development among minority students who reside in Detroit, indicated that there was a literacy gap between African American males and their White and Asian counterparts. Statistics like these, collected by the U.S. Government, as well as local agencies, have significant implications for the African American male youth of Detroit.

### ***Building Nesting Grounds***

This research engaged K-12 teachers, across content areas, in a book club model of professional development, the purpose of which was to enhance their understandings of the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African American male adolescents. Furthermore, as a practical outcome of this research, the hope was that it had an influence on the present and future decisions that teachers make about the curriculum and practice in their classrooms. Teachers' perceptions of the in-school and out-of-school literacy events and practices of African American students has an impact on curricular and

pedagogical decisions they make on text selections, instructional strategies, assessment building, and literacy interventions (Tatum, 2005). The intent of this research was not to replicate the work already done by Tatum and others; rather, I was interested in focusing on how a sustained teacher-centered professional development series may have provided teachers with ways of thinking that contributed to changes in classroom literacy practices centered around enhancing the academic successes of the African American males in their classrooms.

One example of a literacy intervention was one that Tatum (2005) recommended in *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males*. He recommended that educators create what he refers to as “nesting grounds” for literacy for African American males. Tatum talked about his experiences in teaching an African American male in his thirties who had been recently released from prison. The man was unable to find employment and Tatum became increasingly frustrated because he did not see how improved literacy would solve this man’s employment problems. When Tatum spoke about his frustrations to the man, the man’s reply was, “Man, this is the nesting ground” (Tatum 2005, p. 39). Tatum asked what he meant by this and the man replied, “[Literacy] is the nourishment that feeds the mind” (p. 39).

Tatum later developed the nesting ground framework, which was the umbrella for his three-strand model of instructing African American males in literacy. Tatum’s idea of a nesting ground provides for the reconceptualization of the role of literacy, culturally responsive teaching, and the implementation of instructional and professional development strands that focus specifically on African American male literacy (p. 42). Furthermore, Tatum’s framework is a comprehensive model aimed at addressing the

sociocultural needs of African American males as it pertains to literacy development and will be further explored in Chapter Two.

The practical implementation of the idea of nesting grounds provides opportunities for African American male youth to see a positive life trajectory through the immersion of relevant reading materials and relationships built with educators and other concerned adults. Tatum spoke of books that were given to him by his teachers and it is his belief that these teachers helped to save his life. Texts such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Black Boy* provided real-world stories about how literacy saved the lives of the African American males depicted in these narratives. I believe that the life of my friend could have been saved if someone would have immersed him in a nesting ground that showed him the beautiful world to which he could have been privy, through literacy.

### **Purpose of the Study**

#### ***Literacy Development and a Sociocultural Perspective***

This study had two, interrelated purposes. The first purpose was to engage teachers in a book club model of professional development that was designed to generate thoughtful discussion and opportunities for critical reflection about their perceptions and beliefs (both those of which they are cognizant as well as those of which they are unaware) of African American males' in-school and out-of-school literacy practices. The second purpose was to assist teachers in making connections between their perceptions and beliefs and the critical role these play in their curricular and pedagogical decision-making, including: instructional planning, classroom instructional strategies, text selection, and assessments.

In Chapter Two, I will highlight theoretical frameworks that were integral to this proposed study and how they were integrated with pragmatic research aimed at delving into the core of engaging and successful literacy instruction with African American adolescent males. Additionally, historical implications, school organizational structure, and school educational and social practices, were examined and will be highlighted in Chapter Two for their connection to academic underachievement and literacy practices in African American males.

K-12 teachers in all content areas were the subjects of this study because teachers' decisions regarding curriculum and instruction across the educational continuum have a significant impact on literacy development and achievement in students (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Franzak, 2006; Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 2005). This study was conducted at a large, local, countywide intermediate school district. Participants were practicing teachers who voluntarily registered for a professional development series offered at the intermediate school district. The series was offered to any teacher in the county or outside of the county and was entitled, "Literacy Practices of African American Males." The professional development series focused on the role that teacher perceptions and professional development play on the in-school literacy practices of their African American male students. The series generated discussion about teacher efficacy regarding literacy instruction for African American males and student efficacy with regard to literacy development, as seen through the lens of the sociocultural paradigm. An in-depth description of the course and its objectives will be provided in Chapter Three.

As stated previously, a purpose of this research was to understand how teachers'

knowledge gained from the participation in this professional development series, and the book club model, influenced choices and decisions they made about teaching reading to African American males. The lens through which this study was conducted was a sociocultural one; thus, factors such as expectations of certain school social codes for ways of being and behaving, academic language used in school and at home, students' contextual knowledge of literary texts, and teachers' and students' attitudes toward school, were all considered as they read through the texts, participated in discussions, and completed assignments. As a school administrator, it is my hope that the findings of this study will add to teachers', administrators', and policymakers' intervention tool kits, which will allow them to address literacy development in all students, particularly African American males.

### ***Significance of Study***

This study provided a conceptual framework that was practical and provided a foundation upon which educators were provided the opportunity to build to address the academic achievement gap, as it specifically relates to African American male literacy development. The achievement gap is defined as the difference in the achievement on standardized assessments and graduation rates of African American students as compared to White and Asian students (Franzak, 2006; Morgan & Mehta, 2004). The achievement gap is documented on local, state, and nationally standardized assessments (Greene & Winters, 2006; NCES, 2011) and its connection to literacy development will be explored further in Chapter Two.

One of the most common factors cited for the difference in achievement between African American students and White students is the socioeconomic level of the student

(Somers et al, 2008; Somers & Piliawski, 2004). However, the belief that the socioeconomic level of the student is the main factor contributing to underachievement in African American students is countered by Morgan and Mehta (2004), who posit that the academic achievement of African American students is not relative to income, as the parents of African American students who have comparable incomes to their white counterparts, do not achieve the same academic success (p. 82). Thus, there is debate regarding the direct correlation between socioeconomic status and student achievement as it pertains to African American students.

The connection of culture, race, gender, pedagogy, and literacy development is well documented by researchers like Tatum (2005), Lewis (2001), Smith and Wilhelm (2002), Newkirk (2002), and Lewis, Enciso and Moje (2007). These themes speak not only of the connections to literacy development, but of the need to address literacy development and student achievement through a sociocultural lens. This study also was situated theoretically in the importance of the discourse of home and community and the connection, or lack thereof, to the discourse of school. The idea of discourse will be explored further in Chapter Two in the discussion of the research of Gee (1989), Bakhtin (2005), and Cadzen (1988).

Accordingly, this study included discussions about how contextual knowledge has a relationship to literacy development and to the types of texts that are selected through the context of the classroom teacher. Contextual knowledge references the prior knowledge and connections to events, history, language, and experiences that students bring to the literacy event. The teacher professional development provided as a part of this study involved helping teachers to develop contextual knowledge in students. This

study's significance surmounted the boundaries of the educational setting.

Although the teachers participating in this study were from the Detroit Metropolitan area, the issues addressed within it represented a larger, national view of the dilemma that many African American males students face. The problems and challenges that exist with regard to the achievement of African American males exist nationwide are: 1) there is a gap between the graduation rates of African American students and White students, placing African American students at the bottom of the graduation continuum; 2) African American students' literacy proficiency lags behind the literacy proficiency of White students as measured on standardized reading assessments; 3) there is a connection between the literacy of African American males and their success in school; and 4) schools and districts have not found the solutions to address the specific needs of African American male students. By approaching the problem of literacy and overall academic achievement through a sociocultural paradigm, the space was created to construct a multifaceted approach to creating and implementing interventions that address the in-school literacy practices of African American male students as it was framed within the context of this study. Also, because of this study's practical nature that was rooted in real-world, historically documented educational and social occurrences, it created the potential to open further dialogue around the issue.

### ***Research Questions***

This study drew upon the book club model of instruction as the basis for the teacher professional development series. The professional development series focused on developing teachers' understandings of the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African American male students. The intent was that enhanced knowledge and



understanding would help to inform curricular and pedagogical decisions such as: text selection, assessment planning, and instructional strategies.

The following are the research questions of this study:

1. What is the progression and evolution of teachers' knowledge and accompanying perceptions of the African American male students they teach when they voluntarily participate in a professional development series designed to enhance their understanding of both the in-school and out-of-school literacies of these students?
2. In what ways might teachers' developing understandings about the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African American males' contribute to their decisions about pedagogy and curriculum in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the African American male students who they teach?
3. How does the book club model of professional development encourage teachers to use this practice with their students, build a structure of sustainable instructional literacy practices within their classrooms, and provide opportunities for meaningful inquiry about their pedagogy?

This research study was focused in these specific ways in order to consider the potential impact of teacher professional development on the literacy development of African American male adolescents.

## **Overview of the Study**

### ***The Framework of Sociocultural Research***

As will be described in detail in Chapter Three, this study used qualitative research methodologies. Drawing on sociocultural theories of learning and instruction,

participant-teachers were asked to make connections to the varying cultural and environmental factors that affect how African American male students perform in school and develop literacy practices. As the literature review regarding literacy in African American males will show in Chapter Two, literacy practices exhibited by African American male students do not match the expectations of school literacy. School expectations for literacy often do not match African American male literacy practices that occur out-of-school; thus, educators observe African American male academic progress as underachievement and deficient with regard to literacy proficiency. Chapter Two will highlight research that supports the notion that literacy has multiple facets and occurs in a symbiotic relationship with sociocultural factors.

### ***Definition of Terms***

Although many of the important terms used in this study were common, within the context of the study, they needed to be defined. They are as follows:

*Literacy* is defined as the ability to read, write, decode meanings of words, and comprehend. This study does not view literacy or literacy events as being limited to one specific medium or social context. Literacy and what constitutes literate behaviors in students is vast and varying and is often context specific; therefore, it should be regarded as multi-faceted.

*Discourse* is defined as a verbal exchange or a conversation. Furthermore, it is a formal discussion of a subject, either written or spoken. In the context that Tatum (2005) and Gee (1989) reference it, discourse is the language, nuances, mores, values, and unspoken rules and behaviors of a culture. The figurative discourse of school is compared to the literal and figurative discourses of African American male students.

Although *achievement* is somewhat of a subjective term, it can be defined as the measurement of the success and progress of a particular group when compared to that of another or to a particular standard or norm. For purposes of this study, achievement is measured by data collected from qualitative and quantitative assessments. The achievement results of African American male students are compared to those of other racial demographic groups and standards of proficiency expected of students at a particular level. Additionally, since this study focused on teacher professional development and the connection to African American male literacy practices, progress toward developing literate behaviors linked to school and the ability to assert agency, transform identity, and exert power within classroom spaces to make literacy more accessible for African American students, were at the core of the discussions.

*Ecological* or *ecology* is the science of the relationships between organisms and their environments. This study used the framework of a particular type of ecological study called a sociocultural study. By addressing the literacy of African American male students through a sociocultural paradigm, participants in the study were able to engage in discussions about the factors that affect their students' literacy.

For the purposes of this study, the two terms, *framework* and *paradigm*, were used interchangeably. These two terms are defined as a fundamental system or design that serves as a pattern or model. The definitions of terms used in this study helped to guide the study and to keep focus on the research questions.

## CHAPTER 2 – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to immerse K-12 teachers in an evidence-based instructional model of book club, where they had the opportunity to engage in professional readings, discussions, and assignments designed to facilitate their understanding of the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African American male students, and to use that knowledge to improve decisions about classroom practices in the teaching of reading and literature to these students. With this purpose in mind, the review of the literature focused on three main areas of theory and research. First, this review considered the historical impact of the American cultural experience on the learning and literacy development of African American males. Within that framework, the legacy of the African American experience and the relationship to African American academic achievement in the United States was also reviewed.

While the term *achievement* has many different definitions, it was important to define achievement within the context of this study. Arguably, the most common definition of what achievement is, responds directly to student performance against a standard on nationally norm-referenced assessments (Franzak, 2006; Morgan & Mehta, 2004). Students who are assessed in this manner are expected to perform at or above a specific cut-score, which is used to determine proficiency of the given standard. With regard to literacy, the review of the literature and the data, which will be explored in more detail later in this chapter, show that African American students consistently perform below expected literacy proficiency on standardized assessments. (Greene and Winters, 2006; NCES, 2011). One of the intents of this study was to offer teachers a

forum in which to reflect upon and re-conceptualize their definitions of literacy and how literacy development is assessed, particularly among African American male students. Furthermore, this study was aimed at viewing literacy achievement using a broader scope, rather than submitting to a deficit perspective. The review of literature explored the impact that school organizational structures have had on student achievement. The theories that seek to explain African American underachievement and the lack of access to evidence based instructional strategies for literacy were also reviewed.

The second topic, upon which this review of literature was focused, was the underachievement of African American students. Within this topic, the literature review explored data collected from various nationally normed standardized assessments to help highlight where African American students stood with respect to literacy development. It is important to note that the data highlighted in this section only responded to how students were assessed on in-school literacy practices. Furthermore, this section reviewed relevant theory related to learning, pedagogy and instructional practices related to literacy, and interventions specific to how boys progress with their literacy development. It is also important to note, however, that this study did not support the notion that there are literacy interventions that are specific to African American males, rather, it supported that evidence-based interventions should be implemented that would help the literacy of all students (Tatum, 2005).

African American students face sociocultural factors that negatively affect their literacy development that may not affect other demographic groups; thus, interventions used for African American males students need to be focused. This literature review highlighted evidence-based pedagogical practices that provided an understanding about

how sociocultural factors impact the learning and literacy development of African American male students. The quantitative data that was highlighted in this review was used as a means to compare the achievement in literacy as documented on nationally based norm-referenced assessments of African American males to their white and Asian counterparts. The quantitative data was by no means meant to serve as an indictment of African American males and their ability to learn or develop acceptable in-school literacy practices.

The third topic, upon which this review of literature focuses, is school organizational structure and teacher professional development. The purpose of highlighting information about how schools are structured was to gain information about how they may impede or promote teachers' access to meaningful professional development that can be used to support the in-school literacy development of African American males. Moreover, school organizational structure and teacher professional development was highlighted to offer pedagogical solutions based in theory and practice.

The review of literature presented a comprehensive view of learning, literacy development, instructional practices, and implications for classroom daily practice. Throughout, I approached these topics through the lens of sociocultural theory and research.

## **The History of School and Literacy Development of African American Males**

### ***Purpose for Education***

Before beginning a discussion about the role that teacher professional development plays in effective literacy development and academic achievement, it would be helpful to set a context by providing a brief history of school organizational structure

and the purpose of education in the United States. Thomas Jefferson (1781) introduced the idea of public schooling and set the foundation and template for it in his *Notes on The State of Virginia*. In Jefferson's document, he outlined a process by which students would attend schools in their home communities divided into what he called hundreds (Query XIV 203). A hundred was a county or area where the students resided that would dictate where they attended school. In these hundreds, young boys (girls were not included) would attend schools free of charge for three years, after which their families would decide whether or not to continue their schooling privately. Among the boys whose families could not pay, and who showed intellectual promise, the district, or hundred, would continue to fund their schooling (Query XIV 203-208). Not only does Jefferson mention the process for the beginning of public education throughout the document, he posits that the purpose of education is to

Teach them how to work out their own greatest happiness, by showing them that it does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them, but is always the result of a good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits. (Query XIV 205)

Jefferson goes on to state that education in reading, writing, and arithmetic is a means to cure idle minds and to be literate in order to participate in the democratic process. During Jefferson's era, the United States was still fighting against the rule and influence of Great Britain. The United States was a newly formed nation recently liberated from British rule. The British influence consisted of providing education as a means to develop character and morality in students from the perspective of the Bible. From an educational perspective, Jefferson felt that instruction in the Bible and other religious doctrine was ill-placed in his plan for schooling and that children were not mature enough to grasp the complexity of religious thought. His outline for schooling included

not only funding for boys whose families could not pay, but instruction in Greek, Latin, mathematics, history, and reading as a means to cure idle minds and prepare students for study at institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, Jefferson supported a constitutional amendment that stated that education should be public and supported and funded by the government (Query XIV 207).

Jefferson's outline for schooling had direct connections to modern-day organizational and funding practices for public schooling. Some prominent education scholars such as Bond (1966), *The Education of the Negro in the American Social Order*; Dewey (1916), *Democracy and Education*; and Dewey (1909), *Moral Principles in Education*, believed as Jefferson did, that knowledge of history, mathematics, science, and reading, were of more importance than the teaching of character and morality. The idea that learning content knowledge, rather than religious rhetoric, served as the basis of establishing that the purpose of education was to increase intellectual thought and the development of new ideas (Dewey, 1909, p. 10).

From an historical point of view, Bond (1966) wrote this in regards to the purpose of education and the role that African Americans played,

American schools, it was proposed, were to seek to develop better health, give a command of the fundamental processes, develop vocational efficiency, create worthy home members, build better citizens, teach worthy uses of leisure time, and refine ethical character. (p. 8)

Bond supported the fact that African American children should be taught the same content as white children and he fought the opinion of his time that African American children were incapable of learning certain subject matter.

Dewey (1956/1990) further posited that the institution of school is strengthened by the fact that school sets the foundation for democracy. He stated, "All that society has



accomplished for itself is put through the agency of school” (p. 7). When one then contemplates the purpose of school, it can be argued that education sets the foundation for members of society to participate in the democratic process. Further, students in study for math, science, and reading have the opportunity to create, innovate, build and analyze philosophy. With this said, it then becomes necessary that students have a proper foundation in the development of literacy.

### ***Historical Overview***

The African American literacy movement started at the grassroots level during the institution of slavery and afterward, and involved many free, literate African Americans and benevolent religious groups such as the Puritans, Anglicans, and Quakers. Many organizations founded reading societies to promote literacy (Harris, 1992) and saw that it was important to teach African Americans how to read. Many of the white leaders of the literary societies during that time thought it was important to teach African Americans how to read because they saw it as a way for them to surmount many of the economic hardships they had faced due to the institution of slavery. Furthermore, they believed that acquiring literacy skills was a way for African Americans to fully integrate into the larger American society and acquire freedom and power. One person of notable stature was Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1794. Allen was a leader in the movement to gain African American liberty, education, and economic independence and he and others founded benevolent organizations, publications, reading societies, libraries, and schools for African American children during this period (Harris, 1992).

The history of African American literacy development began during the

institution of slavery and continued during The Reconstruction period after the Civil War. Between the years of 1870 and 1920, Bond (1966) estimated that the percentage of African American people who were of school age who attended school, rose from 9.2 per cent in 1870 to 54 per cent in 1920 (p. xiii). The institution of slavery was outlawed in 1865 by the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution, “except as punishment for a crime.” (U.S. Constitution, amend. VIII, § 1). However, many southern states enacted a series of laws dubbed The Black Codes.

### ***The Black Codes***

The Black Codes were a set of oppressive laws that sought to continue to keep African American people in a subservient status by making nearly every daily exchange prone to criminal charges. As a result, newly freedmen, women, and children could be charged with a crime and forced into labor contracts as punishment or to work off fines from those charges. The oppressive laws of the South and the North made it even more necessary for African American people to develop literacy skills to participate in the democracy to which they were legal given rights. Not only would literacy provide the necessary skill to outmaneuver such legal obstacles to full citizenship, reading would be particularly useful when voting and when negotiating sharecropper contracts.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, leaders in the African American community, like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, debated publicly about the merits of literacy and its outcomes. Washington believed that although African American citizens should learn to read and write, they should have sought to prepare themselves for work as laborers or for work in skilled trades. Although Washington’s thoughts were highly supported by philanthropists, politicians, and teachers, outspoken

critics like DuBois viewed this method of educating African Americans as a way to keep them subordinate to Whites and conferring a caste status upon them (DuBois, 1903). Debates such as the one between DuBois and Washington created a controversy between African Americans who needed work to learn transferable job skills and those who believed that the goal of education was to prepare them for acceptance into institutions of higher learning, thus, preparing them for jobs to compete with well-educated white citizens.

### ***Segregation, Jim Crow, and African American Academic Achievement***

In 1896, the ruling in the landmark Supreme Court decision *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, laid the legal foundation for the Jim Crow Era's nefarious "separate but equal" doctrine to be later supported with other federal cases. Previous to this ruling, the United States Federal Government deemed that racial segregation in train rail cars that were traveling between states was unconstitutional. To test whether or not racial desegregation on train rail cars would be upheld, Homer Plessy and a group of activist in the state of Louisiana decided that they would test the law for travel within state boundaries. After sitting in a rail car marked for whites only and refusing to move, Plessy was arrested and arraigned at a criminal court in New Orleans before Judge John Ferguson. Ferguson and the Louisiana Supreme Court ruled that no laws had been broken and that rail companies could maintain separate rail cars for black and white citizens. The ruling was challenged and it was eventually heard before the Supreme Court of the United States.

Plessy's lawyers argued that the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments of the constitution were being violated on the basis that segregation in rail cars was continuing to perpetuate a badge of servitude, much like the institution of slavery and that black citizens were not

being afforded the same rights given to white citizens. The Supreme Court of the United States ruled that states could racially segregate rail cars for intrastate travel as long as Black citizens were provided accommodations that were equal to Whites. The ruling in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case laid the ground for segregation of other public facilities, including schools.

For instance, in 1899, The Supreme Court of the United states ruled in *Cumming vs. Richmond County Board of Education* that school districts could maintain separate school facilities for White and Black citizens and that the school district was not financially responsible for providing equal, but separate facilities. The plaintiffs (African American citizens of Richmond County Georgia) of the case maintained that since citizens were taxed irrespective of their racial ethnicity, their tax dollars should be used to maintain proper high school facilities for their children, just as had been provided for White students who were of high school age. The Supreme Court of the United States supported the lower district court's decision to support the ruling of the Richmond County School Board, which claimed that it could not financially support a high school for White students, a primary school for about 300 African American students, and the proposed high school for 60 African American high school students (*Cumming vs. Richmond County Board of Education*, 175 U.S. 528, 1899). The Richmond County School Board agreed to maintain the primary school facility for African American students but said that if the African American parents wanted their high school aged students to continue receiving instruction, they should enroll them in private schools.

In another landmark case that served as a foundation for the separate but equal designation, in the case of *Berea College vs. Kentucky*, the lower district court of

Madison County, Kentucky ruled that Berea College, a small college in the rural city of Berea, had violated the state of Kentucky law by “unlawfully and willfully permit and receive both the white and negro races as pupils for instruction in said college, school, and institution of learning” (*Berea College vs. Kentucky*, 211 U.S. 45, 1908). The district court ruled that although it was unconstitutional for the state to prohibit individuals from integrating in private institutions, the state reserved the right to prohibit corporations from allowing White and African American students to be educated in the same facilities as that right had been afforded to the states from the federal government. Berea College was a corporation in the state of Kentucky. The Supreme Court of the United States disagreed with the state of Kentucky and ruled that one law could not be considered unconstitutional (the prevention of individuals to be instructed in at the same private institution) while allowing for corporations to segregate. Although the court ruled against the state in this case, it was cases such as *Cumming vs. Richmond Board of Education* and *Berea College vs. Kentucky* that set the framework for states to maintain separate facilities as long as they were deemed equal.

The difficulty in the separate but equal designation was that the term equal was never defined. Thus, because of the ambiguous meaning of the word equal, the application and interpretation of several federal rulings were left to local and state governments. In public spaces across the South, separate would never include equal until the practice was outlawed with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

### ***School Desegregation***

With regard to education, the legal precedence that was set in the aforementioned cases meant that states could set up a system where African American students would not

be allowed to attend the same schools as their white counterparts. As a result, many aspects of American social and public life, particularly in the southern states, was segregated. African American children were forced to attend schools that lacked supplies and books. African American students attended schools that were in disrepair while White students had opportunities to attend schools that provided them access to much more.

In 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in the case of *Oliver Brown, et al. vs. The Topeka Kansas Board of Education, et al.* Thurgood Marshall, the first African American who would later sit on the Supreme Court of the United States, argued on behalf of Brown and the other petitioners. Although the *Brown* case was argued on its own merits, it was also a collection of consolidated cases from around the country, highlighting the vastness of segregation in the South and North. The Supreme Court of the United States ruled, “segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprives children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities, even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors may be equal” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 1954). The Supreme Court of the United States cited other reasons as to why segregation of schools and other public facilities was unconstitutional.

The language from the Fourteenth Amendment of The United States Constitution played a significant role in the *Brown* decision and many key civil rights legal victories.

The Fourteenth Amendment states,

No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” (U.S. Constitution, amend

## XIV, §1)

The Supreme Court of the United States considered the historical plight of African American people, particularly with regard to the academic obstacles that they faced after the emancipation from slavery. Furthermore, it is important to note that in the court ruling, the justices specifically mentioned the importance of literacy among African American students.

An additional reason for the inconclusive nature of the Amendment's history, with respect to segregated schools, was the status of public education during the Jim Crow Era. In the South, the movement toward free common schools, supported by general taxation, had not yet taken hold. Education of White children was largely in the hands of private groups. In the final opinion administered by The Supreme Court of the United States, it was stated that the “education of Negroes was almost nonexistent, and practically all of the race were illiterate.” In fact, any education of African American children was forbidden by law in some states (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 1954). The Supreme Court of the United States understood that the institution of slavery and racial segregation had stifled, outlawed, and prevented African American student achievement and literacy development.

In the details of the ruling of the case of *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, the Supreme Court of the United States had considered a significant portion of the population of African American people to be illiterate. However, Carter G. Woodson, the author of *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, (1933/2000) disagreed with the types of assertions that the Supreme Court of the United States made during the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling. Woodson estimated that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only 15-20% of African

Americans could read. Other estimations of the literacy rates of African Americans also contradicted the assertions made by the Supreme Court of the United States that “practically all of the race was illiterate.” Anderson (1988) estimated that by 1880, 20% of African Americans were literate. Anderson also estimated that in 1900, the literacy rate of African American was about 20-30%.

Although Woodson and Anderson believed that the literacy rates among African American people were much higher than The Supreme Court of the United States estimated, the court’s beliefs about African American literacy provided some context and support for the need to desegregate schools. In essence, The Supreme Court of the United States ruled that separate did not mean equal and they did not believe that separate but equal could be achieved. Furthermore, the court recognized the detrimental impact that segregation had on the schooling of African American students. The *Brown* ruling summarily dismissed the 1896 Plessey ruling (and the others) and put an end to lawful segregation in education. It took several decades for this change to be accepted, adopted, and supported by the citizens and local governments of this country.

The *Brown vs. The Board of Education* decision by The Supreme Court of the United States required school districts to develop desegregation plans that involved eliminating one-race schools or schools that were segregated by a rule of law (Swann vs. Charlotte Mecklenberg, 402 U.S. 1, 1971). The Charlotte-Mecklenberg school district was found to be out of compliance with federal law as they had not developed an acceptable plan that successfully created non one-race schools. To comply with this order, The Charlotte-Mecklenberg schools enacted a plan to transport students who lived in all-Black neighborhoods to schools that had large White populations. Charlotte



Mecklenberg's "Finger Plan", named after Dr. Finger, the court appointed expert to help the district develop a desegregation plan, detailed a plan that bussed students from all-Black neighborhoods to all-White schools as a solution to desegregate the schools. Later in this section, I will detail the implications of bussing on the conversation about school desegregation.

Before and during the time of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, America reached the apex of the industrial revolution. In the beginning to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, many African American families migrated to the northern states for better paying jobs in the auto and steel industries. There are estimates that the Great Migration started around 1910 and continued through to the 1970's (History Channel, 2016). Many northern urban metropolises and metropolitan areas experienced a surge in their African American populations. Families moved to escape the poverty of the South, the inferior schools, wide scale disfranchisement, and the fear of death due to the oppressive laws of the Jim Crow South.

With the migration to the North, many African American children who had experienced interrupted schooling, schools with limited resources, and the promise of separate but equal facilities, faced a new challenge. African American children who migrated to the North faced some of the same inequities that they had faced in their schools in the South. However, in the North, African American students were farther away from their support base of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities that were mainly based in the South. The Historically Black Colleges and Universities, many of which were created during Reconstruction, understood and took into account the fact that African American children had received inadequate education and they worked to

help students achieve post-secondary school dreams. Further, as more southern Blacks migrated North, many white northerners sought refuge in surrounding suburbs and established suburban school districts. This suburbanization created all-White communities with school districts that were also virtually all-White.

There were many implications of the *Brown vs. The Board of Education* ruling. The Federal Government began the forced desegregation of schools and other public institutions. African American students found themselves attending schools with White students, sometimes with the aids of armed military troops who escorted them. Also, although African American students could now legally attend schools with White students, they still faced staunch racism from their peers, White teachers, community members, and politicians who disagreed with the decision. The most infamous of such clashes occurred in Virginia and Little Rock, Arkansas immediate post-*Brown*.

In northern cities like Detroit, the implications of school desegregation lawsuits had a national impact. As school districts around the country attempted to comply with the federal school desegregation mandate, many districts and families disagreed how desegregation plans should be carried out. In 1970, the Detroit Board of Education sought to implement a desegregation plan that would meet the mandate of the federal government. Before the desegregation plan could be implemented, the Michigan state legislature enacted Public Act 48, which dismissed the Detroit Public Schools' Board of Education plan and gave control over school districts to local neighborhoods. Vera Bradley, who had two sons enrolled in the Detroit Public Schools at the time and who believed that her children were victims of an inferior education, contracted the services of the Detroit Branch of the NAACP. Later the same year, Bradley et al. and the NAACP

sued Michigan Governor William Milliken, the Detroit Public Schools' Board of Education, the Detroit Public Schools' Superintendent, and State Superintendent John Porter, for participating in de jure segregation.

De jure segregation is the legal segregation of groups in society usually determined by race or religion. At the time, the Detroit metropolitan area and the Detroit Public Schools had been regarded as the most segregated region and school district in the country (Freeman, 2011). After the case was heard in the United States Federal District Court in 1970, the court ruled that the State of Michigan's actions through Public Act 48 were unconstitutional and that the Detroit Public Schools' original plan of desegregating the schools by involving 53 of 85 surrounding suburban school districts should be enacted (Freeman, 2011; Meinke, 2011; Milliken vs. Bradley, 418 U.S. 717, 1974).

Milliken et al. vs. Bradley et al. reached The Supreme Court of the United States in 1974. The court ruled that surrounding suburban school districts could not be included in the desegregation plan of the Detroit Public Schools in that none of the 85 surrounding districts had been charged or found in violation of any federal law. It seemed as though the initial Detroit Public Schools plan was an attempt to tackle de jure segregation. Therefore, the Detroit Public Schools had to implement a desegregation plan that involved an in-district solution. Some argued that there would be no way to desegregate the schools because of the high concentration of African American citizens that lived within the city boundaries and the high concentration of White citizens that lived in the surrounding suburbs. Olzak, Shanahan, and West (1994) argued that the actions by The Supreme Court of the United States in the Milliken case was one that gave voice to anti-busing advocates and put the end to many school desegregation plans nationwide (p.

198).

It is safe to characterize those who opposed the busing of students across city and neighborhood boundaries as those who also opposed desegregation and the mandate from the federal government. The campaign against school integration had two major implications that were underlying causes of opposition during the time of the movement. The first implication of the anti-busing and anti-desegregation movement was, in regions like the Detroit metro area, many African American citizens lived within the city limits and busing did not present a solution to the problem of districts not being integrated. In the *Milliken vs. Bradley* case, The Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of Milliken because there was no evidence that the surrounding districts were not adhering to the mandate to desegregate the schools.

Most districts across the country required students to live within of the boundaries of the city or municipality or within the boundaries of the school district, which are often concurrent. The movement toward suburbanization provided cover for claims that the districts had purposefully excluded black students. Furthermore, researchers of school desegregation contended that the *Milliken vs. Bradley* case put an end to federal desegregation lawsuits in the North and protests among anti-desegregation advocates increased (Olzak, Shanahan, & West; Welch & Light, 1987). Thus, in areas like Detroit where residential areas were segregated along racial and socioeconomic lines, both African American and White students were prescribed to attend racially segregated schools (Olzak, Shanahan, & West, 1994).

The second major implication in the matter of school desegregation dealt directly with the issue of race. The study conducted by Olzak, Shanahan, and West (1994) found

that those in opposition to desegregation felt a sense of competition with African Americans. Their study used a definition from Blalock (1967) that defined competition as, “a situation where groups or individuals are striving for the same limited resources” (Blalock, 1967, p. 73; Olzak, Shanahan, & West, 1994, p. 201). James (1989) contended that the competition between ethnic groups increased during the time that desegregation mandates were reinforced when residential areas became more integrated. As more African American families were able to move into suburban areas, white citizens felt that they would have to compete for educational, political, and social resources that were once just afforded to those who lived in certain areas (James, 1989, p. 964; Olzak, Shanahan, & West, 1994, p. 201). In the findings of the study conducted by Olzak, Shanahan, and West, they asserted “the mechanism that underlies racial conflict involves perceived and actual threats to Whites’ dominance over African Americans” (p. 232). Hence, it can be argued that opponents to desegregation did not want to relinquish the social and political power afforded the their children and their communities through the exclusion of African American families and students from an equitable education.

Opposition to desegregation further marginalized African American students and served as a barrier to developing in-school literacy practices. As a microcosm of the broader American cultural context, schools’ expectations of student literacy inherently involve an understanding and acceptance of the language of the dominant culture. With the denial of students’ access to schools with multiple cultures and modes of language represented, students were also denied the access to literacy because they are not exposed to the cultural mores, values, and language of the dominant culture, much of which is expected in school literacy. Furthermore, while schools were still desegregated, students

lacked access to the diversity of experiences with other students, teachers, and thought processes that they would have been privy through full school integration. Thus, African American students found themselves at a disadvantage when it came to trying to connect with expected in-school literacy.

## **African American Underachievement**

### ***Student Learning and Literacy Development***

Before beginning a review of the literature of specific data regarding the achievement of African American students and the relationship to literacy development, it is necessary to provide a definition of learning. Definitions of learning are relative to one's perspective. Merriam Webster's Dictionary (2012) defines learning as: "the activity or process of gaining knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, or experiencing something: the activity of someone who learns" (*Merriam-Webster.com*. Retrieved September, 2015, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hacker>).

For many years, learning was approached from a behavioral perspective. Behavioral theorists and researchers like Skinner and Pavlov believed that learning occurred when a stimulus was applied to a being, whether human or animal, and the being changed its behavior as a result. The behavioral perspective is in opposition to the sociocultural paradigm as the behavioral perspective represents a fixed perspective about learning and tries to measure it quantitatively. One may find it difficult to quantify experiences such as pain, fear, or the amount of learning that has occurred within a given period of time.

Educational theorists like Koffka (1935), Vygotsky (1978), and Bandura (2001) postulated that the process of learning began with and was connected to human social

development. Koffka (1935) developed the gestalt theory, based on his work in gestalt psychology. Koffka's theory supported the notion that learning neither occurs before development, nor simultaneously with development. He theorized that learning was a subset of development and maturation, and both allowed individuals to proceed through the maturation process (Koffka 1935; Vygotsky, 1978). Koffka posited that the knowledge of one fact led to the inevitable knowledge of many facts (p. 3). Koffka's theory provided support for the idea that the immersion of teachers in professional development opportunities (e.g., book club) designed to allow them to intentionally develop and build knowledge and ways of thinking was an effective approach for assisting teachers to better attend to the literacy development and achievement of their own students. If gestalt theory can be used to explain literacy and its relationship to overall student achievement, then one might support the immersion of teachers in an evidence-based literacy intervention as a viable component of a theoretical framework used to improve student achievement and literacy development.

Bandura (2001) further supported the thoughts around cognition, human interaction, and agency with regard to learning and literacy development in his work on Social cognitive theory in "Social cognitive theory: An Agentic Perspective." He defined the notion of agency within human beings and their motivations for completing a specific task and its relationship to learning. Bandura described agency as the intentionality of an agent, or person, and their involvement in a specific act. Furthermore, in his social cognitive theory, he made a case for predicting human behavior through use of a psychological framework that addressed sociocultural needs. The work of Vygotsky and Bandura's in social development theory and social cognitive theory respectively,

supported the notion outlined in this study and by researchers identified in this literature review, that literacy is a social act and that literacy development is socioculturally based.

The connection between the sociocultural nature of literacy development in Bandura's and Vygotsky's theories lie at the center of how they asserted that learning is constructed. Both Bandura and Vygotsky agreed that learning is socially based. They agreed that learning is constructed through dialogue, human interaction, and reflection upon one's own ideas as new ideas are introduced (Vygotsky, 1978).

As Lewis (2001) proved in her study with 5<sup>th</sup> grade students who participated in a book club, and Kucer (2009) posited in his model for literacy development, literacy is constructed in much the same way. Lewis' study documented the importance of positive interaction between peers, social power, and student dialogue about texts to help them develop literacy. It was also documented in her study that when social components were missing, students either rejected texts or chose not to actively participate (Lewis, 2001). Students' rejection of literature and literacy events in Lewis' study were directly linked to Bandura's (2001) thoughts on student agency and motivation, which are components of learning within his social cognitive theory. The literacy development of the students in Lewis' study was affected, and their agency reduced, when they did not have the opportunity to have positive interactions with their peers about the texts that they were reading.

Kucer's model of literacy views the social aspect of literacy development from a theoretical perspective rather than the more practical one that Lewis presented in her study. In Kucer's model, literacy events transcend the boundaries of the cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and developmental constructs (Kucer, 2009); thus, supporting



the notion that literacy development does not occur in a vacuum. Each of the subsets of literacy contained in Kucer's model reflects some sort of interaction with one or more human beings. The following thoughts can be argued if one considers the theories of Vygotsky and Bandura, the study conducted by Lewis (2001), and the model of literacy development constructed Kucer (2009): 1) cognition is developed through experience; 2) language is developed through mimicry and refinement of vocabulary through observation; 3) interaction with other human beings is ongoing and necessary for literacy development; 4) development progresses with age, maturation, and experience and should be considered in the process of literacy development. Each component of the literacy model that Kucer mentioned, involved social interactions with other humans while participating in literacy events. Thus, the notion that literacy as a social act is linked to the cognitive and developmental realms of the social aspects of learning. In this way, the book club model of professional development, as well as literacy development, is grounded in the work of Vygotsky and Bandura and provides an instructional framework that can be adopted as a regular instructional practice.

Viewing Bandura's social cognitive theory from the perspective of literacy development, Bandura's thoughts on agency are relative to his other thoughts on motivation. When motivation is examined for its connection to sociocultural factors affecting the agency of a student, one may hypothesize that there is a direct or significant affect. Bandura stated that humans set personal goals and may not meet those goals if they feel that they are being "exploited, coerced, disrespected, or manipulated they respond apathetically, oppositionally [*sic*], or hostilely" (Bandura, 2001, p. 5). Thus,

students must feel that texts are relevant to their lives and that their home or primary culture is valued at school and in the classroom.

When a book club is developed and implemented with full fidelity, it has the potential to address the sociocultural needs of the students (whether the students are classroom teachers learning in professional development or students in a language arts classroom) because such a model makes relevant and engaging texts available, provides the opportunity for students to engage with a knowledgeable other, and provides the opportunity for students to experience flow. Flow is a concept that will be explored in depth later in this chapter. As a result of participating in a book club, teachers had the opportunity in this study to participate in a literacy intervention that was socially constructed, student-centered, and had the capacity to increase both teacher/facilitator and student motivation for literacy and learning.

The type of reaction displayed by students whose literacy development is not aligned with that of the expected or appropriate developmental age in school, can prove to be detrimental in every other academic content area. In his conversations about motivation, Bandura agreed that a student's motivation develops out of the need to feel success with material that is appropriately challenging, while also being appropriate for that student's age or skill level (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

Bandura's theory is inextricably connected to Maslow (1954), who outlined the concept of motivation in his theory of *Hierarchy of Needs* and posited that, in order for people to reach self-actualization, basic needs must be met. Physiological needs and safety needs are at the beginning of the hierarchy that Maslow introduced. With relation to student achievement, Maslow and Bandura both wrote about the need for internal

motivation and the connection to the social aspect of learning and literacy development. As a rung on the hierarchical ladder, the need to socially belong in Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* corresponded to Bandura's thoughts on sociocultural factors that exist in influencing a student's motivation to succeed. These thoughts on motivation and sociocultural phenomena that exist in concert with one another can be used to explain student behavior and motivation and how the two affect cognition. With motivation, behavior, and cognition being negatively affected, student participation in literacy events may be limited. Furthermore, when one accounts for the misalignment of students' primary and school discourses, use of texts that exist outside of students' contextual knowledge, and lack of relevance of school materials to students' lives, educators may contribute to a marginalization of African American male students as they attempt to access the school curriculum.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that because theories such as reflex theory and gestalt theory could be integrated, they were not mutually exclusive; therefore, each is in concert with the other (pg. 30). Reflex theory is the belief that improvement in skills in one area is transferable and can lead to the improvements in other areas. Vygotsky's thoughts on the two theories led to his theory of the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development, or ZPD, underscores that there is a difference between a student's developmental stage and actual age, to the possible trajectory of acquirable knowledge based on the help from a more knowledgeable other (pg. 32). The ZPD for many students, particularly African American students whose literacy development may not be aligned with the expectations of school, may be much lower than that of students who have experiences that make the content in school texts more accessible to them.

Furthermore, the work of Koffka, Bandura, and Vygotsky, helped to define learning and provide a foundation for developing solutions that meet students' learning needs.

Another theory of learning and literacy development cited by Rosenblatt (2004), but introduced as a comprehensive theory by Rosenblatt (1978) is the transactional theory of reading and writing. Rosenblatt's model builds upon decades of research on literacy and contradicted learning theories that were grounded in behavioral models. The transactional theory of reading and writing has several components but posits, that in all literacy events, there is an interconnectedness between the sociocultural experiences of the reader, the morphemic and phonemic awareness of the reader, the intended meaning of the writer, linguistic variations, and the type of text being read (Rosenblatt, 2004). A transaction can be defined as an exchange between two or more parties. Within the context of Rosenblatt's theory, the transaction is between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt stated, "the reader and text are involved in a complex, nonlinear, recursive, self-correcting transaction" (p. 1371). The reader generates meaning by accessing the contextual knowledge that is brought to the literacy event and connects that knowledge to the signs, or words on the page.

With regard to contextual knowledge, Rosenblatt spoke about the public and private meanings of language used within a text. She compared the public and private meanings of text to that of an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg is what we can see; however, underneath the water there is a larger, unseen portion of the iceberg that can only be accessed if one dives below the surface. The public meanings within language are the ostensible, direct meaning of language while the private meanings within language, are the nuances, allusions, or references that are connected to meanings that are not readily

apparent. Rosenblatt's thoughts on language variations are similar to postulations of Gee (1989), Gee (1999), Bakhtin (1986), and Cazden (1988), when they discussed the differences between home or primary discourse and school or secondary discourse and the connection that needs to be made between the discourses in order for students to generate meaning from texts. The theories of Gee, Bakhtin, and Cazden relative to discourse will be discussed in-depth later in this chapter.

Within the context of the transactional theory of reading and writing, Rosenblatt discussed the difference between the stances of the efferent reader and the aesthetic reader. The reader who takes an efferent stance approaches the literacy event with the intention of gaining information about a certain subject or range of subjects. Examples of literacy events where a reader takes this stance would be the reading of a newspaper, manual, or textbook. The reader who takes an aesthetic stance approaches the literacy event with the intention of being affected emotionally by the text. Examples of literacy events where the reader takes this stance would be the reading of a novel, poem, or letter. Rosenblatt (2004) pointed out that virtually no reader falls at one of the poles, rather exists somewhere on a continuum. Thus, during a literacy event, a reader may take an efferent stance but there are components of the aesthetic that exists. The efferent and the aesthetic stances have implications for literacy development and the understanding of texts, particularly among African American males who may not have experience with the information, concepts, or language presented within a particular text.

Thus, it is important that learning and literacy development be viewed as more than a process strictly linked to cognition, rather as an interconnected process that includes developmental, sociocultural, linguistic, and cognitive elements (Kucer, 2009;

Rosenblatt, 2004). The interconnectedness of the work of Vygotsky, Bandura, Rosenblatt, Kucer, and Maslow helped me to develop a teacher professional development model to address learning and literacy development.

### ***The Relationship of Power and Contextual Understanding to Literacy***

The second component that allows researchers to use African American male students' connection to school literacy as a means to improve overall academic achievement is related to the acknowledgement that learning, thus, literacy development, is a social process (Kucer, 2009; Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). To view literacy development as a social process can account for sociocultural factors that influence literacy, and allows researchers to address said factors (Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 2005). Some of the factors that account for a student's disconnect from in-school literacy, include, but are not limited to: lack of understanding of academic vocabulary, lack of understanding of context, the difference between the home discourse of African American students and school discourse, and positioning of social power and social coding among African American students within the classroom (Cazden, 1988; Gee, 2000; Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 2005). These factors, as well as others, will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

With regard to student vocabulary and academic language as factors that negatively affect the in-school literacy development of students, students are often exposed to vocabulary and academic language that is decontextualized from the content being studied and the relevance to their lives (Bloome & Bailey, 1992; Tatum, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). For African American students whose primary or home vocabularies sometimes differ from school discourse, a decontextualized use of vocabulary terms

externalize the content. Students who are able to use vocabulary in context, have access to materials that are relevant to their lives, and whose home literacies are given credence in the classroom and linked to classroom content, have a better chance at developing literacy and language that are congruent to the expectations of the school (Heath, 1989).

The lack of social power also impedes the in-school literacy development of students. In the book, *Literacy Practices as Social Acts*, Lewis (2001) conducted a study and noted that students who did not make connections between home discourse and school discourse often lacked social power in the classroom. She noted that social power and socialization in the classroom were the most important factors in students' literacy development. In her study, she observed a 5th grade class during the span of a school year where the teacher used the book club model. As part of the book club, students were grouped with their peers according to teacher selection. They were required to read passages from texts that they chose and they were asked to write their thoughts on those passages by connecting them to their lives, to other texts that they read, and to other class discussions. Students were then asked to participate in discussions with their reading groups that were related to the texts and their reading logs. Lewis (2001) found that the lack of social power often convinced students to give up on trying to access and understand content and that it often led to being academically and socially ostracized by their peers.

As Vygotsky (1978) supported, students learn when they are allowed to express their understanding of texts and dialogue about their comprehension with other students. In the process of learning by means of a social process, students' understanding changes based on different information and vantage points presented by other students and the

challenging of perspectives. As documented by Lewis, if students lack social power and the social codes by which to obtain that power among their peer group, then they lack access to the dialogue that allows them to change their perspectives, thus, their access to learning is prohibited.

Within the idea that teachers should help students to develop social power within the classroom, students should also be helped to develop social codes appropriate to the school environment. When given the opportunity to develop appropriate social codes, educators further help to address the needs of students' in-school literacy development. Social codes can be described as the behavior, mores, or adaptations to an environment that would be acceptable to most members of that environment. It is difficult to teach students social codes that would be acceptable in school and to teach behaviors that would grant them access to opportunities for socialization with other students. However, if teachers understand the backgrounds from which their students come, they can structure their classrooms that allow for the linkage of student experiences and context to the academic and behavioral expectations of the school (Tatum, 2005). By helping students participate and build the processes that allow them to link their contextual understanding to that of the school's or the classroom's culture, teachers can help students build the social capital and social power needed to participate in the learning process.

Contextual knowledge plays a prominent role in student literacy development (Kucer, 2009; Lewis, 2001; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; McMahon et al., 1997). When students enter the literary event, whether it is at home or school, they bring with them a repository of information that allows them to access the content. Students' contextual



knowledge is linked to their identities, and their identities are linked to their culture and language, and all of those entities affect how they view the world (Bakhtin, 1986).

Students' view of the world helps them to form their identities and their identities are what allow them to connect with texts. If students are given the space and the opportunity to learn school appropriate social codes, they add to their identities and teachers can use those connections to help students understand academic vocabulary and contextual references within the reading (Tatum, 2005). Furthermore, as Lewis (2001) highlighted in her study, inter-textual understanding helped students to make meaning of texts. It can be argued that many of the references made in school texts are not a part of many African American students' experiences and identities. Helping students to understand the underlying discourse or secondary discourse, which is present in much of the expected school related literacy, will aid in students' understanding. This study was aimed at helping teachers, many of who were beneficiaries of the understandings that the dominant culture provides, engage in the dialogues and inquiry into their own instructional practices that gave them the skills to help their students with cross-textual understandings.

### ***Data Highlighting Reading Scores***

When graduation and school success rates of African American students are compared to their white counterparts, there is a noticeable achievement gap (Fisher, 2005; Franzak, 2006; Morgan & Mehta, 2004; Somers et al, 2008). The achievement gap is defined as the discrepancy in graduation rates, scores achieved on state, local, and national standardized tests, and performance in school achievement that is determined by grade point averages and other metrics used to determine proficiency. The gap between

the proficiency scores of African American students, and white and Asian students is characterized as the achievement gap.

In the report, *Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates*, Greene and Winters (2006) cited a correlation between underachievement and the dropout rates of African American students. According to Greene and Winters' data, African American students on average performed about 20-30 percentage points lower on standardized exams that measured their achievement in reading and math proficiency, and have overall graduation rates that were about 20-30 percentage points lower than their White counterparts.

In its 2013 *Condition of Education* report, the National Center of Educational Statistics, or NCES, documented that between the years of 2009 and 2010, that the average national graduation rate was 78%, while the graduation rate of White students was 83% and the graduation rate of African American students was 66% (NCES, 2013). In the state where this study was conducted, in 2013 (which provided the most recent data from NCES), the average graduation rate of all students was 75%, the graduation rate of white students was 81%, and the graduation rate for African American students was 59% (NCES, 2013). While graduation data highlights the discrepancies between racial and ethnic groups with regards to graduation, it merely reports the findings and does not offer solutions to fix the problem. Keeping that in mind, it becomes necessary to delve deeper into achievement data to understand the cause of African American academic underachievement and literacy development while making connections to the political and historical implications and teacher professional development.

In previous decades, there is not evidence that concern was given to the achievement gap that existed between African American students and their White peers, and empirical studies conducted to address the issue were non-existent (Morgan & Mehta, 2004). Morgan and Mehta found that after examining hundreds of studies that addressed academic underachievement, very few of the studies addressed the specific issues surrounding the underachievement of African American students specifically.

Graduation data highlights that underachievement in African American students is an ongoing problem in the United States. The data that highlights the achievement gap also identifies that there is a gap in reading proficiency scores. The 2011 NCES *Condition of Education* report documented the findings of the reading scale scores of students as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. The data reported a consistent gap in reading scale scores between African American students and white students between the years of 1992-2009. The average differential in reading scale scores between African American students and white students was about twenty-seven points (NCES, 2011, p. 44-45). Although data helps to illuminate that fact that there is a problem with regard to reading proficiency of African American students, Morgan and Mehta (2004) contend that not enough studies present empirical findings that present viable solutions to addressing the discrepancy in graduation rates and reading proficiency between African American students and white students.

The assessment data emphasizes that the literacy of African American students is well below that of their white and Asian counterparts (Lindo, 2006). The 2011 NCES *Condition of Education* documented its study and the study produced findings on fourth grade and eighth grade students' reading scale scores and found that in 2009, there was a

25 point negative differential when the reading scale scores of 4<sup>th</sup> grade African American students' was compared to that of their white counterparts. There was a 27-point negative differential when the reading scale scores of 8<sup>th</sup> grade African American students were compared to that of white students (NCES, 2011). Furthermore, the 2009 data showed that 12<sup>th</sup> grade African American students had a 27-point negative differential when compared to the reading scale scores to that of white students (p. 44). Scale scores were used to calculate reading proficiency on a 0-500 point scale.

In the same study, the NCES reported that among fourth grade students, 33% of the total population of students read below basic reading levels; among eighth grade students, 25% of the total population of students read below basic reading levels; and among twelfth grade students, 26% of the total population of students read below basic reading levels (NCES, 2011, p. 178). Basic reading proficiency is defined as partial mastery of fundamental reading skills as measured by assessments administered by the National Association of Educational Progress, or NAEP. Assessments administered by NAEP test for skills that students should know or be able to do respective of their grade level (Lindo, 2006; NCES, 2011).

Increased literacy has proven to be the single most important factor to increase overall student achievement across subject areas (Lindo, 2006). Although researchers such as Lee (2002), Lindo (2006), and Braunger, Greenleaf, Litman, and Schoenbach (2003), have documented a positive correlation between student achievement and teacher engagement in subject-area work through increased classroom conversation, they have also indicated that educators do not frequently engage in discourse about how to improve student achievement. Furthermore, professional development that is relevant for teachers

and aimed at helping them improve the literacy development of their students is also rare (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lortie, 1975; Tatum, 2005). The implementation of an intervention that uses literacy as its focal point will give students the requisite skills to be successful in every subject area (Lindo, 2006); therefore, it seems likely that the teachers who participated in this study, could use what they learned to help raise students' overall student achievement.

### ***The Literacy Development of African American Male Students***

The literature thus far has documented that a sizable achievement gap exists between African American students and students of other varying ethnic backgrounds. As defined previously, the academic achievement gap is the significant difference in proficiency percentage scores obtained by African American students as measured by several standardized tests in comparison to their white and Asian-American peers (Fisher, 2005; Franzak, 2006; Morgan & Mehta, 2004; Somers et al, 2008). Furthermore, the achievement gap is most noticeable when reading scores are reviewed. The gap was first recognized in the 1960s; however, during the 1970s it began to close, later to expand again during 1980s (Morgan & Mehta, 2004; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

One study carried out by Johns Hopkins University and cited by Lewis (2001) found that between 1993 and 2000, high schools with enrollments over 300 failed more students by 75% than did those with smaller populations. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education, in conjunction with The National Commission on Excellence in Education, composed the document, *A Nation Accountable: 25 Years After A Nation at Risk*. The study reported educational statistics between the years of 1978—2006. Within that report, the reading scores of African American students were presented and will be

discussed further, later on in this section.

Much more attention has been paid recently to the achievement of African American students on standardized tests due to the disaggregation of student demographic data mandated by the Federal Government through the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. With the emergence of educational initiatives such as *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and *No Child Left Behind* (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), states began to look at assessment data and began disaggregating student achievement data by content, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and special education status. Data from *A Nation At Risk* and from *No Child Left Behind* provided useful achievement information to states, districts and the Federal Government because it specifically outlined the achievement of students by demographic subgroups. Subgroups are groups that exist within a larger school group that may be defined by socioeconomic status, race, gender, special education status, and English Language Learners status.

In the 2011 joint report between the National Center of Educational and the U.S. Department of Education, it was documented that African American students have among the lowest overall achievement scores of any other demographic group and the lowest reading scores of all other demographic groups, even when accommodations were permitted (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Low levels of reading achievement for African American students were also documented on local and state tests. Tests such as the PLAN, EXPLORE, ACT, and NWEA document low literacy proficiency for African American students. Furthermore, nationally administered assessments such as the NAEP, which collects and provides data to organizations such as the NCES and the U.S.

Department of Education, document students' educational achievement as compared to national standards and expectations. Data collected by nationally respected assessment organizations suggests that there is a significant deficiency in literacy skills among African American students. Although the data provided by the aforementioned organizations document the problem, the data does not delve into causation or solution. Furthermore, data provided by the aforementioned assessment organizations does not measure students' home literacies as they compare to their expected in-school literacy.

Low literacy proficiency, low socio-economic status, educational level of parents and other family members, quality of the schools, the home and community environment, racist school structures, and rigor of students' educational program have all been cited as causes for low literacy development amongst African American students (Fisher, 2005; Franzak, 2006; Morgan & Mehta, 2004; Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2008; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Wood, Kaplan & McLoyd, 2007). However, it is important to draw attention to the work of Noguera (2003), Kirkland and Jackson (2009), and Delpit (1996). The work of the aforementioned researchers speaks directly to the importance of the sociocultural factors that influence literacy development in African American males students.

In the work of Noguera (2003), he made deep connections to the pervasiveness of school failure among African American male students and the home environments of these students. He stated, "scholars and researchers commonly understand that environmental and cultural factors have a profound influence on human behaviors, including academic performance" (p. 433). The environmental and cultural factors are neither addressed in instructional planning in schools, nor accounted for on standardized

assessments that measure for reading proficiency. Noguera also touched on an important theme that is common in the literature about literacy and African American male students. The recurring theme was that there is a relationship between the environments of African American male and academic failure and literacy development. While there is enough literature on the subject to support the relationship between students' environments and the disconnect between school content and expectations, consideration to students' as people who have alternative cultural experiences should be taken into account.

Kirkland and Jackson (2009) conducted a study and their findings led them to agree with Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and Lewis (2001). Kirkland and Jackson found that students' socialization had a direct impact on their connection to literacy. Even as the students in their study existed in a sub-group of students within their schools, and as students participating in a study about literacy, they further sub-categorized themselves based on their social connections. What Kirkland and Jackson found was that students' language, reading preferences, clothing, and music, all affected how they saw the world and it helped to determine their connections to literacy practices. Kirkland and Jackson found that there were categories in which students found themselves, whether those categories were socially instituted or self-proclaimed, and helped to provide further understanding about the linkage between socialization and power and literacy practices.

Students' socialization and power is based on their cultural connections. Their cultural connections may be based on their neighborhood affiliation, ethnic background, music choice, or heritage. Students' allegiances to these cultural connections sometimes position them against school expected literacy (Delpit, 1996; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009;



Ogbu, 1991; Steele, 1992). Therefore, if the status of coolness (the term 'cool' was something that was explored in Kirkland and Jackson's research) does not align with what is deemed cool within the literature, students may reject it. Conversely, when students are taught to develop multiple identities, which may incorporate ideas outside the boundaries of what they originally might not deem as cool, students may be more apt to accept them.

Delpit (1996) presented a different perspective and approach to promoting student learning and literacy through connection to one's cultural environment. Delpit challenged Gee's (1990) assertions that secondary or dominant discourses are impossible to teach. It is often thought that students cannot learn the dominant discourse because they have very little contact and access to the cultural and economic institutions that provide the foundation on which it stands (Delpit, 1996). However, as documented in her book, teachers who recognized the need for students to participate in the dominant discourse provided the means for them to do so. Delpit recounted several stories in which students of color, who came from poor families, attended inferior schools, and who had no access to institutions and activities that allowed them to participate in the larger dominant discourse, were able to transcend their home environments by not only acquiring the language of the dominant discourse, but used it to challenge cultural and economic oppression.

The core of Delpit's argument referenced the significant role that teachers play in helping students in the acquisition of the dominant discourse with regard to language and literacy development and understanding of the dominant culture. It is important to note, however, that Delpit did not call for the hegemony of students' home languages,

discourses, and cultural practices. She encouraged educators and researchers to support the idea that “the point must not be to eliminate students’ home languages, but rather to add other voices and discourses to their repertoires” (p. 163). Delpit’s stance on the role of teachers in helping students acquire the necessary discourse to aid in their in-school literacy development was similar to the stance taken by Tatum (2005). When teaching students who feel marginalized, who come from poor backgrounds, and whose primary discourse differs greatly from the discourse of school, it is necessary for the teacher to help students to navigate through permeable boundaries between discourses and form malleable identities (Delpit, 1996; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Tatum, 2005).

Central to this study was the emphasis and significance of the discussions generated from teacher professional development using the book club model, which corresponded to the needs of students to aid in their development of in-school literacy. The participant teachers who engaged in the professional development series were given the access and opportunity to develop understandings about the language, environments, and experiences of their African American male students as they engaged in a book club. As the philosophy of book club is grounded in Vygotskian learning theory, teacher professional development helped teachers to: 1) view learning and literacy from a sociocultural perspective and account for students’ varying discourses; 2) position the learner at the center of instructional and organizational decisions; and 3) understand how students’ identities are formulated and how helping them form multiple identities helps them gain access to the larger secondary discourse through literature.

Although the literature in this review provided some causation as to why African American students have a difficult time connecting to in-school literacies, the fact

remains that African American males students still perform below their white and Asian peers. A problematic practice within the field of education is to use standardized norm-referenced assessments to measure students' literacy proficiency. Additionally, as will be discussed in-depth later in this chapter, literacy proficiency cannot be properly measured using one-dimensional assessments that assumes each student has identical cultural experiences and understanding of the content. Nonetheless, schools, politicians, and educational statistical agencies continue to use standardized tests as a measure for student educational progress.

Thus, it is not surprising that data collected from the NCES stated that African American students scored 27 points lower on the reading section of the NAEP than white students (NCES, 2011, p. 42-44). Data collected by organizations such as NCES documents and reports the reading scores of African Americans, which lends credence to the argument that the reading proficiency of African American students is well below that of their White and Asian counterparts. However, one of the things that this study helped teachers to do was to re-conceptualize literacy proficiency, as many standardized reading assessments do not account for sociocultural factors. It is common that schools and districts use these data, and the use of the data has contributed to high instances of school drop out of African American students and continued low achievement on standardized tests. Furthermore, data is used to track African American students into remedial math, science, and English classes and others are steered into special education programs.

With regard to performance data, Ernst-Slavit and Mason (2011) documented the effect of academic language on the literacy development of students. They stated that data about literacy development showed that, "many students perform poorly because

they cannot handle the unique linguistic demands of each academic content area” (p. 430). When students lack the language specific to the content area, they fail to make connections to the context of the text. Contextual knowledge is needed to help students connect to texts and it refers to the background knowledge that students bring to the literacy event to make connections to meanings and promote comprehension.

There is support for the argument that literacy development in students has a direct effect on their overall academic achievement (McMahon et al., 1997; Koffka, 1935, Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978,). African American students’ literacy proficiency scores confirmed there is a problem with the connection of the expected school literacy and the out-of-school literacy practices of African American students. Although some researchers such as Tatum (2005) and Heath (1989) supported that the assessments of literacy skills do not examine the full scope of African American students’ literary capabilities and do not subscribe to a comprehensive definition of what literacy is, it is necessary to use standardized testing data as one of the metrics to evaluate the scope of literacy development. Keeping that frame in mind, Lindo (2006) supported the idea of expanding the number of research studies relative to literacy that include African American students and their experiences as a focus. Studies such as the ones that Delpit, Kirkland and Jackson, and Noguera conducted can help to add to the body of research that specifically addresses the needs of African American male students. This research study, which aimed to help teachers think critically about how their assessment choices and the data that they use, has had an affect on their African American males’ literacy development.

The solution to positively affecting the literacy development in African American students has eluded educators for many years. Lindo (2006) examined 971 articles related to reading intervention experiments. She found that none of the articles disaggregated findings according to race, with no listed implications for African American students (p. 150). Furthermore, Lindo found that only fourteen articles documented studies that had 50% or more African American student involvement and only seventy-nine of the total number of articles used school-aged children in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade (p. 150). Moreover, she found that there were no studies that focused on the professional development of teachers. Given the documented data on the underachievement of African American students, particularly in the area of reading, both quantitative and qualitative studies and data are needed. Thus, an expansion of the number of teachers of who are provided professional development to help their African American students provides data to develop pragmatic reading interventions.

Within the context of this study, data underscoring African American students' literacy proficiency was used to guide the conversations for teachers. The conversations generated from this study, have the potential to improve the overall achievement of African American male students, and can lead to a theoretical framework that has several components. The first component of a theoretical framework for which this study set the foundation, was the authentic assessment of content knowledge based on a student's overall literacy development and real-world experiences. The second component that this study set the foundation for, with regard to a theoretical framework addressing the literacies of African American male students, was the engagement in the dialogue about teachers' perceptions that helped teachers to re-conceptualize their understandings of

literacy development to include definitions that were multifaceted, which included thoughts about academic vocabulary that is related to the content (Marzano & Pickering, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Tatum, 2002; Tatum, 2005). The teaching of reading is often thought to be the job of English Language Arts teachers; however, students must be able to access the content and understand the standards of participation as a member of the classroom environment that is specific to the subject area (Cazden, 1988).

The third component that this study provided the groundwork for, with the aim of developing a theoretical framework and helping teachers understand the literacy practices of African American males, were the activities that helped teachers to understand the importance of socialization, identity, and contextual understanding for their students and that gave them strategies to help their access in-school texts.

As stated previously, students fully participate in the classroom environment when they use the academic language of the school or classroom and when they socialize within the environment with other student academicians and use social codes appropriate for the classroom. Furthermore, students make connections to texts when they develop the ability to make references to other texts and information pursuant to the content being discussed (Bloome and Bailey, 1992; Cazden, 1988). The understanding of context plays an important role in literacy development and has a direct connection to students' background knowledge via academic vocabulary, cultural experiences, and socialization within and outside of the classroom environment. As a part of this study, it was also important to give teachers the basis to understand how students access school-related literacy through the sociocultural paradigm.

Although the most commonly cited factors of academic underachievement for African American males are: the low socioeconomic status of students, the education level of parents, lack of motivation among students, home environment, unsafe and failing schools, and uninvolved parents (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008; Somers & Piliawsky, 2008), they are not the only existing factors. Some may argue that the aforementioned factors are most consistent with academic underachievement in African American males; however, they only address student behavior or other activities, rather than focus on instruction, school processes, student content knowledge, and teacher preparedness. Experiences that students have in school have a direct connection on how they view school and access academic content. Also, some school environments, which may differ dramatically in culture, language, and context from students' homes, have a relationship with student academic outcomes. A sociocultural approach to addressing student learning needs through the teacher professional development provided by this study helped teachers to understand the factors that affect students' in-school literacy development and how these factors have historically contributed to school failure for African American students.

### ***Literacy and student agency***

One of the things that this study explored was teachers' understandings of the linkage between students' identities, language, and contextual knowledge to their academic agency. While discussing sociocultural factors that affect student literacy, participant teachers also dialogued about student identity, teacher agency, and teacher efficacy. Identity also has a direct connection to agency, which is discussed in-depth in

Bandura (2001) and documented extensively in Lewis (2001). The ideas about student identity, student agency, and teacher agency and efficacy will be explored later in this section and in the data analysis and conclusion.

Bandura defined agency as the actions in which people participate that drives them to a particular action. Furthermore, he stated that people participate in their own “development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times” (p. 2). The idea of agency as Bandura defined it, had a connection to Maslow’s thoughts about human motivation. With regard to students, teachers can help to increase student participation in school literacy when they give them an appropriate challenge, immediate feedback, and clear directions (Hattie, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

The use of book club as a teacher professional development framework as presented in this study, utilized the framework that Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory outlines. Social cognitive theory explains motivations of human beings as a product of their agency and further explains the relationship between agency and cognitive development. The determinants of agency are influenced by internal motivation, which may be further influenced by external factors in one’s physical environment. The external factors of agency may include experiences based on one’s ethnic culture, exposure to different forms of knowledge, and psychological and cognitive development. When participant teachers participated in the book club, they were participants in conversations about student motivation, and the reasons why African American students’ motivations are negatively affected by the institution of school.

Social cognitive theory operates under the premise that there are three components to human agency: personal, proxy, and collective (pg. 13). Personal or



individual agency corresponds to what Bandura called intentional and deliberate acts by human beings (pg. 6). Agency by proxy refers to the acts of another to which a human being is subject. Bandura further described a proxy agent as one to who power is relinquished because one has not the ability, motivation, or will to complete a task (pg. 6). In the case of agency by proxy, the classroom teacher is the agent by proxy for students. The teacher as the facilitator acts as one of the more knowledgeable others to lead and guide students' learning. Lastly, collective agency refers to the collective belief in a code or set of codes, communal information, and efficacy that produces action (pg. 14).

Bandura (1997) and Bandura (2000) show that collective agency and belief in a common goal, and participation among members with a similar work ethic, improves a groups' overall outcome. Social cognitive theory not only established the three modes of agency as a foundation for determining human action and interaction, it addressed environmental factors that serve as contributors. Bandura (2001) pointed out that the environmental factors that contribute to personal agency relate directly to environments that people chose, those which they do not chose, and those that they themselves construct. This sociocultural view of agency has a direct connection to student learning. Viewing learning through a sociocultural paradigm allows one to give credence to external stimuli as it relates to cognitive development and address student learning and behavior through a holistic lens (Kucer, 2009; McMahan et al., 1997; Vygotsky, 1978,).

McMahan et al. (1997), integrate the theories of Vygotsky and Bandura, along with literacy theorists such as, Gee (1990) and Heath (1991) to produce an instructional practice aimed at building students' self-efficacy to improve their literacy. Bandura (2001) stated that, "efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency" (pg. 10).

Efficacy can be defined as the capacity to produce a desired result or effect (Bandura). Efficacy, according to social cognitive theory, is most apparent during times of social interaction where members of a group work toward a common goal. Social development theory posits that in individuals, efficacy is increased when there is the presence and participation of more knowledgeable others. Furthermore, reflex theory suggests that efficacy is increased in individuals when one masters one particular skill, which leads to the mastery of several other skills. Social development theory, social cognitive theory, and reflex theory all suggest that in order for learning to occur in human beings, there must be opportunities for socialization to learn from others, there must be personal and communal agency, and there must be an external stimulus to guide learning, in this case, the classroom teacher. In order for the classroom teacher to be equipped to provide the proper guidance to students, the teacher must have adequate and relevant professional development and knowledge of these facts.

Agency and efficacy are essential components in the making of one's identity. Gee (2001) defined research in literacy using sociocultural means by focusing more on the identity of the research subject, rather than by strategy development. Proceeding with the notion that learning and literacy are socially constructed, according to Gee, one's cultural identity is central to the understanding of a text. Simply put, if a student's identity does not match, or runs counter to ideas presented in a particular text, that student will either reject or fail to comprehend that text. Thus, students who take assessments that test for their knowledge of cultural context more so than their actual knowledge, will likely fail. Thus, it continues to be important that teachers' choices for texts, assessments, and their perceptions about their students are aligned to their students'

cultural experiences and their identities which helps to increase their efficacy and agency. Teachers involved in this study had the opportunity to speak about how their efficacy, agency, and identities connected to their students' and they provided data about how their students' efficacy, agency, and identities either prevented or provided them access to in-school texts. The fact that teachers spoke about their own perceptions and beliefs about students' identities and the connection to in-school literacy added to the larger conversation about literacy through the sociocultural paradigm.

As Bakhtin (1986) further pointed out, identity is also linked to contextual knowledge and contextual knowledge is linked to how texts and content are perceived. Thus, student language and discourse is linked to identity and how students comprehend content within and outside of their contextual framework (Bakhtin, 1981; Bakhtin, 1986). Consequently, it became especially important that our discussions in this study were framed to help teachers understand student identity and the role it plays in literacy development. Gee (2001) defines and frames the concept of identity in the following way,

When any human being acts and interacts in a given context, others recognize that person as acting and interacting as a certain 'kind of person' or even as several different 'kinds' at once...A person might be recognized as being a certain kind of radical feminist, homeless person, overly macho male, 'yuppie,' street gang member, community activist, academic, kindergarten teacher, 'at risk' student, and so on and so forth, through countless possibilities. The 'kind of person' one is recognized as 'being', at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interacting, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or unstable. Being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context, is what I mean here by 'identity.' (p. 99)

Lewis et al. (2007), represented ideas of different authors of the individual chapters that speak about the existence of student identity within the context of school, home environment, literacy development, and sociocultural research in general. In

Chapter Two, entitled, “Examining Opportunities to Learn Literacy: The Role of Critical Sociocultural Literacy Research”, Moje and Lewis discuss learning and identity as interrelated entities. Learning is situated in participation, while participation is situated in one’s ability to access a particular discourse community (p. 16). Discourse communities are groups of people who make up a culture, speak a particular language or vernacular, subscribe to code of ethics, or believe in a cause. The discourse communities to which students belong help to shape their identities. The teachers in this study made up a discourse community that was aimed at understanding their African American male students’ literacies and using those understandings to help them connect in-school literacy.

Learning is made more difficult when an individuals’ identity exists, or is expected to exist, in multiple discourse communities. If students are denied access to a discourse community because they lack the knowledge necessary to participate, particularly in regards to contextual references in texts, they essentially lack power to access the content (Lewis, 2001; Lewis et al., 2007). A precise strategy for helping students to master the art of accessing content, particularly for African American males whose primary discourse community is often different from that presented in school-based texts, is to be taught how to move between transcultural spaces. The idea of moving in and between transcultural spaces was presented by Guerra (2007) in his chapter entitled, “Out of the Valley: Transcultural Repositioning as a Rhetorical Practice in Ethnographic Research and Other Aspects of Everyday Life” which was a part of the Lewis et al (2007) text. To move between transcultural spaces means to be able to morph one’s identity to fit the needs of a particular rhetorical environment, whether it be cultural,

academic, or social (p. 138). As means to help teachers understand African American males' literacies, it was necessary to guide teachers through conversations about how to help students move through transcultural spaces. Many African American male students struggle with moving between transcultural spaces because they have the fear of acting white (Ogbu, 1991; Steele, 1992). The phenomenon of stereotype threat (Steele, 1992) and the opposition to the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1991), as it relates to learning and literacy development, will be explained in-depth later in this chapter. Both theories, stereotype threat theory and the oppositional culture model, are linked to the identities of students and how they connect to school-related content.

One important concept that is often absent from literacy interventions is the understanding of the concept of flow. The concept of flow was first recognized by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi in the 1960's, given further attention by him in the 1970's and 1980's and culminated in Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Flow theory gives recognition to the fact that human beings look for enjoyment in their work or play. An individual experiencing flow becomes so engrossed in the activity to which they are engaging, that they oftentimes lose consciousness of the activities happening around them. Csikszentmihalyi found that artists, poets, researchers, and others who were working on a project, often ignored their physiological needs as they participated in their work. With regard to literacy, Smith and Wilhem (2002) posited as a result of their study, that in order for boys to connect to school expected literacy, they needed to experience flow. Researchers like Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and Tatum (2005) also supported the notion that boys should be given opportunities to connect their out-of-school flow experiences to their in-school literacy in order to find enjoyment in reading. Students' flow experiences

are especially relevant to agency in that, in order for one to be motivated to participate in an activity, one has to recognize the activity's relevance, one has to experience enjoyment while participating in the activity, and one has to believe that success can be achieved by participating. The concept of helping students experience flow and connect their flow experiences to in-school literacy were central to the discussions with and among teachers in this study.

A literacy intervention that incorporates the social component of learning outlined by Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (2001), allows students to experience flow as outlined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002), responds to students' sociocultural needs as outlined by Tatum (2005) and Kucer (2009), and teaches students how to recognize their identities and allow their identities to become malleable between cultural spaces as outlined by Gee (2001) and Lewis et al. (2007), helps researchers and practitioners to view literacy through the sociocultural paradigm. This study engaged teachers in the conversations that helped them to recognize students' flow experiences and modeled a book club using the aforementioned researchers' theories so that they could use it as an intervention for their students.

### ***Literacy Assessment Instruments and Literacy Development***

In reference to African American males' literacy development, Tatum (2006) made a case for examining the assessments that are used to determine literacy skill proficiency. Based on standardized assessment data, literacy skill proficiency and the development of in-school literacy practices in African American male students are not congruent with that of their White counterparts. With that being said, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and Tatum (2005) attributed the continuing gap in literacy proficiency skills to the

irrelevancy of texts to the lives of the students who are expected to read them. What Tatum (2005) supported was the use of the sociocultural framework to address literacy development. African American male students, just as every other student, need to connect contextual knowledge, cultural experiences, academic language, and social codes to make connections to texts.

One of the ways to address the literacy needs of African American male students is to view literacy development through the sociocultural paradigm (Kucer, 2009; Lewis, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005). Learning and literacy are socially constructed practices (Bandura, 2001; Kucer, 2009; Lewis, 2001; Vygotsky, 1975); therefore, it is necessary to view literacy through a sociocultural paradigm that allows for students' lives to be linked to literature and literate behaviors. As a result of viewing literacy and learning as socially constructed practices, teachers in this study found it necessary to establish a definition of literacy using their personal understandings of sociocultural frameworks. Teachers were later asked to give second definitions of literacy after gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of a sociocultural framework.

The aspects of students' lives that may affect their literate behaviors are their cultural mores and values, language used in the home and community, economic status of their families, and access multiple sources of literature. The current standardized testing landscape does not examine students' literate behaviors using a sociocultural framework (Tatum, 2006) nor do standardized tests and their developers subscribe to a definition of literacy that is multi-faceted. This study helped teachers to discover their abilities to help their students move between transcultural spaces and morph their identities to make connections to texts. Although teachers have little control over the standardized literacy

assessments that are used, they have a fair amount of autonomy with regard to the types of texts to which students are exposed and how students are assessed on their understanding of those texts.

Franzak (2006) supported the notion that literacy assessments are geared more toward categorizing students and placing them into a reading hierarchy rather than developing assessments that truly assess students' reading capabilities (p. 213). The categorization of students into reading ability groups has led to the belief that it is the schools' responsibility to narrow the gap between students' reading scores rather than alter the assessment itself. The categorizations of students according to ability documented by scores achieved on standardized tests are used as data to support the claims of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and other medical model supporters. Components of the medical model are defined as those who support that factors relating to the "cognitive, behavioral, genetic, and neurobiological mechanisms" helps to determine intelligence or ability (Franzak, 2006, p. 213).

It is important to digress briefly to make the connection between standardized testing in general to how students' literacy is assessed. The conversation about the connection between standardized testing and how educators should authentically assess students' literacy is used to further support the use of a sociocultural paradigm in instruction and assessment practices. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) posited that the difference between the scores of African American students on standardized and cognitive tests (mainly documented by IQ tests) are attributable to a number of factors, including ethnicity. Herrnstein and Murray's assertions were based on data collected from several psychometric based assessments. They compared the statistical patterns



generated by these exams by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and perceived cognitive ability. They concluded that: 1) there are differences in cognitive ability according to ethnicity; 2) test bias should not be considered a factor that produces the gap in scores between African American students and white students; 3) there is a correlation between socioeconomic status and cognitive ability; and 4) there is a correlation between genetics, race, and cognitive ability (p. 269-315). Furthermore, they concluded that tests such as the SAT are an accurate predictor of college success based on student performance and that if tests such as these were biased against African American students, then colleges and universities would under-predict the actual performance by African American students on these tests rather than over-predict.

The French psychologist, Alfred Binet, began to develop psychometric tests aimed at assessing the mental acuity in children. His tests led to the labeling of many children during his time period as stupid, retarded, idiots, and imbeciles. His research also led to the development of more contemporary tests such as the SAT, which is a popular assessment used by colleges or universities to determine whether or not students should be admitted. Although the SAT was not specifically designed to assess students' literacy development, one could argue that the covert purpose of the exam is to test students' literacy capabilities. Students' success in college will be determined by their proficiency with expected in-school literacy. The SAT as a measurement tool as supported by Herrnstein and Murray in their study, does test for reading and students' verbal skills, particularly the sections dedicated to analogic analysis. The data collected from psychometric assessments such as IQ tests have led researchers such as Tatum (2005) to assert that such instruments are flawed because they usually measure basic

skills rather than measure students' aptitude to understand materials related to their life experiences.

The implications of psychometric exams as a measure of intelligence and literacy development that Herrnstein and Murray and others support have led to negative educational consequences experienced by African American students (Tatum, 2005). Even the statistics documented by the NAEP and the U.S. Department of Education do not provide the full scope of the literary capabilities of African American students. Franzak (2006) and Lewis (2001) supported the notion that many assessments that make attempts to assess students' literacy skills do not account for "the sociocultural construction of textual interpretation and evaluation" (Lewis, 2001, p. 121). The use of psychometric and other skills-based assessments cannot account for a broad definition of literacy and all of the components that lead to literacy development.

Heath (1989) made reference to the issue of the assessment of the literacy development in African American students and student contextual knowledge as it relates to the connection of students to texts. She asserted that schools and teachers view the development of literacy skills with a finite lens and that they often view literacy as being developed by the use of strategies rather than a connection to context, language, and identity (p. 7). Schools often position themselves in a manner that does not allow them to consider sociocultural frameworks. Schools' position on literacy assessments, texts selections, and teacher professional development often result in lack of attention being paid to the content of literature, but rather to the technical aspects and the mastery of the mechanistic elements that exist within literacy development.

Assessment of students' literacy and literacy skills should be viewed through a

sociocultural lens by using qualitative measures (Kucer, 2009; Lewis, 2001; McMahon et al, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005). The relationship between students' connections with texts and the assessments that measure students' reading proficiency have direct implications to how literacy development is viewed. Tatum (2005) supported the notion that the lack of support for student text selection has a negative correlation to achieved scale and proficiency scores on standardized tests. Use of texts that are not relative to students' lives and assessments that do not measure the full scope of what literacy entails happens not because there is a shortage of texts for students to explore; rather, it is a deliberate attempt to perpetuate the dominant culture over African American students.

Heath (1989) discounted the notion of deficit thinking as it relates to the literacy development of African American males. Deficit thinking can be defined as the beliefs, actions, thoughts, and language associated with the negative suppositions that African American males are incapable of achieving because of their circumstances or inability to succeed. This study documented teachers' perceptions of their students' efficacy with regard to literacy and it gave them ideas about how to make connections to their students' literacies. Heath also pointed out the fact that cultural anthropologists document the rich verbal forms and literary history of African American people and within that rich literary history, there are stories of triumph, happiness, and perseverance. The connections that African American students form with literary forms within their cultural communities are sometimes disconnected from the types of literacy expected in school. The notion of feeling devalued in school on the part of African American students is a by-product of the lack of support and use of texts that are relative to their lives (Fisher 2005; Ogbu, 1991;

Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005). The research of Smith and Wilhelm and Tatum, found some common ground with the research of Heath around the conversation of how literacy should be defined. Literacy is often defined from the context of school and academic reading, disregarding the sociocultural aspects that help students to develop literacy. Recognizing the varied literary forms set the stage for the re-conceptualization of the definition of literacy and helped teachers in this study to question their perceptions of their students' efficacy with regard to literacy. Also, this study helped teachers consider choosing texts that were relevant to their students' life experiences.

There are several components of literacy development other than phonemic and morphemic awareness, fluency, and word recognition. Literacy includes the recognition of social codes, the socialization of students, the use of academic language, the academic environment, pedagogical practices used by the teacher, and student identity that allows them to connect to texts (Gee, 1989; Lewis, 2001; Lewis et al., 2007; Smith & Wilhelm 2002; Tatum 2005). Data from the aforementioned researchers indicated that school-based literacy did not match students' real-world interests and that students participated in out-of-school literate behaviors that included reading of magazines, science-fiction novels, websites, and participated in conversations relative to their reading interests. Teachers should rethink or re-conceptualize their definitions of literacy to include the components that Heath (1989) documented as being components of literate behaviors such as: storytelling, writing, music, and poetry writing, that are often devalued by schools. This study engaged teachers in activities, dialogue, and inquiry that allowed them to participate in a re-conceptualization of their literacy definitions and they will be explored further in the data analysis.

The findings on student literate behaviors inside and outside of school are important to note because they have implications for assessment, text selection, and teacher perceptions. Literacy researchers such as Smith and Wilhelm and Tatum argue that teachers' text selection processes should be aligned to a more expansive definition of literacy; thus, allowing assessment practices and the results gleaned from assessments to reflect students' true literary abilities.

Schools' subscription to deficit type thinking have led to the belief that African American students have reading deficits and are devoid of any literate skills without examining the full scope of what literacy is or literate behaviors are (Heath, 1989). Teachers have the responsibility to value the varied forms of literacy and to help readers generate meaning by encouraging them to immerse themselves in literature that is rich and meaningful to them. Furthermore, schools help students develop agency and self-efficacy by allowing them to choose texts that are relevant to their lives. With this in mind, teachers' perceptions of their students' abilities, their assessment selections, and the professional development to which they are exposed can help them make the connection between the role that literacy plays in students' lives and the sociocultural factors that influence that literacy.

***Theories relating to the underachievement of African American students***

One of the things that this study aimed to do was to explore how teachers' perceptions have contributed to African American male students' connection to school expected literacy. Some of the factors that influence teachers' perceptions of their students' and their proficiency with school related literacy specifically relate to student environmental factors, while others are connected to larger societal and historical factors.

Teachers' perceptions of these students' connections to literacy development were central to the conversations in this study.

African American students often feel marginalized in school. Marginalization refers to the act of intentionally devaluing the culture, language, ideas, and actions of a particular group of people (Ogbu, 1991). With regard to school, underachievement among marginalized groups is often defined by factors produced by the problem rather than the problem itself (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). For example, the commonly cited factors that either cause or contribute to African American underachievement are: low academic achievement as evidenced on national, state, and local standardized test scores, low self-esteem exhibited by students, and increased instances of negative behavior in school. Although the national achievement data cites that there is an achievement gap between the performance of African American students and their White counterparts, there are few viable solutions evident in the research that is aimed at fixing the problem (Lindo, 2006). The fact that the problem of underachievement and literacy proficiency in African American males has not been addressed with workable solutions further marginalizes students. The existence of the achievement gap sheds light on the fact that African American students are not achieving at the level of White students and they are not meeting the basic proficiency standards of expected school related content, particularly in the area of literacy.

Theorists have tried to pinpoint the causes of poor performance seen on standardized assessments by African American students. Theories such as the oppositional culture model and stereotype threat theory, posited by Ogbu (1991) and Steele (1992) respectively, sought to provide alternative explanations for

underachievement observed by African American students. Fisher (2005), who referenced Ogbu and Steele's work about stereotype threat and the dis-identification with school by African American students, conducted a study to test the validity of Ogbu's and Steele's theories. Her work centered around explaining reasons why students rejected school and she asked the question as to whether or not students actually dis-identified with school as an institution, or whether there were other factors that led to underachievement in African American students. Interestingly, Fisher posited a view counter to that of Ogbu (1991). She hypothesized that African American students reject school rather than show opposition towards it. Many may view this difference as negligible; however, the difference between rejection and opposition speaks to the question of value.

Fisher's hypothesis was in line with the research of Smith and Wilhelm (2002). In Smith and Wilhelm's study of boys' literacy practices, they documented that boys rejected school because much of the curricula were not relevant to their lives but they still understood the value of school as an institution. Dis-identification with school would suggest that students do not find an alignment of their own cultures, mores, and values, with the cultures, mores, and values supported by school; thus, they find difficulty in identifying with school as a structure and an institution. However, Fisher's study found that underachieving students' attitudes toward school were generally positive. The African American students in her study documented that they respected and admired students who performed well in school (p. 205). Furthermore, students in both Smith and Wilhelm's and Fisher's studies cited that personality differences and differences in teaching style served more as a barrier to learning than did racial or ethnic

marginalization. The data from this study documented through data presented by teachers that students feel marginalized because of how they are treated by their teachers or other school officials. These distinctions speak the relevance and need for a study such as this one, a study that was dedicated to helping teachers to understand their students from a cultural perspective and to link their school and literacy experiences to their personal ones.

Fisher further discounted Ogbu's theory by challenging his notions of African Americans' cultural and social experiences in the United States. The oppositional culture model presented by Ogbu (1991), postulated that because African Americans' ability to achieve economic, social, and educational success has been hindered throughout history, African American students have developed an opposition to the system of schooling because they don't see value in it and believe that it will continue to perpetuate the ideas of the larger dominant culture. While the theory of the oppositional culture model presented by Ogbu does have some validity, it fails to examine the full spectrum of abilities that African American students do have and it does not delve deep enough into schools' and teachers' impact on student learning and literacy development. By only examining the issue of academic underachievement in African American students from a historical lens, Ogbu's theory ignores significant cultural, pedagogical, and structural factors that contribute to the underachievement in African American males.

The stereotype threat theory postulated by Steele (1992), made the assertion that when controlled for environmental factors, economic factors, and the skill levels of the students, African American students still underachieve when compared to their white and Asian counterparts because they have dis-identified themselves with educational success



because of low self-worth. The definition of dis-identification refers to the intentional and complete rejection of school as an institution because of the historical and sociocultural factors that have prevented African Americans from being successful in this country. Students in Smith and Wilhem (2005), Lewis (2001), and Tatum (2005) studies did not dis-identify with the institution of school, rather they did not connect with their teachers' pedagogical practices and school content.

Student's self-worth is often considered as a factor contributing to academic underachievement in studies such as, Fisher (2005) and Chavous et al. (2003). Self-worth can be defined as an individual's perception of one's abilities, accomplishments, and contributions to the functioning of the larger society. Both Fisher and Chavous et al. used survey instruments to measure students' self-perceptions. They found that students generally had high perceptions of themselves, even when their academic data showed that they were unsuccessful in school. Findings that document high self-worth in the face of academic underachievement run counter to Ogbu's and Steele's notion that self-worth contributes to underachievement.

Chavous et al. further documented that students in their study seemed to protect their self-concept and self-worth in academic environments because of the strong affiliation with school and academic success that African Americans have had historically (p. 1077). Chavous et al. further found that African American students' academic achievement did not have a correlation with their global self-esteem, a term used to describe the general feelings that one has about oneself as a person and academic being. What Chavous et al. found was that African American youths' self-beliefs with regard to their race had a positive effect on their academic achievement.

The concept of school dis-identification was further explained by Morgan and Mehta (2004). Morgan and Mehta defined dis-identification as a student's refusal to accept the mores, cultural norms, and values that are accepted and reinforced by the dominant culture and the school institution. As researchers such as Morgan and Mehta (2004), Tatum (2005), Lewis (2001), Ogbu (1991), and Steele (1992) have made reference to this notion of dominant culture, it is important to define it with reference to how it may affect the literacy development of African American students. The dominant culture can be defined as the ideas, language, actions, notions of power and social codes, and values subscribed to by the majority of Americans. It can be argued that African American male students reject in-school literacy not because they dis-identify with school, but because texts represent the values of the dominant culture, which are different from, or devalue their own. Furthermore, Delpit (1995) asserted that, given the opportunity and guidance by their teachers, students can learn to morph their identities to connect to in-school literacy even when that literacy represents the values of the dominant culture.

Within the sociological construct of the dominant culture, racial and cultural groups often become marginalized because they have not either adopted the ideas of the dominant culture, are unaware of the expectations of the ideas within the dominant culture, are not presented with the opportunities to learn the ideas of the dominant culture because of a lack of resources, socialization, or power, or they reject them because the ideas run counter to their own cultural identities. Thus, marginalized groups become disassociated with the cultural ideals of the dominant culture, which are often supported and reinforced in schools and in the type of literacy expected in school.

Steele's stereotype threat theory defined a threatening stereotype as an interference with African American student's everyday educational performance in school, particularly on important tests. Steele further stated that students try too hard to avoid the low performance that makes the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and even in themselves. Steele's theory contained a number of assumptions that were not based on the type of empirical data that was presented by Fisher (2005) and Chavous et al. (2003). Data in studies that contested the ideas of Ogbu and Steele documented that there was not a correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement on tests or otherwise. The conversation around stereotype threat theory spoke to a number of other conversations relative to this one with regard to agency and motivation.

The conversation about agency has some relevance to Steele's assertions in his stereotype threat theory. When speaking about human agency, Bandura (2001) contended, "people have to make good judgments about their capabilities, size up sociocultural opportunities and constraints, and regulate their behavior accordingly" (p. 3). Viewing stereotype threat theory from the perspective of student agency as described by Bandura, and comparing that to the data collected by Fisher (2005) and Chavous et al. (2003) on positive global self-perceptions held by African American students, one could conclude that students' performance on tests is marred by reasons other than feelings of fear of performing at a low level because they feel that low performance is what is expected of them.

To solidify the point that there is a weak connection between self-perceptions and academic achievement, it is important to briefly reference the work of Maslow (1943)

with regard to behavior and motivation. Maslow contended that “behavior is almost always, biologically, culturally, and situationally [sic] determined” (p. 371). Maslow’s statement sets the stage for an examination of the factors leading to the rejection of school literacy by African American males as more of a symbiotic relationship between several factors rather than the individualized theories presented by Ogbu (1991) and Steele (1992). The theoretical work of Maslow (1943) and Bandura (2001) reifies the relationship between the socioculturalist’s point of view and student literacy development.

However, Ogbu’s and Steele’s theories should not be totally discounted. Fisher (2005) and Morgan and Mehta (2004) do agree that there is evidence of school and literacy dis-identification among some African American students, but they relate it to other factors. Based on assumptions gathered from stereotype threat and school dis-identification, Morgan and Mehta’s study presented three implications that they tested to determine the relationship between global self-esteem and student achievement. Their implications, based on Ogbu and Steele’s theories, and if proven true, would support stereotype threat theory and the oppositional culture model through empirical data:

**Implication 1:** The relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement should be weaker for blacks than for whites

**Implication 2:** The relationship between global self-esteem and academic self-concept should be weaker for black than for whites

**Implication 3:** The relationship between global self-esteem and academic achievement should be weaker for blacks than for whites, and if dis-identification mounts throughout high school, the relationship should weaken over time. (pgs. 84-85)

Morgan and Mehta’s study found that there was no evidence to support a negative correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement. Furthermore, they found no correlation between self-esteem, race, and academic achievement. One might assume

based on the assertions of stereotype threat theory and the oppositional culture model that if self-esteem and race were components that had a correlation to student achievement, then White students, who perform better on standardized tests and who have higher graduation rates, would have data that show that they have higher self-esteem than African American students. This was not found to be the case.

Morgan and Mehta also found that there was not a statistically significant relationship between race and self-esteem, nor did they find that there was a statistically significant relationship between race and academic self-concept (p. 92). However, they did note, as Fisher (2005) did, that although students did not totally reject school as a concept, they still dis-identified with it on some level. Although this study did not look at student achievement using quantitative metrics, it was important to note that the referenced studies did not find that there was a correlation between achievement and literacy development due to one's race or socioeconomic status.

### **Teacher Professional Development and The Organizational Structure of Schools**

#### ***Literacy Interventions and School Organizational Structure***

A conversation about school organizational structure helps to give the topic of teacher professional development some context. Educators and politicians have dedicated hundreds of years to organizing and reorganizing the school as an institution; new ideas were developed regarding the organizational construct of schools, teaching as a profession, and instructional pedagogy. The achievement of students and the relationship to school structures was not examined until well into the twentieth century (Lortie, 1975). Thus, it is important to include the relevance of school organizational structure and its

relationship to student achievement, with particular regard to the implementation of an evidence-based model of teacher professional development as a literacy intervention.

Historically, instructional improvement mostly consisted of revamping the organizational structure, adjusting teacher responsibilities and constant talks with teachers' unions, and the manipulation of funding with little or no attention given to student performance (Lortie, 1975; Rosenholz, 1985; Rowan, 1990). The connection between school organizational structure and literacy development in students has a direct relationship to the implementation of reading interventions and teacher professional development; thus, a schools' organizational structure should provide teachers the time and space to learn about and implement those interventions.

When school officials address the organizational characteristics of school and build community in the school context, there is a positive variance of 32% in student achievement (Rosenholz, 1985, p. 353). Additionally, Rosenholz's study found that the articulation of the purpose and objective of school led to greater teacher and student efficacy and feelings of community. Bryk and Driscoll (1988) also reported that there were fewer instances of teacher and student absenteeism, there was a sense of gained psychic rewards for teachers, an increase in student engagement, and a lower drop-out rate in schools where the mission and goals were made clear and values were consistent among all members of the school organization. The organizational structure of schools has a direct connection to teacher efficacy and the presence of teacher professional development and attention paid to a schools' structure has proven to make schools more effective. The thoughts on organizational theory provide a framework on how to improve schools specifically by making professional development available for teachers. The

importance of teacher professional development as it relates to student achievement and literacy development in students will be explored later.

Conversations about school organization must be closely tied to conversations about the teaching profession itself (Lortie, 1975; Rowan, 1990). School organizational structure has a direct relationship to teacher efficacy, school effectiveness, and student achievement (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Rosenholz 1985; Rowan, 1990). As previously defined, student achievement is the measurement of student success when assessed on a particular academic topic when compared against a standard. Many times, a school's effectiveness is determined by student performance on national and state standardized tests.

Teacher efficacy, however, is a topic that must be explored a little further to make the connection between student achievement and school effectiveness. Teacher efficacy can be defined as the feelings of adequacy, effectiveness, and power and control that teachers feel they have in the learning environment. Teachers may feel that the power and control that they have over the learning environment is lost because, unlike any other profession, there is an expectation of a certain level of acquisition of technical knowledge for teachers, as curriculum and other matters of instruction, are determined by the board of education or the state in which the school resides (Lortie, 1975). This point is important because if there is to be any improvement in the literacy development of African American male students, teachers will need to feel efficacy; and the school organizational structure will have to allow for the implementation of interventions, particularly those that pertain to increasing student connections to expected school literacy.

Teachers' technical knowledge of pedagogy, classroom management, and instructional strategies are expected to result in increased performance on standardized tests that measure for student literacy development. Also, teachers are expected to be involved in the ongoing change of the organizational structure of schools, but are not often consulted for their technical expertise regarding the nature of the changes. Though the teaching profession is inextricably linked to the constant organizational change expected by schools, there is a separation between the two ideas (Armstrong, 2010). What this study sought to do by providing professional development to teachers using the book club model was to challenge the status quo of school organizational structure by positioning the needs of the learner at the center of organizational decisions, particularly the decisions that involve teacher professional development.

The study conducted by Rosenholz (1985) accounted for several variables within schools' organizational structure to determine the relationship between structure and schools' effectiveness. Teachers' feelings of efficacy, teacher enjoyment of work, staff morale, teacher and student absenteeism, student engagement, student achievement, and a sense of community felt by teachers and students determined schools' effectiveness. Findings supported the position that the organizational structure of the school was the most important factor in determining schools' effectiveness. The study found that there was a relationship between schools effectiveness and its organizational structure that made it easier for effective schools to attract and retain quality teachers. Schools that provided opportunities for teachers to achieve psychic rewards increased their self-efficacy and increased engagement among students (Rosenholz, 1985). Psychic rewards can be defined as the feelings of intellectual accomplishment that teachers feel when



students perform well academically, when there is a collegial work environment, and when they feel that there is a direct link between their instruction and student achievement.

While it is important to explore schools' organizational structures, it is also important to examine their organizational structures in relationship to teaching as a profession and the direct and indirect impact on student learning. As Rowan (1990) and Rosenholz (1985) have documented, the organizational structure of schools directly impacts the teaching profession. Although there is data to support the impact on student achievement and its relationship to school organizational structure, the relationship between the technological aspects of instruction and student learning are not apparent (Rowan, 1990, p. 355). Rowan defines the technology of instruction as the ability to set instructional goals, develop actionable plans from those goals, and to ascertain the relationship between the instructional goals, active instruction, and the results.

Schools' organizational structure and culture also play a role in student contextual understanding for students in the classroom. If pedagogy and school structures do not support and promote the use of texts that value student identities, students will begin to experience alienation from the school and its structures (Dreeban & Barr, 1983). Conversations about students' identities, student contextual knowledge, and teachers' abilities to help their students with their literacy development by participating in professional development were important to this study. Although the alienation that students experience is sometimes due to issues of socialization, the lack of power that they experience in the classroom can be directly attributed to their disconnect of contextual understanding of the content (Lewis, 2001). Changes in pedagogy,

instructional practices, and professional development opportunities can be improved by addressing the needs of the student through the changing of the school organizational structure.

### ***Teacher Professional Development***

Teachers are often frustrated when students enter classrooms affected by some of the negative factors associated with the lack of acquisition of school-related literacy, which often results in school failure. Furthermore, many of those same educators are not equipped to address the factors that contribute to African American underachievement, particularly in the area of literacy. A professional development framework that gives teachers the pedagogical skills to address the needs of students who struggle will help students succeed in reading (Tatum, 2005). In *Teaching Reading to Black Male Adolescents*, Tatum dedicated a chapter to how professional development has an impact on the literacy development skills in students. However, many other educators have not been convinced that they are responsible for student-teacher relationships, low motivation in students, and pedagogy that has the ability to address the specific needs of African American students (Franzak, 2006).

There is a relationship between the preparedness of teachers, professional development that they received, and student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lewis, 2001; McMahon et al. 1997). Lewis (2001) spoke specifically to how the book club model of literacy instruction makes differences in students' literacy development and connection to texts by specifically targeting students' conceptual understanding and academic language. Without specific professional development on how to implement the

book club model, many teachers would not have had access to this research-based literacy development tool.

Marzano and Waters (2009) referenced a meta-analysis of school districts worldwide that they performed that isolated the common characteristics of high performing school districts and classrooms. Marzano and Waters stated that high performing school districts eliminate variability in instructional practices, thus in academic achievement, between schools and classrooms by “establishing clear instructional priorities at the system level, establishing a systematic and systemwide [sic] approach to instruction, investing in teacher preparation and professional development, and developing strong instructional leadership” (p. 21). It is the role of the district level and school level instructional leadership to ensure that teachers have access to the professional development that would help them use evidence based literacy instruction for students.

One of the ways to address the professional development needs of teachers is to provide time embedded in the school day that allows teachers to collaborate, review student data, and share practice. The structure that allows teachers to do this is commonly referred to as professional learning communities. Richard DuFour helped to develop some of the nomenclature of professional learning communities; however, he did not develop the idea independent of others’ research. While DuFour was the superintendent of Lincolnshire High School District in Lincolnshire, IL, he conducted research on school reform that led to the term and educational practice –Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs – and it quickly became common lexicon within the field of education (Armstrong, 2010).

DuFour and his colleagues used research from Rosenholz (1985) and Rowan (1990) to develop the foundation of PLCs. Both Rosenholz and Rowan emphasized the idea that in order for schools to be successful, teachers' need for collegiality, control, and shared instructional practice must be addressed. Thus, using the research from Rosenholz and Rowan, DuFour and Eaker (1998) identified six characteristics of PLCs:

1. Shared mission, vision, and values for individuals with roles within the school environment;
2. Collective inquiry into instructional effectiveness characterized by reflection, joint planning, and coordinated action;
3. Collaborative teams comprised of teachers in the same grade/content areas who guide, share, and improve collective instructional practice;
4. Action orientation and a willingness to try different instructional approaches with varying results;
5. A commitment to continuous improvement; and
6. Results orientation meaning that the work of all individuals within the setting results in demonstrable improvement. (DuFour & Eaker, 1998)

Furthermore, DuFour and Eaker established a line of inquiry that each PLC should ask of themselves: 1) what do we want students to know? (curriculum); 2) how do we know if student have learned it? (assessment); what do we do if student have not learned? (intervention); and 4) what do we do if students exceed our expectations? (rigor).

Although many schools and districts participate in PLCs, they do so in name only. In my professional practice, I rarely encounter PLCs that involve themselves in the type of work or activities outlined in the PLC structure. Moreover, in my observations, teachers have not regularly engaged in conversations about the successes and failures of instructional practices with data driving those discussions nor do they participate in the type of professional inquiry that address their perceptions of their students. Furthermore, there seems to be less inquiry about the concept of race and the relationship to professional practice. The PLC structure is one that would lend to the successful

implementation and engagement of the types of inquiry about teacher instructional practices that was the foundation of this study.

As a district level administrator, I am responsible for the professional development of the teachers in the district and the formation of a systematic PLC structure. To guide the work with regard to the successful implementation of district-guided professional development and the structure of PLCs, Marzano and Waters (2009) provided a framework. Marzano and Waters suggested that to improve student achievement in schools, districts should develop a goal that helps to provide focus on pedagogy that has five different phases and that “such a goal is consistent with the apparent purpose of professional learning communities (PLC)” (p. 56). The five phases of focusing on pedagogy that Marzano and Waters identified were the following:

- **Phase 1** – Systematically Explore and Examine Instructional Strategies
- **Phase 2** – Design a Model or Language for Instruction
- **Phase 3** – Have Teachers Systematically Interact About the Model or Language of Instruction
- **Phase 4** – Have Teachers Observe Master Teachers (and Each Other) Using the Model of Instruction
- **Phase 5** - Monitor the Effectiveness of Individual Teaching Styles (pp. 57-59)

For the purposes of this discussion and the activities that were involved in this study, I will briefly touch upon on the first three phases.

In response to Phase 1 of focusing on pedagogy, teachers should identify strategies where evidence of their effectiveness are available. Marzano and Waters warned against the use of programs in lieu of practice. Although one may view the book club model of literacy instruction as a program, book club is the use of several strategies as they work in concert with one another. Marzano and Waters supported the idea that teachers participate in action research to determine the strategies that they use in the

classroom; however, it has also been effective in my practice that the identification of effective strategies can be accomplished by a small group of educators committed to solving the problem. Furthermore, the PLC structure also provides the space for teachers to participate in inquiry about students' literacy practices and compels teachers to gather data and to dialogue about how to address students' literacy needs. In a well-structured PLC, teachers could explore the merits of book club and develop a programmatic structure to use it school-wide.

In Phase 2 of the structure presented by Marzano and Waters (2009), they suggested that educators engage in the construction of a common language around the instructional strategies identified for use. There does exist language that specifies particular action within book club, (Raphael and McMahon, 1994), and if educators use PLCs to address the literacy needs of African American males using a sociocultural paradigm, there is language with which educators should become familiar. Since book club is grounded in social learning theory, teacher participants in PLCs that seek to use book club as an instructional model should be familiar with and understand the implications of the following language: culture, discourse, marginalization, context, and flow. Moreover, within any PLC that seeks to build a sustainable structure to implement book club as an instructional strategy, teachers should engage in inquiry about their perceptions of students, their definitions of literacy, the differences between in-school out-of-school literacy, and the sociocultural factors that influence students' connections to school-related texts. Lastly, PLCs should collect quality qualitative data about students to aid in their discussions about how to address students' literacy needs.

The last phase, Phase 3, in Marzano and Water's recommendation to educators who are building a pedagogical framework that is relevant to this study, supported that teachers frequently use the agreed upon instructional model and language. As teachers participate in dialogue and inquiry, access and discuss quantitative and qualitative data, and share instructional practices with one another in their PLCs, they should be encouraged to implement book clubs with fidelity according to its structure and the agreed upon implementation between individual teachers and their colleagues. The PLC structure calls for regular meeting time (preferably weekly) that enables teachers to share their practice and get feedback.

Some believe that instructional practices are disconnected from student achievement. Literacy initiatives that do not include teacher professional development at its core contribute to the creation of a culture of low academic achievement and low expectations for students, particularly those who are historically marginalized (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Lewis, 2001; Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1985). The argument that teachers should have access to effective literacy does not presuppose that teachers are ineffective or unprofessional. The notion that teachers should seek professional development to address the literacy needs for students suggests the opposite. Teachers may experience frustration when trying to address the literacy needs of African American male students not because they don't work hard, but because they may not be participating in the work that has proven results (Elmore, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Participation in PLCs has the possibility to help teachers determine what the essential work is as they participate in inquiry with their colleagues.

A well-structured PLC should seek to use evidence based strategies and theoretical research to add to current practice. In this study, the participant teachers were exposed to the construct developed by Tatum (2005), the nesting ground framework. The nesting ground framework identified teacher professional development as an essential component of addressing African American male literacy. Tatum, through his framework, supported that teacher professional development has a positive impact on student achievement and endorsed that culturally responsive instruction should also be included in teacher training to address the specific needs of African American males.

As a result of Tatum's support of culturally responsive instruction being a major part of instruction in general, it becomes important to define both the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching and culture within the context of literacy development. Culture can be defined as: "the values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldviews shared by a group of people who are bound together by a combination of factors" (Tatum, 2005, p. 72). Within an instructional framework, culturally responsive instruction involves methods and modes of teaching that value the cultures of the students represented in the learning environment. Furthermore, culturally responsive instruction seeks to expose students to a wide variety of experiences through a wide variety of content. When teachers are trained in pedagogical practices that incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices, teachers and schools can reverse the negative impact that school policies and structures have on African American students that lead them to reject school literacy.

Tatum's (2005) nesting ground framework also provided the backdrop for instructional improvement for the professional development offered in this study. The



framework was previously defined as the model used to provide an environment that feeds the minds of African American male readers through an integration of theoretical strands, instructional strands, and professional development strands. Within the teacher professional development strands, according to Tatum, teachers should be a part of the establishment of professional communities, and they should participate in inquiry-based professional development.

Tatum encouraged educators that the instruction of African American males should be inclusive of the understanding of their cultural and developmental characteristics. The use of culturally responsive teaching runs counter to the idea of those who support the medical model in that there are biological variations in the brains of African Americans that suspends their ability to learn at the rate of White students. To make the assumption that there are biological variations with the way African American male students learn would be tantamount to subscribing to racist beliefs; however, when examined for sociocultural factors that exist in students' lives, the hope is that the participant teachers in this study found some value in professional development that taught them how to address students' individual learning needs.

Within a comprehensive professional development framework, Tatum agreed with Marzano and Waters (2009) and DuFour and Eaker (1988) when it was suggested that educators pay attention to the categories of implementation, continuation, and evaluation. With this being said, at the conclusion of this study, the continuation, and evaluation of, the professional development framework's significance that supports the literacy development of children is necessary.

The second subset of developing a comprehensive teacher professional development framework that addresses the needs of African American males involves teachers being engaged in inquiry about their instructional practices and the literacies of their students. As stated previously, when teachers participate in PLCs, they can participate in such inquiry. The idea of teachers inquiring about students' literate behaviors and allowing them to choose texts is supported by Lewis (2001), Smith and Wilhelm (2002), McMahon et al (1997) and Newkirk (2002). If teachers conduct inquiries about their students' literacy behaviors through their PLCs, they will engage in dialogue about their students' reading habits, their feelings on instructional efficiency, and it would allow them to gather vital information about the students' culture and environment.

Teacher inquiries that are a part of PLC work can also provide useful information about the strategies that work for African American males, their reading, and their responses to characters portrayed in texts, particularly when there is an African American male protagonist (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 153). Teachers, who participated in inquiry as a part of this study, also had the chance to discuss how ongoing professional development could specifically address the literacy needs of their African American male students.

Professional development for teachers such as the one provided as a part of this research study, sought to increase teachers' understandings of the literacies of African American male students by giving them the space to address their biases and perceptions of their students so that they could apply pragmatic evidence-based literacy interventions. The integration of understanding students' social and cognitive development as

components of learning, and viewing learning and literacy as social acts, is connected to the idea that interventions provide opportunities for educators to address students sociocultural needs as well address any cognitive nuances (Lewis, 2001; McMahon et al. 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005). As this study used book club as a means to provide professional development for teachers and because it was grounded in, and heavily influenced by, Vygotsky (1978) and the zone of proximal development, social cognitive theory and social development theory were kept in mind during the course design and implementation.

### ***Book Club***

It is important to briefly describe what book club is and why it was used as a model for professional development for the teachers who participated in this study. As was established previously by documenting the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (2001), learning is a process that happens as we interact socially with peers and more knowledgeable others. Furthermore, this chapter also previously established that literacy is developed as one's identity, cultural and contextual understanding, and efficacy and agency are met with texts that are relevant to one's life experiences. As a practitioner, I used book club as a means to motivate and engage students in their development of school-appropriate literate behaviors. As I moved forward with the understanding that book club was theoretically proven, evidence-based, and was successful in its practical application, I found it to be a viable instructional practice around which to design a professional development series for teachers.

Educators have found it difficult to establish an instructional framework that works to meet the varying needs of students. Teachers are expected to meet the diverse

literacy needs of students regardless of socioeconomic status, culture or ethnic affiliation, or skill level when they enter the classroom (Paratore, 2000). Furthermore, Paratore asserted that the common practice in the structuring of classroom groups, with particular regard to literacy instruction, has implications for low-performing students. She stated,

At the same time that teachers find children's individual needs to be growing more diverse, they have been confronted with evidence that ability grouping, the most widely used practice for meeting students' individual needs, may have unexpected, negative consequences for the very children it is intended to help. (p. 2)

Many times, students are grouped with other students who are perceived to have the same literacy ability or proficiency. When students are grouped in homogenous literacy groups, they are kept from having the types of conversations that are needed to advance their learning. Moreover, the practice of assigning ability groups for literacy instruction may have detrimental effects on low-performing students and those students who are deemed higher performing usually get the better instruction from the teacher (Allington, 1984; Dreeban & Barr, 1988; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995; Paratore, 2000). Thus, low-ability groups often result in the composition of students of color, students whose values or culture is not accepted in the broader school context, and students who reject in-school literacy (Paratore, 2000). The use of book clubs in classrooms is a way to allow students to participate in group talk within heterogeneous groups to access various texts without assigning them to ability groups.

Book club is an instructional practice that represents an alternative view on how to use group structures to facilitate the idea that literacy is a social act. In book clubs,

students become members of a discourse community and are exposed to language that is varied in structure and complexity, ideas that represent diverse points of view, and are provided equity in the ability to access the teacher. The foremost experts and researchers on book club, Goatley, McMahon, Pardo, and Raphael (1997), Paratore (2000), Raphael, Florio-Ruane, and George (2001), and Raphael and McMahon (1994), assert that instruction that enhances school literacy development for students should use the book club model. Raphael and McMahon (1994) stated that literacy instruction in the past was based on behavioral models and focused mainly on helping to develop students' fluency and mastery on assessments rather than allowing them to participate in discourse about their understanding of texts. They stated that, "early beliefs about reading instruction were based on defining reading as a process of getting meaning from the printed page. Not surprisingly, instruction emphasized decoding the print, assuming that decoded print would automatically be understood" (p. 102-103).

Data collected from participant teachers in this study supported the contentions by Raphael and McMahon and chronicled that teachers' beliefs about what literacy is, moved beyond the idea that literacy consists of a set of actions and is solely focused on fluency, decoding, and phonemic and morphemic awareness. Participant teachers re-conceptualized their definitions to include understandings about literacy as multi-faceted, recursive process that allow students to bring their identities, home language, and experiences to the literacy event. Participation in a book club that was designed as a professional development series for teachers was the vehicle to help them develop their re-conceptualized understandings and was used to model the process for them to use with their students.

To help understand how book clubs are structured for the benefit of helping students connect to expected school literacy, researchers Raphael et al. (2001) and Raphael and McMahon (1994) established that book clubs do the following:

- Help students to engage in language use and while they engage in social interactions
- Help students understand language across multiple contexts
- Allow their thinking to ‘go public’ and hear the language of literacy and learning from the teacher and others. (p.160)

The practice of using book clubs as an instructional strategy for teaching literacy also involves using texts that are practical in the lives of students. Learners who are participants in a book club use texts that are culturally and socially relevant, related to their interests, and are grade-level appropriate. When students access texts that allow them to see practical applications of the texts, they begin “honoring their forms and functions rather than treating them simply as vehicles for instruction” (Raphael, Flurio-Ruane, & George, 2010, p. 160). Furthermore, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) indicated that the boys in their study connected with in-school literacy when they found the texts to be relevant to their lives, appropriately challenging, able to experience flow while they read, and when they had the opportunity to participate in discourse about the texts in formal and informal settings. To support this finding, Raphael et al. (2001) stated, “When students see literacy as a powerful tool, they seek to use literacy abilities beyond the confines of the classroom and the curriculum” (p. 166). Although Smith and Wilhelm (2002) did not indicate whether or not the boys in their study participated in book clubs, their findings were key to understanding how boys connect to expected school literacy.

As the purpose of book clubs are kept in mind and the promise of inviting students to discourse communities that position literacy at the center, book clubs are

constructed with a few guiding principles: 1) learners are given the opportunities to participate in discourse about their texts; 2) learners are immersed in texts that are relevant and practical to them; 3) and success in book clubs is irrespective of a particular school, school district, or student demographic. An important component of book club is the time given to community discourse for learners to participate in meaningful discussion about the text. Paratore (2000) defined community reading, a component of the community discourse outlined as a part of successful book clubs as “the time each day when children read or listen and respond to text that will support the development of language and concepts appropriate at their grade level” (p. 5). The research of Raphael and McMahon (1994) helped to identify and helped them to construct a common structure for the implementation of book clubs (Figure 1).

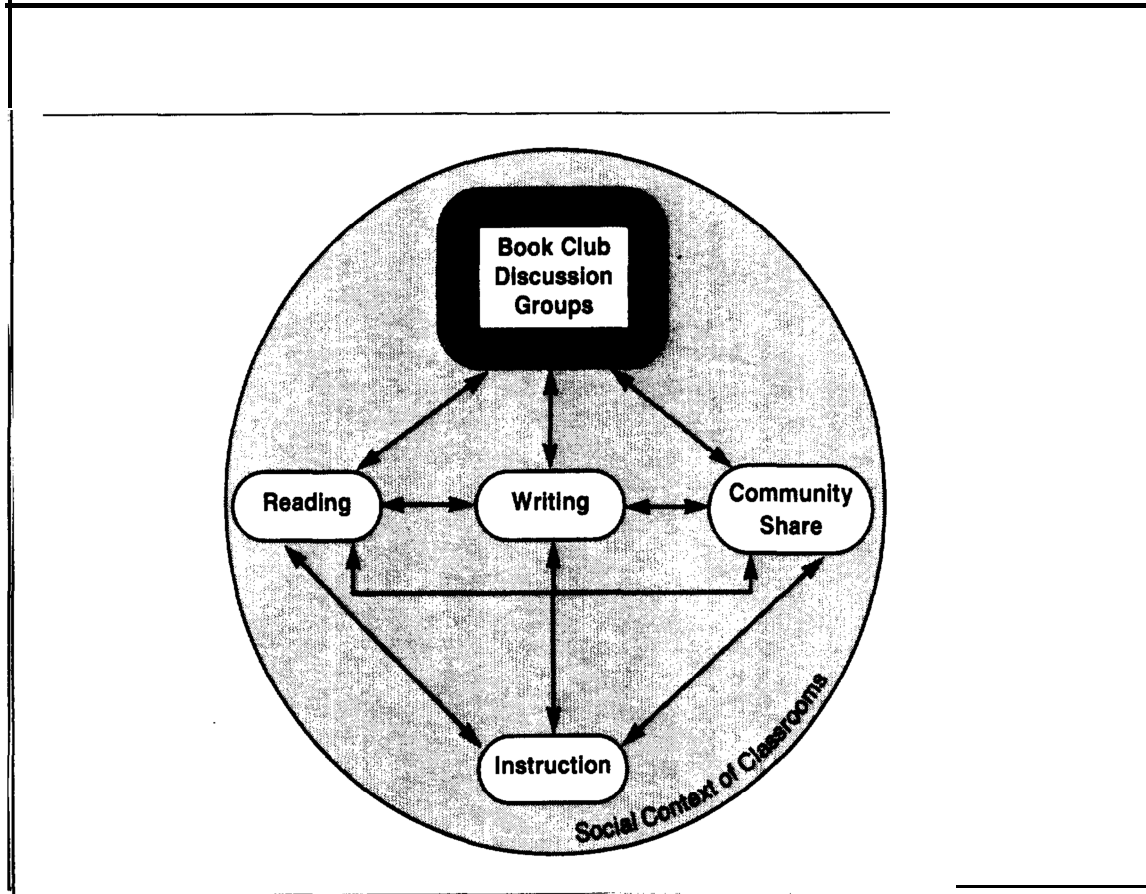


Figure 1. Book Club components (Raphael & McMahon, 1994, p. 104)

Within the smaller discourse communities, students are exposed to appropriate grade-level vocabulary and texts centered on an appropriate grade-level theme or concept. Raphael and McMahon support the notion that writing and reading are essential parts of literacy development; therefore, along with participating in community share and community discourse, each learner in a book club writes in a log to document their experiences with the text, conversations that they have with peers, and interactions with the teacher. Learners may also use their writing logs to write about themes that are tertiary to the text that they are reading. Furthermore, individual learners within a book club read independently and use their logs to document their understandings.



The idea that students should participate in a book club does not mean that their participation should happen without instruction from their teacher or a more knowledgeable other. Direct teacher instruction is an integral part of the success of book clubs and teachers play an important role in the literacy development process. Student participation in book clubs can provide indispensable data to the teacher about student efficacy and how the student uses social power to access the text (Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Paratore, 2001), and how they participate in literacy events. In fact, Paratore (2001) indicated that teachers should constantly interact with the multiple book clubs that occur within the classroom. She stated that teachers should listen in on conversations during book club time,

Retellings provide information about children's comprehension of the text, their ability to organize their recall, their oral language, and their ability to elaborate and clarify. Listening to children during book talks can also provide information about children's comprehension and oral language. In addition, eavesdropping on these conversations can provide teachers valuable information about children's group participation styles: how they get the floor, how they agree or disagree with their peers, how they justify their point of view, how they clarify confusion. Finally, children's written response to reading may provide information about phonemic awareness, spelling, comprehension of text, and grammatical understanding. (p. 8)

Teachers' roles in book club will also vary depending upon the text, the experiences of the students, and students' familiarity of the expected school texts. In the aforementioned citation, Paratore suggested that teachers should be aware of their students' identities and how they connect to literacy along with having knowledge about students' skill level of the technical aspects related to the literacy process.

Although book club is often used as a means to differentiate instruction for diverse groups of readers, it does not help teachers to differentiate instruction in the classic sense of the term and practice; however, it allows teachers to help learners

participate in dialogue with, and learn from the knowledgeable others on which Vygotsky's ZPD premise is based. "Learning is best facilitated as more knowledgeable others guide the learner with appropriate tasks" (pg. 18). The book club model of professional development in which teachers participated as a part of this study, was structured so that participants engaged in discussion with others who may have approached the issue of African American male literacy development from different perspectives. Also, the professional development was designed to model the instructional strategy of book club as a strategy for teachers to use for their students. As previously stated, this study gauged teachers' perceptions of student reading behaviors, immersed them in the use of the book club model as a professional development framework, and engaged teachers in conversations about the relationship between teacher perceptions about literacy and the decisions that they made about curriculum and instruction planning, pedagogy, text selection, and assessment.

### **Conclusion**

There are multiple reasons why African American male students do not fare as well as white students on assessments that measure literacy proficiency skills. The literature thus far has shown that:

- Statistical evidence documents that there is an achievement gap between the performance of African American students and white students on standardized achievement assessments with particular regard to literacy
- When teachers understand their students and the literacy process, they can improve the overall achievement of African American students male students using book club

- There are historical factors that negatively impact the schooling, literacy, and access to education for African American students since the emancipation from slavery
- The professional development of teachers plays a significant role in the implementation of evidence-based literacy interventions and should view African American male literacy development through the sociocultural paradigm
- There should be a reconceptualization of what literacy is to be able to value the literacy practices of African American males and to link their out-of-school literacy practices to expected school literacy

Although this study engaged teachers in a professional development series that encouraged them to view literacy development through the sociocultural paradigm; one of the limitations was that it could not take into account all of the cultural and environmental phenomena that have contributed to the lack of access to literacy for African American males.

In a qualitative study such as this one, the ongoing challenge was determining the impact of the teachers' participation in the professional development on the lives of African American males students. Furthermore, to approach literacy development from the sociocultural paradigm, it was necessary for the teachers involved in this study to examine themselves and examine the relationship between their perceptions and their pedagogy, text selection, and assessment building. As the literature showed, the cultural, historical, and environmental factors in students' lives is interconnected to their learning environment and the preparedness of their teachers. To address the challenges of a sociocultural study and others, the methodology outlined in Chapter Three of this study

will include a comprehensive framework for teacher professional development.

## CHAPTER 3 – DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### *Conducting Research in the Sociocultural Paradigm*

This study was theoretically grounded within the sociocultural paradigm of learning. Sociocultural research, as defined by Lecompte and Schensul (1999), involves:

[Viewing] individuals as functioning in a social context that influences their behaviors. Context consists of the human and physical environment in which events take place; it includes social levels (e.g. family groups, peer networks, school or work settings, community, and the wider society) and sectors (e.g. social technical, and environmental). (p. 56)

It is especially important that the literacy activities and events of African American males be understood and analyzed through a sociocultural lens. As described in Chapter Two of this study, contextual knowledge is as important for literacy development as phoneme and morpheme awareness (Kucer, 2009). Contextual knowledge is advanced by one's understanding of the world through life experiences, exposure to content, and one's cultural lens. Therefore, this professional development series, titled "Literacy Practices of African American Males," was the basis for this research and relied on sociocultural theories of learning as the foundation for teaching the series. Furthermore, sociocultural theory informed the analysis of the data that was based on teachers' participation in the series.

As stated in Chapter One, the research questions for this study were:

1. What is the progression and evolution of teachers' knowledge and accompanying perceptions of the African American male students they teach when they voluntarily participate in a professional development series designed to enhance their understanding of both the in-school and out-of-school literacies of these students?

2. In what ways might teachers' developing understandings about the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African American males' contribute to their decisions about pedagogy and curriculum in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the African American male students who they teach?
3. How does the book club model of professional development encourage teachers to use this practice with their students, build a structure of sustainable instructional literacy practices within their classrooms, and provide opportunities for meaningful inquiry about their pedagogy?

Within the context of this study, literacy development was defined as the ongoing process of interacting with texts through the decoding of signs, comprehension, application of contextual understanding, and connection of cultural nuances to the texts being read (Kucer, 2009). The definition of literacy used for the purposes of this study was expansive but not all encompassing of the many facets of literacy proficiency. Therefore, an intent of this study was to assist teachers in re-conceptualizing their definitions of literacy and literacy development to include a more comprehensive definition, inclusive of instructional and assessment practices that recognize students' cultural backgrounds.

To highlight the importance of conducting a study on literacy development in boys, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) supported the notion that in order for boys to connect to school literacy, texts should be relevant to their lives and allow them a sense of power, control, and agency. To understand boys' out-of-school interests, this study helped to develop understanding in teachers about how they should take action to get to know their

students. In order for teachers to plan relevant literacy instruction for African American male students, they should understand the cultural, sub-cultural, historical, and environmental aspects of African American males' lives and how their perceptions as teachers inform their instructional practices. Therefore, participant teachers in this study were asked to consider the implications of history, culture, and politics, on African American male literacy development by participating in a professional development series that asked them to assume the role of the student in a learning environment that used the sociocultural paradigm as a framework.

### ***Role of the Researcher***

Literacy is a social act (Kucer, 2005; Lewis, 2001); therefore, it is imperative to view literacy through the sociocultural paradigm. As outlined in the literature review of this study, literacy exists in, and is developed through, a sociocultural paradigm that includes: contextual understanding, social power, phonemic and morphemic awareness, cultural experiences, and the relevancy of texts to students lives (Kucer, 2006; Gee, 1989; Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 2005). Consequently, as a researcher, I asked myself the question, "What are the essential methods that should be used to collect the data from teachers about how they encourage the development of school-appropriate literacy practices in their African American male students?" Although I initially identified the methodology after some thought about the aforementioned question, I found that I still needed to identify and justify essential data collection methods and how they aligned to my research questions. To help with the line of inquiry about the rationale for the collection methods I chose and how they aligned with the purpose of this study, I consulted Guba and Lincoln (1994) who aptly put the question about the rationale for conducting

ethnographic research and its congruent data collection methods into context. Guba and Lincoln posited that “the methodological question cannot be reduced to a question of methods; methods must fit into a predetermined methodology” (p. 108). Therefore, since I identified the methodology of this study as one that fit within the sociocultural paradigm, data collection methods that fit within that paradigm were considered valid.

Researchers such as Lewis (2001), Newkirk (2002), and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) all conducted their studies about literacy development in boys through the sociocultural paradigm, using ethnographic data collection methods similar to the data collection methods that I used for this study. Their studies provided valuable information about literacy in boys that could not have been collected using quantitative data collection methods. This study used qualitative data collection methods that accomplished the following:

- documented teachers’ responses about their experiences with teaching literacy;
- recorded authentic conversations between practicing teachers as they engaged in sessions modeled after Vygotsky’s (1978) social learning theory;
- provided a vehicle to compare data collected through multiple means;
- accessed teachers’ current thinking, their progression in thinking, and their belief in their own abilities.

Quantitative methodology and data collection uses a hypothesis as a beginning point, which presumes there is only one truth or one conclusion at which to arrive through the data analysis. Ethnographic research conducted through the sociocultural paradigm uses the research questions and research focus as a means to allow the data to



produce the findings rather than seeking to prove or disprove a hypothesis. The development of literacy in human beings is ongoing, malleable, and exists within a large social context (Delpit, 1996; Rosenblatt, 1978). Therefore, since I conducted research with teachers who help to encourage in-school literacy practices in students within a large social context, I used data collection methodology that fit within the same sociocultural paradigm in which students learn. Quantitative data collection methods would not have allowed me to chronicle teachers' behaviors, pedagogy, and assessment procedures, nor would quantitative methodology have addressed or documented the quality and effectiveness of teacher professional development to meet the literacy needs of African American males. The data collection methods that I used adhered to the notion that there were multiple truths to be discovered through multiple data collection methods. I chose multiple data collection methods for this study to ensure that triangulation and trustworthiness were achieved, topics that will be discussed in depth later on in this chapter.

Ethnographic research allows the researcher to arrive at multiple conclusions through the data analysis. It is ethnographic study design and data collection methodology that allow ethnographic researchers to document findings aligned to research topics that examine human behavior. Data that is produced by a treatment administered to a study-participant or group of participants would not have accounted for the fluidity of human behavior that this study addressed and documented.

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) advocated for conducting research within the sociocultural paradigm but suggested that researchers take measures to separate themselves from their research participants. Separating oneself from research

participants while conducting sociocultural research involves establishing oneself apart from the research participants by maintaining one's role and identity as a researcher rather than a participant.

In Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007), Juan Guerra also supported the notion that sociocultural researchers should remain detached from their research participants. In his chapter, "Out of the Valley: Transcultural Repositioning as a Rhetorical Practice in Ethnographic Research and Other Aspects of Everyday Life," he highlighted the need for sociocultural researchers to move within and between transcultural spaces, just as students are asked to do. To move between transcultural spaces means to morph one's identity to adjust to the mores and culture of the immediate environment. Educators ask students to move between transcultural spaces by learning the language and culture of the school environment, which may differ from the student's home environment. Guerra further supported that students, as well as sociocultural researchers, allow their malleable identities to be transformed within particular environments. For the sociocultural researcher, the skill of formulating a malleable identity is necessary because it allows the researcher to remain objective during observations and reporting of findings (Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007).

During this study, I served as researcher and facilitator of the professional development series. Since I served in dual capacities during this study, I had to pay special attention to the recommendations of Guerra (2007) and LeCompte and Schensul (1999) when they supported that researchers who act as a participant-observer remain objective. I maintained my objectivity as participant-observer by following a detailed plan for each day of the series, by keeping a detailed journal of my actions and the

actions of the participants, and by recording each one of the sessions of which I used to adjust my facilitation techniques. A detailed plan that I used for the course will be discussed later in the chapter.

Furthermore, I asked a colleague to be present during the sessions and observe my actions. My colleague was not a participant in the study, nor did he collect any data. I debriefed with my colleague after each one of the sessions and he helped me to check for researcher bias and objectivity and gave me feedback. The purpose of having my colleague in attendance was to have someone present an unbiased view of my role as a researcher and facilitator. Also, I wanted to ensure that the data that I collected from the participants was not influenced by my interpretations.

I chose a person who had an earned doctorate, who was familiar with the design, methodology, and data collection of ethnographic research. The presence of my colleague helped to lend to the trustworthiness of this study and its results. Our debriefing sessions were critical and helped me to not cross the boundary from participant-observer, which for all intents and purposes, was a facilitation role, into the role of study participant.

As the participant-observer, I facilitated each one of the sessions that are outlined in the course outline. I led the group of participants through the activities, which were designed to do the following: 1) produce a data set that included teachers' beginning perceptions about their efficacy in teaching African American male readers; 2) documented their progression in thinking; and 3) assessed the effectiveness of the book club model of professional development as an instructional tool. With the aforementioned checks in place, I was able to remain in an unbiased position in my role

as participant-observer.

### ***Research Purpose***

There were two primary purposes of this study. One purpose was to engage teachers in professional development that was modeled on the structure of a book club with the intent that this structure be amenable to a teacher-centered curriculum and instruction plan for professional development. The second purpose was to engage teachers in readings, discussions, and assignments that better equipped them to make meaningful and productive connections between their perceptions and beliefs about African American males' in-school and out-of-school literacies and how those beliefs influenced their decisions regarding text selections, pedagogy, and assessments of students' literacy development.

As an executive level school district administrator, I have spoken with teachers in my home district that teach students with varying reading abilities. Additionally, part of my job is to attend trainings and conferences across the state where I meet K-12 teachers who also teach students with varying reading abilities. Many of the teachers with whom I have spoken indicate that they would like access to meaningful, evidence-based, actionable professional development that will aid them in helping facilitate the development of appropriate in-school literacy in their African American male students. With those thoughts in mind, I was motivated to conduct research that served a practical use and that assisted with improving professional development experiences of teachers in the region.

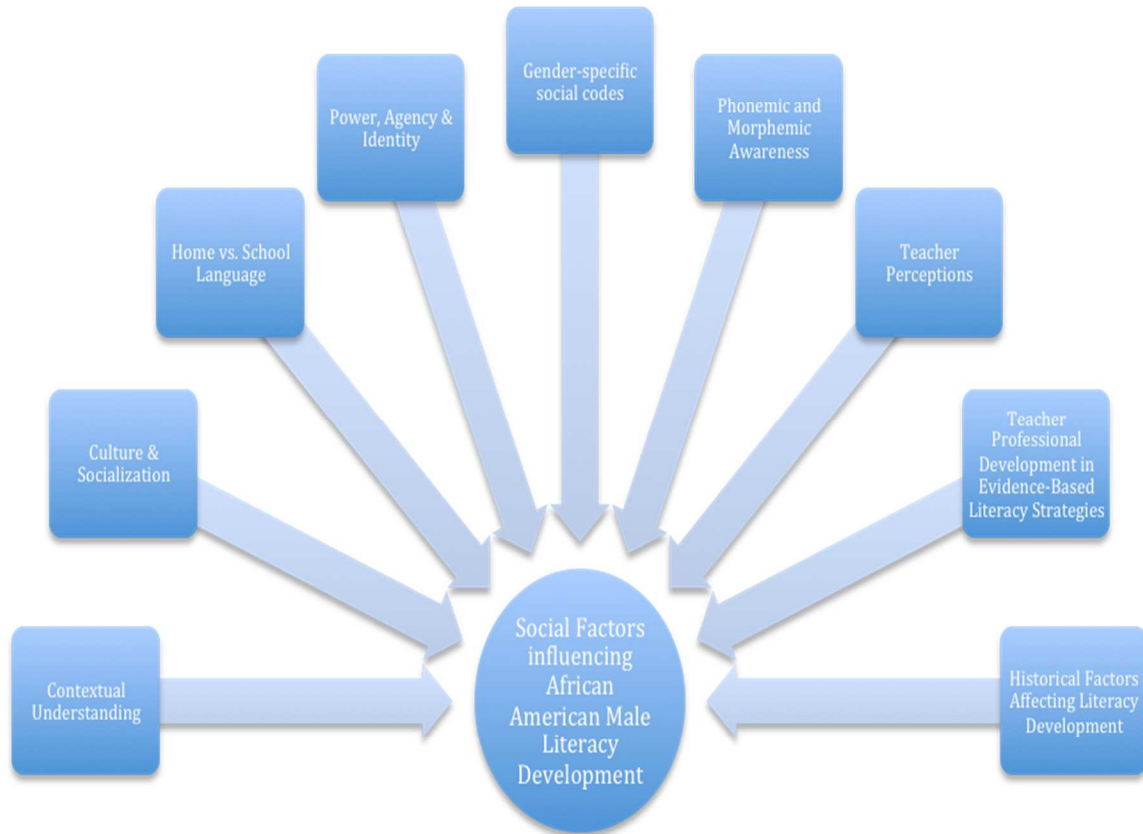
It is my belief that a deeper understanding of the literacies of African American males will contribute to improved strategies for teaching reading and literature to these

students. Although strategy development is essential, Tatum (2005) encouraged educators to go beyond strategy development,

Skills and strategies are only working tools; they have little utility for advancing students' literacy. They are similar to providing a student with a hammer and nails: simply giving someone a hammer and nails does not mean that the person will come up with the idea of building a house. (p. 85)

Strategy development integrated with opportunities for teachers to consider the role of literacy in the lives of African American male adolescents in a teacher professional development setting that was teacher-centered, gave teachers the tools to address the literacy development needs of their students and gave them the tools to develop student-centered classroom environments. Furthermore, documenting and acknowledging teachers' perceptions and understandings of their students' literacy behaviors helped teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their beliefs about the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African American males. Teacher perceptions drive their decisions about curriculum and instruction planning, pedagogy, text selection, and assessment. This study sought to understand the connection of teacher professional development to the literacy development of African American males through a sociocultural paradigm; therefore, through participation in this study, it is my belief that teachers gained a deeper understanding of students' literate lives within a broader social context.

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the sociocultural factors affecting the literacy development of African American male adolescents, builds on the work of Tatum (2005) and Livingston and Nahimana (2006), and is inclusive of the themes found in the literature review about the influences on African American male literacy development.



*Figure 2.* Conceptual model of the sociocultural factors influencing the literacy development of African American males.

### ***Research Design***

As stated previously, this study used qualitative methods for collecting and

analyzing data. The data collection methods I used aligned to my research questions and are outlined later in this chapter. Furthermore, each of the data collection methods that I identified were aligned with sound ethnographic research data collection methods (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The data collection methodologies were the following: observations and prolonged engagement, audio recordings of class discussions, surveys, focus group interviews, and participation in an online discussion board. The rationale for using the data collection methods that were identified provided a wide variety of data. In order to ensure that this study, the results, and the data analysis answered the question of trustworthiness, I included data from multiple sources, using multiple techniques. Descriptions of each of the data collection methods that I used will follow later in this chapter.

Lecompte and Schensul (1999) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) identified several ways to conduct qualitative research and collect data. The methods that were suggested by the aforementioned researchers included: observations, testing, surveying, ethnographic interviews and elicitation. However, the most useful means for an ethnographic researcher to collect data is through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. As participant-observer, I facilitated each of the five professional development sessions and engaged with the study participants for the full three hours of each one of the sessions. During the course of the sessions, I recorded table-group and whole-group discussions. While participants were engaged in table group activities, I observed and recorded the participants' conversations, their interactions, their questions to me as a facilitator, and the nuances of their behavior. After each of the sessions, I wrote thick descriptions of the environments in my

observations notes and debriefed with my colleague.

A qualitative research design helped me to meet the following important research objectives: 1) to collect data that documented teachers' perceptions of African American male literacy development and the connection to their instructional practices; and 2) to use the sociocultural paradigm as the framework to engage teachers in the book club model of teacher professional development.

### ***Purpose for Qualitative Design***

I approached this research using a sociocultural paradigm and qualitative design as the methodological framework because sociocultural research takes into account the social context in which individuals participate in literacy. As I used my research purpose and research objectives to guide the data analysis, this qualitative design provided flexibility and allowed the data to produce the findings, rather than working to prove or disprove a hypothesis. As such, in this study, I operated with the belief that there were many different truths to be explored and examined rather than one truth.

### **Context of Study**

#### ***Setting and Participants***

Participants in this study came from a group of practicing teachers who voluntarily enrolled in a five-session professional development course offered at a large local intermediate school district in the outer rim of a large midwestern city. Each session in the series was three hours long. An intermediate school district is a district that serves the students who live within the boundaries of a particular county. In the 2014-2015 school year, there were approximately 222,000 students that lived within the boundaries of the Common ISD where the study was conducted and there were



approximately 25,000 public school staff, 28 school districts, and about 208 public schools. The Common ISD enrolls students from families that come from many different countries from around the world. Common ISD also offers a robust menu of professional development opportunities for teachers from around the county and the region.

Registrants for professional development sign up for classes through a registration system offered on the Common ISD's website. Instructors for professional development include employees of the Common ISD, employees of member school districts, and state and nationally renowned experts in the field of education. Courses are offered twelve months of the year and most of the professional development offerings of Common ISD are offered at the main building located in the county seat.

Participants in this study came from the population of K-12 teachers who registered for a five-day professional development series at the Common Schools Intermediate School District. Each one of the sessions was three hours long. The enrollment for this series was limited to thirty registrants. Common ISD set the maximum number of registrants at thirty because of the size of the area in which they serve. The rationale behind the limit was to make the group size manageable. I found that the class-size of thirty was manageable and the smaller size allowed me to use data from observations of teachers' discussions, audio transcriptions of selected whole group discussions, participants' writing samples, two teacher surveys, and a follow-up focus group interview after the conclusion of the series with teachers who agreed to be part of the study. All teachers who enrolled in this professional series participated in all activities, discussions, and events, but data was collected only from those who agreed to be participants in the study. For purposes of this research, data was only collected and

analyzed from teachers enrolled in the series who agreed to be participants in the study who signed consent forms.

As a means to represent the recurring themes from the data, I conducted a case study that included four teachers who agreed to be a part of the study. Teacher-participants were unaware that they were selected to be a part of the focus analysis. In the initial teacher survey, I included areas where teachers could provide identifying information about themselves. Participant-teachers were asked to include their names, their ethnicity, the number of years they had been teaching, and their expectations of learning from the series. Although I asked participants to provide identifying information, they had the right to refuse to provide any information that they chose not to provide. The identifying information that teachers were asked to include in the initial survey helped me to vary focus participant teachers across race, teaching experience, and expectations. For data analysis, I only chose four teachers' data to include in the analysis. All identifying information was kept safe in a password protected forum and in my locked file cabinet and all participant information will be destroyed, discarded, and erased at the conclusion of the final dissertation.

The teacher development series that served as the vehicle for this study was titled, "Literacy Practices of African American Males". As stated earlier in this chapter, the primary objective of this professional development series was to engage teachers in readings, discussions, and assignments that were designed to better prepare them to make meaningful and productive connections between their own perceptions and beliefs about African American males' in-school and out-of-school literacies and how these influenced their decisions regarding text selections, pedagogy, and assessments of students' literacy

development. Teachers who participated in the study and in the professional development series represented varying backgrounds, various levels of training, multiple different uses of reading and instructional strategies, and various levels of teacher professional development support provided by their home schools and districts.

As participant-observer, facilitator, and principal investigator of this study, I reiterated the voluntary nature of the study to participants throughout the duration of the study. Teachers enrolled in this series did not receive a final grade or any other form of formal or informal evaluation. The professional development series met for approximately three hours, five times during the fall school semester. There were a maximum number of thirty teachers that were allowed to register for the series. All teachers registered for the professional development series were eligible to participate in the activities, but participation in the study where data was collected was completely voluntary.

### ***Participant-Researcher and Ethical Considerations***

One-week prior the beginning of this course, I sent an email message to all registered teachers. In this message, I explained that I was conducting a study concurrently with the professional development series and I outlined the purpose of the study. I explained that participation in the research study was completely voluntary and that teachers were welcome to enroll in the professional development series whether or not they choose to participate in the study. I sent the consent form as an attachment to the original email to give potential participants the opportunity to have time to decide whether or not they would participate in the study. Furthermore, I explained that all who decided to participate in the study would have data recorded and that the collected data

would become a part of the data set used in the findings of the final dissertation.

At the first class meeting, I distributed an information sheet that explained the study in detail and I responded to all questions and concerns that potential participants had. I then redistributed the consent form to all of the teachers who registered for the professional development series.

Many of the facilitated activities and discussions were conducted while teachers were in groups. I assigned each one of the participant teachers to their groups based on the information that they provided in the initial survey, which was completed before the start of the professional development series. The registrants who decided to opt out of the study were assigned to their own group. I initially indicated that I would need a minimum of four participants who participated in the overall study in order to maintain the validity of this research. Although the enrollment for the professional development was set at thirty registrants, to make the data set manageable, I only included the data set from four participants to be a part of the focus analysis. I selected participant data based on a cross-section of experience, ethnicity and racial background, and experience with professional development. All of the identifying information was collected in the first survey.

### **Structure of the Professional Development Series**

Teachers participated in a book club and the framework that guided the structure for the book by McMahon et al. (1997). The outline for the book club model provides the instructional rationale based and is based on the research of Vygotsky (1978) in social learning theory. McMahon et al. also posited that literacy is a social act and literacy instruction should be structured to give participants the opportunity to engage with others

in the literacy process. According to McMahon et al., a literacy intervention such as this one that used social learning theory addresses the need for learners to engage in meaningful discussion as they interact with texts. This study used the book club model as a framework to increase teachers' efficacy through professional development with regard to reading interventions and it aimed to give them the opportunity to engage with colleagues in the reading of a text while exploring sociocultural factors that influence student literacy development.

The book club model of instruction includes the following: choosing appropriate texts that are relevant to the lives of participants and that value their out-of-school reading interests to align them to expected in-school literacy (Lewis, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tatum, 2005), providing readers with the opportunity to gain social power among their peers (Lewis, 2001), and building the academic language, secondary discourse, and contextual knowledge of participants so that they can connect with texts (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 1989). In a book club, participants are divided into smaller learning groups to give them the opportunity to engage in conversations about the texts (Lewis, 2001), a practice that is directly linked to social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, participants in book clubs have a certain amount of autonomy to assign reading tasks to their group, ask questions pertinent to the reading, and participate in other writing and reading activities on which the group decides.

I selected the main text for this study; however, individual groups and the whole group generated some of the questions for discussion. Also, within the context of this study, the book club format allowed participants to discuss the tertiary sociocultural components (eg. academic language, contextual and cultural understanding) of literacy as

related to the main text.

The teachers who participated in this study were split into groups and were given reading assignments each week. The teachers who elected not to be participants in the study were assigned to their own group. Each group elected a group facilitator and this person was responsible for reporting out for the group on discussion questions during in-class discussions.

### ***Course Design***

When put into the context of African American male literacy, the sociocultural paradigm helps researchers to understand that the academic and literacy behaviors of African American male students are related to larger social and cultural constructs (Powell, 2000); thus, the social constructs that affect the achievement of African American students was explored in-depth from the teachers' perspective. The social constructs that teachers were asked about included how socialization, power, identity, and contextual understanding affect participation in literacy events using school-related content. Moreover, teachers explored how the aforementioned social constructs related to the professional development they received as a part of this study. Teachers were asked to discuss how their preparation through professional development opportunities was directly related to their ability to understand the sociocultural paradigm in which African American male literacy exists.

Student access to school content is affected by their power relationship with other students, particularly within the confines of the classroom (Lewis, 2001). Lewis' study provided a context to understand the relationship between social constructs and the literacy practices of students. Teacher knowledge about students' contextual

understanding better equips them to plan for those who experience socialization patterns that are different from that of the school environment. As a study that viewed literacy through the sociocultural paradigm, Lewis' study also included information about students' lives that affected their literacy development and academic achievement. Also, researchers like Bakhtin (2005) and Gee (1989) spoke to the connection of identity and socialization and the importance of the background that students bring to the literacy event that have an affect on their literacy experiences and contextual understanding. The concepts of socialization, identity, and power within students were important concepts that were explored in the teacher discussions. The professional development series was designed to facilitate conversations and it explored texts that addressed the sociocultural aspects of African American male literacy and teachers' efficacy in teaching their students.

The main text for this study was, *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males*, Tatum (2005). I chose Tatum (2005) because he is the leading authority in instructional design, strategy development, and professional development with regard to helping African American male students develop in-school literacy habits. Tatum is the Dean of the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and he is the director of the UIC Reading Clinic. Tatum's research focuses on the reading practices of African American males and how texts can change the lives of students.

Tatum's text served as the main text and supplementary articles for this course were identified through teachers' interests and based on themes and ideas that emerged from discussions. The complete series outline is listed as Appendix A. The series outline mapped how each session was structured. When teachers came in for the first session, I

asked them to complete a survey through Google Forms (the hard copy version is listed as Appendix B). Google Forms is an online tool that can be used to create surveys and questionnaires. The data collected from Google Forms was viewable only by the researcher and was password protected. The data collected from the second survey also was collected in using Google Forms. Google Forms also allowed me, the researcher, to download the data into an excel file and then upload it into the Atlas.ti qualitative data software. After the initial survey was initiated, the participants in the professional development series began to engage in discussions about the topics in Tatum (2005). The participants were split into cohort groups and each group was responsible for reading assigned chapters and answering guiding questions to engage in discussions within the groups. Also, I facilitated whole-group discussions and led the activities that are outlined in Appendix A. The purpose of the activities was to engage teachers in discourse about their professional development and to discuss their preparation in helping African American male students connect to in-school literacy. Each of the discussions that emerged from the activities and through the interactions within the small groups and the whole group were recorded and used as a part of the data set.

Since the book club model was the guiding instructional practice used with teachers throughout the series, they were asked guiding questions and they were asked to generate questions of their own that helped guide their thinking. Each group was asked to audio record their ideas and discussions with the whole group. As stated earlier, the initial survey was administered to provide baseline data to understand teachers' progression in thinking from their initial perceptions, pedagogy, and text selection methods to how their thinking changed as a result of engaging in this professional



development series. One of the goals of this study was to gauge the progression in thinking among the participants. The focus participant data allowed the major themes to emerge and their data from the initial survey was compared to that of the second survey. The second survey was administered at the beginning of the fourth day of the series; however, participants had the opportunity to respond to the survey for several weeks. Also, teachers had the opportunity to participate in an online discussion board that was developed to document their progression in thinking at the conclusion of each session.

As stated in Chapter Two of this study, the benefit of engaging teachers in book club as a professional development model was related to how this instructional tool was aligned to Vygotsky (1978) and social learning theory. The design of this study and professional development allowed teachers to engage in conversation about theory and their actual practices, explore ideas and topics previously not explored by them as individuals, converse with more knowledgeable others around the topic of connecting in-school literacy and out-of-school literacy, and access the possible trajectory of acquirable knowledge based on their prior knowledge of the subject (Vygotsky, 1978).

The professional development series occurred over the course of five different sessions. There were three sessions in the span of a month, with the final two in the second month. Each session was three hours in length. The purpose for spreading out the sessions in this manner was twofold: 1) the time between sessions gave participants the opportunity to complete the reading that was a major component of the study; and 2) the time elapsed between sessions allowed participants' thinking to evolve as a result of having contact with others who were engaged in the same work (Vygotsky, 1978).

To summarize, the first day of the series involved surveying teachers about their

perceptions, text selections, and pedagogy that they used that specifically engaged the interests of African American males. In the beginning of the first session, I established the purpose of viewing the literacy of African American males through the sociocultural paradigm by leading a discussion on contextual knowledge, identity, academic language, and the historical factors that have affected the literacy behaviors of African Americans. As the facilitator, I led two separate whole-group activities before teachers were split into cohort groups.

The first activity was called “The 5 Why’s”. In this activity, I gave participants a statement to which they had to respond by asking themselves why, five different times. After each answer to the why question, the teachers were asked to provide an answer and then ask why again until they reached the fifth and final answer. Teachers participated in this activity individually and then shared out responses to the whole group. The purpose of this activity was to get to the root of why they believed that African American male students do not perform as well on literacy assessments as their white counterparts.

Another activity that I facilitated for teachers was called “Go To Your Corners”. In this activity, I gave participants four themes or concepts and they were asked choose which one most identified with their current thinking about a particular statement or conversation. Participants moved to their corners, represented by one of the four themes, and discussed with the other participants within that group about why they chose the theme. After participants discussed their choices with the small group, they shared out their discussion with the large group. For this activity, participants were asked which of the following has a greater affect on African American male literacy development: teacher professional development, identity, academic language, or socialization. The

aforementioned facilitation techniques are listed in Lipton and Wellman (2011) and were used to activate knowledge of group participants.

Participant teachers were then split into cohort groups and they were given guided questions aligned to the main text. The aim of the discussion questions helped to generate thinking around participants' current practices and information presented in the text.

The second day of the series included the activity, "Here's What!/So What?/Now What?". The purpose of this activity was to help participants identify the current state and relevant data of African American male student achievement, their own educational practices, what measures they took to address inconsistencies or failed attempts at solving the problem. Furthermore, participants were asked to generate ideas of a future state. The first activity of the second meeting helped to document participants' thinking and guided participants in goal setting for educational planning (Lipton & Wellman, 2011).

After participating in the activity, participants were split back into cohort groups and they participated in a number of discussions. First, participants were given a general definition of literacy as documented in this study. Participants were then asked to discuss the definition of literacy given to them and asked to add any components that they deemed necessary. The purpose of this activity was to aid in participants' reconceptualization of their own definition of literacy. Then, each group was asked to share out their definitions that initiated a whole-group discussion. The discussion that emerged was recorded and added to the data set. Subsequent to the discussion about the definition of literacy, participants were asked to review the nesting ground framework of Tatum (2005) and they discussed the importance of each of the strands within the

framework; theoretical strand, instructional strand, and professional development strand (p. 42). Participants discussed how they used each of the aforementioned strands to improve the connection to in-school literacy for their African American male students.

Another activity that was facilitated as a part of the series included “What’s the Problem? What’s Not the Problem?” The purpose of the activity was to help participants separate the root causes of an issue from the larger conversation (Lipton & Wellman, 2011, p. 53). This activity and others will be explained more in-depth in the overview of the activities in Chapter Four and the data analysis in Chapter Five to provide context, purpose, and importance.

One of the activities of the fourth day of the series involved participants completing the second survey. As explained previously, the purpose of the second survey was to document the progression in thinking among the participants from the inception of the professional development series to how their thinking changed as a result of participating in the course. After completing the second survey, I provided guided reading questions to each of the cohort groups to guide their discussions about the assigned reading from the text. Each group was then asked to record their small group discussions and report them out to the whole group.

During the fifth day of the series, I began the session by leading participants in a chunking exercise with an excerpt from *The Book Club Connection*. The excerpt from the book was entitled: “The Book Club Program: Theoretical and Research Foundations”. Participants then reported out from each of their individual groups on the information that their group read. As individuals, participants used their second or re-conceptualized definition of literacy that they wrote during the fourth session and they compared it to

their beginning definitions that they submitted at the start of the professional development series. As a group, we then engaged in a discussion about how teachers' perceptions and thinking evolved as a result of participating in the professional development series.

On the final day, participants were asked to sign-up to participate in a focus group interview that was conducted a week after the conclusion of the fifth day of the series. The participants and I mutually agreed upon a day and time for the group to meet. I provided each of the participants of the focus group interview with a gift card to Barnes and Noble.

Throughout the series, participants were asked to answer questions relative to discussions, write reflections, and write about their understandings of African American male literacy and the relationship to the social constructs. Along with exploring issues of the relationship of social class, power, identity, and socialization to student literacy behaviors, throughout the series, participant teachers explored ideas about how they could promote self-esteem in students based on their own text selections, solidify students' connections to their identities, increase self-efficacy and agency, and help their African American male students represent appropriate social codes through the connection of their out-of-school literacies to in-school literacy.

### **Data Collection**

As stated earlier, data collection methods included the following: observation and field notes, transcripts of selected small group and whole class discussions collected from audio recordings, online message board discussions, participants' writing samples, two surveys, and one follow-up focus group interview. Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba (2000) and

Thurmond (2001) supported that researchers should use a variety of data collection methods, particularly when conducting qualitative or mix-method designed studies so that the results are valid and reliable. By using the aforementioned data collection techniques, I aligned this study with research proven data collection methods that produced a reliable and valid study. The data analysis included a case study of specific teachers that represented the range of responses and development of thinking and change in ideas for practice. Table 1 outlines the collection process, explaining the purpose and process for collecting each data source.

Table 1

*Data Collection Methodology: Data Source, Method, and Purpose of Method used to Elicit Participant Responses*

Data Source	Method of Data Collection	Purpose
Survey One	The first survey was administered as an online survey using Google forms. Each participant in the professional development series was sent a link to this survey. Only the data from those who agreed to participate in the study was used.	The purpose of the first survey was to collect initial information about teachers' perceptions about African American male in-school and out-of-school literacies, self-efficacy, and experiences with prior professional development. This survey was available before the professional development started and was administered on the first day of the PD series.
Survey Two	The second survey was also administered as an online survey that was administered to participants at the beginning of the fourth day of the series.	The purpose of the second survey was to collect interim data on teachers' perceptions as they progressed through the professional development series. Furthermore, the second survey provided useful data to the researcher with regard to how the professional development series influenced their pedagogy.
Observation and Field Notes	The researcher maintained a set of notes that helped to provide a thick description of the research environment. The observation notes also documented the conversations, questions asked of the researcher, the mood of the group and	The purpose of collecting field notes was to give the researcher the opportunity to record data immediately. The observation and field notes became a part of the researcher's reflection and guided the researcher in planning subsequent

	individuals, and the nuances of group behavior.	sessions.
Edmodo Discussion	Edmodo is a free online tool that was created specifically for educators. Edmodo allows educators to develop threaded discussion boards used to collect information, transmit documents, and communicate information to participants.	The purpose of collecting data through Edmodo was to give participants the opportunity to immediately discuss thoughts about readings and respond to their discussion groups. The intent for this was to begin discussions on Edmodo and expand on ideas once participants came back to the professional development sessions.
Focus Group Interview	The researcher recorded the focus group interview with an app on a mobile device. The app that I used to record the focus group interview was a free one that was loaded on the device when purchased.	The purpose of the interview was to follow-up with participants on their reflections regarding their experiences in the course, development of new ideas and understandings, and anticipated changes in curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, interview questions were structured to allow participants the opportunity to reflect upon their progression of thinking during their time in the series.



Case Study of Selected Participants	The case study will consist of the culmination of data collected through other means	The purpose of the case study was to give the researcher the ability to identify the progression of thinking and understanding relative to their initial thoughts about African American male literacy and their experiences with professional development. The data collected and introduced through the case studies helped me with analysis and helped me to arrive at a conclusion about the efficacy of the professional development series as a model for instruction
Participants' Writing Samples	Throughout the series, participants were asked to answer questions relative to discussions, write reflections, and to write about their understandings of African American male literacy and the relationship to the social constructs about which we will be discussing.	The purpose of collecting writing samples as a data source was to document the participants' progression of thinking and understanding from the beginning of the course to the end. Writings of the participants were collected throughout the series.
Audio Recordings of Sessions	The researcher recorded and had the discussions transcribed throughout the series. The recorder that was used was an electronic iOS device that gave the researcher the ability to store the audio data digitally.	The purpose of recording sessions was to get an accurate depiction of the conversations and the thinking generated by teachers during the span of the professional development

### ***Discourse Analysis as a Coding Framework***

To support my research objectives, I applied a coding system that allowed me to identify data that emerged into themes. The coding system that I used is outlined further in the section on data analysis. After all of the data was collected, it was transcribed and uploaded as text into the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. The Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software was also used as a repository for audio recordings derived from interviews, to establish code families, and to construct models and charts that represented the relationships between themes in multiple sources of data. With the administration of a coding system applied to the data, I was able to pinpoint which themes recurred. Although there are several brands of qualitative analysis software available, I chose Atlas.ti as the preferred brand because of its popularity among research universities and its compatibility with Mac computers. Furthermore, Atlas.ti identified itself as the preferred qualitative data analysis platform used by Wayne State University, the doctoral program that supported this study.

Although there were twenty-five participants who agreed to be a part of the study, I chose four of the participants to focus on their data and be a part of the data analysis. As previously mentioned, I chose participants for the focus participants based on the following criteria: participants' ethnicity, number of years in teaching, unique experiences in the field, and prior experience with professional development specifically aimed at helping them address the literacy needs of African American male students. Teachers included identifying information about themselves as a part of the initial survey data and I also collected information about participants during from observations. In order to get diverse perspectives and to achieve generalizability in the results, I applied

the same criteria for each one of the participants for selection for the focus participants and I chose participants from a wide-range of backgrounds according to the selection criteria. In my observation notes, I documented the conversations and activities of the participants.

After applying the initial coding framework to the data, I conducted the initial domain analysis by coding the participant data using the six building tasks of discourse analysis. I conducted the initial data analysis according to procedures used to conduct domain analyses as outlined by Prieto-Diaz (1990) and Spradley (1980). Each one of the building tasks served as its own domain and I applied the building task and its accompanying definition to each piece of data collected from the participants. By coding the data using the building tasks, while in the process of conducting an ongoing analysis, I was able to determine which of the ideas within the data occurred most frequently among individual participants and among the participants as a group.

As a part of the ongoing data analysis, I performed a taxonomic analysis and by using the Atlas.ti qualitative software, I established a network of each building task and research question, and determined how those pieces of data linked to one another. For instance, I isolated a particular building task, all of the data that was attributed to it, and its connection to my research questions. Through this action, I was able to see which themes among the coded data recurred. Additionally, the software allowed me to build co-occurrence tables. The co-occurrence tables allowed me to establish the six building tasks as columns in the table, and the six building tasks, participants' names, and my research questions as rows. Within the coding process, I established participants' names and research questions as codes so that they could also be linked to specific pieces of data.

The co-occurrence tables helped me to cross-reference data that was coded to each of the building tasks to participants and research questions to establish their frequency of occurrence. Since building tasks, participants' names, and research questions were all coded and connected to interview, writing, observation notes and audio data, I then was able to review the data several times and identified recurring themes. The initial themes and the emerging themes are represented in Figure 3. Performing the taxonomic analysis in this way was also aligned to methods suggested by Spradley (1980). I used discourse analysis, using the six building tasks (Appendix E), to help extrapolate themes (Figure 3) from the collected data (Gee, 1999).

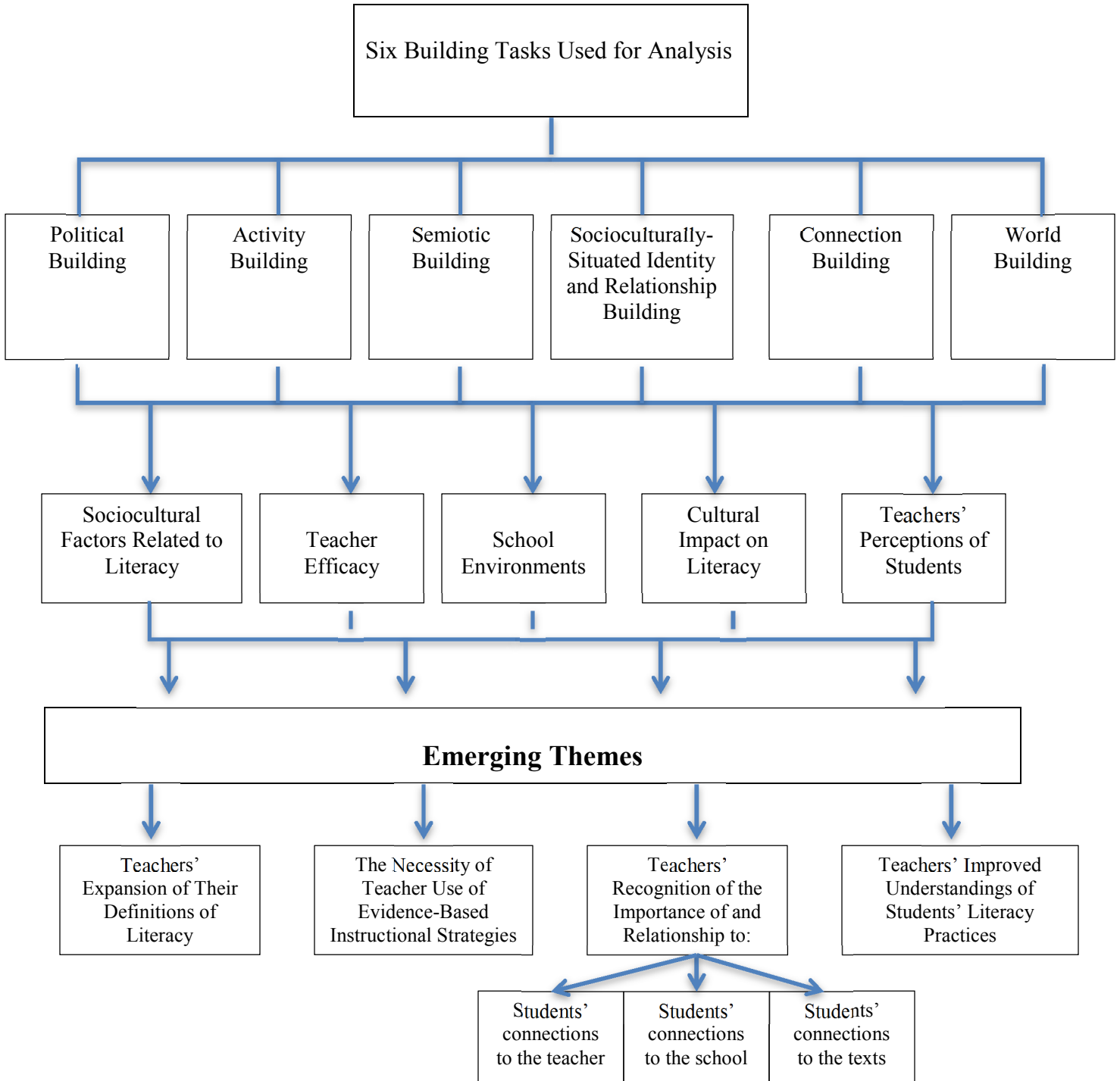


Figure 3. The six building tasks of Discourse Analysis used to do initial coding and identify emerging themes.

Each one of the building tasks of discourse analysis has a specific definition that applies to the context human beings use to respond to information shared within a discourse community (Gee, 1999). I chose discourse analysis to use as a coding framework because it was closely aligned to the research questions of this study. The six building tasks are: political building, activity building, semiotic building, socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building, connection building, and world building. Chapter Four will provide deeper explanations of the themes that emerged from the data of the case study participants; furthermore, Chapter Five will provide deeper analysis of each of the focus participants and how their data helped me to answer the research questions of this study.

Human language and thought is dynamic and nuanced and when analyzed, it should be done so through a framework that captures the ways in which we speak and think. Discourse analysis helps to accomplish the task of framing human discourse and the accompanying thoughts and perceptions of the surrounding environment. The following provides the definitions of each one of the six building tasks by Gee (1999),

1. **Semiotic building:** that is, using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what semiotic (communicative) systems, systems of knowledge, and ways of knowing, are here and now relevant and activated.
2. **World building:** using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what is here and now (taken as) “reality,” what is here and now (taken as) present and absent, concrete and abstract, “real” and “unreal,” probable, possible, and impossible.
3. **Activity building:** using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what activity or activities are going on, composed of what specific actions.
4. **Socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building:** using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what identities and relationships are relevant to the interaction, with their concomitant attitudes, values, ways of feeling, ways of knowing and believing, as well as ways of acting and interacting.
5. **Political building:** using cues or clues to construct the nature and relevance of various “social goods,” such as status and power, and anything else taken as a “social

good” here and now (e.g. beauty, humor, verbalness, specialist knowledge, a fancy car, etc.).

6. **Connection building:** using cues or clues to make assumptions about how the past and future of an interaction, verbally and non-verbally, are connected to the present moment and to each other – after all, interactions always have some degree of continuous coherence. (p. 85-86)

Gee’s building tasks related directly to the questions of this research study. The research questions of this study focused on the perceptions, actions, and sociocultural understanding of teachers as those themes related to the instruction of literacy for African-American males. The six building tasks of discourse analysis helped to unpack the ideas in human thought, speech, and interactions and the framework allowed me to identify the themes within my research questions and assign meaning to them.

### *Phenomenological Stance*

I chose the phenomenological stance for approaching this research. There exists a phenomenon within the field of education that, according to the assessments by which we rate our effectiveness in educating students, African American male students are failing. Though much of African American school performance is labeled as failure and measured by quantitative assessments and data collection metrics, the evidence presented in the review of literature of this study, outlined literacy development as a fluid process that cannot be measured accurately using quantitative metrics. Furthermore, as literacy is the basic foundation for academic success, it should be viewed as the most necessary component of African American male students’ schooling to increase chances for school success. This study collected data from teachers, who are the closest to the success and failure of African American male students, and analyzed their conversations, their responses to activities, and situated them in an environment that allowed them to reflect upon their own practices.

This study, which documented teachers' progression in thinking about their perceptions about African American male students, collected data about their understandings of in-school and out-of-school literacy, and encouraged them to use the book club model of professional development in their pedagogy by their participation in a five-day series of professional development, presented a dynamic structure that could not be explained by data collected through empirical methodologies. Thus, the phenomenological stance provided me with the opportunity to account for, document, and analyze the features of human actions and interactions, which were constantly changing and nuanced. The phenomenological approach to this research, the implementation of a qualitative methodology, and the data analysis called for the need to recognize and identify the consciousness and experiences of the participants, and identify phenomena in the data that resulted in the major themes that emerged (Giorgi, 1997).

### *Surveys*

Two surveys were administered to collect data on teachers' initial perceptions of their African American male students' efficacy in developing school-appropriate literacy practices. Each teacher enrolled in the professional development series was asked to complete the surveys; however, only the data from teachers who agreed to be a part of this study was used in the final data analysis. Teachers were asked to include identifying information on their surveys that included their name, number of years in education, ethnicity, and expectations for the professional development series. The purpose for asking this information was to gain an understanding about the registrants of the professional development series. Although teachers were told that giving identifying information was strictly voluntary, identifying information helped me ascertain those



who had agreed to be participants in the study and it helped me assemble data for the case studies. The surveys were also used to frame discussions about the connection of teachers' perceptions of their students' in-school literacy practices to their choices for text selections, their implementation of specific instructional strategies, and the development of assessments. Data from the surveys were also used to provide a foundation for discussions about teachers' feelings of self-efficacy and personal biases. Discussions were centered on how the potential for teachers' negative perceptions and biases could contribute to students' rejection of in-school literacy and potentially lead to school failure. An analysis of the surveys and the resulting discussions contributed to better understanding the relationship between African American male literacy development, teacher efficacy, and the preparedness of teachers in the area of literacy instruction.

Survey #1 had sixteen questions. Survey #2 had eight questions (Appendix C). Each survey took approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete. I varied the questions on each of the surveys to gather information about teachers' experiences with developing literacy in African American males, the teachers' perceptions of African American students' agency as learners, their experiences and satisfaction with professional education, their concept and definition of literacy, and whether or not their thinking progressed as a result in participation of the professional development series.

### ***Observations and Field Notes***

As participant-observer, I took observation notes and field notes of the study environment as the participants were engaging in the activities of the study. The purpose of the field notes was to document the physical movements of the participants, the mood

of the room, and it allowed me as the researcher to record the events of the study as they happened. The observations and field notes also allowed me to engage in persistent observation and prolonged engagement of the research environment. Persistent observation is the identification of the characteristics and elements in the research environment that are relevant to the problem or the issue being pursued. After each of the sessions, I used my observation and field notes to write a thick description of the study environment. A thick description is a detailed account of the events, discussions, the mood of the participants, and the physical space of the study environment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lecompte & Schensul, 1999; Thurmond, 2001). Writing a thick description allowed me to recall and document the specific data that could not be recorded in audio recordings or other data collection methods. Although using electronic means was useful in recording data from discussions, audio recordings were not useful in documenting specific data that could only be documented in a thick description. The use of audio recordings as a primary means to collect data will be discussed in-depth in the audio recording section.

### ***Edmodo Discussion***

Participants in the study had the opportunity to engage in an ongoing discussion through an online message board called Edmodo. As the researcher and facilitator of the online discussions, I started an account with Edmodo. The online message board was a free, secure site that allowed me to collect information in a few different ways. As the moderator of the online event, I was able to ask questions based on conversations in which the group engaged during the course of the face-to-face sessions. I also had the ability to create polls and create formative assessments. After each session, I posted

questions on Edmodo that engaged participants' thinking. I set up individual groups in Edmodo based on the assignment of participants in groups in the session.

Participants were asked to participate in the online Edmodo discussion between each of the sessions. Participants were told that their engagement in Edmodo discussions was voluntary but that their participation was greatly appreciated in that increased participation had the potential to give the study greater depth and to help to establish validity. Based on the depth of the questions, it was estimated that participation on Edmodo took five to ten minutes per question. However, participants in the study did not engage in the Edmodo portion of data collection as much as I would have liked. Many participants remarked that they did not have the time or simply forgot to include responses. Therefore, data collected on the Edmodo site was not included in the final data set.

### ***Focus Group Interview***

The focus group interview was conducted at the completion of the professional development series. Since I was the facilitator the professional development series, serving as participant-researcher, it was important that researcher-bias was controlled; therefore, the focus group interview had to be conducted after the course series was completed. There were a total of four participants in the focus group interview, including one who responded to the interview questions electronically. Participation in the focus group was strictly voluntary.

The focus group interview was approximately 90 minutes in duration and took place in a room at a local library. The focus group interview was conducted one week after the completion of the course. Interview questions provided an opportunity for

participants to reflect on their pedagogical practices, to comment about the efficacy of the professional development provided in class, and to discuss their progression in thinking from the first class to the last class.

Focus group interviews were conducted with the participant teachers that volunteered to further their participation in the research study. The interview questions were distributed to the participants beforehand to give them the opportunity to be familiar with the themes that I addressed with them (Appendix D). The purpose of the focus group interviews was to obtain information regarding teachers' perceptions of student literacy habits in school, teacher self-efficacy, the sociocultural themes that contribute to literacy development, and the role of professional development in addressing the literacy needs of students. Focus group interviews serve as viable tools for those conducting ethnographic research (Thurmond, 2001). The purpose for conducting the focus-group interviews after the conclusion of professional development series was to give teachers the opportunity to reflect on their progress in thinking from the beginning of the series to the end. Furthermore, conducting the focus group interviews after the conclusion of the course provided the time for me to start the data analysis to better prepare for the interview. I also used the time between the conclusion of the series and the interview to contact interview volunteers and confirm their participation. Teachers were given an incentive to participate in the interview. I offered each teacher who participated in the interview a fifteen-dollar gift card to Barnes and Noble to use as they wished. As the facilitator of the professional development series and principal investigator, I was the primary contact for the focus group interview.

### ***Focus Participants***

Subjects were identified using a range of criteria that included: their total number of years in the profession of teaching, experience teaching African American male readers, their own ethnicity, the uniqueness of the data collected from them, and feelings on the effectiveness of previous professional development related activities. Krefting (1991) pointed out that the popularity in using case studies as a method of data collection and data analysis in ethnographic research illuminates the need to record data in a manner that is as fluid and flexible as the lives that are documented. The purpose behind focusing on the data on a small number of participants as a means for data collection for this study gave me the ability to focus on the expertise of a few participant educators and extract common themes from their data. I used this method as a means to gather data and isolate themes across all of the teacher demographic groups that were represented among study participants. In the data analysis, I compared the data collected from focus participants to certain data collected from the remaining study participants. The purpose of extracting this information was to increase the trustworthiness of this study.

### ***Writing Samples***

Writing samples were collected from the participants throughout the professional development series. The purpose of collecting data from writing samples was to determine the progression in participants' thinking from the time the professional development series started to the end. I collected approximately 2-3 writing samples from each teacher-participant but I only used the writing samples from the study participants. Writing samples were generated from questions that were developed as a part of the overall group discussion and were inclusive of participants' thinking at the

time that the questions were asked. Teachers responded to guiding questions on note cards, paper, or on designated recording sheets that I provided. Teachers were instructed that the facilitator would collect their writing samples. I used the writing samples of the participants who agreed to have their samples used in the final data set; thus, the inclusion of writing samples was voluntary on the part of the participant. The individual writing samples were separate from the writing that participants completed on Edmodo and through other data collection methods.

### *Audio Recordings*

I recorded each of the sessions during the table group and whole group discussion time. The audio recordings of each of the sessions helped me to capture important data that I would have missed when I was taking field notes. I recorded discussions on iPads. Once I recorded conversations on the devices, I transferred the audio data onto a flash drive, and then saved them onto my personal computer. After I gathered the data from the recordings, I had each of the sessions transcribed and uploaded them to the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. I then used the software to help me to identify emerging themes. The data from table group of the teachers who elected to not be participants in the study was not recorded. I explained to teachers their right to not have their voices recorded, even if they signed the consent form to participate in the study.

I collected data through two teacher perception surveys, observation and filed notes, Edmodo discussions, digital recordings of sessions, focus group interviews, and teachers' writing samples. After all the data from each source was collected and transcribed, I uploaded it to the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software, which I purchased for use on my computer. Table 2 establishes the link between each one of my

research questions to my data collection methodology. A behavioral research consent form, which outlined the course design and the data collection methods, was distributed to participants before they took part in the study (Appendix F).

Table 2  
*Data Collection methods Aligned to Research Questions*

<b>Research Questions</b>	Surveys	Observation & Field notes	Edmodo	Focus Group Interview	Focus Participant Data	Writing Samples	Audio Recordings
Research Question #1	X	X		X	X	X	X
Research Question #2		X		X	X	X	X
Research Question #3	X	X		X	X		X



### ***Data Analysis***

For the purposes of analyzing the data, I chose four of the overall twenty-five teacher-participants to conduct deeper analysis. I chose the focus participants based on the following criteria: participants' ethnicity, number of years in teaching, unique experiences in the field, and prior experience with professional development specifically aimed at helping them increase in-school literacy among students. Teachers included information about the aforementioned criteria in their initial survey data and used notes from observations that I collected during the sessions. In order to get diverse perspectives and to achieve generalizability in the results, I applied the same criteria for each one of the participants for the case study and I chose participants from a wide-range of backgrounds, according to the selection criteria. In my observation notes, I documented the conversations and activities of the participants.

The coding system that I used was derived from the work of Gee (1999) that set the framework for discourse analysis. Gee described discourse (or language) in the following manner:

Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write creates that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place. (p. 11)

As previously defined, a discourse can be a spoken language or vernacular, a code of ethics, or meanings derived from surface level or underlying meanings in language or behaviors (Gee, 1999; Kucer, 2009). The participants in this study participated in a discourse about their perceptions and understandings of the literacies of African American male students through the sociocultural lens. The data collection and analysis

methods that I identified in this chapter enabled me to identify recurring themes based on Gee's (1999) methods and theory on discourse analysis. Within a discourse community, participants engage in an exchange of verbal and written signs, codes, and modes of behavior based on accepted norms within that community. For this study, teachers were the participants in a discourse community and I documented their experiences as teachers relative to how they teach African American students.

Gee's work on discourse analysis provided the foundation for the initial coding. Discourse analysis involved coding data using six building tasks: 1) semiotic building; 2) world building; 3) activity building; 4) socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building; 5) political building; and 6) connection building (Gee, 1999). A detailed definition of each of the six building tasks is provided in Appendix E.

The six building tasks acted in concert with one another to formulate the discourse community (Gee, 1999). In that regard, the participants of this study acted in similar ways that students act during in-school literacy events. Gee (1999) posited that the six building tasks used in discourse analysis "use language as a means to construct or construe a situation in certain ways and not others" (p. 86). Therefore, the building tasks served as the foundation of the construction of knowledge in this study by classifying the data (or language) collected through the various methods previously identified. Within the discourse community of this study, the construction of knowledge helped me to answer the research questions that I identified.

The book club model provided the occasion for participants to engage in dialogue, participate in inquiry, challenge previous notions of literacy and teachers' pre-conceived notions about their African American male students, and re-conceptualize literacy based

on their progression in thinking. Each one of the research questions in this study provided the structure for the analysis that also included the six building tasks. The building tasks served as my coding framework and the emerging themes were identified as a result.

I structured the data analysis as such that each building task was represented within each of the research questions; however, within a particular research question, each building task may not have had themes specific to that question. The totality of themes that emerged spanned across, and was represented in, the research questions. The data analysis also included how the themes related to the overall idea of understanding literacy and the relationship to teacher perceptions, text selections, and pedagogy based on the professional development that they received. Aligning the data collection sources to the research questions helped me to keep focus and to make sure that each one of my research questions was addressed in the study.

After applying the initial coding framework to the data, I conducted the initial domain analysis by coding the participant data using the six building tasks. I conducted the initial data analysis according to procedures used to conduct domain analysis as outlined by Prieto-Diaz (1990) and Spradley (1980). Each one of the building tasks served as its own domain and I applied the building task and its accompanying definition to each piece of data collected from the participants. By coding the data using the building tasks, while in the process of conducting an ongoing analysis, I was able to determine which of the terms or ideas within the data occurred most frequently among individual participants and among the participants as a group.

As a part of the ongoing data analysis through taxonomic analysis and by using the Atlas.ti qualitative software, I established a network of each building task and

research question, and determined how those pieces of data linked to one another. For instance, I isolated a particular building task, all of the data that was attributed to it, and its connection to my research questions. Through this action, I was able to see which themes among the coded data recurred. Additionally, the software allowed me to build a co-occurrence table. With the co-occurrence table, I established the six building tasks as columns in the table, and the six building tasks, participants' names, and my research questions as rows.

Within the coding process, I established participants' names and research questions as codes so that they could also be linked to specific pieces of data. The co-occurrence table helped me to cross-reference data that was coded to each of the building tasks to participants and research questions to establish their frequency of occurrence. Since building tasks, participants' names, and research questions were all coded and connected to interview, writing, observation notes and audio data, I then was able to go back to the data and review it several times, which led to identifying recurring themes. The initial themes and the major themes that emerged were represented in Figure 3 (p. 138) of this chapter. Performing the taxonomic analysis in this way was also aligned to methods suggested by Spradley (1980).

### ***Triangulation and trustworthiness***

Ethnographic studies should be designed in such a way that there are multiple means of collecting data to lend to the validity of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thurmond, 2001). Validity was established in this study by ensuring that the results were generalizable, that the design of the study was aligned to research-based study designs, and that the participant sample was large enough and representative of the larger

population. Furthermore, this study was valid because it can be replicated and would produce the same results. In order to add to the validity of this study, I initially determined that I would need 3-5 study participants. I had a total of 25 participants, although my data analysis was conducted with the data of the four focus participants. Also, the detailed course outline and the data collection methods that were aligned to sound ethnographic research practices all lent to the validity of the study and the data analysis.

Another way that research studies achieve validity is through the triangulation of the data. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources, multiple methods of data collection, multiple investigators, and multiple theories (Lecompte & Schensul, 1999). I chose to triangulate the data collection methods for this study. Thurmond (2001) also identified multiple ways to triangulate a study. She supported the notion that research studies should be triangulated through data collection triangulation, researcher triangulation, methodological triangulation, data analysis triangulation, and theoretical triangulation (p. 254). This study was conducted as a series with five different dates, over the course of a month and a half; thus, data collection triangulation through the multiple methods that I identified previously, allowed me to collect information across time, experiences, and events to which the study participants were subject. Using the data collection method of triangulation added to the trustworthiness in the overall findings.

I chose not to triangulate using the other methods of triangulation because this study used a professional development model, which did not lend to accompanying multiple researchers. Furthermore, I chose not to triangulate the methodology, as this

study measured teachers' pedagogy, experiences, and progression in thinking through a sociocultural paradigm and was aligned to how literacy is developed in the students who the participants taught. Finally, I chose not to triangulate using multiple theories, as the book club model, which is grounded in the Vygotsky's social learning theory and was the guiding framework for this professional development, is an evidence-based intervention to improve how individuals connect with texts, ideas, and increase literate behaviors (Goatley et al., 1997; Hattie, 2009). Thus, the methods for collecting data that I used were aligned with the most effective data collection methods.

As a researcher, triangulation of the data helped me to establish trustworthiness. Krefting (1991) outlined a model developed by Guba (1981) that included four subsets of trustworthiness in ethnographic research: truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (p. 215).

Truth-value assesses whether or not the researcher has established confidence in the findings of the study due to the data that participants have presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krefting, 1991). As previously stated, my colleague was present and observed teachers as I served as participant-observer. After each of the sessions, I debriefed with him to receive feedback and to help establish confidence in the overall findings. The questions I used to debrief with him are listed in Appendix G. I maintained truth-value by consulting with my colleague about my role as a researcher, and participant-observer.

Applicability assesses whether or not the findings of the study can be applicable to different settings if the study were to be reproduced. However, Krefting pointed out that applicability is difficult to determine in qualitative designs because as a naturalistic

inquiry, the participants, the setting, and the data they produce will all be different. I addressed the issue of applicability in this study through the provision and application of a detailed study design.

Consistency assesses whether or not the replication of the study would produce the same results. Once I considered the data gathered from the various data sources, I made the assumption that if the setting, the course design, data collection methods, and the overall methodology were replicated, and if the study is followed as outlined, one would come to the same conclusions through the data analysis.

Neutrality assesses whether or not the researcher approaches the study and its findings from an objective perspective. To make sure that I maintained objectivity, I kept a researcher journal to document my feelings and actions after each session. I debriefed with my colleague who has an earned doctorate and is familiar with ethnographic research. The design of this study, the data collection methods, and the data analysis addressed all of the criteria to establish trustworthiness.

I used triangulation with my data collection methodology and it allowed me to gather data using multiple modalities. Without triangulation, the analysis of the data would have been one-sided, not presenting a complete answer to each of the research questions. Also, if I had presented data that was derived from limited sources, using limited methods, I would have created the potential to generate bias; thus, making the findings of this study questionable.

### **Summary**

As stated earlier, this study was conducted within the sociocultural paradigm. The qualitative nature of this study allowed me to take into account the cultural and

instructional practices of the teachers that were involved, as it helped me to make connections between teachers' perceptions and the literacy development of the African American male students that they taught. Moreover, the data collection methodology employed by this study helped to produce a robust data set that was inclusive of nuanced and variance in human thought, language, and action.

Through the use of multiple data collection methods and triangulation, I was able to answer questions of trustworthiness, truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. It was important to produce a study that answered these questions regarding the confidence in the findings, particularly with a qualitative study such as this one. Although difficulties may arise with replicating naturalistic studies, the course design, the activities, and the use of the coding framework (discourse analysis) developed as a part of the research design of this study, if followed, other researchers should realize similar results through analysis.



**CHAPTER 4 – A WALK IN THEIR KICKS: UNDERSTANDING HOW TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS AND PEDAGOGY INFLUENCES THE CONNECTION TO IN-SCHOOL LITERACY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS**

“Click clack.”

No amount of onomatopoeia can aptly describe the sound that a 9mm handgun makes as it is cocked, aimed, and prepared to be fired. At the age of ten, I stared down the barrel of a 9mm handgun for the first time in my life. At that very moment, literacy could not have saved my life, but it could have saved his.

“Check in dem shoes, homey.”

These were the words of the teenager that was in process of helping me understand the concept of preservation of one’s own life over materialism. I was scared. There has not been a single event in my life that has left such an indelible mark on my memory such as this one has. The shoes to which he was referring were my brand new pair of Adidas Top Ten high-tops that my uncle had just bought me for getting good grades. I was a fifth grader, who in a blink of an eye, was thrust into the world of pain, aggression, and limited options of the young man that was robbing me. However, it wasn’t until later on in my life that I understood the significance of this event. I have always loved the city of Detroit, but I knew that I never wanted my own children to have this type of experience.

On that balmy spring day in 1985, I was also in the midst of dealing with my own pain. However, that young man never actually stole my shoes that day. I was a rather large ten-year-old (I probably was the size of a fifteen-year-old) and I had the feet of a grown man.

“What size shoes you wear?!” he shouted at me.

“Ten.”

“Yo feet too big.”

It turned out that my feet were too big for him to fit my shoes. He tried to steal my shoes, but he stole much more from me. He stole my innocence. He could not walk in my shoes, nor could I have walked in his. This was not the only thing that separated us as black boys attempting to navigate our way in this society, facing similar seemingly, and insurmountable odds. I never officially met the young man, but I would venture to say that his educational options were not enough to engage him in academic pursuits. I carried books. He carried guns. I played the violin and cello. He staked out playgrounds for his next play. I solved equations. He robbed people. I was at school playing softball on the playground with my friends when he changed my life. He was not at school. Currently, I am an educator and leader of a school district. I often wonder what he is doing. I currently walk in my own shoes. I wonder if he walks in his own shoes.

It was encounters like this with a young black man in turmoil that ultimately brought me to this research study. I have used my personal experiences to guide my research interests and I have used those experiences to help teachers understand how the psyche, experiences, and educational options of young black men contribute to them either connecting, disassociating, or straddling school literacy. In my professional career, I have sought to understand the factors that may contribute to the discrepancies in achievement among young, black men.

The curricula that participant teachers in this study engaged in was intended to enable them to better appreciate how literacy events can positively impact the lives of students; particularly the lives of black adolescent boys. The analysis of the data

presented in this chapter is designed to enable us all to better teach and value the kinds of literacies in-school that enhance the lives of these young lives outside of school. Furthermore, teachers in this study were asked to consider how the turmoil often present in the lives of many African American male students impacts their in-school and out-of-school literacy practices and access to school content. Teachers were asked to engage in inquiry and reflection about their practices and perceptions and to consider how classroom literacy events improved and/or impeded African American male students' connections to in-school literacy. Thus, the intent is that the data analysis presented in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, will help to illuminate the relationship of the perceptions that teachers have of their students to their students' in-school literacies. Moreover, through this workshop series itself and the research, my hope was to help teachers to understand how the cultural experiences of students relate to both their in-school and out-of-school literacies. Finally, this study sought to help teachers understand the perspective of their students by taking a moment to "walk in their kicks."

In 2008, Barack Obama, a senator from Illinois, the son of a White woman from Wichita, Kansas and an African man from Kenya, a scholar, a lawyer and community activist, was elected the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. He became the first African American to hold the office since the birth of this 239-year-old nation. In his second book, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), President Obama captured the experience of many African Americans in this country. Furthermore, his comments about the perceptions of African Americans have significant relevance with regard to the educational and social experiences of many African American students and how their

teachers and those who represent and make up the larger dominant culture in America perceive them. He stated,

None of us – Black, white, Latino, or Asian – is immune to the stereotypes that our culture continues to feed us, especially the stereotypes about Black criminality, Black intelligence, or the Black work ethic. In general, members of every minority group continue to be measured largely by the degree of our assimilation – how closely speech patterns, dress, or demeanor conform to the dominant white culture – and the more that a minority strays from these external markers, the more he or she is subject to negative assumptions. (Obama, 2006, p. 235)

President Obama's words are relevant to the first research question of this study. Social and cultural environments in schools are microcosms of their surrounding communities and the larger dominant societal culture; thus, teachers' perceptions of their African American male students are often similar to the collective perceptions of those in the larger environment. This study was designed to better understand the ways in which teachers' classroom practices and understandings perpetuate or ameliorate the negative stereotypes of African American male students in regard to literacy and their engagement in classroom literacy events. Further, this study intended to examine the ways in which a professional development series may work to alter both practice and perceptions that emerged as teachers participated. The words of President Obama help to contextualize the relationship between race, expectations, and the sociocultural components that contribute to stereotypical perceptions of African American people.

### **Overview of the Activities Used in This Study**

This chapter presents an overview and analysis of the major themes that emerged from an ongoing analysis of the data garnered from this study, as well as sets the foundation for a more in-depth analysis of the data of four selected teacher participants that will be presented in Chapter Five.

The professional development series that was a part of this study met for three hours, approximately every three weeks, over the course of three months (Sessions 1 & 2, December, 2014; Sessions 3, 4 & 5, January, 2015). Teachers who registered for the professional development series did so because they were interested in learning how to better engage adolescent African-American boys with their literacy instruction in their classrooms.

The professional development was designed based on a book club model of instructional practice and with the intent that teachers could use this model in their own teaching. The book club model was described in detail in Chapter Two of this dissertation (see pgs. 93-100). Qualitative data (transcriptions of audio recordings of teachers' table conversations, whole group conversations, participants' writings, data from two surveys, and transcriptions of teacher focus group interviews) were collected and analyzed.

Teachers were able to reflect on the social and cultural factors and experiences present in the lives of their African American male students as they related to literacy development, while they participated in various learning events and modules. The activities were structured and presented so that teachers could replicate them, with some modification, for use in their instructional practice. Teachers were assigned to specific discussion groups. I did this intentionally to establish groups that represented teachers who were from different districts, had varying years of service, and who had different ethnicities. I felt it was important to create groups that were diverse in order to collect data that represented diverse perspectives. These groups were also similar to professional learning communities, which allowed them to engage in conversations with other

teachers who had divergent points of view. I used the data that teachers provided in the initial interview to build the individual groups.

The four focus participants and the five teachers who elected not to participate in the study were assigned to their own groups. In each of the activities where I collected participant data, the four focus participants were assigned to one group and their data was collected as a group or as individuals within their group. In both whole class and small group discussions, I used guiding questions that either emerged from conversations that we had as a group or that were directly related to the text that we were reading. The questions were designed allow teachers to contribute their thoughts related to the themes of the course as well as to address the particular research questions of this study. Data collected from whole class and group discussions was applied to a coding framework to help discern emerging themes.

Later in this chapter, I will provide some of the guided questions in my description and analysis of the findings and emerging themes. In Chapter Five, I provide more detailed information about the race and ethnicity of the focus participants, detailed information about their school districts, and how they were chosen for the focus analysis as well as the focus analyses for each of the four focus teachers.

The research questions used to guide this study and data analysis were:

1. What is the progression and evolution of teachers' knowledge and accompanying perceptions of the African-American male students they teach when they voluntarily participate in a professional development series designed to enhance their understanding of both the in-school and out-of-school literacies of these students?

2. In what ways might teachers' developing understandings about the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African-American males' contribute to their decisions about pedagogy and curriculum in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the African-American male students who they teach?
3. How does the book club model of professional development encourage teachers to use this practice with their students, build a structure of sustainable instructional literacy practices within their classrooms, and provide opportunities for meaningful inquiry about their pedagogy?

There were several activities that helped to elicit information from teacher participants that set the foundation for further discussion about their perceptions and instructional practices about their students. Teachers participated in using the "What's the Problem? What's Not the Problem?" activity, "Here's What! So What? Now What?" activity, and each teacher was asked to provide their beginning and re-conceptualized definitions of literacy.

In the "What's the Problem? What's Not the Problem?" activity, participants were asked to consider their current experiences with students in their classes and brainstorm their current concerns as well as what they believed the problems were with facilitating African American male students' connections with in-school literacy. Also, the activity called for participants to document their beliefs about things that were often presented as problems, but not authentic barriers to African American male literacy. For instance, in session #2, while engaging in the activity, Lynn talked about her thoughts of the problems that she faces with trying to get her African American male students connect

with literacy and the themes frequently associated with problems but she felt were not really issues in her class. In a conversation where Lynn and her colleagues were discussing whether they thought their students considered participating in literacy as acting White, Lynn stated,

Because being smart [to them], is to act- is acting white. And that's really uncool. So. You know, I think another thing to go along is the positive, how do you succeed? They want to succeed. How do you get away from the acting white piece? You know, how do you bring that positivity- it is okay to be smart. It's okay to succeed?

Lynn's thoughts indicated that for her, African American male students' beliefs that being smart was acting White, but that her students also wanted to succeed in school. Her thoughts around this topic are further proof that students are not in opposition to the idea or the institution of school, but that their identities are often affronted by school structures and values. For many African American students, the prospect of being deemed as acting White means for them that they have denied their Blackness, a piece of their identities that often serves as a source of pride.

In the "Here's What! So What? Now What?" participants were asked to use the problems that were identified in the previous activity and discuss and document what the problems meant in the broader context of African American male student achievement. Also, participants were asked to reflect on their student data, data about student literacy proficiency that were presented to them, brainstorm the possible implications of the data, document what the proficiency data might mean for the lives of African American students, and write about possible resolutions to address the issues and problems identified. This study sought to establish in what ways, if any, teachers' understandings



of student literacy practices had developed or changed as a result of participating in the professional development series.

Participants engaged in the “What’s The Problem? What’s Not the Problem?” activity after engaging in discussions about African American students’ literacies, teachers’ beginning perceptions about why African American students fail, and being asked to consider the ways in which the socialization and indiscriminate criminalization of African American males outside the institution of school may contribute to the ways these students engage and/or disengage with literacy events, both inside and outside of school. Study participants were asked to consider the data presented (e.g., African American student failure rates, the literacy proficiency percentages of African American males, the discrepancy in the how African American students are disciplined when compared to White students, and the rate of incarceration of African American males) to them to have table conversations about what they believe contributes to the failure of African American male students as well as what entities were not responsible for the failure of African American males in school. Participants wrote down their thoughts and submitted them to me and their conversations were recorded on iPads. The data was separated by group and labeled and I used the data in the data analysis.

The activity, “Here’s What! So What? Now What?” was scaffolded to build upon participants’ thoughts collected from the previous activity. Participants were given chart paper to document what they knew about the achievement of African American male students (“Here’s What!”), how they have adjusted their instructional practice to meet the needs of their African-American male students, and how schools have responded to what they already know (“So What?”), and what they believe should be done to continue to

address the issue of African American male school failure (“Now What?”). However, they were first asked to engage in dialogue about the aforementioned topics. In a table conversation where participants were asked to respond to regional, state, and national literacy data (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010; Children’s Defense Fund, 2014) of African American male students, and reflect upon their own practice and their students’ performance, one participant, Michael (a pseudonym), spoke about his feelings about the data that was presented to the participants. In the initial survey, Michael identified himself as White and indicated that he taught English at the middle school level in an affluent suburban school district. Michael responded to the data given to the participants in the following manner,

You know, this- this data makes me think that it's clear as day that there's an issue. You know? When you can put pages of data together to show that there's an issue. And when prison projects and construction are based on third and fourth grade reading levels, then clearly the connection has been made between literacy and our African-American males and future imprison- future time in prison. If we know all of those things, why do we just keep doing what we do? Where is the systemic change that needs to take place? And I think that- that to me is the most alarming part of all it, is we know. And time, effort, and dollars don't necessarily go into changing it.

Michael’s comments and comments such as these met the purpose for the “Here’s What! So What? Now What?” activity. The activity was used to help participants address and discuss the current reality of African American male school achievement and to brainstorm ideas about how to solve it in their current practice. The activity was also used to further the dialogue about the role that teachers and educational institutions play in helping African American males achieve school success by connecting with school literacy. In Michael’s quote, he spoke eloquently about his beginning understandings of the state of literacy attainment of African American male students. As this was one of

the beginning exercises, he also opened up the space to have dialogue about the sociocultural issues that impact student literacy connection. He asked important questions that begin to acknowledge that the issue has to do with a social system that may, in fact, resist or even set-up barriers to positive change.

His questions posed to his colleagues led his group to have the following conversation:

**Susan:** I think systemic change can happen when you have diversity in the voices that are heard that are pushing forward that systemic change. We keep having the same players play the same games and then keep getting the same thing. So I think, you know, some of those people who are leaders need to tell you where to begin...diverse perspectives and having more- you know-...

**Michael:** But you know what? They- in some ways, they may just be going with the flow. Like we're all educators, and in some ways this has been our experience. I mean, you know collectiveness- probably got more than a thousand years of experience in this one room, but here we are going, 'What? Really?' And that's what we do. So- so people are- who are [sic] to have power or in a position to make change- they just may not be aware.

**Susan:** Yeah.

**Kathy:** They really may not be aware.

**Michael:** And they may not be interested.

**Kathy:** Right.

**Michael:** Because you look at this data and you're stuck with two conclusions: one, black people aren't capable; or two, there's institutional racism. And if it's institutional racism, then the institutions have to look at themselves.

This conversation is an important one because it helps to establish the beginning thinking and perceptions of the participant teachers. This conversation early in the first week of the workshop series is a good instance of how the teachers' discussions helped them to ask important questions and progress in their thinking.

The teachers in this dialogue mentioned various sociocultural barriers, social constructs and practices, and ideals, which all influence how students connect to in-school literacy with the accompanying implications. For instance, Michael spoke about how the rate of prison construction is determined by the reading proficiency of third and fourth grade students. If one examined the reading proficiency of the readers in most school districts (particularly urban and suburban school districts), it would be easy to conclude that if the latter is true, one could predict that prisons would be populated predominately by African American males. Moreover, the comments made about whether administrators, policy makers, or other teachers understand or care about what is going on speaks further to the purpose of this study to engage teachers in dialogue about how new understandings of African American male student literacy can influence classroom practices and institutional practices as a whole. Michael spoke very candidly about which conclusions one has to naturally make as a result of understanding the problem of the disconnection between in-school and out-of-school literacy for African American males.

According to Michael, if one believes that African American students are less intelligent, there is no more work to be done and schools can continue to look for strategies to fix students that enter America's classrooms rather than adjust perceptions and pedagogy. However, his comment indicates that he believes that if school institutions and people within them address their racist practices, policies, and instruction, doing self-reflection and evaluation can change the institution. Studies such as this one helped to begin the conversations for teachers to address their perceptions and develop appropriate instructional practices to make the step to change the larger school institution.

The group of focus participants that gathered after the conclusion of the workshop series had a similar conversation when given the same prompt. As stated previously, the focus participants were grouped together and their data was collected individually and as a group. When presented with the data about the literacy proficiency of African American students in the region, state, and the nation, participants were asked to respond to the data and consider their own students' data and their instructional and institutional responses to their students' literacy. As a result of the prompt, a dialogue ensued, of which I extracted certain elements.

**Jane:** That's where I think a lot of things need to be addressed, where obviously the statistics are in the end. You know, we got this many kids in prison, and some of them I was pretty surprised at. You know, I've seen some statistics before, but these were pretty profound. Even federal- where's the initiative starting? I mean, this start[s] [at] three years old, get these kids in schools, set up programs in schools. Instead of dealing with building more prisons, there should be more pre-preschool, schools for parents and kids. I mean, even if it means dropping the two or three year old off for a structured program, get him immersed in reading, get him immersed in education, and just- you know what I mean? And that- I'm bringing more people of different ethnicities [sic] and race into the teaching profession.

**Lynn:** I mean, I- I've seen all of this. I've been shocked and- you know, I was horrified by it already. Seeing all together at once is kind of a new shock to the system. But when you look at who these kids see at school every day, right- who the teachers are, who the support staff it, what kind of role models, what kind of leaders they have every day- and you do back up and you see that eighty-three percent of elementary teachers are white women- that's where it's happening. It's that these kids do not have somebody who looks like them being successful in a building that they are trying to be successful in. And that- that does something to a kid. They kind of disconnect, and they- they pull back a little bit. And you know, by the time they get to us, we have to do some kind of radical things to change it. I think too, the- the special education versus advanced, and gifted and talented, is really what I've been struggling with. Especially when it comes to not being placed solely in a special education program. But what classes are these kids being led to? Right? What classes are our African-American males being kind of corralled to? Are they being encouraged into taking these higher level classes- be taking these AP classes? Or, are they being kind of- you know, for lack of a better word- dumped into these lower-level classes, cause that's where we think they can achieve? So that's what I've been struggling with.

**Julia:** What's systemic, I think- and you know, as a language arts teacher in middle school- I think that there's not a big focus right now. Like, in our special education department and some of the other things we do- and I'm not trying to be critical of one area- but there isn't a big focus on literacy. And I don't understand why that's not the biggest thing they're doing. All we spend our time- in my experience- math. Like, the kids just get a- second math class. With their math teacher even in there now in our grade level, helping them out with math skills. But they can't read and write. They can't be successful in science, social studies, language arts, a foreign language-

**Lynn:** Life.

**Jackie:** Anything.

**Lynn:** Yeah.

**Jackie:** Even some of the math questions on the ACT are so language-based-

**Julia:** And no one's doing reading literacy for them. No one's doing that. And we have kids that are in special ed. that are two or three grade levels below what they should be reading, and there's nowhere to reach them, cause there's no class in the day to do that.

The conversation among these focus participants, clearly documented that they have a good understanding about the importance of literacy in the lives of their students. In this beginning activity, they grappled with the reality of African American students' disconnection from school and the kinds of literacies expected of them in school, as well as what they believed was contributing to the problem from an instructional and structural perspective. From this piece of dialogue, what was particularly striking was their understanding and articulation of the implications and the access that exists when a student has a life filled with literacy, or the turmoil that may exist when a student has a life that is absent of the promise that may be found in literacy.

As I read through their data, I thought about the young man that attempted to rob me of my shoes. I thought about my friend who lived across the street from me when I was growing up who was lured into the drug trade. Were these focus participant teachers making an attempt to walk in the shoes of their students and other African American

learners? If the teachers of my friend and the young man who tried to rob me made attempts to understand their lives and found literacy to engage them, would they have pursued paths that deviated from school and other appropriate societal behaviors? The focus participants of this study and their conversations about opening up opportunities for African American male students by using literacy answered some of these questions for me. Their beginning ideas and conversations set the stage for their ongoing thinking about the ways in which literacy could be used to deter African American male students from prison and other negative outcomes. Both the “What’s the Problem? What’s not the Problem?” and the “Here’s What! So What? Now What?” activities helped to establish the initial understandings of the teachers that were later compared to their emerging understandings to establish whether their participation in this model resulted in a progression in their thinking.

As a means to gather more data about teachers’ instructional practices and strategies that they used for literacy interventions with their African American students, whole-group discussions were conducted that followed the assigned readings of the Tatum text and were among the activities and discussions that helped to bring the emerging themes to the forefront. At the beginning of each session, participants were asked to assemble in their groups to discuss the reading that had been assigned in the previous session. Each group was asked to participate in discussions about the reading and respond to questions that they presented to the group regarding the text.

The practice of engaging in discussions about text readings is one that was documented in Raphael and McMahon (1994), Raphael, Flurio-Ruane, (2001), and George (2001), and Paratore (2000) and is essential to the proper functioning of a book

club. As stated in Chapter Three, Raphael and McMahon (1994) recommend that as participants in a book club read a text, they should be given the space to: 1) engage in language use as they engage in social interactions; 2) be given the space to understand language across multiple contexts; and 3) allow their thinking to 'go public' and hear the language of literacy and learning from the teacher and others (p. 160). Teacher participants in this study were allowed to do this and were encouraged to replicate this model for use with their students.

Since this professional development model used book club as its guiding instructional practice, the participants were given the opportunity to engage in the manner suggested by Raphael and McMahon (1994), with specific regard to the reading of the guiding text. I facilitated several conversations where participants were asked to: 1) reflect upon their own thoughts about a text either individually or with an elbow partner; 2) respond to prompts about the text within their small groups; and 3) share their thoughts with the larger group. Within this construct, participants had the opportunity to make inter-textual references (many of them did), document their own experiences to provide relevance, and participate in writing activities to journal their progression of thought.

For example, in the following excerpt from session #5 of the series, participants were asked to respond to the text by choosing one word and one phrase that resonated with them the most about the reading up to that point. One of the participants, Ann (a pseudonym), introduced her word and phrase to the whole group after first having the opportunity to share her thoughts with her colleagues at her table. In the initial survey, Ann identified herself as an African American woman who was retired, but had thirty



years of service to the field of education. She connected one word and phrase to the larger conversation about student literacy,

So here's where I see some connections in the notion of it, is that ultimately this literacy is a complex piece because now we look at the word 'responsibility' and 'connections.' And so some of us said, 'For literacy to be valuable to students that we need to take the responsibility of making it connected to their life and experience.' And I saw that in, you know, in several of the quotes and the phrases as well. And I went back to- mine was being also that students are better able to understand, you know, text and comprehend it when specific reading strategies are applied- very specific reading strategies are applied. So it says to me there needs to be a marriage between culturally responsive text, and kind of tried and true strategies that regardless of the text are effective at reading for comprehension.

The context of Ann's comments supported the notion that text selection for relevancy and interest is important to connect in-school and out-of-school literacy, and her quote supported the claim that participants were given the opportunity to respond to the text in the manner that the book club model suggested.

The aforementioned activities, surveys, writings, and the focus group interview helped to document teachers' progression in thinking as a result of their participation in the professional development series. Chapter Four will continue along the path of highlighting and explaining the major themes that emerged, while Chapter Five, highlights the focus participant data that support the research and research theories.

### **Major Themes**

The themes that emerged as a result of the data analysis will be discussed in direct relationship with the focus participants and their experiences as teachers and participants in this study in chapter five. As identified in Figure 3 in Chapter Three (p. 135), several themes and sub-themes emerged from the conversations and activities of the teachers that participated as a part of this study and these emerged as central to the analysis.

Throughout analysis of each of the themes and individual focus participant data, I provide an alignment to the specific activity to the individual focus participant data or overall group data to provide clarity.

During the analysis of the data collected from the focus participants, four major themes emerged. All four of these themes were related to the teachers' ongoing thinking and developing beliefs about the importance of teachers and other educators gaining a better understanding of the connection between students' in-school and out-of-school literacies. These four themes were: 1) teachers' recognition of the importance of and relationship to students' connections to teachers, school, and texts; 2) teachers' expansion of their definitions of literacy; 3) teachers' improved understandings of students' literacy practices; and 4) the necessity of teachers' use of evidence-based instructional strategies. Chapter Four is sub-divided to provide rich explanations of each of the themes. Moreover, Chapter Five represents the analysis of the participant data that includes the thick descriptions of the study environment and in-depth analyses of each theme and the relationship of the themes to the data from each focus participant.

The data analysis presented here in Chapter Four is derived from the four case study teachers as well as the other twenty-one teachers who agreed to have their data collected from their participation in the workshop series. Based on the analysis of these four themes, conclusions were made about the effectiveness of book club as a tool to help teachers re-conceptualize their understandings about student literacies. Lastly, in the analysis of participant data, I made connections from the theoretical ideas about literacy, learning, and African American male students' connection to school to the pragmatic practices and real experiences of the teachers who participated in this study.

### **Teachers' Recognition of the Importance of Students' Connections to the Teacher, School, and Text**

One of the most prevalent themes to emerge was the teachers' progression and change in their understandings of how the development of the in-school literacies of African-American male students was dependent upon how they (the students) connected to the mores, values, and culture of the school as a whole, to the teacher(s), and to the texts that represented what they were expected to know and learn in school. The claims about the students' need for connections and how the teachers' thoughts about students' connections changed as a result of participating in this study will be discussed here and further developed in the discussion of focus participants.

With regard to understanding teachers' thoughts about how students connect to the school, teachers, and the text, it was necessary to first understand their beginning perceptions about why African American students failed at school. In a whole group discussion on the first day of the series, teachers were asked why they felt it was necessary for them to attend a professional development series that sought to address the needs of African American male students.

The notion that the teachers in this study believed that student failure was the sole fault of the students or their families was supported by the data collected in the initial survey. In the initial survey, which was administered prior to the first day of the workshop, I asked participants to respond to the following prompt, "List the three top reasons why you believe your African-American male students do not do well in school." There was a common theme among twenty-two of the twenty-five teacher participants

who answered the question about the school failure of African American males. The most common reasons cited for school failure were:

- Low-motivation among students
- Students and families do not know the importance of school
- Limited vocabulary

I noticed that before the start of the professional development series, many of the participants had placed the blame for failure squarely on the shoulders of the students as though they wanted to stake their claim prior to the inaugural day of the series.

In my experience as an educator, I find it to be a common occurrence among other educators to blame student failure on their families because of disconnection from school and its culture, socio-economic background, and the environments from which the students come. In an effort to understand the beginning perceptions that teachers had of their students, I found it necessary to access questions that I believe elicited that data. While analyzing data about teachers' perceptions, I found that there was a link to the biases of teachers and the perceptions that accompanied those biases. It is important to briefly discuss teacher bias as those biases have a direct impact on the instruction of their African American male students.

In my journal, I documented that teachers' believed that they did not have personal biases when it came to their students. I noted,

I also presented my model of the sociocultural factors (please see chapter three, pg. 112). I gave attendees the opportunity to turn and talk to their neighbors and to talk amongst the members of their group. I recorded the responses of those who agreed to participate in the study. We continued with discussions about disproportionality in discipline among African-American students, power in the classroom, and teacher perceptions. Many teachers indicated that they did not have personal biases against students and that their perceptions were not harmful

but that they believed that students and families did not value literacy, therefore, students did not perform well in school.

In the hours of audio data that I collected from discussions, (I listened to much of it and read the transcriptions of all the data), recorded responses of activities that I facilitated in class, and data from the two surveys, I concluded that some of teachers in this study in fact did have biases that were linked to negative preconceptions about students in regard to their abilities in the classroom as well as their lives outside of the classroom. This was particularly the case for teachers who spoke about their students of color. Furthermore, I found in subsequent discussions and activities, the teachers in this study, documented their internal biases of students, whether it was conscious or sub-conscious. For example, one of the activities that I conducted was called “Chalk Talk.” In this activity, we first watched a video entitled, “You Don’t Even Know Me”. I retrieved the video from YouTube and it was developed and produced as a promotional video for the novel by the same name by Sharon Flake (Flake, 2010). I had previously used the video to lead professional development for teachers as I spoke to them about the need to get to know African American male students. The video was produced by Soul Touch Productions and was freely accessible on the internet through the YouTube channel.

The “You Don’t Even Know Me” video featured four different young African American male students who performed poetry about how society and their teachers don’t take the time to get to know them. They spoke about being regarded as thugs, criminals, and being perceived using negative perceptions while they frequently participated in academic, creative, and pro-social endeavors such as, music, poetry, art, and literature.

The purpose of using the video was to allow teachers in this study to hear the authentic voices of African American male students who felt as though their teachers did not make efforts to get to know them. In order to elicit the authentic data from classroom teachers about how they answered the call of the video to get know their students better, I asked teacher participants to provide information about which activities they engaged in to get to know their students. Each table group of teachers was then asked to respond to the following prompt: “What do you do to get to know your students?” Participants had the opportunity to respond to the prompt only by writing his or her responses down. If individual participants wished to respond to the writing of another member of their group, they could only do so by writing, as a part of the protocol for this activity, they were instructed not to provide a verbal response. I did not ask participants to identify themselves because the protocol of the activity called for anonymity, allowing participants to respond to the written comments of others’ in their group and the comments of participants from other groups. Participants had to have the space to feel safe and provide authentic answers. In my journal, I noted the following as I observed the activity,

Afterward, we the group watched a video ‘You Don’t Even Know Me’ and participants were asked to talk to their neighbors, then to talk about how they get to know their students. Our second activity was called ‘Chalk Talk’ and participants were asked to answer the question: What do you know about your African-American Male students? They had to have a ‘silent’ conversation by writing on chart paper about how they got to know their students. All of the participants seemed to be engaged in this activity but it was interesting to read their responses and read their body language while engaging in the activity. After the activity, the participants engaged in a whole-group conversation. I gathered that many of the participants did not do very much to get to know their students. According to the literature, this is particularly important for African-American students.

The picture documented in Figure 4 represents one of the pages from the “Chalk Talk” activity and the responses that teachers had to the prompt.







school cultural environment as they attempted to get to know them. For instance, one participant indicated that African American students are connected to music. As a response to that statement, another participant responded that students keep their headphones on to tune others out, even when the music is not on. Without context, from this statement, one might believe that African American students are generally disengaged from school if they choose to have headphones on. Other participants wrote about students being from single parent homes, being homeless, or not making eye contact.

While teachers may have listed some of the behaviors or attributes of some of their African American students, their characterizations did not indicate how they help their students connect to in-school literacy. Furthermore, many of the comments that teachers made had negative undertones or connotations and indicated that teachers' perceptions of their students may have served as barriers to how the teachers instructed their students. As I surveyed the charts where participants spoke about what they knew about their students, none of the teachers spoke about what they knew about their students' in-school or out-of-school literacy activities.

In the video, "You Don't Even Know Me," which participants viewed before they participated in this activity, the four young men all talked about the perceptions of society and their teachers, about the types of lives that they had, and the types of activities in which they participated. Each one of the young men mentioned how they participated in literate activities and their teachers did not know about their participation in those activities. Similar to the claims that the young men were making, the teachers in this study during this activity did not document the literate activities of their students because

they did not really know them. They spoke about the surface level attributes of their students, which could have easily been determined without deep and meaningful relationships.

I had anticipated that the “Chalk Talk” activity would have provided evidence of the numerous activities that teachers used to get to know their students and how they used that knowledge to connect them to in-school literacy. Instead, the data collected through the activity helped me to understand the beginning perceptions that teachers had of their students and the level of disconnection that those perceptions may have had from their students’ actual lives and literate behaviors. Furthermore, this data was used to establish the progression of thought that teachers experienced as a result of participating in the professional development series.

During the course of the workshop, as teachers continued to talk and write about their understandings and beliefs regarding their students, it became more apparent that there was a disconnect between how teachers said they perceived their students and what were their actual perceptions. It is important to point out that it was not the case that the teachers were intentionally misleading. Rather, and as the data will show, it was more the case that teachers were not aware of the disconnect between what they said regarding their beliefs and perceptions and their actual classroom practice. My intent, in part, was to engage teachers in the kind of inquiry that would enable them to better recognize, understand, and identify their perceptions of their students. The data led me to pinpoint that some of the teachers’ perceptions were rooted in their biases, and had the potential to influence teachers to engage in instruction and choose texts that were irrelevant to

students' cultures and experiences. This sometimes became a point of contention as the study was being conducted.

Another example where a teacher's bias was inherent in their perception of their student was collected as a part of the data collected from session #3. I asked participants to respond to a guiding question while they used Tatum's nesting ground framework to indicate the strands outlined in the framework in which they engaged. As teachers reviewed the framework, I also asked them to consider the following question: "What texts do you read that demonstrate strong African American males with a positive life trajectory?" The following is a quote from one of the participants as she answered the question. The teacher was explaining to her colleagues that she thought students should learn how to connect with historical texts and that it was difficult for her to help African American students connect to these texts, such as a speech from the Virginia Convention. She stated,

Cause when I teach that speech in the Virginia Convention, it's like they don't—they're not concerned about what the war was all about, or what was going on. They don't care. All they want is some barbeque on the Fourth of July. [laughter] You know. They want to hang out, turn up, or whatever. But when they get it, they understand that whole concept.

There were other comments such as this one where teachers' biases influenced their perceptions of their students. Furthermore, this teacher's group members laughed at her comment about her students as she mocked them with the type of vernacular that students may have used, which indicated that either they agreed with her characterization of African American students or they lacked the ability to voice an objection to the type of bias that she displayed. In this particular line of conversation, this teacher continued to speak about her students' connection to their preferred genre of music and how she

thought that the music that the students listened to had little artistic value although it sometimes contained the themes that are found in school content.

Although the purpose of this study was not to search for and identify teachers' biases, it was important to contextualize the type of data that captured teachers' biases, as the argument can be made that specific biases can lead to negative perceptions of students; thus, causing teachers to believe that the content that they select for their students is rejected not because it is irrelevant to their lives, but because there is some flaw present in the student. Furthermore, as the teacher pointed out in her quote, the students in her class(es) were not interested in reading about the Virginia Convention.

A few assumptions can be made about the teacher's observation that her students were uninterested: 1) students were uninterested in the Virginia Convention because it was not relevant to their lives or their experiences; 2) students did not understand the content or the context; or 3) the teacher's instructional methodology did not make it conducive for students to learn the concepts that she was trying to teach within the Virginia Convention. Based on the line of conversation in this piece of data, a fourth, but somewhat unaligned point arises. If this teacher felt the way that she did about the cultural experiences of her students, which was evident in how she spoke about them, what role did her conscious and sub-conscious biases and perceptions play in her students' rejection of the school text? Although I was not able to answer this question and questions like this through my data set, I believe questions like this one should be posed for further research to fully understand teachers' biases and accompanying perceptions as a means to understand why students may reject school and school texts.

As the themes of teachers' recognition of the importance of and relationship to students' connections to school, teachers, and texts; teachers' expansion of their definitions of literacy; the necessity of teachers' use of evidence-based instructional strategies; and, teachers improved understandings of students' literacy practices, emerged from the participant data, it became more and more evident that the relationship between the teacher and the student was one of the most important connections in the learning process and the process of helping African American male students connect to in-school content.

As the workshop series progressed, it occurred to me that this is not unlike the connection between me as the participant-observer, the learners (teachers), and the text, and how essential the constructive integration among these components was to this study and the goals of this professional development series. Moreover, this connection modeled the connection that teachers and the students should have with their students and is essential in the learning process that occurs each day with students. As I facilitated the professional development series, it was necessary that I worked to learn about and understand the experiences of the participants, particularly the teachers that were identified for focus analysis. I frequently looked for ways to quietly observe the focus participants who were assigned to their own group. For me, this was a way to connect with the learners in this learning environment. In a short conversation during session #2, I asked the participants to talk in their groups about how they believed African American male students are perceived in their schools. I sat at the table with the focus participants, interacted with them, and recorded their reactions to the prompt in my journal:

We started the day with a community builder, a prompt to the groups regarding how young black males are perceived in school. The members in this group then

turned and talked to their neighbors about the prompt and then shared out their thoughts with the group. I noticed that the people in the group understood and accounted for the fact that they may have had negative perceptions of African-American students. Also, participants talked about how those perceptions of students have had an impact on how they are treated in school.

As an answer to this question, among the focus participants, I believe it was Lynn's comment that made the perfect connection to teachers' perceptions and the sometimes un-communicated but expected behavior of African American male students. Lynn stated,

But I think it goes back to, again, teacher perception. Because especially for us high school teachers, we assume because they've been in school for so long, that they have the understanding of the rules. So when they walk into our classroom, we have these expectations that are already, again, unspoken like he talked about. And maybe this kid doesn't. Maybe they do need a more personal connection. Or maybe they do need a little bit more direction of all these assumptions that we put on them. And then they don't play the game the way we assume them to play. And then it creates a further disconnect.

Lynn's quote brings to the forefront the assumptions that many teachers have about their students, particularly their African American male students. African American male students frequently find themselves in environments that have unspoken cultural and academic expectations but school environments dictate that students still follow the unspoken and unstated rules. As it relates to literacy, as Lynn points out, the assumption that students have knowledge of the rules of participation in classrooms is similar to the assumption that students will automatically connect with in-school literacy because it is what is expected of them. In my career, I have often heard educators make the claim that students should connect to school content because it is what will help them be successful in life.

There are two problems with assumptions such as these that I believe Lynn makes apparent in her quote. First, students are not often made aware of what is expected of

them when they enter classrooms. They are often expected to read school content for the sake of reading school content and not made aware of the prospect of connecting with the content. It is the responsibility of the teacher to provide the connection for students. Secondly, the assumption is often made that students actually care about the content and that learning the content is somehow connected to their current or future interests. Furthermore, students are sometimes told that content is important but not told why the content is important. Students sometimes reject the content because their teachers or school did not successfully make the connection to the relevance for them. The assumptions that Lynn brings to light are important to dispel because each assumption leads to negative perceptions about students when students reject the content.

As early as session #2, participants in this study began providing data that moved toward answering the research questions of this study. Research questions #1 and #2 were designed to help document teachers' developing understandings and perceptions of their African-American male students. One intent of this research and the professional development series, itself, was to work with teachers to help them better understanding both the in-school and out-of-school literacies of their African-American male students, their perceptions of their students and the influence of those perceptions on decisions about pedagogy, as well as how they develop culturally relevant curriculum. Furthermore, I was interested in whether the evolution of their thinking was a result of their participation in the series.

The aforementioned data from teachers and the documentation from my observation notes and journal helped to establish the types of thoughts that teachers had when they began the series. The data from the focus participants that will be highlighted

in chapter five proved that the beginning perceptions that teachers in this study had of students evolved and helped me to answer the questions of this research study.

The themes identified by this study emerged through the analysis of data and were a result of teachers' participation in classroom activities and conversations and the other data collection methods that I identified in Chapter Three.

I asked the following questions in either the surveys or the focus group interviews that I believe helped the theme about teachers' recognition of the importance of students' connections to the school, teachers, and texts to emerge:

1. I feel like the following sociocultural factors influence my students' literacy development (Survey #1) (these factors were provided by the teacher).
2. What does Tatum say about how to help students develop in-school literacy practices aligned to their cultural experiences? How do you employ these practices in your class? (Survey #2)
3. There is a myth that says that African-American male students reject literacy because they regard it as a feminized practice. However, the literature has documented that African-American male students reject in-school literacy because it lacks relevance to their lives. How do you help students connect to in-school literacy? (Survey #2)
4. What role have you played in fostering the in-school literacy practices of African-American male students? (Focus Group Interview)
5. In your experience, does your current school organizational structure promote the usage of teacher professional development to improve student literacy



development? If not, what have you done as a classroom teacher? (Focus Group Interview)

In later conversations, I spoke specifically to each of the focus participants about their feelings on how students connected their identities with texts and to the school environment. As stated previously, what emerged from these conversations was the theme about connections to the school, the teacher, and the text. The analysis of data henceforth related to the theme of teachers' recognition of the importance of the connection to the school, teacher, and text, will be representative of the data collection methods provided in the previous list.

### ***Connection to the teacher***

As mentioned in the previous section, teachers' recognition of the importance of the connection to the school, teacher, and text, was important to the teachers in regard to forging relationships with students and how those relationships were an essential component of providing students access to in-school content and the school environment. The data showed frequent references about how teachers and students connected with one another. Teachers recounted stories about students' feelings about their relationships with teachers and how they felt teachers treated them when they entered the school and the classroom. The notion that students felt victimized occurred throughout the theme about teachers' recognition of the importance of the connection to the school, teacher, and text. Jackie, one of the focus participants, was the most vocal about the notion that students felt victimized by their teachers. Participants were asked to review the national achievement data of African American students as it pertains to how students performed on the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress). Jackie stated,

And there've been a variety of reasons, some of which have actually been experiences with their teachers. Which surprised me. And then they say that they don't feel empowered. That's what it comes down to. So they've kind of felt victimized, in some cases, with experiences that they've had with their teachers. I mean, there's a wide variety of reasons. But that one kind of struck me the most, I think.

Jackie did not explicitly state why she felt that students were victimized by their other teachers or what students said to her to make her think that; however, the point here is not to note the specific list of details of such victimization, but to document the realizations at which teachers arrive, which frequently happens through student voices. Furthermore, as the conversation about how students connect to in-school literacy is linked to the practices of school institutions and classroom teachers, questions about why African American male students reject school literacy should be explored as they relate to claims of victimization, with particular regard to how teachers treat them and students' general feelings about how they feel accepted in the school environment.

Although Jackie did not expressly state it, African American males' rejection of school literacy does not occur in a vacuum. The spirit of Jackie's comment was that students reject the institution of school not because they don't see value in it, a claim that was supported by the work of Smith and Wilhelm (2002), but because students' relationships with their teachers are often fractured and students often harbor feelings of devaluation by the institution of school; thus, leading to a rejection of school content.

The sub-theme of students needing to feel a connection to their teachers led the participants in this study to conclude that students rejected content or school as a whole if they could not develop positive relationships with one or more of their teachers. I also explored teachers' beliefs that some students felt rejected as learners by their teachers and this perceived rejection led students to their rejection of texts and other course content

and caused them to question their efficacy to succeed in class. Other teachers commented about conversations that they had with their students where students questioned their efficacy because of a fractured relationship with their teacher(s), the content, or their feelings of not fitting in at school. It is important to include conversations that teachers had with their students about why they believe they don't succeed in school because the teacher-student conversations are authentic and they do not give much room for speculation as to why students believed they were not successful. Also, as teachers reflected on what their students have told them, they were given the space to develop a deeper understanding of who their students are in the school environment and how the nuances of sociocultural paradigm impacts their learning. The idea of the victimization of students by their teachers and the school environment will be explored further in Chapter Five.

I collected additional data in the focus group interview that solidified and supported teachers' reflections on students' thoughts about their efficacy as students. Teachers' thoughts about the student-teacher relationship helped to make the connection between relationships and student efficacy and helped the theme of teachers' recognition of the importance of the connection to the school, teacher, and text to emerge. In the focus group interview, I asked the question, "What challenges have you faced when trying to help African American males develop in-school literacy?" Throughout the series, particularly during the focus group interview, Jane, who was also a focus participant, frequently gave emotional responses. I believe that Jane's emotions emerged as a response to her belief that either she has not or cannot help African American male

students in the way she feels they need to be helped. I will explore more in-depth Jane's thoughts about her self-efficacy during her focus analysis.

In response to the question in the focus group interview, Jane responded that her students often walked into her class having already felt a sense of academic defeat. Jane stated that her students would often respond in the following manner,

'I'm stupid. I can't do it. I don't get it. I hate school. My teachers get mad at me. This sucks.' And so I told them all- I said, 'You know what? I'm not even going to attempt to work on reading skills and math skills.' I said, 'I'm not even doing that. All we're going to work on is their self-esteem.'

The connection between student and teacher was an important theme and the participant teachers in this study expressed the importance of developing relationships with students before they expected students to connect to school content. The point that students need to have established and positive relationships with their teachers to have an overall positive school experiences was supported and illustrated in a conversation in the focus group interview. The following conversation between me as the researcher, Lynn, Jane, and Julia makes the link between student-teacher relationships and literacy access.

**Aaron:** You talked about valuing students, and we talked home language versus school language, and valuing students' home language to the degree that, even though we may not use that type of language as a part of our lesson, we still value you as a human being. We value that it's a part of your identity, and therefore you- because that young lady- the other young lady might have wanted that but her dad said no. So-

**Jane:** Right.

**Aaron:** Can't do it.

**Lynn:** Story of my life. [laughter]

**Aaron:** I just did it. My parents said no and I did it anyway.

**Lynn:** I did too.

**Aaron:** So I'm going to assume- and there is a connection to literacy there.

I'm going to assume that, by the very nature of you being here, you believe that literacy is important to the overall academic achievement of students. And the next question is going to ask you to be a little bit vulnerable. [laughs] So, I want to know- and if you choose not to answer, that's okay. But what role have you played in fostering in-school literacy practices, particularly for African-American males. Because some of the research shows us that African-American males are an anomaly of sorts when compared to students from other ethnic backgrounds. And I say that because there's a lot of research out on boys, and literacy for boys, and how boys socialize and that sort of thing. And then there's the other component of students' race, or ethnic background, or the environment in which they grow up. So, have you played a role- or what role have you played- in helping African-American males connect to the literacy that's expected within your- in your school or in your classroom?

**Lynn:** I think that two years ago, my immediate instinct would have been to correct grammar, to correct vocabulary, to correct- and I finally was able to say to myself, 'It doesn't matter. That has no value in this classroom- correcting what they are saying. Absolutely no value. What does have value is showing them, 'Yes, this is your language. This is the way that you speak. That's great. I understand you. You understand me. There's nothing wrong with that.' And that kind of functional grammar piece. One of the things that I've done is I've been bringing in text choice a lot more in class. Instead of everybody reading the same novel, I'll bring in five or six different options. 'Form some book clubs. Here we go.' Or with short stories I'll try to bring something for everyone. And you can choose- whatever you want to read, you wanna read and that's great. But I really think just the focus on- on my boys- has been the difference this year. You know, just kind of checking in with them, the writing that we do, looking at the way that they're writing, helping them one-on-one- but I do think it's the focus. It's the planning. And we talked about that a lot in the class-

**Aaron:** Right.

**Lynn:** Is that you have to plan everything strategically for African-American males, and the rest falls into place. When they are succeeding, my class succeeds. When they are succeeding, their grade succeeds. And so I think, for me that's been the difference. It's just been the focus- the emphasis on the success on this group of students.

**Aaron:** That's awesome.

**Jane:** Well, with mine it's interesting. I've had- first of all, initially when I was teaching in my district, we didn't have always a large African-American population. Now that I- now that's increasing. And [sighs] one of the things I notice with my multi-age room, the placement- student placement in this room is by parent request. So we do our informational evening in the spring. Parents come. They then can observe and they put their name and submit it to the district, and then they determine who's in my room. We don't have, for the most part, African-American families who come to that. And I feel- I'm- first of all, it's a concern and I vocalize that concern. I said, 'I feel like our room- that is the consistency of having families for three years with the focus on building

relationships- is exactly what you should have, I think, for- for some of our African-American male students. Because we're building a community. Because we're about diversity intentionally. I feel we would be a good fit.'

This portion of the conversation between the focus participant teachers and myself supported the contention that they were willing to participate in reflective inquiry about their involvement in a system that led to some students feeling disconnected from school and they explored ideas about how they could change their practice. In this strand of the conversation, the participant teachers spoke about how their relationships with their students provided access to the school content.

Lynn, one of the focus participant teachers who was vocal in each conversation in this study about her optimism in helping African American students, spoke about the progression in her practice and how when she focused on the relationships with her students, she was able to understand what they needed to connect to school literacy. My line of questioning, which was specific as to what teachers did to help to link their students to school literacy, led her to talk about her relationships with her students. After doing self-reflection and after she began participation in the professional development series, Lynn listed specific actions which she believed began making a difference with the African American males in her class. She chose to try to understand their language instead of constantly correcting their grammar. She allowed them choice in their texts. She told her students that she was seeking to understand them and value their experiences. She chose to focus on the literacy of her male students. Although Lynn did not cite specific data that supported her conclusion that her actions led to an increase in the literacy proficiency of her African American male students, she stated that she

believed her focus on relationships with her students made a difference in the literate lives of her students.

In this same conversation, Jane's data also supported the theme that the teachers of this study believed that teachers' recognition of the importance of connection to the school, the teacher, and the text provided access to school related literacy for African American male students. As a subset of this theme, analysis of Jane's data also supported that teachers felt that students connected with the school and texts via the relationships that they have with their teachers. She also provided a perspective that if students did not have positive relationships with their students, then their access to school related content would be diminished and could result in school failure.

Jane's comments supported the idea that students need to find connections to the teacher from a different perspective. She was an elementary teacher and taught in a multi-age classroom (a classroom that had three grade levels of students that stayed with the same teacher for three years) at the time of this study. Her approach to the idea of providing access to school content was to develop a classroom community that valued the experiences of all of the students in the class. Jane's frustration was that only certain students had access to a class like hers. She saw the value of developing multi-year relationships with students but saw that African American parents did not have the access to a classroom like hers that she felt could help with their connections to school literacy.

The idea of the need for students to connect to the teacher was explored in depth in Smith and Wilhelm (2002) when they documented that boys need more teacher time in coed settings to connect with the teacher personally. Additional analysis of the data that explores the ideas related to how the teachers in this study viewed students and the

importance of teacher and student connections will be presented and analyzed as a part of the focus analysis in Chapter Five.

### ***Connection to the School***

Steele (1992), Ogbu (1991), and Morgan and Mehta (2004) defined a student's disconnect from school as a dis-identification from school and its mores, values, and cultural norms because of schools' alignment with the larger dominant cultural structure that often devalues African American students' home or personal identities. The aforementioned researchers supported the notion that students need to connect to school as an institution. The findings from this study support the intertwined relationship among students' connection to the text, to the teacher, and to the school. Teachers in this study, through the relaying of their experiences as well as in discussions of their beliefs, confirm students' view of in-school literacy as irrelevant to their lives, (Czikszenmihalyi, 1990; Heath, 1989; Jackson & Kirkland, 2009; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2001; Tatum, 2005) and further support that if students lack connections and relationships with their teachers, they will not connect with school as an institution. Moreover, the data of the teacher participants in this study support that if students do not connect with their teachers, then they will find difficulty connecting to course content and to the school as a whole.

One of the activities that teachers engaged in during this study in session #3, and directly related to the question of how students engage with school, was the review and conversation around Tatum's nesting ground framework (see pgs. 4-6, chapter one; pgs. 90-91, chapter two). Teachers were asked to review the framework which consists of theoretical strands, instructional strands, and professional development strands, and they



were asked to engage in a conversation about how each one of the strands related to their own practices.

As a guiding question to the conversation about the nesting ground framework, in session # 3, participants were asked to discuss their ideas about culturally responsive teaching and what it means for literacy. Participants were asked to engage in the conversation about the nesting ground framework because of its relevance to third research question of this study. It was important that participants understood how the objectives of this professional development series were directly related to the structure of the nesting ground framework. To understand the nature of teaching literacy to African American male students, one has to have the foundation to participate in conversations and inquiry about the theoretical, instructional, and professional development strands. Accordingly, participants were asked to engage in the conversation about the nesting ground framework to help them understand the basic framework of teaching reading to their students through their participation in the book club, using the Tatum text and framework as the model.

To set the context for the conversation that emerged around the nesting ground framework, it is necessary to clarify and identify participants' thinking before and after the conversation. Prior to session #3, participants read an analogy introduced by Tatum that asked teachers to compare the teaching of reading of African American male students to the preparation of a dinner for those of a different culture than their own. Tatum stated that in the preparation of the dinner, we would ask our guests about allergies or aversions to spices, likes or dislikes, and portion size. The analogy of the preparation of a dinner for those of a different cultural background speaks to teachers'

need to understand and participate in culturally responsive teaching for students whose cultural backgrounds are not represented in the texts that they are expected to read.

In response to the conversation about the nesting ground framework and the necessity for teachers to understand how to respond to students' cultural backgrounds through literacy, Jane (one of the focus participants) posed the following:

So it was really a great way of someone, you know, before you even have the family over, would you spend time getting to know what would be appreciated? What would they have a desire to have? Getting to know the culture which you're going to have represented for dinner? And I think that that speaks to the theoretical strand of looking at that- those structures. How well do you know it? What do you need to know to be able to provide for the learner? One of the other- and I'm going to skip over the instructional strand right now- the professional development strand was interesting, using that same analogy of, you know, what might you do? Would you make it ahead of time? Would you try it out? Is that a dinner that you'd try out and see if you could even do before you actually put it in place? Would you practice that?

Participant conversation related to the understanding and relevancy of the nesting ground framework and its connection to culturally responsive teaching was also important to teachers recognizing and identifying the significance of how students connected to school as an institution. Participant teacher data highlighted that teachers believed there was a distinct connection between teacher-student relationships, students' connections to the text, and students' connections to the institution of school. This was the case from the beginning of this professional development series. However, in the focus analysis in Chapter Five, I establish the extreme importance of the theme of teachers' recognition of the importance of students' connections to the school, teachers, and texts and explore in more depth the focus participant data analysis and how teachers' understandings evolved as a result of their participation in this development series.

One of the activities that stood out in regard to teachers' thinking and understanding was an activity called "Go To Your Corners!" Participants engaged in this activity in session #1 and in the activity, participants were asked the question: What factor do you believe has the most influence on African-American male student literacy? I constructed this guiding question in order to document the beginning understandings and perceptions of teachers. Participants were given the following four choices from which to choose to answer the question: academic language, teacher preparedness, identity, or socialization. I developed the four choices, which had emerged as themes from the review of literature, and cited in Chapter Two of this study, were commonly cited as reasons why African American male students may reject in-school literacy. I taped the four choices onto the four walls of the room and participants then had to physically move to the area of the room that most closely represented their thoughts about the question. They were first asked to discuss the topic among the others in the group who believed the same. Afterwards, teachers were asked to engage in a whole-group discussion about their feelings on how African-American males connect to literacy. In my notes, I documented the following observations of the conversation,

The conversation in the 'Go To Your Corners!' activity moved more toward trying to understand the background from which students come and the context with which students come to link to their academic achievement and literacy development. In this conversation, we talked about how teachers could get to know the psyche of the black male rather than start by judging. The group then started the discussion about student power and identity in the classroom. Before the activity, I asked teachers to read an excerpt from the Lewis (2005) text to help guide this discussion. We spent a significant amount of time talking about identity and making the linkage to literacy and achievement. We discussed how identities were major factors that contributed to, or served as barriers, for students to connect to in-school content.

Jackie, one of the focus participants and the only focus participant who was African American, spoke about a personal scenario with her daughter and her experience in school. Although Jackie never explicitly stated it, the nature of our conversation led me to assume that her daughter was also African American and that the reason why she agreed to introduce personal testimony was to emphasize and support the notion that African American students connect to school and school content through the personal relationships with their teachers. In her statement, Jackie indicated that because her daughter struggled in school and had trouble with in-school content, she disconnected from school. She stated,

I mean, I have to be honest. I have a daughter, and my daughter is nineteen. And she just struggled with testing anxiety. She knew her content. You discuss it, she got it. When it came down to the actual test, she struggled. So for her, graduating with a 'C' average, knowing all the content, was just horrendous on her psyche. And we saw it play out as the years went on. And it just crippled her. Now she's doing exceptionally well. She's [in college] where she's carrying a 3.8 gpa. But that- it took a year of her saying that, 'Oh, I can do this and I am great at this.' You know? So I think that years of being told- whether it's at home or at school or- just not being validated- is just really bad.

The idea that students' identities as they relate to school as an institution and their self-efficacy, is important to how they connect to in-school content, was explored in Chapter Two of this study. As stated previously, the research of Vygotsky (1978), Bandura (2000), and Maslow (1943) showed that there was a link between student motivation, agency, and efficacy. To reiterate, agency speaks to the intentionality of a being to participate in a specific act; motivation to participate in an act is influenced by where a student exists on a hierarchy (mostly related to their emotional ability) to perform the act at the appropriate time; and efficacy speaks to an individual's belief that they can perform and act successfully according to the rules of participation. Also, Gee

(1989) helped to set the foundation to make the connection of students' identities to agency, motivation, and efficacy. If a student's identity is not aligned with, or is devalued in the school context, then they may reject or not succeed with in-school content. When any of the aforementioned factors is negatively influenced, a student's ability to connect to, or successfully meet the standards expected of them may be decreased. What Jackie illustrated for the teachers in the room was that her daughter had not experienced school success because her identity and agency were not aligned to the school environment; thus, her efficacy to do well in school was negatively affected. This idea is important for teachers to understand but can only be done if teachers have a strong connection to their students.

Additionally, as the "Go To Your Corners!" activity was one of the beginning activities of the professional development series, the onset of the activity helped teachers to begin to formulate their own identities as members of this particular discourse community. I noted the following in my notes, which documented how I felt immediately following the activity,

With the exception of 3 African-American attendees, everyone in the room was White and had identified themselves as such. Many of the attendees indicated that they were present because they had some experience (maybe unsuccessful) in teaching reading to African-American male students or they were looking for strategies for how to address the literacy needs of their students. One of the things that initially worried me was that when asked why they were there, many of the attendees indicated that they were looking for strategies to take back to their classrooms. The purpose of this professional development series was not to just provide strategies, but to address how the perceptions, pre-conceived notions, and experience with professional development among teachers influenced their pedagogy, text selections, and assessments of the literacy development of African-American male students. Most of the attendees indicated that they were classroom teachers, (three people indicated that they were building-level or district-level administrators and one person indicated that she was a retired teacher). What was surprising to me is that when I presented data on percentages of drop-outs among African-American students, literacy proficiency of African-

American students as measured by nationally normed standardized assessments, and historical factors influencing African-American male literacy development, to set the stage for the engagement in this activity, most of the people in the room were either surprised, shocked, or expressed disbelief.

Part of the establishment of the identities of the teachers who participated in this study was done by their engagement in this activity and others, and the purpose was to gain an understanding about who they were as professionals, their personal and professional experiences, and their ability to understand who the students are in their classrooms. My observations recorded in my notes, and data collected from participants such as Jackie, helped participants to establish and build community that is essential to a book club model of professional development.

The conversation about student connections to school, text, and to the teacher, directly aligns to the second research question of this study. The second research question asks how teachers might develop understandings about in-school and out-of-school literacy and commit to pedagogy and text selections that are culturally relevant to the African-American male students that they teach. The idea of cultural relevancy relates to how students connect their identities and values to the values of school and how both the school and the individual have to morph to accommodate and promote student learning.

### ***Connection to the Text***

Teachers in this study indicated that one of the things they felt was most important in helping students develop appropriate school literacy was to make sure that students found some connection to the texts they were expected to read. Teachers' thoughts on the need for students to connect with texts aligns with Rosenblatt's (1978) assertion that the author talks to the reader through the text and the reader speaks to the

author when he can generate meaning from the text. However, before we could engage in conversations about how students directly connected to texts, in session #1, teachers were given the space to explore their perceptions of students and the connections of their perceptions to their pedagogy and text selections for students. This particular line of reflective inquiry is relevant to research question #1, which asks how teachers' knowledge and accompanying perceptions of their African American male students evolved as they participated in a professional development series that was designed to help them understand the in-school literacies of their students. Data from group discussions stood out to me as particularly relevant to this research question.

For instance, during a table group conversation, teachers were asked to look through the achievement and literacy achievement data of African American male students as it was compared to their white counterparts. Teachers were given data from The Children's Defense Fund (2014), National Council for Educational Statistics or NCES, (2011), Schott Foundation for Public Education (2010), Kunjufu (2002), and Kunjufu (2005). The data presented statistics about African American males' literacy proficiency, graduation rates, discipline, and college acceptance and compared it to the data of White students. Teachers were asked to participate in an activity called See/Think/Wonder. The activity called for teachers to engage in a conversation with their tables about the what they saw in the data, what the data made them think about, and what they wondered about the data that was not ostensibly addressed.

Teachers questioned and challenged each other about the notion of whether there was a relationship between socioeconomic background of students and students' ability to connect with in-school academic content. There were opposing schools of thought

with regard to why students do not connect with in-school literacy. One school of thought was that students who came from homes that were low on the socioeconomic strata were also the homes where literacy was not emphasized; thus, those students rejected literacy at school. The other school of thought was more related to a line of inquiry that did not pinpoint the problem, but rather asked why students did not connect with in-school literacy and suggested that teacher perceptions was one of the reasons why students rejected school literacy. One of the teachers, Jill (pseudonym), who was engaged in this conversation, commented,

If you weren't raised reading to your children- and so we've had some conversations about that at our school, about- well that's a piece of it. But [Sally], when you said that it was this notion of socioeconomic, you know there's one statistic that jumps out at me that maybe kind of challenges that, is this notion of there are 609,000 African-American males enrolled in college, compared with 1.4 million African-American females. So if the issue is socioeconomics, why are there more than twice as many African-American females? I think there's definitely some sort of issue more relevant to males and perceptions.

Although Jill did not question the specific relationship between teachers' perceptions of students and in-school literacy, she challenged the notion that students' connection to academia and academic content is more related to socioeconomics than it is to how teachers perceive their students. Furthermore, Jill implied that more African American males are not successful in school, which results in the lack of access to post-secondary schooling, as a result of how they are perceived in school by their teachers.

In this same conversation where teachers engaged in a discussion about whether African American male student failure was due to their socioeconomic backgrounds and the lack of literacy being emphasized at home or whether it was due to teachers' perceptions of students, a second teacher, Consuela, challenged the group by extending



the line of inquiry about why students do not participate in school appropriated literacy.

She stated,

I think that for me- I mean, my kids go to school in Detroit. Right? So- but they're half Mexican and stuff, like, but they go to school with mostly black kids. And those kids have been in school since they were two. I mean, like, why- so I would just look at what Aaron has to say about in-school literacy versus at-home, and is it really just the parents reading to them at home? Like, it's got to be something more than that.

In the beginning conversations as well as the data collected from teachers (see pages 163-165 in this chapter), it is clear that they started the process of questioning why African American male students rejected school content. Moreover, teachers' beliefs about why students failed (particularly low socioeconomic status) were aligned with findings from prior studies (Franzak, Morgan & Mehta, 2004; Somers et al, 2008; Somers & Piliawski, 2004) that were referenced in Chapter One (p. 9), and in Chapter Two (p. 66) of this study. However, other studies refuted the claim that school failure was due solely to low socioeconomic status (Gee, 1989; Smith & Wilhelm, 2001). Data presented in the focus participants' section will further support this notion of the need for students to connect to texts to generate meaning.

### **Teachers' Expansion of Their Definitions of Literacy**

In the review of literature for this study, I wrote about the need for teachers to re-conceptualize literacy and develop definitions and understandings that are multi-faceted and expansive, which include all of the components that make up written, spoken, and other communicated language. With that idea in mind, teachers in this study were asked to provide their beginning definitions of literacy during the first session. As our first activity of the series, I asked participant teachers to write down their definitions of literacy and turn them in to me. I asked teachers to submit their beginning definitions of

literacy in order to achieve a foundational understanding of their thoughts about literacy and to help establish whether or not teachers would re-conceptualize their definitions about literacy after participating in the professional development series. In an effort to gather as much data as possible about how teachers felt about literacy, in the first survey, teachers were also asked to provide their thoughts and feelings on in-school and out-of-school literacies.

As previously mentioned, for purposes of this study, literacy was defined as the ability to read, write, decode meanings of words, and comprehend in ways that are relevant and meaningful to students. The work of helping students to develop literacy that is aligned to how it is defined by this study is often context-specific and calls for the necessity of an expansive application of it by teachers that uses instructional methods, such as book club, and that allows students to assert their identities and increase their academic agency through the use of relevant texts and frequent dialogue.

As a researcher and a school administrator, I was interested in facilitating conversations regarding teachers' expansions of their definitions of literacy in order to help them value students' out-of-school literacy practices (e.g. readings of magazines, comic books, and websites) legitimize those literacy experiences and connect them to expected in-school experiences. Moreover, the theme of teachers' expansions of their definitions of literacy that emerged from the data, connected directly to the third research question of this study, which asked how the book club model of professional development can encourage teachers to use this as an instructional practice to meet the needs of their African-American male readers. Literacy is a social act and readers need to have a vehicle to discuss what they read with others, whether it is formal or informal,

to help them gain meaning from the text. Models of instruction, such as the book club model employed in this series of workshops, assisted teachers to re-conceptualize and expand their own definitions of literacy based on the teacher-centered interactions that occurred among them as they participated in the readings and events of the professional development series.

At the conclusion of this study, I conducted a focus group interview with those teachers from the professional development series who agreed to participate in the focus group. Three of the four focus participants also participated in the voluntary focus group interview and the other focus participant provided her responses to the interview questions electronically. Although this fourth participant was not an actual member of the focus group because she did not attend, I thought it was important to include her answers to the interview in the overall data set because of the uniqueness of her experiences as an educator. I considered the fourth participant's (Jackie) experiences to be unique because she indicated in her initial survey that: 1) she taught in an alternative school; 2) she taught a disproportionate number of African American male students; and 3) she taught subject matter that required a high degree of proficiency with literacy but the nature of the academic program at her school enrolled students who struggled with literacy.

During the fourth session of the series, I asked teachers to provide a second written definition of literacy. I asked teachers to do this so that I could gain an understanding of the differences and the growth in conceptualization about the nature of literacy, between their initial definitions and their second definitions. Chapter Five will provide an in-depth analysis about the growth of the first definition to the second;

however, it is important to introduce some initial thoughts about the teachers' conceptualizations of literacy and how they helped the theme about teachers' expansions of their definitions of literacy to emerge. The beginning definitions of the focus participants were as follows:

- Julia:** Literacy [is] the ability to read and comprehend written language – aspects of understanding as essential. Literacy development [is] supporting growth and fluency within – letter recognition, letter sounds, word meaning, reading fluency, comprehension
- Lynn:** Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and act in a way that anyone in the same discipline would be able to understand
- Jackie:** Literacy is the ability to read, write, think, and understand. I believe this includes words, graphics, people, and circumstances
- Jane:** Literacy is reading, writing, and comprehension

I noticed that there was change in their responses when the beginning definitions were compared to the second definitions due to the fact that the initial coding of their definitions were mostly activity based; thus, they were assigned to the activity building code. The initial definitions of literacy were coded as activity building because their definitions were written describing literacy and literacy development as an activity or a list of activities. Activity building activities are defined as events that “[use] cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what activity or activities are going on, composed of what specific actions”. (Gee, 1999, p. 85-86)

The participants' second definitions were assigned the world building, semiotic building, and socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building codes. What this means is, after the focus participants took part in the professional development series, they no longer saw literacy as just an activity, but rather as a way for students to access the world, to form and morph identities, and provide a more authentic view of themselves through the connection of literacy to their personal worlds. Chapter Five will provide

and in-depth analysis of the comparison of the focus participants' beginning definitions of literacy and second definition and the relative conversations about their perceptions of what literacy is, and will discuss how the theme expansion of teachers' definitions of literacy emerged.

So that I could have a firm understanding of whether or not teachers believed that they re-conceptualized and expanded their definitions of literacy, I included an interview question in the focus group interview that asked whether or not teachers' thoughts about literacy had changed as a result of their participation in the professional development series. In response to the interview question, all four of the teachers responded that they had not changed their definitions of literacy, but that their definitions had expanded. The participant teachers' writings of their first and second definitions provided the concrete data about what they believed literacy was and allowed me to document the change in each of their definitions. However, the focus group interview was the best source of data to help me unearth how teachers felt about the process that they went through to help them engage in their expansions and re-conceptualizations of literacy.

For example, in the focus group interview, I asked the question, "Has your definition of literacy changed since the inception of the class? And if so, please let me know how it has." Lynn, who was one of the focus participants, was not hesitant as she was the first person to answer this question. Lynn stated,

Um, I don't know that my definition has changed, but it's certainly expanded. And I-I talked about this at our last session as well. I think, you know, going into it I had this conception of literacy as we read, and we write, and we understand those things that we read and we write. And I think that that has expanded to include the- the listening, the speaking, the you know, kind of world literacy of understanding social cues, and the kind of code switching that our students do every day. All of that is included in literacy. So it's all that decoding that they

have to do on a daily basis. So I definitely think it's- my definition has expanded since- since we started the class.

Lynn started the group down the path and line of conversation where participants began talking about their definitions of literacy as more of an expansion rather than a re-conceptualization. One may view the difference between the two ideas as negligible; however, the expansion of an idea assumes that one has not changed the foundational understanding of the idea but has added new components as new learning has become available, while the re-conceptualization of an idea assumes the reconstruction of the complete thought. It was clear by her quote that Lynn still believed that reading and writing were essential components of literacy but she learned by participating in the series that for African American males, the sociocultural components of literacy are ever-present and important to recognize and address.

Jane was another focus participant who participated in the focus group interview. When asked the question about whether or not she felt her definition of literacy changed, she continued the conversation started by Lynn and responded in the following manner,

And mine was expanded, too- you know, I think there are more nuances to it. And I think it's become clear to me that there are different types of literacy, and that in the bigger picture, all of these various literacies come together kind of in this overarching thing. And they all kind of feed together- as weird as that sounds. You know what I mean?

Jane's response was similar to Lynn's in that they both recognized that literacy was multi-faceted and nuanced and that it included sociocultural components to be inclusive of all the ways that students can display literate behaviors. As I explore the focus participant data around their expansions of literacy in Chapter Five, I will provide more in-depth analysis about how their data was triangulated and generalized to help me

develop conclusions about the validity of a professional development series such as this one and how their data helped me to answer the research questions of this study.

What I found in the ongoing analysis is that when focus participants provided their second definitions of literacy and their thoughts about whether their definitions of literacy changed, I coded those responses differently, with semiotic building occurring most frequently. Jane was the only focus participant whose second definition of literacy was coded as world building. Gee's (1999) definition of semiotic building is that events, "[use] cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what semiotic (communicative) systems, systems of knowledge, and ways of knowing, are here and now relevant and activated." Participants saw that literacy was not just an activity where one has "the ability to read, write, think, and understand." The change in coding from one definition to the second solidifies the notion that there was a difference in the foundational understanding and perceptions of literacy for a few of the teachers.

### **The Necessity of Teachers' Use of Evidence-Based Instructional Strategies**

As a school district administrator, I have many conversations with teachers from varying districts in multiple regions. During these conversations, I hear their points of view regarding instructional programming and what should be provided for students. I often hear from teachers that in order to provide the help that students need, teachers need to be trained in how to use strategies that they can use the very next day, particularly when it comes to improving the literacy development of African-American male students. While I appreciate the sense of urgency these teachers have expressed, I also believe it is important that strategies are grounded in theory and that teachers have an understanding of the relation between theory and practice. However, teachers' sense of urgency aligns

with what they expressed as participants in this study. They expressed, as one of the topics that emerged in discussion, the need to have professional development that assisted them in addressing students' literacy needs.

Teachers' feelings about their efficacy in understanding African-American male students' out-of-school literacies and how to help them was also evident in the surveys that I asked them to complete. I used multiple means of collecting data; however, the data collected from both the first and second surveys provided clarity for the data analysis that helped to identify the theme regarding the use of evidence-based strategies. I asked teachers to respond to the following ideas and topics. Although not all of these items are directly related to instructional strategies, in their responses one or more teachers provided information that was relevant to this theme. These topics were:

1. Briefly explain how the professional development that you have received has helped you with your students... (open-ended question)
2. I have used the following strategies to improve the literacy development of my African-American male students (open-ended question)
3. The reading strategies that I use are evidence-based (Likert Scale)
4. List top three reasons why you believe your African-American male students do not do well in school (open-ended question)
5. I use the information collected about my students as input for text selection (Likert Scale)
6. Briefly explain what you do when student interests and experiences do not match your expectations for reading practices (open-ended question)

The aforementioned list is not inclusive of each of the questions that I asked



teachers regarding their efficacy, their students' efficacy, and their pedagogy, nor is it inclusive of every data collection strategy that helped to answer my research questions. To help illustrate how the major theme of instructional strategies that teachers' used emerged, I picked the questions out of each one of the surveys that I believed were directly related to this theme.

The initial survey was geared heavily toward collecting data about teachers' perceptions of their African-American male students, their own efficacy as teachers to help their African-American male students connect to in-school literacy, and their preparedness and preparation. Conversely, the second survey was geared heavily toward collecting data about how teachers responded to student interests. The data will show that the focus participants thought that instructional strategies that teachers use were closely connected to teacher efficacy and student agency.

### **Teachers' Improved Understandings of Students' Literacy Practices**

Teachers' understandings of the out-of-school literacy practices of African-American male students, the sociocultural paradigm in which those practices exist, and the connection to the expected in-school literacy practices of those same students was key to this study. The central themes in the research questions of this study sought to make meaning of teachers' beginning perceptions of their African-American male students and the relationships to those perceptions to their pedagogy and text selection, their understandings of African-American male students' in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, and the prospect of using book club as an instructional model to address the literacy needs of their students.

Specifically, the second research question of this study asks, “In what ways might teachers’ developing understandings about the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African-American males’ contribute to their decisions about pedagogy and curriculum in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the African-American male students who they teach?” It is teachers’ understanding of their students’ literacy practices that helped to guide their perceptions, their text selections, and how they connected to their students. In Chapter Five, the data from individual focus participants will show how teachers identified their perceptions, beliefs, and understandings about their students and how those thoughts and understandings changed throughout the course of the professional development series.

In the beginning of the series, I asked participant teachers to provide their definitions of literacy. In session #4 of the series, I asked the same teachers to provide a second definition of literacy that was inclusive of what they learned in the professional development series. Although the beginning definitions highlighted in the previous section are directly relative to how teachers’ expanded their definitions of literacy, there is also a direct relationship from their expanded definitions to their improved understandings of student literacy practices and it is necessary to make the connection here. I extracted the first and second definitions of literacy of the focus participants from the rest of their data and coded them. I then analyzed their definitions closely to determine whether there was change in their responses and their definitions from the first one to the second one. A striking and insightful piece of data came from Lynn in session #4 as we were considering how teachers’ definitions of literacy impacted their feelings

about their students' efficacy and the sociocultural factors that influenced their literacy in school and beyond, and how they understood those. Lynn stated,

So you know, I think most of us- I mean, I look around this table and I think most of us have, you know, a set of skills- or a repertoire of skills- that are pretty much scientific, evidence-based- these are skills and strategies that work to encourage reading and comprehension. And I think we do a good job of that. We do a good job at teaching skills. I mean, the CCSS [Common Core State Standards] has a lot of that skill-based stuff built into it too. So where we've definitely been lacking- and we talked about this in previous sessions- is, how much does the literature that we bring to the classroom, or allow students- maybe that's the more important thing- allow students to bring to the classroom- how much of it is truly reflective of them? And how much do they see themselves in that text? Does it- does it matter to them? Because we can teach all the best strategies in the world, but if the kids don't care about what they're applying the strategies to, it's not going to matter. And I go back to this notion of, 'Conditioning to see themselves as inferior being.' Right? And then that notion of turmoil, and in the sense of controlling your own destiny, feeling in control and out of control. How are we- how are we representing that?

The second definitions from the participant teachers were given to me at the end of session #4, after teachers engaged in conversations such as this one, since the goal was to have their definitions encapsulate as much of the professional development experience as possible. The importance of Lynn's thoughts as they related to teachers' definitions of literacy and the relationship to their overall understandings of student literacy was that once teachers began to expand their definitions, they saw literacy as more than just an activity with which one participates in school, but they began a line of professional inquiry about how literacy could bolster the academic and personal confidence in students.

Finally, the discussions about the Tatum text elicited responses from teachers that brought forward this notion that their definitions of literacy expanded from the time the first definition was requested to the time that the second definitions were requested. Teachers' expanded definitions and understandings were important for them to use as a

basis to understand students' literacy practices in and out of school. Therefore, I used the Tatum (2005) text as a means to answer the research questions of this study and to gather data about the impact of the book club model of professional development on the practice of teachers. I established in Chapter Three that Alfred Tatum is considered a leading expert in the teaching of reading to Black male students. At the end of each session, participants were asked to read the assigned chapters (see the Course Outline, Appendix A) and asked to consider and answer the guiding questions that were provided to them. Each text reading and discussion was guided by an introductory/guiding question.

Tatum's (2005) nesting ground framework posited that teacher professional development that is aimed specifically at helping teachers address African American male students' literacy needs is integral to helping them connect to and access school literacy. The facilitation of the activities and conversations of this study and the use of the book club model of professional development encouraged teachers to use it as a pedagogical practice in their classrooms and it followed the model for book clubs that was outlined by Raphael and McMahon (1994) and Raphael, Florio-Ruane, and George (2001). Thus, participants were asked to read texts, answer questions related to the assigned texts, and participate in small group and large group discussions about the assigned readings.

Furthermore, the assigned groups identified essential questions for themselves and for their individual group discussions. The following guiding questions that were provided to the groups by me helped the theme about teachers' improved understandings of student literacy practices to emerge:

1. How do variables outside of schools affect students' access to and attainment of literacy? (Session #1)
2. How do you choose texts? How important is contextual understanding to literacy? (Session #1)
3. How has your thinking changed from the time that we started until now? (Session #5)
4. Do you believe turmoil plays a factor in the literacy development of Black males? If so, what do you do to mitigate this factor? (Session #3)
5. What cultural competencies do you believe Black boys should have to be successful in school? (Session #4)
6. What does the promise of literacy "do" for young Black males? (Session #3)
7. Does viewing literacy as a social act and through the sociocultural paradigm change how you view students' literacy connections? (Session #4)
8. As a teacher, how can you help to validate students' identities? (Session #5)

Some of these questions were questions that were identified on the course outline; however, many of the questions were generated as a result of reading the text. In the methodology section, I specifically documented that I expected many of the guiding questions, with regard to the text discussions, to be generated and developed through the reading and processing of the text. I led several discussions using the guiding questions or thoughts and each question was directly aligned to one or more of my research questions.

The questions that were either submitted to participants as a part of the intended guiding questions and those that were developed by and through the discussions

themselves, were integral in helping to collect data from the participants and they helped the theme of teachers' improved understandings of student literacy to emerge. As a part of the book club methodology, participants are expected to engage in inquiry that might not otherwise happen in any other instructional practice. In my journal notes that documented the activities of session #2, I noted that participants' engagement was starting to decrease; however, participants were beginning to question and challenge their perceptions and practice.

Participants began designing questions in their small groups to present to the larger groups to present to engage the larger group in discussions. The hope is that the questions that they develop will bring forth the type of data that will help to answer some of the research questions.

The guiding questions used in the activities in this study helped participants to focus their thinking around the assigned reading and to help answer the research questions by providing an additional data point to address triangulation. Furthermore, the subset of triangulation that was most closely addressed by the guiding questions was truth-value. Truth-value assesses whether or not the researcher can establish confidence in the findings by the data that the participants contribute. The additional questions that were aligned to the guiding text of this study helped me to address the issue of truth-value because they occurred, were developed, and arose during the course of the study which gave the data that was collected from the participants more credence and authenticity.

### **Summary**

The analysis of participant data and the identification of the major themes presented in this chapter helped to establish the conclusions, assertions, and implications explored in Chapter Five. The major findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that involvement in the professional development series encouraged a progression and

evolution in their perceptions and understandings of in-school and out-of-school literacies of the African-American male students that they taught.

Participant data helped to address the research questions of this study as participants engaged in inquiry about their instructional practice and they sought to adjust their practices to apply to their new cultural understandings of the students they taught. The research questions were addressed when participants were encouraged to: participate in inquiry about their perceptions and practices with their colleagues, challenge their use of texts within classrooms, consider the sociocultural constructs that students use to access in-school and out-of-school literacy, and use a guiding text with the book club model as a frame to address the needs of their African American male students. Finally, I identified four focus participants from whom to extract data and used to allow the themes to emerge for further analysis. The focus participants' data will be presented in Chapter Five along implications and suggestions for further study.

## **CHAPTER 5 – RACE, POWER, IDENTITY, AND LITERACY: TRACING FOUR TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE LITERACIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS**

### **Introduction to Focus Participants**

As outlined in Chapter Three, focus participants were identified using a range of criteria that represented a cross-section of experiences that included: years in the field of teaching, experience with teaching African American students the uniqueness of their professional experiences as related to the district in which they taught, and their ethnic or racial background. The experiences of the teachers were important to consider in the focus participant selection process as I wanted to ensure that there was the representation of teachers who taught African American male students in homogenous and heterogeneous populations; I wanted there to be a variance in the number of years of teaching to provide a comparison of beginning, mid-career, and veteran teachers; and I wanted to see if certain patterns or commonalities emerged in the data when I considered the findings in the context of the self-identified race and/or ethnicity of the focus group participants.

The data collected and analyzed for focus participants included the initial survey, classroom observations and discussions, as well as a final focus group interview (three of the focus participants engaged in a focus group interview, one answered questions electronically). The purpose for using a focus group as a methodology for data collection was to allow a more in-depth analysis of certain key findings that emerged from the analysis of the professional development series meetings. Furthermore, utilizing a focus group allowed me to further address each one of my research questions, as shown in Table 2 in Chapter Two (see pg. 146).



One of the goals of this research was to learn more about teachers' understandings of in-school and out-of-school literacies among the African American male students they taught and how they came to have those understandings. Through the ongoing analysis of the data, I was able to determine four themes that existed and emerged across all the data. The themes that emerged as central to this study were: 1) teachers recognition of the importance of students' connections to teachers, school, and texts; 2) teachers' expansion of their definitions of literacy; 3) teachers improved understandings of students' in-school and out-of-school literacy practices; and 4) the necessity of teachers use of evidence-based instructional strategies, which were related to addressing the literacy practices of their students.

This chapter presents an analysis and discussion of the major themes for the four focus participants. The chapter begins with a general introduction to each focus study participant. This is followed by an analysis of each focus group participant in relation to the four themes identified above. In Chapter Six, I will discuss the implications of this study with regard to the literacies of African American male students.

### **Lynn – The Optimist**

In table group discussions and in the focus group interview, Lynn indicated that she had African American male students enrolled in both her standard and advanced level English classes. Lynn identified herself as a Caucasian woman on her initial survey and later during the focus group session that took place after the conclusion of the professional development, she specifically identified herself as Jewish. She indicated that she was born and raised in the district where she taught and further stated that she learned her values of providing an equitable education to all children from her father;

however, she did not expand on how her father specifically influenced her with regard to her outlook on how to educate students.

At the time of this study, Lynn was teaching high school English in a predominantly White, wealthy school district in a suburb of Detroit. When I examined the performance data found on the MI School Data website for the district where Lynn taught, I discovered that when data is accessed for all students, students in the district outperformed the average for the state and the average for the county in the subject of reading. The website, MI School Data ([mischooldata.org](http://mischooldata.org)), is a database that is developed and monitored by the Michigan Department of Education and it keeps the educational statistics of each of the schools and school districts in the state.

In Lynn's district, the average proficiency for all high school students in reading was 98% for the 2013-2014 school year. The average reading proficiency for the county was 63% and 59% for the state. A demographic breakdown of the students in the district showed that 96% of the African American students were proficient in reading while 98% of white students were proficient in reading. At the high school level, in the 2013-2014 school year, reading proficiency and college readiness was measured by student performance on the ACT exam. Furthermore, when compared to individual districts, the district where Lynn taught was frequently ranked as one of the top performing districts in the state. Lynn's experience is unique because she indicated that during the same time period that this study was conducted, she taught both advanced level and standard level eleventh-grade English classes.

I characterized Lynn as an optimist because she held the belief that she could help meet African American male students' literacy needs despite the turmoil that they may

have faced in and out of school. Furthermore, as I will explore below, Lynn used her ability to form relationships with her students as a means to engage students and increase their efficacy to relate to expected in-school literacy. Analysis of the data collected around Lynn showed that she believed in her students' abilities to connect with rigorous in-school content, regardless of whether or not they previously struggled with literacy.

### **Jackie – The Nurturer**

Jackie self-identified as an African American woman. At the time this study was conducted, Jackie was a teacher in an alternative school and she had a wide-range of experiences in her fourteen years of teaching. She has taught students with varying abilities and in urban and suburban areas.

I characterized Jackie as the nurturer because she had an undying belief in her students' ability to succeed, she built strong relationships with them that helped her to understand their lives and helped her to find appropriate in-school content for them, and she differentiated her instructional strategies to meet the needs of all of her learners. As I will describe in more detail later in the chapter, many of Jackie's students have experienced a tremendous amount of turmoil in their lives. The participant teachers in this study frequently identified that the turmoil in students' lives was a barrier to their success in school and with literacy. Jackie was adept at recognizing the turmoil that her students experienced and she adjusted her instruction accordingly. This is one of her strengths as a teacher.

At the time that this study was conducted, Jackie was teaching in a district that was a suburb of Detroit where African American students made up 94% of the student population. In the initial survey, Jackie indicated that she has taught in the same district

for the last thirteen years at the middle school level, high school level, at the district's alternative high school. Over her years of teaching, she has taught English Language Arts, Economics, Civics, Government, African American History, and World History. At the time of this study, she was teaching Advanced Placement Government to twelfth grade students at the alternative high school.

Although I am a veteran educator, as an educator and researcher, I made an incorrect assumption about the alternative schools, similar to the academic environment in which Jackie taught. I made the assumption that students like Jackie's who attend alternative schools, did so because they did not thrive in their comprehensive high school environments. Alternative schools are frequently structured to provide environments for students who have experienced school failure or who struggle meeting the standards of behavior that comprehensive high schools set. To support this assumption, I found it prudent to provide a few pieces of statistical data about Jackie's school and district.

Data from the Michigan Department of Education's website of school and district data, MI School Data ([mischooldata.org](http://mischooldata.org)), provided a snapshot about student performance for the 2013-2014 school year. The school where Jackie was teaching at the time of this study was 98% African American and 61% of the students received free or reduced price lunch.

Information about families' financial statuses is collected every year from parents and help districts to determine how to provide services for their students. The purpose for documenting students' free and reduced lunch status is to make an attempt to observe whether or not there is a relationship between a student's socioeconomic status and his academic performance. Frequently, the students who make up the group of economically

disadvantaged, a term used by the state of Michigan, are African American students. Districts have often made declarative statements that link school failure among African American students to their economic status. However, the importance of studies such as this one is that it accounted for many of the sociocultural factors, including socioeconomic status, to help to develop conclusions about why students fail.

In Jackie's school district, 33% of the students were deemed to be proficient in reading as determined by the ACT exam. At the school where Jackie taught, 10% of the students who took the ACT exam were deemed proficient in reading. Of the African American students in the district, 34% were deemed to be proficient in reading, while 47% of the white students were deemed to be proficient in reading. The discrepancy between white students and African American students in reading further sheds light on the gap in achievement between the two groups. The intent of providing data about the performance of students in Jackie's district and school was to contextualize the data provided by her.

In the whole group and table group discussions, Jackie spoke about meeting the needs of her students, regardless of their academic or behavioral history. I will elaborate further about Jackie's commitment to her students in the in-depth case study discussion of Jackie. Jackie indicated that before arriving at the alternative school, her students did not succeed academically at their respective comprehensive high schools and during the course of the professional development series, in the first and second surveys, and the interview questions that were sent to her electronically, she documented the need to use different instructional strategies to help students connect their out-of-school literacies to in-school literacy. In the session #1 during the "Here's What! So What? Now What?"

activity, Jackie stated that many students had not had experiences previous to arriving in Jackie's class that connected them to school. I will document later what Jackie had to say about how her students' experiences have led to school failure for many of them.

### **Jane – The Passionate Teacher**

In the focus group interview, which Jane attended with three other participants, she indicated that she had been teaching for thirty-two years. In the initial survey, Jane identified herself as Caucasian. According to the data she provided during the interview, she spent her first couple of years teaching in the Detroit Public Schools, in a school that was predominantly African American. At the time that data was collected for this study, Jane had been teaching in her current school district for thirty years. The school district where she teaches is in a suburb of Detroit and borders the city on its southeastern side. When one crosses from the city of Detroit into the school district where Jane teaches, it is easy to see the stark contrast in the physical environment and in racial and socioeconomic make-up of the people who live there.

I chose Jane as one of the focus participants because of her experiences with teaching students from varying backgrounds and academic abilities. Furthermore, I chose her because an analysis of the data showed that she exhibited a progression in her thinking and an understanding for the need to accept, validate, and promote out-of-school literacy to help students connect with in-school literacy.

In the focus group interview, Jane said that, “as an idealistic, White, female teacher who was right out of college, I didn't understand the varying issues with which African American students had to contend.” I interpreted her statement to mean that, in her initial foray into the world of educating African American students, she was not

prepared to teach the students who dealt with turmoil in their home lives that directly affected their access and connection to the school environment. Jane articulated what many young, White teachers have articulated when they have African American students in their classrooms. When students have trouble connecting to the school environment and experience school failure, many teachers do not know what to do to help their students.

Jane indicated in the focus group interview that when she first started teaching, she suspected that her principal and other administrators served as barriers to students learning; however, she indicated that she felt that the administrators thought that they were helping students. For example, she explained that in her first years of teaching, the school administration would alter students' answers on state tests and would monitor her teaching for the purpose of making sure that students' classroom experiences were geared toward performing well on state assessments rather than on learning the content. When I asked her about her early experiences with the administration at the school where she began, and how she approached learning with her African American students, Jane became quite emotional. She began crying when she talked about why she left her school in Detroit and the students that she left behind. She stated, "When I was there, I did good things, I felt like I just sold out." Jane left the Detroit Public Schools after two years of teaching and began teaching in her current school district.

I characterized Jane as the passionate teacher out of the group of the four focus participant teachers because of the emotion that she displayed when we talked in the focus group interview about African American male students and the responsibility she felt when it came to providing a quality education to them. Jane was the most veteran

teacher of all the focus teachers and her experiences with teaching students at both ends of the socioeconomic scale gave her a unique perspective. Also, I believe it was Jane's experiences and years within the field of education that helped her to see the need to help African American male students be successful in school by improving their connection to in-school literacy.

In order to provide context about Jane's past and recent experiences, it was necessary to provide student performance data about Jane's district to understand her statement about why she thinks she sold out. The Michigan Department of Education's school database website, [mischooldata.org](http://mischooldata.org), reported that Jane's school district, which is a suburb of Detroit, consistently outperformed other districts in the area and in the state. At the high school level, in the subject of reading, the mean ACT composite score of all 11<sup>th</sup> grade students who took the ACT exam was 23 in the 2013-2014 school year, with 62% of the students in the district meeting the college readiness standard. As stated previously, the ACT organization determined that students are college ready when they achieve a 22 or better on the individual subject-area exams and a 22 or better in the composite score. The mean score of all students in the State of Michigan in the area of reading was a 19, with 37% of the students meeting the college readiness benchmark. The mean reading score of African American students within Jane's district was an 18, with 27% of the students meeting or exceeding the college readiness benchmark, while the mean reading score for white students was a 24, with 72% of the students meeting the college readiness benchmark.

Jane indicated in her initial survey that she taught at the elementary school level; however, she did not indicate which grade level she taught. Since Jane indicated that was



an elementary school teacher, I thought it was relevant to provide reading data from the elementary level as well. Prior to the 2014-2015 school year, student performance at the elementary level was measured by the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) exam administered by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). Starting with the 2014-2015 school year, the MDE began administering the M-Step exam (in place of the MEAP) to measure student performance for grades 3-8 & 11th; however, at the time of the publication of this research, the results of that exam were not yet available.

I accessed the MEAP results for Jane's district for the 2013-2014 school year through the MI School Data online database. At the elementary level, the MEAP exam only tested grades 3-5. In Jane's district, the average reading proficiency for students who were tested at the elementary level was 84%. The MI School Data site would not allow me to disaggregate the reading scores of African American students and white students for Jane's district to provide a comparison, as it did in other scenarios.

### **Julia – The Realist**

During the initial survey and in the focus group interview, Julia indicated that she taught in an affluent suburb about thirty miles north of Detroit. In the initial survey, she indicated that she has taught in her current district for the past ten years. Julia has taught English Language Arts and Social Studies and all of her years in her current district were at the middle school level. Julia's district has been consistently rated among the top performing school districts in the state and the high school in the district rated among the top 10% of high schools nationwide in 2015 by *U.S. News and World Report* and *The Washington Post*.

As I did with the school districts of the other teacher participants in the case studies, I accessed the MI School Data student and district database website to provide information about Julia's school district. All of the data that I accessed from the website was for the 2013-2014 school year. According to MI School Data ([mischooldata.org](http://mischooldata.org)), the district where Julia taught had a 91% graduation rate when all students are combined. Since Julia indicated that she taught middle school, student assessment data in the reading category from the MEAP was used; however, it was also important to highlight data pertaining to high school aged students to set the context for how students performed on the middle school to high school continuum. Furthermore, high school assessment data is viewed to be a representation of how well a district can effectively educate all of its students.

As previously stated, the mean ACT score that is set by the ACT organization that denotes whether or not a student is considered college ready is 22. For the 2013-2014 school year, the ACT exam served as the state proficiency exam for students in high school. The statewide mean ACT score for reading was 19, while the mean ACT score for students in Julia's district for reading was 21. Based on the data collected from MI School Data, 50% of all of the students combined in Julia's district were deemed college ready using ACT's metrics. When the data was disaggregated and using the composite score of 22 as a benchmark to determine college readiness, 50% of white students were deemed college ready, while only 29% of African American students were deemed college ready. The mean score in the area of reading was 21 for white students and 18.5 for African American students. Furthermore, as measured by ACT, 72% of all students

combined were proficient in the area of reading, 82% of white students were proficient in reading, and 50% of African American students were proficient in reading.

Reviewing data about college readiness and reading proficiency led to the following questions (which may not be answerable within the scope of this study): 1) why was there not a stronger relationship between college readiness and reading proficiency for Julia's district?; 2) why was there not a stronger relationship between reading proficiency and the graduation rate for Julia's district?; and 3) why was there not a stronger relationship between college readiness and the graduation rate for Julia's district? The assertion of this study is that a high level of literacy and the connection between students' out-of-school literacy and expected in-school literacy, positively impacts students' ability to be successful in school.

The data collected about Julia's district led me to consider the following possibilities: 1) the courses at the high school level in Julia's district lacked rigor; and, 2) the standardized assessments used to measure reading proficiency are not aligned to how literacy is developed in students. There is evidence to support the latter of the two conclusions as the data from Julia's district reified the notion that there is a misalignment between how literacy is assessed through the metrics of standardized assessments and how language and literacy are developed in students.

For the 2013-2014 school year, the MEAP served as the statewide assessment for students in grades 3-8. The MI School Data website also provided assessment data for students at the middle school level. Since it was unclear through her data which specific grade level Julia taught, eighth grade data was used as the eighth grade is the culmination of the pre-high school experience. When looking at eighth grade MEAP data, I found

that 78% of all students combined were proficient in reading in Julia's district. During the same year, as measured by the same assessment, 85% of white students were proficient in reading in Julia's district while 62% of African American students were proficient in reading. All of the data collected about Julia's district further highlighted the fact that African American students in the district were disconnected from the expected in-school literacy and that the assessments given do not accurately measure students' literacy that is attained through the sociocultural paradigm.

### **Major Themes**

During the ongoing and recursive analysis of the focus participant data, four themes emerged. As stated previously, the four themes that emerged were: 1) teachers recognition of the importance of and relationship to students' connections to teachers, school, and texts; 2) teachers' expansion of their definitions of literacy; 3) teachers improved understandings of students' literacy practices; and 4) the necessity of teachers' use of evidence-based instructional strategies. This section documents and discusses the relation of these themes to the research questions of this study.

#### ***Teachers' Recognition of the Importance of Students' Connections to Teachers, School, and Texts***

Analysis of the data supports that teachers' understandings of how sociocultural factors in the lives of their African American male students sometimes serve as barriers to making connections of in-school literacy practices to their out-of-school literacy practices changed and evolved throughout the course of their participation in this workshop. During the course activities and focus group interview, several teachers spoke about either their unawareness of, or their failure to make the connection to, African

American male students' lives and their disconnection of school, the school culture, and school related content. However, several of the teachers, such as Lynn, had very clear ideas about the ways in which school fails African American male students.

Lynn, one of the more outspoken participants in this study, explained that students sometimes experienced turmoil at the hands of their teachers, their school environment, the communities from which they came, or a composite of all three. In the initial survey, participants were asked to list three factors that they believed contributed to African American male students not doing well in school. Lynn provided the following factors that she believed led to student failure among African American male students,

[Students] lack connection to the material; [experience] cultural exhaustion -- going through the day without seeing anyone in a position of authority who looks like you has to be exhausting and, similarly, consistently having to code-switch or harness part of who you are is tiresome as well. [There is a] lack of understanding or compassion from teachers/administrators. I find that many of my students, particularly my African American males, are written off the second they do something seen as 'wrong' or 'inappropriate.' Rather than trying to help students understand how to better navigate the rules of school, students are dismissed as being problem students too early.

Lynn's response was particularly relevant to the second research question, which asked how teachers develop their understanding of student literacy and its relationship to their cultural efficacy, leading to effective pedagogy and text selections of those students. Lynn stated that she believed that the lack of connection students have with the texts, with their teacher, and with the cultural and social construct of school, leads to their failure. She further documented the need for the connection between students' cultural experiences and expected cultural experiences in school, and how students connect to in-school content. As she wrote about students' needs to connect with school and school

culture, she also documented the need for students to connect with their teachers and other adults at the school with whom they can identify.

Lynn's comments about African American students being "written off the moment they do something wrong" speaks to the larger issue of the perception of African American male students in public schools. The very fact that African American students are disciplined at higher rates, manifests itself in higher rates of suspensions and expulsion for these students, thus, leading to an increased disconnect from school and its mores and values, and school related content.

For example, many districts around Michigan have been cited by the Michigan Department of Education as having significant disproportionality with regard to the over-identification or disproportionate discipline of African American students who are in special education (Michigan Department of Education, 2016). The criteria that the State of Michigan uses to determine significant disproportionality involves the identification of any student that is overrepresented in the areas of discipline or identification in a special education certification, when compared to their percentage in the overall student populations. In laymen terms, if the percentage of students that are suspended is higher than their overall percentage of representation at the school or district, the district is found to be in significant disproportionality.

Some may argue with the metrics that are used to determine whether or not a district is deemed as having significant disproportionality; however, the fact remains that there is a major cultural disconnect between African American male students and school. When African American students are perceived to be more aggressive, to be less intelligent, or to be less inclined to participate in literacy events, teachers' expectations of

these students have an impact on how they connect with the teacher, the school, and in-school texts.

One of the most notable pieces of data, and subsequent analysis, that helped the theme around connections to emerge was when Julia spoke about how students develop literacy and how teachers have historically not given value to how African American male students participate in literacy events. In session #3, as a means to guide the conversation around chapters 7-9 of the Tatum text, I asked participants to respond to the following questions: 1) How do you choose texts?; 2) How important is contextual understanding to literacy?; and 3) Should you re-conceptualize your idea of literacy? Julia responded in the following manner,

Well, there was- there was a passage- this was one of the last things that I got to reading- on page 48- and they were talking about the movie Finding Forester- and I think- I'm not going to read the whole thing. It was something to the effect of- this kid's writing this journal, and what he's writing is completely benign. It's just like, blah. And the guy who's his mentor says, 'You're sixteen and you're black.' Like, that's- And the kid right away is like, 'What does that have to do with anything?' But, writing about life through that lens- looking at what it is that makes your lens different than everyone else's lens- then kind of gives you an angle in which to see the world in. And I wonder if, by pretending we don't have that lens- we don't see that lens- then we're also ignoring the fact that kids do have that lens. They are looking at our world. They are looking at our curriculum through their lens. If this is a really stupid book, if it has nothing to do with my life, if we are not thinking about the fact that they're thinking that way, we're not going to be able to [sic] any sense of what we're teaching them.

Julia's commentary about seeking to understand literacy through the eyes of a sixteen-year-old Black male was key to being able to understand how her philosophy of literacy aligned to the instructional practices that she spoke about in this study and that I will identify later in this chapter. In the initial coding, I coded Julia's thoughts about the lens through which educators should use to comprehend African American male literacy, using the semiotic building and socioculturally-situated and relationship building codes.

The lens to which Julia referred is the context that is shaped by African American male students' experiences, culture, mores, values, and language. Julia highlighted the need for educators to value African American males' lenses and the literacy practices that they bring to literacy events. Moreover, her thoughts on how educators should view the literacy of the students in their classes is similar to the sentiment shared by Lynn, in that teachers should be continuing to find the lens with which to understand the several contexts that students bring to literacy events.

Lynn stated that students should be allowed to be "sixteen and Black and have an opinion." The data from focus participants in this study has documented that teachers believe that students are often disenfranchised from the educational environment and the content through the treatment by their teachers, and that being sixteen and Black is sometimes a barrier between students' realities and their access to in-school literacy. Lynn's data supported the assertion that oftentimes students feel disconnected from school and the content due to the treatment by their teachers.

Other data that established that teachers' understanding about student literacy, the lens through which students view literacy, and the importance of understanding students' connections, came from Julia. Julia showed that she understood that the lens through which African American male students see the world is directly connected to how they view the literacy that is expected of them in school. Thus, as Julia's data will show, she articulated that students may not find it easy to connect to themes in literacy of which they have little experience or understanding. Subsequent to the realization of a disconnection between the student, his experiences and the content, it becomes the



teacher's responsibility to ensure that students are provided contexts that they understand and can apply across texts and content areas.

To better establish how participants used the professional development series to allow their understandings to be positively influenced to understand the lives of their African American male students, in the focus group interview, I asked the question, "What role have you played in helping African American males connect to the literacy that's expected within your school or in your classroom?" Julia spoke about how she challenged her own thinking and perceptions to be able to help the students that she taught to develop contextual understanding. Julia stated,

I think, until this class, I was not doing enough to foster in-school literacy for my African American boys. This year the classes that I teach have changed. And because of that- and this is actually one of the things I'm trying to fix in my school- because of the classes that I teach, I now have a much higher population of African American males. And I'm also- this has become my passion. This has become my mission in school, is to improve school for these boys. In all ways. And I'm on- I don't know, ninety-two different groups dealing with that. But it's really- this has been my focus since the beginning of the year. And everything I do, and every book that I choose, and every activity that I, you know- it's with these boys in mind. And you know, some of the things that have really worked have been things like that language activity- helping them recognize, you know, that their language is valuable and is the way they speak, and there's nothing wrong with that.

According to Julia, it was clear that throughout the school year and as a result of this professional development series, she recognized her own understanding of African American male literacy as it progressed. Furthermore, in her quote, she articulated her commitment of viewing literacy through the lens of the African American male students that she taught, in the practical setting of the classroom.

Julia's thoughts and understandings about viewing literacy through the lens of her students addresses the first research question of this study which asked, "What is the

progression and evolution of teachers' knowledge and accompanying perceptions of the African American male students they teach when they voluntarily participate in a professional development series designed to enhance their understanding of both the in-school and out-of-school literacies of these students?" It was Julia's understanding of her own ideas and beliefs about literacy and how students connect to literacy, which confirmed the relationship between her instructional practices and her perceptions of students and their abilities. Moreover, through the ongoing analysis of her data, I was able to assess how she called upon her instructional philosophy to help students connect to literacy. Analysis of Julia's data around her understandings of literacy is directly related to the theme of connections and helped to illuminate the inextricable link between teachers' perceptions about their students' efficacy with literacy and her instructional response.

Another key piece of data from Julia that provided deeper understanding regarding her thoughts about her purpose as a teacher and her belief system about African American male students and how to help them connect with her, the school, and school content, emerged in session #3 during the activity where the group discussed Tatum's nesting ground framework. In this activity, I asked participants to talk with their table groups about how their individual practices aligned to each strand of the framework (the theoretical, instructional, and professional development strands). Julia's group quickly began a conversation about instructional strategies they used in their classrooms. Although this particular section is not about instructional strategies per se, nevertheless, this exchange firmly established that some of the strategies that teachers use should be

about helping students connect to school. During the conversation, Julia opened up the dialogue about the importance of teachers connecting to students:

And I think just asking them- like, I think that makes those connections which seems to be- my takeaway so far from this whole course, is that like, the strategy we need is to connect with our chil- like, our students. So just make those connections. Like, that's the whole like, 'give a damn' strategy. That's the damn strategy. Like, find out what they need. Like, come to where they are.

Although Julia was searching for the language to articulate her understanding, she made an important realization. Julia's response to the question about how to connect to students' out-of-school literacy and to African American male students as learners, spoke specifically to the first research of this study.

Teachers' perceptions of their students as learners, and how they connect to them, helps teachers to know their students better and; consequently, teachers are able to make better choices about appropriate texts and learning tasks for their students. Furthermore, Julia's cognizance about what she learned from the professional development was significant. Her acknowledgement of how important it is for teachers to make connections to students so that the classroom becomes a comfortable learning space, spoke directly to Rosenholz (1985) and Rowan (1990) and the notion of psychic rewards that teachers need to experience to be successful, with students' academic success being a major component.

Other teachers spoke about how important the connection to school as an institution is for African American male students. Accordingly, participant teachers found that the idea of helping students connect to school and the teacher was the most important connection to be made, even before trying to help students connect to in-school content. Although an analysis of the data from each one of the focus participants led to

the emerging theme of the importance of connections to the teacher, school, and the text, data analysis of two focus participants (Jackie and Jane) emanated as particularly important in helping to establish this claim. Jackie spoke about her feelings about the turmoil that students faced not only outside of school, but also at the hands of their teachers and their school institutions. Furthermore, within the line of conversation about turmoil, Jackie spoke about teachers' roles in solidifying meaningful relationships with their students.

Jane also took up this theme in important ways in her comments about how the notion of addressing student turmoil should be addressed through teacher-student connections as she spoke about her experiences with students' lack of efficacy to be successful with in-school content and how she helped them to develop self-efficacy. Furthermore, Jane spoke extensively about how the idea of power and identity has played out in her classrooms over the years and how those concepts sometimes served as a barrier for students to connect with the school as an institution and in-school content.

There were two activities in which Jackie participated that turned out to be particularly relevant regarding her thoughts about students' connections to the teacher, the school, and the text. The first of the two activities was called, "What's the Problem?, What's Not the Problem?" and was facilitated in the second session. In this activity, participant teachers were given the prompt: "African American male students do not connect well with in-school texts." Participants were instructed to make a list of all of the things that they felt did and did not contribute to the statement related to the activity. Afterwards, participants were asked to discuss their answers in their groups as I recorded their conversations on the iPads. The second of the two integral activities for which

Jackie provided data that helped the theme about connections to emerge was an activity that I facilitated named, “Here’s What, So What?, Now What?” and it was also conducted during the second session.

Jackie indicated in her response to the prompt about African American male students not connecting with literacy that, although many of her students struggled with the content of in-school texts, they struggled mostly to make connections within their school environments, primarily with their teachers. She stated,

I teach at an alternative school in [District X]. And so our population is primarily African American. And so I wasn't really aware of what I was seeing and how that really relates to our nation as a whole. But I am aware, you know, that my classroom is primarily boys. I was aware of that. I always kind of wondered why. And I- I oftentimes have asked my students, "Well, why are you here?" You know? We started our class with, "Why are you here?" And there've been a variety of reasons, some of which have actually been experiences with their teachers. Which surprised me. And then they say that they don't feel empowered. That's what it comes down to. So they've kind of felt victimized, in some cases, with experiences that they've had with their teachers.

Jackie spoke directly to what researchers Bryk and Driscoll (1988), Newkirk (2002), Ogbu (1991), Smith and Wilhelm (2002), and Tatum (2005), Vygotsky (1978) asserted in their research with regard to students needing to connect with both the content and school environment. Students need to experience psychic rewards, have a sense of agency in completing the work, and they need to understand the standards of participation to complete a specific task; all of which can be completed if the student develops relationships with their teachers and has a connection with the school as an institution. Jackie’s comments about students feeling disconnected from school and the content, as a result of how their teachers have treated them, is indicative of the notion that teachers’ perceptions of their students and their abilities, and their understanding of their students’ cultural backgrounds, is directly related to how students connect to literacy.

With regard to Jackie's comments on students' experiences with their teachers, I coded the response as socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building and connection building. Her feelings about her students' experiences related to how students are perceived by their teachers and how students perceive their teachers as a result of their cultural and gender affiliation and how students find that they cannot connect to their teachers as a result of feeling "victimized" by them. To further emphasize the need for teachers to connect with their students, in the same activity, Jackie spoke about how she developed close relationships with her students. She stated,

I got tons of boys all the time. I laugh but it's- you know, if you're honest with them, they see care- they- sometimes they're so down because they're like- my son- 'I don't know what to do.' 'Let's talk about it. Look at this and really dig in deep. Let's forget about everything else and let's talk about you. Because right now you're in control. You're fifteen, you're sixteen. You're in control of this. This is what you want to do. Let's not worry about what other people are telling you right now. What do you want to do?'

Jackie's relationships with her students enabled her to set the foundation for how she helped them to connect with the text and to the school. Her thoughts about student connections show the interconnectedness of her thoughts and feelings about student-teacher relationships and literacy, and her understanding about how to connect students to school and in-school texts. As Rosenblatt (1978), Rosenblatt (2004), and Feathers (1983) suggested, there is a recursive process involved in reading that occurs between the reader and the text, with the reader being involved in a relationship with the author or creator of the text. Jackie's data and the data from the other focus participants supported that, in order to bring African American male readers to the literacy events to begin relationships with the authors and with the texts, there first needs to be relationships between the reader and the teacher, and the reader and the school.

In my analysis, I was able to establish a more direct alignment between the relationship that students have with their teachers and the intended relationships that schools expect students to have with texts, through Jackie's data. To speak briefly about the recursive process referenced by Rosenblatt (1978) and other researchers, I agree that the recursive process between reader, text, and author does not begin when the reader enters the literacy event and accesses a text, but it begins as a relationship between the reader and his environment. Furthermore, the recursive process begins when a reader engages in an ongoing self-awareness process whereby he formulates and continuously morphs his identity and begins to feel like his contextual understanding and background knowledge is valued by the teacher, when he brings it to the literacy event.

The events of the readers' connection to his teacher and his learning environment must also be inclusive of available texts that are relevant to his past and ongoing experiences. Viewing the recursive process of literacy through this lens allows the reader to access and engage with the text. To further support this point, I structured an interview to gather teachers' thoughts about how they believe students connect to texts. Jackie did not participate in the focus group interview, as she was unavailable to do so in person, but provided her responses to the questions to me electronically. In the interview questions that I sent to Jackie, I asked the question, "How important is it for students to see representations of themselves in the texts that they read?" Jackie responded,

It is extremely important for students to see themselves represented in the texts in which they read. The text allows students to feel validated, drawing a link between school and life. The text should also include African Americans who have 'made it' despite the odds to help encourage the students that read the text.

I believe that because Jackie first develops a relationship with her students before introducing texts to them, she understands the types of texts that will interest them and

texts that allow them to connect to the themes that she wants them to understand. Jackie's quote spoke directly to Tatum's (2005) assertion that African American male students should have the opportunity to experience African American male protagonists in narrative texts that have a positive life trajectory. Jackie's view about students' connections to their teachers reveal that, in her experience, students experience school failure because they lack the connection to the teacher, which leads to a disconnect from the school and from the in-school content or texts.

To illuminate her feelings about the importance of students connecting with school as an institution, Jackie talked about some of the things that her students conveyed to her about why they don't believe they connect with school. In one of the concluding activities, I asked participants to write down and discuss a word or phrase from the Tatum text that resonated with them. Although this activity helped the theme about teachers' improved understandings of student literacy to emerge, when put in context with Jackie's response to the activity, it was also appropriate that her thoughts that were collected during this activity helped the theme about connections to emerge as well. Before speaking about Jackie's point of view about the turmoil that students face, it is necessary to provide context about the activity grounded in the reading of our guiding text, Tatum (2005).

As stated previously, I recorded the discussions of this activity as both table group discussions and as whole group conversation. In a section of Tatum's book, he talks about the turmoil that many African American male students experience in their every day lives. Many of these experiences have served as a barrier between students and



school because their life experiences and contextual understanding does not connect to the context of school or the material found in their in-school texts.

Of the four participants in the focus group, two chose the word “turmoil”, and one chose the word “obstacles” to describe words that resonated with them from the Tatum text. The conversation about turmoil was important because Tatum talked throughout the text about the turmoil that many African American male students face and the impact that personal turmoil has on their academic progress. Additionally, the personal turmoil that students experience is often documented in texts and the popular media and the news. Tatum (2005) states,

The image of the black male as a subhuman, unintelligent, sexually promiscuous, idle buffoon was everywhere – in stage shows, novels, advertisements, newspapers, and magazines – and it took hold of the American psyche...These barriers, along with educational, economic, political, and social disenfranchisement made it nearly impossible for black males *as a group* to climb above the bottom rung of the social ladder in jobs, education, income, and political power (p. 27).

Tatum’s (2005) words are relevant here because he establishes the historical connection of Black male turmoil. In his text, Tatum wrote a section entitled, “The Roots of Black Male Turmoil” (p. 26). He refuted the notion that African American male turmoil exists only because of the current social, cultural, and economic positions in which African American people often find themselves; rather, the turmoil of African American males began during the institution of slavery. According to Tatum, as a means to continue to discredit, dehumanize, and assert hegemonic dominance over African American people, the cultural and academic institutions of this country have served as the foundation of turmoil for African American male students. These result in actions which have

manifested themselves as inter-communal problems rather than those that have deeply-rooted connections to American historical actions and values.

The institution of slavery, the black codes, Jim Crow laws, school segregation, and the ongoing overt and covert racism against African American males, have been a barrier to their academic pursuits. Furthermore, the perceptions of African American males by the larger dominant culture have impacted (and continues to impact) how school institutions view them and their ability to succeed. Tatum's quote is inextricably linked to the words from Obama (2006) as they establish that the perceptions of African American males have served as barriers to academic success. If one views another as sub-human, animalistic, and unintelligent, as propaganda and media about the image of African American males has reified for millions of Americans, those images have and had the potential to quickly become interwoven into the cultural psyche of both individuals and institutions.

The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, located on the campus of Ferris State University in Big Rapids, MI, provides tangible evidence that supports Tatum's claim about how African American people are viewed, with the largest collection of the racist imagery that has been used to imprint racist images about African American people into the cultural fabric of this nation, which has negatively affected the perceptions of African American people, particularly African American males (The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, 2016).

Thus, the negative images, thoughts, perceptions, low-expectations, and feelings about the abilities of African American males is also part of the culture that exists in the institution of school (and its school staff and students) as school is a microcosm of the

larger American societal culture. Hence, the words of Tatum (2005) and Obama (2006) help to contextualize the turmoil experienced by African Americans as a part of the ongoing historical events and cultural institution of the United States of America, rather than a subcultural and environmental phenomenon experienced by African American people, all by their own volition. The idea that race, historical events, and perceptions of African American males has a connection to how students connect to texts and how teachers connect to them, is a conversation that the group also explored throughout the series. The idea that perceptions about African American males is relevant to how teachers instruct them and makes the connection to Tatum's and Obama's observations because teachers, many of whom were raised in middle-class families and represent middle-class values, may support the marginalization of African American male students through how they perceive them in school and by the texts that they choose for them.

As many teachers represent the dominant cultures' values that many African American male students often reject, it is imperative that they understand the link between students' cultural experiences in their personal environments, the experiences of their parents and other family members, and the treatment that they face in the white dominant power structure and the in-school texts which often support students being further marginalized and disenfranchised. Tatum's analysis of students' experiences with the popular culture and the media captures how many students feel when they walk into classrooms but cannot articulate appropriately. The power that African American male students lack in the larger society is the same type of power that they lack when they enter many classrooms.

Jackie indicated that Tatum's views on the turmoil of African American male students resonated most with her as she supported the notion that turmoil has a negative effect on students when they try to connect with school. Jackie stated,

To me, a lot of that turmoil has to be- has to deal with the multitude of ways that we- we tell or show or represent ways that black males don't belong in school. And that is- it's kind of constant in a lot of ways. But they don't go on in school. There's a turmoil there- here. 'If this is a place that I don't belong, that doesn't accept me for who I am, why should I engage in a way - Why should I follow those particular rules, or you know, whatever that is?' So I think that's a really, really big factor. So for instance, Hamlet. There's a lot of ways as being a human being, they could engage. But the fact that this is white European culture, is that we don't help bridge with kids, is one more way of showing them that this isn't really about you. And it doesn't have to be that way.

The interesting and ironic element of Jackie's quote is that she implicates schools as entities contributing to the turmoil of African American students. Many educators assume that the turmoil that students experience occurs at home or outside the school environment. Also, Jackie made a direct link between negative perceptions and maltreatment by teachers toward students and the expectations that schools have for students to still connect to the curriculum and texts selected for them regardless of how they are treated by their teachers.

Oftentimes, teachers' negative perceptions or low expectations of their students lead them to select curriculum and texts that do not represent the students who read them (Braunger, Greenleaf, Litman, Schoenbach, 2003; Heath, 1989; Newkirk, 2002; Tatum, 2005; Tatum, 2006). Additionally, Jackie's quote indicated that, as she recognized the need for schools and teachers to be inclusive of students' culture and experiences, she also understood that students have to become a part of the discourse of school and adapt to the broader school and societal context. Hence, in her quote, Jackie advocated that

African American males should become skilled at navigating multiple identities, multiple environments, and understanding multiple contexts.

Jane also provided significant insights that contributed to the theme of teachers' recognition of the importance of connections to: school, teachers, and texts to emerge. Jane's comments and observations were interesting in that she relayed experiences that spoke directly to ideas found in Lewis (2001). Jane asserted that her students found difficulty in connecting with the school itself and school content because they lacked social power; thus, their self-efficacy became negatively affected.

Jane, who at the time that the data was collected for this study was an elementary school teacher, spoke about a young man in her class who she tried to link to in-school content. She described him as being very direct about his own efficacy. Although the following quote from Jane is not specifically about her student's efficacy with literacy, it spoke to how Jane connected with her students and helped them to see their own value as they attempted to connect with content. In the focus group interview, I asked the participants to respond to the following question: "What role have you played in fostering the in-school literacy practices of African American male students?" Participants started an in-depth discussion about this particular topic as they spoke about their efficacy as teachers and how they influenced their students' efficacy and the relationships between themselves and their students. Jane responded to the question in the following manner,

When they walked in the door, the first thing these kids said to me- one little boy, he just- very articulate- he just said, 'I want you to know, I don't do math.' And I said, 'I beg your pardon?' He said, 'I don't do math. I don't get it, I don't like it, I don't do it.' I said, 'Oh. Okay.' And I said, 'Well, we have some room to grow.' And they just sort of- and they sat, and all of these kids articulated to me, 'I'm stupid. I can't do it. I don't get it. I hate school. My teachers get mad at me. This sucks.' And so I told them all- I said, 'You know what? I'm not even going to attempt to work on reading skills and math skills.' I said, 'I'm not even doing

that. All we're going to work on is their self-esteem.' So that's all we did, was community-building and self-esteem.

Similar to the stories and experiences Jackie told, Jane's assertion that some of her students had experienced school failure because they had not connected with their teachers and that the students believed their teachers' negative perceptions of them, helped to establish that there was a link between students' connection to in-school literacy and the relationships they had with their teacher(s). Jane's experience and the experience of her students is reminiscent of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), as she sought to meet students' needs at the lower levels of safety, belonging, and esteem by connecting with them on a human level before attempting to meet their needs to reach self-actualization. To have a student reach self-actualization as it relates to literacy is parallel to students having the ability to connect to, contextualize, and apply concepts and themes found in expected school-related literacy. Jane's analysis of her students' efficacy influenced her decision about how she should approach the instruction of her students.

### ***Student Identities and School Literacy***

As the findings in this section will relate, identities that students bring to the school environment are essential to helping them connect to in-school content. It is particularly necessary for the identities of African American males to be valued in school. During the same time period that I was conducting this study, I was in the hallway of one the schools that I supervised as I was leaving a meeting with a colleague. I overheard a conversation between a group of young African American male students and a white female, a person who I presumed to be a teacher in the school. The young men were in the hallway in front of their lockers and they were using slang with each other. The

teacher walked up to the group and began to correct their grammar. After the teacher walked away, one of the young men replied, “Damn, I can’t even be Black in the hallway!” The young man’s comment aligns with Lynn’s earlier assertion that teachers have to understand that young Black men have a unique perspective that they closely align with their identities, and they should be allowed to express their perspectives without fear of retribution. The exchange between the group of students and the student’s comment after the teacher walked away is indicative of students feeling like their home or primary language is not valued in school; thus, their identities are not valued.

The data from the teachers in this study captured their understandings of the importance of valuing students’ identities as a means to connect them to themselves as teachers, and to the school as an institution. Acknowledgement of African American male students’ cultural identity is essential to help them link to in-school texts and in-school contexts. As Gee (2001) asserted, if a student’s identity runs counter to their contextual understanding in a text and there is no space in the classroom to deconstruct representations of identity present in text, they will reject it; similarly, if a student’s identity is not valued at school or in a classroom, they will reject relationships with teachers and reject the school environment.

In the third session, as participants were discussing chapters 3-5 of the Tatum (2005) text, table groups began a conversation about what the re-conceptualization of literacy meant for them as instructors. As they were speaking, Lynn talked about the need for teachers to listen to the voices of students as they looked to choose appropriate texts for them and she advocated that these texts be linked to students experiences and

identities. In her advocacy for giving students a voice, Lynn stated, “You know, like giving them permission to be sixteen and black, and have an opinion, right?” Her language and actions were deliberate in that she chose to advocate for and value students’ identities, with their ethnic culture being central to this idea. She also addressed a point that I have heard many teachers highlight with regard to getting to know African American male students.

Lynn’s ideas about teachers giving students a voice, without teachers thinking that they are racist because students speak their truth, is germane to the point about valuing students’ voice and identity. The nature of the comments of the young man in the hallway is symptomatic of a disconnected relationship between the student and the teacher, and student and the school.

The idea that schools and teachers should develop and maintain student connections as they value students’ identities is a complex subject to breach. Researchers such as Ogbu (1991), Steele (1992), and Kirkland and Jackson (2009) all support the idea that students need to feel a connection with the concept of school first before they can engage with school content. It was the foundational belief that students’ identities are and should be connected to school-based literacy espoused by focus participants had that helped the connections theme to emerge; thus, making it a major theme that existed across the conversations and activities of this study. I found that the conversation about student identities and social power and how the two influenced their literacy practices continued throughout the professional development series and into the focus group interview.



In the interview, as a part of a larger conversation about student power and identity in the classroom, I asked the participants the following question,

And you hit upon a point that I didn't ask this in one of the questions here, but I want to talk about, that- that sense of identity, and how students' identity plays a part in how they interact with their peers in the classroom. And one of the books that I read was called *Literacy Practices as Social Acts*, and it talks about power in the classroom. And how students' access to content relates to their social power among their peers. And so you hit upon that point when we talk about identity, when we talk about social power, and when we talk about how students may or may not feel connected to the activities of the classroom. Do you see that in your classroom? Do you see that play out? Even if we took out race as one of the factors, do you see students' ability to participate in activities in your class relate to how they're perceived by their peers?

The aforementioned question was a follow-up question that I posed to the group, which stemmed from an earlier question that I asked of the teachers who participated in the focus group interview, and was related to how teachers helped students link to school literacy. Jane responded to the discussion and the line of questioning by discussing why she believed students disconnected with school. Jane stated,

There's a whole thing that goes on. And then you have the fringe people. And the fringe people, from my view, tend to be the kids who are the minority students, who are the kids in the lower socio-economic groups. And you know, what happens- what starts to happen at the beginning of the year, is these kids who are in play groups together- who are in those private preschools together- who were- who do all the neighborhood club activities together- tend to bond and want to run your classroom together.

Jane spoke to the idea that students need to experience power in the classroom to connect with school and school literacy. Lewis (2005) found in her study that when students did not experience social power in the classroom among their peers and with the teacher, they found it harder to connect with texts; thus, these students found it more difficult to access content. Therefore, it is the job of the teacher to build a classroom environment that is inclusive of students who come from different cultural, economic, and social

backgrounds through relationships that helps them experience social power in the classroom. Jane's experiences with students in her class solidified the fact that the students who have access to and understand the cultural mores of the dominant culture find it easier to connect with in-school literacy.

As Jane spoke about how she made connections with her students to help them connect to the institution of school, she also spoke about the need to help students connect to in-school texts. Jane understood that the relationships that teachers develop with students and those students' connection to texts are not mutually exclusive. Other evidence that supported Jane's understanding of the connection between African American male students' need to link their cultural experiences to the texts, was recorded in the group discussion when I asked participants to discuss a word, phrase or sentence that resonated with them. Moreover, it was clear that Jane's understandings of the importance of connections for students developed as a result of her participation in the professional development series.

For example, in the same activity where Jane provided data about how students' identities allowed them access to school content, I asked for participants to talk about how the professional development series changed them. Jane started the conversation with her group members by asking her group the question: "where do we have this strong black male in our literature or [t]hat we talk about in class?" As previously stated, Tatum (2005), our guiding text, supported the notion that African American male readers should be exposed to texts that have strong African American protagonists with a positive life trajectory.

Jane's aforementioned question about having strong black males in the literature for students to experience, spoke to Tatum's assertion about the need to have strong Black male protagonist exemplified throughout school-based literature. Although the response to Jane's question was not provided by a focus participant in the study and whose data was not a part of the general analysis, but by someone who did provide an informed content, it was still important to include the response in the data analysis because it further documented the need to help teachers develop their understanding about African American male literacy and it provided evidence that teachers' participation in the professional development series helped in teachers' progression of thought. To reiterate, a participant who signed the informed consent provided the following quote. She answered Jane's question about the absence of African American males in school texts in the following manner,

We need to find texts that reach all students. And as our presenter [has] talked about, you know, it's helpful for all students to have strong male- African American male role models in their texts, just as it is to have everything else that we carry every day. So we need to maybe find bridge texts and things we can bring into our classroom that allow us to make those leaps, even if we're doing a novel that doesn't have that, like maybe we can find something that relates directly to that- hits their culture, their feelings.

As a part of the facilitation of the professional development series, I presented instructional strategies that teachers could use that were connected to the idea that teachers' perceptions and beliefs about literacy should be addressed. Hence, the participants that engaged in a discussion about possible instructional strategies, was not done in isolation of their understanding of sociocultural nature of literacy. The aforementioned participant's response to Jane's question about where the Black male protagonists are in the literature was apt in the fact that even though some of the main in-

school text selections might not include Black male characters, it is incumbent upon teachers to provide supplementary texts that meets the needs of students. As the participant suggested, when teachers do such things as finding bridge texts, their understandings of student literacy further solidifies the connection of the student to the text, particularly if teachers use out-of-school texts with which students are familiar.

Participants' developing perspectives and ideas about why students do not connect with the teachers, the school, and the texts was an extremely important theme to emerge from this data. Without students having a pathway to make these connections, it becomes impossible for teachers to get to know their students, to develop and implement meaningful activities for students, and for teachers to conceive that they should re-conceptualize their ideas and perspectives and how students take up literacy events in their classrooms.

### ***Teachers' Expansions of Their Definitions of Literacy***

One of the themes that emerged from the focus participant data was how they construed and defined literacy. Teachers' individual conceptions of literacy was important because their personal thoughts about literacy had the potential to have an impact on their perceptions of their students' literacy and the pedagogy and texts that they selected for them. Our guiding text for this series, Tatum (2005) called for teachers to re-conceptualize their definitions of literacy so that those definitions are inclusive of the sociocultural nature of literacy and the various ways that African American male students display literate behavior.

In the beginning activity of the professional development, I asked teachers to provide their written definitions of literacy. Teachers were asked to provide their

definitions without context and without influence of the activities of this study, as I wanted their beginning conceptions to be authentic and representative of their individual thoughts. Moreover, as the research questions of this study asked, I wanted to be able to understand the impact of this professional development series on their definitions of literacy and whether or not the series encouraged them to re-conceptualize their definitions. The first definition of literacy was used to compare to a subsequent definition of literacy that I asked participants to submit after they participated in the activities of this series and close reading and reflection of their teaching with the use of the guiding text.

In my experience as an educator, although individual teachers or educational institutions may not explicitly define literacy, literacy is often regarded as a one-dimensional, non-recursive, static process. Literacy is often not defined as a process, but rather as a set of actions with which one engages, and this assertion has been substantiated through dialogue that I have had with teachers, some of who participated in this study.

One participant in the professional development series, who participated in all of the activities, but who was not selected as one of focus participants, defined literacy as, “the ability to read and comprehend information, the ability to write coherently using logic and support.” Another participant defined literacy as, “...reading and deciphering text and symbols (and codes).” Finally, another participant defined literacy as, “...competent and proficient in reading (decoding and comprehension) (verbal and written).” Although each one of the initial conceptions provided by the participants were not all coded using the activity building code, when I conducted the ongoing analysis, the

conceptions spoke of actions using varying systems of communication; thus, many of the participants conceptions of literacy were coded using either the activity building code, the semiotic building code, or both. The purpose for the initial coding of the participant data was to be able to document evolution in thought through participant data and coding from the inception of the class through the final sessions and interviews.

Initially, many of the teacher participants in this study included in their definitions the multiple ways that students can communicate, but many did not include how students interact with one another during literacy events, how students connect to texts, the historical and sociocultural nature of literacy for African American students, or how the relevance of the content of in-school literacy plays a part in students' lives. If literacy is defined as the ability to understand and decode texts, then the function of literacy and the idea that it can serve as a means to open one's ability to interact with the world may be lost on many African American students.

Many of the initial conceptions of literacy of the participants in this study were not multi-faceted; therefore, their definitions were not coded using multiple codes. Furthermore, none of the initial definitions were coded using the socioculturally-situated or relationship building codes. If the premise that is supported by this study is that literacy is sociocultural in nature and that literacy is a social act, then the argument can be made that many of the teacher participants in this study did not have definitions that aligned with the definition supported by this study. Thus, my assertion that many educators often view literacy as a one-dimensional, non-recursive, static process was supported by the data.

Although I collected the concrete examples of two definitions of literacy from each participant, it was the final interview that brought forth the data about how the participants felt about the variance between their two conceptions of literacy. In the focus group interview, I asked the question, “Has your definition of literacy changed since the inception of the class? If so, please let me know how it has.” Before providing analysis of the data about participants’ thoughts about how they expanded their definitions of literacy, it is important to provide a few examples of focus participants’ beginning conceptions of literacy and how those conceptions changed after they engaged in five days of professional development that was aimed at helping them to gain a better understanding of their African American male students’ literacy.

Many of the initial conceptions of literacy were activity-based definitions; however, I used several of the different codes from discourse analysis to identify the essential components of participants’ thoughts and feelings regarding literacy. In the analysis, I identified the components of each of the participants’ conceptions that were activity-based and noted the development between the two ideas of individual focus participants. Additionally, the data that focus participants provided in the final interview helped me to determine if they had expanded their definitions. For example, Julia’s beginning definition of literacy was, “... the ability to read and comprehend written language – aspects of understanding as essential. Literacy development [is] supporting growth and fluency within – letter recognition, letter sounds, word meaning, reading fluency, comprehension.”

In my initial coding, I coded Julia’s conception of literacy using the semiotic building code. In discourse analysis, semiotic building refers to participants using

communicative systems and other systems of knowledge to convey events of the past, present, and future. Although somewhat action-oriented, Julia's initial conception of literacy provided a glimpse into her thinking about the multiple components and facets of literacy and it later developed into a more inclusive definition after she participated in the professional development series and was documented after her second definition was provided.

At the beginning of the fourth of the five sessions, I asked participants to write a second definition of literacy and submit these to me. In Julia's second definition of literacy, she defined literacy as "...the ability to intellectually engage with, and make meaning from, various forms of communication – written language, art, music, spoken language, culture." Julia's second definition of literacy was coded the same as the first one; semiotic building. However, in her second definition, rather than focusing on specific actions, she spoke about the promise of literacy and the multiple ways one can ingratiate oneself into the process of literacy development.

Julia's developing interpretation demonstrates how her beginning understanding of literacy evolved as a result of participation in the professional development series. Similar to the other focus participants, Julia believed that she did not re-conceptualize her definition of literacy, but that it expanded as a result of participating in the professional development series. This is important because the objective of the professional development series was not for teachers to uncritically adopt any one specific viewpoint. Rather, it was that the series provided teachers opportunities to reflect and consider multiple points of view and to integrate new understandings into their own beliefs and practices in ways that made sense to them.



In response to the question posed to the focus participants in the final interview about whether or not their definitions of literacy changed as a result of participating in the professional development series, Julia responded in the following manner,

My definition of literacy did not change, because I felt already very aware and very comfortable about it. What I found to be interesting is others' perceptions and the methods other teachers use. Like what you just said about doing the different books. I thought that was really - that's really nice that you did that. It gave also the child the opportunity to share that connection.

Julia felt that she had a firm grasp on what literacy was and what it meant for her students. When I reviewed Julia's two conceptions of literacy, I was able to observe that her understanding of what literacy is became more nuanced and complex. In her quote, Julia indicated that she believed that the professional development series served as valuable to her as she sought to expand her conception of literacy to be inclusive of her students' literacy behaviors.

Julia was not the only focus participant who had the revelation that the professional development series helped with the re-conceptualization and expansion of their initial conceptions of literacy. Data provided by Lynn had some of the same themes and were similar to thoughts brought forth by Julia. As stated previously, even though she could have been considered a fledgling teacher when her years of service were compared to the years of service of the other participant teachers, Lynn was one of the most vocally assertive teachers in this study and her voice provided rich data for analysis.

Lynn specifically spoke about how she believed her conception of literacy developed and expanded as a result of her participation in this study. In the beginning, Lynn defined literacy in the following manner, "Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and act in a way that anyone in the same discipline would be able to

understand.” I coded Lynn’s initial conception of literacy using the activity building code. The definition of activity building speaks directly to an individual making connections to discourse that is centered on specific actions. Lynn’s initial conception of literacy was activity-based as she documented that literacy was the ability to perform certain tasks. However, Lynn’s re-conceptualized thoughts about literacy showed a more expansive definition of literacy. Lynn stated,

Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, listen, act in a manner that an expert in any discipline would be able to understand what you are communicating. To be literate means to be engaging in literacy, be it reading, writing, speaking, listening, or acting. With each attempt our literacy skills are improved. Literacy is developed through the sociocultural paradigm – literacy and literacy development cannot happen in isolation, but rather must happen in a social and cultural context that is relevant and meaningful to the learners.

Lynn’s re-conceptualized ideas about literacy represent a metamorphosis from a previously activity-based conception. Her new conceptualization of literacy was an affirmation of how students develop literacy, make human connections, and should be inclusive of how social constructs are linked to literacy development. She included the initial activity-based functions of literacy in her re-conceptualization, but expanded it and spoke about how students develop literacy, and how literacy is a social act, influenced by one’s social and cultural identity. Furthermore, she spoke about the relevance of literacy events to the readers. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) spoke extensively about the need for readers to find relevancy in literacy and literacy events to be connected to them.

Lynn’s re-conceptualization of literacy showed growth from the first definition to the second one. Additionally, her re-conceptualization of literacy, as well as her understanding of literacy as a multi-faceted, social act, helped to connect the ideas of the definition of literacy, to teachers’ understanding of it. As stated earlier, in the focus

group interview that was conducted after the series concluded, Lynn spoke to the question of the expansion of her definition of literacy,

Um, I don't know that my definition has changed, but it's certainly expanded. And I-I talked about this at our last session as well. I think, you know, going into it I had this conception of literacy as we read, and we write, and we understand those things that we read and we write. And I think that that has expanded to include the- the listening, the speaking, the you know, kind of world literacy of understanding social cues, and the kind of code switching that our students do every day. All of that is included in literacy. So it's all that decoding that they have to do on a daily basis. So I definitely think it's- my definition has expanded since- since we started the class.

It was refreshing that the participants in this study found that their participation in the professional development series encouraged them to think more deeply about the nature of literacy and the implications of literacy for African American male students. However, throughout the data analysis, I wondered if the ethnicity of the teacher and the ethnicity of the students with which the teacher had experiences, was a factor in how teachers' re-conceptualized literacy. Three of the four focus teachers taught in affluent districts where, when compared to African American students in other districts, students existed at the higher end of the economic strata and have different social experiences than students in other districts. Therefore, with regard to the re-conceptualization of literacy, I thought it was important to compare the findings from other participants with findings from Jackie to determine whether or not there was some congruence in the thoughts about what literacy is and the promise of literacy for the students that the teachers taught. Furthermore, when this particular theme emerged, I wondered if the fact that Jackie was African American and 98% of the student body where she taught was African American, might have contributed to different initial perspectives and beliefs about what literacy was and what it meant for her students.

I wondered if the activities and the text used in this study were as valuable for her as they seemed to be for her colleagues who had different ethnic backgrounds, taught in different districts, and had taught a different population of students. Jackie's conceptualizations about literacy were integral in helping the theme of teachers' expansion of their definitions of literacy to emerge. One of the major findings evident across all four focus participants emerged through the discussions about teachers' developing understandings about literacy and how those understandings led to their re-conceptualized understandings and definitions of literacy.

Jackie's beginning definition of literacy, which was collected as a written response in the first session, was, "literacy is the ability to read, write, think, and understand. I believe this includes words, graphics, people, and circumstances." Ironically, in my ongoing analysis of participant data, I found Jackie's written definition of literacy was not as expansive as her understanding of in-school and out-of-school literacy as she expressed them in class. I coded her beginning conceptions of literacy as activity building. With regard to literacy, in discourse analysis, activity building does not speak to the expansive and multi-faceted nature of literacy. Furthermore, activity building simply denotes the specific language about actions with which one is involved to participate in a task or event. Simply put, activity building with regard to literacy is linked to the action or function of reading rather than the connection between ideas, the sociocultural nature in which literacy sits, or the possibilities that arise from one's participation in literacy events. Jackie's data reinforced and continually reminded me that one of the purposes of this study was to help teachers realize that their

understandings of literature, their pedagogy, and text selections can open up a world to students to which they could only be privy through literacy.

As a way to help determine whether teachers' understandings about literacy developed as a result of participating in the professional development series, and to determine if teachers re-conceptualized their definitions of literacy, I asked them to submit a second definition of literacy in the fourth session. In Jackie's second definition, she defined literacy in the following manner,

Literacy is one's ability to read, comprehend, and apply one's understanding of a text, whether it is written, verbal, or an artistic representation. Furthermore, during the process of literacy development, one learns to decode text in any form in order to find meaning. Literacy exists in the sociocultural paradigm and embraces one's diverse cultural background to assist or connect students to a given text.

I coded Jackie's second definition of literacy as semiotic building. When compared to the first definition, there seemed to be a development of the thoughts and ideas of literacy from Jackie's first definition to her second one. In discourse analysis, semiotic building refers to using cues to identify a system of knowledge. Although Jackie's thoughts about what literacy was, when compared to her understanding of in-school and out-of-school were different in language, I believe that Jackie had a clear understanding and an improved development of ideas of the multiple components of literacy and literacy development and that her understandings of literacy developed as a result of participating in the professional development series.

I conducted a focus group interview with the three other focus participants, however, Jackie could not be present but she was able to provide answers to the questions electronically. To get a sense of whether or not participants themselves felt as though their definitions of literacy had developed as a result of participating in the professional

development series, I asked the question, “Has your definition of literacy changed since the inception of this class?” Jackie responded in the following manner,

I do not believe my definition of literacy has changed since the beginning of the class. I have always believed that literacy is one’s ability to read, comprehend and interpret text, whether the text is words, symbols, etc. Furthermore, literacy incorporates one’s ability to articulate the text in written or verbal form.

Although Jackie did not believe that she had not re-conceptualized her ideas about literacy, it was evident to me that her initial conception of literacy developed from being an activity-based function to a broader idea about literacy that was inclusive of possibilities, actions, students’ surrounding environments and culture, and the inclusion of other genres of expression of thought.

After reviewing Jackie’s data about her conceptions and re-conceptions about what literacy is and comparing it to other focus participants’ data, I found that Jackie found value in participating in the professional development series and it had an influence on how she conceptualized literacy, just as it did with the other focus participants. I also found in my analysis of data that the theme about teachers’ understandings of students’ literacy and the expansions of their definitions of literacy was essential to helping the other themes emerge. I came to this understanding as I realized that the other themes (Teachers Recognition of the Importance of and Relationship to Students’ Connections to School, Teachers, and Texts and The Necessity of Teachers’ Use of Evidence-Based Instructional Strategies) were borne out in the notion that teachers had a firm understanding about their own understandings of literacy and what literacy meant to students’ lives.

### *Teachers' Improved Understandings of Students' Literacy Practices*

During the focus group interview, the four focus participants recounted their experiences regarding their students' current literacy practices and the goal of developing understandings and connections to expected in-school literacy. As an example, Lynn spoke about her understandings of her students' literacies, her need to understand the sociocultural aspect of literacy development, and her willingness to address her own perceptions about students in her class. Lynn's foray into self-inquiry and the inquiry about the practices of her colleagues began when she answered the question in the initial survey, "What do you hope to get from your participation in the professional development series?" As a response to this question, Lynn stated,

My hope through this class is to increase my own cultural competence while obtaining new strategies for working with my African American male students. I feel that by addressing the needs and difficulties of this group of students, I will be helping my classroom community as a whole.

One of the goals of this study was to gain an understanding of teachers' perceptions and beliefs about their students and the impact those perceptions and beliefs have on their pedagogy and text selections for those students. In this quote, Lynn challenged herself to address her own perceptions and beliefs by stating that she would like to increase her cultural competence; thus, indicating that she would like to improve her knowledge about who her students were and the identities that they brought with them to the classroom environment. As discussed in the literature review, researchers like Gee (1989, 2001) support the contention that the identities that students bring to the classroom are what help them connect with and understand texts and should be central to teachers' understanding of their out-of-school literacies. The idea of increasing one's own cultural competence from the perspective of the teacher was directly related to the focus

participants' desire to make classrooms more equitable for students and provide access to literacy.

A few of the items in the initial survey attempted to elicit data from participants about their beliefs about the connection between student success and teacher success. The first question asked, "Is the success of your students tied to your success as a teacher?" The question was written as a Likert scale question that participants were asked to respond using the following choices: 1) not at all; 2) a little bit; 3) somewhat; 4) very much; and 5) most of the time. All four of the focus participants indicated that they believed that the success of their students was directly tied to her success "most of the time." In a separate item that was related to helping the theme about teachers' improved understandings about students' literacy teachers asked teachers to respond to the statement, "African American male students in my class can achieve at high levels." This prompt used the same Likert scale choices. Again, all four focus participants responded that they believed that African American male students could achieve at high levels "most of the time." The two questions in the initial survey about teachers' belief that their students' success is tied to their success as teachers and whether or not their African American students could perform at high levels are important in establishing that the teachers in this study believed in their own efficacy and the efficacy of their students to connect to school-based literacy.

Based on discussions with their group members and with the whole group, the surveys, and other data sources, such as the focus group interview, the "Go To Your Corners!" activity, and recordings from discussions about the assigned readings from the guiding text, the focus participants showed evidence that they understood the importance



of viewing literacy through a sociocultural paradigm and they outlined various ways that they made the connections in their classes. For example, in session #3 during a discussion about the assigned reading from chapters 3-6 in the guiding text, Lynn stated,

The crisis of identity in the Tatum text was something that I really had thought about a lot after reading it. And the fact that we ask our students to carry all of these various identities with them, and know how to change between them at any given moment- even when they overlap- so that, you know, the identity- the self that they are with their friends is going to be different than they are at school. But we ask them to do those two things simultaneously.

Lynn made the aforementioned statement as an answer to the question asked of her table group, “How do you help students connect their identities to the texts that you are reading?” This question was asked during session #3 to help the individual table groups and larger groups begin a conversation about how the role students’ identities play in how they connect to the texts and the understandings that teachers have about the connection between the two. Interestingly, Lynn makes an important point about the idea that students’ identities have a connection to how they connect to school as a social institution and is the same point that Guerra (2007) made when he spoke about the need to adopt multiple identities and to be able to allow those identities to adapt to their environments (p. 138). As stated in Chapter Two of this study, to move through transcultural spaces means to move between transcultural spaces and to be able to morph one’s identity to fit the needs of a particular rhetorical environment, whether it be cultural, academic, or social (see Chapter Two, p. 62).

The importance of the conversation about students’ abilities to allow their identities to adapt is twofold: 1) schools cannot expect that African American students whose identities may conflict with schools and their cultural affiliations, already know how to allow their identities to adapt; and 2) teachers and schools must get to know their

African American students well enough to help them develop the skill. Lynn understood the connection between students' identities and how those understandings encouraged her to reflect about the components of literacy for her African American male students.

Jackie responded similarly to questions about what she believed comprised the literacy of African American male students. In the initial survey, I asked participants to write briefly about their understandings regarding in-school and out-of-school literacy. This question was meant to understand teachers' beginning perceptions of their students' literacy to determine later if the professional development series helped them to foster improved understandings. Jackie responded in the following manner to the prompt,

I believe that in-school literacy is equally as important as out-of-school literacy. Students must be able to navigate through life, whether it is in the classroom, on the job, or in one's community. Students who have the abilities to read a text, comprehend, interpret, and apply the text are successful in life. Unfortunately, many African American male students struggle more with in-school literacy for a plethora of reasons and it is my job to bridge the gaps in which they find difficulty.

Since the initial survey questions were distributed prior to the beginning of the professional development series and prior to teachers' engagement in any of the activities, the participants had no idea that I was going to ask them for their initial and secondary ideas about literacy. However, in her answer to the prompt, Jackie began to explain her definition of what she thought literacy was. Jackie's awareness about student literacy helped to establish a link between the theme of teachers' improved understandings of student literacy and teachers' expansion of their definitions of literacy.

Interestingly, I coded Jackie's answer to the question about her perceptiveness of in-school literacy and out-of-school literacy as world building, using Gee's six building tasks for discourse analysis. Gee's (1999) definition of world building is "using cues or

clues to assemble situated meanings about what is here and now (taken as) ‘reality; what is here and now (taken as) present and absent, concrete and abstract, ‘real’ and ‘unreal,’ probable, possible, and impossible” (p. 85-86).

Jackie’s feelings about in-school and out-of-school literacy were one of the few pieces of data that I coded as world building. I coded this piece of data as world building because her thoughts outlined a simple, but precise definition of literacy, which was inextricably linked to the possible outcomes of students who develop multi-faceted literacy habits. The detail about how Jackie describes in-school and out-of-school literacy is important to note because it is directly aligned to the second research question of this study and one of the purposes of this study. The second research question of this study asks how “teachers’ developing understandings about the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African American males’ contribute to their decisions about pedagogy and curriculum in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the African American male students who they teach?”

The conversation about students’ identities as they related to how teachers could better understand them and connect those identities to the appropriate texts and classroom practices, seemed to be a recurring conversation throughout the series. This conversation about student identities also seemed to be somewhat linked to teachers’ beginning understandings of what African American male literacy was. It was evident that through our conversations, activities, and reading of the guiding text, teachers began to make the link for themselves between students’ identities and their in-school literacy practices.

The participants made important points about helping students’ morph their identities and develop feelings of power in the classroom. Lewis (2005) and Enciso,

Lewis, and Moje (2007) asserted that students need to feel a sense of power in the classroom, to be connected to, and have access to literacy that engages them. Since engaging in literacy events is a social act, the social power that students feel in the classroom is strongly connected to their identities and allows them access to conversations and activities with their peers and with the teacher. Gee (1989), Gee (2001), and Bandura (2001) support the notion that students' identities are developed as a part of the maturation process, which happens simultaneously with learning. As the focus participants identified, if they as a teachers are helping students to develop their identities and if they value students' identities as a part of helping them connect to literacy, then they move closer to valuing the sociocultural construct in which literacy exists.

One of the activities for the participant teachers in this study that helped to establish the improved understanding of student literacy, particularly as it related to the connection between their understandings of students' literacy and the identities that students brought to the classroom, occurred in session #5 where I asked teachers to identify a word and a phrase that resonated with them from the Tatum (2005) text. I asked teachers to participate in this activity to get a sense of the impact of the course and the text on their understandings about the literacy practices of African American male students.

To help establish that her participation in the professional series helped with her improved understandings of African American male literacy and the connection to their identities, Jane stated,

I put 'cultural' as my key word, just because that's so much of what we've been through- discussing, like, the culture of our students. Um, the phrase that I put

was just kind of a piece of a phrase about students coping with oppression and marginality. Which are things that I'm- I'm aware of, but frequently forget and just remind me of how students- not necessarily our African American students, but the whole can be oppressed and marginalized. And then the sentence that I chose was, 'Teachers can use text to help black males add meaning.' And again, I think it spans across a variety of cultures that we can use the text, specifically in English, to help our students add meaning to their learning and their lives.

Jane's answer to the question in this activity helped me to: 1) comprehend how her aptitude in relationship building lent to how she connected with her students; 2) link how her participation in the professional development series helped to progress her thinking; and 3) establish the notion that Jane developed cultural acumen to apply to her literacy instruction.

Jane mentioned that she understood how students' cultural experiences should inform the texts that teachers select for them and that she agreed with Tatum's assertion that text selections can add meaning to the lives of African American male students. Jane's awareness about how students' cultural environment and experiences help them connect to school and to in-school texts is an integral piece of the process in developing relationships with them. If teachers do not have a basic understanding of the internal and cultural turmoil that their African American male students may be facing, they are not likely to develop relationships with them or choose appropriate and relevant texts for them. Researchers like Smith and Wilhelm, Lewis, Heath, and Tatum, even suggest that students be allowed to choose the texts that are most relevant to their lives and experiences.

The notion that students should choose their own texts is also supported by McMahon and Raphael (1997); further supporting that student's participation in literacy events such as book club, gives them the forum to participate in a discourse community,

similar to the one in which teachers participated as a part of this study. The data collected from Jane and other participants legitimized the fact that participation in a book club helped participants to challenge their own thinking and perceptions of the world, be privy to new knowledge and modes of thinking, and make connections from their individual cultural contexts to the text.

The data that I collected from participants prior to session #5 and the subsequent focus group interview, illustrated their beginning perceptions about African American male students' out-of-school literacies and their beginning understandings of how their perceptions connected to her students' connection to literacy. As an example, as a part of Lynn's improved understandings of students' out-of-school literacy as it related to their identities, she furthered her ability to give the space for students to foster appropriate and valued literacy practices within the school setting. In session #5, in the same activity where I asked teachers to choose one word and one phrase that resonated with them from the Tatum text, Lynn showed that her understandings of students' literacy practices improved as a result of participating in this professional development series. Lynn stated the following:

Um, the word that I wrote was 'obstacles'. The phrase kind of went along with that, although it's the hopeful version- 'overcoming academic and societal barriers'. And then the sentence that I wrote was, 'The way literature is discussed in the class profoundly affects black males' engagement or disengagement as readers.' And I- I kind of see all three of those going together. You know, understanding the obstacles, or the things that my students are coming to class with. You know, all of the stuff that's happened before they walk into my room. All of the stuff that they're worried about happening after they leave my room. And how literature, or our course content, or the way that we approach it can help to overcome some of those barriers, or to help students realize that they can overcome some of those societal barriers. And so for me, those three things kind of all worked in tandem, even though they were from different parts of the text. Which I liked.

Lynn's improved understanding about African American literacy was profound because as I compared it to her initial thoughts, she used much different language. In her improved understanding, she spoke about her understanding of students' culture, identities, and how disenfranchisement had led to disengagement in her students. All of these ideas are indicative of Lynn's understanding of the sociocultural impact on African American male students' literacy. To compare her improved understandings to her initial understandings, I looked at the data that Lynn provided in the initial survey about what she believed were the components of her African American male students' literacy. In the initial survey, participants were asked to describe their familiarity with the in-school and out-of-school literacy of their African American students. Lynn responded in the following manner,

I feel that out-of-school literacy directly impacts in-school literacy and vice versa. If students are comfortable and confident in reading and engaging with text in their home-lives, I have an obligation to bring those kinds of readings into my classroom and help students understand the bridge between them. I also have become a proponent of functional grammar. Although I still teach technical grammar and encourage students to understand the rules before they can break them, I also understand the concept of functional grammar--if I can understand my students and the intent behind what they are trying to say, that is enough for me!

Lynn's initial thoughts included activity-based ideas and a technical understanding of literacy, but was not inclusive of an understanding of the fact that students' lives and experiences have to be valued to help them connect to literacy. Her developed understandings of student literacy, which occurred after she participated in the self-inquiry, discussions, and the activities of the professional development series provided by this study, documented a change in her thinking with the adoption of a socioculturally based definition of literacy.

One goal of this study was to analyze the data in order to better apprehend how participant teachers conceptualized students' literacies. At the beginning of the professional development series, each participant was asked to provide their initial thoughts of in-school and out-of-school literacy. The participant data helped to establish that activities with which teachers engaged, and the book club model of professional development using the Tatum text as the guide, helped participants to develop improved understandings of what literacy means in the lives of African American male students.

### ***The Necessity of Teachers' Use of Evidence-Based Instructional Strategies***

Many of the participant teachers entered the professional development series with the notion that the purpose of the series was to introduce strategies that they could use to fix the problem of literacy development in African American male students. The teachers indicated in their initial surveys that they were searching for instructional strategies to meet the needs of their African American male learners. However, I agree with Tatum (2005) in that the implementation of strategies alone will not improve how African American males connect to expected school literacy practices. With the particular notion in mind that literacy development is sociocultural in nature, the focus participants still frequently spoke about the need to have evidence-based instructional strategies to use with their students. Within the context of this study, evidence-based strategies are instructional strategies that have documented data and evidence proving their effectiveness with students. This study used theoretical foundations and empirical proof of the strategies modeled and suggested before recommending them to the participants of this study.



The theme that emerged as a result of the conversations between and among the four focus participants was the necessity of teachers' use of evidence-based instructional strategies for literacy that they can use in their classrooms. This theme is directly aligned with the third research question of this study, which asks how the book club model of professional development influences teachers to use the model with the students in their classes and whether their participation in this study encourages them to engage in inquiry about their pedagogy. The conversations in which the focus participants engaged spoke directly to the type of inquiry that was an expected outcome of this study and spoke to its overall purpose.

The idea that teachers need evidence-based instructional strategies to use in their classrooms is tied to the notion that many teachers feel like they don't receive adequate professional development aimed at helping them meet the literacy needs of their students. My experiences as a professional educator, along with my review of the literature about teacher professional development and its connection to student literacy attainment, led me to conclude that many practicing teachers have not had in-depth professional development experiences that directly influence their perceptions of students and inform their pedagogy and use of evidence-based instructional practices.

Data from focus participants like Julia helped to communicate that the expectation of this and any other effective professional development series should not focus solely on strategies, but present learning models that address several different needs of the learners. In this particular case, the learners were the teachers. In the first session, participants were asked to move into their table groups to discuss the following question prompt: "How do you meet the literacy needs of your African American male students?" Julia

responded that she used multiple strategies to help students connect to in-school literacy, “I use Think-Pair-Share, Whisper Reading, Anticipation Guides, Graphic Organizers, Mind Mapping, OPTIC, Response Chaining, See Think Wonder, Text in the Middle, and many other thinking routines.”

Subsequently, it became evident through data collected from the focus group interview from Julia why she was not able to discern the effectiveness of the strategies that she used and why the strategies used by her and her colleagues in her district did not work either. Although the specific question about the effectiveness of the strategies that teachers used was not asked, teachers were asked to document their beliefs about their effectiveness as teachers and whether their students failed as a result of their efficacy. Furthermore, as the conversation about the effectiveness of literacy strategies was unprompted, Julia provided information about why she believed the students in her district did not do as well as they could. Julia recounted her belief that her district had not provided adequate professional development of students, nor had they provided a plan to sustain strategies that teachers learned.

In the focus group interview, I asked the following question that helped to establish how Julia felt about why the strategies she and her colleagues used were not evidence-based: “In your experience, does your current school organizational structure promote the use of teacher professional development to improve student literacy development?” Julia provided a multi-layered response, of which I will provide a brief highlight. Julia responded,

We have, in my- we have two main problems when it comes to this: buy-in and follow-through. Or follow-up, I guess maybe. Another one. We have a lot of time, but we have more professional development days throughout the year than I think any other district. We have now, in ninth and tenth grade learning

communities, and we have weekly small learning community meetings. We have staff collaboration time that has taken the place of regulated staff meetings. But we also have about a thousand initiatives. And so what happens is that we will have a PD. We will spend a whole day focused on a topic. And then nothing happens with it. There's no follow-through, there's no check-in, there's no, 'Have you tried these strategies,' and come back and share out. There's just nothing afterward.

The strategies that Julia listed and reported having attempted in her classes, but did not have the support to follow-through to implement the strategies with fidelity, spoke to many of the concerns that teachers have with the use of such strategies. Thus, the reality that many teachers like Julia who are well-meaning when they try new strategies but do not have positive outcomes for students, have a negative influence on their efficacy. As evidenced by Julia, her frustrations led her to feel like her district had failed her with regard to providing the type of training that she needed to effectively address the literacy needs of her African American male students.

During this study, the four focus participants at various times during the study spoke about how their institutions (schools and districts) and their colleagues participated in self-inquiry that helped to answer the third research question of this study: "How does the book club model of professional development encourage teachers to use this practice with their students, build a structure of sustainable instructional literacy practices within their classrooms, and provide opportunities for meaningful inquiry about their pedagogy?" Julia's data did not provide evidence that she had begun a book club as a result of participating in this study; however, her data helped to position the discourse in this study around how teachers should use an evidence-based practice such as book club as a means to connect students to in-school literacy.

The focus study participants expressed their concerns about not having regular and focused professional development geared specifically toward helping their African American male students to succeed. Participant data supported the contention that the strategies that teachers use, particularly those that are effective, are influenced by their exposure to quality professional development. In my current professional role, I have been privy to conversations where many teachers have indicated that they do not feel properly equipped to provide effective literacy strategies for African American male students. As teachers have indicated that they do not feel properly prepared to meet the complex needs of African American male students, I wondered whether there was a relationship between the lack of preparation among teachers and their willingness to participate in inquiry about their instructional practices.

Participants in this study answered the question about why they participated in professional development aimed at improving their understandings about African American males' literacies. I am confident that had the data from each of the twenty-five participants been analyzed with the scrutiny that was applied to the focus participants' data, I would have found that more participants found value in the purpose and the nature of this study. The conversations between focus participants showed that they engaged in conversations about their practices as a result of registering for this professional development. The evidence to support this claim is provided by Jackie and other participants.

Although the aforementioned quote from Julia did not directly state that the professional development series had an influence on her thoughts about the practices that she used, other participants spoke concretely about how the professional development

series made an impact on their instructional practice and their efficacy to use evidence-based strategies in their classrooms. In the final interview questions that I provided to Jackie electronically, I asked her, “In your experience, does your current school organizational structure promote the usage of teacher professional development to improve student literacy development? If not, what have you done as a classroom teacher?” Jackie spoke to the issue of lack of evidence-based practices for literacy provided to her because of a lack of available professional development. She said,

This professional development has started me on the process of learning how to better reach my African American population, specifically the male students. I have had the opportunity to broaden my understanding of reflective teaching practices, differentiated instruction, and data-driven teaching, instruction, and assessment to assist my students in their academic achievement. However, I am always looking for additional means of addressing the needs of my students.

Jackie’s concrete connection to teacher preparedness and teacher exposure to evidence-based instruction strategies became evident as I conversed with her throughout the sessions prior to the final interview and recorded how she responded to questions about how to better teach her students. Jackie’s comments solidified that her participation led to her improved understanding of her students, reflection on her practice as a teacher, which were relative to the second research question of this study; moreover, she spoke to her developed understanding that led her to reflect on her pedagogy as a result of her participation in this research study.

Jackie made another comment in response to this question that was also important,

The current school structure within my school building attempts to address the literacy of African American males, but not directly. Teachers administer and confer with various assessments such as MAP, ACT Explore, ACT Plan, and others to identify the literacy needs of the students. Teachers spend tremendous amounts of time dissecting data and correlating those literacy needs to Common

Core for the specific purpose of School Improvement and instruction. However, after the literacy needs are identified among students, many teachers do not know exactly what to do with that data. Teachers are only given limited opportunities to attend professional development opportunities in the building, district, and are often denied access to outside organizations due to finances.

Jackie's answer to this question provided insight on two levels. One could interpret that the question asked how the structure of school helps to promote professional development activities geared toward literacy such as the ones that were used in this study. Additionally, within that same argument, one could argue that the question also asked what the teacher's role in professional development process should be in the school and among their teaching peers. However, Jackie's answer to the question spoke to the specific need for teachers to have professional development available to them to use data collected from assessments to make direct connections to students. If teachers lack connections and access to evidence-based strategies geared toward improving literacy, they will find it difficult to make connections to students. Jackie's response to the question about whether the structure of school is conducive in promoting professional development activities to help teachers identify evidence-based strategies, showed how the teachers in this study place importance in it.

Other teachers talked about the importance that they placed in effective instructional strategies and the implications of not having access to them for their students. Lynn and Jane spoke about the importance of professional development and how professional development such as which was provided by this study positively influenced their instructional practices (please see p. 207 & 208 in Chapter Four). I wanted to establish the importance teachers felt about the type of professional development that was available to them. Therefore, in the initial survey, I asked teachers

to “Briefly explain how the professional development that you have received has helped you with your students.” Jane indicated that,

Over the course of 30 years of teaching I've logged a lot of hours of staff development. I typically attend these things with an open mind. If I can gain a couple of things to experiment with, its a win. I'm still pulling on some things that I learned in college. I'm forever putting a different spin on things or combining ideas to try to fit the unique needs of various students in my class.

The fact that Jane had to use strategies that she learned over thirty years ago supported the urgency to address teachers' professional development needs. One of the objectives of this study was to provide professional development that used a book club model and would also serve as a framework for teachers to use in order to increase in-school literacy practices among the African American male students that they teach. The purpose of my inquiry about teachers' professional development experiences was meant to help establish a foundational understanding about the types of strategies that teachers' were exposed to that were aimed at improving student literacy.

In the first and second surveys, I asked teachers a series of questions about their experiences with professional development, the strategies that they use with their students, and how their professional development experiences influenced their pedagogy. Teachers' experiences with professional development help them to develop a repertoire of evidence-based instructional strategies that work for the students that they teach. Furthermore, teachers cannot develop hypotheses on the effectiveness of the strategies they use will work unless they have data on their students' performance and unless they have strategies on how to get to know their students better (Tatum, 2005).

Although many of the participants enrolled in the professional development series did so with the intention of only learning new strategies for their students, they were

given the opportunity to participate in much more meaningful ways. Participants used what they learned in the five-day series to begin the reflective and recursive process of examining their instructional practices. As stated previously, the intent of this study and professional development series was to encourage participants to engage in inquiry about their pedagogy, identify and challenge their perceptions of African American male students and the implications of those perceptions on text selections, and inspire them to use the book club model of instruction with their students. The participant data has shown, and will continue to show, that the professional development series in which they engaged, was successful in accomplishing the goals of this study.

### **Summary**

The three themes: teachers' recognition of the importance of students' connections to teachers, school, and texts; teachers' expansion of their definitions of literacy, and teachers improved understandings of students' literacy practices, all linked to the fourth theme, the necessity of teachers' use of evidence-based instructional strategies. Analysis of participants' data makes the case that teachers and students had to develop meaningful relationships in order for students to feel a sense of value at school. Without these relationships, teachers felt that students would not connect with the school or the texts with which they wanted them to engage. It was teachers' understanding of this fact that led them to expand their definitions of literacy, which was integral to the growth of their overall understanding of the literacies of their African American male students. Without the belief in the importance of the relationships between teachers and students, and without the growth in their understandings about the nature of literacy for their African American male students, it would have been difficult for teachers to



understand the importance for the need to integrate those improved understandings with the need for effective instructional strategies for their students.

Many of the teachers who participated in the professional development series started the series with prescriptive notions about constitution of literacy. Since they had not spent time prior to this professional development series reflecting on their practice or having limited opportunities to engage in evidence-based professional development to help African American males connect to school literacy, they did not have a clear understanding about how their perceptions of students impacted their school-based literacy behaviors. Thus, it was important that the participant teachers engaged in this professional development series as it assisted in their professional growth and development.

Participants showed growth in their improved perceptions of African American male students as cultural beings and the literacies that accompanied them to educational settings; they expanded their definitions of literacy by moving from activity-based understandings of literacy to providing definitions that were multi-faceted; and they spoke about the need to implement instructional strategies that were inclusive of the sociocultural understandings of their students.

Participants were immersed in multiple activities, which included: several small group and large group discussions, modeling of instructional strategies, a book club, and a focus group interview. Their data showed that their participation in these events resulted in the overall growth of their mindsets as teachers. Chapter Five verified the link between the activities that were outlined in Chapter Four and the major themes that emerged across the data collection methods. Chapter Six will give a general synopsis of

the major themes, the activities, the conclusions based on the data analysis, implications for research studies such as this one, and recommendations for implementation and further study.

## CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION

The academic achievement of African American males has been a concern for quite some time for educators across this nation. However, mere concern about the problem is not enough. The data regarding the drop out rates, graduation rates, and reading proficiency is alarming. Schools and politicians have made attempts at fixing the problem regarding success in school for African American children but little has produced measurable and sustainable results. Furthermore, the reading proficiency of African American males students has been measured through the use of standardized assessments, which tells educators very little about students' proficiency with texts. The most common response to students' failure and lack of proficiency in reading on standardized assessments is to provide reading specialists, assign students to remediation groups, or to certify students for special education services. Since standardized assessments test less for fluency and word recognition and more for students' familiarity with the values, events, and assimilation with the dominant culture, many interventions that lack the sociocultural component of helping students link to literacy often fail.

Chapter One of this study provided the background, purpose, and context for conducting a study such as this one. Data about African American student graduation rates and reading proficiency documented that there is a gap in achievement and reading proficiency between African American students and their White counterparts as evidenced on standardized assessments. Not only is there a gap in achievement between the two peer groups, the data and literature documents that African American students are disenfranchised from school.

As a means to jumpstart the conversation about how to engage African American students in school-based literacy, Tatum (2005) was used as the guiding text in the professional development series described in this study. Alfred Tatum, Dean of the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago, is one of the leading national authorities in teaching reading to African American males; consequently, it was appropriate to use his seminal text as the guide for this study. The Tatum text encouraged educators to build nesting grounds for literacy for African American students and the nesting ground framework developed by Tatum served as a foundational document of which the participants used to engage in dialogue.

Thus, this study had two purposes: to help teachers to build nesting grounds for literacy for their African American students and to provide potential resolutions to the problems of school disenfranchisement and the rejection of school-based literacy. Engaging teachers in a series that allowed them to participate in reflection about their perceptions of African American students' literacy and to encourage them to use the instructional practice with their students, addressed these purposes through the use of the book club model of professional development. This study aimed to help teachers make connections of their perceptions of their students and their literacies to the influence of those perceptions on their pedagogy, assessments, and text selections for those students.

This study was conducted in the Metropolitan Detroit area at a suburban intermediate school district (ISD). Teachers were invited from across the region to participate in the professional development series. Once the registration process was complete, an informed consent was sent to the registrants for them to read and sign to participate in the study. Only data from registrants who signed the informed consent

were used in the analysis of data. This study included a robust data collection methodology that was used to address the need of triangulation and trustworthiness and the multiple means of data collection were used to elicit data from participant teachers.

The initial source of data was a survey that was used to establish teachers' beginning understandings about African American student literacy, teacher efficacy, and experience with professional development. During the course of the series, data was also collected using the following methods: two separate surveys, audio recordings of class and individual group discussions, participant writings, a discussion board, observations and field notes, and a final focus group interview. Through the use of multiple data collection methods, I was able to establish that the collected data and subsequent analysis, was valid and reliable because the major themes that emerged, existed across each one of the data collection methods; thus, I was able to establish the trustworthiness of the results.

Chapter One helped to establish the purposes of this study; furthermore, it also established the three separate, but interrelated research questions to guide the conversations, activities, and data collection. The research questions of this study were:

1. What is the progression and evolution of teachers' knowledge and accompanying perceptions of the African American male students they teach when they voluntarily participate in a professional development series designed to enhance their understanding of both the in-school and out-of-school literacies of these students?
2. In what ways might teachers' developing understandings about the in-school and out-of-school literacies of African American males' contribute to their

decisions about pedagogy and curriculum in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the African American male students who they teach?

3. How does the book club model of professional development encourage teachers to use this practice with their students, build a structure of sustainable instructional literacy practices within their classrooms, and provide opportunities for meaningful inquiry about their pedagogy?

Four major themes emerged from the collection of data and subsequent analysis and allowed me to answer the research questions of this study. The major themes that emerged from the two surveys, class discussions and activities, observation notes, and focus group interview were: 1) teachers' recognition of the importance of and relationship to students' connections to teachers, school, and texts; 2) teachers' expansion of their definitions of literacy; 3) teachers' improved understandings of students' literacy practices; and 4) the necessity of teachers' use of evidence-based instructional strategies. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the general findings that existed within the major themes of this study and will outline implications and recommendations for further study.

### **Teachers' Recognition of the Importance of and Relationship to Students' Connections to Teachers, School, and Texts**

The four focus study participants' data authenticated the need for teachers to better understand their students, their backgrounds, and their identities. Furthermore, what I was able to find during the ongoing analysis of the data related to this theme was that the students of the teachers told them stories of feeling victimized by their teachers. There was an overwhelming sense from these teachers that their students rejected school

because of the negative experiences with their teachers. The participant teachers also found that when students did not have meaningful relationships with their teachers, they rejected school and school-related content. They recounted that they were able to get their students to connect with school-related texts when they took the time to get to know them, when they valued their identities and their language by integrating it with the academic language of school; conversely, many of their students' other teachers marginalized them and their identities which led to their diminished agency and efficacy. Furthermore, teachers spoke about how the structure of their schools served as a barrier to access to literacy for their students. Lewis (2001), Lortie (1975), and Rowan (1990) support the notion that school structure provided yet another barrier for access to the school related content for African American males.

The teachers in this study recognized the importance of developing relationships with their students and talked extensively about what they did to accomplish establishing those relationships. It was their data related to this theme that allowed me to answer the questions of this research study. The teachers talked about their perceptions of their students and their students' abilities and how those perceptions were influenced by the larger dominant culture; they spoke about the ways in which they made their instructional practices culturally relevant to their students; and they engaged in ongoing inquiry about their pedagogy and how they could improve it to make it relevant to their students, including using the book club model as an instructional practice.

Within this theme, teachers also talked extensively about students' identities and how those identities often run counter to the values found in expected school literacy. Ideas about students' identities sparked conversations about the need for teachers to

understand them and as one participant declared, “students should be allowed to be sixteen, and black, and have an opinion. This theme had a connection to the other ones with regard to teachers’ behaviors in that without students’ connection to the teachers, the school, and the text, it would not matter what teachers’ beliefs were about student literacy and which strategies they used to help students to connect.

### **Teachers’ Expansions of Their Definitions of Literacy**

In the beginning activity of this study, I asked teachers to provide their written definitions of literacy. The purpose of this activity was to establish a foundational understanding of teachers’ beginning perceptions of literacy and to determine how their participation in the activities of this study may have influenced them to re-conceptualize their definitions and aid in their progressive understanding of literacy in the lives of their students. As a means to gauge teachers’ overall growth in their understandings of African American students’ literacies, the fourth day of the series provided them the opportunity to submit a second written definition of literacy, after having participated in many of the activities provided by this study. Finally, in the focus group interview, focus study participants were asked to talk about their growth in understanding about their definitions of literacy and whether they felt they had re-conceptualized their definitions as a result of participating in this study. The group overwhelmingly felt that they had not re-conceptualized their definitions but had expanded them. Although the difference between the two ideals may seem negligible, the teachers in this study felt that the activities of this study allowed for their definitions to be inclusive of the multi-faceted ways that literacy is represented rather than conceive it as a monolithic or limited concept.



Discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) was used as the initial coding framework. Many of the teachers' beginning definitions were coded using the activity building code, which established that many of the teachers viewed literacy as a set of activities. Teachers' expanded definitions of literacy included other building codes used in the initial coding: activity building, socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building, and world building. The growth in how teachers' definitions were coded represents a growth in thought and how they conceived literacy. Teachers' expansion in their definitions of literacy served as the underpinning for establishing their improved understandings of students' literacy practices.

Participant data that contributed to the emergence of this theme helped to answer the first and second research questions of this study. Teachers talked about how they expanded their definitions of literacy and their overall understandings of students' literacy practices as a result of participating in this study. Accordingly, their data helped to establish that their participation in the professional development series encouraged them to use their improved understandings to change their instructional practice and to develop culturally relevant instruction.

### **Teachers' Improved Understandings of Students' Literacy Practices**

The teachers in this study reflected and engaged in conversations about their perceptions and the relationship to their instructional practices. The conversations in which teachers were engaged, along with the emergence of their expanded definitions of literacy, were integral in the overall emergence of the major theme of their improved understandings of their students' literacy practices. As such, the participants, including the focus study participants, used the conversations and activities that sparked the inquiry

into their practice to speak about the need to develop better understandings about their students' out-of-school literacy practices. As a result of better understandings of their students' out-of-school literacy practices, they were able engage in discussions about how to develop instruction that linked those practices to expected school related literacy. Within this theme, teachers spoke about the need to further understand the lives of their students through a sociocultural paradigm. They spoke about students' varied lives, understandings, and opportunities to make connections in their literacies. With these understandings, teachers were able to eloquently speak about the types of strategies that may work to help improve the literacy connections for their students.

### **The Necessity of Teachers' Use of Evidence-based Instructional Strategies**

Before the inception of the professional development series, many teachers indicated on the initial survey that their purpose for registering for the professional development series was to learn new strategies to help their African American students. While wanting to learn new strategies to improve the literacy of African American male students is a noble purpose, as Tatum (2005) asserted, the implementation of strategies alone will not help to improve literacy for these students. Thus, this study sought to engage teachers in conversations about their perceptions, beliefs, and mindsets while it simultaneously modeled evidence-based strategies for teachers to use in their classrooms.

In the initial survey, teachers were asked which instructional strategies they used in their classrooms to improve student literacies. Teachers provided lists of strategies that they used but many of them documented that the use of the strategies was met with minimal success. Proceeding with this notion in mind, the data analyzed from the participants in this study supports the assertion that the confluence of the ideas derived

from the activities in this study, is a necessary component for the identification of appropriate instructional strategies to build effective instructional frameworks to address the complex literacy needs of African American male students. This theme helped to answer all of the research questions of this study, particularly the third research question. Participants documented their plans of developing book clubs with their students and instituting other methods of instructional interventions that they gleaned from their colleagues.

### **Recommendations**

In order for teachers, administrators, schools, and districts to develop appropriate literacy interventions for African American males, the historical implications and an understanding of the sociocultural component of literacy and students' identities, should be at the core of their understandings. The literacy review of this study helped to connect how the institution of slavery, Jim Crow laws, school desegregation, and the negative perceptions of African American males woven into the cultural, political, and social fabric of this country have had a devastating effect on African American male student literacy.

As a result, to help African American male students connect and buy-in to school literacy, educators must use different approaches than what have been attempted in the past. Students' home values and identities must be given value in the school context before students can be expected to connect to school values, mores, and sociopolitical thought. It is possible to help students to make connections to these ideals through their exposure to appropriate texts. This study asserted that the use of the book club model

could help students to connect their out-of-school literacy behaviors to the ones expected in school.

Although book club is a widely used evidence-based instructional model with the specific aim to improve the reading comprehension of students, there are few studies that document its use for African American students. Furthermore, there are very few studies that specifically focus on improving the general educational outcomes of African American students (Lindo, 2006; Morgan & Mehta, 2004). This study established the importance of using an effective literacy intervention for students to help them connect to school-based literacy expectations as the teachers were engaged in a five-day series of professional development that used the book club and the accompanying activities as a model for literacy instruction. Moreover, the research on collaboration, improving schools' culture, and Professional Learning Communities conducted by Rosenholz (1985), Rowan (1990), and DuFour and Eaker (1998) respectively, supports the need for ongoing professional development and collaboration time for teachers.

### ***Implications***

It is problematic to continue to support the idea that schools have no responsibility in adjusting practices and policies to accommodate the needs of African American male students. If African American male students continue to be expected to change their identities to fit the values of the school, then students will continue to feel disconnected from their schools. Educators should continue to participate in inquiry that involves the restructuring and re-conceptualization of the institution of school and the model introduced by Thomas Jefferson (referenced in Chapter Two of this study), where

he asserted that school is for [white] boys that show the most promise and the “rubbish” should be discarded.

The structure of the institution of school has changed only slightly since its inception, prompting the question about whether the current structure of school will ever be able to accommodate the needs of African American male students. At the beginning of the institution of school, African Americans were still captives in the institution of slavery and it was illegal for African Americans to learn how to read or participate in any academic endeavors. Thus, school was never designed in its structure, with its alignment to the adoption of the mores, values, and practices of the White dominant culture, to accept or accommodate the culture, language, or literacy of African American people.

It is incumbent upon teachers, administrators, and policy-makers to re-conceptualize the structure of school so that it does not only represent the view point of the White dominant culture and power structure. The current structure of school supports the dominant cultural structure and it often runs counter to the home culture, values, and understandings of African American male students. As long as schools and school related content supports and enforces the current discourse, African American male students will reject it.

The idea that African American boys refuse to connect or buy-in to school culture should be reviewed further. The review of the literature and the data presented from the participants of this study established that African American male students find it difficult to connect with school cultures; regardless of the school or school districts they attend. What was missing from the data from the participants of this study was a discourse about how teachers could influence a whole-scale structural change of the institution of school.

Though this study directly addressed how teachers help students connect to in-school literacy, one of the tertiary discourses which it initiated was how the convergence of the lives of African American students, how they connect to school, and how teachers' perceptions of them impact their school success. Data from focus participants about helping students buy-in to already established school cultures, subscribes to the presupposition that the existing cultures in schools are in fact right for African American male students. As literacy is situated within the sociocultural paradigm, it is appropriate to participate in inquiry about how schools' cultures impede African American males' access to in-school literacy.

Participants in this study also indicated that although they believed that their understandings of African American male literacy progressed as a result of participating in this study, not enough professional development is available to engage them in the types of discussions to help them improve their practice. Also, other practitioners in the field of education recognize that there is a dearth of professional development that is offered to meet the complex needs of students, particularly those of African American male students. Teachers in this study indicated that either the professional development that they have had previous to what was offered by this study was not effective, or that they simply did not have access to it. Although many districts provide teachers with the time to converse with their fellow teachers, they do not encourage or require dialogue and actions to be aligned to theory, nor are teachers given the capacity to collect or review data to determine the effectiveness of their new learning on the achievement of their students. Teachers should be given the opportunity to engage in new learning that

addresses each one of the strands outlined in Tatum's nesting ground framework (theoretical, instructional, and professional development strands).

Another implication of this study is the recognition of the ongoing impact of teachers' treatment of the students with whom they come in contact. Data from participant teachers in this study indicated that many of their students felt disconnected from school because teachers have "victimized" them. Furthermore, one of the case study participants indicated that educators often feel that the turmoil that many African American male students face occurs outside of the institution of school; however, students often encounter turmoil as a result of the relationships, or lack thereof, with their teachers and the school environment. In order to authentically address the literacy needs of African American male students, teachers must be willing to address their own biases toward their students. Throughout the literature review and analysis of data, I made the case that teachers should participate in collaborative inquiry about their perceptions of students and how those perceptions influence their instruction, treatment, and text selections for African American male students.

Furthermore, the impact of the race and culture of the teacher, the race and culture of the student, and the cultural context of school and literacy should also be a part of teacher and school conversations. The participants in this study questioned their own practices and perceptions and the practices and perceptions of their colleagues and they were provided the safe space and opportunity to grapple with race, culture, and instructional practices and expectations of the most vulnerable population of students. However, there were times that the teachers in this study defaulted to the belief that students' skill sets alone were the entities to be addressed. If educators do not move

beyond accessing and discussing data about the failure rates of African American male students and do in-depth analyses of in-school expectations, discipline practices, and how race serves as a predictor of a student's life and academic trajectory, then students will continue to find difficulty connecting to in-school literacy and in-school content.

Finally, teachers in this study indicated that while in conversations with their colleagues, they often felt that they could not be honest about their feelings about colleagues' racist or insensitive comments. In order to move beyond harboring negative perceptions of African American male students, teachers must feel comfortable enough to address and correct negative, racist, and biased assumptions about African American male students. Teachers can participate in such dialogue within the construct of professional learning communities or other structured professional development conversations.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

There were limitations of this study that would prevent readers of this research to assess its full impact on the achievement of African American male students. This study was conducted over the course of five, three-hour sessions. Although the focus participant data supported that teachers' engagement in the series influenced their progression of understanding about the nature of literacy and how African American male students connect to in-school literacy, there was minimal data that was collected to support that teachers changed their actual practice. Research such as this might be better supported in teachers' school environments over a longer period of time with a component that allows the researcher to observe the teacher in her classroom environment. Furthermore, research studies such as this one should be grounded in an



ongoing discourse, within the context of a community, such as a school professional learning community to provide the ability for teachers to align their instructional practices, discourses, and student data.

Another limitation of this study was that participant teachers were invited from districts around the county. There was not a concentration of teachers from a single school or school district. One of the assertions that I made after analyzing focus participant data was that teachers should participate in inquiry about how to make larger structural changes to the institution of school. To move organizational change, professional development should be aligned to districts' visions and missions and activities such as the ones used in this study and should become a part of the common practice, lexicon, and mindset of school districts. Therefore, classroom teachers, superintendents, and other instructional staff should participate in ongoing professional development such as what was provided in this study, and they should participate in activities that provide evidence-based instructional frameworks upon which they can rely.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The literacy development of African American male students does not occur in a vacuum but rather as a part of their maturation and is aligned to their social experiences. To ignore the unique way that literacy is intertwined with other aspects of the lives of African American male students is tantamount to education malpractice, social and academic marginalization, and ineptitude on the part of educators and education policy makers. The data collected from hundreds of studies about how to improve literacy over the many course of decades should be applied to the instruction of African American

males. This study supports actions such as these and makes a strong case for educators to view the literacy practices of this population through a different lens.

It is imperative that teachers be given the tools to address the chasm between the in-school and out-of-school literacy practices of African American male students. Those in the field of education must start by first addressing the in-school cultural hegemony of African American male students. Teachers and schools must help students feel like their primary discourses are valued because they are concomitant with their identities. Since students bring their identities to literacy events, they must know and feel like those identities are valued in order to connect with expected school literacy.

Schools must seek new ways to help African American male students connect to the institution of school. As documented by the literature review and data from the focus participants in this study, African American male students reject school and school content because they do not have positive relationships with their teachers; thus, African American male students experience school failure as a result. The data highlighting the rate of school failure of African American male students should spark outrage and be viewed as an educational pandemic. The best way to address the pandemic of school failure among African American male students and to address their in-school literacy development is to provide appropriate professional development for educators that allows them to: 1) address their negative perceptions and beliefs about African American male students; 2) have access to evidence-based instructional strategies; and 3) participate in meaningful dialogue about pedagogy. Furthermore, results from research studies such as this one should serve as a theoretical foundation and can be a catalyst to spark educators to begin the necessary dialogues.

**APPENDIX A**  
**SERIES OUTLINE**

Week	Objective	Activity
<b>Meeting #1</b>	<p>Read: Chapters 1-3 in Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To establish a context for the class and the importance of literacy among African American males</li> <li>· To make connections of teaching practices to the sociocultural factors that influence the in-school literacy of African American males</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanations of the study</li> <li>• Interested participants will complete consent agreement</li> <li>• <b>Writing sample:</b> Why do you teach?</li> <li>• 5 Why's</li> <li>• Discuss the historical and social impact on African American male literacy</li> <li>• Go to your Corners!</li> <li>• Edmodo: What has been the political and social impact on African American male literacy?</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting #2</b>	<p>Read: Chapters 3-6 in Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To contextualize literacy, learning, and schooling from the African American perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chaps. 1-3 discussion</li> <li>• <b>Writing sample:</b> What is the achievement gap and what does it mean for literacy?</li> <li>• Here's What!/So What?/Now What?</li> <li>• Review Tatum (2005) Nesting Ground Framework</li> <li>• Read different definitions of literacy and discuss a possible</li> </ul>

		<p>reconceptualization of what literacy is</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Edmodo: What is literacy?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meeting #3</b></p>	<p>Read: Chapters 7-9 in Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To discuss the impact of culturally responsive teaching on the literacy of African American males</li> <li>· To gather data on how teachers select texts for their African American male students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chaps. 3-6 discussion</li> <li>• Discussion: How do you choose texts? How important is contextual understanding to literacy?</li> <li>• Activity: Moving Forward</li> <li>• Read excerpts from Lewis (2005) about power and identity in the classroom</li> <li>• <b>Discussion &amp; Writing sample:</b> How power and identity have played out in the classroom?</li> <li>• Edmodo: What is culturally responsive teaching? What does this mean for literacy?</li> </ul>

<p><b>Meeting #4</b></p>	<p>Read: Chapters 10 in Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey #2</li> <li>• Chapt. 7-9 discussion</li> <li>• PowerPoint and class discussion on managing student academic language and socialization</li> <li>• What's the problem? What's not the problem?</li> </ul> <p>Edmodo:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does academic language affect one's literacy development? Socialization?</li> <li>• How important is professional development? What does it mean for literacy?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Meeting #5</b></p>	<p>Read and chunk Excerpt from <i>Book Club Connection</i>: "The Book Club Program: Theoretical and Research Foundations"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of excerpt and Chapt. 10 discussion</li> <li>• <b>Discussion &amp; Writing sample:</b> Reconceptualization of literacy definition</li> </ul> <p><b>Edmodo:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some strategies for improving literacy?</li> <li>• How has your thinking changed from the time that we started until now?</li> </ul>

**APPENDIX B****SURVEY #1****Teacher Efficacy and Perceptions of Student Performance and Literacy Development****Name** \_\_\_\_\_**Ethnicity** \_\_\_\_\_**No. of years in teaching** \_\_\_\_\_**What would you like to gain from this PD?**

This survey focuses on your current thinking about teaching African American students as well as other professional development experiences you have had in the past. Please be sure to answer all of the items truthfully as to provide the most accurate data. There is no right or wrong answer.

1. I feel confident about my abilities as a teacher.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Not At All      A Little Bit      Somewhat      Very Much      Most of the Time

2. Briefly explain how the professional development that you  
have received has helped you to help your students.

3. I believe that I can help my African American students perform at high levels.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Not At All    A Little Bit    Somewhat    Very Much    Most of the Time

4. I have used the following strategies improve the literacy development of my African American students.

5. Student performance is directly related to my performance.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Not At All    A Little Bit    Somewhat    Very Much    Most of the Time

6. The African American students in my class(es) like to read.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Not At All    A Little Bit    Somewhat    Very Much    Most of the Time

7. The African American students in my class(es) read things not related to school.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Not At All    A Little Bit    Somewhat    Very Much    Most of the Time

8. Please describe your feelings about in-school literacy and out-of school literacy.

9. The reading strategies that I use are evidence-based.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time

10. I spend a significant amount of time on helping my students to improve their literacy.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time

11. I believe in my student's abilities.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time

12. Literacy helps students in every subject area.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time

13. I feel like my students are better readers because of how I've helped them.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time



14. I have learned how to help my students by working with my colleagues.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time

15. When my students fail, I usually know why.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time

16. List the three top reasons why you believe your students do not do well in school.

17. I can help my African American students, even if they do not have parental support.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time

18. I feel like if I had better professional development, I could help my students more.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All	A Little Bit	Somewhat	Very Much	Most of the Time

19. I feel like the following sociocultural factors influence my African American students' literacy development.

**APPENDIX C****SURVEY #2**

The purpose of this measure is to collect data about your current thinking with regard to your perceptions of your students' efficacy and your changes in thinking and practice since the beginning of this professional development series. There are no right or wrong answers and you can choose to omit any question that you do not feel comfortable answering.

1. If I didn't before this professional development, I have decided to use the following measures to collect information about my students:

2. As a result of our discussions, I will use the information I collect about my students as input for text selection.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

3. What does Tatum say about how to help students develop in-school literacy practices aligned to their cultural experiences? How do you employ these practices in your class?

4. Talk briefly about how you have re-conceptualized literacy based on this PD series. Please include the ways that you believe students can display literate behaviors.
5. Briefly explain what you do when student interests and experiences do not match your expectations for reading practices.
6. According to Tatum, it is important for African American male students to read texts with strong male protagonists. I introduce these types of texts to my students
- |                |       |         |          |                   |
|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1              | 2     | 3       | 4        | 5                 |
| Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
7. Researchers like Kucer (2009), Lewis (2005), and Tatum (2005) describe literacy as a social act. What do you think this means and how do you apply this concept in your classes as a result of this PD?

There is a myth that says that African American male students reject literacy because they regard it as a feminized practice. However, the literature has documented that African American males students reject in-school literacy because lacks relevance to their lives. How do you help students connect to in-school literacy?

**APPENDIX D****FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Has your definition of literacy changed since the inception of this class?
2. What do you believe are the components in helping students link to in-school literacy?
3. Do you believe that literacy is important in a student's overall academic achievement? Why or why not?
4. What role have you played in fostering the in-school literacy practices of African American male students?
5. What challenges have you faced in helping African American male students develop in-school literacy?
6. How important is it for students to see representations of themselves in the texts that they read?
7. Do you believe that your instruction has helped African American students improve their literacy?

8. How does the concept of “flow” relate to student literacy development? How do you promote it in your instruction?
9. Have you seen a difference in the literacy practices of male and female students?
10. What is your text selection procedure? Can you say that this procedure is evidence-based?
11. From your perspective, what are the historical and political implications on the literacy development of African American male students?
12. In your experience, does your current school organizational structure promote the usage of teacher professional development to improve student literacy development? If not, what have you done as a classroom teacher?
13. What data do you use to inform your literacy instruction?
14. Speak about Vygotsky’s Social Learning Theory and its connection to literacy development.

**APPENDIX E**

## DEFINITIONS OF THE SIX BUILDING TASKS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

1. Semiotic building: that is, using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what semiotic (communicative) systems, systems of knowledge, and ways of knowing, are here and now relevant and activated.
2. World building: using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what is here and now (taken as) “reality,” what is here and now (taken as) present and absent, concrete and abstract, “real” and “unreal,” probable, possible, and impossible.
3. Activity building: using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what activity or activities are going on, composed of what specific actions.
4. Socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building: using cues or clues to assemble situated meanings about what identities and relationships are relevant to the interaction, with their concomitant attitudes, values, ways of feeling, ways of knowing and believing, as well as ways of acting and interacting.
5. Political building: using cues or clues to construct the nature and relevance of various “social goods,” such as status and power, and anything else taken as a “social good” here and now (e.g. beauty, humor, verbalness, specialist knowledge, a fancy car, etc.).
6. Connection building: using cues or clues to make assumptions about how the past and future of an interaction, verbally and non-verbally, are connected to the present moment and to each other – after all, interactions always have some degree of continuous coherence.

(p. 85-86, Gee, 1999)

**APPENDIX F****INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

Understanding the In-School Literacies of African American Males Through A Sociocultural Paradigm: Implications for the Professional Development of Teachers

Principal Investigator (PI): Aaron Johnson  
 Curriculum and Instruction  
 248-918-8912

Purpose

You are being asked to be a participant in a research study of Understanding the In-School Literacies of African American Males Through a Sociocultural Paradigm: Implications for the Professional Development of Teachers. This study is being conducted by Aaron Johnson, a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction Department at Wayne State University. The anticipated number of participants in this study is approximately 15-35 practicing teachers. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

In this study, you will be asked to:

- Complete two surveys through a password protected Google form, aimed at assessing your feelings about your instructional practice student efficacy, and your perceptions about your African American students
- Participate in recorded discussions that are aimed at providing a context for understanding the sociocultural factors that influence the literacy development of African American males
- Participate in focus group interviews
- Logon to a secure online discussion board aimed at documenting your thoughts about questions, discussions, and concepts that will be presented during the series
- Participate in a book club where the guiding text will be: Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males by Tatum (2005).

The purpose of this study is to collect information on teachers' perceptions of African American male students' in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, student efficacy, and your beliefs about the use of teacher professional development in your instructional practice. During the course, you will be asked about your thoughts on how historical,

political, and social constructs impact the literacy development of African American male students.

### Summary of Rights

I must inform you that all data collected as a result of this research will be used as part of a research study and may be published. However, all research will be conducted in accordance with the Institutional Review Board Committee guidelines, set forth by Wayne State University.

As participants of this interview, you are entitled to certain rights. Below, please find a brief summary of those rights. For a complete listing, please visit: [www.irb.wayne.edu](http://www.irb.wayne.edu).

1. All information collected in this interview will remain confidential. Names and specific titles will not be used in the final dissertation.
2. You have the right to have any answer to any of the questions deleted. They will also be deleted from the final submitted transcription.
3. You may withdraw at any time from the study.
4. You have the right to refuse to answer any question.
5. You have the right to a written copy of the transposed transcripts.

### Study Procedures

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to:

- Complete surveys that will help to document your perceptions of your students and of your efficacy as a teacher. Furthermore, as principal investigator, I will lead and facilitate discussions about how your efficacy as a teacher and your professional development impacts your African American male students' efficacy as readers. Completion of this survey should not take longer than 30 min. The results of this survey will be documented in the final dissertation.
- Participate in a one-time 30-45 minute focus group interview. Participants will be interviewed as a group. During this interview, you will be asked questions about:
  - Your feelings on text selections for your students
  - The role your cultural background plays in the instruction of your students
  - Your feelings of student efficacy in regards to home and in-school literacies



- The historical and political impact on the literacy development of African-American male students
- Participate in professional development using book club as a model. The researcher will conduct the professional development and take observation notes and record discussions. Participation in this study will involve:
  - Reading text selections and engaging in conversations with group members about topics in the text
  - Making connections to your everyday instruction of African American males and their literacy practices
  - Responding to questions posed by the researcher and other group members through Edmodo
- The researcher will then transcribe the audio recordings, interview, survey results, and observations and present the results in the final dissertation and report the findings as a part of the overall research.

### Benefits

The possible benefits to you for taking part in this research study are:

- Receiving professional development to address the in-school literacy development of African American male students as an intervention to help close the achievement gap.
- Gaining an understanding on how teacher perceptions of student abilities and feelings of self-efficacy influence instructional decisions, text selections, and in-school literacy development

### Risks

Risks to participate in this study are minimal. As part of the study, I will conduct a case study to compare the data of different participants. As part of the criteria to identify participants for the case study, I will use identifying demographic information; therefore, confidentiality serves as a risk to participants. However, all identifying information will not be shared with anyone and I will destroy and erase any identifying information at the completion of my data analysis.

### Costs

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

### Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Those who agree to participate in the focus group interview will be given a gift card to Barnes and Noble Bookstore to use as they wish.

### Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

If photographs, videos, or audiotape recordings of you will be used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. The audio and/or video recordings will be erased immediately following the conferring of the final degree (approximately May 2015).

As a participant, you have the right to review and edit any audio or video recording that contains your likeness or voice. The usage of audio or video recordings will only be used for purposes of transcribing data to report findings. Access to video or audio recordings will only be granted to the principal investigator and a transcriber.

### Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in the study you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

The PI may stop your participation in this study without your consent. The PI will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision that is

made is to protect your health and safety, or because you did not follow the instructions to take part in the study

### Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Aaron Johnson at the following phone number 248-918-8912. Also, my email address is: [amdj9265@gmail.com](mailto:amdj9265@gmail.com). If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant / Legally authorized representative \*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of participant / Legally authorized representative \*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of witness\*\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed of witness\*\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

**APPENDIX G****DEBRIEF QUESTIONS**

1. Do you believe I violated any of the rights of the participants that were outlined in the informed consent form that I distributed to participants OR by any other means that are standard for conducting behavioral research? If so, what participant rights did I violate and what are your suggestions for correcting them?
2. What could I have done to improve in my role as participant-researcher during the previous professional development session?
3. During the course of the previous session, did I use at least one of the data collection methods that I have identified to help me answer my research questions? Which data collection methods did I use?
4. When reflecting on the facilitation methods that I used during the previous session, do you believe they were effective in collecting the data that I aimed to collect?
5. Since this is a book club, did I use or employ any instructional theory related to improving African American male literacy? Which theories did I reference? Are there theories that I should have referenced but didn't? If so, what are they?
6. What other facilitation techniques could I have used to collect the data that I am expecting to collect that aligns with my research questions?
7. What other ways can I improve my craft as a researcher?

## APPENDIX H

### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

- Cleveland, K.P. (2011). *Teaching Boys Who Struggle in School: Strategies That Turn Underachievers Into Successful Learners*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD
- Davis, B.M. (2012). *How to Teach Students Who Don't Look Like You: Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies (Second Edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other People's Children*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Kafele, B.K. (2013). *Closing the Attitude Gap: How to Fire Up Your Students to Strive for Success*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD
- Kafele, B.K. (2009). *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD
- Kunjufu, J. (2007). *Raising Black Boys*. Chicago, IL: African American Images
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- McMahon, S.I. and Raphael, T.E. (1997). *The Book Club Connection: Literacy Learning and Classroom Talk*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Newkirk, T. (2009). *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
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- Smith, M.W. and Wilhelm, J.D. (2001). Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
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- Tatum, A. (2005). Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers
- Vadas, L. (2005). Bridging the Widest Gap: Raising the Achievement of Black Boys. Education Update (the official newsletter of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), 47(8), 1-3.
- Wynn, M. (1992). Empowering African-American Males to Succeed: A Ten-Step Approach for Parents and Teachers

#### **Websites:**

- <http://tinurl.com/2013agsummit> (MDE African American Young Men of Promise Initiative)
- <http://librariesliteracyandaamayouth.weebly.com/module-1-literacy-and-lifeoutcomes.html> (Libraries, Literacy, and African American Male Youth)
- <http://ncebc.org> (National Council on Educating Black Children)
- <http://www.edchange.org/multiculturallindex.html> (Resources available for equity and diversity educators)
- <http://www.teachingtolerance.org> (Teaching Tolerance)
- <http://www.rethinkingschools.org> (Rethinking Schools)
- <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/> (Teaching Diverse Learners)
- [www.brownsbooks.com/](http://www.brownsbooks.com/) (Brown Sugar & Spice Books & Educational Services)
- [www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org) (National School Reform Faculty)

## APPENDIX I

## IRB Approval



IRB Administration Office  
87 East Canfield, Second Floor  
Detroit, Michigan 48201  
Phone: (313) 577-1628  
FAX: (313) 993-7122  
<http://irb.wayne.edu>

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**NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL**

**To:** Aaron Johnson  
Teacher Education

**From:** Dr. Deborah Ellis or designee C. Zolaudatz/PB  
for Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

**Date:** November 26, 2014

**RE: IRB #:** 098814B3E

**Protocol Title:** Understanding the In-School Literacies of African-American Males through a Sociocultural Paradigm: Implications for Teacher Professional Development

**Funding Source:**

**Protocol #:** 1410013485

**Expiration Date:** November 25, 2015

**Risk Level / Category:** Research not involving greater than minimal risk

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The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were **APPROVED** following *Expedited Review Category (#6 #7)\** by the Chairperson/designee for the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 11/28/2014 through 11/25/2015. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Revised Protocol Summary Form (received in the IRB Office 11/17/2014)
  - Protocol (received in the IRB Office 9/26/2014)
  - Receipt of Letter of Support from Oakland Schools
  - Behavioral Research Informed Consent (dated 11/17/2014)
  - Recruitment Flyer
  - Debriefing Script/Questions
  - Data Collection Tools: Survey #1, Teacher Survey #2, Focus Group Interview Questions, Course Outline, and Definitions of the six building tasks of discourse analysis
- 

- \* Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Renewal Reminder" approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval **before** the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can never be reported or published as research data.
- \* All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB **BEFORE** implementation.
- \* Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (<http://www.irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php>).

**NOTE:**

1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the IRB Administration Office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at each use.

\*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998

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**ABSTRACT****UNDERSTANDING THE IN-SCHOOL LITERACIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES THROUGH A SOCIOCULTURAL PARADIGM: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

by

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There has been great debate about the reasons why African American male students reject the institution of school and school related content. Furthermore, data from multiple sources, including, national and local assessments and governmental studies, document a gap in achievement and school retention rates between African American students and their White counterparts. The data substantiates the notions that African American males have an aversion to the pedagogy of their teachers, schools' environments, and the cultural mores and values of the institution of school that often run counter to their home or community values. This study explored how immersing teachers in a book club model of professional development could encourage them to use the practice in their classrooms and to use literacy as a means to connect students to the institution of school and school-related content. The book club model is heavily anchored in Vygotskian theory, and this study used Vygotsky's social learning theory as a foundational theoretical framework while exposing teachers to a professional development series that encouraged them to address their perceptions of students by

participating in inquiry about their instructional practice. Accordingly, teachers were asked to reflect on their pedagogy, text selections for their African American male students, and their thoughts about the nature of literacy and its components. The purpose of this study was twofold: 1) to engage teachers in professional development aimed at providing evidence-based literacy strategies to use with their students; and 2) to assist teachers to make connections between their perceptions of their African American students and their pedagogical decisions. The history of African Americans in this country, Supreme Court cases related to school desegregation, and the sociopolitical ideals of this nation were used as a backdrop to contextualize the current academic pandemic that faces African American children. This study used Tatum (2005) as the guiding text and his nesting ground framework was the main construct upon which the activities, conversations, and solutions were grounded. It was understood that human thought is varied and nuanced; therefore, it was necessary to employ a qualitative methodology using a sociocultural paradigm to understand how to improve teachers' understandings of their students. Also, a robust data collection methodology was used to ensure that the findings could answer questions of validity and reliability.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

I was born in 1974 in Detroit, Michigan and attended Detroit Public Schools K-12. Early on, my family, friends, and teachers noticed that I was particularly engaged in academic pursuits. At the age of eight, I was recommended to attend a new school that was designed to challenge the city's academically advanced students. Enrollment in Bates Academy, a magnet school, helped to change the course of my life. Attendance at Bates Academy for six years solidified my acceptance to Detroit Renaissance High School, one of the nation's premier high schools. Renaissance High School prepared me for a success in academia and prepared me to compete in every area of my life. After graduating from Renaissance in 1992, I attended Eastern Michigan University, The New School for Social Research in New York City, and Wayne State University, graduating from Wayne State in 2000 with a Bachelor of Science degree in English Education. After receiving a Bachelor degree, I knew that that would not be the end of my formal education.

I realized early in my life that education had been an entity that saved me from some of the turmoil happening around me; thus, I concluded that education has the power to save students' lives. As I moved forward with this understanding, I allowed my life's experiences, along with my professional teaching and administration experiences, guide me toward my dissertation study topic, *Understanding the In-School Literacies of African-American Males through a Sociocultural Paradigm: Implications for Teacher Professional Development*.

I began teaching in the Detroit Public Schools at King and Renaissance High Schools, while earning my Master of Education degree from Wayne State University. Shortly after I began teaching, I knew that I wanted to be an administrator. While I was still a classroom teacher at Renaissance High School, I applied for, and was accepted to the doctoral program at Wayne State University. During my coursework, I began to focus my interests for research around literacy development.

My role as school and district administrator has given me a greater opportunity to affect the educational paths of children. I started my journey in administration as an Assistant Principal at Hamtramck High School in Hamtramck, MI. Later, I was given the opportunity to work as an Assistant Principal at Farmington High School in Farmington, MI. After two and a half years as an Assistant Principal, I was chosen as the principal of Harrison High School, another school within the Farmington Public Schools. While serving as principal of Harrison, I still felt that I had more to offer to the field of education. Since then, I have accepted positions as the Director of Secondary Instruction for Grosse Pointe Schools and as the Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services for the Farmington Public Schools. My research that stems from my work as a part of my dissertation study has given me a greater understanding of curriculum and instruction as it relates to practical implementation while my leadership skills have been honed by my participation in programs such as Courageous Journey through MASA and Education Policy Fellowship Program or EPFP.

It has been my lifelong goal to be a positive force in the lives of children. I plan to continue my work in improving the field of education by providing support to teachers, promoting learning for students, and helping all children realize their academic dreams.