

Rethinking the Texts We Use in Literacy Instruction with Adolescent African American Males

Out of all the texts in the world, why do we put these texts in front of African American adolescent males living in economically deprived communities?

—*Reading for Their Life* (Tatum, 2009, p. 42)

The nation’s young black males are in a state of crisis.” Such is the sobering conclusion of a recent report from The Council of the Great City Schools (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010). In support of this conclusion, the report lists the following findings:

- In 2007, one out of every three Black children lived in poverty compared with one out of every ten White children.
- In 2008, Black males were almost twice as likely as White males to drop out of high school.
- In 2006, Black students were two times more likely than Hispanic and American Indian students, three times more likely than White students, and five times more likely than Asian American students to be suspended from school.
- In 2010, the unemployment rate for adult Black males was twice as high as the unemployment rate for White males of the same age (Lewis et al., 2010).

Research is beginning to connect these negative educational, economic, and social outcomes to low literacy rates among African American male students (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010; Tatum, 2009). A

recent report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation was the first to directly link graduation rates with reading skills and poverty levels (Hernandez, 2011). This report, based on a longitudinal study of nearly 4,000 students, finds that students who are not proficient readers by third grade are four times more likely than their proficient peers to drop out of high school. Poverty increases the dropout rate even further: students who were both non-proficient readers and who lived in poverty for at least a year were six times less likely to graduate than proficient readers. A third factor—race—raised the likelihood of dropping out even higher; 31% of poor, Black, non-proficient readers did not complete high school, a rate that is eight times that of all proficient readers.

How many African American males are non-proficient readers? According to recent NAEP data, only 14% of African American eighth graders performed at or above proficiency in reading on national tests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Black males, on average, performed nine points lower than Black females on these tests. Putting these two recent reports together, it would seem that a majority of the nation’s Black males are in desperate need of inter-

ventions in literacy education, and that improvements in literacy skills among these students would translate not only into improved test scores, but improved lives for these young men.

Closing the Literacy Gap

Much has been written about how to improve literacy rates among minority children and teens, and a good deal of this research focuses on the choice of texts. Research has stressed the importance of providing children and adolescent readers with texts that reflect their personal experiences and that accurately portray characters like themselves and their families, friends, and peers (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Bell & Clark, 1998; DeLeón, 2002; Feger, 2006; Ganji, 2008; Pirofski, 2001; Purves & Beach, 1972). The availability of such texts affects both reading achievement and reading motivation in students (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Bell & Clark, 1998; Gangi, 2008; Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Research shows that “when readers interact with literature that relates to their culture-specific experiences, their reading comprehension performance will improve” (McCullough, 2008, p. 7). Research also suggests that adolescents who typically display antipathy toward reading may react differently when provided with texts that are culturally relevant, as author Sharon Flake (2007) describes:

Black boys will read. But to get them off to a flying start, we've got to give them books that remind them of home—who they are. When this happens, they fly through books—even the most challenged readers. They hunger for the work like a homeless man finally getting a meal that's weeks overdue. (p. 14)

In a recent book, Tatum (2009) takes the idea of culturally relevant texts a step further, arguing that African American adolescent males need exposure to texts that not only contain characters who look, act, and think as they do, but that encourage and empower these young men to take action in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. He maintains that one reason that African American males suffer academically, emotionally, and culturally is a lack of exposure to “texts that they find meaningful and that will help them critique, understand, and move beyond some of the turmoil-related experiences they encounter outside school” (p. xii). Tatum calls such writing *enabling texts*, and contends that not only should such

texts be put into the hands of African American males at every opportunity, but that these texts should also be mediated by a teacher, parent, librarian, or other adult—that is, utilized to “engage the students in dialogue about issues and concepts that matter in school and society” and to do so from “multiple perspectives and in relation to multiple identities” (p. 90). The mediation of an enabling text is critical to Tatum, who reminds readers of the historical importance of community literature circles within the African American population. Without the chance to discuss their reading with others and to respond to the texts through writing, Tatum argues, enabling texts cannot fulfill their true potential in the lives of these young men.

Defining and Identifying Enabling Texts That Feature African American Males

How can educators, librarians, and parents identify texts that are culturally relevant, powerful, and able to make a positive difference in the lives of their readers?¹ This is a difficult task, particularly given the small number of books that feature African American characters published each year (Horning, Febry, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2011). While any given book with an African American male protagonist may hold the interest of Black adolescent male readers, many of these texts fall short of the benchmarks set for an enabling text. According to Tatum (2009), some of these books actually “reinforce a student's perception of being a struggling reader incapable of handling cognitively challenging texts” (p. 65). He calls such texts *disabling* texts. Included in his definition of disabling texts are books that are developmentally inappropriate, that is, books that may be on the student's reading level but “ignore their need for human development” (p. 67). As an example of this type of disabling text, Tatum describes a case in which a Berenstain Bears book, written for primary students, was selected for instructional use with a 16-year-old Black male (p. 67).

Also included in his definition of disabling texts are books that serve mainly to reinforce the stereotypes of Black males, especially Black urban males. Some titles in the street fiction genre may meet this criterion; as Brooks and Savage (2009) discuss, these books “embod[y] the potential to valorize infidelity,

criminal activity, and a wide range of unprincipled and even stereotypic behaviors” (p. 50). However, as these researchers also note, street fiction novels are scattered along a “nuanced and varied” continuum such that dismissing all street fiction as disabling shortchanges the genre (p. 51).

To help teachers, librarians, and parents identify

enabling texts—those texts that have the potential to motivate Black males to become better readers and to help them define themselves—we have created the rubric shown in Figure 1 (Tatum, 2009, p. 77).² Unless otherwise noted, each characteristic was derived from Tatum’s work. In the next section, we use sample enabling texts to describe each element of the rubric.

Characteristic	Definition	
Provides a healthy psyche	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • leads Black teen males to look within • shows Black male teens defining themselves 	
Provides a modern awareness of the real world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • connects to issues/questions that students find essential today • takes place w/in the context of their life experiences • deals with issues that are important to Black adolescent males • presents “real” environments/conditions Black male teens face inside and outside school 	
Focuses on the collective struggles of African Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides insight into issues related to social justice • allows Black male teens to take a critical look at their oppression & oppressors and to examine the academic & social ills they face • contains content that will cause them to take action in their own lives • challenges them to think about their existence 	
Serves as a road map for being, doing, thinking, and acting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflects an improved human condition • suggests steps/strategies/supports for improving life • speaks to the power of the individual and of the collective 	
Recognizes, honors, & nurtures multiple identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • academic • cultural • economic • gendered • personal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social • sexual • communal • national • international
Demonstrates resiliency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focuses on self-reliance • focuses on self-determination • shows Black males as problem solvers • challenges victim mentality 	
Interesting and provocative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • thematically engaging • complex/multilayered • developmentally appropriate • fast moving and provocative • taps into feelings, imagination, and intellectual curiosity 	
Avoids caricatures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hoopster • fatherless son • gang recruit • truant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uses poor grammar and raw language • rappers • drug users
Includes a mentor or role model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides guidance or offers wisdom to the protagonist • often an adult or elderly member of the African American community • usually not didactic or preachy 	

Figure 1. Enabling text rubric (based on Tatum, 2009)

Characteristics of Enabling Texts

Provide a Healthy Psyche

Tatum (2009) argues that enabling texts portray characters who practice self-reflection, leading readers to look within and to define themselves. The process of

self-definition is often an explicit part of an enabling text's narrative. Take, for example, the protagonist David in *Pull* (Binns, 2010). After David's father kills his mother and is sent to prison, David must decide whether to risk splitting apart his younger siblings in order to pursue a college education and basketball career (his mother's dream for him) or to keep his family together

by forgoing college in favor of an apprenticeship with a construction foreman. David eventually chooses the latter path, explaining his decision to his high school basketball coach this way:

You asked me what I want for my future. I want the wind. And mortar and bricks too . . . I want to look over the plans for something that never existed before. I want to dream up those plans and make them real . . . And I'll be taught by a master. And in the meantime, I'll be keeping my family together. Not because I feel guilty, and not because I have to. I'm doing it because I want to (p. 302).

David comes to this decision after a good deal of introspection, and his thought processes are clearly documented throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, David summarizes what he has discovered through his deliberate decision making: "People can learn if they're willing. Learn to live their own lives, and overcome their own faults. They can decide not to crash and burn, and not to be ruled by other people's dreams" (Binns, 2010, p. 307). Novels like this one provide young adults with a healthy model for their own decision making.

Facilitate a Modern Awareness of the Real World

As Tatum (2009) notes, enabling texts connect adolescent readers with the world around them by honestly portraying characters, issues, problems, and environ-

ments that African American males might encounter in the real world. Consider two important facts related to this characteristic of an enabling text.

First, "realistic" for one reader may be fantastical for another. Just as we should not assume that a White teenager comes from a middle-class, dual-parent, suburban home, we should also be careful not to assume that all African American adolescent males come from urban, poverty-stricken, violent communities (Hughes-Hassell, Hassell, L., & Agosto, 2010). Not all Black adolescent males will identify with a protagonist who must check his clothing for gang colors before leaving his home each morning, as the characters in *Chameleon* (Smith, 2008) must do. This does not mean that gritty urban fiction cannot be enabling or is not realistic—undeniably, many people do live in situations like these. But educators, parents, and librarians should recognize that some African American male readers may find it difficult to connect with the characters in such novels. As one Black teen noted in a discussion of *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* (Myers, 2005), a book that meets the criteria of an enabling text, "I mean it was a good book, but since I'm not in a gang it wasn't anything I could relate to" (personal communication, March 15, 2011). Unfortunately, it is difficult to find contemporary young adult (YA) titles that feature African American males that take place outside of harsh inner-city settings.

The second important factor to keep in mind when considering which texts offer a "modern awareness of the real world" is that books other than contemporary realistic fiction can also meet the criteria for this category. Tatum (2009) recommends that teachers use historical works, such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Douglass, 1845/1997). These texts, while seemingly not at all modern, still offer truths that resonate with young adults today. While the world has changed in the decades since such texts were written, adolescents can still draw parallels between the people, events, and issues in such historical texts and their modern-day lives. As YA author Sharon Draper states, studying the past allows us to "understand some of the social, economic, and political realities of the present. The past is a teacher from which we can learn much" (Hinton-Johnson, 2009, p. 92).

Similarly, genre fiction (such as fantasy and science fiction titles) should not be automatically dis-

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carded for failing to represent the “real world.” Like historical texts, genre novels often present modern, real-world problems and issues indirectly; they require only a small leap from the reader to bridge seemingly fantastical narratives with the realities of everyday life.

Focus on the Collective Struggles of African Americans

The African American community has faced and continues to face a variety of obstacles along the path to equity. Enabling texts neither ignore these struggles nor paint African Americans as merely victims of history. Instead, as Tatum (2009) argues, enabling texts challenge African American males to critically examine the challenges they face, whether those challenges are academic, social, economic, or personal. Enabling texts may achieve this focus through looking at historical African American struggles such as slavery or the Civil Rights movement. For example, *The Rock and the River* (Magoon, 2009) explores the civil rights era through the eyes of a young man who feels torn between the nonviolent beliefs of his father and the dangerous-yet-exhilarating Black Panther allegiance of his brother. Alternatively, enabling texts may deal with present-day civil rights struggles faced by African Americans. Tupac Shakur’s poetry anthology *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* includes several poems that confront the economic and social ills of African Americans. Consider a portion of this untitled piece that implores readers to “Please wake me when I’m free / I cannot bear captivity / where my culture I’m told holds no significance” (1999, p. 15).

Serve as a Road Map for Being, Doing, Thinking, and Acting

Despite an awareness of societal and personal challenges facing African American males, enabling texts are positive in that they affirm the power of both the individual and the collective to improve one’s life (Tatum, 2009, p. 68). These texts do not present miracle solutions to poverty, oppression, prejudice, or violence. In fact, if a novel resolves itself with such a magic bullet—a character wins the lottery and is transported out of poverty, or a gang member suddenly and without significant cause sees the error of his ways and reforms—this is a good indication that such texts are not enabling in that they do not reflect

the way problems are solved in reality.

As Tatum argues, African American males need concrete strategies for confronting problematic issues in their own lives, and enabling texts can help provide such strategies. For example, in *The Rock and the River* (Magoon, 2009), the protagonist Sam decides to testify at a friend’s trial, even though it could mean endangering himself. Sam’s brother tries to prepare him for what this choice signifies: “You have to understand what it means to tell the truth People are afraid to testify. It’s a serious thing to stand up and say the cops are lying.” Sam replies, “The easy choice is almost never the right one, right?” (p. 222).

Enabling texts present difficult choices and genuine responses to issues—responses that African American readers can use as models when making similar choices in their own lives.

Recognize, Honor, and Nurture Multiple Identities

Just as real people can never be defined by a single trait, neither should characters be solely “the smart guy,” “the Puerto Rican,” or “the single teen mom.” As Tatum (2009) notes, characters should instead be portrayed as having multiple identities—academic, cultural, religious, gendered, social, national, etc. Such a nuanced portrayal is closer to reality and encourages readers to reflect on their own identities as well as to realize that other people they encounter in life should also not be defined or judged by a single characteristic.

Two titles that illustrate this characteristic are *We Could Be Brothers* (Barnes, 2010) and *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002). In *We Could Be Brothers*, the two main characters—young men who initially appear to be insurmountably different from one another—each discover hidden identities within the other, leading them to develop respect and friendship for one another. The students in *Bronx Masquerade* develop a love of poetry during a study of the Harlem Renaissance. When they begin to share their original poetry with

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each other on open-mike Fridays, they discover the individuals beyond the stereotypes. Tyrone explains:

I look around this class and nobody I see fits into the box I used to put them in . . . Mr. Ward [the English teacher] says you have to take people one at a time, check out what's in their head and heart before you judge. Word. (Grimes, 2002, p. 86)

Demonstrate Resiliency

Whether an African American male reader is growing up in urban poverty or in suburban affluence, developing resiliency—the ability to think critically, solve

problems, and bounce back from negative events—is critical for long-term success. According to Tatum (2009), enabling texts can assist in this development by portraying characters, especially African American male characters, who are self-reliant problem solvers. Seeing such a positive portrayal of African American males can confer a sense of self-efficacy on readers.

An example of a text that fulfills this criterion is *Bang* by Sharon Flake (2007). Thanks to a well-intentioned but misguided father, the protagonist (an African American male) of *Bang* finds himself kicked out of his home and having to survive the violent streets of his neighborhood on his own. Despite a few missteps along the way, the protagonist ultimately finds a way to survive without resorting to the cruelty and lawlessness of those around him. While his particular path is not one that many adolescent readers would choose to follow, the overall positive portrayal of this young man as a determined, resourceful problem solver gives African American male readers someone to look up to in literature and affirms the reader's ability to demonstrate those same character traits in the midst of adversity.

Interesting and Provocative

For Tatum (2009), a key component of literacy is the ability not only to read, but also to be able to express oneself in writing. Thus, enabling texts should provide positive reinforcement of the characteristics of strong

writing. They should be engaging and fast-moving; they should be thematically rich; they should provoke deeper thinking from their readers; and they should awaken the intellectual curiosity of the reader.

One example of such a text is the novel *Black and White* (Volponi, 2006), which tells the story of two young men, one African American and one White, who have very different experiences within the criminal justice system after being caught for the same crime. The novel's plot provides fertile ground for additional exploration and discussion of such questions as “How color-blind is justice?” and “Is American society constructed to save some and sacrifice others?” Another example is Tupac Shakur's poetry. After reading the following poem, teens might be inspired to write their own poetry that addresses the “weeds” they believe are holding back the growth of young Black men in America: “I find greatness in the tree/ that grows against all odds/ it blossoms in darkness/ I was the tree who grew from weeds” (Shakur, 1999, p. 115).

Avoid Caricatures

Tatum (2009) notes that stereotypes of Black teen males are prevalent in disabling texts, where they are likely to be portrayed as “the hoopster, the fatherless son, the gang recruit, the truant, the dummy in need of remediation, and the purveyor of poor grammar” (p. 82). When Black male characters defy these stereotypes, they are often mocked by others for demonstrating intelligence or for breaking the norms of their impoverished neighborhoods. Not mentioned by Tatum but equally important, disabling texts also often stereotype non-African American characters as well (for example, the Asian nerd, the Hispanic girl with an attitude, or the cruel White teacher). Enabling texts avoid such caricatures, instead providing well-rounded and multidimensional characters. Such texts often succeed in this regard by showing characters directly challenging stereotypes or realizing in the course of the narrative that the stereotypes they held are invalid.

For example, the protagonist in Sharon Flake's poem “You Don't Even Know Me” rebukes his teachers, neighbors, and even his friends for making assumptions about his academic ability, his career aspirations, and his behavior based on stereotypes of Black male teens: “You know/ I've been wonder-

ing lately/ Trying to figure out just how it could be/ That you can see me so often/ And don't know a thing about me" (2010, p. 4). In *The Freedom Writers Diary* (The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 1999), one teen writer comes to discover that she cannot be defined by the labels others place on her: "For the first time, I realized that what people say about living in the ghetto and having brown skin doesn't have to apply to me" (p. 203).

Include a Mentor or Role Model Figure

One aspect of enabling texts that is not discussed by Tatum but which we identified in many of the texts we evaluated was the presence of a mentor or role model figure. This character is often, but not always, significantly older than the protagonist and passes along wisdom and advice in the course of the narrative. While the mentor or role model is often an African American male, this is not always the case. In fact, sometimes the role model relationship develops unexpectedly, as in Walter Dean Myers's *Lockdown* (2010), where the mentor role is fulfilled by an elderly White character who at first seems openly hostile toward the protagonist. Nor does the mentor figure have to be physically present in the narrative; in *Jimi and Me* by Jaime Adoff (2005), the main character idolizes Jimi Hendrix, whose song lyrics and life story provide the guidance that the protagonist needs to navigate a difficult family situation.

Conclusion

For Tatum (2009), the ultimate goal of literacy instruction is not simply to improve the reading scores of adolescent African American males, but to empower them to improve their lives. Just changing the texts we use in our literacy instruction alone will not achieve this goal; however, it is an imperative first step in the process. A careful, thoughtful, and informed selection of texts is critical. As Tatum notes, however, the final decision of whether a text is engaging and inspiring will be made by the young men themselves. And the only way we will be able to know their ideas is if we make their "voices and viewpoints part of the equation" (Tatum, 2009, p. 138). In this spirit, we end this article with quotes from three young Black men who participated in a discussion of enabling texts that we facilitated. We believe their comments confirm

Tatum's (2009) assertion that enabling texts provide a forum for young Black males to define self, become resilient, engage others, and build capacity.

I think *Sunrise over Fallujah* [Myers, 2009] is a good book for African American males to read 'cause it's common for us to go to war without noticing really why. A lot of them they don't really join the military unless they think they have nothing . . . or because they think they don't have anything else to do.

This book [*Skeleton Key*, Mowry, 2007] showed how [African American males] are always having to struggle for everything, and we really have to earn everything we get. And it really was a good way of showing how Jarett turned nothing into something. And he was able to do all these positive things in such a negative environment.

[*Bronx Masquerade*, Grimes, 2002] . . . tells us that African American males feel like we do have a future, we just have to invest in it. . . . Me, for example, I don't live in a neighborhood in a community where I have problems like this. I'm sorta one of the luckier males. But these guys have to work hard day in and day out to make something with their life while people around them are constantly telling them they have no future, that they can't do anything with it. So these guys are really brave and courageous for going past what other people think is right in the African American community to make a future for themselves.

Notes

1. Tatum's (2009) definition of enabling text is broad and includes literary and nonliterary texts, conventional and nonconventional texts, and texts that do not feature African American characters (p. 41). In this article, we only focus on identifying enabling texts that include African American male protagonists.
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