

# Adolescent Males' Valued Texts:

Shaping and Making Their Identities Public

“To describe is to value”

—Patricia F. Carini

**B**y considering what students value and confront outside of the classroom walls, we literacy educators can start to create safe spaces for taking risks. As previous research (Beers, 2003; Clark & Marinak, 2011; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) suggests, there is an imperative for classroom teachers to allow students to self-select texts, for by doing so, student motivation and desire to read increases. In addition, avenues for bringing out-of-school literacies and interests into the classroom are paved. This article seeks to extend this conversation by describing our action research study in which seventh-grade students selected texts and shared how and why they should be valued. What we found is that by allowing students to have choice and control within their reading and to voice the value of both the books and themselves, we had created space in which students were able to construct or alter their identities. To explain how this occurred, we briefly discuss the research literature and give details about the study, after which we share our findings regarding the participants' identities.

Adrienne and Shanetia met while Adrienne was earning her secondary English teaching certification. Shanetia was one of her education professors. Adrienne often spoke of feeling “almost jealous” because her middle and high school experiences did not mirror those of her grade-school days; she retreated from reading after grade school, finding that “school reading” was not enjoyable. She yearned for books and stories that spoke to her, that provided an escape from

her reality, or showcased the contradicting feelings she had during middle and high school. She vowed that when she entered into teaching, her classrooms would provide access to books that went beyond the common study novels that she had read when she was in school. She would do her best not to shy away from books with unhappy endings; instead, she would invite students to read more “melancholy” titles (de la Peña, 2012).

With this pledge, she entered into her classroom with a renewed focus. Young adult literature is so vast and intricate, just like the lives of adolescents today. Therefore, the texts Adrienne introduced and read while as a preservice teacher and now as an inservice teacher mark the continued evolution of her teaching philosophy.

## Brief Review of Literature

We were particularly interested in what the impact of self-selection would be on the adolescent males in Adrienne's class. The research asserts that adolescent males yearn for ownership of their reading selections. A study conducted by Patrick Jones, Maureen L. Hartman, and Patricia Taylor (2006, cited in Jeffery, 2009) found that 43% of the boys don't read or only read what they have to. Therefore, to disrupt these numbers, we set out to increase students' (particularly males') choice and control with the hope that both would raise the “enjoyment of reading and [foster]

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voluntary reading” (Taylor, 2004/2005). Taylor cites Brozo (2010): “Choice and control are two ingredients commonly missing in instruction provided to adolescent boys who are not reading as would be expected

in their grade level and who are disinterested . . . readers” (Taylor, p. 294).

Classroom teachers serve a vital role in supporting students’ self-concept and self-esteem. Therefore, we launched our study with the following premise: students who value books and perceive themselves as compe-

tent readers are more likely to read for purpose and pleasure, as well as improve fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension; therefore, in order to nurture literacy competence and motivation, adolescents should be invited to read and respond to valued texts (Beers, 2003; Clark & Marinak, 2011).

Other studies informed this action research project, too. Asking 55 middle school boys who frequent her school’s library, Charity Cantey found that they want action (Cantey, Bach, & Bickmore, 2009/2010). “[Adventure], suspense, and a touch of mystery” kept these boys active readers (p. 3). Moreover, “kids doing amazing things” generated the boys’ enthusiasm for reading. Dwayne Jeffery (2009) reminds literacy educators that “boys will read if we put the right book in their hands. They need books with male protagonists, honesty, and most of all, books with characters and stories they can relate to.” Boy readers are “discriminating readers” (p. 56). Moreover, research also shows that “out-of-school literacies play a very important role in literacy learning, and teachers can draw on these skills to foster learning in school” (Sipe, 2009, p. 3).

These examples of the research literature serve as the foundation of this action research. Therefore, our guiding question is, “How does allowing students, particularly males, to self-select valued texts support the construction of their identities?”

## **Methodology**

We embarked upon this action research project during Adrienne’s 10-week student teaching placement. The

study took place from February 2011 to May 2011 in a seventh-grade combined advanced and proficient English/language arts class in an urban middle school in central Pennsylvania. This class period lasted 50 minutes and met Monday–Friday. Twenty-five students were enrolled in the class; this article focuses on a representative sample of the males.

The action research project was modeled after the “Text Talk” project that was assigned in the adolescent literature/developmental reading class that Shanetia taught and Adrienne took. In that class, Adrienne and her cohort read and wrote a variety of texts, such as novels, short stories, poetry, informational pieces, plays, art, and music. In addition, the class selected texts to share with one another. For the “Text Talk Tuesday” presentations, students provided bibliographic information, genre, appropriate grade level, a summary of the text, and a brief explanation of why that text should be included in a classroom, school library, or curriculum.

We knew the effect the text talks had on the secondary English preservice teachers, but we wondered what kind of connections and community building would occur in a “real classroom with real students.” Adrienne assigned, assessed, and evaluated the success by implementing a classroom activity called Text Talk Tuesday, otherwise known as T3. In a world wherein life is increasingly difficult and young people are faced with new challenges that are unimaginable to people in their teachers’ generation and older, we were eager to discover more about the students vis-a-vis these Text Talk Tuesdays. For the purposes of this article, we limit our discussion to three males’ reports and presentations.

## **Participants**

Adrienne’s entire class participated in Text Talk Tuesdays. Each Tuesday, a different group of students presented texts of their choosing. Their goal was to pretend they were persuading teachers to include their text in future lessons. Students were informed that many texts would be presented, so they prepared their arguments using persuasion and solid reasoning. They talked about their books in a 5-minute presentation. Of the 25 students enrolled in the class, we are sharing the work of three adolescent males whose parents signed an IRB consent form—Jamal, Charles, and Ethan (pseudonyms)—because they are representative of the males in the class.

Jamal is biracial (Caucasian and African American) and highly capable of producing quality work on assignments, depending on his choice of companions on a given day. Like most adolescents, peer relationships were important. He had a tense relationship with some of his teachers, primarily because he enjoyed the social aspect of school.

Charles is also biracial (Caucasian and African American) and had a difficult time in seventh grade. His mother legally changed his name because of personal family issues that were linked to his birth name. Changing his name devastated his world. Therefore, his acting out in class—calling out, getting out of his seat, and insulting his peers—may have been attributable to this change.

Ethan’s family is from Ecuador, and he is the first to be born in the United States. He is bilingual and has exceptional verbal English skills, but his written English and penmanship were strained. As the first family member born in the United States, Ethan expressed the pressures imposed upon him by both his parents and his culture to succeed. He, too, wanted to be accepted by his classmates, though his small stature made him a social target.

### Data

With each presentation, the students created a handout for Adrienne, which included the following information: title, author, genre, a short summary of the text, a paragraph describing why the text should be included in the classroom, and why the students valued the text. (See Appendix A for the assignment write-up.) The day of their T3 presentation, students submitted a handout and spoke to their peers. While some jumped at the opportunity to present their projects to the class, others were more hesitant due to fear of speaking in front of their peers, so as part of their grade, Adrienne awarded participation points for simply reading the handout aloud. Students were advised that because public speaking is so scary for many, they should treat their peers with the utmost respect. As the presentations progressed, the ease of speaking formally in front of the class increased.

Figure 1 details the selections that the three highlighted males—Jamal, Charles, and Ethan—chose. More in-depth explorations of their texts and presentations follow.

## Appendix A: Text Talk Tuesdays (T3)

February 10, 2011

Each week, a different student will present a “Text Talk” on a text of their choosing. You will select a text that you love or one that has been special to you for any reason. Your goal is to pretend as though you are convincing your teachers to include your text in their future lessons. Many texts will be presented, so you must be persuasive and be sure to include solid reasons to back up why your text should be selected. You will be presenting your text to the class in the form of a 5-minute presentation.

For each presentation, you must also create a handout for the class containing the following information:

- Title
- Author
- Genre
- A short summary of the text
- A paragraph describing why this text should be included in your classroom
- A paragraph explaining why you value this text

The day of your presentation on T3 (Text Talk Tuesday), you will turn in a copy of your handout; these will be used for a special project at the end of the semester.

I will be presenting T3s of my own on the first three Tuesdays of this project. Then, from March 8–29, groups of students will be presenting. Today you will be signing up for a date to present your T3. Shortly after you sign up and know what date you will be presenting, you should get started on finding and reading your text.

You may choose from a variety of types of texts: poem, short story, historical fiction, fantasy, mystery, music, artwork, etc. You may also read a nonfiction work. If you have a question regarding the type of text you are selecting, please ask. And always, enjoy selecting your text!

Student	Type of Text	Genre	Text Title
Jamal B.	Book	Fiction: Realistic	<i>Secrets in the Shadows</i> (The Bluford High Series), Anne Scraff
Charles B.	Book	Fiction: Fantasy	<i>Ark Angel</i> , Anthony Horowitz
Ethan P.	Book	Fiction: Realistic	<i>Bait</i> , Alex Sanchez

Figure 1. Books presented by three male students

## Jamal B.

“Buying presents is not more special than the ones you make.”

—*Jamal*

Jamal’s report pleasantly surprised us and his classmates. His intellectual competence was never in question, but his motivation to complete the work was. Prior to this project, Jamal mentally drifted in and out of class, but his attitude shifted dramatically with the announcement of the T3 projects. His peers noticed and commented on the positive and excited change in demeanor in the class.

Jamal chose *Secrets in the Shadows* (Scruff, 2007). This book is part of The Bluford High series in which:

. . . the main characters all attend a fictional [urban] California Bluford High School, named after the first African-American astronaut Guion “Guy” Bluford. Alternating between male and female protagonists, each book focuses on characters whose parents leave them (and only sometimes return), who face bullies and gunshots, and who experience their first romances. (Cantey, Bach, & Bickmore, 2009/2010, p. 4)

Jamal reported that he had tried to read this book before in school, but had been denied. Previous teachers and librarians had said that it contained too much violence, sex, and other “inappropriate” elements. Not deterred, Jamal returned to this book.

After summarizing the book, Jamal explained why he felt the story should be included in the classroom. He explained, “The story should be in my teacher’s classroom because it teaches that money takes over people’s minds. It shows that a guy is not thinking about other people, but *that* girl!” (Brown, personal communication, March 29, 2011). As we listen to conversations throughout the school, it has become apparent to us that this age group is concerned with pursuing several different types of relationships. Peer relationships are paramount. Jamal reflected upon how selfish someone can be when pursuing a relationship, even to the point of forsaking other important relationships. His insight into how “money takes over people’s minds” is also important in light of students’ intense attention to their peers’ clothing, sneakers, cell phones, and jewelry.

In the third section, which asks why he valued the book, Jamal wrote, “I value this text because it tells me that Raylin is turning into his dad. He is

starting to be a monster” (Brown, personal communication, March 29, 2011). Jamal is being raised by a single mother and has no positive male role model in his life. He responded to the text and its main character because of a personal situation he has endured for years and can relate to (Rosenblatt, 1938).

Jamal continued, “This book also taught me that gifts from the heart have an endless price. Buying presents is not more special than the ones you make” (Brown, personal communication, March 29, 2011). Jamal took this message away from the book when so many other images were present. He found value in a book that was both relevant to his experiences and meaningful to his growth, in that it gave him a deeper moral message that could inspire him to be a better young man.

## Charles B.

“The story almost made me break a sweat reading it!”

—*Charles*

Charles B. chose to read *Ark Angel* (Horowitz, 2006). For him, completing this project in the first place should be celebrated. Charles rarely completed assignments and was in danger of failing the seventh grade. He completed the assignment fully and earned an A. The summary Charles completed was detailed, and during his time of presenting to his peers, he was engaging and passionate. His level of enthusiasm inspired his peers, and they were eager to ask him questions about the story. His classmates even wrote the title of the book down so they could read it on their own. When Charles saw the “A” he had earned, he was ecstatic and expressed that he will work to raise his grades.

Charles believed *Ark Angel* should be included in the classroom because “[it] proves that children or teens can care a lot about the earth and that children are able to control their actions and help the environment” (Baldwin, personal communication, March 22, 2011). He also became energized about the environment. He concluded by saying, “The story is also very interesting to read. It is very intense. It contains a lot of action and keeps you at the edge of your seat. Most teenage kids my age are interested in action” (Baldwin, personal communication, March 22, 2011). His understanding of what teenagers want is on target.

Charles listed his reason for valuing the text: “It

was written by my favorite author. The story almost made me break a sweat reading it! Intense, mysteries, and action books are my favorite kind of texts” (Baldwin, personal communication, March 22, 2011).

### Ethan P.

“[If] you open up, you will feel better. Talking to someone is just one way to feel better.”

—Ethan

When first assigned the project, Ethan chose a fantasy book. He expressed some excitement for the project, but like many other students, he needed some encouragement to get started. Ethan had been struggling to finish the fantasy book, and when his interest waned, he needed help to find something more interesting. He sought assistance right around the time Adrienne found out through other students that he was cutting himself. All the signs supported that he was cutting: he wore long sleeves even on warm days, he was withdrawn at times, and he expressed through various mediums that he was depressed<sup>1</sup>. One evening, Adrienne scanned her home library and located *Bait* (2009) by Alex Sanchez. She thought it would interest him without being overbearing. The book confronts the sensitive issue of a teenage boy cutting himself to release his anger about the years of sexual abuse he had endured. While the reason for Ethan’s cutting was uncertain, Adrienne thought that maybe something in the book would reach a part of him that she couldn’t.

Discreetly giving Ethan the book, she did not say what it was about. Adrienne simply told him that he may enjoy reading it. Throughout the day, she saw him reading it—in the halls, in the cafeteria, and in her class. He read this book everywhere. The following morning, Ethan asked if he could change his book selection to *Bait*.

When it came time for Ethan to present his T3 report, we were not sure what to expect. His written report disclosed a personal desire to open up about his experiences. Ethan wrote that he valued the text because “[if] you open up, you will feel better. Talking to someone is just one way to feel better” (Perez,

1. School protocol was followed. Adrienne and her mentor teacher sent Ethan to the nurse so she could examine his cuts and file a report. He reported to the nurse and school psychologist regularly.

personal communication, March 22, 2011). He read his written report aloud to the class, but it was the discussion that followed that indicated just how much this text really did speak to him.

Ethan went “off-script” and began to tell the class why the main character in the book, Diego, would cut himself. He confessed that the character was sexually abused as a young boy and even started to question his own sexuality. At this point, different boys in the class started to mutter the words “fag,” “gay,” and other derogatory terms, but Ethan held fast to tell Diego’s story. He said to the class that even though the boy questioned his own sexuality, it was because of the abuse he endured. Diego had no outlet to deal with what happened to him or the anger that resulted, so instead, he resorted to cutting himself and fighting. The

passion and conviction with which Ethan spoke to defend this fictitious character indicated that he could empathize and even identify with him.

After Ethan began to defend Diego, students started asking more questions. They wanted to know who abused Diego, how old he was, and what his anger caused him to do. Ethan coolly answered the questions and advocated for this misunderstood character, forgetting for a moment that he was a shy and reserved seventh grader. Regardless of all the names his peers called Diego, Ethan boldly defended his fictitious friend. At the end of Ethan’s report, at least 10 students, some of whom were the bullies, asked to borrow the book. Some of these students dealt with similar issues in their past as well. *Bait* was the most shared book of the T3 project; it became the impetus for many boys to become public readers and, most important, change their behavior toward their peers (Skillen & Clark, 2011).

### Identity Construction

We set out to discover how these three young males utilized self-selected texts to construct their identities. The T3 project underscored the need for a classroom

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space that would provide “a forum upon which to build cosmopolitan worldviews and identities” (Bean & Moni, 2003). These novels reinforced topics that are at the forefront of students’ minds: peer relationships, money, abuse, and their world. After the presentations, Adrienne met with students individually to discuss their choices.

Jamal’s T3 illustrated that he questions the rules of relationships. He highlighted that the reason that the main character, Roylin, turned to lying and stealing and, therefore, sacrificed relationships with his friends was that Roylin “. . . is not thinking about

other people, but *that* girl” (Brown, personal communication, March 29, 2011). Jamal realized that pursuing dangerous behavior, even if he wants to purchase a gift for his dream girl, is not right. He became a close and critical reader, expounding upon why the protagonist behaved as he did, thus helping Jamal to reconstruct the manner in which he himself behaved. In other words, through his selection, *Secrets in the Shadows* (Scraff, 2007), he was

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able to “imaginatively rehearse” a particular path—in this case, stealing his friend’s wallet. Jamal made the deliberate decision not to follow Roylin’s path. Even more crucial is what he learned about healthy relationships and his place in them.

Charles, too, used a book, *Ark Angel* (Horowitz, 2006), to expose his goals to his peers. The entire class learned of his commitment to the environment. Charles’s revelations about his desire to protect the environment demonstrated his interest and possible future career. Prior to the T3 project, Charles’s out-of-school literacy choices were neither validated nor affirmed. However, when he made public his interests, his feeling of “personal rejection” was diminished (Lenters, 2006). The affirmation he received from the entire classroom community edified his self-concept and self-esteem.

Ethan was able to use *Bait*’s Diego (Sanchez, 2009) to reveal himself to his classmates. Speaking through a veil of anonymity (Clark & Marinak, 2010),

he exposed and delved into issues surrounding victimization. *Bait* not only mirrors adolescent lives, it also explores lessons that affect adolescent lives. Ethan advocated for those who had been victimized. His sense of agency, as spoken on behalf of the protagonist Diego, so moved his classmates that their behavior toward those who had traditionally been marginalized changed. On another level, Ethan became a public reader! His confidence escalated, and he was embraced by his peers.

The three, brave young males shared during both the T3 project and debriefing interviews that the power to choose their own books was important. Their comments that this project sparked a renewed interest in school and connected them to their classmates was remarkable. Beyond forging new bonds with their peers, we observed shifts in their demeanor and behavior in class.

These boys were not public readers. In other words, the reading they did prior to this project was relegated to stories in the literature anthology or common study novels. Since other types of novels were not welcomed into the classroom, these young males, especially Jamal, believed that their reading preferences did not matter. Publicly acknowledging and celebrating the books that provided a lens into their lives created a safe space and provided room to construct personal identities.

Prior to this action research project, we had many hopes and preconceptions about what would occur. We had questions about how Adrienne’s students, in particular the males, would respond, and we wondered if they would embrace different types of text, such as poetry, music, or art. What actually happened during this research project went beyond our own expectations. We were surprised that all of the boys, including the three we highlighted in this article, chose novels, many of which were challenging and multi-layered. They reached for books that were not easy. What this shows is that when given the chance, students will strive beyond the simple; they want to stretch their thinking, and they want to be validated when they do.

Many students chose some intense and heartfelt books that contained themes some might consider mature for their young ages. These themes ranged from the environment to sexual abuse and self-mutilation. Questions of romantic relationships arose. This variety

illustrates the topics that concern them as they shape their own identities in an increasingly complex world.

## Final Thoughts

This action research served two purposes. First, it showed the importance of student choice in the classroom. Adrienne, who is currently a beginning teacher, experienced firsthand what happens when motivation, choice, and control intersect. The students in her class relished the opportunity to unpack and bring new books, short stories, and poems to their classmates. Before this project, they had never been asked to do such things. Her teaching will forever be changed. Second, as a teacher educator, Shanetia's pedagogical choices have been reaffirmed: continue to enable individuality within the classroom and remain steadfast in introducing quality books, stories, poems, and other types of texts into the teacher education program's coursework. The chasm between the teacher education program and secondary classrooms is lessening. The experiences in the adolescent literature class within the teacher education program clearly influenced Adrienne's student teaching and full-time classroom teaching.

Much scholarship has focused on the importance of enabling students to have choice in the classroom. Scholars such as Tatum (2005); Fletcher (2006); Beers, Probst, and Reif (2007); and Smith and Wilhem (2002) have researched the impact of adolescent males having choice and control in the classroom with regards to reading, and the profound effect it will have on them long-term. Despite all of this knowledge, the call *still* needs to be heard. What is deemed as common knowledge, that students need choice, is not consistent and pervasive in classrooms today. Students are still not being invited to share valued texts with their peers in the classroom, and there is still a pressing need for teachers to "hold the space" for students, especially young males, to voice their reading desires—not only to advance the love of reading, but also to foster a sense of classroom community. As we discovered, the textual choices are oftentimes more complex and complicated than what is being offered in school.

The T3 project helped to further solidify the classroom community. The students highlighted in this article showed both who they are as readers and who

they are as people. The active construction of new identities as *public* readers was profound. Reading in spaces inside and outside of the classroom was new for these students. That

in and of itself demonstrates the importance of reiterating the call to allow students to make connections to texts in meaningful ways, in spite of additional pressures due to the various standardized tests. The T3 project reaches beyond the typical book report,

wherein students just give a summary. Ironically, the end result of urging students to open up and articulate why the texts should be valued actually makes the case for them to be valued. It's an ideal symmetry.

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## Call for Student Reviews for *Voices from the Middle*

*Voices from the Middle* is NCTE's journal for the Middle Level Section. The Student to Student feature runs in each of the year's four issues and contains five short book reviews *written by students* who have enjoyed a book and want to recommend it to others. This has been a popular and motivating element of *VM* since its inception.

Wendy Ranck-Buhr, principal at the San Diego Cooperative Charter School, serves as department editor for this feature. She invites teachers from across the nation and the world to submit their students' book reviews. We know from teacher feedback that these reviews motivate students to write with care, help readers pick out new books, and generally support our students as readers and writers.

Please send Student to Student submissions as Word files to [vmstudenttostudent@gmail.com](mailto:vmstudenttostudent@gmail.com). Keep in mind that reviews should be 200 words (including bibliographic information—title, author, publisher, year of publication, number of pages, non-discounted price, and 13-digit ISBN number), the student's grade and school must be identified, and the book reviewed should not have appeared in *VM* within the last three years. (For an easy reference, check the annual indexes appearing in every May issue, both print and online.) You will be required to secure a parent's signature on a consent-to-publish form and fax or email that form to Dr. Ranck-Buhr.

We hope you will encourage your students to write reviews for consideration. Publication has made a difference in so many student lives!

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