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The authors explore strength-based learning projects that value the lived realities and literacies of adolescent scholars of color, setting the stage for the powerful relationships through which meaningful learning happens.

As readers of *English Journal* are well aware, our educational and other social systems are far from equitable. Susan L. Groenke et al. remind us in the January 2015 issue that these matters reach far beyond our classrooms; indeed, "certain social constructs of adolescence/ts get certain adolescents killed" (35). They write, "when all teenagers get to be teenagers, when we are willing to get to know Michael and Trayvon and Jordan in life, not just in death—maybe then we will know youth of color in all their humanity, as 'substance,' not 'shadows'" (39).[1] At the heart of the work that we educators can do to be in solidarity with youth of color (and indeed, all youth) are the relationships that we form with them. As such, we use "adolescent scholars of color" to highlight Groenke et al.'s notion of "substance" and to affirm the literacies of these youth.

Despite their centrality to our work, relationships are often overlooked as the contemporary reform movement frames education as cognitive research-driven "best practices" in content and skill delivery. A focus on relationships is of particular importance when teaching and learning with adolescent scholars of color, who are all-too-often minoritized through deficit orientations.[2] As former English teachers in schools serving scholars of color and current teacher educators, we want to share concrete examples of learning projects that embrace strength-based models of literacy education with and for youth of color.

In one of the two projects that we present here, an adolescent scholar was asked by one of his teachers why many of his peers were not engaging with school. James, who was 20 years old at the time of the study and is African American, responded: "they live where they live, and school is not where they live," a reply that can be read in two ways. In the first reading, which is perhaps the dominant perspective in educational research and practice, these young people and their community do not value school and choose to focus on other endeavors. This is the deficit orientation, which positions these young people and their community as lacking or unable to succeed in and through education. In the second reading, it is the processes and practices of formal education that do not engage the lived realities or experiences of marginalized young people. This reading, which we espouse, puts the onus on us as literacy educators to create learning projects that "live" in the multiple spaces where minoritized young people live, and to make connections between these lived realities and other literacies.

Building relationships with any learner or community of learners requires that we educators reflect on our own social locations. Understanding the cultural narratives one is operating within is integral to creating relationships that move away from framings that position some learners as lacking in life experience or funds of knowledge. One of us, Noah, is a middle-class White male with associated privileges that distance his experiences and understandings from those of many young scholars of color. As a teacher of minoritized learners, it was (and is) important to engage in dialogue and learn from students' experiences and ways of seeing

the world. The other of us, Erica, is a middle-class Black female with life experiences parallel to and different from the Black female youth participants in her research project. Erica saw her role as that of "muse," a term Amy M. Sullivan used to frame the relationship between an adult female mentor and her adolescent female mentees as that of a listener, advocate, consoler, teacher, and believer. For Erica, it was essential to engage in literacy projects alongside the girls to better understand herself and where she stood in relation to them. Through relationships, educators of all life experiences can take steps toward understanding and transforming social spaces, working to interrupt harmful practices and processes. Acknowledging differences in power and privilege, we worked with each group of adolescent scholars to create academic spaces where they could challenge dominant perceptions of who they are and can become through analysis of educational experiences and aspirations.

The Possibilities of Positive and Generative Relationships

That poor relationships further diminish educational opportunity is in little doubt. Structural inequities lead to wide variations in opportunity, but research demonstrates that social capital—resources and support present in social networks that can be "activated" through relationships like those between students and teachers—can support greater possibilities for marginalized learners (Stanton-Salazar). Overwhelmingly, the reform discussion has focused on recitations of statistics that spotlight educational and life trajectory outcome gaps for scholars of color, an approach that does nothing to identify effective practices or meaningful supports (Haddix). What, then, are effective practices and meaningful projects? Researchers have documented the importance of fostering learning projects that are tailored to students' interests, life experiences, and understandings (Kirkland). Further, school-based collaboration and care shift the focus from perceived deficits to strength-oriented learning spaces and positive outcomes (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson).

Our projects reinforce the importance of generative relationships, ones that can engender possibilities for meaningful literacy exchanges. Further, our projects point to the negative impact poor relationships can have for learners. The adolescent scholars we collaborated with focused on the role relationships played in their educational access and success. In Noah's project with young men of color in majority-minority secondary-level "second-chance" programs in a large city in the Northeast, many young men immediately pointed to poor relationships with teachers when explaining why they left (or were pushed out of) their first or second high schools. One young man, Terrell, who is African American, recalled a teacher telling his fourth-grade class: "Some of y'all in this classroom will not amount to anything. Some of y'all will end up in jail, or even—even worse." While saying this, Terrell recalled that the teacher "looked directly at [him]." Because of this incident, he shared that "ever since that day, I wanted . . . to leave . . . I wanted to get out of that school." Terrell expressed a desire to prove to that teacher he was not a failure, a desire that has stayed with him throughout the intervening years.

Erica's project highlights the fact that peer relationships also strongly influence academic participation and success. Like the male youth in Noah's project, the young Black females in Erica's project faced hardships in academic spaces. Fifteen-year-old Jordan described her middle school experience as such: "Sixth grade was like my worse year. Seventh grade I went into isolation and only hung out with the Black kids. It was only me and two other girls at a table at lunch . . . we would just associate with ourselves so much that we wouldn't talk to anybody else. Outside of school I would only hang out with my friends, India and Imani—wouldn't talk to anybody White." Jordan continued by describing her first year of high school as a period of "trying to figure out who I was around a bunch of White people." Speaking to the challenges of negotiating prevalent discourses about adolescent scholars of color, Jordan struggled to find her identity as a young Black woman in these majority-White environments. It is precisely because of these sorts of prevailing negative notions about young men and women of color (e.g., as uncouth, loose, loud, aggressive) that we developed an interest in working with adolescent scholars of color in single-sex spaces—to explore

and document how these scholars resist and negotiate these gendered and raced notions of who they are or can become. Our projects demonstrate the importance of relationships, both with mentors and peers, in supporting youth of color whether in primarily White institutions (PWIs) or majority-minority communities.

The point here is not to blame teachers for social inequities. There are structural constraints that limit the ability of educators to connect with students, among them class size, inequitable resources, and a curriculum increasingly dedicated to preparation for participation in testing regimes (Rose). While we need to engage in activism to challenge these constraints, there are immediate steps that we can take to position our adolescent scholars for excellence. Our argument is that these stories evidence what we see as a deficit-oriented positioning of learners—an orientation that severely constrains the possibility of positive and generative relationships. We offer examples of meaningful projects that both engender and build on positive relationships that can and should ground the teaching/learning process.

They described growing up in their largely segregated, under-resourced urban communities of color as "the trap," a system pushing or pulling their lives in a particular direction, one not of their choosing.

Adolescent Male Scholars of Color as Co-researchers and Advocates

Noah worked with a group of twelve African American and Caribbean Latino adolescent male scholars (ages 17–21) on a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR[3]) project. In the project that began as a school-day-based men's group, the adolescent scholars wrote journals; created collages based on their educational pasts, presents, and futures; and created a video detailing their life experiences outside of school. The overall theme of the project focused on how formal education can better connect with the lived realities and aspirations of minoritized scholars. The adolescent scholars committed to twice-weekly after-school meetings at a nearby university, meeting 32 times over the five months of the project. These young men created a series of recommendations for educators of adolescent male scholars of color and presented their experiences and approaches at a local conference of urban educators, a national conference, and, most significantly, in a professional development session with teachers from their own High School Equivalency program. In these spaces, the young men explained why it was important for educators to (1) take the time to know them as individuals, (2) create learning activities that value their knowledge and lived realities, and (3) build on their interests while connecting to their goals.

Early on in our work, the young men developed a specialized vocabulary to talk about their lived realities. They described growing up in their largely segregated, under-resourced urban communities of color as "the trap," a system pushing or pulling their lives in a particular direction, one not of their choosing. They identified the end result of this trap to be the prison system, minimum wage jobs, or illegal street activities. The trap, according to the young men, works through "vibrations" that can shape a person's mindset, essentially ensnaring them. Given these vibrations, the young men described people having to "have a creative mind to get them outside the trap." One of the young men, Dante, who was 19 years old at the time of the study and identifies as African American, pointed out that many people "don't have—or [were] never introduced to . . . tools to fight off these vibrations." Examples of these tools included photography for James and athletics for Dante, endeavors about which these young men were passionate and deeply engaged. These tools, which the young men termed "callings," could allow minoritized adolescents facing the trap to find new life possibilities.

The young men had positive relationships with teachers to report, ones that made a powerful difference in their learning and wider relationship with formal learning. Dante spoke of Mr. M., "one of the greatest teachers [he] ever had." Mr. M., who taught history, always had "something interesting on the board, something new, something we had never known before," but, more importantly to Dante, "outside of the lessons . . . he would give us some crazy information about, you know, a country he had been to . . . you know, the feel of education." Despite the fact that Dante described Mr. M. as having little in common with him in terms of life

experience and positionality, Mr. M. took the time to connect with Dante and engaged teaching/learning in authentic ways. At the core of the young men's work was a desire for dialogue and meaningful relationships.

Adolescent Female Scholars of Color as Autoethnographers

For two years, Erica met with a group of Black adolescent females (ages 14–21) in a reserved section of a library that is part of a network of libraries located within a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. During these weekly 90-minute sessions, Erica facilitated dialogue around issues of race/ism, colorism (the belief that skin color determines one's beauty/character or lack thereof; see also Russell, Wilson, and Hall), school, literacy, friendship, intimacy, media (mis)representations, and misogyny. Yet it was through autoethnography,[4] a frequently used methodological approach to examining the self, that the most immediate concerns were addressed: Erica, for instance, used autoethnography to retrace the various trials and triumphs of her youth and to mark her later journey toward self-acceptance; 21-year-old Venetia used autoethnography to rewrite her future as a teenage mother; 18-year-old Nikayla used autoethnography to recount significant aspects of her life's journey as a high school push-out and rape survivor; 15-year-old Jordan used autoethnography to explore her feelings toward her hair; and 15-year-old Chyvae used autoethnography to probe the meaning of her mother's absence in her life. Erica and the girls used multiple data including personal photographs, artwork, graphics, journals, collages, and YouTube. In digital spaces such as Prezi and Pinterest, Erica and the girls used these texts to disrupt public ideologies of young Black women and girls as loose, loud, and/or aggressive. Engaging in such literacy practices resulted in critical self-awareness and in the construction of a much broader narrative of what it means to be adolescent, female, and Black.

During this time, Erica witnessed Nikayla's sophisticated use of pictures, quotes, taglines, personal artwork, and YouTube clips within Pinterest. Rather than simply be labeled "push-out" (or "drop-out"), Nikayla used these tools to craft her self-image. Nikayla titled her Pinterest board "my journey (finding myself)," introducing herself by writing "society would say Nikayla sneaky under handed a hoe she not going to be nothing . . . she's not in school . . . always around males . . . she's a bad person to be around." Nikayla began here by naming how others had chosen to define her. Yet in observing the rest of Nikayla's Pinterest board, it is interesting to note that she pinned a variety of inspirational images (e.g., a quotation by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a photograph of Grammy and Oscar winner Jennifer Hudson, a picture of a woman diving into water) along with her own affirming commentary (e.g., "my Black is beautiful strong independent women looking away from my pass & seeing straight to my future," "making progress . . . me in the future on the road to success jumping into the world of fame"), which seemed to be her deliberate attempt to create a self-defined standpoint that was in contrast to how society and those closest to her might have characterized her (e.g., as deviant, hypersexual, uneducated).

In Erica's follow-up interview with Nikayla, she asked, "What did you get out of being a part of my research study?," to which Nikayla replied: "Because you helped me a lot about opening up and speaking about myself. . . . And the writing we did was interesting. And the questions you asked us about our goals and stuff like that. Took me around a different environment than I grew up around." For Nikayla, Erica became more than just a researcher, but also a teacher, coach, guide, and muse. This relationship also allowed Nikayla to gain further insight into her past, her present, and her future and to become more aware of who/where she wanted to be.

Relationships Fostered through These Projects

Each of these projects speaks to the urgency of cultivating authentic relationships with adolescents of color and recognizing them as powerful scholars. Given that the lives of adolescents of color are continually framed through discourses of tragedy, lewdness, failure, and violence (Noguera; Winn), teachers and researchers must then consider: What more can be learned about and from the lives and

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literacies of adolescent scholars of color? What pedagogies can be used to affirm their lives and literacies? Further, how else can we engage in praxis for and with them?

In each of these projects, the adolescent scholars are recognized as experts of their own lives who have much to contribute to discussions on how we educators can best support them. In this way, these projects resist deficit models in name and practice: the projects begin with the learners' strengths and funds of knowledge. Further, literacy is understood not as a decontextualized skill but as a range of communicative practices that begin with our selves and exist in and through our relationships with other people and the world.

These scholars created digital public spaces, wrote in multiple genres, read and discussed challenging texts, produced multimedia, and presented at conferences. These literacy practices engage the Common Core and beyond, yet begin through relationships.

Relationships in and of themselves are not all that is necessary: through these relationships, meaningful teaching and learning have to occur. In our projects, adolescent scholars use and further their reading, writing, public speaking, and critiquing skills as they engage issues that emerge from their own concerns. These scholars created digital public spaces, wrote in multiple genres, read and discussed challenging texts, produced multimedia, and presented at conferences. These literacy practices engage the Common Core and beyond, yet begin through relationships. While we do this work, though, it is vital that we never "confuse hugs for calculus" (Fine) (or, in the case of ELA teachers, confuse hugs for a brilliant essay or analysis); relationships serve as a means to affirm students and as a starting point for rigorous and relevant academic labor.

School Can Go Where Our Learners Live

If "school is not where they live," as James put it when asked why some of his peers were not engaged in formal education, the impetus is on us as educators to connect our work with the life experiences and funds of knowledge of our learners. As these projects show, inviting adolescent scholars to be collaborative researchers, autoethnographers, and self-advocates can provide a means of forging strong

relationships grounded in knowledge produced by scholars whose voices and experiences are all-too-often marginalized or ignored. For instance, what kinds of essential questions might lend themselves to autoethnographic research (or self-study) in which adolescents of color can use interviews, research journals, or artifacts from home to examine their lives? Or, how might a collaborative research project bridge pressing out-of-school concerns with academic literacies?

While we chose to work with single-sex groups to engage and challenge the gendered discourses of adolescent scholars of color, and to extend projects that began in the classroom to after-school spaces, these strength-based approaches can and should be brought to classroom-based teaching and learning. The goal is not to "fix" those labeled "struggling," "disruptive," or "at risk" but to shift the contexts that position learners in these ways, including our own practices and relationships with the adolescents with whom we teach and learn. Our work within formal education cannot continue wider social processes that minoritize learners based on race and gender, among other group-based identities. Though not a panacea, strong relationships are a necessary opening to the meaningful teaching/learning that can support marginalized youth. Through the relationships created through strength-based approaches, school *can* go where adolescent scholars of color live.

Notes

1. Since these words were published, media reports tell us that 1,083 people have been killed by police officers between January 1, 2015, and November 30, 2015, among them a disproportionate number who are people of color. This number comes from the "Killed by Police 2015" website and is an estimate based on media reports due to the fact that it is not mandatory for law enforcement agencies to keep these statistics. These include the killings of Walter Scott, Freddie Grey, and many others who have not gripped the nation's attention.

2. We say "minoritized" as opposed to "minorities" to call attention to the social processes that privilege some people at the expense of others. In other words, no one is born a "minority"; social arrangements position and produce majority and minority communities. As educators, our goal is to work for equity and access in ways that interrupt these negative processes.

3. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) "provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems" (Cammarota and Fine). Due to differences in power and positionality, Noah worked at times to distance himself from the collaborative work that emerged, attempting to make himself more of an ally and not the center of the work.

4. Autoethnography is a reflexive process that encourages thinking around larger issues of self and as it relates to the positioning of self within society (Ellis and Bochner). Unlike autobiography, autoethnography follows typical research methodology that includes the collection (via field notes, interviews, artifacts, etc.) and analysis of data through a particular methodological lens.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

"Explore Your Reading Self" invites teens and parents to reflect on their reading histories. With an eye toward understanding their feelings about reading, teens will recall their earliest reading experiences up to the most recent ones. Using an online tool, teens will create a graphic map of books they've read and rate each reading experience. Was it positive or negative? After thinking, talking, drawing, and writing about reading, your teen will reread a favorite book and choose a fun activity related to it. http://bit.ly/1gV8Hc8

The student writer

tries to tell me
it is all right to be grandiose—
that that is the quality he was hoping for
all along. He believes whatever he's got is enough,
and maybe it is. He's accomplished this much
in whatever version of his life he is so busily writing.
He sees himself somewhere in the future
at the last remaining bookstore in town, signing autographs.
Who am I to tell him something different?
He argues with me at my desk, stealing the time
I could be spending doing anything else.
Do what you want I tell him, losing what is left
of my resolve.

—Diane Riley

Diane Riley, a member of NCTE since 2009, is in her 20th year as an English teacher at O'Fallon Township High School in O'Fallon, Illinois, and loves finding ways to reach high school students through poetry. She views cultivating relationships as the number-one perk of teaching. She can be reached at rileyd@oths.us.

Fellowship Opportunity

Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color (CNV) invites fellowship applications for its 2016–2018 cohort. This NCTE Research Foundation–supported program provides early career scholars of color with support, mentoring, and networking opportunities. In the program, doctoral candidates and doctoral graduates who have completed their dissertations up to two years prior to application cultivate their ability to draw from their own cultural/linguistic perspectives as they conceptualize, plan, conduct, and write their research. Please read CNV's program guidelines for more information; they're at www.ncte.org/research-foundation/cnv/guidelines. Completed applications are due **March 15, 2016.**