

Orienting African American Male Adolescents toward Meaningful Literacy Exchanges with Texts

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from a sociohistorical understanding of the roles of texts for African American males and data from a recent survey of teens' meaningful experiences with texts, the author provides a general understanding of the roles of texts among African American males and African American male adolescents' meaningful relationships with texts. These understandings are necessary for re-orienting these young males toward meaningful literacy exchanges with fiction and nonfiction texts with socioemotional and cognitive orientations. Implications for shaping more responsive textual pathways for struggling and non-struggling readers are offered.

The associations we make—between our potentials, our bodies, and our characters—with what we read are particularly sharp for African Americans.

(Holloway, 2006, p. 28)

For more than four centuries, the academic, economic, social, and political advancement of African American males in the United States has been a direct function of their literacy attainments (Anderson, 1988; Belt-Beyan, 2004; Fisher, 2009). The historical record is laden with African Americans taking up residence in books to mark the stages in their lives (Belt-Beyan, 2004; Holloway, 2006). African American males, in particular, were forced to author their masculine identities to protest against attempts to destroy their manhood and humanity in a society with complicated race and class strictures. Becoming literate males and possessing valuable skills were central to their self-sufficiency and independence (Hine & Jenkins, 1999). Essentially, literacy functioned as one of the tools of protection for African American males.

Currently, the proliferation of assessment data indicates that a high percentage of African American male adolescents are not attaining the literacy protection required to shape positive academic, economic, and social consequences over their life course. There is a persistence of difference in school success as measured by reading outcomes (Snow, Porsche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). These persistent differences are more prevalent for young males attending schools in low resource, high-risk urban communities with a complex layering of issues such as racial isolation, exposure to incidences of violence, and few social supports (Hall, Cassidy, & Stevenson, 2008). Growing spatial concentration of poverty and the expansion of geographically rooted income inequalities are

yielding social and economic deterioration, making it increasingly more difficult for young African American males to achieve impressive academic and societal outcomes (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004). Many of these young males continue to encounter poor educational practices in schools that manifest into economic disparities and social indignities.

While more scholars have given attention to the challenges facing African American male adolescents and called for comprehensive solutions that involve mentoring, positive racial socialization, socioemotional and mental health welfare, promising instructional practices, policy shifts, and community-based solutions (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, & Chen, 2012; Hall et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007), little attention has been given to the roles of traditional print texts in the lives of African American male adolescents. For example, in the recent publication, *A Call for Change: Providing Solutions for Black Male Achievement* (Council of Great City Schools, 2012), 3% of the 170 recommended solutions, excluding the one chapter dedicated to literacy, focused on reading while 0% focused on the roles of texts in their lives. This glaring omission continues to occur across studies and policy reports focused on the educational advancement of African American males although reading outcomes and limited experiences with texts across all disciplines are significant contributors to most of their academic difficulties or challenges.

Recent scholarship focused on African American males' literacy development has given more attention to the types and range of literacies (e.g., critical, hip-hop, contested) with the aim to offer conceptualizations of *what counts as literacy* among African American males and why these literacies need to be honored (Kirkland, 2009, 2013; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Morrell, 2004, 2008). Still, the pathways for engaging African American males with texts in schools in ways they find meaningful and in ways that yield academic success and positive life outcomes are unclear. This warrants serious attention because meaningful relationships with texts contribute to intrinsic motivation and prosocial goals, both of which are positively correlated with increased engagement with texts and higher reading achievement (Guthrie, Alao, & Rinehart, 1997; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2013; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Meaningful experiences with texts also serve as a protective factor against vulnerable-producing incidents (Tatum, 2008a; Tatum & Fisher, 2008).

The goals of this paper are twofold: 1) to provide a general understanding of the roles of texts among African American males, and 2) to discuss the significance of re-orienting African

Table 1. Items of Meaningfulness Students Responded to in the Survey Study

I read a text that . . .

1. Had a lasting effect on me
2. Made me want to do something for someone else
3. I continued to think about after I finished it
4. Started me on a new path
5. I reread several times on my own
6. Stayed in my mind
7. I felt a connection with
8. Shaped who I am
9. Changed the way I behaved toward other people
10. Opened my mind
11. I chose to talk about it with others
12. I recommended to others
13. Made me feel connected to something important
14. Made me think about moments in my life
15. That was important to me
16. Caused me to think the way I think today
17. Changed me

American male adolescents toward meaningful literacy exchanges with texts in schools where they spend a large proportion of their academic lives. Each should be useful for shaping more responsive textual pathways for struggling and non-struggling readers. I will draw from a sociohistorical understanding of the roles of texts for African American males and a recent survey of teens and texts in which African American males identified texts that were meaningful to them. Seventeen items of meaningfulness were identified for the survey study (Tatum & Karabatsos, 2013).

The focus on texts and meaningful literacy exchanges with print is grounded in the work of other researchers who have explored how gender and social class influence students' discussion of texts (Clark, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Sprague & Keeling, 2007) and the potential of texts to be transformative for students (Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Mosenthal, 1998). Additionally, a focus on meaningful literacy exchanges brings an additive perspective to the extant literature that offers insufficient guidance for selecting and mediating texts with African American male adolescents. Also, it is difficult to find literature that highlights the limitations of the meaningful literacy exchanges associated with the texts African American male adolescents are assigned to read in schools.

MEANINGFUL LITERACY EXCHANGES WITH PRINT FROM A SOCIOHISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A meaningful literacy exchange (MLE) is defined here as reading or encountering print texts that initiate or shape decisions significant to one's wellbeing. Meaningful literacy exchanges with print can shape opportunities for individuals to contribute to matters larger than themselves (Bronk & Finch, 2010). I provide an illustrative historical example published in the *Philadelphia Liberator* in January 1817 that recounts an incident of Black people coming together to vote on a proposal by the newly created American

Colonization Society that free Blacks in the United States should be resettled in Africa:

It was, some observers remarked, a debate on two equally powerful yet antithetical dreams within the Black American soul. James Forten, a prominent African American male leader in Philadelphia's growing Black community, spoke during the debate on resettlement. He stood before the audience and cited his "A Series of Letters by a Man of Color" composed four years earlier in which he opposed the legislature's attempt to force all Blacks in the city to register. Forten reminded the audience of how central Negroes have been to every dimension of life in the colonies, and how Crispus Attucks was the first to die opposing tyranny. (Johnson & Smith, 1998, pp. 281–282)

In this example, text focused on a decision by the legislature (i.e., "A Series of Letters by a Man of Color") was placed at the center of the discussion to connect people to issues larger than a single individual. The meaningful literacy exchange was community-centric and people-centric (Tatum, 2013). It was aimed at improving the status of a people (i.e., Black Americans) in a society in which racial disparities needed to be remedied.

COUNTERING AHISTORICAL AND APOLITICAL APPROACHES TO TEXT SELECTION

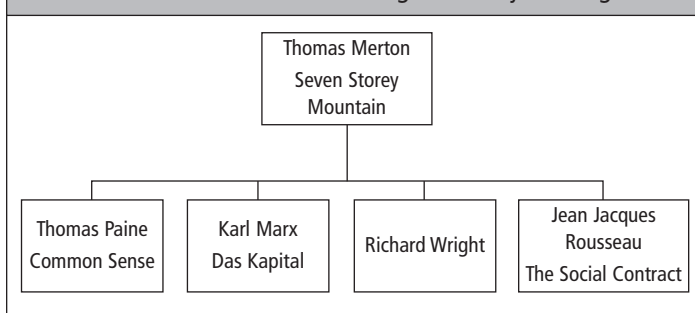
During the current era of literacy reforms, commercial reading materials are sought and privileged over teachers' autonomous decision-making in many schools. Many teachers have to comply with policy and administrators' authorizations and mandates that have not been proven to advance meaningful relationships with texts among African American male adolescents. Teachers' expertise is needed to evaluate the selection of texts for particular instructional purposes and particular children (Hiebert & Sailors, 2009).

Concerned about the ahistorical, apolitical, and asexual approaches of text selections for African American male adolescents (i.e., those that ignore historical precedence and the power of texts in the lives of African American males), I conducted a textual analysis of 94 autobiographical and biographical accounts by or about African Americans that spanned two hundred years to identify: 1) texts central to their overall development, 2) how they engaged with the texts, and 3) the roles texts played in their lives. I constructed textual lineage charts as a data-gathering tool (Tatum, 2007; 2009).

The constructed textual lineage chart of Eldridge Cleaver in the figure above resulted from reading his series of essays in the book, *Soul on Ice* (Cleaver, 1968). Cleaver recounts his experience reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Merton, 1948). He offered:

I was tortured by that book because Merton's suffering, in his quest for God, seemed all in vain to me. . . . I could not keep [Merton] out of my room. He shouldered his way through the door. Welcome, Brother Merton. I gave him a bear hug. (p. 54)

Figure 1. Textual Lineage Chart of Authors Identified by Eldridge Cleaver That Stimulated Meaningful Literacy Exchanges



The author, Thomas Merton, became Eldridge Cleaver's *Brother Author*, and a passage from *The Seven Storey Mountain* became Cleaver's guidepost. He offered:

For a while, whenever I felt myself softening, relaxing, I had only to read the passage to become once more a rigid flame of indignation. It had precisely the same effect on me that Elijah Muhammad's writings used to have, or the words of Malcolm X, or the words of the spokesman of the oppressed in any land. I vibrate sympathetically to protest any tyranny.

I then coded the words of each African American male archetype as reflected in the autobiographical and biographical accounts to answer two questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the texts African American males find meaningful to their development?
2. Is there an alignment with the characteristics of texts being used with today's African American male adolescents?

My analysis led me to conclude that the texts found in the autobiographical and biographical accounts were characteristically *enabling* texts. Enabling texts led African American boys and men to *become*, *act*, or *think* differently as a result of what they read (e.g., to become once more a rigid flame of indignation). Another example with an adolescent is the impact the *Columbian Orator* (Blight, 1988) had on thirteen-year-old Frederick Douglass. Young Douglass wrote, "[The book] opened my eyes . . . the readings of this document *enable me* [italics added] to utter my thoughts and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery" (Douglass, 1845/1997, p. 54). This text shaped the rest of Douglass' life, becoming part of his textual lineage (Tatum, 2009).

MEANINGFUL TEXTS AND ADOLESCENTS

Researchers have examined adolescents' interests and engagement with texts (Ivey & Broadus, 2004; Moje, Dillion, & O'Brien, 2000; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Other researchers have called for an examination of what adolescents value in texts and the impact texts have on students' lives (Brozo, 2010; Glenn, 2012; Ivey, 2008; Moje et al., 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). For example, Glenn (2012), who defined texts as signifying practices and discourses available in local and larger discourse communities that help adolescents make sense of their experiences and offer

opportunities for identity development, offered the term *touchstone* texts as texts in adolescents' lives that are woven into their school and social behavior in a process of ongoing revision.

Meaningful experiences with texts cause adolescents to feel differently about themselves, affect their views of themselves and others, or move them to some action in their current time and space because of ethnic, gender, personal, or adolescent connections with the texts (Tatum, 2008a). It is clear from the recent research that texts play an important role in adolescents' lives as the texts provide benefits as adolescents navigate through their social worlds and as the texts lead to explicit and tacit enactments (Glenn, 2012; Tatum, 2008b).

MEANINGFUL LITERACY EXCHANGES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS

I have collected and analyzed more than 3000 textual lineages from middle and high school students since 2007. I have also observed and characterized the types of textual experiences African American males were having in more than twenty-five middle and high schools I visited over a period of five years while providing professional development support. Many of the texts were characteristically "*disabling*." These texts reinforced students' perceptions as struggling readers and delegitimized reading as the lever for human development (Tatum, 2005). Many of the texts selected for struggling readers were chosen because of their readability and interest levels (i.e., high interest and low readability).

For this paper, I bring attention to texts identified by African American males ($n = 73$) and the comments they offered about the meanings the texts held for them. The students received the following directions:

Please tell us about your experiences reading texts that were meaningful to you. These texts can include books, poems, essays, blogs, scriptures, short stories, Internet sites or other texts you may have read as required readings inside of school or texts that you selected to read on your own.

The data are from a larger survey study completed in 2012 involving nine schools and 1,194 adolescent respondents across multiple ethnicities (Tatum & Karabatsos, 2013). The responses below are from a group of African American males from one of the nine schools.

The number of texts identified by African American male adolescents as meaningful had a mean of $\mu = 2.56$. However, a closer analysis when coding for *enabling* characteristics of the texts yielded a significantly lower mean of $\mu = .84$ for this group. For example, all five texts identified by student #8 had enabling characteristics. This student started to *think* differently as a result of the meaningful literacy exchanges (e.g., "*It made me more encouraged*"), whereas the enabling characteristics of texts for students #1 are absent. He offered that the "*story was great*" and he found [one of the texts] interesting and the other text "*was a book he always wanted to read*." While the texts may have led to an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 2005), for

Table 2. Texts African American Found Meaningful with Explanation of Meaningfulness

Student	Text	Explanation of Meaningfulness	Age
1	Right Behind You	Story was great. I can somewhat relate to it.	17
	Dante's Inferno	It a book that I've always wanted to read. Interesting.	
2	The Bible	It gave us good advice on how to live a better life.	15
	Black Boy	It helped me get a better understanding of African American culture.	
	Night	Helped me to really see what people in the Holocaust went through	
3	Romeo & Juliet	It wasn't	-
	Dante's Inferno	That was awesome	
	To Kill a Mockingbird	Sucked	
	Iliad	Nice	
	Kite Runner	Gay	
4	I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness, to the Blind Side, and Beyond	Gained knowledge on his life long achievements and goals	17
5	Firefighter Rescue and Survival	I'm in a fire science class and I like reading this stuff.	17
	Joker One	I like the USMC.	
	We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young	I like reading about Vietnam and its battles.	
	Report from Engine W. 82	I like the fire service.	
	Firefighters: Their Stories in Their Own Words	Same thing, I like the fire service.	
6	Black Boy	I myself been through a lot of things that he did . . . being black.	17
7	We Beat the Street	It don't matter where you came from you can still be something.	14
	The Battle Jericho	You don't have to put up with anything to be in a group and that sometimes it better to stick up for what is right.	
	Middle Passage	There are so many ways to be bond to slavery but its how you escape is what matter.	
*8	We Beat the Street	It made me more encouraged that I could also do something good	
	The Battle of Jericho	It made me not believe in hazing.	
	The Bible	Made me understand how to live the right way	
	The Creed	The way I am supposed to be about school	
	Diary of Anne Frank	It made me feel more grateful about what I have.	
9	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	14
*10	The Battle of Jericho	I learned that you should never do stupid things to join a group.	14
	We Beat the Street	I know that I need to become successful in life	
	Dr. Martin Luther King Documentary	We as black people need to come together as one and stop this black on black crime.	
*11	We Beat the Street	It was meaningful to me because it tell about how you can change up your whole life	15
	The Battle of Jericho	The Battle of Jericho taught me that you can loss things try to be in a club.	
*12	We Beat the Street	It showed how you can go from nothing to something as long as you try.	15
	Never goin' back: Winning the weight-loss battle for good	Because you have challenges you will succeed in life.	
	A Series of Unfortunate Events	Without a mother or father you will have work hard to support you brother and sisters	
	Bill Cosby Autobiography	You don't know what people go through by the way that they act.	
	7 Habits of a Highly Effective Teen: The Ultimate Teenage Success Guide	It shows way to get out of peer pressure and in to positive behavior.	
13	The Battle of Jericho	It impact on me because we go through the same stuff and school	15
	The Freedom Writers Diary	Kids writing to change their self.	

Table 2. Texts African American Found Meaningful with Explanation of Meaningfulness (continued)

Student	Text	Explanation of Meaningfulness	Age
14	The Battle of Jericho	It shows how peer pressure is a factor in everyday	14
	The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe	This novel takes you to another place.	
	Taking Sides	All of your life you have to make decisions.	
	Monster	<i>None</i>	
	We Beat the Street	<i>None</i>	
*15	Lord of the Flies	It was just really good and I love it.	19
	Antigone	It showed me not to be afraid of anything.	
	Frankenstein	It was powerful and extremely in depth	
	To Kill a Mockingbird	It opened my eyes to prejudice	
*16	Speak	It opened my eyes to teen rape.	14
	The Glass Castle	It has a strong message to careless parents	
17	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	15
*18	Michael Jordan	It made me feel like I was him sort of.	15
	Allen Iverson	It teaches me to be a leader on and off the court	
	Arthur's First Christmas	It made me feel like that was my family when we were together.	
	Language's of the Heart	It talks about how family comes together and works as one.	
	Manic Magee	It showed me how blessed I am to have people that care about me.	
*19	Coaching with Chris Paul	It helped me become a better basketball player	14
20	We Beat the Street	It showed that if you want to become something you can do it.	14
	The Pact	It showed that if you want to become something you can do it.	
	Monster	It show people struggle and conquer	
	Maniac McGee	It show people struggle and conquer	
	The Game	Very good	
*21	We Beat the Street	It helps me try to find a role model.	15
	The Battle of Jericho	I don't know.	
	Middle Passage	These were just good books.	
22	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	15
*23	The Freedom Writers Diary	This book helped me realize that my life is nothing compared to the kids in the book so I can't complain.	14
	The Battle of Jericho	This book helped shape up my self-esteem	
	We Beat the Street	This helped me realize I can do anything if I put my mind to it.	
24	Poems	I write poetry and to read other types of poems is great.	16
	Books	I like reading a various types of books to broaden my imagination.	
*25	The Bible	Help me with keys to life	14
26	Do I Love Her or Do I Love the Sex?	It was meaningful to me because	-
	<i>Illegible</i>	<i>Illegible</i>	
	<i>Illegible</i>	<i>Illegible</i>	
	Let a Girl Remain a Virgin	<i>Illegible</i>	

Table 2. Texts African American Found Meaningful with Explanation of Meaningfulness (continued)

Student	Text	Explanation of Meaningfulness	Age
*27	The Giver	It talked about how things were reversed.	–
	Langston Hughes	He made you think you can do anything.	
	Malcolm X	Made you wanna be a Muslim. Got the message out and made you think.	
	Money Hungry	Made you think about not taking money for granted	
	Doctors	They make you want to know about everything in your body.	
28	Bible	Taught me right from wrong	15
	Urban Dictionary	Taught me more slang	
	Malcolm X	How black people upcoming	
29	The End	A kind smoking a lot and almost end his life	15
	The Girl Who Didn't Know What to Do	A young girl having sex for money	
	A Group of Fun	A group of guys who believed in their self.	
	She Own	A mother who always passed life with flying colors	
	The Game	A team that was bad at caring for each other.	
30	The Battle of Jericho	<i>None</i>	14
	We Beat the Street	<i>None</i>	
	The Freedom Writers Diary	<i>None</i>	
31	Romeo & Juliet	It doesn't mean anything to me.	15
32	My Bloody Life	I can relate.	16
	Wake	Not real and it kept my attention	
*33	Harry Potter	It kept me interested.	15
	We Beat the Street	It taught me how to carry myself.	
	The Life of TD	I love the game of basketball and he's my favorite player.	
	The Battle of Jericho	It taught me about brotherhood.	
	The Freedom Writers Diary	It taught me how to express myself when writing.	
34	Friday Night Lights	It was a sports book and I could actually relate	15
*35	Into the Wild	Because it's full of adventures, stones, it's inspiring and a book that we came as close as we probably ever can to another person's wait and soul.	16
	Big Fish	It's an adventurous story and it made me think.	
36	Adventures of Huckleberry Finn	School	16
	Assassination Vacation	School	
37	The Freedom Writers Diary	Had to read it for class.	18
38	Of Mice and Men	It was a good book and was a good read.	16
39	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	15
40	Blogs	It was helpful.	17
*41	Different Essays in Academic Writing	It helped me know how to correct my essay.	18
	Speak	<i>None</i>	
	Room	<i>None</i>	
42	Friday Night Lights	Because I like football and I learned the back story of the movie	17
	Of Mice and Men	It was a good play/movie.	

Table 2. Texts African American Found Meaningful with Explanation of Meaningfulness (continued)

Student	Text	Explanation of Meaningfulness	Age
*43	Black Boy	Not that I enjoyed reading it, but it gave lots of history and motivated me to work hard	16
	The Scarlet Ibis	It shows you should not take people for granted.	
	Of Beetles & Angels	It shows how other people appreciate America but Americans don't.	
	5 People You Meet in Heaven	It teaches you life lessons.	
44	Friday Night Lights	I learned to understand about dependency.	16
	Raisin in the Sun	How to beat odds	
	Of Mice and Men	I learned how much people affect others.	
45	<i>None</i>	<i>None</i>	16
46	Brick	Cause I was a drug dealer too	16
*47	Macbeth	It showed me the meaning of power corrupting people.	
	Candide	Gave me experience of dark humor	
	Kendrick Lamar Bio	Gave me a better understanding of my favorite artist	
	Tupac Poetry	Helped me become a better poet	
48	Black Boy	It was history.	
49	Black Sox	I had to read it to get a grade.	
50	Black Boy	It gave me insight into how things were back then.	
	Pierce the Veil "Caraphernelia"	<i>None</i>	
	Bring me the Horizon	<i>None</i>	
	Mayday Parade – The Silence	<i>None</i>	
	I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings	<i>None</i>	
51	Tears of a Tiger	The main character's friend died in a car accident. I thought it was something someone could relate to	15
*52	Monster	It let me know where I could be with no education.	15
	The Bronx Masquerade	It let me know expressing myself is good	
	Dracula	It was worded well	
	What a Wonderful World	It talked about my average life	
	Animal Farm	It explained humanity.	
*53	We Beat the Street	It showed me that with dedication and support I could be successful.	15
	Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff	The book was about teens and their troubles as well as how they stuck together.	
	Batman	It is my favorite cartoon show.	
	Slam	It spoke of real life situation and I could really relate.	
	The Battle of Jericho	<i>None</i>	
54	The Battle of Jericho	It had a touching story and it exposed a real serious situation.	15
	FreeRice.com	It helped unfortunate children get fed.	
	Mr. Dong's Speech	It was inspirational.	
	We Beat the Street	I could relate to it.	
	The Freedom Writers Diary	It was a touching story	

Table 2. Texts African American Found Meaningful with Explanation of Meaningfulness (continued)

Student	Text	Explanation of Meaningfulness	Age
55	We Beat the Street	It informed me on how a black young man could be successful	14
56	MySpace	Had lots of friends to talk to	14
	Facebook	Has fun games	
	Monster	Tells you that you don't wan to spend your life in jail	
	The Battle of Jericho	Told you the right and wrong things to do	
	Twitter	Has many famous people	
*57	The Middle Passage Era	It showed and told me about the events throughout the time	14
	We Beat the Street	It made me believe in brother and promise	
*58	We Beat the Street	It showed me how we should turn around and help others succeed	15
	Mis-Education of the Negro	It tells flaws of Negroes and how we have been brainwashed. Also how to fix it.	
	Middle Passage	It shows the mindset of a free Negro and how they survived	
*59	The Battle of Jericho	I could relate to Jericho's life	15
	Handbook for Boys	The story talked about a young man that improved his life.	
	The Freedom Writers Diary	Inspired me to do good in school.	
	We Beat the Street	Let it be know that there's a lot of negativity in the streets	
	Diary of Anne Frank	The book informed me of a good person that was at the wrong place	
*60	Greek Mythology	I was fascinated about how the gods were good and bad. I am a Christian man and it somehow relates to it.	14
	Derrion Albert	He was killed right by my aunt's house and I knew him.	
	The Battle of Jericho	This story relates to me because of all the peer pressure.	
	Monster	My older cousin was in a trial and the odds were against him and he won.	
	The Dying Boxer	This relates to me because a man got caught and nearly died.	
	Slam	It made me become a better basketball player and made me want to be like him	
61	Black's Law Dictionary	It helped me learn about law.	14
	The Battle of Jericho	I was amazed of how if someone else thinks for you things go very wrong.	
	Batman	<i>None</i>	
	The Giver	<i>None</i>	
	Bronx Masquerade	<i>None</i>	
	We Beat the Street	<i>None</i>	
*62	The 50th Law	It showed me to take control and stand up.	15
63	Malcolm X	I really looked up to him and it showed his struggle	14
*64	We Beat the Street	It helped me see that I was not the only young man going through something	15
*65	We Beat the Street	Now I know us (African Americans) can do anything.	16
*66	"Where I Come" poem	I have to create and use my mind	14
67	The Battle of Jericho	It was about trust and loyalty. I see things happen like what happened in the story a lot.	14
	The Freedom Writers Diary	I like the way a group of students and new teacher turned around to become great writers.	

Table 2. Texts African American Found Meaningful with Explanation of Meaningfulness (continued)

Student	Text	Explanation of Meaningfulness	Age
68	We Beat the Street	I felt the same about the book.	15
*69	The Battle of Jericho	It told me don't do things you don't want to do or things don't feel safe	14
	We Beat the Street	It told me that I can be anything I want to be if I try to be it.	
70	Hatchet	It reached out to my interest in the wilderness	15
	The Battle of Jericho	It showed me how real life is. Tell about how people need to make good decisions.	
	Maximum Ride	Adventurous person	
	Jim Jones Movie	It tell you how people can hurt if you don't keep your guard up	
71	The Battle of Jericho	It was meaningful to me because it gave me a lesson about joining gangs.	16
	Malcolm X	It was meaningful to me because it's really saying that words can take you far in life.	
72	We Beat the Street	Even though they did wrong they were still able to be what they wanted.	15
*73	A Cool Moonlight	It was a good book about a little girl who she could do anything she wants.	
	The Battle of Jericho	It is meaningful to me because don't do things that can harm you.	

* Identified at least one text with enabling characteristics

student #1, the texts did not lead to a meaningful literacy exchange as indicated by his responses.

It is clear from the pattern of students' responses that many of the enabling characteristics of the texts were "soft knowledge" as compared to "hard knowledge." Soft knowledge is more focused on students' socioemotional orientations and dispositions vs. hard knowledge focused on students' cognitive orientations and dispositions anchored in academic domains (e.g., "I learned three new facts about the effects of hunger and started an anti-hunger website to build awareness based on my ongoing research").

A text selection default continues to underserve African American male adolescents, particularly the ones attending urban schools. Teachers, namely reading and English teachers, identify texts that they believe these young males will relate to and texts

focused on shaping their socioemotional dispositions. This default is a result of misinterpretations and misapplications of the influential literature on culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995) that has led many teachers to select fictional texts with Black male protagonists or texts about "beating the odds" for African American male adolescents. Texts with discussions of gangs, drugs, violence, and peer pressure are also high on the default list. It is possible for teachers to identify texts that African American males feel a connection with without connecting these young males to something important beyond the texts (Tatum, in press). African American adolescent males identified very few nonfiction texts from their content area classrooms as meaningful. Two texts that figured prominently among the African American males in this group were *We Beat the Street* (Davis, Jenkins, & Hunt,

Table 3. Example of Soft and Hard Enabling Characteristics

"Soft" Enabling Characteristics	"Hard" Enabling Characteristics
It made me more encouraged that I could also do something good	Helped me become a better poet.
Made me understand how to live the right way	It helped me learn about law.
It was meaningful to me because it tell about how you can change up your whole life	It helped me know how to correct my essay.
It helps me try to find a role model	
It told me that I can be anything I want to be if I try to be it	
Inspired me to do good in school	
It showed me to take control and stand up	
It let me know where I could be with no education	
It showed how you can go from nothing to something as long as you try	
It showed me that with dedication and support I could be successful	
It showed me not to be afraid of anything	

Table 4. The Battle of Jericho and We Beat the Street

The Battle of Jericho	Explanation of Meaningfulness
Soft	It made me not believe in hazing.
Soft	I learned that you should never do stupid things to join a group.
Soft	You don't have to put up with anything to be in a group and that sometimes it better to stick up for what is right.
Soft	The Battle of Jericho taught me that you can lose things trying to be in a club.
Soft	It had an impact on me because we go through the same stuff and school.
Soft	It shows how peer pressure is a factor in everyday life.
Soft	This book helped shape up my self-esteem.
Soft	It taught me about brotherhood.
	It had a touching story and it exposed a real serious situation.
Soft	Told you the right and wrong things to do.
Soft	I could relate to Jericho's life.
Soft	This story relates to me because of all the peer pressure.
Soft	I was amazed of how if someone else thinks for you things go very wrong.
Soft	It was about trust and loyalty. I see things happen like what happened in the story a lot.
Soft	It told me don't do things you don't want to do or things that don't feel safe.
Soft	It showed me how real life is.
Soft	Tell about how people need to make good decisions.
Soft	It was meaningful to me because it gave me a lesson about joining gangs.
We Beat the Street	Meaningfulness
Soft	It don't matter where you came from you can still be something.
Soft	It made me more encouraged that I could also do something good.
Soft	I know that I need to become successful in life.
Soft	It was meaningful to me because it tells about how you can change up your whole life.
Soft	It showed how you can go from nothing to something as long as you try.
Soft	It showed that if you want to become something you can do it.
Soft	It helps me try to find a role model.
Soft	This helped me realize I can do anything if I put my mind to it.
Soft	It taught me how to carry myself.
Soft	It showed me that with dedication and support I could be successful.
	I could relate to it.
Soft	It informed me on how a black young man could be successful
Soft	It made me believe in brother and promise
Soft	It showed me how we should turn around and help others succeed
Soft	Let it be known that there's a lot of negativity in the streets
Soft	It helped me see that I was not the only young man going through something
Soft	Now I know us (African Americans) can do anything.
	I felt the same about the book.
Soft	It told me that I can be anything I want to be if I try to be it.
Soft	Even though they did wrong they were still able to be what they wanted.

2005) and *The Battle of Jericho* (Draper, 2003); 10.6% and 9.5% of the young males identified a meaningful literacy exchange with these texts. It is clear, however, that both texts had “soft” enabling characteristics.

DISCUSSION

The data presented in this paper indicate that too few of the African American male adolescents from one of the schools in an ongoing study had meaningful literacy exchanges with print. A distinction between high- and low-academically performing African American male adolescents was not made because effective text mediations for both groups require the same conceptual grounding viewed in light of their gender, cultural, and situational identities (Tatum, 2008c, 2013; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). When meaningful literacy exchanges were present, many of the enabling characteristics were soft knowledge that contributed to a shift in students’ socioemotional dispositions. Arguably, an oversaturation of these texts, although selected with good intentions, forecloses or competes for in-school opportunities for meaningful literacy exchanges with texts with greater interdisciplinary depth across disciplines. This is clearly a limitation of text selection for these young males that is misaligned with the historical record that indicates African American males read the best texts available, both fiction and nonfiction, across a wide range of disciplines (Tatum, 2013).

It is not clear if “soft knowledge” emerging from the texts functions as a precursor to latent academic and social success for low- and high-academically performing African American males. While I do not underscore the importance of socioemotional orientations (e.g., hope, encouragement, and self-esteem) emerging from the texts, I assert that it is valuable to have soft knowledge orientations augmented by hard knowledge orientations that can potentially shape students’ pursuits and expansion of disciplinary knowledge and career choices. Relying on soft knowledge orientations to increase African American males’ opportunities to fully integrate into the economy and move beyond some of the constraints of urban communities is a conceptually thin approach to their overall socioemotional and cognitive development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SHAPING TEXTUAL PATHWAYS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ADOLESCENTS

Teachers of African American male adolescents in urban communities should conceptualize texts as tools of protection to compete with some of the vulnerable-producing incidents occurring in these environments. Although more research is needed, the data presented in this paper indicate that their relationships with texts are being unintentionally severed or diminished. There is a need to shape textual pathways that restore their belief in texts as tools of human progress and development. Increasing meaningful literacy exchanges with print texts in schools creates more potential for texts to serve as tools of protection and nurture students’ resilience. I offer the following recommendations:

1. Become familiar with and honor the historical precedence of the roles of texts among African American males.
2. Establish a litmus test for text selection for low- and high-academically performing African American male adolescents. This might involve asking the following questions: 1) Out of all of the texts in the world, why do I want to use this text with my students? 2) What are the social and academic benefits that students can accrue from these texts? 3) How might these texts translate into students’ actions?
3. Establish a balance between “soft knowledge” and “hard knowledge” text selections to advance these young males’ socioemotional and academic development across a wide range of disciplines.
4. Develop a culture of meaningful literacy exchanges focused on building students’ capacity to become, think, and act differently as a result of their reading.
5. Periodically assess students’ meaningful literacy exchanges with print to inform text selections.
6. Use a wide range of texts (e.g., essay, short stories, speeches, books, poems) across disciplines and avoid the *text selection default* for African American male adolescents.
7. Become voracious readers of historical and contemporary texts with the aim to share a wider array of texts with students to ensure they have increased exposure to the best texts available.
8. Develop expertise for teaching reading and mediating texts so that the expertise benefits struggling and non-struggling readers.

Teachers’ understanding of the roles of texts for African American males and dispositions toward texts and their students are as important as the instruction. I am reminded of an eighth-grade student who once asked me, “*Why do you care so much that we read so much?*” My response—“*I want you to live and live the life you deserve.*” This was the young male’s first time hearing that reading is equated with living. This young male began to see texts in a different way as instructional practices and text selections were aimed toward building his textual lineage. It is this re-orientation toward meaningful literacy exchanges that has the potential to shape positive life outcome trajectories for African American male adolescents, particularly the ones trying to navigate urban communities.

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