

# Adolescents as Readers of Social Studies: Examining the Relationship between Youth's Everyday and Social Studies Literacies and Learning

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## Abstract

*In this paper, we examine the relationship between student engagement and social studies literacy, exploring the possible connections between students' reading interests and practices and social studies learning. With a sample of 802 secondary students from five schools in one urban community, we use complementary methods to explore survey and interview data. Descriptive analysis of survey data indicated that study participants often perceived social studies education in school as boring and irrelevant. Nevertheless, qualitative analysis of interview data from a subsample revealed that many young people describe using texts to explore dimensions of their identities as well as themes of struggle and conflict. We use these findings to illuminate connections between youths' concerns and interests and the enduring problems taken up by the social sciences, arguing that attention to these connections has the potential to engage students and develop their thinking and literacy practices in the social studies.*

**Keywords:** social studies education, adolescent literacy, student engagement, content area literacy, motivation

I think they need to come up with better assignments, assignments to keep us more awake, more interested, y'know what I mean? 'Cause reading a book and doing questions, is all...like, 'why I gotta do this again?', y'know? If they were just more interesting, more into what we're used to doing on an everyday basis, I bet you we would learn a lot more than the curriculum we got now.

These words, spoken by a high school student during an interview about his social studies<sup>2</sup> classes, underscore the disconnect this 17-year-old saw between what he was learning in school and what he was "used to doing on an everyday basis." In this paper, we draw from his words to examine the relationship between student engagement and

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this study, "social studies" refers to the content area classes labeled with this term in the participating schools; as is common throughout the United States, these schools offer United States history, world history, civics/government, and economics as their core "social studies" classes. The social studies then represent the K-12 representation of school-based social science learning.

social studies literacy, exploring possible connections between students' reading interests and practices and social studies learning.

Specifically, we examine the relationships between youth's attitudes towards social studies education and their interests outside of school, particularly with respect to out-of-school reading. Through complementary analysis of survey and interview data, we examine the interests and literacy practices of a predominantly Latino/a sample of urban adolescents around social issues, both in and out of school, with an eye towards discovering what we can learn about the types of texts and activities with texts young people find engaging. This student sample tended to see less utility and personal connection to their school-based social studies learning, which was often represented as remembering names, dates, and other facts, even as they engaged in exploring what were essentially social science questions on their own. Thus we argue that attention to these questions re-positions students as active and empowered participants in their own education and, if engaged by educators, might shift social studies learning towards deeper processes of inquiry. Moreover, as researchers, we challenge deficit models of urban youth, particularly youth of color, as disengaged from reading and learning and suggest instead that their schooling may be missing opportunities and openings for engagement.

We argue that insight into the texts and topics that capture the attention of young people can inform the development of social studies curricula, materials, and pedagogy, not by seeking to make social studies concepts and texts "relevant" to youth but by using what we know about young people's interests to make clear the relevance of the social studies to the everyday. In addition, we look beyond simple calls for instructional "relevance" that often suggest ways to *hook* young people into interesting issues but fail to dig deeper into a careful study of social, historical, economic, and philosophical concepts. Instead, we use our findings about youths' interests, identities, and literacy practices to illuminate connections that can be made between their concerns and interests and the enduring problems or questions taken up by the social sciences. Thus, in our findings and conclusions, we discuss areas of student interest and inquiry that connect to dominant concepts, texts, and literacy practices demanded in the social studies classroom, positing that all students deserve education that challenges them, includes them, and also develops their thinking and literate practice.

### **Rationale**

In 2006, only 32% of 12th graders assessed in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam scored proficient or advanced in civics (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007) and only 14% scored at the proficient or advanced level in history (Lee & Weiss, 2007). In 2010, the percentage of 12th graders at or above proficiency in civics on the NAEP actually went down to 24% (National Center for Education Studies, 2011a), while in history there was no significant change in performance for 12th graders. Moreover, many young people at the secondary level, particularly those in urban schools, have difficulty judging the quality of the information they encounter in historical texts (Wineburg, 2005). Many young people view history texts as voices of authority and accept their conclusions without question, yet they also find the texts disconnected from their lives (Bain, 2006). These findings hold across ethnic groups. However, the achievement data also show that despite generally low scores on the United States

History NAEP, White students had on average scores that were 27 points higher than Black students and 20 points higher than Latino students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b), suggesting that social studies learning is more problematic for youth of color in the U.S.

A plausible explanation for the lack of social studies achievement among young people is the lack of connection students feel to the content and practices of social studies; research on task values and interest has shown that youth tend to achieve greater academic success and reading proficiency when they value the topics being studied (Alexander, Kulikowich, & Jetton, 1994; Durik, Vida, & Eccles, 2005; Tobias, 1994). Ironically, studies of adolescent literacy practices outside of school demonstrate that young people are interested in a variety of social issues (Collatos, Morrell, Nuno, & Lara, 2004; Moje, 1999; Morrell, 2004). Moreover, many researchers and educators have demonstrated success in engaging young people in learning about history, politics, culture, and other areas of the social studies (Bain, 2005; Beck, McKeown, & Worthy, 1995; Jewett, 2007; Pescatore, 2007), findings that indicate that students are not inherently disinterested in social studies issues. These studies showed that student engagement in and motivation for social studies learning were linked to connecting students to the voices and practices of historians and other social scientists, positioning students as investigators of social science questions and connecting what appeared to be abstract social-science concepts to the concepts of students' lives. These engaging practices were key to generating both greater motivation to learn social studies and, likely as the result of greater motivation, higher achievement in the subject. By giving voice to students' interests and concerns with respect to social studies concepts and education in this study, we hope to inform ongoing conversations about improving instruction and achievement in this important academic domain.

Education that views students as capable of generating questions worth investigating and that further takes up study and analysis of these questions opens the door to deeper critical thinking and learning by students. This type of schooling, in which students are positioned as capable participants in their own learning, is more common in schools in affluent communities and has generally been denied to students in more marginalized communities, particularly communities of color (Anyon, 1981; Delpit, 1995; Oakes, 2005). Yet all students deserve rigorous, challenging schooling in which real-world concerns that have an impact on young people are taken up and studied in the academic disciplines. In addition, incorporating problems and questions that relate to students' own struggles and identities can help shift social studies instruction away from a "banking" approach to education (Freire, 1990, p. 58) in which students are positioned as passive recipients of transmitted information. Instead, they can move toward "problem-posing education" in which "students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (Freire, 1990, pp. 68-69). Focusing learning around problems in this fashion also lends itself to the inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices and can help teachers move closer to the types of reading and writing practices now being required in most states by the Common Core State Standards for literacy in the content areas.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives**

A sociocultural perspective frames our approach to this study of literacy practices, learning, and schooling. Vygotsky (1975) argued that learning was rooted in the dialectical relationship between cognition and social and cultural contexts. In this study, we address adolescent engagement in learning and literacy practices both in and out of school, arguing that any compartmentalization of school and out-of-school learning in research runs the risk of setting up a false binary. Young people bring what they learn outside of school into the classroom; their notions of history, for example, may be shaped by their family narratives (Seixas, 1993) or by popular media, such as Disney movies like *Pocahontas* (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001). Similarly, what they learn in school may be used to understand the larger world. Thus the consideration of both contexts and their intersections (or lack thereof) is important for understanding the complexities of schooling and learning.

In addition, how young people see themselves and how others see them play a critical role in their literate practice (McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje & Luke, 2009). We work from the perspective that identities are not stable states but are rather enactments “of self, made within particular activities and relationships that occur within particular spaces at particular points in time” and are always dependent on and mediated by relations of power and histories of participation (Moje, 2004, p. 16). In other words, we conceive of identities in terms of *positions* that people take up or assign to one another in their interactions. These positions of identity thus have an impact on how young people perceive and take up different literacy practices, both in and out of school, and they may be associated with literacy practices that can be taken up by educators and leveraged in the classroom. However, when racial and ethnic identities are not taken up in explicit ways in their academic experiences, young people may perceive a disconnect between their learning opportunities inside and outside of school (Lee, 2007).

### **Students' Interactions with Social Studies Instruction and Learning**

This study is also grounded in a sociocultural theory of the contexts that surround adolescent literacy and learning about social issues. One crucial and obvious component of this context is schooling itself. Previous research examining people's attitudes towards social studies, in particular with respect to history as it is presented in school, does not present a promising picture. Studies of attitudes towards school-based history learning have found that both adults and school-age youth often describe social studies as boring or irrelevant (Bass & Rosenzweig, 1999; Stodolsky, Salk, & Glaessner, 1991).

Although such studies demonstrate patterns of negative attitudes towards social studies education, they do not reveal much about how young people regard the content they encounter in these classes nor do they address how racial and ethnic identities might position youth in particular ways in classroom interactions. Epstein (2000), however, carried out research in a racially mixed urban community, comparing the perceptions of Black and White students regarding historical figures and events across grades and racial groups. Almarza (2001) explored similar questions with Latino students. Both researchers found that the youth of color in their studies felt disconnected from the history they studied in school as compared to White students. Their family and community narratives of history had more authority than the historical accounts they encountered in school.

Furthermore, students of color in these studies did not seem to see themselves and their community represented in the academic version of United States history and thus often felt disconnected from the content presented in school. This lack of connection is likely to reduce the motivation to learn, which in turn is likely to reduce achievement (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) add an important, moral dynamic to this argument, arguing that people living in marginalized communities have often internalized the negative stereotypes and narratives put forth by the dominant society to justify ongoing inequality. To address the potential for this type of "self-condemnation" (p. 57), Ladson-Billings and Tate call for the inclusion of instruction and learning that help people "name" their own reality and begin to understand the historical roots of their oppression. We argue that attending to the questions and literacies of young people in these communities can help us move in this direction.

In this context, the consistently low performance in history and civics nationwide does not seem very surprising, nor does the racial achievement disparity between White students and Blacks and Latinos. If scholars are serious about improving both general achievement and educational equity for students of color, then they need to consider how different groups of students are, or are not, connecting to the instruction and texts they encounter in social studies classrooms.

### **Adolescent and Disciplinary Literacy**

The studies cited above provide important background for research related to the social studies, suggesting problems with general student engagement in this content area. Moreover, the work of both Epstein (2000) and Almarza (2001) describe how young people use their own cultural and social lenses to interpret information in these classes. Questions remain, however, about the role of reading and text use in youth's motivation in the learning of social studies. Much of social studies instruction requires the reading and writing of many different kinds of texts (Wineburg & Martin, 2004), suggesting a need for a broader examination of young people's uses of text in and out of school.

In school, as young people move out of the primary grades, their studies become more focused on specific academic domains and they shift to learning how to read and write in these disciplines. However, many young people struggle with the complex literacy tasks required at the secondary level, especially those requiring non-fiction texts, as indicated by everything from national test scores (e.g., Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007) to small-scale qualitative studies (e.g., Hall, 2007). Ironically, as the demand for challenging reading increases, the assistance needed to help students meet these demands typically decreases. One solution to this problem involves explicit and discipline-specific instruction in reading strategies (Conley, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Disciplinary literacy instruction, however, is more than simply teaching discipline-specific reading and writing practices. Disciplinary literacy instruction needs to be rooted in the problems of the discipline and structured so that students use texts and literacy practices as tools to explore disciplinary problems (Bain, 2006; Moje, 2007; Stockdill, 2011). In this way, students can be positioned as apprentices of disciplinary learning, thinking, and literate practice, as opposed to passive consumers of abstract content. For example, instead of using a textbook to learn about the Civil War by memorizing

important terms, names, and dates, students can engage with a wider range of texts to explore how differing ideologies of identity and race played out in the conflict between North and South. By studying problems and questions that they have already identified as interesting and learning how such questions are, in fact, the problems of academic disciplines, young people are more likely to see themselves as part of the social studies (or social sciences) community.

### **Adolescent Literacy and Learning across School and Everyday Contexts**

Moving from learning in history to the broader issue of literacy among young people, policy-oriented reports on adolescent literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999) have reported that several million young people across the country are “struggling readers” and that schools are not doing enough to address this issue. Racial disparities emerge in this context as well, with White students scoring, on average, more than 20 points higher than Black and Latino students on the 12th-grade NAEP reading assessment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). The picture presented thus is one of a national crisis in adolescent reading.

On the other hand, research on adolescent literacy outside of school has demonstrated that so-called struggling readers are highly engaged in a range of sophisticated literacy practices (Alvermann, 2001; Franzak, 2006; Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Leander & Lovvorn, 2006). Moje, Overby, Tsyvaer, and Morris (2008) found that the young people in their study read in conjunction with different social networks that were integrally tied to differing formulations of identity and social capital. The texts with which students engaged also differed widely in topic and difficulty and included a range of websites, personal communications, music lyrics, magazines, and more traditional academic texts such as novels. Students read these texts on their own, with family members, and even in conversation or text exchanges with peers. Many of these students did not self-identify as readers, yet they nonetheless engaged in diverse literacy practices. Much of this work was carried out with youth of color (Alvermann, 2001; Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Moje et al., 2008) and demonstrated how youth from a range of cultural backgrounds called upon knowledge and experiences as learning resources. The status of adolescent literacy is thus complicated. Academic achievement appears to be low, yet at the same time many adolescents positioned in school as struggling readers appear to demonstrate skill, power, and agency in their reading outside of school, thus calling into question the discourse of the struggling reader.

To explore the complexities of these relationships between everyday experience and academic study, it is helpful to return to a sociocultural perspective and the idea that schooling takes place within a broader environment, one that includes out-of-school events in the daily lives of the students. As Vygotsky (1986) argued, people learn in both formal and informal settings, with some concepts developing *spontaneously* through experience and others *scientifically* through instruction. Schooling that recognizes this dynamic can help young people learn to navigate among the various domains of everyday life and the domains of school and other learning contexts. The related concept of “funds of knowledge” put forth by Moll, Armanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) frames this interaction in a similar way. Young people call upon their funds of knowledge, including their non-school networks of knowledge and resources, as they develop new

understandings about the world. Moll et al. (1992) have argued that these funds of knowledge have the potential to help mediate school learning as well, asserting that there are many possible connections between everyday funds of knowledge and academic funds that teachers and curricula can tap into if they are aware of them.

Indeed, how young people see themselves in and interact with their social world outside of school may have great bearing on their approach to reading and learning in school. Moje (2006b) reported that a study of out-of-school reading showed that youths in the sample leaned towards texts where they could identify with the narrative in terms of the age of characters, geography of the setting, or cultural background of the protagonist. In relation to social studies, Seixas (1993) found that six 11th-graders' thinking about the past was shaped primarily by their own personal experiences, their family background, television, and images from popular culture.

It is not surprising that young people first view history through their personal experiences and perspectives. What is surprising is that much of what happens in history classrooms does not seem to take this foreknowledge into account. If youth's school and out-of-school lives are mutually informing and interactive and young people do indeed care about a range of problems potentially related to the same concepts addressed in formal social studies education, then investigation of what young people care about and are interested in can inform social studies education in important ways.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Research Context**

This particular study was carried out as part of a larger investigation of adolescent literacy practices in and out of school, the Adolescent Literacy Development (ALD) project (Principal Investigator Elizabeth Moje). The ALD project explored how characteristics such as race, cultural background, socioeconomic status, gender, and school as well as community contexts mediate youth's literacy practices in ways that influence school achievement and young people's capacities to negotiate complex literacy demands. The four-year study surveyed over 1,000 youths who were middle or high school students in five urban schools across one community in a large Midwestern city. During each of the four years, participants in three target grades<sup>3</sup> took broad literacy surveys and a reading diagnostics, along with written questionnaires with open-ended questions. Survey questions addressed in- and out-of-school literacy practices and values. Youth who spoke Spanish were given the opportunity to take the survey in Spanish or English. Over the four years, the researchers recruited a subsample of over 100 students who had taken the survey to participate in semi-structured and reading-process interviews.

The five schools from which the participants were drawn ranged in size from approximately 280 students to around 1,450 students. They included two high schools and three middle schools, and all of the schools were located in the same community,

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<sup>3</sup> 2007–2008: 9th, 11th, and 12th grades; 2006–2007: 8th, 10th, and 11th; 2005–2006: 7th, 8th, and 10th; 2004–2005: 6th, 7th, and 9th.

which identified as predominantly Latino/a. This community confronted many of the same challenges faced by urban areas across the nation; there were concerns about violence and gangs in the schools, and close to half (46.6%) of the adult residents in the community had not completed high school, a rate double that of the city as a whole. Over 60% of households in the community survived on less than \$35,000 annually, with half of that number earning an average household income of less than \$15,000 per year. In addition, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), more than half of the youth and children under 18 in the city in which the community is located lived in poverty. The community also suffered some of the highest levels of air pollution in the state, along with high rates of childhood asthma and other illnesses related to air pollution (Lam, 2010). Academic achievement, as measured by standardized tests in the community's schools, including the schools in our sample, was well below state averages. However, this community was also the cultural center for Latinos across the whole metropolitan area, and it was home to a viable commercial district, active community-based organizations, and a variety of cultural institutions.

### **Data Collection and Participants**

For this study, we identified the data sources from the ALD project that were available at the time of analysis and most relevant to our questions regarding social studies. We used the broad literacy survey data collected during the second wave of data collection, the 2005–2006 school year, in the analysis reported herein (N=802). These computer surveys were lengthy, so each participant was therefore only asked questions about two of the four core academic domains (n ranges from 350 to 370 for each academic subject matter area, including English, math, science, and social studies). At the end of each computer-based survey, students were also given the open-ended questionnaire, but not all students responded with written answers. For this study, we used the responses from the students who did complete this portion of the survey in this administration but only for three key questions: “What is your favorite class?” (n=720); “What is your least favorite class?” (n=713); and “Do you have a FAVORITE book or BEST book you have ever read? Please tell us about what it is and why it is your favorite!” (n=682). Many students chose not to answer the second part of this question (“why it is your favorite”), and the subsample of students who did provide a complete explanation (n=295) was also identified and used for some of the analyses described below.

In addition, we used data collected from semi-structured interviews carried out during the second and third years, 2005–2006 and 2006–2007, of the ALD study. Researchers carrying out additional ethnographic and observational work at the school sites recruited interview participants. We relied upon students who had already taken the computer survey to volunteer and follow through with their participation in the study, and we made an effort to recruit students who represented the larger population of the community schools. While 60 interviews had been completed for the ALD study when we began this analysis, only 26 of these interviews included questions about social studies. Those questions specific to social studies were added to the interview protocol specifically for this analysis. The subsample of 26 interviews then became the focus for the qualitative analysis of interview data. The table below summarizes the tiered

approach to data collection that allowed us to gather both quantitative and qualitative data in manageable ways.

Table 1  
*Data Sources*

<b>Type of data</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
Survey questions using Likert and frequency scales about out-of-school literacy practices	N=802
Survey questions using Likert and frequency scales about school-based literacy practices in different content area classes	350<n<370
Open-ended survey question about favorite class	n=720
Open-ended survey question about least favorite class	n=713
Open-ended survey question about favorite book	n=682
Open-ended responses with explanations of choice for favorite book	n=295
Semi-structured interviews including social studies questions	n=26

The main survey sample of 802 youths was approximately 56% female, and the large majority of students (72.3%) self-identified as Latino.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-six percent, 211 out of 802, of the participants reported having been born in another country. Of these 211 foreign-born students, 174 were born in Mexico, and 34 were born in other parts of Latin America. Almost 60% of the youths in this sample self-identified as Spanish speaking, and over 48% reported being able to both read and write in Spanish. Around one-fifth of the participants were African-American. Although only proxies for socioeconomic status, student reports of parents' education levels and students' reported free and reduced lunch status indicated that the majority of young people in the sample lived at or below the poverty line. The largest proportion of participants, 63%, came from one school, the large public high school, which had an enrollment of over 1,500 students at the time. In addition, over three-quarters of the students in the study were in the 9th or 10th grade at the time they were surveyed. Just over 20% of the participants were in the 7th grade.

<sup>4</sup> Within the Latino student population, there are multiple cultural and/or national identities: Predominantly Mexican, Mexican-American, and Puerto Rican, as well as Central American and Caribbean nationalities. This paper is focused on broad cultural identities, and the omission of these data is not meant to suggest a monolithic cultural identity for Latinos.

The subsample of 26 youths who participated in the semi-structured interviews with social studies questions included 12 Latinas, 8 Latinos, 1 Black female, 3 Black males, 1 White female, and 1 White male. Approximately one-third of the participants in this group were in middle school, and the remaining two-thirds were in high school.

### **Analytical Procedures**

To explore our complex and layered data sets, we employed a mixed-methods approach, using quantitative analysis of survey data to study student demographics, literacy practices, and attitudes regarding schooling. We then expanded on those responses with Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of interview data. This combination of descriptive and interpretive approaches allowed us to explore our research questions with different data sets and to triangulate our findings across these data with a range of analytical tools.

We compiled demographic data on the students in the sample through a descriptive analysis of survey items (N=802). We also analyzed student attitudes towards their subject area classes with further descriptive analysis of survey responses and an ANOVA to explore possible school and grade-level influences on attitudes towards their classes. To further explore students' attitudes towards their classes, we engaged in CCA of open-ended question responses about favorite and least favorite classes as well as CCA of related interview data.

Our next step was to analyze youth's interest in possible social issues through CCA and coding of the open-ended responses about favorite books. The responses of participants who provided a book title and reason for choosing that book were coded according to the topical interests expressed in the explanation of their choice. We used CCA to develop 29 different codes that represented students' reasons for their favorite book choice. With further analysis, we combined some of the codes from the initial set of 29 into larger categories of *identity* and *struggle* (discussed in our findings with exemplars). For example, one student explained her choice of the book *Color Me Dark* by Patricia McKissack, writing, "I like it because it reflect[s] how they look at light skin black people and darker skin black[s]. I liked it because it reflected me and my grandmom." This response was coded initially for racial identity and then placed in the larger category of *identity*. *Struggle* became the larger category for initial codes such as "S=struggle to overcome and/or survive" and "W=war/Holocaust". We included responses such as the one below that references the endurance of great hardship in this category:

The best I have ever read is *Night*. This book is about the experience a boy has while in a concentration camp. It also explains some of the torture that the Jewish people were put through while in these camps.

We then analyzed each of the 245 book titles mentioned by students and applied the same coding framework to the books themselves, finding online descriptions of the book's primary topics and themes and using this information to guide our coding.

Interview data provided yet another source for exploring students' thematic interests. In order to get a sense of what types of themes, topics, and questions were of interest to

students, part of the semi-structured interview protocol involved showing students pictures of the covers of a range of books (both fiction and non-fiction), newspapers, magazines, and comic books, as well as screenshots of websites. Over 90 specific titles and websites were chosen based upon previous research that identified them as popular texts and sites among young people in this community. In many cases, youth reported that they had already read and enjoyed one of the possible texts, although in other cases they reported that, based on the title and image on the cover, they would likely pick up and explore a particular text.

Analyzing the responses to these and other relevant interview questions about reading practices, we applied a similar set of codes as those used with the open-ended responses to statements about favorite books. We refined these codes through constant comparison with previous coding and developed a categorical framework for student interest in themes of identity and struggle. Throughout the coding process, we revisited and refined earlier interpretations of data as necessary, and we organized categories into a key linkage chart (see Figure 1 below), which we also continually refined and used to evaluate earlier coding (Erickson, 1992). Moreover, we compared our coding and categorical framework to related work done by researchers using the same interview data for the ALD Project. Multiple researchers working independently drew similar—if not identical—conclusions, and previous studies supported these codes (Moje et al., 2008; Price, 2006).

### **Findings**

The major assertion of this paper is that, for the youth in our study who claimed to read outside of school, texts served as tools for exploring, building, and maintaining dimensions of their identities, including identities as ethnic/“raced” beings, urban residents, youth, immigrants, and gendered young people. A dominant theme in their reading and discussion around identities was the idea of struggling to survive and/or succeed in the face of different hardships. Struggle itself, from individual efforts to survive abuse or gang violence to larger struggles such as movements for equality, was a popular topic of both reading and discussion (see Figure 1).

What makes this finding so intriguing is that these different constructions of identity and struggle were integrally connected to central concepts in cultural studies, history, politics, sociology, and psychology. Youth were engaged in reading and inquiry around important historical and political questions. As demonstrated below, they were interested in some of the deep, enduring questions taken up by historians and other social scientists. Why, then, are young people not interested in the social studies offered in school? The findings detailed in the remainder of the paper suggest a gap between youth’s everyday reading and topical interests and their academic interests, or lack thereof, in social studies. When analyzed carefully, these findings—in the form of youth’s talk about their interests and identities—allow for the connection of youth’s interests to possible approaches offered by extant research on effective social studies pedagogy. In what follows, we provide details regarding youth’s interests, texts, literacies, and learning in school and everyday life.

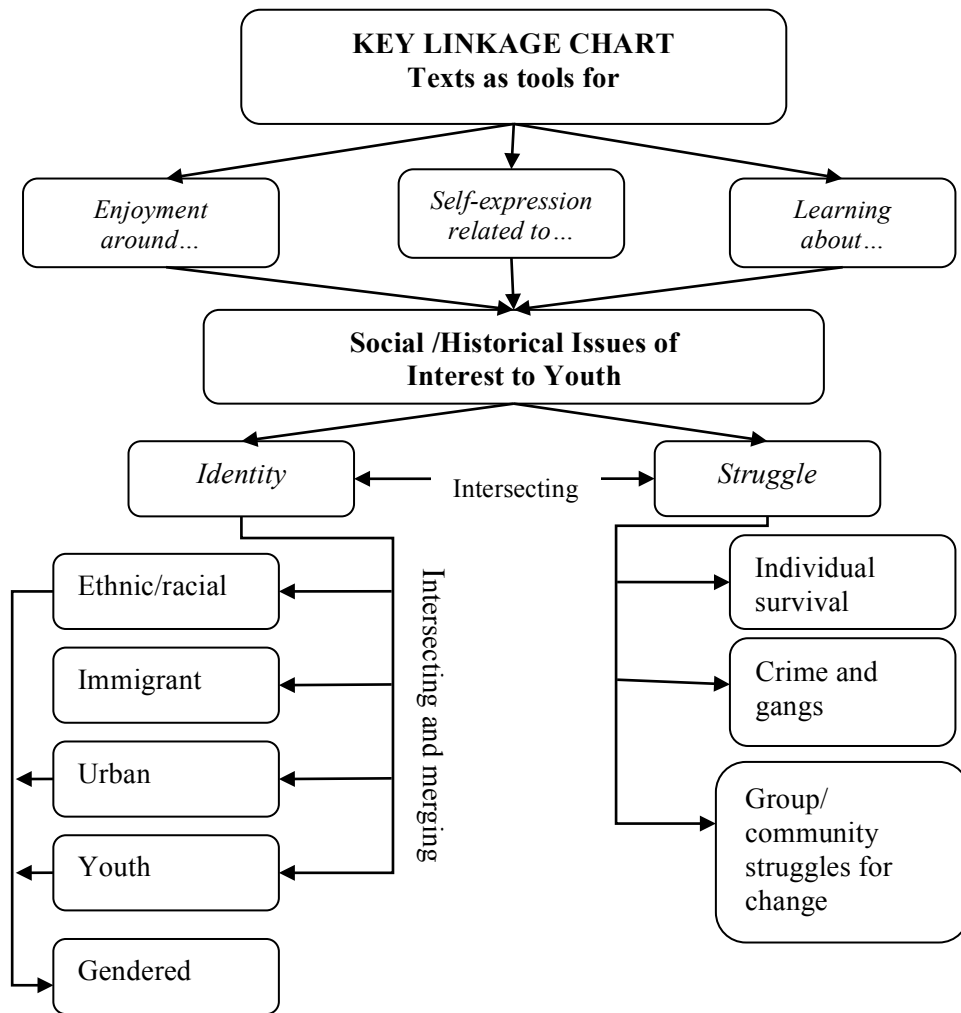


Figure 1: Key linkages among categories and properties in the various data sources

**Youth’s Views on Social Studies Education**

Analysis of both survey and interview data revealed that study participants tended to like social studies less than their other core classes. Forced-choice items indicated that respondents not only disliked their social studies classes but also tended to see less utility in social studies when compared to the other three core classes and did not feel as good about their own ability in social studies when compared to math, English, and science classes. An ANOVA showed no significant variance on these measures across schools and grades, demonstrating a general pattern across all students in the sample that was not significantly impacted by school site or grade level.

Table 2  
*Mean Responses for Core Class Attitudes (n=350-370)*

	<b>How much do you like it?</b>	<b>How useful is it?</b>	<b>How good at it are you?</b>
Social Studies	3.55	4.57	4.53
Science	3.98	4.81	4.58
Math	4.32	5.65	4.76
English	4.8	5.68	5.28

*Note:* 1= not at all, not at all useful, not at all good; 7= a lot, very useful, very good.

Analysis of the responses to open-ended survey questions about favorite and least favorite classes yielded similar results. Only 44 of 720 respondents named social studies as their favorite class, and 170 out of 713 chose social studies as their least favorite class. Thus participants chose social studies courses as their favorite class less frequently than classes in the other three domains; they also chose social studies class as the least favorite more often than English and math courses and only slightly less frequently than those in the sciences. They tended to attribute both their positive and negative attitudes to factors including teacher characteristics, class activities, and their personal disposition toward the subject (e.g., “I just don’t like history”).

Analysis of interview data revealed a similar pattern. Looking across the responses in the subsample of 26 interviews, nine youths expressed generally positive attitudes; five expressed both positive and negative attitudes and connected these attitudes to various conditions, usually based on the teacher or the work in the class; and 11 youths presented negative evaluations along the lines of “boring.”<sup>5</sup> In the following statement, a student admitted that her economics class was important but also lamented that it was boring:

Um, I hate government, I hate, economics, and I know it teaches me something, but they’re boring classes, most all of my teachers are history teachers. They sound like that commercial for eye drops with the guy that’s just talking and makes you go to sleep.

In addition, half of the students who reported liking social studies for one reason or another in the interviews mentioned something along the lines of their classes being “easy” or associated liking the course with getting good grades. For example, a male student in the 10th grade reported that he liked his social studies classes “pretty good,” and when asked why, he explained that he started liking them when he found out that “you could find some of the answers in the back of the book.” In this case, this young

<sup>5</sup> One student was not asked that particular question.

man was not engaging with the content of the class but found it predictable and easy to manage.

Integrally tied to young people's views about social studies classes were their attitudes toward reading in this area, particularly with respect to textbooks. Data were collected in the survey about perceptions of textbook use in the four core classes. A comparison of the mean responses among the four core subjects for textbook items revealed interesting patterns similar to the patterns of attitudes towards the classes themselves. Although students reported reading their textbooks most often in social studies (see Table 3), survey data indicated that they tended to feel better about their ability to read the English and math textbooks (see Table 2). Students reported liking their textbooks more in English and math as well, although they liked science textbooks slightly less than social studies texts. This pattern was repeated for how useful students felt their textbooks were for developing understanding. Students also, on average, rated science and social studies textbooks as more difficult to read when compared to English and math texts.

Table 3  
*Mean Responses for Core Class Textbook Use*

	<b>English</b>	<b>Math</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Social studies</b>
Textbook (how often read for class this year)	4.77	4.68	4.76	4.93
Reading your textbook (how good at in class)	4.72	4.71	4.51	4.59
Reading your textbook (how much you like it in class)	3.89	3.58	3.28	3.37
Reading your textbook (how useful for understanding )	4.66	4.65	4.36	4.4
How DIFFICULT do you find it to understand your textbook?	3.37	3.43	3.52	3.53

*Note.* 1=not at all, not at all useful, not at all good; 7=a lot, very useful, very good. 343<n< 365.

In interviews, few participants discussed reading in the context of their social studies classes because they were not directly asked about it. Nevertheless, in the course of discussing their attitudes towards social studies classes, several of the youth did make comments related to the texts they read in school. A consistent pattern among these students was that they did not find their reading in the social studies classes to be very interesting, and, therefore, they often forgot what they read. A young woman described

the problem with textbooks, the primary type of text mentioned, with the comment that there was “too much information being told.”

### Student Interest in Social-Historical Issues<sup>6</sup>

Despite this lack of interest in social studies classes and texts across the broad sample, many students reported liking books with possible social studies connections (e.g., *Night* by Elie Weisel) in the open-ended survey. Moreover, the young people in the interview subsample reported using a range of texts as tools for enjoyment, self-expression, and learning about a variety of social and historical issues in which they were interested, although they did not necessarily name these issues as “social” or “historical.” These issues can be grouped into the two primary and related categories of identity (i.e., how people represent themselves) and struggle (i.e., how people organize for, react to, and resist challenging situations across time and space). More specifically, interview participants referenced ethnic, racial, age-based, immigrant, urban, and gendered identities as they discussed their reading, and many students across the entire sample also seemed drawn to themes and content in reading that related to people or groups overcoming difficult situations. Issues of identity and struggle are important areas of study across the social sciences, and thus they provide possible entryways for students into more disciplinary study.

**Student interest in identity.** We analyzed participants’ interest in questions related to identity through the open-ended question responses about favorite books and the interview data. For example, the respondents routinely chose books about teen life, identity, and childhood in both open-ended survey responses and during semi-structured interviews. Indeed, we documented codes related to identity such as urban, real life, childhood, identity, and teen life over 100 times within the 245 book titles listed in responses to the open-ended survey question about favorite books. When looking at respondents’ explanations of why they chose certain titles, we initially noted a range of responses that were labeled with different codes. For example, 9.2% of the responses were coded for an interest in “mystery,” and 7.1% of the responses were coded for “fantasy,” including the following response: “I like mythology, things like wizards, dragons, and those kind of things. I actually have fun reading those books.” Many of the fantasy texts youth mentioned, particularly the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, were stories about young people trying to find their places in an adult world.

More explicit references to identity also stood out. We assigned 32.9% of the students’ explanations of why a certain book was a favorite to the *identity* category across the subsample of complete open-ended survey responses (n=295). Students tended to refer to more than one characteristic, and as a result, we did not identify subcategories of identity at this level of coding. In the following exemplar, a student wrote about *Esperanza Rising*, a book by Pam Muñoz Ryan: “esperanza rising is about a mexican girl

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<sup>6</sup> The term “social/historical issues” refers to topics, concepts, and problems in which youth express interest and that are related in different ways to areas of study in the social sciences, particularly cultural studies, sociology, economics, civic/political science, and history. These social sciences appear in schooling as “social studies.”

who migrates to the US. I like it because I can relate to *esperanza* and to all that she went through.”<sup>7</sup> This young Latina woman referred to her own identification with the character *Esperanza*, citing *Esperanza*’s ethnicity, gender, and immigration experience. Although her words did not reveal precisely what in *Esperanza*’s experience resonated with her, it seems clear that their shared ethnicity, gender, and immigration experience were central to her feelings about the text. This response also suggested a dual coding for the category of *struggle*, with the words, “all that she went through” indicating the young woman’s identification with *Esperanza*’s struggles as recounted in the novel.

Although the “favorite book” survey question and response did not provide students with a forum to discuss their responses in depth, the semi-structured interviews did. In the interview subsample, students mentioned topics related to cultural identity as well as interest in local news and issues in 17 of the 26 interviews, with 20 total mentions. Having coded for the broad category of identity, we then returned to our analysis of the participants’ written as well as verbal responses in order to identify subcategories of identity based upon how students represented themselves. These subcategories included: a) ethnic/racial identity, b) immigrant identity, c) youth identity, d) urban identity, and e) gender identity.

***Ethnic/racial identity.*** In terms of ethnicity and race, we saw clear references to African-American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and broader Latino<sup>8</sup> “raced” and ethnic identities by the young people when they discussed their reading interests. A participant born in the Dominican Republic selected *The Color of My Words*, a book by Lynn Joseph, writing in his open-ended response, “the reason why I like that book is because it was written by a Dominican author and it basically talks about growing up as a kid in the Dominican Republic.” A Mexican-American youth commented in the interview, “I read like, Mexican-American authors...because I can relate to them.” Another participant reported that he read a Latino newspaper with articles in Spanish because, “it’s helping build my Spanish.” When the interviewer asked him why that was important, he responded, “My grandfather is Mexican, and he’s not living anymore, so I’m trying to build up my Spanish so I can get a little bit more better at it than I am now.” This young man seemed to want to connect to his grandfather and his culture through language, and reading text in Spanish provided one way to do that.

Participants also engaged with issues of race and skin color through their reading, particularly through books that dealt explicitly with these topics. One of the most commonly discussed books in the interviews was *The Skin I’m In* by Sharon Flake. One African-American student wanted to read this book to “learn, probably to see how they feel ‘cause sometimes I don’t feel like I like the skin I’m in, maybe they can tell me why I don’t like the skin when I read that story.” Speaking about her choice of this book, another young African-American woman expressed a similar deep personal connection:

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<sup>7</sup> *Editor’s Note:* Student quotes have all been included in their original form.

<sup>8</sup> The youths in the study used many different terms to refer to themselves; we explore their references to national and ethnic identities in other work. In this paper, we simply report the words that youth used to refer to themselves as ethnic and racial beings.

I: OK, what made you pick *The Skin I'm In*?

X: When I was little I used to have a real problem about my skin color. And I read some of it but I never got to finish it because I have to turn it back in.

I: What did you like about it?

X: The character, I forgot her name, she was more like me. Like every problem she had that people making fun of her, it was just like me. We had similarities.

I: OK. How would you say that the experience of reading the book was?

X: It was good because like it made me think about I'm not the only person that goes through it, so as I got older I got confidence.<sup>9</sup>

This young woman identified with a character with similar problems involving skin color, and she not only related to the character but also reported gaining confidence through this textual interaction. In referring to their own conflicts involving identity, both participants who identified with *The Skin I'm In* located themselves in deep patterns of history and the social construction of race, even if they were not explicitly aware of the potential historical connections to their interest. The first young woman's search for an answer to why she doesn't "like the skin" could, in part, be addressed through thoughtful and age-appropriate instruction on the historical and social construction of race.

Other participants referred to identity more in terms of ethnicity or national origin. One young man, knowing nothing about *When I was Puerto Rican*, a book by Esmeralda Santiago, was attracted to the title, saying, "because I am Puerto Rican, I would be interested in reading that." The possibility of reading about the shared experience of being Puerto Rican seemed to influence his text selections. In other words, he seemed interested in reading texts that spoke to his particular cultural identity in that moment.

Other students reached further into the past and sought to better inform their own identity construction, recognizing in some ways that identity is also an historical construct, as in the following exchange:

X: I like to read a lot of books about Africa.

I: Why?

X: Because, like I'm African-American and I just, I don't know, because I don't know too much about my culture because I was kind of, well, my ancestors were stolen from our culture and African-Americans nowadays, we don't know much about who we are or where we come from, so I try to read any little information about it.

This young man recognized a gap in his own knowledge, connected it to historical forces and events, and went further to suggest that he read specifically to learn more about his own historical identity as an African-American. These students appear to be reading to inform their own connection to history and to different racial and ethnic identities. In the context of Epstein's (2000) and Almarza's (2001) studies, it is possible that these young people are creating learning opportunities not afforded to them in their school-based learning. Although students had likely encountered some of these books through their

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<sup>9</sup> I=interviewer; X=respondent; this convention used throughout this paper.

English classes in school, their choices of these books as their “favorites” and their discussions of deep connections to the books suggest that the books had taken on meaning beyond school. The students’ words also provide insight into the issues and questions broached by these texts that could be taken up in the social studies, albeit in different ways.

***Immigrant identity.*** The experience of immigration is related to Latino ethnic and cultural identities in this particular community.<sup>10</sup> Many references to immigration and to being an immigrant in the United States, connected with Mexican and other Latino identities, emerged in the interviews. One young man, when asked why he showed interest in an information book about Mexican history, replied, “I don’t know much about Mexico ‘cause they brought me here when I was four, so I didn’t learn much about Mexico.” Similar to the African-American student quoted earlier, this student sought to learn about his past through reading. Although this student also referred to his Mexican identity, he did so in the context of a discussion around immigration.

In a different interview, a Latino youth responded to the question of why immigration was an interesting topic in the news for him:

In immigration, well, it’s kind of weird because like, if it’s gonna be immigration and you’re not allowing people to come in, it’s like not allowing for the population to grow. You understand? And then like if you don’t want people from other countries to come in anymore, why still have that plate on the Statue of Liberty?

This young man was moving beyond expressing an interest in immigration and into analytical contrasts between current immigration news (much of which was about efforts to limit immigration) and historical narratives of America as a land of immigrants, as represented by the Statue of Liberty. On his own, he was considering a deep and enduring historical problem in the U.S. related to how we reconcile conflicting narratives of inclusion and exclusion with respect to who is considered “American.” Indeed, across these examples, young people were reading and talking about immigration, a topic typically discussed in U.S. history curricula, as both a personal and a political topic, and, on their own, they were reading for connection, information, and analysis.

***Youth identity.*** Youth and adolescence also assumed very important roles in students’ written and verbal responses related to identity. An initial indicator of the importance of youth identity in this study was the fact that young people were the protagonists and/or foci in the five most commonly named favorite books:

- *Harry Potter*, by J.K. Rowling (different titles), 44 students;
- *The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton, 15 students;
- *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and Kimberly Kirberger, 13 students;
- *Holes*, by Louis Sachar, 12 students; and

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<sup>10</sup> Twenty-five percent of the students in the sample were immigrants, and many more were children of immigrants.

- *A Child Called It*, by Dave Pelzer, 9 students.

Furthermore, in the interviews, many young people referred to the problems that teenagers face, as well as the solutions to those problems, as areas of interest for discussion and reading. Several of the respondents selected and talked about *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*. As one female participant explained, this book deals with “like teenager stuff, and about family problems and friends and all that, that was like the most specific thing I liked about that book.” Other young people made similar statements and added commentary about learning from the discussion of problems described in the book. One respondent explained her choice of the book, saying, “Like, it has stories about teenagers who have problems, and they put them into a poem or into a story, trying to teach you a lesson.” As young people themselves, immersed in all of the complexities of adolescent relationships with friends and family, these youth seemed drawn to these topics, which they read about to gain insight.

Reading for problem-solving information or for examples, particularly about “teenage” problems, was also evident with other texts and was a consistent theme across student responses. *The Coldest Winter Ever*, by Sister Soulja, as well as *The Outsiders*, were popular texts, and students seemed to value them for similar reasons as seen in the exemplars below:

I: And what did you like about it [*The Coldest Winter Ever*]?

X: It just talked about how teenagers are and the struggles that she went through in the book and her family was, well, her father was a drug dealer and stuff like that.

A different student, referring to *The Outsiders*, echoed this sentiment, stating, “I like this book because it tells about young teenagers struggling just like us. Bad habits, peer pressure.”

Participants demonstrated interest in the problems facing young people through other types of reading as well, as was the case with a young woman who preferred to read newspaper articles about young people.

I: What kind of articles do you find most interesting?

X: Things that involve like kids like our age and stuff so we would like, we did an article on HIV. And so like I was reading that one for a while ‘cause it was long and stuff. But I got interested ‘cause it was kids our age that are getting it mostly though.

Whether through the selection of texts that told the stories of adolescents or through purposive reading about issues critical to teenagers, these young people clearly identified themselves as youths and also seemed to place value on exploring this aspect of their identities.

**Urban identity.** The youth in this study saw themselves not only as young people but also as urban residents living in a particular big-city environment. Urban identification was represented through high interest in community and city-wide events, through identification with urban notions of the “street,” and with practices such as the writing

and reading of graffiti. In talking about newspaper reading habits, many participants discussed the importance of knowing what was happening in the neighborhood and city in which they lived. In fact, twice as many respondents in the interview subsample expressed an interest in local news as in national or international news, as exemplified by the following response: “Um, for one thing the \_\_\_\_\_ News, I get to know what’s happening around the city, if there’s anything wrong or anything good happening.”

Several participants also identified with urban or street themes and topics. One youth commented, “I like to read stuff, that, urban books, they bring the street to the book like that.” Another youth explained that *The Outsiders* was his favorite book because “it talks about life on the streets.” The conceptualization of the street by these young people suggests some sort of “real” or authentic representation of common urban experiences as perceived by the respondents. Participants appeared to select these types of books because they told stories that resonated with their own urban experiences, as in the following interview excerpt about *Always Running*, a book by Luis J. Rodriguez:

I: What looked interesting about it [*Always Running*]?

X: Um, it was about real people, it was, it was like inspired by a real friend, the author wrote it about his life, and it was pretty much, it was set more in like, like an urban setting. It was cool, I liked it.

These urban narratives also connected with issues of gangs, crime, and violence, and therefore crossed into the category of struggle as well, but youth’ interests were strongly connected to the presence of real urban stories.

Urban identity (intermingling with youth identity) also influenced youth’s literacy production choices and self-expression. Several participants in our sample, mostly male, discussed their involvement in graffiti writing and framed it as an urban literacy practice, a type of text they both produce and consume on the walls of their community. One young man discussed what graffiti meant to him, beginning by connecting the practice to living in his community, stating, “I learned [graffiti] because I grew up here all my life.” For him, doing graffiti was an extension of where he lived and who he had become. Talking to the interviewer, he commented, “You won’t understand nothing. To me, if I look at it I know exactly what it is, I know exactly who it’s from, and I know exactly what it’s trying to say. Just from the experience.” He went on to discuss the meaning and purpose behind graffiti: “It shows creativity. It shows we are alive. We ain’t just meaningless drums to whatever music or whatever industry that the city’s a part of. We do have ideas and creativity and minds of our own.”

For this young man, his identity as an urban youth—and as an urban graffiti artist—shaped the ways in which he expressed himself. In talking about “we,” he indexed himself and other urban youths involved in graffiti. He recognized that their experiences outside of school, in the streets of the city, not only have shaped their identities and literacy practices but also have given meaning to all of their other practices. How young people are represented and how they represent themselves throughout history and across spatial geography appeared then to be questions that might have interested some of these students.

**Gender identity.** Gender was one important aspect of identity not discussed directly by many of these young people. Few participants made specific references to being male

or female with regard to their interests and reading choices. However, in our analysis, we did note patterned differences between male and female adolescents, likely tied to gender socialization. For example, males tended to talk more about sports, and females talked more often about fashion and style. Nevertheless, the overall patterns of being interested in racial, youth, urban, and immigrant identities and struggle around those identities did not vary across gender. In the few instances in which gender identity was clearly referenced, it was only done so by girls and was tied to youth identity, such as when a young woman expressed interest in the poetry collection, *My Sisters' Voices, Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*, edited by Iris Jacob:

I: *My Sister's Voice*? Have you read that one before?

X: No. But it looks interesting.

I: Looks interesting. How come that looks interesting?

X: 'cause it says, teenage girls of color speak out.

I: Mhm.

X: Like, I would like to know what girls my age think about, go through, during these times of, life, 'cause, like once you turn to a teenager, you mostly have a lot of drama, teen pregnancy, and all that stuff.

This student seemed to be identifying with the texts as a young woman, and a few other girls expressed similar ideas in which age seemed to interact with gender in their talk. As these and the other examples demonstrate, identity is complex and multifaceted. Nevertheless, participants' talk about their interests and reading choices demonstrated that different representations of their identities played an important role in capturing and maintaining their interest. Moreover, participants used texts for exploration, expression, and information gathering about these different ways of being and of being represented in the world. Such questions of representation are important and pertinent to understanding the world through the lenses of history, sociology, psychology, and other social sciences, and thus present opportunities for engaging young people in critical disciplinary practices of inquiry in these areas.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that these fibers of the identity "thread" do not stand alone but must be integrated with each other to form the whole. We observed the different identity expressions (race/ethnicity, immigrant, youth, urban) and coded many data points into one category or another. However, we also recognized that these identities could be easily shifted and/or merged depending upon the interpretation. Overall, the categories of identity seemed clear in the data, but what was not clear was when one representation was being privileged over another. Trying to identify some sort of primary identity expression in a given situation seemed less important than recognizing that young people in this sample were clearly interested in and identifying with texts that spoke to these merging representations of who they were.

**Student interest in struggle.** Related to their interest in identity, participants also consistently engaged with topics and themes related to the broad category of struggle, which we used to capture the idea of people and/or groups seeking to engage in, survive, overcome, or resolve different forms of conflict. As already discussed above, for example, participants showed interest in different types of struggles associated with youth and urban life. In responding to the open-ended survey question about why they chose a

book as their favorite, students also commonly wrote about these themes. We coded 30% of the responses from the subset of 295 responses explaining favorite book choices into the category of struggle, with the most common book choice and response pattern pertaining to narratives about young people living in hardship (e.g., *A Child Called It* and *The Friends* by Rosa Guy), as seen below in participants' written responses to open ended questions:

*Child Called It*...it's about a boy whose mother abused him. I like this book because it's interesting to see how he overcame his experiences. My favorite book is *the friends* because it tells you the problems that kids have growing up with a mother who is ill and live in place where they dont like colored people.

Although both students might be identifying with the young protagonists in these stories, and although race is mentioned in the second excerpt, the difficulties characters had to overcome seemed to garner the respondents' attention. As represented below, close to half of the responses coded for identity or struggle were dual coded for both. Primary codes were assigned based on our interpretations of what the students seemed to emphasize, as described above.

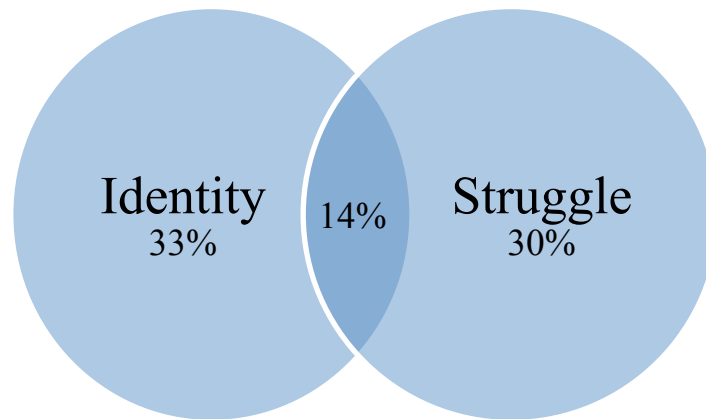


Figure 2: Primary and dual coding for favorite book responses

Respondents' interests in different forms of struggle also emerged in the analysis of the interview data. In the interview subset, we coded over 20 data points across 18 of the 26 interviews for discussion of violence, crime, and gangs, as well as for mention of leaders and movements related to civil rights. Through this analysis, we identified subcategories that participants talked about as important and engaging: a) individual struggle for survival, b) gangs and crime, and c) group/community struggle for change.

**Individual struggle for survival.** As described previously in the discussion on youth identity, these young people expressed interest in the problems and hardships faced by other young people. Similarly, respondents often referred to struggle in relationship to individuals surviving abuse or overcoming other challenges such as racism, poverty, or even the Holocaust. With respect to the selection of favorite books like *A Child Called It*,

which was very popular, it seemed that the experiences of individual characters in difficult circumstances attracted the youth's interest, as seen below:

My favorite book is *Child Called It*. It's a sad book, it where this little boy was abuse by its mother. She beat, hit, she wouldn't feed him. And he was always glad when his dad was home, because he knew then his mom wouldn't beat him.

Even when discussing books about the Holocaust, students often referred to individual experiences of survival, as seen in the following responses:

The best I have ever read is *Night*. This book is about the experience a boy has while in a concentration camp. It also explains some of the torture that the Jewish people were put through while in these camps.

I am Rosimary [*I am Rosemarie* by Marietta D. Moskin]. It is about the Holocaust and it is also about a girl who spent her whole life in a concentration camp till they were released. *Daniel Half Human*, it is about a boy who was half Jewish, and Nazi and his friend and him wants to join Hitler's youth (will his friend betray him or not.)

In these instances, the students discussed individual young people in the context of larger struggles. Although the interviews did not delve deeper into why students were interested in such stories of struggle and survival, the community context in which these young people live might offer some insight. In a community with relatively high levels of poverty, substance abuse, and crime, ideas of struggle and survival are perhaps familiar concepts to young people. Their reading practices may be implicitly (and in some cases explicitly) motivated by an effort to better understand their own lives. An alternative explanation is that their interest in reading about the struggles of others is another kind of identity practice, wherein the youths in the sample identify with struggle because they face it in their own lives each day. This interest in struggle may help students enter into the study of different historical eras through the experiences of people struggling in times of conflict.

**Gangs and crime.** Often intersecting with participants' interests in individual struggles, especially when tied to youth and urban identity, were their interests in crime and gangs. One of the favorite books among the participants of the larger study in each of the four waves of data collection was *The Outsiders*. Although this tale revolves around White youth, it speaks to the struggle of young people trying to make it in a tough neighborhood in a larger society that looks down upon them. One youth expressed his preference for *The Outsiders* in his written response to an open-ended question:

it tells kids like teenagers, how its like to be like in a gang. And, how you feel if...um...you want to like get out of the gang, and you never would get out, and if you get out you be killed.

Reading this book connected to real issues in this boy's world. Other students expressed similar sentiments in the open-ended responses, such as the following response to *The Outsiders*: "My favorite book is *The Outsiders*, because it makes you think, about life. It

makes you think, about how life is going to be if you get into gang, or if you are a gang member.”

In addition to books about gangs, participants also engaged with books about different types of crime, which are often associated with (although certainly not limited to) urban areas, including drug trafficking and auto theft. *Young Boys Incorporated*, a book about an infamous drug gang, was listed as a favorite text by a student, who wrote:

My favorite book is *Y.B.I.*, it's an autobiography of Butch Jones, [the city's] most wealthy heroin dealer ever. He started selling when he was 15. his bussines grew so much that when he went to jail, he had 35 million dollars that he made.

In this instance, there seems to be interest in not only the crime but also in the way the protagonist made money and survived through crime, struggling, in a sense, to make it his own way. Although it is important not to overgeneralize, it should be no surprise that gangs and crime might be part of the knowledge base, and may even be part of the reading repertoires, of young people who live in a city with high crime rates. Turning these topics into problems for academic study in high school social studies courses like sociology or economics might then present an interesting opportunity for youths to examine these phenomena in a new light.

**Group/community struggle for change.** Although individual struggles to survive and overcome hardship, as well as gangs and crime, might be part of the context of many of these young people's lives, it is important to recognize that they also frequently chose texts about collective struggles for change. Whether expressing interest in civil rights or community improvement, many participants appeared to value struggle as a means to obtain equality and a better life. Such interest is represented in their choices of stories about young people trying to deal with problems as well as of non-fiction accounts of individuals engaged in collective struggle, as shown in the following written response to the favorite book question:

my favorite book is a spanish book called pancho villa and i like it becasue it talks about how was his life and how he fought for his rights that is why i like that book.

Similarly, participants frequently identified issues of racism, discrimination, and systematic injustice as topics of interest for both reading and discussion. In the interview sample, nine of the students discussed these issues in relationship to the texts they chose to read. In general, they attended to how people coped with these forces and also worked against them, as illustrated in this interview excerpt:

I: So you seem to be drawn to books about people of color, like *When I was Puerto Rican, I Know Why the Cage bird Sings*. Is there a reason for that?

X: Hmm, It's like um, about discrimination, and people warring, and how they were treated from like different type of people, like White people, Hispanic, um, I like that.

Within this broad area of interest around injustice and societal conflict, several historical topics and eras were discussed as well. Slavery, the Mexican Revolution, and

both the Black and Chicano Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s through the 1970s were clearly of interest to many participants, with a marked focus on civil rights leaders such as César Chávez and Martin Luther King, Jr. Some students knew a fair amount about one or the other, but others did not and wanted to learn more. The interview excerpt below was representative of comments about historical figures:

I heard what [César Chávez] stood up for, but I really don't know what made him stand up for his rights, really, so that's why I want to read about him.

This young woman was familiar with César Chávez to a degree, but she recognized that she did not know enough and expressed that she would like to learn more, especially with respect to the motivations behind his actions. She expressed a desire to learn more about both King and Chávez, and she raised the idea that she could use her reading as fodder for demanding that her teachers add information about Chávez to the curriculum:

I: And what about Martin Luther King, what drew you to that book?

X: Maybe it's only more that I probably I would know a lot about him I mean I could learn more that I don't know about him already.

I: What about César Chávez?

X: I know a little bit, but I don't know a lot so probably I like to learn more 'cause I don't know like a lot about him. 'Cause they don't really say, like they tell us what he did, but they don't really tell us like they tell us like about Martin Luther King and stuff, so maybe if I read this book I can find out more and then tell the teachers to probably tell the other kids more.

Other students referred to more contemporary political struggles against racism and even around environmental issues. Participants demonstrated an awareness and concern for these problems, which made evident their interest in civic action and social justice.

When asked to identify the challenges facing their community in the semi-structured interview, many youths were able to name different problems, and they also expressed a desire to learn more about solving these problems. Thirteen of the twenty-six interview participants talked about violence and crime in their community and made references to gangs and bullying, often in the context of trying to solve the problem, as seen in the following quote:

X: I think that, what interests me the most is bullying, like

I: Bullying?

X: I need to, like, learn, about people who like, try to overcome that, or, help people as well. So, yeah, just bullying and discrimination. Stuff like that.

Similarly, 10 respondents discussed political themes including racism and discrimination, immigration, youth rights, and war. Eight participants brought up quality-of-life issues such as the environment, pollution, abandoned homes, and road conditions in their city. Three youths also mentioned economic issues such as gas prices and jobs. Three more participants talked about health issues that included teen pregnancy, drugs, and sexually transmitted illnesses. Only five of these interview participants replied that there were no issues of concern or that they did not know of any. Overall then, 21 out of

the 26 youths interviewed were able to identify issues facing their community, and many also expressed a desire to solve these problems.

### **Discussion**

Considering the findings presented above, social studies and literacy educators alike are faced with a number of critical questions. How do we develop an educational program that recognizes the knowledge and interests young people bring into the classroom and allows them to call upon these assets? How can we take up the narratives and questions of students who may feel marginalized and excluded from the traditional high school curriculum? How might social studies educators help young people see that what they know and care about is both reflected in and expanded by studies of history, economics, sociology, and psychology? How might social studies educators engage their students in reading and writing practices that expand their social science understanding and literacy skills even as they draw from them? How can young people be challenged through academic inquiry to move towards deeper disciplinary knowledge that will help them be effective agents of positive change in their community? What role does disciplinary literacy instruction play in supporting young people in developing such agency? Does a curriculum that repositions marginalized students as valuable resources in the classroom contribute to greater educational equity and student connection to content? Finally, does our current national focus on standardized assessments make such curricula and instruction even more challenging to enact in our classrooms?

A key step is to recognize that although some young people do not find social studies classes and texts interesting, these data suggest that many youth may nevertheless be interested in social, historical, cultural, and political concepts, issues, and texts. Many young people do not engage with social studies instruction and texts in school, yet they do study problems and questions which lend themselves to historical and social science inquiry. The students interviewed for this project, all of whom lived in a low-income, urban community and were predominantly students of color, preferred to read about young people who, like themselves, were struggling with issues of race, cultural identity, and poverty. They were consistently interested in topics of crime, violence, racism, and other forms of struggle, all of which are realities in the community in which they live. We hypothesize that they also called upon diverse funds of knowledge about these areas as they tried to make sense of the world, relying upon learning acquired through observation, experience, and even reading outside of the classroom. From the young women aware of the dynamics of skin color and discrimination in their community to the young man knowledgeable about how to avoid gangs, these young people know a great deal about their world. Some of the students' everyday learning is undoubtedly biased, and some of it may even be erroneous when different perspectives and additional information are considered, yet that learning provides a conceptual base from which students operate and perhaps an entry point for discussions and lessons in the classroom around related and important social studies concepts and questions.

Educators can also help students structure their learning around real problems. Some of the young people in this study expressed a desire to go beyond reading and learning about such content toward using knowledge to improve both themselves and their communities. Similarly, Moje (2004) documented a strong sense of social activism in the

same community in an earlier study, and the work of Foley (1991) and O'Connor (1997) demonstrated that young people who recognized the importance of collective struggle and positive forms of resistance had higher achievement and levels of resilience than youth who saw achievement as tied only to individual merit. If schools recognize such dispositions as assets and encourage them through academic study, then both the quality and appeal of social studies could improve.

In short, the results of this study demonstrate a missed opportunity for social studies curricula and instruction. School-based learning can and should draw from what young people know, care about, and already read about, write about, and discuss. How young people understand what they read and learn in school is shaped across multiple spaces; although school spaces are typically thought of as distinct from home, community, and peer spaces, educators can help to develop “third spaces” (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000; Moje, 2004; Moje et al., 2004), where school and out-of-school can come together to integrate the learning of spontaneous and scientific concepts (Vygotsky, 1986). These third spaces, not bound by notions of in- or out-of-school, become places where teachers and students function as learners with the opportunity to engage in the co-creation of knowledge. In such spaces, schools can access and utilize community funds of knowledge by bringing in parents, for example, to provide real world economics lessons around student questions that teachers can then help students analyze in academic terms. Students who do not see themselves as represented or present, and who may not connect to the conventional content in social studies classes, might benefit from such learning opportunities that explore, with academic rigor, the questions they might already have about their world and lives that connect to the social sciences.

### **Implications for Capitalizing and Expanding Upon Youth Interest**

It is important to exercise caution, however, when advocating approaches that look to what students know, care about, and can already do as a potential resource. Education in history and the social sciences, indeed, in any discipline, should expand one's knowledge, interests, and skills. Ravitch (1987) wrote compellingly about curricular changes focused on student interests and experiences in the 1920s and 1930s that led to a “less academic” social studies education in the United States as it strove to be “more closely related to the students' interests and experiences” (p. 345). Although Ravitch's critique focused on the early grades, it is important to bear in mind with respect to this study. It is possible that the conclusions we offer could be read as promoting a curriculum of student interest. Nothing, however, could be further from our intent. Indeed, our analysis suggests that student interests *are already* historical, cultural, social, political, and economic. That is, young people are already interested in the content of the social sciences, but our data suggest that they do not experience a social science education that makes clear to them the relevance of deep social science inquiry to their everyday lives.

Knowledge of historical, economic, political, and social concepts, and facility with the thinking and research skills of social scientists are important skills for citizens who wish to participate in a democracy. In other words, we do not intend to promote a curriculum that is relevant to students because it only explores what already interests them. Rather, we seek to make curricula that demonstrate to students the relevance of social science concepts and inquiry to their lives. This is a subtle, but important,

difference. For example, high school students in history classes often study life in the U.S. during World War II with conventional textbook lessons in which they read about and define terms like “rations,” “Victory Gardens,” and “war bonds.” These conventional lessons often mention the contributions of Blacks and women to domestic production for the war, yet they offer students few tools to help them understand their own lived realities today. A different approach to this time period, however, can be taken by looking at how the changing role of African-Americans and Latinos, for example, both in the military and in the workplace, began to challenge the racial status quo in the United States. Students could explore the causes and effects of the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles, the Detroit Race Riots of 1943, or the race riots that occurred in Mobile, Alabama. Exploring the historical impact of these conflicts can help students understand contemporary segregation in the U.S. as part of the legacy of past inequality and segregation (Stockdill, 2011). What historical lines, for example, might students be able to draw between the shift in race relations during World War II to the Civil Rights Movement to current debates on segregation in our schools in the 21st century? How could we frame the study of problems in the U.S. during World War II to help us understand the problems of today?

Curricula and schooling that use student interest and experience as a launch pad for learning social science concepts and skills have great potential for promoting critical inquiry and learning and also represent a right to which all students are entitled but to which some students have historically been denied. Students in poor, working-class communities, particularly communities of color, have often been provided with less dynamic, critical curricula than their suburban, middle-class counterparts whose backgrounds, discourse, and experiences are more often represented in official curricula (Anyon, 1981; Delpit, 1995). All students, and the communities and backgrounds from which they come, deserve a place in curricula and instruction, and the data presented in this paper present an outline of some of the student interests and knowledge that could serve as resources for such an approach.

### **Implications for Curriculum and Instruction**

Engaging students in social science investigation around ideas of identity and struggle need not be limited to the study of their lives and communities. These concepts are hardly new to the 21st century, so it is worth exploring how students respond to investigating the struggles of people in the past. Questions that already interest and capture the imagination of students can be applied to different places and times, and instruction can be centered upon the exploration of these questions.

In the effort to engage students in these complicated explorations, educators need to analyze the texts of social studies instruction to explore the limits (and opportunities) they provide young people to explore engaging questions of identity and struggle. Work can be done in a variety of areas, perhaps beginning with social studies textbooks and other print resources. As one interviewee stated, “If you like a book you can remember it. If you don’t like it...it’s like you forget it the next day.” To move young people toward deeper engagement with instructional texts, educators, curriculum developers, and publishing companies need to provide more engaging and effective primary, secondary, and tertiary texts for use in instruction. These data suggest young people are interested in

other young people, even throughout history, and if the stories of young people overcoming adversity in different historical epochs were effectively integrated into textbooks, perhaps they would be more engaging and effective instructional tools.

Our results suggest that students might be drawn to texts that speak to the identities and struggles in their lives, even if the identities and struggles do not exactly match their own. These will vary from community to community, but there are also common struggles across communities and historical eras, and the students in this study clearly liked reading about real people, their problems, and how these problems might get solved. Primary documents like diaries or multicultural youth fiction could be used to help students connect these themes to historical content (Wilson & Shaver-Wetzel, 2005). Although several scholars have advocated the use of multicultural literature and historical fiction in the social studies classroom (Freeman & Levstik, 1988; Kornfeld, 1994; Kornfeld & Leyden, 2005; Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994; Wilson & Shaver-Wetzel, 2005), there has been little research carried out on the effectiveness of this approach at the secondary level. In light of the results of this study, in which students chose to read books relevant to the social studies, this is an area that merits further investigation.

In this context, it is notable that many of these young people talked and wrote about using texts as tools to explore themselves and their world; they never discussed reading for memorization or test preparation. When given a choice, they read with purpose. Thus, a final and important implication of this study for texts and other material selection is that we need to more closely examine the affordances and opportunities young people find in their own reading and learning as compared to what happens in the classroom. These students did not have much to say about purposive reading and literate practice in school, and further research should look deeper into these questions. We hypothesize that many of these students are engaging in processes of authentic inquiry on their own, but we also imagine that they could benefit from effective scaffolding and the application of disciplinary knowledge and skill sets to further develop their analyses.

Of course, the shifts we are recommending likely necessitate a transformation in how schools conceive of, implement, and assess history instruction, and these recommendations thus also have policy implications. State assessments that assess laundry lists of details and do not provide students with opportunities to explore authentic disciplinary problems have the potential to inhibit the type of instruction we are recommending. Without delving too deeply into these questions, there is a need for a broad discussion on the role of standardized assessment with respect to how it drives instruction, for better or for worse. This is particularly true in the context of our national transition towards the Common Core standards and their focus on inquiry and more complex student interactions with a range of texts in schools.

### **Conclusion**

In this context, our work calls for the integration of themes of students' conceptions of identity and struggle into instruction, materials, and literate practice in the classroom. Although the youth in our study avowed an interest in social, political, economic, and historical world and community issues, this interest did not appear to transfer to their academic learning of social studies or to their reading social studies texts, as evidenced by their achievement records. The identities and struggles of young people in

marginalized communities in urban America are as much a part of our history as the usual survey of presidents, wars, and scandals, which have served as the conventional content of our social studies instruction. Indeed, history is an ongoing narrative of shifting identities and struggle, and young people should have the opportunity to engage with stories about “real” people who remind them of themselves while also expanding their knowledge of people who are different from them. If educators pay attention to what students care about, then it is more likely that young people will be engaged in school and, in particular, social studies. If educators learn about and capitalize on students’ funds of knowledge and everyday understandings of the world, then they can more effectively mediate comprehensive understandings of the world. If educators and publishers consider what types of reading materials capture youth’ attention and build deep knowledge and literacy skills, then youth and teachers alike may find such materials easier to access and teach. Such changes to curricula, materials, and pedagogy are necessary for young people to see history, economics, politics, and even society as realms in which they can and do participate.

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