

ENGAGING THE DISENGAGED: DETRACKING ENGLISH  
EDUCATION FOR 9TH AND 10TH GRADE STUDENTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

This critical ethnographic qualitative case study uses a critical theory lens to discover the implications of academic tracking in a southeastern secondary school and to explore detracking English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement. The purpose of the study was to determine the ways in which academic tracking affects standard and advanced classrooms, and to discover how detracking with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement might alter student engagement. In Vivo coding was used to analyze the data that included observations, field notes, interviews, and student artifacts, and was collected from 2015-2017. The findings indicated the district's academic tracking practices structure inequality and division in the school system; and, detracking 9th and 10th grade English education with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement engages historically underserved students. These findings support Freire's notion of critical theory (1970), that argues for the amelioration of the oppressed through liberating practices aimed toward transforming the oppressive state. While similar studies have analyzed tracking, detracking, and critical literacy practices, they have not analyzed all three components in one study, from the teacher-researcher's point of view, and in conjunction with the implementation of multiyear placement. This research provides insight into (a) a multiyear teaching approach in a secondary setting; often the studies focus on primary levels; (b) practical classroom applications of critical literacy practices from the teacher-researcher's point of view; often the studies explore theoretical assumptions; and, finally, (c) the entire detracking process. While

many studies offer suggestions for detracking, very few explore what happens during or after classrooms are detracked.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. Kevin, because of your unwavering support and patience, I can chase my dreams. Porter, thank you for being the best big brother possible while I tried to multitask (not well) parenting and writing; and, Collins, thank you for being the best little sister and “junior mommy.” Both of your sweet smiles and countless hugs pushed me to continue.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation, which represents years of dogged persistence, to my father, George Jonathan Porter, who taught me to never relent. A storyteller at heart, he inspired my love of characters and the words they wield. Daddy, I miss you every day.

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## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ABSTRACT.....                                  | ii |
| DEDICATION.....                                | iv |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....                          | v  |
| LIST OF TABLES.....                            | ix |
| LIST OF FIGURES .....                          | x  |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....                   | 1  |
| Tracking Problems in Places, Old and New ..... | 1  |
| Statement of the Problem.....                  | 12 |
| Research Questions.....                        | 14 |
| Purpose and Significance of the Study .....    | 15 |
| Theoretical Framework.....                     | 17 |
| Researcher Positionality.....                  | 20 |
| Operational Definitions.....                   | 22 |
| Dissertation Outline .....                     | 23 |
| CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....      | 25 |
| Part 1: The Lineage of Academic Tracking.....  | 25 |
| The Mechanics of Tracking .....                | 29 |
| Teachers' Perceptions of Tracking .....        | 32 |
| Students' Perceptions of Tracking.....         | 33 |
| Part 2: Detracking .....                       | 34 |
| Multiyear Placement (Looping).....             | 41 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Summary .....  | 44  |
| CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....                                 | 45  |
| My Antidote to Tracking: Critical Literacy Practices .....   | 46  |
| Purpose .....  | 46  |
| Research Questions .....                                     | 47  |
| Research Design: Critical Ethnographic Case Study .....      | 47  |
| Setting .....  | 49  |
| Participants .....   | 50  |
| Permissions .....  | 56  |
| Data Collection .....  | 57  |
| Data Analysis .....  | 61  |
| Limitations of the Study .....                               | 64  |
| Summary .....  | 65  |
| CHAPTER 4: PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES: A DETRACKING MANIFESTO ..... | 66  |
| Where to Begin? .....  | 66  |
| A Detracking Manifesto .....                                 | 71  |
| Classroom Activities .....                                   | 73  |
| Summary .....  | 107 |
| CHAPTER 5: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS .....                  | 109 |
| Academic Pangaea: Tracking Different Worlds .....            | 109 |
| Chapter Outline .....  | 111 |
| Research Question 1 .....                                    | 111 |
| Research Question 2 .....                                    | 133 |
| Conclusion .....   | 167 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION.....                                   | 169 |
| Luminosity .....   | 169 |
| Introduction.....  | 170 |
| Extending the Theoretical Framework.....                     | 171 |
| Summary of Findings.....                                     | 172 |
| Implications for Practice .....                              | 176 |
| Recommendations for Future Research and Studies .....        | 181 |
| Conclusion .....   | 183 |
| REFERENCES .....   | 184 |
| APPENDIX A: PERMISSIONS.....                                 | 193 |
| APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER ..... | 195 |
| APPENDIX C: INFORMED ASSENT LETTER .....                     | 196 |
| APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT LETTERS .....                   | 198 |
| APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....                          | 204 |
| APPENDIX F: JOURNAL PROMPTS.....                             | 206 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 1.  | City Demographics, 2010 Estimates.....   | 49  |
| 2.  | Elmsville High School and School District Statistics, 2015–2016.....   | 49  |
| 3.  | Description of Faculty Participants.....   | 51  |
| 4.  | Description of Student Participants .....  | 51  |
| 5.  | Linking Research Questions to Data Collection.....   | 57  |
| 6.  | The Guiding Principles of E-3 .....  | 75  |
| 7.  | Students’ Comments on the Process for the Digital Liberty Project .....  | 93  |
| 8.  | Sample Student Responses to Question 1 of Summative Assessment .....   | 95  |
| 9.  | Student Responses in Google Classroom Discussion About Dating Someone Their<br>Parents Did Not Like .....  | 101 |
| 10. | Student Responses: Would You Characterize Yourself as a Member of a Group in<br>High School? What Sets This Group Apart From Other Groups? ..... | 116 |
| 11. | Racial and Socioeconomic Demographics in River City’s Schools, 2015–2016.....  | 119 |
| 12. | Student Participant’s Rationale for Track Choice .....   | 128 |

LIST OF FIGURES

|                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Gene's T-shirt design.....    | 145 |
| 2. Andrew's T-shirt design. .... | 146 |

CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION

*Stand in the place where you live  
Now face north  
Think about direction  
Wonder why you haven't before*

*Now stand in the place where you work  
Now face west  
Think about the place where you live  
Wonder why you haven't before*

*If you are confused, check with the sun  
Carry a compass to help you along  
Your feet are going to be on the ground  
Your head is there to move you around*

—R.E.M. (1989)

**Tracking Problems in Places, Old and New**

A two-mile stretch of yawning smoke stacks, galvanized factories, and the occasional mismatched mansion welcomes visitors to River City as they cross over its aptly named brooding, mouthy body of water that spends its days spitting heavy barges out into the hazy horizon. The 55,000 or so residents of this industrial city need not bother with a calendar on Fridays because one of the curmudgeonly, steely occupants signals the close of the week by emitting a sickeningly sweet, oppressive smell that grips the olfactory senses and manages to linger throughout the weekend. This tall, iron giant produces a well-known, national brand of rather inexpensive cat food, and like his perhaps distant cousin of the paper mill variety, he provides many jobs to the town's hardworking, uniform-compliant citizens.

About six miles west from this landmark, the silver skyline dips a bit before altogether disappearing from the river's muddy banks, and, in this new stretch of shoreline, sprawling fields of cattle grass gently wave at the water below. Here, stark, isolated government structures with clean angles and neutral tones stand formidably amid the verdant landscape. These impressive metal giants house a conglomerate of engineering and manufacturing companies who busy themselves with fabricating space rockets, not cat food. In this straightforward trajectory of a mere six miles, the east and the west differ drastically. At one end of the spectrum, the uniformed men and women employed by the feline food factory enter and leave work with a punch on the clock; whereas, down the street the business casual dress worn by the mostly male engineers employed by the rocket facility enter and leave work, well, when they consider it time to do so. Displays of economic disparity sporadically continue as one drives further into the heart of the city flanked by these two industrial magnates. Along the major highway splitting the town, a seemingly endless stream of title loan shops, fast food restaurants, a smattering of laundry mats, and a neighborhood Wal-Mart overshadow two high-end furniture galleries, a day spa, a boutique clothing store, one upscale candy shop, and two local Barbecue restaurants.

River City further divides itself between what locals simply refer to as "The Southeast" or "The Southwest." In the Southeast section, many of the area's founding families reside in antebellum homes where gold-plated historical register placards detailing the structure's ancestry are either built into the home's façade or displayed proudly on black galvanized posts. Generations of residents settle into this side of town where sprawling ranch-style homes and one-story ramblers remain hidden beneath the shadowy veils of elderly oak trees that soar high above the power lines. In 1950, the city built its first high school and aptly named it River City High School (RCHS).

As the population increased, the need for another high school became apparent, so River City begrudgingly reached across the railroad tracks and annexed its contiguous neighbor, Elmsville, otherwise referred to as the Southwest; and, in 1962, the city opened the doors of its second high school, Elmsville High School (EHS). On this relatively newer side of River City, the first neighborhoods model smaller versions of the same styles of homes found in the Southeast. Many newcomers purchase homes in the Southwest where young neighborhoods continue to crop up. Approximately 1,400 students attend EHS; however, RCHS only houses around 900 students. While the Southwest continues to expand, the Southeast, having no more land to grow into, and perhaps no desire to do so even if it were possible, remains stagnant.

But, like a well-established Jackson vine, this theme of division spreads rampantly from River City's opposing sentinels of industry, creeps into the nooks and crannies of Southeast and Southwest homes, and crawls inside the classroom walls of Elmsville High School.

### **Research Context: Elmsville High School**

Standing stolidly among a network of quaint, older homes, Elmsville High School overshadows its residential neighbors with its hulking campus design housing 12 separate structures that extend like rigid tentacles across approximately 13 acres. Situated along a four-lane road that hustles morning commuters northbound toward the industrial riverfront or afternoon commuters south- and suburban-bound, EHS greets guests every day with both a traditional and digital welcome. A nostalgic and kitschy entrance sign constructed alongside the school in 1962, hovers low to the left of the front entrance drive, and its garish, burnt orange and black tiles signify the institution's namesake and colors. Just a few feet further to the left, and fifty years younger, a sprightly, digital billboard vertically stretches 20 feet and flashes fluorescent images of model students and athletes, as well as messages from local advertisers. Behind the signage, a half-empty parking lot filled with gently used cars precedes an impressive

stretch of lawn that only four years ago bore the weight of 14 double wide, beige trailers. At the time, Elmsville High School underwent a minor facelift and demolished the original, one-story, flat-roofed social sciences building in favor of a two-story, state-of-the-art, impressively flashy structure. The construction took about a year and the history and science teachers spent around 187 days too many in overcrowded portable classrooms with spotty air conditioning units. Upon completion of the social sciences building, construction crews spent the following summer refurbishing the library's countenance to match the architectural integrity of its neighboring building. Because these structures are the first to face visitors' gazes, it only seemed logical that they would also be the first to receive improvements in what began as part of a three-year project to update Elmsville High School. However, at the start of the third year, the district's superintendent of 14 years retired and his younger protégé abandoned the school improvement plan; so, EHS bore the appearance of what appeared to be a botched plastic surgery: Half of its architectural face, including the social sciences building and library, appeared progressively modern while its other half, including the math and English buildings, remained old and untouched.

Still today, Elmsville High School appears divided between the future, present, past, and forgotten. Time has repaired the previously yellowed grass, and new digs for the history and science teachers have almost erased their memories of claustrophobia. But, just beyond the citadel of new and old construction, the rest of EHS remains untouched and significantly dated. Located in the center of campus, the main office appears as the eye of this operation, the Panopticon (Bentham, 1791). From this vantage point, the principal, three assistant principals, a school resource officer, and additional clerical staff have a 365-degree view of the six awning-covered pathways that usher approximately 1,400 students and 113 faculty members to and from

six satellite wings named simply for their content area. The library, cafeteria, guidance office, and gymnasium are the main office's closest neighbors. The A, B, and S (auditorium, band, and science) buildings extend to the south of the main office and the M and E (math and English) buildings stretch to the north. Two dingy tennis courts in desperate need of repair, a practice soccer field shared by both boys and girls, softball field, and football field occupy the larger west side of campus, or what coaches call "The back 40" because only the athletes frequent this remote portion of EHS.

**My classroom, E-3.** The grand tour of Elmsville High School ends where the rest of this story begins: E-3, my classroom. Since 2006, I have called this room my home away from home. Every morning, I drive exactly 7.2 miles to EHS, and I usually enter E-3 by 8 a.m. The first detail students notice is that my room functioned, many moons ago, as a science lab. Seven science stations line the back wall of the room and defunct sink nozzles droop wearily to the left or right from years of students' fidgeting hands. A rainbow of literature and grammar books span the length of the classroom, and locked cabinets that used to hold combustible materials now house department sets of *Great Expectations*, *Animal Farm*, *Night*, *Raisin in the Sun*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Frankenstein*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. An almost floor-to-ceiling wall of glass windows occupies the right side of the classroom and when the beige vinyl curtains are drawn, one can gaze upon a small open courtyard with three randomly placed benches, many overgrown bushes, and one lonely evergreen that, fittingly, shelters mockingbirds in early April when we just so happen to be pages deep into Lee's Maycomb County. Along the front wall of the classroom sits my modest desk, painted a lovely shade of pale lavender by a former student who graciously helped me update my classroom in 2011 because she told me that all the brown furniture "depressed her." What began

as a small painting task, extended into a full-blown aesthetic transformation. In just a few weeks, we successfully flipped the space from the standardized, factory-like motif of beige, brown, and more beige to a soothing serene landscape inspired by Sherwin Williams' coastal collection. Now, sea salt covers the walls, coastal fog clings to the cabinets and lab tables, and French lavender provides splashes of color on the book shelves, classroom door, and it even spells out the names of my family along the face of the front lab table from where I often begin instruction.

Nine rows, three desks deep, stretch across the classroom that can comfortably hold more than 27 students, but often only seats around 23 to 25 in a typical class block. Often, we shiver throughout the warmer months when the hulking, industrial air conditioning unit located centrally in the ceiling runs relentlessly, and we sweat bullets in the winter as the radiator spanning the entire left wall cranks out dry heat. A lingering hint of eucalyptus-scented essential oils diffuses throughout the room. Aside from the fifteen fluorescent lighting boxes that hum overhead, E-3 does its best to make a peaceful first impression.

**Elmsville High School faculty.** The faculty at EHS mirrors the setting's continuing pattern division of old versus new. A small group of veteran teachers calling themselves "The Old Guard" have called this place home for 25 to 30 years. Many of them attended EHS, and they not only know students' names, they also know their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and enemies. They can provide a detailed backstory on many of River City's families, and they pride themselves on knowing which closets hoard skeletons. On the second Tuesday of every month, their voices dominate faculty meetings. They are the first to question change and, likewise, the last to do so.

Just across the hall in E-4 lives one such veteran teacher, Ms. Patton (all names are pseudonyms). She's the English department chairperson and has called these halls home since

1976 when she first entered EHS as a freshman. Now nearing retirement, she says, “I’m old as dirt and I’ve seen it all. If you think kids are bad now, you should have seen the 90s!” Ms. Patton oversees 12 English teachers, nine of whom have been teaching a little more than a decade, including me. I consider her a dear friend and wonderful person, but our teaching styles and classes differ—sometimes dramatically. In her classroom, only blue or black ink pens are allowed. Gum is forbidden and will land students in ISS (In-School Suspension)—never mind that the code of conduct doesn’t support this ruling per se, the administration simply knows not to interfere with her rules or methods.

When I started at EHS in 2006, Ms. Patton taught Advanced Placement (AP) Language to juniors, advanced English for freshmen, and one standard senior class; I taught standard sophomore English. Every day, she and I stood at our doors, exchanged pleasantries, and welcomed gaggles of teenagers into our rooms. Within the first month, I noticed one very important distinction between E-4 (her room) and E-3 (my room): While only 12 squares of worn, brown, concrete tile separated our doors, our classrooms felt worlds apart.

**Elmsville High School students.** In this section, I explore the classroom as a place with two very different narratives detailing what a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student might typically experience in an advanced and standard English classroom at EHS. Fain (2004) encourages educators to regard “the curriculum as an architectural plan, a blueprint if you will, for a designed dynamic environment” (p. 10). With this metaphor in mind, I provide two drastically different “blueprints.” The first details Ms. Patton’s room, and the latter details Mrs. Walter’s room. Because these two places of learning do share a few similarities that bear mentioning, I will briefly discuss these first before detailing their continental differences. These examples stem from extensive observations and experience.

### **Exploring students' places at EHS: The advanced and standard classrooms.**

*Similarities.* Obviously, both advanced- and standard academic tracks must follow Alabama College- & Career-Ready Standards (CCRS). For the 9<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum, this means all students should be exposed to and proficient in all 41 standards. Furthermore, according to the section titled, Grades 9-12 Overview in the 2016 Revised Alabama Course of Study: English Language Arts, it encourages secondary teachers to consider the following goals:

In designing instruction to help all students achieve success, careful consideration should be given to addressing the individual learning needs of students. This can be accomplished by including a variety of instructional strategies such as projects, demonstrations, and collaborative learning groups; conducting formal and informal assessments to provide continual feedback regarding student progress; and by utilizing all available technology for both teacher and student use. (p. 69)

In addition to this credo, students in both tracks must receive instruction from a highly qualified teacher as stipulated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) signed into law in 2002. According to NCLB (2002), a highly qualified teacher must possess “a bachelor’s degree, full state certification, as defined by the state, and demonstrated competency as defined by the state, in each core academic subject he or she teaches” (NCLB, 2002, P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. § 6319).

All eleven teachers in EHS’s English department, including myself, are highly qualified; and, in addition to a bachelor’s degree, we all hold master’s degrees.

In term of instructional resources, all of the classrooms have equal access to a classroom set of literature books for all grades, and each student receives a grade-appropriate grammar workbook at the beginning of the school year. Every teacher has one desktop computer, and as mentioned earlier, the entire school shares two portable carts with 25 netbooks each. Every building boasts a computer lab with approximately 30 desktop computers; but, teachers must reserve this room months in advance and there is no limit on how many days a classroom can occupy the lab. In the library, there are about 40 desktop computers and these must be reserved

as well. Unfortunately, the guidance counselors often reserve the library for standardized testing, AP testing, district meetings, etc.; so, the library is often closed to classrooms.

All of the students participate in standardized testing at least three times per school year—September, December, and April—for the STAR Reading and Math online assessment (now called the ScanTron Performance Series). While the online test provides immediate results for students to see, the school does not provide a testing report for the students and their parents. Essentially, the district extrapolates the data and uses it to assess overall reading and math scores for each school. Beyond this purpose, I am uncertain, as I am not privy to the district’s data collection purposes. I do, however, know that students in advanced-level tracks tend to score much higher than their peers in standard tracks according to the testing data presented to teachers by the Secondary Curriculum and Instruction director.

In summary, advanced-level and standard classrooms share the following similarities:

- Both (should) follow the same course of study.
- Both are taught by highly qualified teachers with master’s degrees.
- Both have access to many of the same instructional resources, such as textbooks, workbooks, and computers.
- Both participate in district-wide standardized testing at least three times a year and none of the students receive individualized reports.

While these two worlds may resemble one another in minor ways, the next section shows how they generally exhibit galactic differences.

*Differences. Advanced English for freshmen.* Inside this world, a pack of giggling students wearing charcoal-gray, comfort wear T-shirts with *EHS Band* boldly plastered across their chests, gingerly deposit their musical instruments in a neat row at the front of this

classroom. Not the least bit fazed by today's Tetris-like furniture configuration, nor tired from the weight of their hefty tow perched upon their backs, these students, Bedouins of this academic terrain, move confidently and expertly to desks in which no one has claimed tenure. Here, everybody knows one another. Monogrammed initials and names appear everywhere on Yeti tumblers, Hunter galoshes, puffy sweatshirts, and L.L. Bean book bags. Within these few seconds prior to the start of class, it becomes apparent that most of the students want for nothing because they seem to have everything.

The bell rings, yet its purpose feels futile for these students. No one rushes in at the last minute, no one arrives tardy; instead, 17 students excitedly glance in the teacher's direction and politely await instruction. It's almost too eerily perfect and this scene could surely appear in the film adaptation of Stephen King's (1977) short story, "Children of the Corn." Except, unlike King's version, not all of the children have blonde hair and blue eyes—only two possess these traits. The rest run the spectrum of the usual hair colors, save one intrepid soul. A girl with Smurf blue hair straightens from a slump to reveal telltale, stoned (look-alike) Gummy Bears dancing in circles on her Grateful Dead shirt. A pink-studded nose ring bedazzles her right nostril, and it pairs nicely with her cat eyeglasses. She reaches to her left and pulls out a MacBook Pro with the universal recycling symbol neatly plastered over the trademark Apple.

While the EHS Code of Conduct clearly states that students may not have distracting hair colors, facial piercings, or clothing that suggests drug use or drug paraphernalia, this student avoids a discipline referral. Instead, the student and teacher engage in a conversation regarding the day's project: Word maps linking themes and characters found in a book they recently finished, *The House of the Spirits* (Allende, 1982).

"Our Allende posters are due today, right?" asks the student.

"Yes," beams the teacher, "and I know yours is going to be fantastic!"

The pale girl blushes and retrieves an 11x17 canvas covered with what looks like a vastly complicated network of kitchen twine and words. Following suit, the rest of the students pull similar pieces of word art from their book bags. After presenting their projects, the students transition to avante-garde MoMa enthusiasts and take a gallery walk around the room to admire every student's contribution and provide constructive feedback.

In addition to Allende, students in advanced English 9 read *Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850), *The Chosen* (Potok, 1967), *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1597/2000) *The Odyssey* (Homer, unknown), *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945), and any other novels suggested by students and/or teachers. Ms. Patton, who teaches predominately advanced classes, explains why this level of autonomy exists in advanced, but not standard classrooms:

We (she points down the hall in the direction of another veteran teacher) follow a different system than the rest because we're preparing this group for the Advanced Placement exams their junior and senior years. We have to cover a lot more material than most classes, so we supplement and exchange titles as we see necessary.

Approximately 25 % of freshmen at EHS enroll in advanced English, and many follow the advanced track all four years, which means Ms. Patton's rebel student in the Jerry Garcia shirt, as well as her peers, will learn that the code of conduct need not apply to members of this private academy, within a public institution. Inside this school within a school, labeled by Morrell (2008) as the two-school phenomenon, students have access to a superior curriculum taught by veteran teachers. In this advanced classroom, students feel empowered to express their individuality and alter the curriculum to meet their academic needs and interests. But what about the other 75%?

*Standard English for freshmen.* Outside of the advanced freshmen classroom where students continue their gallery work on Allende, the hallway remains mostly deserted. On this particular day, the slow, Southern drawl of Sissy Spacek echoes from the standard freshmen

English classroom two doors down. Breathing life into the pages of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the famous crooner reads aloud, “Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop.”

The transition between the previous academic place and this one only takes 10 or so steps, or long enough for Sissy to read two sentences, but upon crossing the threshold of this world into another dimension, two things readily become apparent: Sissy does not teach English here, and nobody finds her audio recording of this Southern classic particularly engaging—save, perhaps the teacher and a few dutiful fans who faithfully follow Ms. Spacek and Ms. Lee, line for line, in their individual copies of the book.

Inside this world, the crowns of many heads and faces with drowsy eyes ebb and flow like the sea. Aside from students’ upper bodies bobbing up and down on 28 desks arranged rigidly in six rows, no other physical movement visibly occurs until one student slowly lifts his right arm in the air. When his nonverbal gesture fails to garner the attention of the teacher, who with a downward glance, appears lost in the pages, he quickly interrupts Ms. Spacek to request restroom permission. Without pause or a glance in his direction, the teacher nods affirmatively and waves the student toward the exit. In the following forty minutes, Ms. Spacek trudges on through Maycomb’s “red slop,” and seven more students request a restroom pass to take a trip out of this place.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This dissertation explores how schools divide space unequally and inequitably through tracking—the sorting method that separates students based on ability, as well as differentiates the curriculum between the advanced and standard tracks (Hallinan, 1994; Oakes, 1994; Sadovnik, 2011). Some researchers claim tracking exists in more than 95% of secondary schools (Akos, Lambie, Milsom & Gilbert, 2007; Schweiker-Marra & Pula, 2005), and many schools use this

practice without questioning its implications for the historically underserved students not following an advanced track. Standard, regular, on-track, low, and remedial are some of the labels given to classes designed to academically prepare a student who wishes to progress through the curriculum at an average pace. Conversely, Advanced, Honors, Advanced Placement (AP), Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP), and High are some of the elitist labels given to classes designed to academically prepare a student who wishes to progress through the curriculum at an above-average pacing. In addition to the labels indicating the pace of the class, they also suggest a key underlying assumption, which is this: Students of average academic ability belong in standard tracks and students of above-average academic ability belong in advanced tracks. Essentially, these tracking mechanisms sort students into the winners and losers of the public education system (Apple, 2001; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Gruenewald, 2003; Labaree, 1997; McLaren, 2003; McNeil, 2000; Popkewitz, 1991; Spring, 1998) and track placement affects the classroom.

In *Pedagogy of Place* (2004), Callejo Pérez, Fain, and Slater argue, “the nature of the space in which teaching and learning occur is an important factor in shaping the educational experience” and they observe schools, and their respective classrooms, “as the place where learning happens and where the lives of student and teacher can thrive or wither—a place rich in human potential” (pp. 1-2). Many factors can affect school climate; however, I argue that the classroom environment is largely impacted by track placement.

After my first few years of teaching at EHS, I began to notice advanced and standard students were treated, which is a common problem with academic tracking (Ansalone, 2010; Goodlad, 1984; Gratch, 2002; Graubard, 2004; Mayer, 2008; Modica, 2015; Morrell, 2008; Oakes, 1985/1987/2005; Worthy, 2010). Furthermore, advanced students at EHS received

instruction from veteran teachers, Ms. Patton and our previous department chairperson, Mrs. Berry, who were doing what I initially called “ping-ponging” a small group of students back and forth so that they could develop personal and meaningful connections with their students (Bellis, 1999; Goldberg, 1990/1991; Hanson, 1995; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Moll et al., 1992; Hitz, Somers & Jenlink, 2007). For example, Ms. Patton would teach Advanced English 9; Mrs. Berry would teach them in Advanced English 10; Ms. Patton would see them again their junior year for AP language; and, finally, Mrs. Berry would welcome them back their senior year for AP literature. Essentially, this select group of students benefitted from this form of looping. They represented the academic “haves” of EHS who benefitted from what Morrell (2008) described as the two-school phenomenon because they attended a private academy inside of a public high school. These students were treated like kings and queens, and the places they occupied often appeared to be lively, happy, engaging classrooms. It was easy to see why the academic “haves” might enjoy high school so much, but what about the “have nots” at EHS? Were all students at EHS, regardless of their academic track, receiving the same high- quality education as those in Ms. Patton’s and Mrs. Berry’s? In short, I wanted to explore this question posed by place-based scholar and educator David Gruenewald (2003): “What are our places telling us and teaching us about our possibilities?” (p. 639).

### **Research Questions**

Guided by the line of inquiry above that explores the geographical and ecological implications of academic tracking, this study explores the following two questions:

- RQ 1. How do the faculty and students at Elmsville High School (EHS) perceive academic tracking and what are its implications of this practice in the classroom?
- RQ 2. What happens when I detrack English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement?

If we provide equal and equitable academic experiences for students, they will graduate high school with the knowledge that multiple opportunities exist. Like Gruenewald (2003), I believe that meaningful instructional practices can connect students to the world outside of the classroom; however, if I were to focus on this goal and begin locally in River City, I would be asking students to care for and respect a divided community that visibly separates its economic opportunities. While not everyone works for the Meow Mix factory or a rocket-manufacturing company, this community certainly resembles EHS's tracked academic setting with a disproportionate number of residents employed by processing plants.

Gruenewald (2003), and other scholars (Berg & Dasmann, 1990; Bowers, 2001; hooks, 1992; Orr, 1992; Smith & Katz, 1993), use the terms *decolonization* and *reinhabitation* to describe the process of recognizing and rejecting the dominant culture of a place (decolonization) so that one can construct a socially just place (reinhabitation). This is semantically and philosophically similar to Freire's (1970/1995) concepts of *conscientizacao* and *situationality*. In short, both decolonization and *conscientizacao* suggest the idea that one becomes aware of an oppressive place; and, in turn, reinhabitation and situationality suggest that one alters the space to create a more socially just environment. This is exactly what I would like to do at EHS because I believe that by recognizing and rejecting the oppressive practice of academic tracking, I can help students construct a socially just place *inside* and, ultimately, *outside* of the classroom.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this critical ethnographic study is to (a) explore the implications of academic tracking at EHS; (b) describe how I detracked English education with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement; and (c) examine what happens when English education is detracked for historically underserved students.

Tracking in River City appears to perpetuate economic disparity because students in advanced classrooms receive a superb education, have access to the best teaching resources, and, ultimately, have a leg up toward NASA (the rocket facility); whereas, students in standard classrooms receive an inferior education that centers on rote instruction as a means to prepare River City students for repetitive, working-class jobs (Ansalone, 2010; Graubard, 2004; Oakes, 1985).

Students in advanced tracks generally receive a superior education while those in standard tracks often receive an inferior education (Ansalone, 2010; Goodlad, 1984; Gratch, 2002; Graubard, 2004; Mayer, 2008; Modica, 2015; Morrell, 2008; Oakes, 1985/1987/2005; Worthy, 2010). So, I decided to flip the script and provide a superior education to students in my incoming English 9 standard class. Like critical place pedagogues, I want to transform the classroom as a place by finding ways to engage students who may have felt forgotten, ignored, and (possibly) bored in previous standard classrooms where drill and kill exercises tend to dominate the curriculum.

Guided by Friere's (1970) notion of critical theory, Gruenewald's (2003) and Casey's (1997) notions of place, I wanted to transform the classroom as a place by finding ways to reach students who may have felt forgotten, ignored, and (possibly) bored in previous standard classrooms where drill and kill exercises dominated. In short, I would detrack English education for historically underserved students. But, how?

First, I needed to determine what I considered to be superior and inferior educational practices, so I compared Ms. Patton's advanced classes to Mrs. Wood's standard classes. Based upon observations of their classes, as well as my own teaching and learning experiences, I believe a superior education, supported by theory and practice, includes two key elements: (a)

Pedagogical practices that promote an inclusive and collaborative space in which (b) students can create and sustain meaningful, personal, and memorable connections with each other and the teacher. Both factors are often present in advanced track classrooms and missing in standard classrooms; and, I believe, the presence or absence of these factors affect classroom environment the most.

The need to decolonize and detrack English education is significant because as Gruenewald (2003) argues, “Critical pedagogies are needed to challenge the assumptions, practices, and outcomes taken for granted in dominant culture and in conventional education” (p. 3). As a teacher-researcher, I can contribute to the scholarly debate on academic tracking and detracking, as well as share the ways in which I enacted critical literacy practices in my classroom and their effects on the students, classroom, and community. Secondly, this study highlights what many River City residents do not realize: The magnet school program structures inequality inside and outside of the classroom, and the effects of this program linger well beyond students’ primary years. Finally, while many elementary schools practice multiyear placement, secondary schools do not, and this study reveals its positive effects on the classroom, students, and teacher.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place,” Gruenewald (2003) hybridizes critical pedagogy and place-based education to form a critical pedagogy of place— “a much needed framework for educational theory, research, policy, and practice” (p. 3). Using this framework as a starting point, I support Gruenewald’s (2003) sociological discussion of critical pedagogy in which he cites the field’s key theorists (Freire, 1970/1995; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2003) and observes that the main purpose of critical pedagogy is for educators and students to transcend to a higher consciousness and commit to “identifying and redressing the injustices,

inequalities, and myths of an often oppressive world” (p. 4). I also support Gruenwald’s (2003) notion of place as a socially constructed space in which one can transform the self by altering his or her relationship with the environment; however, unlike Gruenwald (2003), I believe that we cannot connect students to the world outside of the classroom without first connecting with students inside of the classroom. Given the amount of time our youth spend in school, it seems logical—and necessary—to explore the ecology of the classroom when first considering place-based pedagogies. While every classroom can be quite different, tracked classrooms tend to exhibit similar aesthetics, pedagogical practices, and social interactions. Students in an advanced track benefit from trusting relationships with the teacher, critical engagement, and a student-centered curriculum; whereas, students in standard tracks suffer from a lack of relationships, choice, autonomy, and empowerment.

While I use Gruenewald’s (2003) critical pedagogy of place as a theoretical entry point and augment it with Casey’s (1997) notion of place, it’s imperative to note that this study’s foundation rests upon Freire’s notion of critical theory (1970). Because of Freire’s (1970) seminal piece, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I began to understand the ways in which places can operate as oppressive and liberatory. These theoretical elements framed the way in which I approached and implemented critical place pedagogies that encourage “the possible transformation of oppressive spaces” (Johnson, 2015). In this case, I explore the dehumanizing effect academic tracking has on the standard classroom, a place that I consider to be an “oppressive space” in dire need of transformation. I compounded Freire’s (1970) critical theory with Casey’s (1997) notion of place to create what I consider to be a necessary precursor to a critical pedagogy of place, which “lacks a specific theoretical tradition” (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 3). Gruenwald (2003) observes,

A critical pedagogy of place aims to (a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization). (p. 9)

Combining these theories provided a broader lens of place and contributed to a critical pedagogy of place—in this case, tracked and de-tracked classrooms. In this study, I provide vignettes detailing both standard and advanced classrooms; and I specifically address these three components: pedagogical practices, human connections, and the implications both have on the classroom as a place.

A student may conceive of the collective classroom as a negative place based upon previous experiences; but, his perception can always change depending upon the events and practices within the academic setting. I resonate with Casey's theory of place (1997) in that he views place as fluid and never definitive—places can be redefined over and over again. I find this to be a promising premise for my study because it negates the generalized dichotomous argument that students either love or hate school. Often students' views change based upon the classroom setting or place. This is equally similar to the claim students sometimes make that they hate reading; they often recant when given the opportunity to choose what they read. Casey (1997) observes that “. . . places gather things in their midst—where ‘things’ connote various animate and inanimate entities. Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts (Casey, 1997, p. 24). Each student experiences and perceives place differently based upon particular memories and the events they hold. “A place is generative and regenerative on its own schedule. From it experiences are born and to it human beings (and other organisms) return for empowerment” (Casey, 1997, p. 27).

Just as a place can empower, it can also oppress. Rote classroom instruction with repetitive instructional tasks drains a place of its energy and creativity; and, in doing so, also

dulls the student's experiences, thus making it more difficult to create unique, inspiring memories. For example, meet Joe. He works in a button factory where one day resembles the next 100 days because of mundane job responsibilities. Through repetitive sequencing, Joe fashions buttons. Because each day mirrors itself, and so on ad nauseam, this particular place gathers little in terms of unique properties. Similarly, in a monotonous classroom, time passes unremarkably because very few notable moments occur to define the place and mark it chronologically. Therefore, the *hold* of the place is weak (fragile) as it is loosely held by trivial moments (Casey, 1997). Experiences in the classroom can be analyzed similarly. Students remember the great teachers, cool projects, challenging *and* boring classes, social relationships, as well as where and among whom they felt most comfortable. The various places (events) define the student and vice versa.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In this section, I provide my educational background, as well as how I came to occupy E-3 as an English teacher at EHS. Furthermore, I provide additional insight into what inspired this study and why I felt the need to change how I approached the classroom as a place, as well as the actors inside—the students.

I was lucky like Ms. Patton's E-4s. Nobody chooses the family into which he or she is born, but I was fortunate enough to fall from a family tree that just so happens to prize education. The question was never would I go to college, but where. As the only child of two military brats, I grew up as the central focus in a very regimented household. Education, discipline, and the constant pursuit of both theoretically framed my upbringing. My paternal grandfather, a 1946 West Point graduate and 1965 Georgetown University Law School graduate, held education in high esteem as did my paternal grandmother, who graduated from Vanderbilt University in 1981 with a degree in English. Even with six children, my dad being the eldest, my grandparents both

possessed a dogged love of learning and undoubtedly instilled this drive in my dad, who graduated from The University of Alabama in 1971; and, later, returned and graduated with a Master's in Accounting in 1977. After spending 25 years in the Air Force as an instructor in instrument flying, my maternal grandfather attended The University of Alabama from which he graduated in 1967 with a degree in Computer Science, and my maternal grandmother attended Bethesda School of Nursing and graduated in 1945. As the middle child of six, my mother graduated from The University of Alabama in 1973; and, she too furthered her education by receiving a Master's in Guidance and Counseling in 1977 and a second Master's in Special Education in 1979.

I grew up recognizing Denny Chimes almost as early as McDonald's golden arches. We regularly visited The University of Alabama, and from 8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I spent two weeks every summer participating in UA's swim camp. Academically or athletically, I was expected to attend and excel at The University of Alabama. I almost flunked out twice during the first semesters of my freshman and sophomore years because I spent more time socializing than capitalizing on my education. My parents threatened to yank me back to the small, rural town to which I swore I would never return, and I graduated in 2000 with a degree in English. Performing well in my classes during my junior and senior years did little to mitigate the damage I did the previous two years; however, even with a somewhat unimpressive 2.87 GPA, I managed to secure a journalism internship with Southern Progress Corporation and spent two semesters with the travel department at *Southern Living* magazine. I fact-checked many stories, made numerous copies, compiled ample research, and jumped at the chance to write a one-column story on anything from a Shag dancing contest in South Carolina to a cycling tour through the Everglades. Fortunately, the sister magazine to *Southern Living*, *Coastal Living*,

hired me as a copy/production assistant. The first year I fact-checked even more stories and read every novel suggested by editors so that I would be knowledgeable in the break room in the event someone referenced Thomas Pynchon or his masterpiece, *Gravity's Rainbow*. All of the salty editors hailed Hunter S. Thompson and his gritty style, while the upper echelons praised David Sedaris and his sardonic wit.

Mimicking the vocabulary of those around me and those on the pages, I slowly progressed through the ranks. After four years with *Coastal Living*, I had traveled to many unique coastal destinations and written myriad articles detailing my trips and the various finds and quotes I found along the way. I took my dad with me on a couple of stories, and he always had a knack for recognizing the small things that so many people overlook. He constantly reminded me that writers must be astutely aware of their subjects during an interview because their body language sometimes revealed more than their quotes. While I loved my time in journalism, I wanted to share my passion for learning with others; so, I returned to school and graduated from The University of Alabama at Birmingham with a Masters in Education with a focus in Secondary English/language arts. Shortly after I started teaching at EHS, my mentor and greatest muse passed away in 2006. But my dad left knowing that I wanted to instill in my students a love for writing and reading, just as he had done for me.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Place*, as Casey (1997) observes, signifies an event, not thing. It carries with it historical, social, cultural, psychological, and physical implications. “A place is generative and regenerative on its own schedule. From it experiences are born and to it human beings (and other organisms) return for empowerment . . .” (Casey, 1997, p.27).

*Space and time* operate within *places*; the subjective event precedes the objective void. “A given horizon is at once spatial and temporal, and it belongs to a field that is the perceptual

scene of the place whose horizon it is. . . . place includes space and time as part of its own generative power. Rather than being the minion of an absolute space and time, place is the master of their shared matrix” (Casey, 2007, p. 43).

*Academic tracking or ability grouping* organizes students according to scholastic talents and/or intellectual ability. River City High School (RCHS) offers four tracks ranging in difficulty from lowest to highest as follows: Standard, Honors, Advanced, and Advanced Placement.

*Critical literacy* is an approach that advocates “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting justice” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382).

*Multiyear placement, or looping*, is the educational practice of the same teacher spending two or more years with the same group of students (Goldberg, 1990; Hanson, 1995).

### **Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation is the culmination of a two-year qualitative analysis and comprises six chapters that follow a mostly traditional dissertation format. Chapter One introduces River City as a place and identifies a theme of division prevalent amid the community and within its school walls. Specifically, it explores the school setting and the ways in which academic tracking can position students in places of power or oppression. It further delves into the problem statement, purpose and significance of the study, the theoretical underpinnings that provide a frame for analysis, and researcher positionality. Chapter Two provides a review of current and previous scholarly literature on academic tracking, critical literacy practices, and multiyear placement—all of which affect student engagement in the classroom. Chapter Three explains the qualitative research methodology that grounds and frames this study. Chapter Four delves more deeply into my pedagogical choices, the rationale supporting each, and provides data findings from many of the critical literacy practices; and, Chapter Five provides detailed data, as well as the findings,

from the two research questions. Finally, Chapter Six offers an overarching reflective glimpse of the study, explores possible implications for academic structuring, classroom practices and policy; and, lastly, suggests future research opportunities.

## CHAPTER 2:

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review is essentially divided into two parts: tracking and detracking. In the first half of this chapter, I briefly explore how academic tracking established roots as a traditional practice in the United States. Then, I review present-day tracking practices, including how schools operationalize track placement and the instructional differences between advanced and standard classes. Finally, I examine teachers' and students' perceptions of academic tracking.

In the second part of this chapter, I explore possible solutions to tracking. First, I provide an overview of detracking and analysis of critical pedagogy. Then, I review empirical studies documenting the implementation of critical literacy practices. Finally, because I propose multiyear placement as a form of detracking, I examine its history and implications in the classroom.

Combining these research threads establishes the foundation of this study and positions it as an approach to detrack English education for historically underserved students.

#### **Part 1: The Lineage of Academic Tracking**

##### **In the Beginning**

To critically analyze tracking, it first must be deconstructed as a tradition. Prior to grouping students according to intellectual achievement or ability, otherwise referred to as tracking in the United States, one-room schoolhouses mainly existed for children of wealthy families in the mid-Atlantic states cite. These schools aimed to “increase opportunity, teach morality and citizenship, encourage leadership, maintain social mobility, and promote

responsiveness to social progress . . . Pedagogy consisted largely of rote learning, recitation, and strong discipline” (Oakes, 2005, p. 16). But, in the early 1900s tracking became more prevalent as a result of the immigrant influx in which approximately 15 million southern and eastern Europeans flooded Ellis Island by 1924 (Ansalone, 2010; Oakes, 1987/2005; Mayer, 2008). Most of these immigrants lacked skill, education, and money; but left their homes in search of a new and improved life (Oakes, 2005).

Burgeoning industrialization and urbanization in the United States attracted larger populations of adult immigrant laborers and reduced the need for child labor. Child labor laws emerged and by the close of the nineteenth century, many children were considered ineligible in the work force because of enforced mandatory education laws (Ansalone, 2010; Best, 2000; Geltis, 1998; Mitchell, 1995; Oakes, 2005; Persell, 1976). In an effort to meet the demands of America’s increasingly diverse population, education and the secondary curriculum required change from the traditional core subjects of “classical, Latin-scientific, modern languages, and English” (Oakes, 2005, p. 18). As public high schools grew exponentially, so did the need for uniform college entrance requirements. During this time, two conflicting thoughts emerged on how to best educate the masses. Harvard University president Charles Eliot argued that college and non-college bound students should receive the same secondary education. “The proposed curriculum consisted of the learnings the committee saw as valuable in the process of becoming an educated person, regardless of future plans” (Oakes, 2005, p. 19). On the contrary, psychologist G. Stanley Hall envisioned a differentiated curriculum because of the population’s increasing diversity. He argued that

immigrant youth could be characterized as culturally neglected as well as biologically inferior. As such they were susceptible to the good works of the socially and morally advanced classes, who could provide them with character training—more important to society by far than an attempt to develop their inferior intellects. (Oakes, 2005, p. 24)

Eliot countered in an Educational Review (1905) and claimed he

will refuse to believe that the American public intends to have its children sorted before their teens into clerks, watchmakers, lithographers, telegraph operators, masons, teamsters, farm laborers, and so forth, and treated differently in their schools according to these prophecies of their appropriate life careers. Who are we to make these prophecies? (pp. 330-331)

As a result of the debates, schools were redefined as a place where learning and “social control” could take place. “The classics were no longer the only curriculum found in schools. Schools began to include a curriculum that would train students to be citizens as well,” (Mayer, 2008, p. 9). In essence, curriculum tracking emerged from this schism and educational institutions began sorting students into two trajectories: college and non-college bound.

### **Tracking Today**

Currently, many secondary schools offer curriculum tracking (Akos, Lambie, Milsom & Gilbert, 2007; Schweiker-Marra & Pula, 2005). In 2015-2016, 21% of students at Elmsville High School (EHS) enrolled in at least one advanced course, and in 2016-2017 22% enrolled in *at least* one advanced course. A student at EHS may choose from the Advanced, Regular, or Occupational diploma path and enroll in any of the following levels of tracked classes within each subject: Standard, Advanced, or Advanced Placement (AP). A student may also enroll in an advanced class for one subject and a standard class for another subject. According to the research, many secondary schools provide this diverse structure of tracking (Oakes, 1987).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the *Survey of High School Curricular Options* conducted a national study on tracking in 912 public secondary schools, grades 10-12, and found the following:

- Most public secondary schools (86 percent) reported offering courses in their core curriculum that are differentiated in terms of content, quantity or intensity of work, or expectations regarding independent work.

- However, only 15 percent of schools described themselves as having traditional "tracking" policies, reporting that they offer differentiated courses and do differentiated grouping in their core curriculum.
- The majority of schools (71 percent) indicated that they offer differentiated courses, but give students open access to any course provided they have taken the prerequisite course(s).
- The remaining 14 percent of schools indicated that they offer a variety of undifferentiated courses in their core curriculum and allow students open access to any course provided they have taken the prerequisite(s). (NCES, 1993)

Because many schools track according to different variables, the data above indicate a disparity between what is and is not considered traditional tracking. It appears that what many schools term “differentiated curriculum” or “curricular differentiation” is in fact a euphemism for the stigmatized labeling and sorting method of tracking. “American education is so decentralized that there are probably many different forms of tracking in this country, and a case study cannot describe them all” (Rosenbaum, 1978, p. 238). Conflicting terminology, multiple sorting variables, and schools’ common denial of tracking seem to complicate data findings, as well as question their reliability.

Recently detailed in *The Brown Center Report on American Education* (2013), the NAEP conducted a longitudinal study on tracking among 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The survey was administered to principals who were asked in varying years about different subjects “whether students are assigned to classes based on ability so as to create some classes that are higher in average ability or achievement than others” (Loveless, 2013, p. 18). The findings indicated that math is the most frequently tracked subject with English/Language Arts ranking as the second most tracked

subject. Science and history classes contain much smaller numbers of tracked students. While there is an increase in ELA tracking from 1998 to 2003, it is unclear whether or not this trend continued because the question was not asked again for this subject. While there are many different understandings of what is considered traditional tracking at the national level, some researchers claim that it exists in more than 95% of secondary schools (Akos, Lambie, Milsom & Gilbert, 2007; Schweiker-Marra & Pula, 2005).

## **The Mechanics of Tracking**

### **Determining Track Placement**

While tracking widely exists in secondary schools, most institutions declare differently (Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1978; Jencks, 1972). “Many schools claim that they do not track students, but it is the rare school that has no mechanism for sorting students into groups that appear to be alike in ways that make teaching them seem easier,” (Oakes, 2005, p. 3). To complicate the issue further, schools use different methods in determining how they track (Bernhardt, 2014; Findley & Bryan, 1970a; Hallinan, 1991; Hornby & Witte, 2014; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 2005; Persell, 1976; Rist, 1970). The five factors most schools consider when determining track placement are previous track placements, standardized test scores, grades, teacher recommendations, and student/parent choice (Findley & Bryan, 1970a; Hallinan, 1991; Oakes, 2005; Persell, 1976; Rist 1970).

In a two-year study examining how five urban high schools conducted course scheduling, Riehl, Pallas, and Nariello (1999) found that the process in which schools sorted students largely ignored criterion-based measures and instead was arbitrary and socially constructed. Often, counselors made determinations on placement without a clear indicator of the student’s performance because the feeder middle schools’ grades varied due to inflation. Furthermore, standardized test scores were often not available when course schedules were determined.

EHS relies upon teacher recommendations and student/parent choice to determine how students will be tracked. For example, when 8<sup>th</sup> grade students register in the spring for their upcoming 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes, they list the courses they wish to take on their enrollment form. Then, they must have each core teacher initial the form by his or her subject area. If a student wants to take Advanced English 9, but the 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher feels the student is not ready for the challenge, then that teacher can refuse to initial the form. If the student still wants to enroll in the advanced course, he/she must have their parent sign a waiver acknowledging that the current teacher does not recommend the student enroll in the course. The student is placed in the advanced English 9 class; however, if he/she requests out of the class before the end of the semester or fails the course, the school basically pulls out their damning *Scarlet Letter*-like “I told you so form.” The parent waiver form is intended to deter students from enrolling in a course that the current teacher does not feel the student is academically prepared for. Most students give up on the possibility of taking an advanced course if their teacher does not initial the selection.

In a landmark case study, Rosenbaum (1978) found that students transitioning to a higher track is rare. “Very few noncollege track students move upward to college tracks. Similarly, few lower college track students move upward, but many move downward (particularly after tenth grade)” (p. 242). Once students enter high school, they usually follow the same track throughout the four years, which can be problematic if an incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grader has been improperly placed due to uninformed decisions.

### **Instructional Differences: Exploring the Two Worlds of Schooling**

In John Goodlad’s landmark research, *A Study of Schooling* (1984), approximately 150 researchers, including teacher researcher Jeannie Oakes, conducted case study research on 25 secondary schools spread throughout the United States with 13,719 teenagers of diverse

socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Because schools label high-track classes in a variety of ways, such as Advanced Placement, Honors, Gifted, and College Preparatory; and low-track classes as Regular, Standard, Basic, Low, Remedial, and Vocational, the researchers simply divided the classes into two levels: high-track and low-track. To provide a glimpse into the classroom climate of high-track and low-track classes, the researchers asked students the following question: “What is the most important thing you have learned or done so far in this class?” (Oakes, 1985, p.67). In the high-track classes, many responses cited composing research papers, expressing individual thoughts, writing poetry, and reading classical novels. For example, one student in a high-track class responded, “I’ve learned to analyze stories that I have read. I can come with an open mind and see each character’s point of view. Why he or she responded the way they did, if their response was stupidity or a heroic movement. I like this class because he [the teacher] doesn’t put thoughts into your head; he lets you each have a say about the way it happened” (Oakes, 1985, p. 67). In the low-track classes, the responses cited filling out forms, spelling words, and training for jobs. For example, one student in a low-track class responded, “I’ve learned how to get a better job and how to act when at an interview filling out forms” (Oakes, 1985, p.70).

It is evident based upon the responses that the high-track students learn decision-making skills and are given many opportunities for higher-order thinking; however, the low-track students are being groomed for working class jobs (Ansalone, 2010; Graubard, 2004; Oakes, 1985). Further research confirms the prevalent notion that classroom environment and instructional practices differ substantially in high-track and low-track classes (Ansalone, 2010; Gratch; 2002; Graubard, 2004; Mayer, 2008; Modica; 2015; Oakes, 1985/1987; Worthy, 2010). Referred to as the “two-school phenomenon” by Morrell (2008) through his observations of

urban high schools in northern and southern California, he noted the existence of two separate “schools” operating under the guise of one. The affluent, advanced track students who were predominately White and Asian-American graduated from high school and attended elite universities; however, poor Latino and African-American students in the lower tracks struggled to even complete high school (Morrell, 2008) and moved on the college at much lower rates.

In a case study examining instructional differences between “honors” and “regular” language arts classes, Worthy (2010) observed 25 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and students from eight middle schools in a Texas school district with 56% of its students living at poverty level. With students’ ethnic composite of 53% Latino, 14% African American, and 33% European American, this district, while larger than my own, appears to possess similar student demographics. Worthy (2010) found that while the names of the low-track classes had changed from the 1970s/1980s labels of “basic” or “low” to the recently termed “regular” or “grade level”, the same negative stigmas attached to tracking persisted in schools.

### **Teachers’ Perceptions of Tracking**

Many teachers prefer to teach academically advanced students (Ansalone, 2010; Gratch, 2002; Graubard, 2004; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Hallinan, 1991; Smith, 2008). Smith (2008) even identifies advanced students as “winners” of curriculum tracking or ability grouping. This classification applies to the advanced students at EHS. For example, many of these students are given the positions of office and teacher aides, as well as given a certain amount of freedom that may not be awarded to students on the standard track. Also, the AP students are encouraged to bring their laptops from home to use in all of their classes while standard students are not.

In the interviews with teachers of standard classes, Worthy (2010) discovered, as previous research on this topic has supported (Ansalone, 2000/2010; Hallinan, 1994; Mayer, 2008; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1985/2005; Riordan, 1997) that teachers expect less from students

in low-track classes. Many teachers in the study simply desired standard students to remain seated and silent, regardless of if they were reading individually or not because “whether they are just sitting there, they need to learn how to be sustained silent readers. Because that’s what the [test] requires” (Worthy, 2010, p. 281). State achievement test preparation was often cited by the teachers as the focus of standard instruction even though many doubted whether or not reading improvement would occur among students not reading on standard. Worthy (2010) documented many defeatist comments regarding the lack of reading success, such as the following from two teachers:

I have one little boy who’s on first grade level, and it’s hard to know how I can motivate him to read what he can’t read. I feel bad that he’s gotten this far, and I feel bad that he’s probably going to leave me not reading and I’m his reading teacher. But I can’t cure what should have been cured way down there. All I can do is try to teach him to cope with the skills he has. (p. 284)

If you’re in 6th grade and you’re on 3rd grade level, I don’t think the chances of your reading level getting higher are really good of the system stays the same way. (p. 284)

Many teachers who routinely instruct standard classes become disgruntled and disheartened, which is likely to affect their instructional efficacy, as well as attitudes (Finley, 1984; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Hargreaves, 1967).

### **Students’ Perceptions of Tracking**

Students’ perceptions of their academic ability, as well as their academic expectations, are largely influenced by track placement (Ansalone, 2009/2010; Karlson, 2015; Smith, 2008); and, track placement can positively or negatively impact a students’ self-esteem (Ansalone, 2010; Gratch, 2002; Graubard, 2004; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Hallinan, 1991; Hargreaves, 1967; Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1976; Smith, 2008; Van Houtte, 2016). In a case study following a first-year 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, Gratch (2002) examined through the teacher’s eyes how tracking affects school climate and students’ attitudes. The teacher discovered that the advanced

students were the “pets” of the school, and the standard students considered themselves the “dumb class” (Gratch, 2002, p. 430). At the close of the year, the teacher concisely summarized the class differences: “The honors students probably benefited because their concerns were heard and as a result they were challenged more academically. However, the regular students felt undermined and silenced throughout the decision-making process (Gratch, 2002, p. 432).

The belief that advanced-track students experience school in positive ways while low-track students view it negatively is largely supported by research (Ansalone, 2009/2010; Berends, 1995; Gratch, 2002; Karlson, 2015; Oakes, 2005; Smith, 2008; Van Houtte, 2016). In a recent two-year study, Van Houtte (2016) examined the effects of tracking on 4500 first-year secondary students scattered throughout 57 Belgium high schools. Specifically, the author wanted to determine the cause of lower-track students’ sense of academic futility. Van Houtte (2016) found that the “sense of futility is associated with track position, and does not just precede track enrolment. Moreover, tracks appear to be the steering force behind futility, not school (composition)” (p. 885). When standard instruction relies heavily upon factory-like lessons filled with worksheets and rote skills (Rosenbaum, 1978; Worthy, 2010) or teachers interchangeably use the term “regular” with low-ability (Worthy, 2010), it is not surprising that some students in these classes have an inferior view of their worth in an educational climate that appears futile. So, what’s the fix? How do we engage the disengaged?

## **Part 2: Detracking**

In this next section, I review studies that advocate detracking and detail democratic, socially just classrooms that use a student-centered pedagogy based upon critical literacy practices.

## **A New World of Schooling**

Detracking the classroom is an example of actualizing a tenet of critical theory because I want to make visible those who have likely been invisible in previous standard classrooms; and, engaging the disengaged requires teachers to connect meaningfully with students, discover their individual interests and dreams, and participate in lively discussions with them (Jones, Clarke, Enriquez, 2010; Kamler & Comber, 2005). As educators, we are charged with educating all students (Ansalone, 2010; Becker, Trautwein, Baumert, Ludtke, & Koller, 2012; Gratch, 2002; Modica, 2015; Oakes, 1987/2005; Smith, 2008; Welner & Burris, 2006; Worthy, 2010; Yonezawa & Jones, 2007). To do this, many scholars recommend detracking (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Kroeger & Bauer, 2004; Mayer, 2008; Modica, 2015; Welner & Burris, 2006; Worthy, 2010). Unfortunately, the research is limited on recent, longitudinal studies analyzing specific cases of detracking within schools or what happens during the detracking process.

## **Baby Steps: Detracking in Action**

In this case study, Modica (2015) spent five months in a northeastern charter school as a participant observer of one teacher's "on-level" and advanced 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade English classes in an effort to discover how tracking affects educational opportunities and the racial identity of students. While there were no curricular differences between the standard and advanced 10 classes, there was one controversial difference between the standard and advanced 11 classes. The administration only allowed the teacher, *Charlotte*, to teach *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1970) in the advanced class because they felt "the on-level students, by virtue of their lower grades, were too immature to read a serious text such as Morrison's (1970) . . ." (Modica, 2015, p. 81). Furthermore, the administration and *Charlotte* also deemed the standard parents as too immature to comprehend this serious text. *Charlotte* rationalized,

if you do it with honors kids, their parents can listen to a rationale and respond to that calmly. But if you do it with an on-level kid, it's going to be some uneducated person that calls you up, screaming and cursing at you . . . on voicemail . . . that's out of control, storms into the building. I mean, there are stories of this, but it's definitely an unsaid prejudice, I think. That on-level kids – I think it's, I guess a class thing. (Modica, 2015, p. 82)

This example supports previous research findings that teacher expectations vary according to a student's selected track (Ansalone, 2010; Broussard & Joseph, 1998; Oakes, 1985) and standard track students experience a much different school climate (Gratch, 2002). Omitting a classical piece of literature from the standard curriculum deprives students of critical thinking skills and rigorous academic discussions. Modica (2015) argues, "Assumptions that conflate academic achievement, emotional maturity, race, and social class provide the foundation of low teacher expectations and send some students the familiar message that higher academic achievement is outside of their capability" (p. 82). A classroom is a place of learning, but overt tracking differences between advanced and standard places create divided spaces in which the former is creative and rigorous and the latter is dull and mediocre.

Modica (2015) proposed detracking as a beneficial solution for students at the charter school. Interestingly enough, the school implemented the practice for the literature classes only two years after Modica's (2015) semester-long visit. *Charlotte* reported that students were benefitting from racially diverse classes especially during classroom discussions. "Lower tracked students who in previous classes were focused on basic skills and comprehension questions were now drawn into analytical discussions . . ." (Modica, 2015, p. 85). While detracking isn't currently an option at my district or school level, I agree with Modica (2015) who argues "[c]lassrooms must be places where all voices are welcomed and affirmed" (p. 86). Tracking silences (Gratch, 2002) and my immediate answer to this dilemma at EHS is to bring high expectations, rigor, and engagement to standard classes.

In their scholarly discussion and analysis of empowering pedagogical approaches, Kim and Slapac (2015) provide overarching goals for educators interested in transforming the classroom with a “*multidimensional*” pedagogy (p. 19). This approach combines differentiated instruction with multiliteracy practices. Critical literacy advocates “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting justice” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382); and, this approach effectively differentiates instruction to meet the needs of all students by empowering them to highlight and share their voice in multiple ways. Through the use of engaging critical literacy practices, students can participate in activities designed toward creating an equitable and just classroom. Before all of this can happen though, one must begin with place in mind.

### **Critical Literacy Practices in Place**

A critical transformation requires students to act in contextual environments—the classroom, online, home, and the community; and, critical literacy practices can foster social, political, and cultural activism in multiple spaces and places. Unfortunately, transforming traditional educational spaces into socially just classrooms isn’t always easy. In a one-year, empirical study that stemmed from a larger, longitudinal study, Williamson (2017) followed Octavia, a novice 9<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, as she tried to implement a social justice curriculum in a southwestern, urban school with 96% students of color, 80% of whom also struggled economically. At the close of her first year, Octavia reflected upon her biggest struggle: the reading curriculum. Williamson (2017) specifically observed the following tensions: “. . . problems related to defining what counts as a text for reading, students having difficulty accessing texts, and ideological conflicts or questions about this belief” (p. 108). It is important to note that Octavia used the same reading curriculum for her standard and pre-AP students

because she, like myself, believes that every student should experience and participate in an engaging, high-quality education.

A critical, transformative pedagogy highlights a student-centered approach to literacy, and Octavia encouraged all of her students to choose books of interest for them. This method allowed her to connect with reluctant readers, but students were leery of the independence. Like many students, hers had not previously been given *carte blanche* regarding book selection because they were used to prescriptive, standardized test preparation practices and canonical texts. Critical teachers and some administrators also found this practice suspect, a concern stemming from “historicized beliefs about what reading, writing, and language should look like in schools” (Williamson, 2017, p. 111), especially for poor and minority children. Limited access to texts, such as young adult literature, further exacerbated Octavia’s struggle to enact a social justice curriculum. Williamson (2017) observed,

Here the social universe of Colina High was one where students were expected to read from textbooks, not novels, and the belief systems of others who were more powerful did not see students’ reading interests important considerations in making decisions about curriculum materials, reflecting some of the tensions in teaching for social justice. (p. 110)

I found this study apropos because the mindset of Colina High appears to mirror that of EHS and many other secondary schools. Enacting a socially just, student-centered pedagogy can be challenging, but transforming the classroom space is a necessity. For this to happen on a larger scale, empirical studies in this field, as Williamson (2017) and others (Cochran-Smith, 2010) have observed, are needed so that more equity-minded teachers, like Octavia and myself, can confidently face these obstacles.

### **Trust In Me, Trust in the Place**

A trusting classroom community requires a considerable amount of time and teachers must first examine their pedagogical style, as well as the identity they project in the classroom

(Kim & Slapac, 2015; Kincheloe, 2011) before asking the same of students. Self-reflexivity can be not only revealing, but sometimes disappointing and embarrassing if you discover that you've possibly projected the negative stereotype of the disgruntled, workbook-loving, oppressive instructor that you swore you'd never become (Hallam & Ireson, 2003). Regardless, it is a necessary first step. Kim and Slapac (2015) advise, "In describing the empowering pedagogy, we argue why it is important for teachers to critically reflect on their own cultural identities to create a classroom environment where students can share diverse cultural narratives of multiple identifications" (p. 19).

Effecting change begins with the teacher, which seems obvious and overly simplified, but few in the field actually do this (Kim & Slapac, 2015; Kincheloe, 2011). This action is a necessary component to framing a critical literacy approach because to "disrupt the commonplace" (Lewinson, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002), you need to know what's become status quo in the classroom. Then, it's imperative to know what is uncommon or unique for each student, which would also appear to be obvious, but researchers (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004; Bartolomé, 2004; Kim & Slapac, 2015; Slapac & Kim, 2014) argue that this is more often not the case.

Creating a place respectful of multiple voices and implementing this progressive curriculum requires a sincere understanding of students' unique backgrounds because of their lives outside of the classroom, including their forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1982), as well as other factors, influence and ultimately shape their ideology, which in turn situates them comfortably or less so in the classroom.

### **Depositing Funds Into Place**

Students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) are considered specific fields of information and each student possesses a unique portfolio of expertise. Students constantly rely

upon these funds; therefore, critical pedagogues should access this valuable and culturally rich information because doing so provides an opportunity for students who may not have previously spoken in the classroom to share their story. In the landmark study conducted by Moll et al. (1992), the researchers found that teachers can access these funds of knowledge through home visits. Because the teacher, Amanti, initiated an interest in her student, Carlos, she found he possessed an entrepreneurial spirit—a discovery that ultimately culminated into a multicultural classroom project. Because Carlos had a teacher who knew his interests and talents outside of the classroom, Amanti was able to forge a complex, “multi-stranded,” rather than “single-stranded” relationship. Moll et al. (1992) explains this difference:

Thus, the “teacher” in these home based contexts of learning will know the child as a “whole” person, not merely as a “student,” taking into account or having knowledge about the multiple spheres of activity within which the child is enmeshed. (pp. 133-34)

Even if teachers do not conduct home visits, they should find ways to bridge students’ spaces of home, school, and community (Asher, 2008; Hoffman, 1997; Kim & Slapac, 2015; Moll et al., 1992; Nieto, 2010).

Critical educators can illuminate their students’ strengths by acknowledging, validating, and supporting the voices and views of every student by giving credence to their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and recognizing the value of each. Teachers can layer students’ various identities and forms of knowledge into a “baklavic-like” educational setting in which each layer effectively assists and supports the next in establishing a satisfyingly whole product like a democratic classroom. For this to happen, one must first highlight and pair students’ individual strengths with quality teaching practices to assist in creating a transformative classroom and transcendent students.

## **Multiyear Placement (Looping)**

Continuously improving upon critical literacy practices in the classroom, as well as discovering what happens when creating a space of high quality education takes a considerable amount of time, which is why I chose to use multiyear placement, otherwise known as looping, as an additional approach to use when establishing a positive and socially just classroom. In this final section of the literature review, I briefly explore multiyear placement.

In addition to the implementation of critical literacies to positively alter student engagement in the classroom, multiyear placement assists in fostering and bolstering student-teacher relationships. McCown and Sherman (2002) observe,

Most people do not change bankers, doctors, and dentists on a yearly basis. Instead, they use these individuals over several years to develop continuity. The accumulation of knowledge about a person's needs fosters a more effective partnership in maintaining and improving a person's well being. (p. 17)

Also referred to as looping, multiyear grouping, and multiyear assignment (McCown & Sherman, 2002), multiyear placement began as a concept in 1919 with Austrian educator Rudolf Steiner (Bellis, 1999; Hanson, 1995; Ogletree, 1974). Founder of the Waldorf Schools, Steiner believed teachers should remain with the same group of students during the elementary grades (Hanson, 1995). This practice gained traction in the United States in 1974 when transformational educator, Deborah Meier, utilized this practice to transform New York's public schools (Goldberg, 1990, 1991). "Committed to destroying the stultifying status quo, Meier set out to create a 'terrifically exciting school' " (Goldberg, 1990/1991, p. 27).

At Central Park East High School (CPE) approximately 250 students, mostly of color, on free lunch, and in special education classes came together with the ultimate goal of establishing a caring and close-knit community of teachers, learners, and parents. The students remained with the same teacher for two years, which allowed them to form a "multi-stranded relationship"

(Moll et al., 1992) in which teachers genuinely knew students' strengths, weaknesses, and interests, and vice versa. Meier summarized the experience as “[o]ur general view was that if the teacher cared a lot and the kids cared a lot, that was a good topic” (Goldberg, 1990, 1991, p. 27).

Today, approximately 50-plus schools practice multiyear teaching in District Four where Meier built the first school of this type. Its success stems mostly from the genuine relationships developed among teachers, students, and family members; and, collective decisions regarding educational content. Student portfolios as opposed to achievement tests are used as indicators of student performance, and the overall results are impressive. “The overall [dropout] rate for New York City exceeds 50 percent; for Hispanics it is 78 percent and for Blacks 72 percent. The dropout rate for CPE graduates is 3.1 percent” (Goldberg, 1990, 1991, pp. 27-28). Meier attributes this astounding success to the mutually respectful and genuinely caring relationships that are established and nurtured because of the multiyear teaching approach.

In an elementary New England school system where multiyear teaching was piloted, Hanson (1995) and others (Bellis, 1999; Hanson, 1995; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007) found similar benefits as well as the following:

- Reduced anxiety in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year because student teacher relationships and expectations are well understood.
- Increased instructional time because first-month getting-to-know-you activities aren't necessary in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year.
- Social and team-building skills, as well as conflict resolution strategies seamlessly work toward supporting a collaborative classroom—especially in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year.

Hanson (1995) argues,

Multi-year assignment is increasingly vital to the countless children whose lives are riddled with change—change of residence, change in family structure, change of

economic status. Our kids come from broken homes, or go home to empty houses, or see parents only on weekends: they seem to really benefit from having a teacher as a role model, mentor, and friend. (p. 43)

### **Looping: There's a Catch**

While relationships are at the heart of multiyear teaching, not all relationships are symbiotic, and it's possible that some students will resent spending two years with each other or the same teacher (Bellis, 1999; Hanson, 1995; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007). Conversely, for many positive relationships, it can be dramatic when classes must separate at the end of the two years and can cause emotional distress (Hanson, 1995). Further, teachers may experience anxiety regarding students' standardized test performances if their job performances are merit-based (Hanson, 1995). Regardless of these potential issues, it appears the benefits outweigh the risks (Bellis, 1999; Goldberg, 1990, 1991; Hanson, 1995; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007). At the close of Hanson's (1995) first year, she noted that "the month of June did not mark an ending; it was merely an interlude," and on the first day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, a 4<sup>th</sup> grader wrote in his journal, "This is the best first day of school. I can be with my teacher from last year. I can see my friends. I like school" (Hanson, 1995, p. 43).

With very few multiyear teaching studies conducted at the secondary level, I hope my study will add to this field in the scholarly literature. "Most people would agree that people learn best from someone they know well. If teachers and students know each other well, teachers can more effectively personalize instruction" (McCown & Sherman, 2002, pp. 17-18). When I began my study in 2015-2016, I did not consider multiyear teaching as an option because the school did not utilize this practice; but, the administrators quickly agreed to multiyear teaching my 2<sup>nd</sup> block class for the 2016-2017 school year.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the scholarly literature on academic tracking, critical literacy applications, and multiyear teaching; as well as, how these approaches can influence the classroom as a place; and, furthermore, help shape the personal and social aspects of students' aspects on place. After reviewing alternative pedagogical practices in other classrooms, I have discovered that if I want to encourage critical democracy in River City, I must begin by first focusing on community-building in the classroom with the implementation of critical literacy practices and multiyear placement. Applying all of these research threads in my classroom established the foundation of this study and positioned it as an approach to alter traditional standard practices in a 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English/language arts classroom.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Detracking what my incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders understood to be a standard class first required me to aesthetically examine my classroom. Students should be able to identify with their surroundings and feel that the teacher has put forth the effort to relate to them; unfortunately, my classroom bordered on the likeness of an operating room with all tools and sterility. In critically assessing my “health” as an instructor, I diagnosed myself as diseased—plagued with the ills of bad teaching. Perhaps I had become too focused on the robotic mechanics of teaching, partly due to all of the standardized testing pressures, and I had forgotten the main reason why I chose to initially teach: I wanted to inspire others, as my dad did for me, to fall in love with storytelling and word-crafting. Furthermore, I wanted my students to fully appreciate life, each other, and strive to be the best. It’s true—we all wake up on different beds, in different homes, and on different streets, but we all wish to be heard, understood, and treated equally. Unfortunately, the teaching practices traditionally used in tracked standard classrooms, such as rote instruction aimed at improving standardized test scores and prescriptive reading programs, tend to silence and divide (Ansalone, 2010; Gratch, 2002; Mayer, 2008; Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1978; Worthy, 2010). So, to rid my classroom and myself of this troubling teaching disease, I chose to abandon these oppressive, de-humanizing practices and replace them with critical literacy practices in an effort to establish meaningful, personal, and noteworthy connections relationships in the classroom.

## **My Antidote to Tracking: Critical Literacy Practices**

The standard classrooms that I have observed, and previously taught in, lack choice, voice, and freedom. As an antidote to this inferior educational space, I have chosen critical literacy because it encourages students to do the following:

1. Design a curriculum that is informed by their lives.
2. Create learning activities that highlight their individual strengths and interests.
3. Choose texts that reflect their reality.
4. Voice their opinions inside *and* outside of the classroom.

Ultimately, these liberating practices contribute to the creation of a socially just environment where students can learn to create meaningful connections with one another, the teacher, and the world beyond the classroom walls. “Critical literacy, then, is inclusive of many typical forms of literacy teaching and learning in progressive pedagogies in the US such as the read aloud, shared reading, independent analyses of the texts used in such practices – and in some cases (and what I argue is a central concern) the power relations and social realities within the local context where such practices occur” (Jones, 2004, p. 163). I consider these practices transformative because they alter the standard classroom from a dehumanizing space to a humanizing place in which students can create and sustain meaningful connections and positive memories of a superior educational experience.

### **Purpose**

The overarching purpose of this critical ethnographic case study rooted from my desire to discover what happens when students in a standard track English/language arts classroom receive an intervention from the low-level, rote, skill and drill practices they are typically subjected to and, instead, are given access to the type of high quality education often found in advanced track classrooms. Following this line of inquiry, I first explore academic tracking and its implications

in classroom ecology by combining observations of advanced and standard learning environments, my personal teaching experience, interviews with faculty, and student testimonies to analyze and augment the scholarly research on academic tracking. Then, I include extended narrative segments (Van Maanen, 1988) to document the actual process of detracking my own classroom with the implementation of critical literacy practices for students enrolled in a standard English course. To provide a holistic view of this study and practice reflexivity (Etherington, 2007) throughout, I juxtapose in-process analytic writing (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) with observations, field notes, semistructured and structured interviews, and student artifacts. The amalgamation of this data documents my two-year endeavor to, ultimately, discover what happens to the classroom as a place when English education is detracked for historically underserved students.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were as follows:

- RQ 1. How do the faculty and students at Elmsville High School (EHS) perceive academic tracking and what are its implications of this practice in the classroom?
- RQ 2. What happens when I detrack English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement?

### **Research Design: Critical Ethnographic Case Study**

Given that critical qualitative research lends itself to the exploratory investigation of social issues and problems, such as the controversial educational practice of academic tracking, I find this paradigm apropos for this study. Merriam (2002) addresses the highlights of this approach:

Critical educational research, for example, queries the context where learning takes place, including the larger systems of society, the culture and institutions that shape educational practice, the structural and historical conditions framing practice. Questions are asked

regarding whose interests are being served by the way the educational system is organized, who really has access to particular programs, who has the power to make changes, and what are the outcomes of the way in which education is structured. (pp. 9–10)

Marshall and Rossman (2011) observe of this approach, “Historically, critical ethnography developed from the commitment to radical education in several works sharply critical of accepted teaching practice (hooks, 1994; Keddie, 1971; Sharp & Green, 1975; Weis, 1990; Weis & Fine, 2000; Young, 1971)” and it “can also go beyond the classroom to ask questions about the historical forces shaping societal patterns” (p. 26). While critical literacy practices may not qualify as “radical,” by today’s standards, they represent my attempt to “disrupt the commonplace” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) inside the standard classroom and outside of the school’s walls. I worry about the students who endure four years of educational mediocrity. After they ceremoniously flick their tassel and exit the walls and halls of EHS, where do they go? What do they do? Who are they becoming? Do they know that multiple and infinite paths lay before them or do they travel like trains eastward toward River City’s industrial skyline? Surely, as children, they explored the magical realm of limitless possibilities in “Oh, The Places You Will Go!” where Dr. Seuss (1990) proclaims,

You have brains in your head

You have feet in your shoes

You can steer yourself ANY direction you choose. (p. 2)

Regardless of where these students go, it is my wish that they will graduate from EHS with fond memories of the classrooms they have traveled through and the education they received. These academic places possess the power to “gather things” (Casey, 1997, p.24), such as memories, that can work toward strengthening or weakening “the hold” (Casey, 1997, p.24), or recollection, of the experience. To fully explore what these places “gather,” as well as the

ways in which classrooms can connect and disconnect students (Callejo Pérez, Fain, & Slater, 2004), I use case study as a strategy to explore the phenomena of academic tracking and detracking—specifically their implications on the classroom as a place—and I capture these moments with an ethnographic approach.

### Setting

Erected in 1962, Elmsville High School’s (pseudonym) sprawling campus rests in a relatively small and sleepy Southeastern town of approximately 55,683 residents (2010 census). EHS is part of a diverse district of 8,500 students that is also composed of three middle schools and 12 elementary schools. As for the residents of River City, 23.1% possess a bachelor’s degree or higher and the median household income is \$42,867. Table 1 outlines the city’s demographic estimates, and Table 2 outlines the 2015-2016 EHS and school district statistics.

Table 1

*City Demographics, 2010 Estimates*

| Category         | % of total |
|------------------|------------|
| White            | 62.9       |
| African-American | 21.7       |
| Latino           | 12.4       |
| Asian            | 0.9        |

Table 2

*Elmsville High School and School District Statistics, 2015–2016*

| Characteristic            | RCHS  | District |
|---------------------------|-------|----------|
| Enrollment                | 1,438 | 8,428    |
| AP enrollment             | 8.0%  | 9.5%     |
| Graduation rate           | 87.0% | 86.0%    |
| Free and/or reduced lunch | 55.5% | 55.5%    |
| White                     | 39.2% | 40.0%    |
| African-American          | 37.0% | 31.5%    |
| Latino                    | 21.1% | 24.0%    |
| Asian                     | 0.9%  | 1.3%     |

EHS houses grades 9-12 and offers three academic tracks ranging in difficulty from lowest to highest as follows: Standard, Advanced (grades 9 and 10), and Advanced Placement (grades 11 and 12). At the time of the study, it operated on a mostly traditional schedule with the exception of the 2<sup>nd</sup> block class, which met daily for 50 minutes during both semesters; it served as the setting for this study. The remainder blocks, 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> met daily for 80 minutes, but after the first semester, students switched to a new schedule with new classes (with the exception of 2<sup>nd</sup> block). The structure of 2<sup>nd</sup> block differed from the other blocks because it originally was implemented into the schedule in 2013-2014 as a 30-minute class called Connect. Unlike the current 2<sup>nd</sup> block class, the Connect class did not provide academic instruction, but rather served as a mentoring program. Every teacher was assigned approximately 12-15 students, similar in age, from diverse backgrounds, and the program's vision focused on building relationships, teaching life skills, setting goals, and taking pride in the school. As a mandatory class, every student participated. After the first two years, EHS saw a significant increase in attendance rates and a decrease in discipline referrals. However, in 2015-2016, the school district implemented the current, nontraditional block schedule and the previously allotted thirty minutes for Connect transitioned into fifty minutes, thus, 2<sup>nd</sup> block—the main setting of this study—was formed.

## **Participants**

### **Faculty Participants**

Ms. Patton, the English department chairperson, has taught at EHS for 32 years. As the most experienced of the four faculty participants, she teaches only advanced tracks. Mr. Walton, a science teacher, has taught at EHS for 13 years. He teaches both advanced and standard classes. Finally, Mrs. Rowe, a special education teacher, has taught at EHS for 10 years. She

works exclusively with students engaged in the regular track. She is also the mother of three EHS graduates who mostly followed an advanced track. Table 3 summarizes this information.

Table 3

*Description of Faculty Participants*

| Pseudonym  | Years at EHS | Position                       |
|------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| Ms. Patton | 32           | English department chairperson |
| Mrs. Rowe  | 10           | Special education teacher      |
| Mr. Walton | 13           | Science teacher                |

**Student Participants**

I collected data from eight student participants who met with me daily from 2015-2017 in my 2<sup>nd</sup> block, standard, English 9 and English 10 classes. At the onset of the study, the student participants' ages ranged from 14-16. Table 4 lists specific ages and the race/ethnicity of each participant.

Table 4

*Description of Student Participants*

| Pseudonym | Gender | Race/Ethnicity   | Age |
|-----------|--------|------------------|-----|
| Andrew    | Male   | Hispanic         | 14  |
| Cyrus     | Male   | Caucasian        | 15  |
| Gene      | Male   | African-American | 14  |
| Julian    | Male   | Hispanic         | 15  |
| Raven     | Female | African-American | 15  |
| Shonda    | Female | African-American | 14  |
| Taylor    | Female | African-American | 14  |
| Zora      | Female | Hispanic         | 13  |

I want to take time here and provide a description for each of the eight participants because their names and contributions will appear throughout the findings. Following my commentary on each student, I have included responses from their first journal entry that they

wrote during the first week of their 9<sup>th</sup> grade. For their prompt, I asked them to tell me a little about themselves. I begin with Andrew and Zora because, as the outliers of the study, I focused mostly on them. Then, I have alphabetized the remaining participants.

**Andrew.** Andrew spoke very little during his first semester in the class. Often, he dreamily glanced out the wall of windows in E-3, and many times he would mumble to himself during class discussions or throughout assignments. During the first week, he did proudly announce to the class that he knew sign language because he had previously dated a girl who was deaf. This prompted shouts of students screaming, “What’s my name?” and “Do my name!”. We detoured from the lesson and with a sheepish grin, Andrew patiently went around the room helping each student sign his or her name. On days like that, Andrew appeared content and pleased; however, many days he refused to do assignments and he especially loathed working with the computers—a fact that he reminded me of quite regularly. Andrew wrote of his frustrations and struggles in his response:

I don’t know. I’m not really excited because I’ve always hated learning from a computer. Sometimes, I don’t understand what you want from me, and I haven’t seen a lot of my friends. Some teachers call me smart but I don’t have good grades. I have an older sister that goes here, but she doesn’t really help me. I don’t get why you need this essay. My science teacher confuses me and I don’t understand. I don’t feel comfortable when I get to the school and no friends are really around. I don’t feel really successful. Sometimes I can’t think straight. I’m a nice, generous person, but I don’t feel comfortable around different people. People say I have a very good memory, but I feel I forget things easily. I don’t understand why people think I’m a very smart person. I’m not excited for this year.

**Zora.** Zora entered the classroom as the youngest student at only 13 years old; however, she is the oldest of her four siblings. In middle school, her parents divorced, and now Zora and her two sisters and brother live with her father. She explained to me at the beginning of the year that as the oldest child, she was responsible at home for many of the housekeeping activities, such as cooking, cleaning, and helping her sisters and brother with their homework, as well as getting them ready for school in the morning. During the first semester, Zora spoke very little

and even told me after her first interview that because she was painfully shy, she would not be able to interview again because the process was too stressful. Here, Zora wrote the following about her future dreams:

In the future I hope to be a successful person in life, but I don't quite know what I want to be as I get older. I was hoping I could be a dentist or an engineer. If I don't quite make it to those jobs, I'll find another as long as I'm not working at a fast food restaurant. I hope to pay back all the stuff my dad bought me to make me a happier person. I would help him with his bills and taxes or other stuff like that. I would also like to keep his house because I grew up in it and have memories there; so, I hope to keep those memories along with the house.

**Cyrus.** I knew of Cyrus before I met him because his grandmother works at EHS as a special education teacher. Prior to the start of school, she met with me to discuss some concerns she had about Cyrus. Nervously wringing her hands, she told me that while very gifted and bright, Cyrus had a difficult time focusing in school. She wanted me to know that if I had any problems with him that she would help in any way possible. Finally, she told me that he loved hands-on learning. In his first response, Cyrus expressed his love of electronics:

Ever since I was little I have liked technology. I like to build and program computers. I started helping my dad fix computers to make money. I was ten years old when I built my first computer by myself. It makes me feel old even though I am only 14. I remember when touch screens first came out. My first ever touch screen was a Nokia and it was terrible. I had had every Galaxy phone so far except for the 6. I really like technology.

**Gene.** Gene, just like Shonda, loved every angle of attention. His syrupy sweet Southern accent reverberated throughout the hallways, and he often called other students, *child*. He never ran short on advice, and most of it was given without solicitation because he felt many students needed his moral and spiritual guidance. Some of the students called him "Preacher Man," because not only did he excel in the edification of young adults and children at his church, he also belted out Gospel hymns while traveling to class. His first response echoed his exuberant and positive spirit:

Work is very easy for me. I understand it better and I like how my teachers break it down to me. I also love homework. When given homework, I get very excited. But I was told it would get harder, so I am prepared. Work is very challenging sometimes, but yet I like the learning environment here. We've only been in school for six days, so teachers are doing good.

**Julian.** Julian dressed to the nines, as my grandmother would say, for his first day of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. On day one he sported a neatly pressed sea blue Polo shirt and paired it with pristinely white and starched dress shorts, as well as shiny white Reeboks. For his bling statement, he pieced the whole outfit together with a white canvas belt that ostentatiously buckled with an oversized, silver-plated Gucci clasp. Like Julian, many students wore fancy, new clothes on the first day; however, unlike Julian, none consistently followed such an impressive display of dress. Not once did he ever slack in his daily endeavor to dress sharply and impress. Julian immediately impressed me with his high standards, and he was quick to tell me that he paid for everything on his own. He stressed his hard work ethic in his first essay:

My mom and dad came from Mexico in 1999 for a better life. My education is very important to me, my parents, and uncles. I'm studying to be a carpenter, plumber, and engineer. I want to be a carpenter because my uncles and dad are carpenters. Over the summer and weekends, I go to work and I like working with them. I want to be a plumber because it's a well paying job and not a lot of people like to do it. I want to be an engineer because I have uncles that are engineers and I like what they work on.

**Raven.** Raven arrived tardy on the first day, but smiled mischievously almost every day. Just like Zora, Raven told me that she basically was raising her little sister and that meant that she struggled to do her own work because she was always helping little sister with her homework. Ever the talker, Raven never met a stranger, and she tried very heartily to engage in conversation with Shonda during classroom instructional time. Unfortunately, in the third week of school, Shonda got involved in a physical altercation with another girl during lunch and both girls were sent to the Center for Alternative Placement (CAP) for two weeks. In Shonda's response, she hinted of her relationship with drama:

I am so happy to get out of middle school. It was okay the first few years, then I started getting in trouble for little things. I played basketball my 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade years, then after basketball season everything fell apart. I started hanging with the wrong people and started entertaining drama. My grades were okay, but I couldn't keep my grades up if I was in trouble, right?

**Shonda.** Unlike Zora, Shonda loved to be the left, right, and center of attention. Even in the first week when the classroom held forty-plus students, she made her presence known on the first day when she gregariously skipped into class, gave me and Ms. Reeves a hug, announced her name, and sat front and center. Her boisterous laughter could often be heard as soon as she burst into the building. Here, Shonda voiced her future dreams:

I have big goals and high expectations for myself. After I graduate high school, I plan to be a cosmetologist. I love to do hair. I just can't wait for my time to shine. If plan A doesn't work, I plan to be a brain surgeon. I want to be both if it's possible to be a cosmetologist and a brain surgeon.

**Taylor.** Taylor proudly wore her Elmsville High School volleyball and basketball apparel on most days. Long and lean like a gazelle, Taylor always moved gracefully and spoke with the same poise. Unlike her classmates, and myself, who often changed hair color or styles, she remained consistently devoted to her chocolate brown, sleek, shortly coiffed bob. As the class perfectionist and peacemaker, Taylor selected her words carefully and in any times of dispute, classroom or not, students prized her opinion. The tone and cadence of her voice soothed turbulent discussions, and in times of frustration, her gentle smile calmed my nerves. She excelled in most everything—especially sports—and in her first essay she shared with me her athletic lineage:

My family is very athletic; everyone played sports in my family. My grandmother played volleyball, cheerleading, and track. My granddad just did basketball. I have a cousin who played football and basketball for Elmsville High School. I also play sports. I play volleyball and basketball for EHS. I love doing sports because they keep me in shape and I like working together as a team and winning.

## Permissions

Before beginning the study, I first contacted the principal of EHS and superintendent of the district to request permission to conduct this study (Appendix A). With their permission, I began the IRB process and explained the study and informed consent to the faculty participants (see IRB approval in Appendix B). I stressed that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. For the student participants, I distributed assent and consent forms (Appendices C and D) in class, and invited parents/guardians to an informational session in which the study was presented. Participants were then given time to consider the study and ask follow-up questions. (None of them asked any questions.) The students were also informed that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Secondly, they were informed that even if their parent/guardian gave them permission to participate, they should only do so if they desired. All course participants were contacted in person with a short invitation to the study along with a copy of the informed consent and/or assent forms.

The assent and/or consent forms for each participant are stored in one locked cabinet in my home office. The participants' pseudonyms are linked to the assent and/or consent forms. This is the only place that the participants' real names are linked to their pseudonyms. Furthermore, data collected from all participants has been marked with only the pseudonym. No real names appear on any of the data collected. All data is also stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. Only I have access to the data, and I anticipate needing it for two more years. When the data is no longer needed, it will be shredded or otherwise destroyed.

After all of the above information was thoroughly discussed with students, fifteen returned signed assent and consent forms. I used purposive sampling to focus upon the 8 students who looped with me through years one and two. As the study progressed, I used intensity sampling to include, "information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not

extremely” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28) and opportunistic sampling. This combination strategy supported flexibility and encouraged triangulation.

### Data Collection

Freire’s (2000) notion of praxis, “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed,” (p. 126) illuminated my process of data collection. A critical ethnographic case study relies upon multiple forms of data, such as observations, field notes, conversations (semistructured and structured interviews), and student artifacts (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I used purposive sampling to identify faculty participants who experience academic tracking in various ways. In deciding the type and quality of data to collect, I used the formula shown in Equation 1.



The first two images in this equation represent the divisive two worlds of EHS that I described in Chapter One; and, the third image symbolizes the socially just place I wanted to create through this study. When collecting data, I tried to remember that these places contextualize participants’ attitudes, experiences, engagement, relationships, as well as the ways in which they express themselves.

Table 5

#### *Linking Research Questions to Data Collection*

| Research question | Observations | Field notes | Interviews | Student artifacts |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------------|
| RQ 1              | X            | X           | X          | X                 |
| RQ 2              | X            | X           | X          | X                 |

## Observations

To create a liberating place, I needed to engage in reflexivity throughout this process.

According to Etherington (2007),

Reflexive research encourages us to display in our writing/conversations the interactions between our selves and our participants from our first point of contact until we end those relationships, so that our work can be understood, not only in terms of *what* we have discovered, but *how* we discovered it. (p. 601)

As my confessional tale in Chapter One revealed (see p. X), I have been guilty in the past of using oppressive practices in my own standard classroom. I observed them in the classrooms around me; and, unfortunately, I replicated some. Even though I couldn't erase the past or eliminate academic tracking in every classroom at EHS (at least for now, but I'm hoping this paper will open minds), I could use my prior "sins" as a list of what NOT (⊗) to do.

As an insider researcher (Greene, 2014) who has taught at EHS for the past 12 years, I easily negotiated entry into other teachers' advanced and standard classrooms. By giving up my planning block on certain days and with the help from generous colleagues who volunteered to watch some of my classes, I spent at least one hour in each of the English teacher's classrooms. These observations afforded a broad view of academic tracking in different contexts (classrooms), which added depth to my findings.

## Field Notes

To document two years with these students in the classroom, I used Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (1995) ethnographic practice of in-process analytic writing. The length of the study allowed for 16 100-page composition books and these served as a loose map for the study. Reflecting upon these notes at the end of the day sparked further lines of inquiry, as well as helped in shaping or altering the next day's events. I captured the following field note episode in

the first week of the study, and I include it here as a way of *showing* this form of data collection, rather than simply *telling* it to you.

**Field note episode: “Just tell us what to do!”** “Just tell us what to do and we’ll do it,” declared Julian when I encouraged the students to write about whatever they wanted in their journals. Tapping his right heel nervously, he looked down at the first page of his composition notebook, smeared his palms on his shorts, clutched his pencil, and then furiously moved it back and forth on the paper’s lined horizon.

Julian mumbled, “This pencil’s dull. Gotta sharpener?” I smiled and pointed him toward the electric contraption, and he moved like molasses across the room. After sufficiently whittling years off the life of his #2, he sulked back to the seat he had chosen, and gingerly placed his pencil in its desktop cradle. After a minute of staring at his paper, he looked at me with desperation and asked, “Umm, Mrs. Kusta? Can I go to the bathroom?”

After capturing field note episodes (like the example above), I manually and electronically created asides and commentaries in reporters and composition notebooks, copy paper, lined paper, napkins, receipts, book margins, Microsoft Word, iNotes—basically anything that could hold words. I followed the same process with all of the data.

### **Interviews (Structured and Semistructured)**

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), “One’s personal biography is often a source, an inspiration, and an initial way of framing a research question” (p. 61). I steer off-topic in many of my interviews because I’m guilty of a short attention span, so I did structure the initial interviews with faculty participants in a typed format. However, over the years, I’ve found that informal interviews, albeit recorded, elicit more story telling. For each interview, I asked students to choose a time in which they would like to meet with me. Students did not have a preference, so I held the interviews on Wednesdays during our class while the students

participated in silent sustained reading. I provided students with a copy of the questions in advance, and I encouraged them to interrupt me at any time during the interview (see Appendix E for interview protocol).

Throughout the study, I had interviews with student participants about various topics. Often, I began with one open-ended question about a novel we read, a journal entry, or one of our critical literacy activities. Then, the participant generally guided the cadence and length of the conversation. I recorded all of these chats with the voice memo function on my iPhone, and then I later transcribed them, which allowed me to revisit our talks. Many of the stories I gleaned were crucial to understanding how people, activities, and their experiences with both, shape a place.

### **Student Artifacts**

The students and I wrote weekly journal entries throughout the course of the study. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that journal entries allow the researcher and students ways to craft stories out of experiences in English class, as well as reflect upon the oeuvre of stories that are created over the years. I encouraged students to write without prompts, what we called “free writing,” but many weeks they desired an open-ended prompt, which usually centered on a relevant and timely topic or a particular theme within a novel that we were discussing.

With almost every young adult novel that we read, I tried to link the participants’ life experiences with themes found in the literature, and they documented this connection in numerous formats through various classroom assignments. Participants often completed individual or group projects in multimodal formats. They also constructed and presented visual portraits detailing how the participants viewed themselves.

In chapter four, I provide lengthy descriptions of the classroom activities and also provide many student artifacts.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the data analysis guidelines supported by Marshall and Rossman (2011), I began this process with “preliminary research questions and the related literature” (p. 209). First, I relied upon the following overarching research question as an entry point into data analysis: Do all students, regardless of their academic track, receive a superior education? I combined this question with the literature findings on academic tracking and alternative pedagogical practices, such as detracking, critical literacy practices, and multiyear placement to identify the “likely themes” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 211) of oppression, liberation, engagement, disengagement, resistance, empowerment, autonomy, place, and memory. Then, using the “immersion strategies” (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 17), I relied upon 13 years of experiential evidence as a classroom teacher, as well as 12 hours of intermittently observing advanced, standard, and inclusion classrooms to fill four composition notebooks and three reporter notebooks with analytic memos using thick description (Geertz, 1973) to detail the effects of tracking on the classrooms at EHS.

As for the descriptive data analysis of the ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2005), faculty and participant interviews, and student artifacts, I began with open coding (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Saldaña, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as a way to organize the data into three conceptual categories: school (academic and social), self, and goals; and, the contemporary ethnography *Shelter Blues* (Desjarlais, 1997), also served as a methodological guide when outlining a portraiture of tracking’s implications on EHS classrooms. Desjarlais (1997) suggests of labeling in his book depicting the homeless culture, “To describe someone as ‘homeless’ announces a lasting identity . . . Homelessness denotes a

temporary lack of housing, but connotes a lasting moral career (p. 2). Because this logic could also be applied to affixed tracking labels, I considered it a relevant source throughout open coding. When analyzing the 21 interviews with faculty and student participants, student questionnaires, as well as the 16 composition journals collected from the participants over the course of two years, I used In Vivo Coding (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2013; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to “honor the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91) because that is a major characteristic of critical pedagogy. Lest I negate the purpose of my study, I want to point out that I realize coding is not without its critics (Augustine, 2014; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; St.Pierre and Jackson, 2014) and I understand it could be considered antithetical to Freire’s (1970) notion of critical theory, which is why I applied “theory to determine, first, what counts as data and, second, what counts as “good” or appropriate data” (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p.715).

Whenever I ventured too far into the data mine and felt suffocated by words, I “listened” for my wise canary, Saldana (2013). On data analysis, he *sings*, “No one, including myself, can claim final authority on coding’s utility or the “best” way to analyze qualitative data” (p. 2).

### **Trustworthiness**

**Reflexivity.** In the early stages of analysis, I noted that students were reluctant to participate in critical literacy practices. In fact, they seemed down-right suspicious! But why? Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) explain,

In asking such questions, the ethnographer draws on a wide variety of resources, including direct experience of life and events in the setting; sensitivity toward the concerns and orientations of members; memory of other specific incidents described elsewhere in one’s notes; the leads and insights developed in in-process commentaries and memos; one’s own prior experience and insights gained in other settings; and the concepts and orientation provided by one’s profession or discipline. (p. 177)

With their advice, I employed reflexivity (Etherington, 2007) and imagined myself back in standard senior English. I made a mental comparison between the inferior educational practices I endured in one year of Mrs. M.'s class with the superior practices I enjoyed in the previous three years of advanced English. I then shifted memories from the personal to professional realm and recalled prior teaching experiences in, and observations of, standard classrooms. After combining all of that information and examining it through my theoretical framework lens, I arrived at the following conclusion: While most advanced-level classroom practices value student input and encourage creativity, years of completing robotic assignments in standard classrooms can program some students for passivity and/or resistance.

**Credibility.** Engaging the disengaged took time—lots of it, but extended time in the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2011) is necessary to establish validity and credibility in a critical ethnographic case study. Because these students looped their 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade year with me, I amassed a reservoir of data and much of it stemmed from the collaborative nature of critical literacy practices. This two-year study moved rhizomatically and every unpredictable turn required reflexivity on my part. Feeling in flux and temporally befuddled, I often lost track of traditional, linear markers when constructing this overall narrative of multiple narratives. Constantly member checking with students ensured that I shared their voice in the way they wanted to be heard.

I provided a copy of the transcriptions to everyone I interviewed, and I also shared my written fieldnote episodes to make certain that all of the mentioned participants agreed with my observations. As a longstanding teacher at EHS, I hopefully garnered the trust of all the participants and have established a strong rapport with the students. The length of the study allowed me to practice triangulation “by gathering data from multiple sources, through multiple

methods” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 40). This approach encouraged reflexivity and throughout the study I continuously visited the past, so that I could make alterations as needed.

**Flexibility.** Ethnographic research allows for flexibility (Creswell, 2013); and, as a reflexive teacher-researcher with 12 years of experience, I have learned that “the map is not the territory” (Korzybski, 1933). Neither the map or territory is fixed, and certainly not singular, but rather fluid and plural. In short, the practice of teaching and writing can follow differing maps (points of view) in a territory (context), and the trip can be quite clunky. Even though I began this study with high hopes of implementing a one-to-one program at my school, things didn’t go as planned and that’s okay. In fact, I would argue that turns in research are neither right or wrong; they are simply turns. There were, of course, many obstacles to providing a higher quality education. As the adage goes, change is hard; and, transforming the classroom—or trying to—can be quite an undertaking when an institution has been doing things a certain way for so long. But, I consider it just as important to share what worked, as well as what didn’t work. Revealing these transparent and honest accounts add trustworthiness to my research.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Determining what and/or who will be researched, as well as the methodology chosen and the way in which the researcher presents the case, are all subjective. I *am* an insider researcher, so my positionality could be considered a limitation of this study. I knew this before beginning the study, which is why I extensively detail my researcher positionality. I consider objectivity fallacious. Can one exist outside of his or her mind? No. Even at conception, an idea, such as this research topic, stems from an ideological perspective. Greene (2014) observes the following of this limitation:

As researchers, we cannot deny our position of power, neither should we deny that participants also have their power. However, no matter how much we include

participants' views and voices and negotiate our relationships, in the end, the research is our work. (pp. 613-614)

As a White, middle-class, 40-year-old female who has benefitted from the regulatory system I criticize, it may seem hypocritical to ground my research study in a Freirean (1970) approach of critical theory. My understanding of reality likely differs from that of students who have been "Othered" by the system, but I cannot change this. I can, however, take steps to establish an equitable place for all learners and constantly reexamine myself as a teacher-researcher (Freire, 1970).

### **Summary**

I began this chapter with my understanding of qualitative research, specifically the methodological approach of a critical ethnographic case study. I then outlined details of the two-year study exploring the following research questions:

- RQ 1. How do the faculty and students at Elmsville High School (EHS) perceive academic tracking and what are its implications of this practice in the classroom?
- RQ 2. What happens when I detrack English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement?

I described the research setting, participants, data collection methods and data analysis procedures, and explained how this study is trustworthy and credible. With the methodological measures outlined in this chapter, I now progress to the next chapter, which delves more deeply into my pedagogical choices, the rationale supporting each, and data findings from many of the critical literacy practices.

## CHAPTER 4:

### PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES: A DETRACKING MANIFESTO

*Getting to know you  
Getting to feel free and easy  
When I am with you  
Getting to know what to say*

*Haven't you noticed  
Suddenly I'm bright and breezy?  
Because of all the beautiful and new  
Things I'm learning about you  
Day by day*

—Rodgers and Hammerstein, “Getting to Know You”

In this section, I would like to detail some of the activities I considered necessary when detracking the classroom, as well as some of the data collected from these activities. I consider this a necessary component of my research study because I felt that the scholarly literature on detracking the secondary ELA classroom with critical literacy practices *and* multiyear placement as told from the teacher-researcher’s point of view was scarce. Also, by providing this chapter, I am enacting the fourth component of a critical literacy approach by “taking action and promoting justice” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382).

#### **Where to Begin?**

In the spirit of a critical ethnographic case study approach, it was very important to me that I experiment with numerous ways to highlight my students’ voices. But in the beginning of my quest to determine how best to provide a high-quality education, I didn’t know exactly which critical literacy practices would best engage the students. Before the students and I could analyze

texts and the relationships within them, we needed to establish a multistranded relationship (Moll et al., 1992) with one another, as well as form a loving and respectful classroom community; and, as a teacher researcher, I wanted to learn how to do this *from* a fellow teacher researcher.

Ernest Morrell's (2008) seminal study served as a guide when I began developing a frame for what would become this two-year study aimed at implementing critical literacy practices into my classroom. As a teacher researcher and critical literacy scholar, Morrell (2008) spent 12 years collecting data on critical literacy practices from two urban sites in northern and southern California and created narratives detailing those experiences in his book, *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth*. I identified with this study for many reasons, but mainly because (a) Morell's (2008) purpose to provide examples of quality critical literacy practices in action (praxis) mirrored my study's intentions; (b) he applied these practices in standard classrooms because he, too, observed a "two-school phenomenon" in which advanced track students receive a more quality education than those in standard tracks—thus creating the image of two different schools under one roof; and, most importantly, (c) this is an empirical study conducted by a fellow teacher researcher and detailed practical and theoretical applications of critical literacy in the classroom. The last reason is relevant because it appears that scholarly literature in this field lacks empirical research conducted by teacher researchers, and my hope is that my study will meaningfully contribute to the field as Morrell's (2008) has done

Narrativizing the experience is integral to my ultimate purpose of not only improving my classroom practices, but also sharing with other colleagues and researchers what happens when we detrack English education for historically underserved students. Most importantly, I chose to implement practices advocated by Morrell (2008) that would best encourage students to share their backgrounds, hopes, dreams, struggles, fears, needs, wants, wishes, desires, and goals

because “[c]ritical literacy is necessary to redefine the self, transform oppressive social structures” (Morrell, 2008, p. 5). Through all of the data, I tried to show how students have redefined themselves because of critical literacy practices.

Because of the length of the study and my fear of the unknown, I thought it might be best to loosely model my approach to critical pedagogy after Morrell’s (2008) five tenets of critical praxis—all of which are built upon contributions from critical scholars Freire and Macedo.

1. *Historicity*. Critical composition pedagogy must begin with students’ experiences as citizens of the world. 2. *Problem-posing*. A critical composition pedagogy must embrace, as its curriculum, the real world problems and struggles of marginalized people in the world. 3. *Dialogic*. A critical composition pedagogy must entail authentic humanizing interactions with people in the world. 4. *Emancipatory*. A critical composition pedagogy must confront individual alienation and social injustice and have as its project liberation from oppressive realities. 5. *Praxis*. A critical composition pedagogy must be about action and reflection upon that action. (Morrell, 2008, p. 116)

While I did frequently reflect upon these guidelines throughout my study, it is important to note that critical literacy does not follow a scripted curriculum because there are no set rules for following specific critical literacy practices (Behrman, 2006; Luke, 2003); and, I found this more liberating than intimidating. A prescriptive program can often be found in standard classrooms as a symptom of tracking, and I wholeheartedly wanted to avoid a rigid approach advocated by skill and drill programs because this, I believe, would be the antithesis of critical literacy. So, I adopted a philosophy that emphasized student and teacher freedom to determine which practices work best for the individual and collective community (Behrman, 2006; Comber, 2001; Luke, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

Of all the critical practices Morrell (2008) explores, I found his applications of writing and critical reading to be most necessary when developing a critical literacy pedagogy. In his book, Morrell (2008) provides suggestions for critical literacy practices in the classroom, such as using pop culture to engage students when discussing the various values that citizens prize and

criticize, as well as their effect on society. For example, he paired Homer's *Odyssey* with Coppola's timelier and, perhaps, more relatable *Godfather* to connect Odysseus and his obstacles to those of father Vito Corleone and son Michael. This unit depicted "an example of critical literacy instruction in that it is using literature to explore complicated themes in the larger world" (Morrell, 2008, p. 95), and it prompted discussions of real-world applications of citizenship. For the writing component of the unit, students chose between two essay prompts. The first required students to defend or critique the roles of Michael Corleone and Odysseus as epic heroes; and, the second prompt required students to explore the roles of women and their use of power in both epics by providing textual and film support. In analyzing students' responses, Morrell (2008) found that students exhibited a high level of textual mastery when they were "provided spaces for authentic conversation and when asked real questions about these texts" (p. 98). By linking the students' lives and real-world concerns to those of classical and pop iconic literary figures, Morrell (2008) discovered that students could develop a meaningful relationship with complex texts and essentially learn to interrogate and decode any text once this connection was established. He further asserted, "This form of agency, even textual agency, is important in facilitating the individual and collective emancipatory projects" (Morrell, 2008, p. 98).

With this in mind, I based most of my textual selections on themes in which my students could easily identify with and meaningfully connect to their real worlds. In essence, I wanted to create a positive, safe place, the classroom, where students could read, discuss, write, share, and ultimately, visualize ways in which their choices and actions affect their places of import—online spaces, home, the community, and society.

In addition to reading whole class texts, I also encouraged individual, *aesthetic readings* (Rosenblatt, 1978). This practice, also supported by Morrell (2008), accomplishes two goals:

first, it encourages students to read because they have autonomy over their book selection; and, secondly, it reminds students that reading can be a fun and safe way to explore identity performances. Time is always a concern in the classroom and implementing independent reading can be difficult, but implementing this practice is a necessary component of a critical literacy pedagogy (Morrell, 2008).

One key element to ascertaining which themes might interest my students centered on establishing a “multistranded” relationship (Moll et al., 1992), which wasn’t very easy given that many of the students in my classroom were accustomed to oppressive educational spaces in which they were taught to be quiet and do work. After years of being tracked and sitting in places where teaching encouraged silence, many of the students in my study were used to being disengaged and withdrawn, and they were reluctant to open up to me. So, we began with weekly journaling—an informal writing practice that eventually grew into an exhibition of students’ poems, stories, letters—all of which represent pieces of their (personal narratives or) storied lives. Morrell (2008) advocates the use of Foucault’s (1980) *hupomnemata*, or composition notebooks in which students document all that surrounds them. He observes,

They are functional texts, they are emotional texts; they are living texts. . . I associate these writing practices with critical literacy because they are potentially empowering writing practices, particularly as they help to develop empowered identities and help students to cope with fear, alienation, and other negative outcomes associated with being a member of a marginalized group in society. (Morrell, 2008, p. 169-70)

Students require exploratory means in which to find the self, and journaling (Morrell, 2008) opens the door to many different genres of writing for students to assert their voice. Employing these writing practices into the classroom provided students with ample opportunities to explore their unique selves in various real and imagined places. “It is through this writing for others, a writing for the world, that we come to know and love ourselves, that we come to be empowered over our own texts and ultimately, our own lives,” (Morrell, 2008, p. 176). As a

critical literacy practice, writing can help students recognize the power they possess and offer them the ability to question, resist, and promote change through self-definition.

Ultimately, throughout this study, I focused on the myriad personal and social processes of writing and reading, as well as the multiple ways in which students connected, created, and shared their relationship with words, texts, and one another in various spaces. Sharing, showing, and telling stories can be messy. As much as I may wish for an educational Nirvana-like study, I realized that this hypothetical perfection would ultimately result in boredom, misery, and scholarly settlement. The victory narrative is predictable and often only found in Disney films that begin with *Once upon a time . . .* and close with *The End*. My study lives in the ellipses where conflict, resolution, and everything in between exists in a state of flux.

In addition to Morrell's (2008) research, I also recalled what I had observed in all of the classrooms, standard and advanced, and decided to incorporate four key elements that I found in the classrooms of Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry. Their academic places offered what I consider to be a superior education because they focused on (a) building relationships, (b) kindling critical engagement, (c) encouraging autonomy; and, (d) spreading empowerment. I used these guiding points and developed my own teaching manifesto for detracking English education.

### **A Detracking Manifesto**

I believe the following four elements are imperative in a critical classroom:

1. Students should be able to choose how they express their identity (i.e. what makes them an individual and sets them apart from the collective classroom), as well as identify with characters in various artistic mediums, such as novels, poems, short stories, plays, media clips, and films.
2. Students should be able to link together the various places in which they express their identity, such as home, the classroom, and social settings outside of the classroom.

Building these mentally connected bridges assists in strengthening students' sense of community, which augments the first element because while individuality is necessary in a critical classroom, so is respecting each character and his or her unique contribution to the communal whole.

3. Students should be able to construct and nurture meaningful relationships with other characters within each community, whether those characters appear on the fictional or nonfictional page, virtual screen, or in daily face-to-face interactions. Establishing trust through multistranded relationships (Moll et al., 1992) is, in my opinion, the cornerstone of critical democracy inside and beyond the classroom walls.
4. Students, and all members of a community, should be able to share individual, family, cultural, religious, and political beliefs with one another and the world. Voicing our ideologies in multiple places reminds us all that while our beliefs may, at times, disconnect us from others, the desire to express those thoughts and feelings connects us as humans.

A critical literacy curriculum encourages teachers to envision the classroom as a place in which each student, from his or her unique point of view, fashions the best possible educational experience. Through designing an individualized learning experience, students enrich the classroom as a place by incorporating their funds of knowledge with those of others. In this light, students come from a place of confidence because by relying on their previous knowledge, they are astutely aware of their strengths in the classroom. Furthermore, choices in composition diversify the ways in which students share what they know. Many of the activities were collaborative and assisted in building and strengthening peer relationships in the classroom.

In the following section, I include data that details my classroom structure, as well as the activities students participated in throughout units that focused thematically on identity, choice, community, relationships, and most importantly, voice. Regardless of the lesson, I strived to incorporate all four of the above focus themes into our classroom activities.

### **Classroom Activities**

#### **The Classroom Community: Establishing a Place of Trust, Respect, and Love**

Critical pedagogues advocate student autonomy and an excellent way to supersede the traditional and oppressive classroom model of teacher-superior/student-inferior is to equally share the power. Establishing a community of learners inherently implies that everyone in the classroom participates as a learner and this especially includes the teacher. Paulo Freire, critical theorist and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Thomas Jefferson, founding father and author of *The Declaration of Independence* both outline egregious abuses of power in their political tracts intended to incite a revolutionary movement in which the oppressed redefine their roles in newly envisioned places and spaces.

As with any new community, democratic ideals must be upheld and consistently maintained to avoid abuses of power and this likely means radically altering the traditional classroom place. This requires an overhaul of the banking concept of education and its oppressive practices, which Friere (1970) outlines as follows:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice; and the students comply;

- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it:
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- (j) the teach is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (p. 84)

In the above model (Freire, 1970), everything begins with the teacher, and I certainly didn't want to emulate the oppressive practices exhibited by tyrannical rulers, such as Freire's (1970) depiction of the Brazilian colonizer or Jefferson's depiction of Britain's King George III, so I took a seat and followed some advice from critical educator Ira Shor (1997) who suggests "one way to inaugurate a new speech community on Day One of class is to invite students to take the most active role while the teacher restrains her or his verbal profile" (p. 30). So, I asked the students to establish guiding principles for E-3.

### **The Guiding Principles of E-3**

For this activity, students first worked as a classroom to develop the following five categories: Online Etiquette, Work Ethic, Group Work, Sharing Ideas, and Rules for Respect. I admit, bossiness is one of my many weaknesses, and I claim to come by it honestly as an only child. Take that and couple it with years of being a teacher, and I can be downright controlling. Keeping my mouth shut as a passive classroom listener and learner gave me the shakes. Seriously, I wanted to comment after every student spoke, which I began to see as a problem. If I only heard my own thoughts and opinions, how could I hear the students? Furthermore, if I fell into my old habits of dictating and bossing, I might as well share my tyrannical presence with the power-hungry individuals Freire (1970) and Jefferson (1776) lambasted. So, I remained quiet while students developed their categories, which took about thirty minutes, and then I posted the

categories on Edmodo. On the following day, students grouped themselves, signed up for a particular category and posted no more than five guidelines for each category. Table 6 outlines the Guiding Principles of E-3.

Table 6

*The Guiding Principles of E-3*

| Category          | Guiding principles  |
|-------------------|---|
| Online etiquette  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No cyberbullying.</li> <li>2. Watch what you post.</li> <li>3. Never post silly or ignorant things online.</li> <li>4. Don't take pictures of people without their permission.</li> </ol> |
| Work ethic        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Always try your hardest.</li> <li>2. Don't cheat off of anybody else's paper.</li> </ol>  |
| Group work        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work hard and consistently with respect towards one another.</li> <li>2. Share ideas and don't leave anyone out.</li> </ol>   |
| Sharing ideas     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Raise your hand before speaking.</li> <li>2. Speak loudly and clearly.</li> <li>3. Be nice.</li> <li>4. Do everything as a group.</li> </ol>  |
| Rules for respect | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Treat others like you want to be treated.</li> <li>2. When someone is talking, be respectful and listen.</li> </ol>   |

**The Home Community**

While it's certainly important to establish a community of trust, respect, and love in the classroom, this cannot be sufficiently done without knowing what roles students play in other places—most importantly, their home—as well as what they value and honor. Before assigning this multimodal project, I first reminded students that the classroom is a working community in which we see each other every day and show respect toward one another for different reasons. We discussed the meaning of community and students identified other communities, such as

Elmsville High School, sports/club teams, church, friends, and River City. I then gave them the following assignment instructions:

I want to know about your community at home—yes, your family is a community, too! In order to build a classroom community filled with trust and respect, we must first learn all about you and what you do during your time away from school with your family community. To accomplish this task, you will create a media presentation to share with your class and explain who is in your family community, what you all enjoy doing together, and why you respect your family community. What is the role you play and how do you contribute positively to your community? Your presentation should contain the following:

1. Introduction \_Your name, date, block, and a picture of your family community.
2. Define what community means to you. (Include an image that represents community.)
3. Explain who is in your family community. (Include picture(s) of your family.)
4. What do you enjoy doing together as a family community? (church, dinner, trips, family dinner.)
5. Explain why you respect each other in your family community.
6. What is the role you play and how do you contribute positively to your community. (Do you wash dishes, take care of siblings, work, cook, maintain peace, etc.?)
7. What makes your community unique?

This critical literacy activity invited students to glimpse into each other's personal worlds. They could begin to see multiple viewpoints and, perhaps, construct a mental bridge connecting places, such as the classroom and home. As stressed by Montgomery (2014), "Given the daily technological advances, scholarship on now we might foster critical democracy through critical literacy practices in online spaces is warranted" (p. 201). The digital literacy component of this activity encouraged composition choice in which students could determine how to best share the content (Mills & Exley, 2014). Even though students could choose the composition mode, I was a little disappointed that all of them used PowerPoint, as opposed to countless other presentation methods. I take full responsibility for this, as I did not encourage them to step outside of their PowerPoint comfort zone.

For anonymity purposes, I cannot provide the visual component of this project because students included images of their family members; however, I am sharing the written content from the presentations of Gene, Raven, Shonda, and Zora.

**Gene.** Gene defined community as “a number of people who live in the same place and have certain things in common.” On the next slide he included many pictures of his family—mother, brother, and himself—all very nicely dressed for various church activities. He explained that he enjoyed “attending church with my family, eating dinner with my family, and going out for night of eating dinner with his family. Gene stressed that respect is very important in his family, and he wrote, “We respect each other in my community because we know how to act toward one another. We feel that you give respect to get it, and by showing and utilizing respect, that is what you get.” On the next slide, Gene described his role in his community as “the dish washer. And since I am the mature one, I’m the responsible one. I also cook a lot, which I love doing, and I am also the peace maker.”

**Raven.** Raven defined community as “a group where more than one person lives together. A community doesn’t necessarily have to live in the same house. They can live together on different streets, cities, or states. All of them are still a community.” Raven’s family consists of her mother, two sisters, and one niece; however, she wrote, “I live with my mom and one of my sisters. It is just us three and we have lots of neighbors.” As a family, Raven and her sister love “watching movies, playing the Xbox, walking, and playing basketball. My sister and I also love to make food. We made our own mozzarella sticks yesterday and they were so good!” Raven respects everyone in her family because “I love them and you never know when you might not see them anymore.” As for her role in the family, Raven explained, “I help my mama

cook and clean the house. I also have to help my little sister with homework and anything else she needs help with.”

**Shonda.** Shonda didn’t define community but instead wrote, “My community actually means a lot to me. I only socialize with one of my neighbors. My community is on the side of town called the bad side, which I don’t agree that I live in a bad community or a bad side of town. I love my community and nothing is going to change that.” On the next slide, she provided pictures of her family and explained that she lives with her mother, has three older brothers, and is the only girl. She wrote, “None of my brothers live with me anymore. My oldest brother is in jail. My second oldest brother is also in jail. The youngest brother is in Florida with my uncle to better his ways and his attitude. I love all of my brothers to death and miss them all like crazy.” Shonda also wrote that she loves to spend time playing games with her family when they are home during the holidays.

**Zora.** Zora defined community as “a group of people (family, friends, etc.) living in the same place and/or having similar characteristics.” She identified her community members as her dad, a brother in first grade, two sisters (one in sixth grade and the other in kindergarten), and their dogs, Lova and Fluffy. She explained that her family enjoys having fun together. She wrote, “I enjoy going out to places with my family like the mall, zoo, or just going to dinner. When we’re at home, we usually watch a movie at night together or go outside with our dogs.” In discussing her role, she wrote, “My role as the oldest child is to take care of my siblings every day after school and to cook for them, clean, and help them do their homework and my own homework. As the oldest child, I have many responsibilities.” On her slide describing what makes her family community unique, she said, “My community is unique because unlike other communities, we have actually gone through a lot of hard times together and not the kind of

problems that most families go through when their child is being a rebel or low on cash, but a divorce. It is not easy living with a divorced parent especially when there are young children going through something they don't quite understand."

From these presentations, as well as the students' personal narratives, I learned that many of them exhibit agency at home on a daily basis. Acting as caretakers for their younger siblings, Zora and Raven place the needs of others first, which sometimes meant their own schooling and well-being suffered as they often came to class tired. Also, even though Julian didn't complete this assignment, I learned from his personal narrative that in addition to caring for his younger brother, he also contributes financially through earnings he receives while working construction with his family after school, on the weekends, and during any school holiday. Without tapping into these students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), I would not have discovered these important strands of their identity. Moll et al. (1992) observe,

The typical teacher-student relationship seems "thin" and "single-stranded," as the teacher "knows" the students only from their experience within rather limited classroom contexts. Additionally, in contrast to the households and their social networks, the classrooms seem encapsulated, if not isolated, from the social worlds and resources of the community. When funds of knowledge are not readily available within households, relationships with individuals outside the households are activated to meet either household or individual needs. In classrooms, however, teachers rarely draw on the resources of the "funds of knowledge" of the child's world outside the context of the classroom. (p. 134)

Learning more about the students, their families, and their roles at home added an element of mutual trust through the reciprocal act of getting to know one another as people, not just in the academic setting through such limited binary roles of student and teacher.

### **Building and Strengthening Relationships Through Journaling**

Once the students shared information about themselves to the classroom, I wanted to know even more about them, so we began weekly journals—a practice advocated by many educators, including Ernest Morrell (2008), one of the teacher/researchers whose practices

influenced this study. Throughout the course of the study, students responded to 25 prompts, and I have included 20 of these in Appendix F, as well as the online link to a YouTube clip if applicable. To establish a routine, I tried to provide a prompt every Wednesday. I called this our “Connect Wednesdays” and I would begin the class by showing a media clip, providing a personal anecdote, or just simply inviting students to engage in a classroom discussion regarding a topic relevant to the lesson or current affairs. Either the clip, story, or discussion would take around 5 to 15 minutes, and students would spend another 15 minutes responding to a prompt.

Initially, I envisioned this activity as a combination of critical and digital literacy practices. I tried to center the media clip, story, or discussion on current sociopolitical issues that could be linked to identity, community, relationships, and voice. Furthermore, I tried to incorporate multiple perspectives into the lesson by choosing media clips voiced by diverse individuals. For example, during one of our Connect Wednesdays at the beginning of the year, students viewed two powerful examples of spoken word poetry. The first clip showcased an exemplary choral poem detailing historically controversial issues stemming from censorship, violence, racism, and sexism as told from the perspectives of three female teenagers of African American, Latino, and Caucasian descent. The second clip, an example of button poetry, highlighted two teenage performers—an African American male and Caucasian female—as they vocalized the unique challenges of each race and sex, as well as the frustrations felt by each person when others try to speak about these subjects for them. I encouraged students to post to Edmodo their thoughts/feelings/reflections on these performances. I hoped this would encourage students who rarely shared their thoughts aloud in the classroom to divulge their unique perspective in an online space. This didn’t happen. Immediately after I showed students the Edmodo forum that I created for them, Shonda’s hand bulletted to the ceiling and before I could

call on her she blurted out in despair, “But if we post online will everybody see our comments?” I responded yes, and tried to give a very democratic spiel on the merits of sharing our individual viewpoints with one another. I further stressed that if students wrote solely in their composition notebooks, that only I would be able to see their beautiful thoughts. Unfortunately, my speech feverishly advocating online posts abruptly flatlined when Shonda again interjected, “Do we have to post online?”

Maybe I should have told them yes, but this study was built upon the Freirean (1970) philosophy that I flatten my presence so that the students could be seen and heard. Dictating how they responded to clips would negate this core tenet. So, I told them that they could write in their composition notebooks or post their responses online.

After students submitted their journal responses, there was only about 25 minutes left in the class, so I spent the remaining time connecting with each student individually at my desk while the rest of the class practiced Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) with either a whole-class novel or one of their own choosing. I called these last 25 minutes “Free-Read Time.” Essentially, “Connect Wednesdays” allowed students to personally connect with themselves, me, and the world around them through the critical literacy practices of journaling and aesthetic readings (Morrell, 2008; Rosenblatt, 1978).

It should be noted that none of the students ever chose to post their Connect Wednesday responses in the online forum. From this portion of the study, I found that students prefer journaling in a composition notebook, as opposed to posting their responses online. Even when I told them they could post their responses online in a direct message that only I would see, they still said they preferred the more personal nature of pouring their thoughts into a journal. They also LOVED getting back my written responses to each of their journal entries, and if I forgot to

respond to one of them, they made sure to remind me. For example, Gene was absent on one of the Connect Wednesdays, so he responded to the prompt the next day, and I forgot to comment on his entry. He wrote me an email reminding me to respond to his post, placed a Post-it note with the same reminder in his composition notebook, and verbally reminded me at the end of class.

I'll admit, it took quite a bit of time to personally respond to each of the students on a weekly basis, but this activity was probably my favorite. The act of writing back and forth to one another in journals made me nostalgic for my childhood. I loved writing in my sparkly, unicorn-decorated diary as a child; and even though it had a tiny padlock, I often left it open on my desk for my parents to read. Sadly, I don't recall any of my high school teachers using composition notebooks for anything other than copying pages of notes from the board. I regret not incorporating this critical literacy practice into my curriculum until now.

Weekly journaling is the metaphorical Swiss Army knife for any classroom, regardless of the content area. This multifunctional practice allowed students to express their identity in relation to others' point of view, to establish a face-to-face meaningful relationship with me, and to assert their voice as a unique and valuable member in our place of learning. Furthermore, by giving me the opportunity to establish and maintain a multistranded relationship with each student, journaling provided threads of knowledge about each student that I used to weave together a communal tapestry from which I often highlighted throughout the year. For example, when students mirrored the writing style of Nikki Grimes' *Bronx Masquerade* and constructed their own identity poems during one of our "Connect Wednesdays," I noticed that many of them faced similar obstacles such as being one of the main caretakers in a single-parent household. So, I would pull out these identity threads during classroom discussions—anonymously, of course, I

might say something like, “Did you know that six of you assume the responsibility of taking care of your siblings while your mom or dad is at work? Or, nine of you admit to being bullied at school and fifteen of you mentioned experiencing moments of feeling incredibly alone. But you’re not! You have each other. You have me. You have us.” These sparks of building a communal spirit often kindled discussions where students would speak out and voice their experiences with the classroom. Our classroom tapestry of identity threads provided a source of safety and comfort as it draped us in a mosaic of experiences and memories. It encouraged and nurtured relationships as it held us together, but also highlighted and embraced our differences.

**Bronx Masquerade, poetry out loud, and six-word memoirs.** Since it was still the beginning of the year, and the above poems were personal, students did not volunteer to share aloud, and I did not force them. I simply used these poems as a springboard into the textual anchor of the unit, Nikki Grimes’ novel, *Bronx Masquerade*. I chose this as our first book because it explores the identity of 18 eighth graders who attend an urban school in the Bronx. At the onset, these students appear to share little in common other than being in the same English class; however, when the teacher assigns an essay, and one of the students suggests they instead write and participate in spoken-word poetry, the class learns to appreciate each other’s differences and also find camaraderie with students who share similar hopes and struggles.

Grimes’ fictional community of learners and their individual chapters guided my students’ development of their own poems and chapters, which they were invited to share with the classroom. This unit extended beyond the classroom walls when students participated in our school-wide participation in Poetry Out Loud. This annual contest, sponsored by The National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, began in 2005 and encourages students to choose a poem to memorize and recite. It functions as a pyramid contest, so it initiates in the

classroom and ultimately culminates into the national finals. At Elmsville High School, we have augmented Poetry Out Loud and paired the recitation contest with an original poetry portion in which students pen their own poems to recite. As an introduction to the contest, we began with a six-word memoir in which students only had to write six words. Many chose to write more than one memoir, and some deviated from the word count, but I always tried to be flexible and remember the purpose of the activity: To learn about the students.

**Six-word memoirs.** Unlike other poems they constructed, students readily volunteered to read these six-word memoirs, and they had so much fun with these that Shonda suggested they write them on the classroom board for all students to see. I used this suggestion as a springboard into what could possibly become a digital post and share on Edmodo or Google Classroom, and tried to encourage the students to post their memoirs online, but they were still too afraid of who might see their poetic musings. Even after reminding them that our Edmodo and Google Classroom accounts were only visible to them and me, they still resisted. So, I pulled out a bucket of Expo dry erase markers and they transformed our naked white board into a *mélange* of colorful musings. I labeled their memoirs as *Groovy Graffiti* and asked to keep their art on display for the week. At first, Zora and Andrew wanted me to erase theirs, but Shonda and Gene told them to be proud of their work. I gave them the option to erase their names if that would make any of them feel better, to which Zora and Andrew quickly did, but the rest agreed to share their writing with my other classes.

By the next day, all of my classes wanted to write six-word memoirs and place them on the board. I told my trendsetting authors the news, and they beamed. Bursting with pride and confidence, the students wanted to write more, and I took this as the perfect opportunity to

explain that they would be crafting their own chapter and poem just like the characters in *Bronx Masquerade*. This critical literacy activity resonated with the students for the following reasons:

1. First, as I mentioned earlier, the novel itself represents 18 diverse student perspectives on relevant themes, such as adolescence, beauty, dreams, family, friendship, love, and race.
2. Secondly, students could model their chapter/poem in the same format as one of the book chapters.
3. Finally, and most importantly, the students felt confident about their writing because I scaffolded the writing activities and organized them in a manner that culminated into this larger project.

In the spirit of retaining the structural layout of *Bronx Masquerade* and as a tribute and heartfelt thanks to Nikki Grimes (2008) for inspiring the voices of E-3, I respectfully mirrored each student's chapter and poem format in the same manner as the novel.

### **River City Masquerade. The voices of E-3**

**Zora.** Well, I live with my dad, and I'm not gonna lie. It's kind of a struggle having to wake up early, get my siblings ready for school, and then leave the house to show up here with rude, annoying, disrespectful people. But, I have to deal with them. Having to deal with them is a bit difficult. Every time I hear them talking, I try not to say anything back. I try not to explode but with all this stress in me sometimes it can be really hard for me not to say anything. Well, with my life I do the same things every day. I clean, cook, eat, and bathe my siblings. I'm basically their mother. Our mother doesn't really care for us . . .

Growing up for me was really difficult being the oldest. I was always wrapped up in my parents' fights and arguments, and it's been like this for a few years now. I'm hoping that this

argument of our custody doesn't last long because I just want to find happiness, but for now, I'll just wait . . .

***Depression.***

*Depression. Anxiety.  
People tell us to forget about, it will go away,  
but they don't know  
it will simply just "go away"  
because it is more than they think it is.  
It is feeling alone while in a room filled with people.  
Depression is like drowning when you can still see everyone else breathing.*

**Shonda.** Walking down the hallway, I think of my hair flowing, lips glossing, natural glow glowing, outfit standing out, and being the gorgeous, intelligent, Black, African American, young lady that I am. I had to come to reality and *really* see what was *really* going on with the outside. There was stiffness in my natural hair, eczema on my skin, and baggy pants and shirt. Some people see me of being that girl that's just going to dropout, get pregnant, and become a stripper, but I believe that I, Shonda, am better than that. I'm going to be that girl that is going to be slaying hair, nails, and faces on the block. I always come with a plan B. If my "slaying" plan doesn't go right then I will go into the medical field. I want to be that girl known for helping others by slaying beauty. Seriously, sometimes I really do think about being a stripper because of the money and the dancing. I love to dance. I have rhythm like the best free-styling rapper, but I just don't have the moves.

***The Haters Can't Stop Me!***

*See me here, now you don't.  
Peeking in, just don't say "she won't."  
I see the eyes lurking, hoping that she don't.  
But when she make it, they'll be hating when they could have been with her.  
The haters get madder and madder everyday.  
But they was too busy saying "she won't"  
that they didn't realize they could have been there with her.  
She at the top scheduling hair appointments for people all over the world.*

*She just that good,  
and now she giving back to the people that helped her up the mountain.*

**Gene.** My mom repeats all the time, “I want you to be better than me!” Sometimes, it bothers me because she makes it sound like she’s not successful. She’s a single mother, who got her GED, didn’t go to college, but works hard so that we can have. She’s pretty darn successful to me. She may mumble and complain every now and then but she makes us a priority and not an option. Unlike my father, he’s there sometimes or when I ask him, or even when he gets ready. His father was like that to him as well. My father lies sometimes and even uses my mother as an excuse to why he can drive by my house and see me standing outside but don’t even bother stopping, let alone beep that horn. He has four children, takes care of two, and acts like he only has two. That’s fine with me because I’m going to break that curse. I’m going to make sure that I make it a priority for me to be there for my kids. My mom tells me this and that about my dad, and I believe everything that she says, but he is still my dad and I refuse to act like he’s not.

Let’s not make this all about my parent because all I’m trying to do is stay focused on church, home, and school. I’m trying to prove these folks wrong, let them know that I can be successful, and I can be something. If I don’t go to college it will be because of church. Just to throw this out there, jail AND prison will NOT have my name, unless the officers are discussing how successful I am. I’m that “preacher” NOW, and I will be LATER. Sometimes that comes with a challenge. It comes with a challenge because all these folks around me be cursing and doing stubborn things that I want to do but can’t do. Like, they talk like they have no God in their life if you know I mean, as if they were just made by themselves. But, I just ignore and reject these crazy kids. I leave them alone and let them be. All I got to do is keep on striving to be the best I can be.

But anyways, I often question myself a lot but all I need are some goals and some dreams to achieve and I promise I'll make it through the day. Now, school ain't my only goal. I still have to live my religious life 24/7, and live it right so I can get my life on the right path and get on out of this old place here, and go to heaven. Life ain't no joke no more and I'm not either.

***Because of a Goal!***

*I want you to be better than me.  
I can say that all day long  
but I am of the belief  
that won't stop my goal.*

*If I reach up into the stars  
and get burned by the sun,  
or if I get burned to ashes,  
that didn't stop my goal.*

*My goal will be a legacy  
that will continuously live on,  
and if my family never does,  
just know that I still had my goal.*

*I hear them say that "stick and stones"  
can maybe "break my bones,"  
but I can say that your opinion  
WILL NOT STOP MY GOAL!!!!*

**Raven.** My name is Raven, and I'm from Chicago, Illinois. Being broke is not what's up. Every morning I wake up and ask myself why do my dad have to do this to us? I've sat at the dinner table and watched my mom argue on the phone with my dad because he's not sending child support money. He only has to send enough for two people—my little sister and me. I'm 15 and my sister is 12. My mom and dad got divorced when I was 7. They argue about every little thing! My dad is an alcoholic, so he makes the situation worse. I love my dad a lot, and even though I'm a daddy's girl, he still gets on my last nerve sometimes. He wonders why I hate coming around him. It's like every time I see him, he's drunk! Sometimes I feel like getting one of his beer bottles and hitting him with it. He embarrasses me around any and everybody! When

my dad gets drunk, he likes to fight, argue, fall, and sleep everywhere! Now that he has a “new girlfriend,” he gets even drunker! She doesn’t even like my family or me. She and my dad are always arguing over us, but I love my dad so much. I just wish I could stop him from drinking.

***My Dad.***

*Cussing,  
Yelling,  
Fighting,  
Crying,  
Drinking,  
Falling,  
Rolling.  
My poor, poor dad.  
The sun may shine,  
but only on sober days.  
The next day it's as dark as a broken light bulb.  
Once it's dark, the pain occurs again.*

**Julian.** I live with my mom and dad, but I like my dad more. Even though he gets me in trouble a lot, he is always there for me. I thank him for all the things he has done for me. He gives me advice and wishes, one day, to see me be a successful person in life and have a good job, money, and a good education.

I have two younger brothers, Sam and Silas. Sam is always trying to get me into trouble. Whenever he does something wrong, he blames it on me and I get in trouble. Silas is always taking my stuff and hiding it.

My mom is always pushing me to do better. She encourages me to pay more attention in school, get better grades, be a role model to my brothers, and show them the good, not negative things. She wants me to be the big brother, and she wishes to see me lead them the right way.

***Success.***

*Success isn't given.  
It's earned  
on the track,  
on the field,*

*and in the gym  
with blood, sweat,  
and the occasional tear.*

**Taylor.** My life is tough seeing my mom trying to work so hard and try to take care of two kids by herself. It is a lot on her shoulders. I am going to try my best to keep my grades up so when I am ready to go off to college, I can go there with a scholarship. I want to make my mom proud and be able to help her out so she doesn't have to worry about how she is going to get the stuff we need and want.

I have family members who always want someone to help them when they are in need, but when my mom is in need of help they always find excuses about why they can't help her out. I love my mom to death. She helps people even when she is in her lowest time or highest time because she has a good heart. Times are hard, but I know we can get through the tough times because we always do. Like my grandma says, "There is always a good thing coming along the way."

***Independent.***

*Times like this,  
You have to remember  
what it takes to get Yourself  
out of the situations You are in,  
and believe in Yourself  
that You can make it on Your own  
without anyone trying to help You.  
The only person You have in this world is You  
and only YOU.*

**Cyrus.** Once upon a time in a high school in northern Alabama, everyone was a friend. In this school, no one was bullied, no one was called names, and everything was perfect. But in the real world, it is completely different and it is not all just fun and games. You have people getting bullied because they're fat or just not good at something, or they are called names like cupcake or pork chop. They tell you if they push on your stomach, food will just pour out.

But if they would just take the time to get to know the person, it would be a different story. There are some good things. If you have really good friends, that helps you to deal with the bad stuff. Like my best friend Josh, he and I have been good friends ever since we met in sixth grade. We have history and lunch together this year. We laugh, cut up, and he spends the night at my house. He is a real friend. The point of my story is don't believe the people who tell you high school is perfect because it's not.

***Bullies.***

*You get made fun of because you're fat  
like rat-a-tat tat.  
They say your hair looks stupid, so you wear a hat.  
But don't!  
You are who you are.  
Don't give them what they want.  
Don't just stand there and take it.  
Be yourself. Don't be a bully.*

After students submitted their chapters and poems to me, Gene suggested that we have an Open Mike performance just as the students did in *Bronx Masquerade*. Some of the more vocal students like Shonda and Raven screamed, "YES!" while Zora's eyes widened in fear and she vigorously shook her head no. I quickly stressed to the students that they need not feel pressure to perform; those who wanted to share could and those who didn't could simply listen. So, the next day, we heard the chapters and poems from Gene, Shonda, Raven, and Taylor. I tried to encourage the others to share, but they would not budge, so we moved on to the next activity.

**Ready, set, action: Creating an iMovie trailer.** Crafting the poems and chapters took students approximately a week in class, and because it was a very individualized activity, I chose to follow it with a collaborative, digital literacy project. Since there is, unfortunately, no film adaptation for *Bronx Masquerade*, I decided the students could direct and film iMovie trailers teasing the novel. But before I assigned this project, I first made sure that *I* could create a trailer

with relative ease. I chose my son's love for hockey as my subject and created a trailer using clips from hockey practice and games. Piecing together the clip took approximately an hour, and my son and our family truly enjoyed watching it. My son even went on and created more trailers of his various interests, like Lego-building and karate. I shared these with the class, and they immediately wanted to create their own, so I pitched the idea about using *Bronx Masquerade* as the subject and they wanted to start filming immediately.

The students selected their production crew and organized themselves into four groups of five or six. I told them they would need to divide roles evenly, and I suggested they assign a director, recorder, writer(s), and actors. About ten minutes into the activity, we discovered that while many of the students had smart phones, only a few had iPhones, which they needed to use the iMovie trailer application. That issue was easily resolved, but we encountered other technical difficulties that mainly arose because of the school's spotty WiFi service. While students could use their own cellular data, many would often complain about being "low on data" or not wanting to "waste data on a school activity." I reminded them that their devices are called smart phones, not social media phones, and Shonda laughed at me, brushed my words away with her hands, and said, "You're so crazy, Mrs. Kusta." Luckily, Shonda had unlimited data and agreed to record each group's Trailer, but this also meant that she had to go around to each group, film numerous individual clips, and then help edit the trailer since all of the content was on her phone. For schools without WiFi issues, this activity would be much easier, but in the end, what took me about an hour to create using my home WiFi, took students about a week working with our ridiculously shameful WiFi. Regardless, the students had a blast with this activity and their trailers were quirky, original, and fun for everyone to watch. At the close of the activity, I asked

the students to comment on each other’s participation and involvement. Here are a few comments from the students regarding the process (Table 7).

Table 7

*Students’ Comments on the Process for the Digital Liberty Project*

| Student | Comments  |
|---------|---|
| Andrew  | “I was confused, a little camera shy, and I didn’t do much.”  |
| Gene    | “I felt personally that I did well collaborating with my peers. I enjoyed the laughter we had and it turned out a success!” |
| Julian  | “Some of the people in the group didn’t really contribute, but I would like to do something similar again.”                 |
| Raven   | “I would definitely do another trailer. I liked this and it was fun.”   |
| Shonda  | “This project was fun and creative. I also think we should do it again.”  |
| Taylor  | “This was a good project to get to know people better and it got more people involved.”                                     |
| Zora    | “Even though we had a hard time finishing our trailer, I would like to try this again.”                                     |

**A not-so-formal summative assessment.** I often feel that formal, summative assessments fail to truly gauge what students learned during a unit. Perhaps any of the projects the students completed during the *Bronx Masquerade* unit would suffice as a loosely structured summative assessment; however, I decided to craft a not-so-formal summative assessment for the students to finalize the unit. I wanted to avoid a multiple-choice, standardized-type assessment because that would totally deplete the creative spirit that fueled the previous activities; and instead, I designed a test that would further encourage students to make connections between themselves and the characters in the novel.

It contained the following five questions:

1. Now that you've completed the novel, which character do you identify with most? Why? Explain your reasons. Example: I identify with \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_  
...
2. Who or what influences the students most? Family? Society? Teachers? Friends? Of these, which is most influential and why?
3. Of the following motifs, which three do you share with the characters and why?
  - Establishing Friendships
  - Acceptance among others
  - Refusing abuse
  - Eliminating prejudice by voicing your mind
  - Exhibiting courage and avoiding peer pressure
  - Understanding other cultures
  - Following your dreams
  - Confronting poverty, racism or death
4. Of the above motifs, which is the most important to follow in the real world—outside the school walls.
5. What piece of advice would you give your favorite character? Identify the character and write your advice.

Table 8 shows some of the students' responses to the first question.

In all, I considered this unit a success because each of the students found at least one character with whom they shared interests, concerns, and dreams. Furthermore, the students really enjoyed reading the novel in class together and frequently fought over who could read the next poem or chapter. Rarely does this happen with the traditional novels our department espouses for freshmen English. While I taught *Bronx Masquerade* to my English 9 class, the English 9 students down the hallway read *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 1861). While I agree that some of the classics have a place in the canon of high school English literature, I also find some of the classic novels to be a bit stuffy and extremely intimidating for reluctant readers. In

my previous years of experience with teaching *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 1861), none of the students fought to read chapters aloud and many admitted to only reading SparkNotes.

Table 8

*Sample Student Responses to Question 1 of Summative Assessment*

| Student | Responses  |
|---------|--|
| Andrew  | “I identify with Lupe Algarin because sometimes I feel lonely and seek for a lot of love and attention.”   |
| Cyrus   | “I identify with Raul Ramirez because we both like to paint.”  |
| Gene    | “I identify with Tyrone because we are both alike, very open about situations, and we don’t mind voicing our opinion about certain situations.”                        |
| Julian  | “I identify with Tyrone because school is complicated to him as it is to me. I want to succeed in the future like he does.”  |
| Raven   | “I identify with Janelle Battle because we both don’t like our bodies. Sometimes I dream about going out with people, but I don’t because it’s mostly the body issue.” |
| Shonda  | “I identify with Tanisha Scott because she is popping and all the girls want to be like her. Just like me.”  |
| Taylor  | “I identify with Judianne Alexander because me and her both have self-image issues, and I really don’t have friends that I can just talk to about anything.”           |
| Zora    | “I identify with Janelle Battle because we both have a lot of body issues, as in how we look.”   |

As mentioned at the opening of this chapter, developing a critical classroom first means that students should be able to express their identity (i.e. what makes them an individual and sets them apart from the collective classroom), as well as identify with characters in various artistic mediums, such as novels, poems, short stories, plays, media clips, and films. One of the major appeals of *Bronx Masquerade* is the number of authentic, believable characters (18) and the diverse perspectives they provide. Also, they each possess a unique talent that they ultimately share with the class through their Open Mike performances; so, for the next digital literacy

activity, the class brainstormed and decided they would each create their own web site and share their talents, interests, or dreams with the world.

**Spin a web.** For this activity, I reserved three class periods in the library so the students could work from reliable desktop computers and not the substandard laptops with increasingly frustrating WiFi concerns. Prior to our time in the library, students brainstormed with partners in the classroom so they would have a few working ideas before designing their sites. While I'm sure there are numerous sites that assist in web design, we used weebly.com simply because it was free and I was familiar with the site having used it to create previous teacher web pages. While I cannot share the students' sites because many contain identifiable information and personal photos, I can share some of their design content.

Zora's site focused on baking and cooking tutorials. Specifically, she shared her experience with following a new sugar cookie recipe for a classroom assignment. She also showcased her love of photography by documenting the process of making the cookies.

Shonda touted her talents as an advice columnist and wrote on her home page, "Just be yourself, whether the people like it or not, whether it's good or bad, just do you regardless." She also answered the question, "Who am I" with the following response, "I am a student working to change the world one post at a time. This is a site to make people feel like they are in a safe environment where we can just stay posted and talk about anything." Shonda's content revealed her love of conversation coupled with her desire to help people.

Probably the most detailed site came from Gene because he is usually extremely thorough in his work ethic. He wrote on his home page, "What defines me? That is the question? Well I'll start like this: what doesn't define me is my name, my clothes, or my actions. What *does* define me is my mind, my intelligence, and my talents. Here, you will find things I like to do and

things I enjoy doing.” He created three subpages to detail his three predominant interests:

singing, church, and babysitting. Of his first love, singing, he wrote:

I love singing because it calms me down and it is what I love to do. Singing is a gift and a talent in my life. I have been singing all of my life and I only sing gospel. When I sing, it is so relaxing and I feel confident. There is nothing in this world that is going to stop me from doing what I do best. I have sung in front of 1 person up to 2,000 people. I act and sing. Never am I scared . . . until I sing on the BET Awards.

He then posted a picture of him singing the lead in his church choir. Of his second love, church, he wrote,

I love church because I love God. I have been in church all of my life. My mom has and it is just my life. If I'm not at home, I'm at church and those are places where you can always find me. I am a Sunday School teacher, Youth Sunday School chairman, and Youth Sunday School secretary. Right now, I am working on making and ordering shirts for our youth. As you can see, I play a big role at church. My pastor always tells me, “Make sure you have the young people in order.” That is what I do and I am good at it.

Next to this post, he included a picture of him teaching a lesson to his youth group. His innate love for leading and teaching definitely shines in the classroom, too. I have no doubt that Gene inspires countless people on a daily basis.

Finally, of his third love, babysitting, he wrote the most:

Taking care of kids is what I love to do because the joy they bring in my life helps me get my mind off of things that I go through. If there is one thing that I wouldn't trade in the world, it would be my love of children. I've worked at a daycare, and as you have seen on my page about church, I play a major part in the lives of young people. I really love kids because anytime I am going through something, their presence helps me forget about it or get it off my mind. They make me laugh, and my patience is really long. You know, working with kids isn't hard. They are my pride and joy. I actually want 9 kids.

He also shared a picture from the previous summer when he worked at the church daycare and took the kids to Chuck E. Cheese. He looked so incredibly proud and happy.

Whereas Gene loved to share everything about his life, Andrew avoided talking too much about his personal life. His web site described his love of soccer, and he also posted a few YouTube videos of various soccer players performing skilled tricks. He didn't have much

content, but in his defense, he spent most of his time in the library helping others, and I could tell that made him very proud because it was one of the few weeks that I consistently saw him smiling and interacting with others. It was ironic that Andrew, who claimed to hate computers, seemed to know a lot about them.

Raven told me repeatedly throughout this activity that she didn't like doing "computer stuff" and she wanted to know, "What book are we reading next?" She created a simple site called "Slimmm' Dunkinnn" where she shared her love of Michael Jordan basketball shoes. Her favorites included the Jordan 11's, Jordan 12 Posters, Jordan 12 floral print, and the 2016 Johnny Kilroy pair.

Like Raven, Julian preferred face-to-face classroom activities and didn't seem to enjoy creating a web site. He, too, said he'd much rather be reading, having class discussions, or writing in the journal. Nevertheless, he created a one-page site about guitars in which he shared their range of cost.

Taylor wrote on her home page, "I am a person who loves to shop and loves to go out and put wonderful outfits together." On her fashion-centered site, she pieced together a few trendy outfits and detailed a list of online shopping resources where one could purchase accessories.

Finally, Cyrus designed a page called, "Fishing 101." On his home page he wrote,

This is a site about my experience with fishing. I like to fish for anything. I have been fishing since I was about 4 or 5. There are many types of fish and different ways to catch them. My three favorite fish to catch are blue gill, catfish, and bass.

On his subpage, he wrote about fishing rods. "There are many types of fishing rods, but I use three. The three I use are bait caster, spin reel, and a push button. The first fishing rod and reel I used was a Zebco 33."

Overall, the students enjoyed this visually creative, digital literacy activity, and even when some struggled to upload content, other students would rush to their aid, and beam at the

opportunity to co-teach. Two of my more reserved students, Andrew and Zora, excelled throughout this project because of their ease with most online tools; so, many students frequently called for their advice on a layout or for troubleshooting assistance. At the end of the three days, students shared their web sites with the class and I was quite impressed by how much they accomplished in such little time. Ironically, while Andrew and Zora were the most knowledgeable with online tools, they preferred hand-written journaling to this activity.

**Storyboarding with Romeo and Juliet.** Before we began reading *Romeo and Juliet*, I created a Google Classroom account for the students, introduced them to it, and asked which platform they would rather use: Edmodo or Google Classroom? Of the 14 who responded to the online poll, 11 wanted to use Google Classroom and only 3 wished to continue with Edmodo. So, we switched to Google Classroom and it, like Edmodo, continued to function as mostly a hub where I posted questions, assignments, or handouts.

At the start of *Romeo and Juliet*, I posted the following on Google Classroom: “We are going to complete our next digital literacy project with this play! Would you like to create a movie trailer, song, rewrite/modernize and act/scene, or write a storyboard?” Of the 17 responses, 8 wanted to rewrite/modernize the text, 7 chose to write a storyboard, 1 voted to write a song, and 1 chose to create another iMovie trailer. Because we had not tried creating a storyboard yet and students could modernize or adapt an act/scene with this tool, they also felt like it would be a good idea to try digital storytelling. We used StoryBoardThat.com and students enjoyed creating various adaptations of scenes throughout the play. At this site, students have multiple design options and can create two storyboards per week with a free account. Some designed one and some two, and they all uploaded them to Google Classroom where we could share them. The only drawback to this site is that students can only use six tiles per storyboard

with the free account, and some of them had to break their adaptation into two parts in order to spread their storyboard out over 12 tiles. If you have the funds to purchase an account for each student, I'm sure this issue of limited availability could be solved easily.

After students shared their storyboards, I posted a parody of *Romeo and Juliet* from the CBS hit sitcom, *The Goldbergs*, in an episode called "Cowboy Country." In this comical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, two teenagers in love experience the woes of family feuding when they realize one father roots for the Dallas Cowboys and the other for the Philadelphia Eagles. This light-hearted parody appealed to the students and made the play much more relatable from a modern perspective. This episode prompted a discussion on Google Classroom and while students were engaged in online conversation, I also posted the following to the discussion thread: "Have you ever dated someone that your family didn't like? How did that work out for you?" The students posted the responses shown in Table 9.

While I loved the relative ease in which the students could respond to the discussion thread on Google Classroom (many elected to respond from their smart phones and not with our classroom laptops), I noted the brevity of their answers. Also, they rarely responded to a classmate's post unless I made that part of the grade, which just seems like encouraging the type of forced conversation you have at family reunions with some great aunt that last saw you 36 years ago in diapers. It's not that the students felt uncomfortable talking with one another; they would have loved to just converse with one another every day, but they preferred face-to-face over online interaction. Personally, I can relate to this because I despise online discussion boards and I had to post numerous responses to classroom discussions in graduate-level courses. I understand the convenience of online courses when students live hours away from the campus, and I also realize that students must meet hourly requirements per week in online posts.

Nonetheless, the online threads feel dead and inspire little in the way of classroom camaraderie and scholarship.

Table 9

*Student Responses in Google Classroom Discussion About Dating Someone Their Parents Did Not Like*

| Student | Responses  |
|---------|--|
| Andrew  | Andrew chose not to respond.   |
| Cyrus   | “No, they really don’t care.”  |
| Gene    | “I do not remember if my mom or any other family members disliked one of my past girlfriends. Well, I actually remember one. Her name was *****. OMG!! Well I dated her in the 3rd grade, but now she just gets on my nerves all in her feelings. I was 1,000,000 with her and told her I didn't like her. Then, like I went off on that girl, then my cousin went off on her, all because she got mad at a "TBH" that she liked, and I was being honest with that girl. It worked out good, because . . . HUNNY!! I am not presently associating with her!!!” |
| Julian  | “No, I'm usually the one they don't like.”   |
| Raven   | “No, I haven’t. Every dude that I have dated my mom liked, but we ended up not working out because my mom was too into our relationship.”  |
| Shonda  | “Well, see, I was dating this one dude and he just broke up with me, but I recovered from him. My mother really liked him though. I still don't understand why he did me the way he did. I was faithful and everything to him; I would have done anything he told me to do but good things don't last forever.”  |
| Taylor  | “I have never dated someone my parents don't like, and my parents don't believe in dating at a young age anyways.”   |
| Zora    | “Yes, I have. My parents didn't like him for some odd reason. He was a really nice guy and it seemed like he really liked me, but eventually we stopped dating because of my parents interfering with our relationship.”   |

After trying to encourage a few more posts on Google Classroom (maybe the students just needed more time to appreciate discussion threads), Raven asked me, “When can we go back to our journals?” Admittedly, we had taken a few weeks off from our weekly journaling because of the digital literacy activities and the time involved with those, so I asked the class if they missed our Connect Wednesdays in which they would respond to a prompt in their journal for me to read, comment, return to them, and discuss their musings with them one-on-one at my desk. “YES!” they echoed. Shonda shouted, “We should write three journal entries per week instead of one,” and so we tried that the following week.<sup>1</sup>

**Changing places and effecting change in the classroom.** As the students requested, they responded to three journal prompts in one week. The first, *Being a Teenager*, prompted them to think about what difficulties *Romeo and Juliet* faced and consider how time and place shifts teenagers’ daily concerns.

***Being a teenager.***

*Andrew.* I know what it’s like to grow up with a mom who always wants to know everything. And about friends who talk about anything they want to, and drama, quite some drama.

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<sup>1</sup> It should definitely be noted that the old teacher version of me would have likely rejected this idea because I hadn’t planned for us to spend three of the five school days journaling. Would I cover enough of the standards? Would we fall behind? Would my principal wonder what we were doing and consider it not productive enough? All of these questions and more often entered my mind throughout this year, but I tried my best to push these nagging, bureaucratic-type, standardized-based questions aside and instead focused on the students and their interests. They were happier and more engaged than I had ever seen in all my years of teaching, so I knew what we were doing was making a difference. As the old adage goes, “nothing changes if nothing changes,” and as I’ve said earlier, changing your classroom as a place through the use of critical pedagogy practices requires flexibility, but it is so absolutely worth it.

*Gene.* I know what it's like to deal with brothers who talk about you all the time. I don't know what it's like to frown in spite of the pain I've been through. What I can do to fix it in the future is teach my kids to stick together.

*Julian.* I know what it's like to make money like an adult. I don't know what it's like to get money from my parents to go out with my friends. I would give my children five dollars a week. I started to work around the age of 11 or 12. I wanted to work so that I could be able to go out with my friends and eat without asking my dad for money. So he can't tell me that all I do is ask for money. Since I started to work, I learned what it's like to earn money. It's hard to work for money. But then you waste all that hard work you put into working just to waste it in less than one hour on shopping or whatever. Now I know how it is to get money. Now I look up to my dad and tell him thank you for what he has done for me.

*Raven.* I know what it's like to grow up with low money. My dad left when I was little. He started drinking heavy and he lost his job. My mom works at home. She alters clothes and sews. Every time my dad gets money, he spends it on beer and alcohol. When my mom gets money, she has to pay the bills. When I need something, I have to ask my dad a million times. I only call him on Tuesdays and Wednesdays because I know when he gets his money. My parents are about to get their taxes, and hopefully I can get some money. I'm going to stop this by making my own money. That way, I can buy whatever I need whenever I want.

*Shonda.* I know what it's like to struggle most of your life, but as a child you thought you had the best childhood ever. When you go out in public and everybody makes jokes about you and you go cry to your brother, and he tells you to "shut up" in front of his friends. But I don't know what it's like to have a wealthy family and three loving brothers. Instead of brothers, I had twin cousins that showed me love whenever I needed it. I can change this situation in my future

by going to college and making my bank account wealthy. Then, I'll have kids and make my kids admire and love one another. I'll also show them that if nobody loves you that mommy loves you. P.S. This class might turn into *Freedom Writers*.

*Taylor*. I know what it's like to live with two people and just one of them providing your needs and wants. The things I can do to keep this from happening is make sure I find the right person who has a job and will be able to help me out whenever I need him.

*Zora*. I know what it's like to be in a divorced family, to be in a family with a lot of problems—problems that cause the police to come. I know what it's like to have a mother that would constantly put me down for my size, weight, voice, and how I walk. I don't know what it's like living with a normal family that is still together and loves each other. I don't know what it's like to have a mom who gives me confidence about myself. I know now what not to do with my future family. I do not want to put them through the struggle I had to experience.

*Cyrus*. Cyrus was out for almost two weeks due to illness and unfortunately, he never submitted his make-up work.

The next entry, *When are you happiest?* is a prompt the students designed and it somewhat spun from a discussion regarding the tragic ending of *Romeo and Juliet*. I told them that while being in love (or infatuation) makes many teenagers giddy, it's important to not lose sight of all the other many pieces of life that inspire happiness.

***When are you happiest?***

*Andrew*. I am happiest when I am with my friends because I just completely enjoy the company of my friends because then I can share my thoughts to my closest friends that I trust.

*Gene*. I am happiest when I am cooking and when I'm around kids. I get happy when I'm cooking because everything comes naturally. I know how to do stuff because my granny and

mom cook well. I wasn't taught how to cook, I just happened to be the one of 30-plus cousins to know how to cook. I also am VERY happy when I'm around kids because their personalities help me forget things I go through. They love me and I love them. I work well with them and I educate them.

*Julian.* I am the happiest when I get to play soccer. I like to play soccer when I go to play with my friends. I like to buy soccer balls a lot. I have 10 or 12 soccer balls now. I also like to shop for cleats. I teach my little brother how to play soccer, and he's getting a little better with more practice.

*Raven.* I am happiest when I go out with my friends and go to fun places. I love to go to the fair, the "ville," and just ride around with my friends. I only have one best friend and her name is \*\*\*\*\*. We get into so much trouble together. We've gotten in trouble at the fair and almost got arrested together. That's not good, but we learned from it. Now, we just chill and walk around with some of our associates. But, that's my best friend.

*Shonda.* I am happiest when I am with my family and we are all having a good time. I like to cook and go on road trips/vacations with my family. My brother closest to me in age—I try to stay as far away from him when we are out in public. My second closest and third brother I have to stay away from all the time. I believe the No. 1 thing that keeps me happy is seeing my blood and nonblood related nephews and nieces happy. I just love seeing people happy and smiling because you never know what people go through behind closed doors. That's why I try to make everyone laugh and try to make them forget about being hurt because nobody ever tried to make me forget about being hurt.

*Taylor.* I am happy when I am with my friends and we go out somewhere because I like to get breaks from being in the house so much. Another thing is when I get to go to my grandmother's house because we always go out and do things together.

*Zora.* I love baking cakes and cookies. I really like to bake because when I'm finished I let my siblings try it and when they say they like it, I feel great. I feel like I actually accomplished something, which is great. When my baby sister and brother get older, I hope to teach them baking because they seem interested in it and that would be fun.

The third prompt, *How can you be visible in a positive way?* encouraged students to reflect upon the changes they experienced in this classroom throughout the year, as well as how all of our activities positively transformed the classroom from a place of learning to a place of love, trust, understanding, and *learning*. I hoped that students would remember this year fondly and try to become agents of positive change in all of their classrooms.

***How can you be visible in a positive way?***

*Andrew.* Andrew did not respond to this prompt.

*Gene.* I can be visible in a positive way simply by being positive. I can also show men how to pull up their pants and help them with their work, etc.

*Julian.* I can be visible in a positive way by not getting into trouble, and by doing good things so little kids can follow the good things I do and not the negative things.

*Raven.* I can be visible in a positive way by keeping up my grades. Doing this can help me get a long way. When I get out of school, I want to attend a community college and work my way up. I've heard that that college is the best school, so I want to get in school more and get more interested in it. Once I actually start liking school, I want to go to a big college and set a good example for my sisters, niece, and future kids.

*Shonda.* I can be visible in a positive way by not letting the things my brother and mom do affect the way that I act when I'm out in public and school. These past couple of days I think I have been happy because my mother and I are back on good terms even though we had a disagreement a couple of days ago. I told Raven about everything that was happening and she encouraged me to write my mom a letter and apologize for my attitude, actions, and how I plan on changing.

*Taylor.* I can be visible in a positive way by being the type of person to help someone out. I can be kind and generous to others. Having a great attitude helps and always coming to class prepared for anything.

*Zora.* I can be visible in a positive way by hanging out with good people, having a better attitude, getting better grades, being polite, and joining a sport.

As students submitted each response, I would comment on each journal prompt and we would discuss their writing further one-on-one at my desk while others students continued to write or while they participated in free-read time. Sometimes, they didn't want to talk about the journals and instead chose to tell me something about their day—an issue, accomplishment, or maybe they asked for my opinion on something. Occasionally, they requested to see their grades in INOW, and at times, they just wanted to read and not talk. Again, being open and flexible remained key components in this study.

### **Summary**

At the close of the first year, I reflected on the differences between how the students behaved during collaborative digital literacy activities, such as directing their iMovie trailers, designing a web site, and creating a storyboard, and during more individualized traditional activities, such as journaling and writing. I also wondered if I could teach an English class centered solely on digital literacy activities? Would all learners, regardless of track, thrive if our

school shifted to the one-to-one computing environment that I initially envisioned as utopian? Even though I really wanted to believe a computer could be the answer to every educational problem, I began to see it for what it was: a tool. Some of the reserved students, like Andrew and Zora, did not want everyone reading their thoughts online—they preferred journaling. Of course, my flexible students like Gene, Julian, and Taylor, appeared to enjoy almost everything we did regardless of the activity or tools involved. In short, it struck me that the way to engage learners, regardless of track, did not exist in one, profound tool, but rather an ongoing exposure to multiple ways of learning and exhibiting knowledge.

In this chapter, I described my pedagogical choices, the rationale supporting each, provided a detracking manifesto, and data findings from many of the critical literacy practices. While we completed numerous other activities throughout the students' two years with me, the ones detailed above, as well as the *Speak* novel unit that I will discuss at length in the next chapter, appeared to engage students most because they focused on choice, voice, identity, community, and relationships. I now progress to the next chapter, which addresses the data analysis and findings in response to the study's research questions:

- RQ 1. How do the faculty and students at Elmsville High School (EHS) perceive academic tracking and what are its implications of this practice in the classroom?
- RQ 2. What happens when I detrack English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement?

## CHAPTER 5:

### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The project is clear. Today we are called to change the world, and to change it in ways that resist injustice while celebrating freedom, and full, inclusive, participatory democracy.

—Norman K. Denzin (2010, p. 32)

#### **Academic Pangaea: Tracking Different Worlds**

Propped casually against my classroom door, careful to avoid the splintered part that recently claimed my favorite navy blouse, I smile at students as they pass by my room on their way to English class. It is Friday, so I spy a few more grins than usual, not only because of the impending weekend, but also because of the afternoon pep rally. Our football team remains undefeated, and we're up against our cross-town rival tonight. Just as the tardy bell rings, I hear the entrance door to the building slam and a group of football players run in yelling, "Who you with?" to which the same voices respond, "E-High!" Before I can say anything, Ms. Patton moves briskly out of her room, E-4, and into the hallway. In a stern tone, she loudly whispers, "Gentlemen! We are having class!" The boys freeze and bow their heads as if in prayer. By now, Ms. Patton has assumed the stance: She's directly facing the group, feet about four inches apart (to take up more of the hallway) right hand poised on hip, head cocked to the right, eyebrows raised, lips pursed. I know this pose well because I've worked across the hall from Ms. Patton for thirteen years. Even though she's of short stature, in her early sixties, and wears orthopedic shoes, I've seen her intimidate the largest of students. Today's no exception. It's employee casual dress code day, and she's wearing her favorite forest green, Winnie the Pooh sweatshirt.

“Look at me,” Ms. Patton orders in a clipped, but calm manner. Her reputation precedes her, and the boys slowly raise their eyes, not heads, to meet her steely glare, as well as look squarely in the eyes of the entire Winnie the Pooh gang. Even though you’d think Winnie or Christopher Robin would be placed in the design’s center, it’s actually Eeyore who takes center stage. So, whether these boys are glancing into the droopy eyes of the morose donkey or the steely gaze of Ms. Patton, I’m not sure; but, one thing is always certain when squaring off with Ms. Patton. She wins. The boys sheepishly mumble a collective, “I’m sorry,” and Ms. Patton curtly says, “Get to class.” Wanting to sprint, but likely fearing another lecture, they move in a hyperbolic gait toward the end of the hall. She looks at me, rolls her eyes, and I smile.

Since it is my planning block, I poke my head into Ms. Patton’s room and a sea of White faces ebb in my direction but flow back to what looks like an editing workshop. Each intellectual pod of desks contains four students, and I quickly count five pods. Where the four corners of the desktops meet, an organized Tupperware holds a rainbow of highlighters, Crayola markers, and multiple packs of Post-it notes. I want to count the Yeti stainless steel cups, but that would take too long, so instead I ask Ms. Patton, “What are y’all working on?” Now seated at one of her two desks, she moves her head to the right of her computer monitor so I can see her full face. “We are evaluating our timed writings,” she cheerfully responds. Ms. Patton proudly beams at her AP Juniors, who she also refers to as some of her “star students.” Glancing over the horizon of their heads, I nod at the wall of yellow stars neatly constructed from sturdy card stock. At the top of the wall, stenciled black letters proudly present, “The Cinco Club.” Underneath the banner, each star boasts a student’s name indicating he or she made a 5 (the top score) on the AP exam.

This impressive constellation guides my thoughts and I arrive at two conclusions: First, Ms. Patton is a stellar teacher; and, secondly, these AP kiddos are bright. After years of standing

at my door watching advanced students enter and leave her classroom, I've learned a few things. Even early on, say 5 years into my teaching career at RCHS and approximately 25 for Ms. Patton, I noticed one very important distinction between E-4 (her room) and E-3 (my room). While our doors are only separated by 12 squares of worn, brown, concrete tile, our classrooms often feel worlds apart.

### **Chapter Outline**

In this chapter, I first explore the culprit behind this educational Pangaea—academic tracking by examining the implications of this practice at EHS. Then, I discuss how I approached detracking my standard English 9 and standard English 10 classroom with a discussion of my pedagogical choices and a description of classroom activities. Next, I describe what happened when I detracked English Education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement. Finally, I describe, through an extended narrative, how detracking encouraged students to make meaningful, personal, and memorable connections. These findings and my analyses are organized by the research questions, which are as follows:

- RQ 1. What are the implications of academic tracking in River City and Elmsville High School?
- RQ 2. What happens when I detrack English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement?

### **Research Question 1**

Like many other secondary schools (Akos et al., 2007; Schweiker-Marra & Pula, 2005) EHS uses curriculum tracking; and, while some schools deny their use of this practice (Jencks, 1972; Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1978), EHS embraces it—as does the entire district. In fact, academic tracking begins in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, but the process isn't exactly transparent, nor is it optional until middle school. When students finally reach the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, they, and their parents,

may choose advanced or standard classes, regardless of their academic aptitude or test scores. They may follow an advanced track entirely, with all advanced classes, or they may follow a standard track entirely, with only standard classes. Or, they may take a combination of both advanced and standard classes. Some students choose advanced classes, not for the challenge, but to be segregated from the general public and experience benefits often found in private schools: smaller class sizes, better resources, and an engaging curriculum. Conversely, other students choose to remain in standard classes because they find those classrooms familiar; also, they don't want to leave their friends, fear extra work, or feel insecure about their skills in a particular subject. These students are the ones my study hopes to reach, i.e., the ones academic tracking has adversely affected. To understand this dilemma, I have divided this question into two broad sections: Places and Perceptions. First, I explore academic tracking's long-term implications on places, specifically River City and its classrooms. Then, I present the different ways in which the faculty and students perceive this practice.

### **Places**

As a resident, educator, and parent of two school-age children, I have spent the past 14 years extensively observing the ways in which academic tracking has affected River City as a place, as well as its classrooms—from both a teacher and parent perspective. In this section, I present those observations in conjunction with the student participants' responses to the following questions:

- Do you think you received a good education in elementary and middle school? Why or why not?
- What were your fears before starting high school?

- Would you characterize yourself as a member of a group in high school? What sets this group apart from other groups?

After analyzing years of observations, as well as the student participants' responses regarding the ways in which academic tracking affects places, I found that (a) advanced students receive royal treatment; (b) the track to success starts early; (c) the magnet program structures inequality; and, (d) advanced classrooms provide four components of a superior education.

**Advanced students receive royal treatment.** After years of witnessing the “two-school phenomenon” (Morrell, 2008, p. 19) at Elmsville High School, I have found that academic tracking fulfills the interests of students in advanced classes, yet largely ignores the needs and preferences of students in standard classes. Dubbed by the principal as members of EHS’ “royal family,” students in advanced classrooms receive this title for two reasons:

1. Their names and faces receive heavy recognition from local paparazzi, such as the school yearbook and newspaper staff, the EHS social media team, and River City’s local newspaper for their not-so-surprisingly frequent social and academic successes.
2. This elite society remains relatively small with only 25% occupying this advanced track.

In the English department, students enrolled in Pre-Advanced Placement (Pre-AP) and Advanced Placement (AP) classes have access to a superior education provided by Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry. With 62 years of combined teaching, these veterans of academic places have nearly perfected their craft by focusing on (a) building relationships, (b) kindling critical engagement, (c) encouraging autonomy; and (d) spreading empowerment. These four components provide what I consider to be a superior education; and, all students, regardless of track, should have the opportunity to walk the red carpet. Unfortunately, only students following

advanced tracks are provided with the scaffolding to reach the step and repeat portion of the red carpet. They *step* onto a stage separating them from the majority and *repeat* the process—year after year.

In Ms. Patton’s and Mrs. Berry’s private-within-public school, everyone knows everyone. At the start of a new school year, it’s not unusual for Ms. Patton, who now teaches her second generation of EHS’ advanced students, to know students’ names and family background before they set foot in her class for the first time. “Mrs. Kusta,” she’ll say, “This is so and so, and I taught her mother.” Then she’ll recall some story, always positive, about the parent, and the child beams. The conversation ends with Ms. Patton hugging the child’s neck or patting them on the back, and then they walk into a class of familiar faces.

Familiarity with the teacher, or the understanding that he or she knows someone from your family, gives students a boost of assurance, and this early building block toward a trusting relationship isn’t always in place on the first day for students in many standard classes. For example, when I asked the student participants, “What were your fears before starting high school?”, only two of them mentioned a concern over the content of the classes. Raven said she feared “harder classes” and Taylor responded similarly with noted anxiety toward “work.” Most importantly, though, all eight of them expressed concern over whether or not they would feel accepted as evidenced by a few of their answers. Zora responded, “will I fit in?” and Julian said that he feared “not being able to socialize with many people.” Raven said that she worried about “new people” while Gene worried about “being picked on and talked about.” Both Cyrus and Andrew cited a fear of bullying.

While many incoming freshmen express anxiety during the transition from middle school to high school, most of the students who enroll in one of Ms. Patton’s three classes of Pre-

Advanced Placement English 9 classes, have known one another since their magnet school days began in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and their parents have established relationships with one another as well. This tightly-knit bond among these students and parents works somewhat like a safety blanket that travels with them until they graduate their senior year. Like Ms. Patton noted, she has taught many of her students' parents because she has been working at EHS for 32 years; but, in the unlikely case that someone is unfamiliar with Ms. Patton and the small web of advanced teachers at EHS, a royal party parent can quickly quell any concerns with outstanding testimonials of Ms. Patton's instructional talents. Deserving of her praise, Ms. Patton remembers details like an elephant, and she knows her followers. Of course, only 25% of the students at EHS follow an advanced track, so it's somewhat easier for Ms. Patton to maintain such a close bond with her educational constituents and their families. But for the remaining 75% of students following a standard track, they could walk into one of four teachers' classrooms for freshman English; and, because standard classes are often given to newer faculty members, familiarity between students and teachers is rare.

This lack of familiarity can make students feel disconnected or isolated from a group, and after years of this treatment, a pattern emerges. I discovered this link after asking student participants the following question: "Would you characterize yourself as a member of a group in high school? What sets this group apart from other groups?"

The structure of the question reveals a bias on my part, and I didn't notice this until I began analyzing the responses. By providing a follow-up question to the first one, I assumed that the students would all identify as members of a particular group. While I didn't intend to reinforce director/writer John Hughes' oversimplified teenager stereotypes, the second question does imply that everyone belongs in one group—for this I was wrong. Zora and Raven did not

respond at all. The rest of the participants appeared divided. Table 10 shows their varied responses.

Table 10

*Student Responses: Would You Characterize Yourself as a Member of a Group in High School? What Sets This Group Apart From Other Groups?*

| Student | Response  |
|---------|---|
| Andrew  | “Yes I would, in my group, we have had many losses and suffered much of the same things But we still go on together as a family.”   |
| Cyrus   | “No. I am friends with everyone.”   |
| Gene    | “I wouldn’t characterize myself as a member of a group in high school because I’m my own person. I lead and live my life differently and it requires me to live a certain way.” |
| Julian  | “No I wouldn’t characterize myself as a member of a group. I don’t participate in any after-school activities.”   |
| Shonda  | “Yes. My group is goofy-lame people that knows everybody; we don’t communicate to a lot of people and we’re not basic.”   |
| Taylor  | “No, I am not involved in a group.”   |

Based upon these responses, only Julian identifies the term “groups” with after-school activities; the other five participants appear to interpret it as intended—a circle of friends in which you share similarities. Interestingly, Cyrus is the only one who claims to be friends with everyone, yet he admitted to being a victim of bullying on numerous occasions—in his journal responses, through poetry, aloud in class, and in other classroom artifacts. While Andrew and Shonda identify with groups, Andrew notes that his group has “had many losses and suffered much of the same things,” and Shonda claims that her group is comprised of “goofy-lame people” who know everybody but “don’t communicate to a lot of people.” Through these responses, I discovered that a sense of isolation follows students excluded from the chosen magnet group.

**The track to success starts early.** Most of the chosen group of magnet students share a lengthy history with one another and have commuted together since the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade--like many of their parents before them. They have followed River City's scenic, rather than industrial route, because, as most of their parents know, it showcases some of the best places to learn within this educational system, starting with the district's two magnet schools. In Ms. Patton's three advanced freshman classes, 41 of the 57 students, or 72%, attended Red Star Elementary School (RSES) and Yellow Star (YS) for grades 2-5. In my one standard freshman class, only 7 of the 24 students, or 29%, attended these schools. The students not enrolled in the magnet program likely followed what I consider to be the industrial route through River City where the other nine elementary schools mostly follow a standardized curriculum. While I am certain each elementary school has a few stellar teachers like Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry, I doubt their schools experienced the extreme level of pomp and pageantry bestowed on the magnet schools. Both RSES and YS best the other elementary schools by providing an enriched curriculum with specialized courses placing emphasis on STEM and fine arts. As for the majority of students not magnetized toward this education, they likely followed the standard curriculum that mirrors the town's industrial route—it's repetitive, long, and unremarkable.

However, I found this impression to be somewhat misguided. When I asked the student participants, none of whom attended the magnet schools, the following question, "Do you think you received a good education in elementary and middle school? Why or why not?", five of the eight students felt positive about their formative schooling years. Cyrus, Shonda, and Andrew were the only participants who noted negative experiences. Cyrus said, "Not in elementary because I had some eye problems but in middle school yes," and Shonda said, "No, but it was on my behalf." Based upon these responses, both participants hold themselves accountable, not the

school system, for the way in which they viewed these places. As for Andrew, he claimed, “I did not receive a good education in elementary and middle school, I don’t know why.”

As for those who claimed they received a good education, Zora spoke very highly of her classrooms and said, “I think I went to great, over-achieving schools.” Julian agreed. He praised his teachers because “they always tried to push me to do better and have me extra work cause I struggled.” Gene also commended his teachers for using words such as, college and future, during instruction. Raven and Taylor equated positive experiences of these places with high grades, not necessarily the content delivered or quality of instruction. Raven simply said, “I made A, B honor roll.” Based upon these responses, Julian, Gene, Raven, and Taylor, consider the following components necessary in a good education:

- Teacher encouragement
- Instructional support materials
- High grades

All of these components and more could be found within the walls of a magnet school, so why didn’t these students choose the advanced track at a young age?

**The magnet school program structures inequality.** Choosing the scenic or industrial route depends upon the driver; but this is not the case in River City. Here, participation in the magnet program is not optional. Even though, according to Magnet Schools of America (2013), attending a magnet school is a choice and “open to all students regardless of zip code” (magnet.edu). No such opportunity exists in this district.

Table 11 provides insight into the racial and socioeconomic demographics within the River City district and at each of the district’s schools. Most importantly, it highlights disparity

between the magnet (advanced track) schools, an exclusive neighborhood school, and the remaining (standard track) schools.

Table 11

*Racial and Socioeconomic Demographics in River City's Schools, 2015–2016*

| School site                   | Enrollment | Non-Hispanic White (%) | Black (%) | Hispanic/Latino (%) | Free/Reduced lunch (%) |
|-------------------------------|------------|------------------------|-----------|---------------------|------------------------|
| River City district           | 8,384      | 41                     | 32        | 27                  | 56                     |
| High Schools (9–12)           |            |                        |           |                     |                        |
| 1. Elmsville High             | 1,438      | 44                     | 35        | 21                  | 56                     |
| 2. River City High            | 978        | 49                     | 31        | 20                  | 56                     |
| Middle schools (6–8)          |            |                        |           |                     |                        |
| 1. Site A                     | 340        | 8                      | 43        | 49                  | 54                     |
| 2. Site B                     | 872        | 50                     | 34        | 16                  | 53                     |
| 3. Site C                     | 662        | 51                     | 25        | 24                  | 56                     |
| Elementary schools*           |            |                        |           |                     |                        |
| 1. Magnet: Red star (K-2)*    | 254        | 59                     | 25        | 16                  | 48                     |
| 2. Magnet: Yellow star (3-5)* | 348        | 65                     | 22        | 13                  | 41                     |
| 3. Site C                     | 355        | 15                     | 25        | 60                  | 63                     |
| 4. Site D                     | 491        | 28                     | 29        | 43                  | 58                     |
| 5. Site E                     | 391        | 52                     | 31        | 17                  | 51                     |
| 6. Site F                     | 217        | 69                     | 21        | 10                  | 35                     |
| 7. Site G                     | 383        | 23                     | 43        | 34                  | 58                     |
| 8. Site H                     | 391        | 56                     | 27        | 17                  | 50                     |
| 9. Site I                     | 376        | 28                     | 32        | 40                  | 69                     |
| 10. Site J                    | 297        | 61                     | 20        | 19                  | 58                     |
| 11. Site K                    | 282        | 12                     | 32        | 56                  | 58                     |
| 12. Site L                    | 309        | 17                     | 46        | 37                  | 52                     |

*Note:* All elementary schools include grades K-5 unless indicated by an asterisk. Source: Alabama State Department of Education, [web.alsde.edu](http://web.alsde.edu).

As indicated by Table 11, both of River City’s magnet elementary schools, Red Star (RSES) and Yellow Star (YSES), have a higher enrollment of Non-Hispanic White students at 59% and 65%, respectively, than the district’s overall average of 41%. From a socioeconomical standpoint, both RSES and YSES have fewer students on free and reduced lunch at 48% and 41%, respectively, than the district’s overall average of 56%. It is also important to note Site F’s low student enrollment of 217, as well as their racial and socioeconomic imbalance as compared to the other sites—excluding the magnet schools. With a Non-Hispanic White enrollment at 69%, it has the lowest enrollment of minorities among all of the schools in the district. Also, at 35%, Site F has the lowest percentage of students in the district enrolled in free and reduced lunch. Clearly, River City needs to reduce its number of elementary schools, and Site F should be the first for elimination; however, residents zoned for this elementary school generally represent multiple generations of River City’s most affluent families. Like the two magnet schools, Site F operates like a private school within a public school district, so when students at this school are not invited into the magnet school program, parents don’t complain as much because their consolation prize school still does what most of these parents want: It separates their children from the rest of River City’s school-age population.

Entrance into River City’s magnet program requires an invitation that is, supposedly, awarded to the top 5% at each of the district’s elementary schools; however, the selection process lacks transparency. Officially, the district claims that only the top 5% are accepted and the selection process is based upon three criteria: (a) teacher evaluation; (b) a standardized assessment; and (c) an evaluation of the students’ portfolio. However, these rules do not apply to everyone. For example, legacies are exempt from his process. Siblings of students previously or currently enrolled in one of the magnet schools receive automatic admission. The rules are also

arbitrary. There does not seem to be a standard rubric consistently used by all of the elementary teachers, so the weight of each component, or whether it is even evaluated, is not clear. In fact, when I asked one of my son's elementary teachers (he, nor my daughter, attend the magnet school) what student artifacts are placed in the portfolios and how they are evaluated, she sheepishly grinned and responded softly, "Oh, I don't even know what all goes in those portfolios. We (the other elementary teachers) each do it differently." Based upon her response and some of the other conversations I've held with elementary teachers, schools mostly look at the standardized score, which should be a consideration, but not a determining factor.

Regardless of how students are selected, one thing is certain: The small population of students chosen for RSES and YS consistently magnetize the community's focus. For example, each year, the third, fourth, and fifth grades perform a musical at the city's historic theater, and the entire production flaunts all of the pomp and pageantry one might witness on Broadway. The school hires a freelance drama producer who hails from New York and spends approximately six weeks in River City shaping the amateur lot into young thespians. Each production becomes more involved than the last, and musicals with large casts are intentionally chosen so that each student receives a role—whether it is gaffer or lead. *Mulan* was quite impressive, but last year's rendition of *The Lion King* truly amazed with absolutely stunning professionally made costumes.

Even after the curtain falls on the last night of production, River City continues to showboat these elite elementary students in encore performances throughout the spring. Whenever the city needs to impress the who's who, the magnet school troupe of performers are sure to shine as what the district considers them to be: quintessential students. After receiving a few years of star treatment on the stage and in the classroom, many of these academic celebrities

and their parents create powerful cliques with high expectations and the ability to generally get who, or what, they want in school.

**Advanced classrooms provide four components of a superior education.** Before these students start their first day as freshmen, they already know the places and people who can equip them with the best secondary education available in River City; and, in the English department at EHS, Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry fit the bill. These veteran instructors build and maintain relationships with their students by incorporating the following four components into the curriculum: (a) building and maintaining relationships, (b) kindling critical engagement, (c) encouraging autonomy; and, (d) spreading empowerment.

Since many of the freshmen enrolled in advanced classes participated in the magnet program, as well as followed an advanced track in middle school, they know each other very well; but, to maintain and strengthen that connection, Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry employ the practice of multiyear placement (Bellis, 1999; Goldberg, 1990/1991; Hanson, 1995; Hitz et al., 2007; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Ogletree, 1974). This pedagogical approach, that I initially identified as “ping-ponging,” affords each teacher two years with the students who follow an advanced track for four years. Ms. Patton instructs them as freshmen, Mrs. Berry instructs them as sophomores, Ms. Patton instructs them as juniors; and, Mrs. Berry instructs them as seniors. *Ping-Pong.* With the additional time, these teachers can identify students’ academic strengths and weaknesses in the first year and differentiate the curriculum to meet their needs for the second year. Because multiyear placement supports a lengthy commitment to students, Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry can develop multistranded relationships (Moll et al., 1992). This first component of a superior education provides the base for the next two components: kindling critical engagement and encouraging autonomy.

In an effort to encourage student interaction, desk configurations in these classrooms frequently change. The curriculum also shifts and detours as students actively participate in curriculum design. They negotiate curriculum modifications based on their current interests in a particular theme, book, or project because they understand their opinion matters. Autonomy reigns in advanced classrooms, so controversial debates happen regularly. Igniting student's analytical powers and spreading empowerment, these conversational sparks often carry their voices beyond the school walls, into their homes, on social media, through River City, and beyond. But what about the voices of the remaining 75%? How have students' experiences in the standard classroom shaped their unfolding storylines on school? Most importantly, how can they gain access to the throne?

### **Perceptions**

In this section, I explore the perceptions of academic tracking held by the four faculty participants: Ms. Patton, an English teacher with 32 years of experience; Mr. Walton, a science teacher with 13 years of experience; and, Mrs. Rowe, a Special Education teacher with 10 years of experience, who is also a parent of three former EHS graduates. I also provide and analyze data collected from questions given to the eight student participants (Andrew, Cyrus, Gene, Julian, Raven, Shonda, Taylor, and Zora) at the beginning of their freshman year. The purpose of the questionnaire was to help students think about some of the significant stages and people in their life.

After analyzing the faculty participant interview transcripts and student participant questionnaires regarding their perceptions of academic tracking at EHS, I found that (a) the participants mistakenly believe that tracking is a choice; (b) students avoid advanced classrooms not because they are apathetic, but because they fear failure; (c) students in advanced tracks benefit the most; and, (d) students in standard tracks need an alternative approach.

**Tracking isn't always a choice.** All three faculty participants consider academic tracking necessary; however, they support it as a practice for different reasons. Ms. Patton, a veteran English instructor who teaches predominately advanced students, explains, "I believe as neat as it sounds to have everyone on the same level, realistically it's not, and by including everyone it just holds back those who are eager and capable to learn." She supports tracking because she believes students who exhibit individual autonomy, responsibility, and meritocracy deserve a better education than those who do not wield these traits. Ms. Patton also perceives academic tracking as "both beneficial and detrimental," as well as a choice for students and parents. She argues,

Academic tracking is due to mainly the choice of the students and the parents. It can be bad if they're not realistic about their child's abilities, but it can also be beneficial because it provides motivation for them to move on into something that is better, something that is better for the student. I think sometimes we get them in a path or track that they cannot escape and that limits their choices for later. Otherwise, I don't think it's a bad thing. Other people may be against it, but I'm not. I think it's a good thing for a lot of students.

While she is correct that students and parents have the opportunity to take advanced classes in middle and high school, the problem is the district starts tracking at the elementary level.

Mr. Walton, a science instructor with 13 years of experience teaching both advanced and standard tracks also supports tracking because "it's unrealistic to have children in classes that are above their ability level." While he agrees with Ms. Patton that tracking is necessary, he admits that it structures inequality among the students.

Mrs. Rowe, a special education teacher with 10 years of teaching experience, believes there are pros and cons to academic tracking. She observes,

I think, being a special educator, I think there are pros to having just special education children in classes on some levels because you can cater to just those kids. But on the other hand, I like having them in a regular classroom because they gain so much from other kids. And also, other kids gain from them as well. So, I think the variety, the mixture of both is good. Okay, as far as having all kids being in upper level classes all

day long, I did not choose that for my kids because I did not like them being with the same kids all the time.

Unlike Ms. Patton and Mr. Walton who do not have children of their own, Mrs. Rowe is the mother of three sons who completed grades K-12 in the River City district. Her oldest son, now a practicing optometrist, was not selected to participate in the magnet school program, and when her middle son did receive an invitation to attend, she was told that the oldest could now attend because of his younger sibling's admittance. Understandably irritated at the offer, she said,

I told the magnet school no and I never mentioned the situation to either of the boys. My third son was also invited, but we said no again. I do not want my children thinking they are better than anyone else, and I think that's what the magnet school implies. Even when parents could request teachers for their children, I never did this. I wanted my children to learn to work with all people because that is how the world works.

Like Mrs. Rowe who found the selection process for the magnet program "confusing," Mr. Walton also finds the tracking practices at the secondary level to be problematic, and he doesn't think EHS is forthcoming about its tracking practices and their implications. He bluntly stated,

I think the way it's executed is detrimental because whatever we say we don't track in River City, but that's a load of crap because whatever you enter in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade that's where you stay for the next four years. And it may start earlier than the 9<sup>th</sup> grade; it probably starts in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Mr. Walton is correct that many students do not switch tracks; however, tracking begins much, much sooner for students. In fact, after the first grade, the educational path diverges and the sorting process begins.

**The magnet school lottery: "May the odds be ever in your favor."** Every spring, for the past 35 years, on a day unbeknownst to parents, each of the eleven elementary schools administers a standardized test to all of the first graders. It is not clear which test is used, nor is this information conveyed to parents. The results, used in conjunction with the teacher's

evaluation of the student, as well the student's work samples, and other nondisclosed factors, determine who will receive a golden ticket to River City's magnet schools for grades 2-5, i.e., the advanced track. Only the top 5% of students from each school receive an invitation; so, in April, parents wait nervously by their mailbox for THE coveted letter that, for many, symbolizes a fast pass around River City's cat factory, beyond glass ceilings, and into the stratosphere.

"Did you get in?" becomes a standard greeting, and accepted parents make sure to post the good news on social media, starting the two-tier system. Parents of the rejected usually respond in one of the following ways:

1. They hang their heads in shame and claim, if asked, something along the lines of, "these things are political."
2. They withdraw their child from the River City School District and take up residence at one of the area's three private schools.
3. They become irate, exercise their forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1985), and, miraculously, a spot suddenly opens.
4. With limited forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1985), they remain oblivious because they know nothing of the magnet school program; and, if they do, are unaware that bullying for a spot is an option.

The chosen magnet students will not have to intermingle with the general public until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when they feed into one of the district's three middle schools; however, because many of them arrive wearing a badge of superiority, most of the 95% without privileged labels avoid them.

Now, for the first time, all of the students may *choose* which track they will follow: advanced or standard. Generally, the magnet students continue on their advanced track because

they have traveled through some of the best classrooms in the district—together—and these places have afforded positive experiences, thus strengthening students’ “hold” or memories of school (Casey, 1997). Even though the nonmagnet students now have the option to take advanced classes, they generally do not. Placed on the standard track at a young age, they have now, after many years, established tenure in standard classrooms. They know their place, find comfort in it, and fear change. In short, they are becoming what River City needs them to be: subservient, silent, and disciplined workers.

Rarely do the students cross the tracks and forge new relationships. Instead, the ability groups remain separate, which perpetuates a “stratified friendship network” (Hallinan & Sorensen, 1985, p. 499). Most of the magnet students continue down the same, well-worn, advanced path because it feels comfortable and familiar; and, the same goes for the nonmagnet students. So, YES, as Ms. Patton stresses, students may choose which track they will follow, but not until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade; and by then, as the research shows (Oakes, 1987), students do not often switch lanes.

**Student apathy disguises fear.** Like anyone, students fear failure. I found this to be especially true of students in standard classes. At the beginning of the student participants’ freshman year, I asked them the following questions:

- Throughout school, have you enrolled in mostly standard or advanced classes?
- What are your reasons for choosing one over the other?

Table 12 outlines the student participant’s responses.

Table 12

*Student Participant's Rationale for Track Choice*

| Student | Track choice and rationale  |
|---------|---|
| Andrew  | "I've had plenty of honors' classes, but mostly grade level." No rationale provided.  |
| Cyrus   | "I have been in a mixture. I was in honors in the subjects I was good in and grade level in others."                              |
| Gene    | "For every grade I go, I enroll in one honors class, but I've enrolled in predominately grade-level classes."                     |
| Julian  | "I've enrolled in grade-level classes. I want to take honor classes, but I don't want to fail the class and not be able to pass." |
| Raven   | "Grade-level, I don't want to take any [honors' classes]."  |
| Shonda  | "Grade-level, because I don't think I can handle honors."   |
| Taylor  | "Grade level. I don't think I am smart enough for honors."  |
| Zora    | "Grade level is much better for me."  |

Of the eight participants, only Andrew, Cyrus, and Gene had previously taken an advanced class—Andrew and Cyrus did not specify the course; and, Gene took advanced history in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Like Gene, Julian wants to take an advanced course, but his fear of failure, which likely stems from a lack of confidence, holds him back. Shonda's assumption, "I don't think I can handle honors," as well as Taylor's claim, "I don't think I am smart enough for honors" also indicate insecurity about advanced classes, even though they, like Julian, have never sat in an advanced class, so it seems illogical that they would reject something they have never experienced. Perhaps they would feel differently about themselves and their ability level if the magnet school, in its arbitrary wisdom and penchant for siblings, bestowed an invitation to them eight years ago. Then, they might be considered one of the *haves*--Ms. Patton's label for students who follow the advanced track—even though they didn't *have* a choice in deciding

which way to track during their formative years. The research says that students in advanced classes benefit from BLAH-insert research. From my observations of Ms. Patton's advanced classrooms, this is absolutely true. When I asked Ms. Patton if she would limit or reduce the advanced tracking paths at Austin, she replied,

I think we're reasonably okay. I hesitate getting rid of honors and hesitate to only have the AP or non-AP tracks because some students are honors material but they're not necessarily wanting to put forth the extra effort, and I think we should accommodate their abilities and desires.

Mrs. Patton's mention of certain students measuring as "honors material" conjures an image of a comic book-like caricature of a student hero who possesses "honors material." But what exactly is "honors material" and how does one transform from "regular material" to "honors material?"

**Students in advanced tracks benefit the most.** From what I've observed in most advanced classes, the transformation from "regular material" to "honors material" requires one element: a fatter paycheck. Generally, students in these classes are the products of parents who possess and use their forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Using a combination of economic, social, and cultural capital equips these parents (and students) with the tools they need to gain access into the magnet schools, follow an advanced track, demand the best teachers, afford tutors if needed, visit college campuses, take educational tours and more. Cultural capital disparities amplify educational stratification, which in turn creates inequities. This stratification stems from the technocratic-meritocratic view of education—held by Ms. Patton—that claims the successful in society are more intelligent and skilled; and, one's cognitive outcomes determine success.

Ms. Patton acknowledges that EHS' current tracking system benefits students in advanced classes the most and refers to this group as *the haves* as opposed to those in standard classes, who I'm assuming she regards as the *have-nots*. I see her classroom as a place of

privilege where wealthy students move excitedly—even though their backs bear a cumbersome load of books. Many of their book bags boast an embroidered monogram to identify the students, and the expensive brand labels tagging their totes, such as North Face or LL Bean, socioeconomically place them as those who “have” in a school where 67% of students on free and/or reduced lunch appear to be those who *have-not*. While the divide between her classroom and mine isn’t always so clear, the binary stereotype is visibly evident.

Since Ms. Patton only sees advanced students all day, I asked Mr. Walton, who teaches both advanced and standard classes, if he agreed with Ms. Patton. He said,

The students that benefit from tracking really are the smart kids—the smarter, higher ability kids—because they get put in the classes where often there are more resources as is the case at EHS. Typically, the better teachers instruct the higher-level classes. Then, the students in the lower-level classes are faced with the first-year teachers, the inexperienced teachers. We put our lower-level kids in classes with first-year teachers who really don’t know what they’re doing. They are the ones that need the attention. The ones in the higher-level classes, the APs, they get the more experienced, more seasoned professionals. These students are going to learn the material whether they have a seasoned professional or a first-year teacher.

As Mr. Walton indicated, EHS only offers the advanced classes to veteran instructors; and, students in standard and inclusion classes are often taught by new teachers. This assessment is largely supported by the research (Ansalone, 2010; Gratch, 2002; Graubard, 2004; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Hallinan, 1991; Oakes, 1987/2005; Smith, 2008).

Mr. Walton’s sentiments regarding veteran teachers appears to be the attitude shared by Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry. When asked how the underrepresented could be better served, Ms. Patton argued,

I don’t know how much more we can serve them to be honest. We have all these teachers in remediation, we have all these programs in place, all these opportunities, and for the most part if they’re not participating it’s by choice. It’s not for lack of opportunity and I think that’s in every job and organization. It’s not what they’re interested in so they don’t see the benefit.

It's unclear which "programs in place" Ms. Patton is referring to, but her bubbling frustration pointed toward students in standard tracks appears to stem from her impression that high school remediation programs should fix the undesirable symptoms like apathy in these students. When they fail to take their medicine, she considers this a form of defiance.

Mr. Walton offered a more cynical response to the question. He stated,

Yes, the underrepresented could be better served by flipping the current situation, but that's never going to happen in education because we've been set up with how high you are on the totem pole. Veteran teachers say, *What is the pecking order? Why should I have the riff-raff? I'm a veteran teacher.* The perception in education is *I've paid my dues, I should have the better kids.* Is it more difficult to instruct a lower-level class? Yes, there are a lot more behavioral problems than in an advance class. That surely has a lot to do with who is in the class. It's a whole different way of speaking and knowing who they are and how to interact with them.

For all four years, veteran teachers like Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry coddle the small group of advanced students who are referred to by Mr. Walton, Ms. Patton, the principal, and the district as the *better kids*, *royal family*, *top 5%*, *magnet students*, and *the haves*, respectively. Perhaps the "better students" are not "behavioral problems" because they have passed through multiple classrooms with veteran teachers "knowing who they are and how to interact with them." When students who are referred to as *riff-raff*, *regulars*, *low-level*, *basic*, and *the have-nots* are treated as *better kids*, *royal family*, *the top 5%*, *magnet students*, and *the haves*, they become all of that and more. The long and short of it is this: Places that honor students, create students that honor places.

At EHS, the places occupied by advanced and standard classrooms differ. All of the faculty participants noted that advanced classes often contain fewer students than standard classes. As a former advanced student at EHS and also as the faculty participant with more than 30 years of teaching experience at EHS, Ms. Patton offered her explanation for this imbalance. She said,

Well, AP history has large classes. One reason is because there are fewer students who want to take the advanced classes. They don't want to push themselves, so that's kind of a result. That does make some of the regular classes too big or bigger than is ideal. If we open up advanced classes to anyone who wants to take them, and we do, am I going to hold back fifteen who are serious about doing better things with their lives? Am I going to say, *I'm sorry, you're just kind of stuck with the 25 other kids and they do nothing*. I don't see any way out of the situation because we have students who take the easy way out. I see this happening more and more.

Ms. Patton argues that advanced classes are smaller because many students “don't want to push themselves” or “do nothing” and take “the easy way out”, which may be the case for some. But, I found that when the student participants were given the time to establish trust and develop multistranded relationships (Moll et al., 1992) with their peers and teacher through multiyear placement, they excelled—much like the seemingly boisterous and confident PreAP students in Ms. Patton's and Mrs. Berry's classes who also participate in multiyear placement.

**Students in standard tracks need an alternative approach.** When I asked the faculty participants how they would restructure classes if given the opportunity and how this would affect academic culture at EHS, Mrs. Rowe succinctly noted, “I think our regular education kids fall through the crack. I think EHS is a great school, but as far as academically—I think we could do more.” Mr. Walton agreed and provided a solution. He said,

If we eliminated the tracks, all students would be held to a higher standard. It would reduce the labels because those dictate to the students how well they need to perform. If you're a regular student, you achieve at a regular standard. Ultimately, these labels limit what students think they can do. We can really hold our students to a higher level of accountability.

Detracking the school, as Mr. Walton suggested, would reduce some of the stigma attached to standard classes; and I would like to see this happen for the entire district.

Unfortunately, none of the faculty participants considered this as a viable solution. Ms. Patton firmly resisted detracking as an option and advocated the instruction in standard classes. She commented,

A lot of the grade-level instruction here at EHS is excellent. I've seen what a lot of the teachers do in the classes. No, it's not honors, but when they leave they're taught well and so they can utilize those things. I don't think that they're really at any kind of disadvantage. I think if you go through EHS and do the grade-level, you can still be really effective in your choices for later. I think it's just a choice of would you rather have higher grades or would you rather have less work for a lot of students.

After observing the differences between the tracks, I disagree with Ms. Patton and believe students in standard classes are absolutely at a "disadvantage" compared to those in advanced classes. They have limited access to (a) experienced teachers; (b) instructional resources; and, (c) an engaging curriculum; and, to put it simply, this is unfair, which is why I chose to detrack my classroom.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question was, what Happens when I detrack English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement? After analyzing this two-year culmination of personal experiences, classroom observations, student participant interviews, both formal and informal, journal responses, poems, essays, multimodal projects, and a variety of questionnaires, I found that on the journey to detrack, (a) obstacles multiply; (b) technology isn't the answer to every problem; (c) change takes time and requires vulnerability; (d) some students will initially resist and resent change; but, ultimately, (e) detracking encourages students, and the teacher, to make meaningful, personal, and memorable connections in the English/language arts (ELA) classroom.

### **Obstacles Multiply**

I experienced numerous obstacles on my journey to transform entrenched practices. Initially, I envisioned this study as a collaborative effort with another colleague who also teaches freshman English. We decided that at the start of the upcoming academic year, we would combine two of our freshman classes and structure them like the ones we observed in the other

district. I met with our district superintendent, who has since retired, to explain the purpose of my research, gain consent, and petition for 50 laptops. Prior to our meeting, I sent him my study prospectus with a review of the current literature on digital and critical literacy practices. I envisioned our meeting as a lively scholarly discussion on innovative practices, but reality differed. After nervously waiting in the lobby for 20 minutes, our meeting lasted only three minutes. 180 seconds. He told me that our technology director had already applied for a grant and would be receiving 30 Macbooks. Unfortunately, he had already promised them to our Art teacher who would be teaching gaming design. But, as a silver lining, I could use two carts of netbooks that had previously been assigned to our school for teachers to share, which was feasibly ridiculous because 113 teachers sharing 50 netbooks meant that I had never actually seen said carts. But, it was a start. I would be able to keep the carts in my classroom, but only for the specified class of freshmen involved in my research study.

After my brief meeting with the superintendent, I explained my study to our school registrar because she designs the master schedule for our school, and I wanted to make sure that this class could meet during our “skinny” block. As explained in Chapter three, our school operates on a nontraditional block. Like traditional block scheduling, classes last for one semester and meet daily for 80 minutes. However, our school has squeezed in what it calls a “skinny” block that meets daily for 50 minutes during *both* semesters, and I felt this would be optimal for building and sustaining a meaningful community of learners. The registrar promised she would cap the two class sizes at 18 students, so that meant we would have no more than 36 students total. I reasoned that we could comfortably fit forty students in my classroom, given its previous existence as an oversized chemistry lab. We could place 30 students in desks and scatter the remaining 6 at the lab tables. As we witnessed at the other school, class sizes were larger yet

differentiated instruction was still possible. I was toying with the notion that there would be days when we would combine the two classes and have all 36 students gathered in my classroom for mini-lectures when face-to-face instruction was needed. But, we could also separate the two classes into our respective classrooms if needed for small-group instruction or independent online learning. Essentially, we could hybridize the classroom structure by blending face-to-face and online learning, as well as differentiate instruction based upon individual student needs. Furthermore, we would engage students by combining critical and digital literacy practices. I envisioned this to be a dynamic place of learning where I could encourage critical democracy in online and traditional educational spaces.

Three days prior to the start of the school year, we received our classroom rosters and noticed that the two English 9 classes of 36 students had increased to 48 students. After our panic subsided, we did like any teachers would do—we brought chairs from home and decided to make this work. The day before students returned, all district employees gathered for Institute Day in the River City High auditorium. During this two-hour meeting, we usually hear opening remarks from our board of education, as well as receive guiding wisdom from a motivational speaker. But that year, our superintendent chose to deliver a speech on the importance of technology in the classroom. He suggested that the teachers who weren't using technology in the classroom on a daily basis, should retire. Then, he provided a list of companies that are now defunct because of the affordances technology provides. He closed with the following remarks, "Our students deserve technology and if they don't receive it, they will go elsewhere. They are our customers. Technology needs to be in every classroom."

**Day 1.** I returned to my classroom in total agreement with our superintendent, but I couldn't help but wonder how the one wireless access point in my room would be able to support

48 students online simultaneously. My fears were confirmed on the first day when 52, not 48 and not 36, but *fifty-two students* shuffled into my room at 9:45 a.m. When the shrill tardy bell rang five minutes later, a sea of bodies continued to ebb and flow in search of a place to sit. I felt sweat bead on my lip and prayed for my 747-jet of an air conditioner to take off and lull the masses into a manageable calm. It didn't and just getting everyone to a space took another 10 minutes. By the way, these were freshmen, so they were already confused. Capitalizing on a silent second, I introduced the co-teacher, Ms. Reeves, and myself, and awkwardly penned my name across the empty whiteboard. I faced the audience and felt my knees slightly give much like the inexperienced joints of a baby giraffe. I felt caged, hot, and frustrated, and I couldn't even see all of the students because some were sitting on the floor by the lab tables with their bodies awkwardly contorted. After a round of cursory introductions, the screaming bell scattered our thoughts, as well as 52 students who scrambled and bottlenecked their way out of E-3. Ms. Reeves and I stood frozen in our tracks, stared at each other with eyes like saucers, and burst out into maniacal laughter. No way was this going to work, but we remembered the third piece of advice given to us by the principal at the school we visited: Be flexible. And so we bent.

**Day 2: Technology isn't always the answer.** On day two, we decided to test-drive the 50 netbooks, as well as our substandard WiFi, so we fired up every last netbook and placed them around the classroom. As for the two students who would be without netbooks, well, honestly, we hoped for a miracle. In the meantime, those students could share; while it was an unforeseen inconvenience, it was seemingly the least of our problems. Real estate and lack thereof ranked at the top of our concerns and meeting the needs of 52 students trailed closely behind. At 9:45, the rambunctious horde stampeded the classroom and appeared excited to see the netbooks. One student incredulously announced, "Sweet! These are ours? What are we going to do with them?"

I explained that we would first try to access the WiFi, and I provided login instructions. From the baffled looks we received, the students must have thought we were a pair of pearl-wearing dinosaurs from the land time lost, but it didn't take long for the students to confirm what we suspected. A chorus of voices began echoing a cacophonous rendition of "Mine's not working. . . Something's wrong with mine. . . I'm on. . . Nope, I'm off. . . . These computers suck." For the duration of class—a very short, sweaty, stressful 55 minutes, Ms. Reeves and I awkwardly straddled bookbags while shuffling from computer to computer trying to help students login to the school WiFi. Just as one student would gain access, another three rows over would scowl and announce, "I just got knocked off." The entire process proved futile and overwhelmingly frustrating.

That afternoon, a member of our district's IT department came to my classroom to check the WiFi access point. He ran a diagnostic on the access point and told us that it could likely only support 25 students at a time, but just to be sure, he would check the server the next day while students tried to login. This way, he would be able to explain to us exactly what was possible, and apparently, impossible. "There's no way 50 students can simultaneously be logged in on *this* access point in *this* classroom." On the verge of tears, I told him that I was promised by our district's technology director that our WiFi broadband width had been expanded over the summer and additional access points had been installed in our building. He rolled his eyes, averted contact with mine, and said, "Well, that didn't happen." A few hours later, the technology director herself entered my classroom and inquired about the pilot study. I recounted the past two unsuccessful days in one seemingly never-ending run-on sentence and when I finally ran out of breath, she smiled, surveyed the classroom ceiling, and initiated the following bizarre conversation exchange:

IT director: Well, have you tried turning off the lights?

Charly: (Very confused) For what . . . when?

IT director: When trying to login the students.

Charly: (Still very confused with a, no doubt, quizzical expression.)

IT director: This building is very old and these classrooms have fluorescent lighting. Maybe you can try turning off the lights tomorrow while students are logging into the server.

Charly: But we'll be sitting in the dark.

IT director: Just open your blinds.

With a Vanna White-like use of her right palm, she motioned toward my wall of 53-year-old Vinyl blinds--the same blinds that fought me during my first year in E-3 because they would collapse on the floor with the tiniest hint of a tug to close them. Still a bit in shock from her suggestion, I repeated aloud her instructions of turning off the lights if I wished for 50 students to access the WiFi. She nodded in agreement and I thanked her for the suggestion.

**Day 3: Still in the dark.** The next day, the students entered the dark classroom. Because I didn't want them to consider us insane, I told them that the absence of light would help them better see their screen. No luck. Lights on or off, 50 students *could not* access the WiFi simultaneously. We decided then that we would need to split the two classes when using the netbooks, and perhaps we could combine again for offline activities. We quickly discovered that Ms. Reeves' classroom used the same WiFi access point as E3; therefore, that meant we would have to alternate online days. This proved to be the breaking point for Ms. Reeves. She wished me luck with the study, but thought it best if we simply split the classes because she already had reservations about the time we would need to invest in, essentially, redesigning the way we had previously taught English 9. While sad not to have a teaching partner with me while venturing

into this new space, I understood. So, we parted ways, as well as the classroom of now 48 students.

**Day 4.** I decided the fourth day of school would actually be the first for the students in E3. When the tardy bell rang at 9:50, I could actually see 24 faces seated in 24 desks. I explained why Ms. Reeves and I decided to split the classes, and I furthermore stressed that I sincerely hoped we would now be able to use the netbooks. Thankfully, everyone could login to the network simultaneously, so we began the business of building critical democracy with critical literacy practices.

### **Change Takes Time and Requires Vulnerability**

In the beginning, I struggled. First impressions often create vivid memories, and I feared that 54 students would remember their first week of 9<sup>th</sup> grade English in E-3 as a chaotic disaster. Even though Ms. Reeves and I explained to the students that the lack of netbooks and technological issues were out of our control, I still felt guilty for welcoming them into a class, explaining how much fun they would have, and then telling half of them that they would now report to Ms. Reeves' classroom, and they likely wouldn't be using the netbooks. Judging their faces, most didn't seem to mind and some—like those who had to sit on the floor—sighed relief now that they could, at the very least, have their own desk and a respectable two-foot distance from their seatmate. I envisioned some of their “How was your first week of high school” conversations with parents and friends, and in my version it went something like this:

Parent/Friend: How was your first week as a freshman in high school?

Student: Okay. You know that crazy English class that I told you about . . . the one with too many kids and not enough chairs . . . yeah, well, one of the teachers said she didn't have room for all of us to stay because our school doesn't have enough computers. Or enough WiFi. I can't remember exactly--something like that. Anyway, I'll go to a different English class tomorrow with the other teacher.

Parent/Friend: That sounds awful! And that teacher sounds even worse. What an idiot.

That afternoon, I kicked off my heels (no orthopedic footwear for at least the first month of school), and padded around the room barefoot. I surveyed the mismatched chairs that other teachers donated to us upon hearing of our class size. Some looked familiar—like the faded, green foldable chairs with rusting legs that supported my husband and me in our first apartment, home, and during many camping trips. And I couldn't help but crack a tiny smile when I stared at the beige stools that very recently lived in my kitchen until a week ago when I desperately scanned my home for seating I could a) lift and b) fit in my car. As I removed the clunky furniture from the classroom, the aesthetic improved and my mood strangely lightened. I chalked the first week up to be a false start. It may have felt like a fail, but I forced my eyes to trace the silver lining. Tomorrow, I would meet, again, the new students of E-3, and while the location remained the same, the place felt a little different.

**Voices carry.** I discovered that the critical literacy practices advocated by Morrell (2008), such as journaling, writing poetry, and connecting students' lives to the literature, are all excellent ways to connect with students; however, they also require vulnerability on the part of the teacher. If you want to hear your students' opinions on current matters, you must create time for the class to read aloud books that have relatable, young adult characters; and, the teacher must be relatable, too. Incorporating young adult literature into the curriculum and embracing vulnerability invites the real world into the classroom; and, likewise, connects students to the teacher, as well as the outside world—a key component of critical literacy. For our first novel, we read *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikii Grimes, as detailed in Chapter 4. The poetry prompts revealed some of the more personal and poignant threads about each student and were given to students during a unit that thematically focused on identity and community. Throughout this unit, students read Nikki Grimes' *Bronx Masquerade* and engaged in journaling activities designed to

highlight their individuality and showcase their identities. However, I doubt students would have felt comfortable sharing had I not first opened up to them.

**Modeling poetry writing.** The students' first poetry prompt was inspired from George Ella Lyon's (1999) "Where I'm From" template; and, the second prompt came from the "I Am" formula. I veered from the first pattern a bit and encouraged students to follow the templates or abandon them entirely. I understand formulaic poetry may cause some English teachers to cringe, but I consider it a necessary icebreaker. Before I asked them to write their own poems, I shared my own creations with them. Because I try to never ask students to do something that I can't do myself, I modeled writing by participating in the activities with students watching how I approach writing. In this manner, they saw me tackle an assignment, wrestle with words, and, ultimately, learned more about me as a person as I made myself vulnerable in front of the classroom and revealed the inner sanctum of self that teachers often hide from students. Sharing pieces of you with your classroom affects the mood and tone of a place, as it did for E-3, and students began to see me as a person with flaws, warts, and all.

**Embracing the power of vulnerability.** I chose to share my poems first because this is how I modeled these activities for the class, which as I mentioned earlier, definitely helps reluctant writers.

*"Where I'm From"*

*I am from numbers and interventions, discipline and dysfunction.*

*Clumsy feet navigate my path and, in my world, pinkies are overrated.*

*The night reveals a vivid landscape for characters like Peppi Le Mochos, Sashaline, and dear Uncle L. W.*

*Mingling with the refugees, Rapunzel relentlessly "lets down her hair."*

*Meanwhile, the vacuum cleaner whirs and zooms across pristine white carpet.*

*The monster leaves its telltale Vs across the floor.*

*Better not upset a V or dare to visit a locked bathroom.*

*Microwaves emit waves of radiation and the aroma of burned popcorn.*

*Cereal doesn't smell.*

*Saucony running shoes stained with sweat and tears line the back porch.*

*Neon vests pass as early morning attire.  
An array of animals fills my void.*

*“I am . . .”*

*I am honest and serious.*

*I wonder if social media causes isolation.*

*I hear cacophony and euphony—both are necessary noises.*

*I pretend to be strong and fearless.*

*Sometimes, though, I feel too much.*

*I touch my pen to reach your heart.*

*Worry? I worry about worrying; I worry about it all.*

*I cry salty tears like you.*

*I understand people can be mean.*

*I say “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”*

*But, I know that is a lie.*

*I dream for my school children and biological children.*

*I hope that you hope for everything big, small, and in between.*

*I am your teacher. I am your friend.*

*I am a person just like you.*

After I wrote these poems, I took time to explain the first one because while it described my childhood, it did so in an abstract and vague way. I unintentionally did this, and I knew that this likely stemmed from my need to distance myself from a somewhat dysfunctional upbringing. Even though I felt uncomfortable having a couch-like psychotherapy session with my students, I knew this had to be done. First, I wanted them to see me as an individual, not a generic, robotic teacher; secondly, I wanted to reveal more about myself because sharing is a necessary component in building relationships; and, finally, I needed to show them how elements of my childhood home—these memories—are always with me regardless of the place I occupy.

We dissected each line of my “Where I’m From” poem, and I told them that my father was an accountant and my mother an elementary school counselor. While that was a simple enough beginning, I then told them that my mother struggled with an eating disorder, as well as obsessive compulsive personality disorder, and I was never good or thin enough for her. I told them that being an only child might seem ideal, but it just means that you have no one to commiserate with you when things go horribly wrong—like when I lost my dad to cancer. He

was the one who fashioned nightly fairy tales to share with me at bedtime, and he filled my imaginative world with friendly faces who I'd visit when reality overwhelmed me. I told my students I see vacuum cleaners as roaring monsters because my mom owned eight of varying sizes and she brought them to life frequently. Once the floors were perfect, my mother would twice daily clean the bathrooms and lock them when finished. Sometimes I would use a hanger to unlock the bleach-scented bathroom, and if I forgot to refill the toilet bowl with the tell-tale blue cleaning gel, she would scream uncontrollably. My mother rarely cooked, so we often dined on fluffy popcorn kernels, cereal, or frozen dinners.

Every morning of my parents' life, and I mean *every morning*, my parents woke at 4:30 am to run six miles. No weather was too inclement and no holidays too sacred. Even after diagnosed with cancer, my father simply slowed to a walk until he was bedridden in the final months. When punished in high school for my frequent acts of defiance, I would have to join my parents during their morning runs, and I would often cry during the first mile. Real or crocodile-like, my tears never shortened the run, but I never gave up on using them. I put in a lot of miles during high school because I quite often rebelled against my smothering parents. Our house was like a revolving clown car, but with pets. These housemates often became my siblings, and in that respect, I lived in a diverse foster home.

From this poem analysis, I moved into a briefer description of the second one, and I detailed my current life. I told my students that I still have a strained relationship with my mother, and while that saddens me, I instead choose to focus on what makes me happy, like my husband, Kevin, and children, Porter and Collins, as well as teaching and learning from my students. I then encouraged the class to write their own poems.

I'll be perfectly honest, divulging dirt about my childhood with my students intimidated the hell out of me. What if they thought of me as damaged and unfit to teach them? But, I'll tell you what—and if you're a teacher you'll know what I'm talking about—there are moments in teaching when you truly feel connected to every student in the room. If what you're sharing is genuine, meaningful, and heartfelt, students stop what they're doing, look up at you, and listen. This was one of those moments. I could even see pain and sadness in some of their eyes when I described the dysfunctional relationship I share with my mother. Please don't think I'm a sappy, emotional person—there's nothing wrong if you are—but I am not. I reveal this about myself so you know how truly difficult it was for me to open up to my students and share raw feelings, but it was so worth it, as I will reveal in Andrew's interview transcript in the next section.

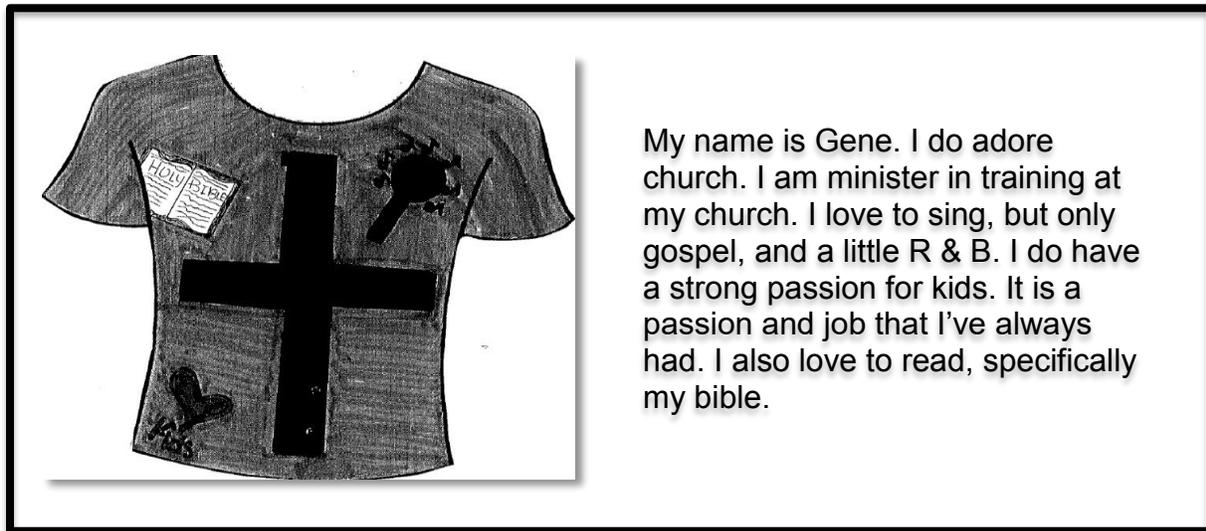
Students need to see teachers without their titles. No pretentiousness—just human to human. Remember when you were little and you saw one of your teachers at the grocery store and it totally freaked you out because, if you were like me, you thought, *What is my teacher doing out of the classroom, away from the school, shopping for real stuff—like toilet paper?! Doesn't she live at the school?* Then, for the remainder of the shopping trip, I would sheepishly stare each time we passed one another in the aisles. The next day at school, I'd almost burst at the first opportunity to blurt out this prized secret to my friends, like, “Guess WHAT? I saw Mrs. Collins at the grocery store!” Well, now that I think about it, I apparently knew very little about Mrs. Collins except that she was nice, drank Tab, and used a lot of Charmin. Is it really any wonder I thought she lived at the school? I didn't even know if she had a family or what they did away from school other than buy diet soda and toiletries. So, my point is this: If you want a meaningful relationship with your students, you have to open up to them and share your stories, good and bad.

## Some Students Initially Resist and Resent Change

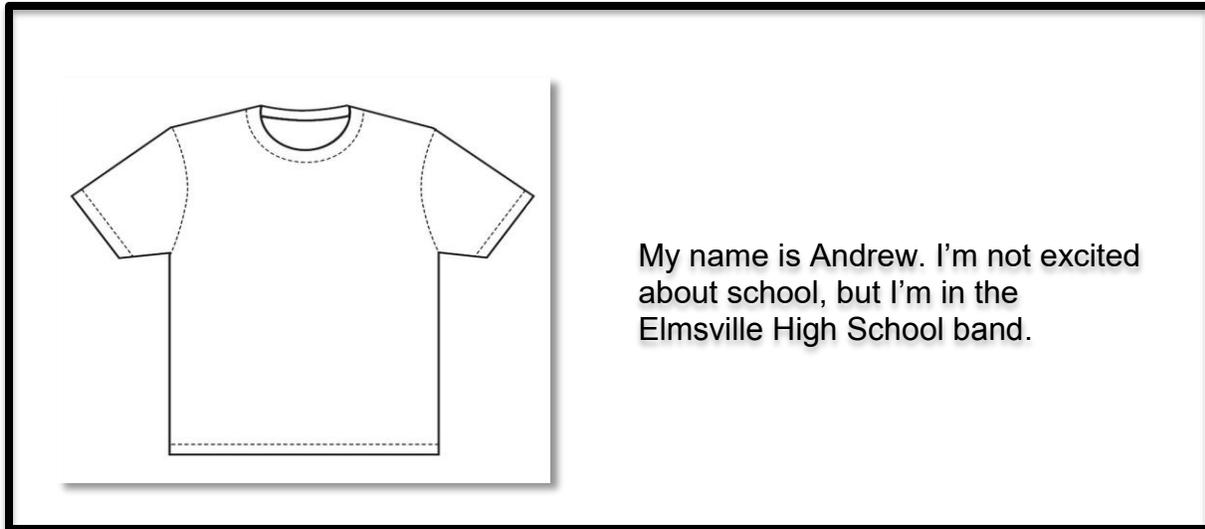
While most of the students appeared enthusiastic on the first day, I quickly discovered that not all students embrace change, and this especially applied to Andrew. At the end of the first week, I gave students a handout with the outline of a T-shirt at the top of the page and a writing prompt at the bottom. The instructions were simple:

1. Decorate your shirt with colors/designs that describe or fit your personality.
2. Introduce yourself in a brief three to four sentence paragraph in the space provided below.

I hoped that through this activity, the students would share their hobbies, likes, dislikes, and more. For example, whereas Gene's T-shirt and response was detailed and creative (Figure 1), Andrew's was unenthusiastic (Figure 2).



*Figure 1.* Gene's T-shirt design.



*Figure 2.* Andrew's T-shirt design.

Based upon his refusal to do the first activity and this negative response, I imagine Ms. Patton would label him as apathetic; however, I believe that refusing to participate was his way of maintaining control. Deciding whether to participate or refuse was probably one of the few choices afforded to him in standard classes, which is likely why he wrote, "Some teachers call me smart, but I don't have good grades." Throughout the entire year, I pleaded with him in various ways to speak, participate, and critically engage, but he mostly refused. Initially, I believe he saw me as just another teacher who would throw a remedial program in his direction in an effort to fix him. Had I not continued as Andrew's English teacher his tenth grade year, I suspect he would, as Mrs. Rowe said, "slip through the cracks." Fortunately, that didn't happen, because multiyear placement provided him with the emotional and foundational support he needed.

### **Multiyear Placement**

An empowering education can bridge the realities of students' lives with the realities of fictional characters' lives, but to create that connection, teachers need to really know their students; and this takes time. Multiyear placement provides teachers with an additional year to

build and maintain relationships with their students, and I consider this a critical literacy practice because each student has a story, and their words are far more important than those found in the pages of a classroom novel. Without multiyear placement, students like Andrew may not have connected with me, others, or school.

As a freshman, Andrew rarely spoke. He sulked and often refused to participate in the class. He hid behind his long hair and avoided eye contact. But in the fall of his second year with me, he began to open up, and he blossomed in the spring of his sophomore year. Now an 11<sup>th</sup> grader, Andrew stops by my classroom at least once a week on his way to English class. He walks gracefully and tilts his chin slightly upward to reveal his smiling face—now clearly visible since he wears his long, brown locks in a low ponytail these days. Recently, he applied for an exchange student program in Japan that is sponsored by one of River City’s local industries. Students interested must meet with a faculty panel and it’s not unusual for students to struggle with the hour-long interview process. Freshman Andrew would have struggled to make eye contact and engage in conversation with the faculty. Not anymore. When I asked the guidance counselor, a member of the panel, how Andrew’s interview went, she giggled and said, “He wouldn’t STOP talking! Even after we finished asking him questions, he continued to talk and when everybody finally left, he followed me to my office and kept talking.”

When I recently interviewed Andrew, I was delighted to see this gregarious side of him—a side that didn’t emerge until the latter part of his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year with me. I asked him to reflect on his time spent in my class, and I wondered if he would be the outgoing student he is today had he not spent two years in a detracked classroom.

Mrs. Kusta: Let’s say that you didn’t have the experience that you had with being with me a couple of years. How do you think you would be today? Do you think you would still be putting yourself out there?

Andrew: No. I wouldn't be, because the way I experienced and all of that build up with the poems, *especially the poems*; I wouldn't have an outlet, and I wouldn't have talked to others with wisdom and with my own poems, because that's what I love to do. Emotionally, I was a bit stubborn in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. I was stubborn, hard-headed, and I was basically chewing myself out.

Mrs. Kusta: Why?

Andrew: Just things that I thought like, "I need to be better at this. I'm not good enough."

Mrs. Kusta: So, you think the poetry? Or what do you think kind of changed your mindset? It sounds like you were almost criticizing yourself. You had your own critic, so what do you think changed?

Andrew: What really changed was going through the year thinking about what it means to be here, the way we would talk about it in class. You would open up and then really ask us to. It made me jump into different cultures. It let me open up myself a little bit.

Mrs. Kusta: Well, what were your plans as a 9th grader? Let's kind of take you back as you were coming in. Try to get into your mindset of starting school. How would your plans be different? I know that's hard. I'm taking you back to 9th grade. Let's say it's the first week of school, or the beginning of 9th grade. What did you think of the future then? Did you think about the future?

Andrew: I didn't. I was too stubborn-headed for it. I didn't think about what I wanted to be. I was just there, and I just wanted to get out.

Mrs. Kusta: And you just wanted to be done with school?

Andrew: Yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: When do you think you finally kind of turned it around and said, "I really want to be here. People want to hear what I have to say."?

Andrew: Definitely not in the 9th grade. I believe it was in the 10th grade, as we were learning about each other. You know, opening up a bit more.

Mrs. Kusta: Yeah.

Andrew: I can't stop going back to the poetry. The poetry is what really opened me up.

Mrs. Kusta: Okay. So that speaks volumes, and now you just write poetry. How much poetry do you think you write now?

Andrew: I don't write much until I have a strong feeling about something.

Mrs. Kusta: And then you-

Andrew: Because when I do, I just come up with a way of thinking, and seeing in a way that I don't see often. It's sort of like having a different mind all of a sudden, and you see things in such a different way, and you understand it so well that you can speak it, write it down, express it in a really well way.

Mrs. Kusta: That's excellent. Well, good! Have your plans changed from 9th to 11th, and they have, because I guess in 9th in the beginning, you were like, "I just want to be done." And then now, look where you are now. So when you said they've changed then-

Andrew: Oh yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: Okay, and your mindset, your attitude? I guess the way you saw school? Like you said, 9th grade, you were stubborn. So what were some ... I guess, how would you describe yourself as a 9th grader? If you had to pick some adjectives?

Andrew: Probably a hard-headed, close-minded, tempered child.

Mrs. Kusta: And then today, how would you describe yourself?

Andrew: More of a joyful, open-minded, understanding. I've been more of that.

Mrs. Kusta: That's wonderful. Okay, so what are some things that we maybe did in my class that you wish you could do in all your classes? We did the notebooks, we read different things, we did poetry. I don't know, we had conversations. What are some things, maybe, that you remember that you wish other classes did more of?

Andrew: More like opening up, just like ... you know, you have class and then you can have a conversation. You know, talk to the teacher, talk about stuff. A bit more of something to build, like a friendship.

Mrs. Kusta: Yeah. I think friendships are missing in a lot of classrooms. What do you think? I mean, between the teacher and the student.

Andrew: Yeah, because usually, the students just ... They don't care about the teacher.

Mrs. Kusta: Yeah, and then the teacher, I don't think, takes the time to get to know the students, because the teachers are usually like, "I've got to follow, I've got to do this." I think when you let those things go, there's a lot of learning that takes place that just doesn't happen in the way that most classes-

- Andrew: I like what this teacher once said, when she was teaching classes. "You guys aren't understanding what I'm trying to put down. You're just like second graders. They can copy, but they won't understand."
- Mrs. Kusta: Yeah. What do you think? How does that make you feel? What do you think about?
- Andrew: It makes me think about how all we're doing is just looking, copying, and that's it. We're just doing this repetitively every day, and then we look at it, study it, and go to school.
- Mrs. Kusta: Yeah.
- Andrew: Go to school, do it, have a test, and then we just forget about it.
- Mrs. Kusta: Yeah.
- Andrew: We don't care about it. We just leave it.
- Mrs. Kusta: But I hope that that wasn't your experience, I mean, 100% in the 9th and the 10th grade in my class.
- Andrew: It was in some of the classes. But looping [multiyear placement] ... I don't know. I can't express it, how it just opened me up. It was just like my mind started to just go.

Without multiyear placement, Andrew may not have established a meaningful, personal, or memorable connection with me or some of the students; and, for him, adapting to change took time. Now when I see him walking around campus, he appears goofily happy, giddy almost, which is the complete opposite of how he walked as a freshman with hunched shoulders and eyes glued to the floor.

In the following excerpt from our interview, Andrew identifies what he sees as a problem in schools today.

- Andrew: They [Students] feel like, trapped and they're just stuck in a system that's just not meant for them.
- Mrs. Kusta: Yeah. Yeah, like it's just cranking you out. I felt like it's a factory setting. Kids come in 9th grade, they do these workbooks, they do whatever, then they go to the 10th grade, then they do the same thing, and you never really get to know your teacher. You don't really get to tap into what you like, and then it's just the same over and over. I feel like in some of these

classes, I would look at some classes and the kids knew each other, and they got to go off curriculum, and I thought, "Well, I want to do that with my class too."

Andrew: It's sort of like the way I think about it is like: Think about how the innovation of a phone. Think about it how it was back then. It was just a big old box, and you had to pull this thing off. Nowadays, it's just this small piece of technology that can do so much more. A car back then could only go as fast as 20 miles an hour, and nowadays, they go as up to 300 miles an hour. It's sort of the way I see it in schools. Schools back then are almost the exact same way as they are now, and it's not right, because nowadays, there's so much more creativity that you need, and it's just the same thing over and over for every student, without letting them open up to what they want.

Mrs. Kusta: So I think what you're talking about in the dated practices of schools, it's like they just expect one type of student, and they don't appreciate diversity in, like you said, in students' interests and what they want to do. So we just keep cranking out the same or the school system thinks, "Well, everybody's the same. We're just cranking out the same person." I think that's damaging to many students. I think it deters them, and I think it discourages them.

Andrew: Especially now that the fact that we have such advanced technology. It's not that we need smart people. We need creative people, people who can innovate what we have already created.

Andrew describes schools then and now as the same, and he aptly identifies many of their practices, such as those found in most standard classrooms, as dated, uniform, and void of creativity. As a result, many students “feel like, trapped and they're just stuck in a system that's just not meant for them.”

Like Andrew, Zora entered her freshman year as someone who looked lost, “trapped,” and “stuck.” Journaling, a critical literacy practice advocated by (Morrell, 2008; YADA) provided the escape she needed. She credited our weekly writing sessions as a way to “express my feelings more, rather than keeping them to myself.” Extremely shy, Zora rarely spoke aloud during her first year with me. In our first, and only face-to-face interview, Zora briefly shared her thoughts with me on technology, novels, journaling, and multiyear placement.

Mrs. Kusta: What do you think about the English class we're doing with some computers, teaching through novels? Do you like that?

Zora: Yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: How do you feel about it? What are some things you like?

Zora: I catch onto it more 'cause I get it. The computers help me more and some of the novels, too.

Mrs. Kusta: Okay, how do the computers help you more?

Zora: Like Quizlet, those help me with vocabulary.

Mrs. Kusta: Do you like Google classroom or Edmodo?

Zora: I like Google classroom.

Mrs. Kusta: What about Edmodo did you not like?

Zora: I did like it but I like Google classroom is better because you get to do more stuff on there.

Mrs. Kusta: What do you like doing on Google classroom?

Zora: I like when you ask questions. I also like using Storyboard 'cause it's easier than doing PowerPoint.

Mrs. Kusta: Do you like PowerPoint and Prezi?

Zora: Yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: But Storyboard is better? What about I was asking my other student in here, do you think we should start a classroom Twitter? Or Facebook? I'm trying to get us talking more, or should I just keep it on Google classroom and ask more questions?

Zora: Keep it on Google classroom.

Mrs. Kusta: So, in terms of our novels, like *Bronx Masquerade*, do you think you could identify with any of those teens?

Zora: I think one of them was Lupe where she wanted to have a child. Gloria had one and she was thinking that that was crazy because it's not easy having one. Another one, I think it was a guy. Not sure what the name was but he was living in a cruel neighborhood with gangs and all that and he was talking about how it wasn't easy living in there.

Mrs. Kusta: Yeah I think so. Do you relate? Some of the kids there were from single family households and I know that you and I have written about that in your journal. So do you think other teens have to go through similar situations as yourself?

Zora: Well, people have different problems. We all have a struggle. Some may be different, some may be similar. I think that some teens do kinda have the same problem as me, like single parents.

Mrs. Kusta: Well then I think ... the reason why I have this journal back and forth, for one it helps me to know you guys on a more personal level. I know that you probably wouldn't talk about any of this in the classroom out loud. Or would you?

Zora: No.

Mrs. Kusta: If I were to post more questions on Google classroom, would you be more willing to respond online?

Zora: Yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: Even though other people can see your post? If I were to ask not a question about your personal family but to ask you how do you feel about this character or what do you think about this theme, would you be willing to write more?

Zora: Yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: Okay, and respond maybe to people online?

Zora: Probably.

Mrs. Kusta: Why is that easier than speaking out in class?

Zora: I get more nervous when talking to other people.

Mrs. Kusta: Why's that?

Zora: I'm not sure, I just get nervous. I forget my words and I can't say anything and my voice gets softer.

Mrs. Kusta: So, what is your favorite subject?

Zora: English, I like reading all the books and all the novels that we have.

Mrs. Kusta: Did you like poetry?

Zora: Yes.

Mrs. Kusta: So if we were to do more, do you like the project's that we're doing? The technology projects that we pair with the literature?

Zora: Yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: Is there one in particular you enjoy more than the rest?

Zora: I like the Storyboards.

Mrs. Kusta: Trailers, did you like that?

Zora: That was kind of difficult but it was fun.

Mrs. Kusta: It was difficult I think because not everybody had the app.

Zora: Yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: That was somewhat difficult. Is there another something you might suggest I do more?

Zora: No.

Mrs. Kusta: So when you guys take Tenth grade, If I can I'd like to have some of you that would like to be maybe in my English class next year? Would that be something you'd be interested in, having the same teacher, or would you like to meet a new English teacher?

Zora: I want the same teacher.

Mrs. Kusta: Why is that?

Zora: I'm so used to you asking us personal questions, I'm talking to you more. I understand more how you explain things, like you explain it better in a way I can understand.

Mrs. Kusta: Oh, well what I'm hearing from you is post more questions on Google classroom to get you talking to me more that way?

Zora: Yeah.

Mrs. Kusta: Should I do more one-on-one questions with you online, or do you like writing in the journal?

Zora: I like writing in the journal.

Zora claimed to like responding to the questions I posted on Google Classroom; however, she only responded with a few words or less. She also liked working with the computers because

she did not have to engage with anyone face-to-face, and this, in conjunction with network issues, is one of the reasons I encouraged the class to participate in face-to-face conversations. Gene, Shonda, and Raven were notably not shy, and they enjoyed reading aloud their journal entries, but the other five participants did not. So, I used the individual topics discussed in the journals as springboards into weekly conversations linked to identity, community, relationships, and voice and paired with the lesson or a current sociopolitical event.

Like Zora, all of the students spoke enthusiastically of journaling and without this necessary component, I suspect Zora and I would not have built a multistranded relationship (Moll et al. 1992) and, perhaps, she would not have agreed to stay with me for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Still somewhat reserved, but definitely more outgoing, I see Zora almost every day because she is now an office aide assistant, which means she must engage with school visitors on a daily basis. While she still shys away from face-to-face interviews, Zora did agree to provide written responses to a few questions for me regarding the two years she spent with me. Describing herself as a freshman, she wrote, “I was a bit of a disaster. I wasn’t prepared.” When asked which three adjectives she would use to describe herself then and now, she wrote of her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, “I was shy, unhappy, and had no confidence.” Now, she states, “I am outspoken, confident, and satisfied.” She listed “writing in our notebooks and having class discussions” as her fondest memories of the class; and, when I asked her what we did in my class that she wished she did in her current classes, she responded, “have daily discussions to express our opinions.” On her feelings regarding multiyear placement, she wrote, “It helped me because I felt more confident talking to you and the students around me because we knew each other well.”

### **Students Engage and Connect**

Enacting alternative pedagogical practices in the classroom created multiple opportunities for students to find an approach to the lesson that capitalized on their academic strengths and

personal interests. Also, the students enjoyed the freedom to choose how they would show each other, as well as me, what they learned. Quite often, their creations far exceeded anything I could have imagined, and in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year together, they were quite adept at snowballing each other's ideas when determining which book we would read next and how we could make real-world connections with the text. The following excerpt provides (a) a detailed sketch of this interactive, student-driven process; (b) shows how critical literacy practices and multiyear placement assisted students with building relationships, kindling critical engagement, encouraging autonomy, and spreading empowerment; and (c) reveals how detracking encouraged students to make meaningful, personal, and memorable connections in an English/language arts classroom.

**Adapting the curriculum and speaking up!** During our last semester together, spring arrived earlier than usual for E-3. Everything did actually. The ides of March still loomed in the distance, and yet my students were already well versed in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Shakespeare, 1599/1963). Prior to the holiday break, I told the students we would read the play when we returned, and I told them that they'd probably enjoy it—especially if they liked cartel- or mafia-related content like *The Godfather* (Puzo, 1969) series. On the first day back to school, Julian announced he wanted to be Caesar. He told the class that he watched all of *Narcos* on Netflix and parts of *The Godfather*, too. As he saw it, his viewing research justified him for the role. Of course, Act III enraged him. “They killed me!!!” he screamed. “That’s shot out, Mrs. Kusta. I’m not reading anymore of this.” But a few minutes later, he wanted the role of Marc Antony. Unfortunately, Gene wouldn’t share his part. Julian settled on Octavius, and we continued to move through the play faster than years past, and the students were actually engaged during the entire play.

I noticed the same rapid progression with Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). At the opening of her novel, Lee aptly describes Maycomb as "a tired, old town," and some years, it felt like E-3 and Maycomb could be related, but not this time. We took Boo Radley's hand, thanked him for his kindness, and walked him home a little after Valentine's Day. The pacing of our reading was fast, but our engagement was anything but trite. I could end this chapter of the dissertation with details of our days spent with these traditional titles that are not only mandated by Alabama's course of study, but also quite often overly done in scholarly literature; however, I do not. I take a different turn.

**Students speak, I speak, we all speak.** The students chose our final novel. Shonda, probably the most avid reader in the class, suggested the title—even though, at first, she couldn't remember it. "You know, Mrs. Kusta, it's one of the books suggested by my GoodReads account." All of the students established a GoodReads account at the beginning of their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year; in fact, we did this after we finished *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002). Each student rated the novel (most gave it high marks) and then they continued rating other titles so the site could suggest individualized recommendations. Shonda used the site quite often so she also had the app. "Here, Mrs. Kusta," Shonda angled her phone so I could read the screen. Squinting without my glasses, I tried to enlarge the screen. Shonda giggled. "I got you, Mrs. Kusta. I'm gonna read what it says about the book. Y'all listen." The class stopped what they were doing and faced Shonda as she began to read the online teaser,

"Speak up for yourself—we want to know what you have to say." From the first moment of her freshman year at Merryweather High, Melinda knows this is a big fat lie, part of the nonsense of high school. (Anderson, 1999)

"Yup," said Gene, "that's the one." Raven affirmed with a sly smile and a slow head nod, "This sounds a-ight," which meant she approved. "Y'all let her finish," I urged. Shonda continued,

In Laurie Halse Anderson's powerful novel, an utterly believable heroine with a bitterly ironic voice delivers a blow to the hypocritical world of high school. She speaks for many a disenfranchised teenager while demonstrating the importance of speaking up for oneself. (Goodreads, 2001)

After hearing the last sentence, I knew this would be the one. Based on the title alone, I thought maybe this book serendipitously chose us and not the other way around. Not everyone in the class agreed. Julian groaned, “I want to read about Pablo Escobar!” Taylor and Cyrus rolled their eyes, and Cyrus, who rarely spoke, said, “Julian, we’ve read *Julius Caesar* and that was like mob stuff. You even got to be Caesar. I’m sick of hearing about Pablo!” Julian jokingly scooted his desk away from Cyrus, threw up both hands in surrender, and said, “Whoa, whoa. Okay, Donald Trump.” (Recently, Julian had started calling Cyrus this nickname in response to Cyrus’s attempt to call him Pablo. Julian liked his moniker, but Cyrus did not.) Andrew, who remained oblivious to the slightly heated exchange, looked up from his phone, and said, “I remember reading something about this book, too. Let’s do this one.”

**But it’s not part of the traditional canon of literature.** Upon voting, *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) won. Not unanimously—Julian still wanted something Pablo-related, so I promised him that at the end of the year, I would buy him a Pablo Escobar-related book of his choice. He considered that a sufficient deal, and we moved on. But, since I didn’t have *Speak*, had never read it, nor had it ever been taught within the department, I needed to track down and purchase 15 copies. As I had already spent all of my teacher-allocated money on 15 copies of *Things Not Seen* (Clements, 2002), *Max the Mighty* (Philbrick, 1998), and about 30 other YA novels suggested by the students for our classroom library, Amazon Prime would not work. It would either a) take too long to deliver used copies from independent sellers in 15 different stores across the United States; or, b) cost too much for new books. So, that weekend my family and I drove four hours, round-trip, to the nearest 2<sup>nd</sup> & Charles, the mecca for English teachers and

avid readers alike. I found 16 copies (an extra for good measure) for roughly \$3.75 each and I received a teacher discount. So, in all, I believe the MasterCard commercial equation goes something like this:

Sixteen copies of *Speak*: \$50

Round-Trip Gas: \$40

Looks on students' faces when they determine their own curriculum: Priceless.

**Connecting through Speak-ing.** Having not read the novel before, I should have read it first. That's pretty much Teacher 101, but I wanted to read it *with* the students, not *to* the students. Besides, the back cover stated it was appropriate for ages 10 and up. At the onset, we discover that the main character, Melinda, harbors a deep secret that she struggles to utter aloud. We also find out that the summer before her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, Melinda attended a party, then called the cops and busted everyone there, so all of her friends have abandoned her. As an outcast, Melinda sinks further into her silence and depression, until we discover the horrid truth: She was raped . . . at the party . . . by one of the most popular boys in school.

After reading the novel in class, I asked students how we could further engage with the text. In many standard classes, a typical project might take shape on the overhead as a Prezi or PowerPoint. While some presentations can be fantastic, many drone on and few interest the class. In short, the class reads a fantastic book, loves it, and then the experience is muddled with 30-plus Prezis of the same content—or worse, the experience ends with a pencil, Scantron, and too many multiple-choice questions. But, after working alongside these students for almost two years, I knew their suggestions would be anything but dull.

Encouraged by *Speak*, they spoke, and their ideas bubbled forth. Raven couldn't wait to share, "Oooh Oooh, oooh, oooh, Mrs. Kusta, let's do the project like Melinda did with her tree!"

“Yes!!!” echoed Shonda. “I’m gonna draw something awesome. You got any pink construction paper, Mrs. Kusta?”

Gene answered, “Yeah, they’re in the third drawer. I’ll get the markers.”

“I call green!” Julian hollered. “I’m gonna draw the dollar bill because I LOVE MONEY!”

“Wait,” Taylor, always polite and calm, but ever the perfectionist, asked, “what exactly will we be doing?” I opened *Speak* (1999) and read the assignment instructions just as they were given to Melinda by her art teacher, Mr. Freeman:

You will each pick a piece of paper out of the globe.” He walks around the room so we can pull red scraps from the center of the earth. “On the paper you will find one word, the name of an object. I hope you like it. You will spend the rest of the year learning how to turn that object into a piece of art. You will sculpt it. You will sketch it, papier-mâché it, carve it. If the computer teacher is talking to me this year, you can use the lab for computer-aided designs. But there’s a catch—by the end of the year, you must figure out how to make your object say something, express an emotion, speak to every person who looks at it. (Anderson, 1999, p.12)

Looking up, I saw Taylor’s worried face. “Do we have to do it exactly like they did or can we choose our object?” Already sketching something in his notebook, Andrew looked up at her quizzically and said matter-of-factly, “We choose.” Without missing a beat, he continued, “Umm, Mrs. Kusta, what do you call those masks people wear to parties? Like the ones in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1597/2000)?”

“Oh, I love those! I’m not sure, let’s ask the Google.” Before I could reach my desk, Zora began listing them, “The *Bauta*, the *Colombino*, the *Medico della peste*” Zora spoke quietly, but she smiled loudly. “See, they’re right here.” She leaned over and extended the face of her phone toward Andrew.

“Yes!” beamed Andrew. With widened eyes and an excited expression I’d never seen before, he tapped the air with his sharpened #2. “That’s it. Thanks, Zora.”

“Mrs. Kusta,” Gene’s booming preacher man voice filled the room. Now standing at the far right lab table, Gene looked directly at me with his eyes. He had lowered his black horn-rimmed, browline glasses so they rested below the bridge of his nose, and it was uncanny how much he resembled a young Malcolm X. I knew this face; it meant business. He wore this expression when he designed his projects, and I knew his idea would be good. He lifted his right hand, pencil already in tow, and upturned his palm to indicate his first point. “I think we need to write a little something about why we’re drawing . . .” Gene panned the class with his right hand.

Shonda pounced at the silence. “A cactus! I’m gonna draw a cactus!”

Not even looking up from his composition notebook, nor pausing his pencil, Julian interjected, “Money. The dollar bill.”

Gene chimed in again, but this time he continued drawing while talking, “What I was saying, *SHONDA*, was that we need to explain why we’ve chosen our object. We should write a little something and share it with our art.”

Nodding in agreement, but without looking up, Taylor dreamily spoke, “Sounds good.”

Educational Nirvana. Educational Effervescence. Call it what you will, but it’s that moment of pure elation when you know something is really working in the classroom. I used to interpret these moments as personal affirmations of successful instructional practices; they describe feelings of satisfaction and usually chalk up the whole experience to be a result of their tireless effort. I was having this moment, but with one very important distinction: It really had nothing to do with *me*, the teacher, and that was the best part. I scanned the class and noticed a sea of crowns entranced by their blossoming designs. As young masters of their own education, the students of E-3 ruled. I simply sat in awe and admired the beauty of creation.

**The art of speaking up.** Still elated from their presentations, I returned the next day feeling wiser, and one year older. Shonda remembered first. “Happy Birthday, Mrs. Kusta! Hey, y’all, let’s sing!” After the students finished an exuberant round of “Happy Birthday,” Julian looked at me with solemn eyes and asked, “Did she call?” I knew what he was talking about and I felt touched that he remembered. Last year, when the students were 9<sup>th</sup> graders, my mom failed to call on my birthday—instead, she texted. While all of the students knew of the strained relationship I shared with my mother, we only discussed the birthday incident once, and that was exactly one year ago. Admittedly, I was hurt because she had not called me, her only child, yet again. My eyes watered a bit, and I knew that if I blinked once, I might not be able to stop the tears. I took a deep breath, patted Julian on the shoulder, and smiled. “Thank you for asking. She hasn’t, but the day is still young. We’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

The next day, Julian beat Shonda to the punch. “So, did she call?” At this point all eyes rested on me. Zora looked like she might cry. I waved my hand back and forth as if I could erase this moment from existence, but the air was too heavy, too permanent, and I knew this moment wouldn’t pass without an explanation. “Have y’all ever heard of an Etch a Sketch?”

Gene responded, “Is that the thing that you draw on and it erases?”

I clapped my sweaty palms together. “Yes! That’s exactly what it is.” Zora cocked her head to the right and looked at me for further clarification. “It’s a toy. I used to have one when I was a little girl and I’m pretty sure they still make them. It’s a red square, like a tablet, and you can draw using two white knobs. If you mess up, or want to draw something else, you shake the tablet and everything erases. Then you can start over.”

Andrew handed her his phone with an image of the gadget. “Oh. Okay.” She looked at me and I could tell from her raised eyebrows that she intended for me to continue my

explanation. Zora had written often in her journal about her mother abandoning her two years ago. She would not speak face-to-face with me about the painful relationship she shared with her mother; I tried once, and she told me it was too hard to say aloud. Instead, she wrote to me, and I to her. She and I connected over this topic, which is why her prodding gaze urged me to speak. So I found my words and continued. “You know, they say it’s important to find a silver lining to every situation. So my mom didn’t call and wish me a happy birthday. I could choose to dwell on this and feel sorry for myself. In fact, last year I did. So much so that I ignored my family and failed to recognize their kindness on my birthday. I could obsess over every awful thing my mother has ever done to me, but I won’t. She followed her mother’s footsteps—unfortunately—and didn’t always make the best choices. But, she did the best she knew to do, and I can learn from her mistakes. Instead of repeating history and ambling down the same worn path, I choose my own way. I can’t change the past, but I control some parts of the future. I am a better mother to my daughter because of the lessons I learned from my mother.” I forced myself to stop rambling. Desperate to lift the mood, I concluded, “So, I have learned that even when my children are grown, I will still call them on their special day and sing Happy Birthday.” Zora smiled encouragingly, and I took that as a signal to move on. “Now, for the end of the year . . .”.

Before I could finish my sentence, Andrew’s voice filled the room, “I have an idea.” He nervously swept his long, brown bangs away from his eyes and tucked them behind his left ear. “I’ve heard that it sometimes helps to write a letter to the person who brings you the most pain.” He nervously shifted his eyes left, right, left, and then focused on me.

Inside, I was screaming, *YES, YES, ANDREW IS SPEAKING*, but I knew if I responded in that manner, he’d blush from the attention and clam up. So, instead, I slowly dipped my chin downward and widened my eyes, trying my best at nonverbal encouragement—I also didn’t want

to interrupt him. He slowly continued, “Well, my dad and I don’t always get along. He doesn’t really talk to me. I want to do things with him, but he just pushes me off on my mom. I can’t tell him how I feel, so instead I wrote him a letter.”

By now, Shonda has outstretched her hand and is touching his desk. She softens her voice to match his and asks, “Did you give it to him?”

Andrew quickly shakes his head no and his bangs fall like curtains over his eyes. When he pushes them to the side again, we can all see the pain through his glassy gaze, “No.” His monosyllabic response lands like a staccato note. “I wrote this long letter—like eight pages—telling him how he makes me feel when he ignores me, and then I just wadded it up and threw it away.

“Naw, child. I woulda mailed that letter to my daddy and made sure he read it!” Gene’s getting geared up for a sermon, but Andrew continues more excitedly.

“No. Instead, you just let it go. Write it down and let it go.”

Julian jumps in, “I got dad issues, too, bro. I need to write my dad a letter. He’s hardest on me ‘cause I’m the oldest.”

Andrew looks from Julian to me and says, “Mrs. Kusta, you should write your mom a letter, throw it away, and let it go.”

Shonda takes this as a cue and belts out the chorus of the theme song from Frozen (2013), “*Let it go, Let it go, Can’t hold it back anymore*” The class bursts out in laughter, so Shonda stands, and waves her hands like a composer bringing the orchestra together.

Raven, annoyed at Shonda, lifts her hand and pushes the air down as a sure signal for Shonda to hush and sit down. “Hey, I know! Instead of throwing our letters away, let’s tie them to a balloon and really let them go!” Everyone delights at this idea, and the students’ voices

crescendo to a cacophonous roar. I expect Ms. Patton to walk in at any moment and silent us. But she doesn't, and the class is so excited, I bet she couldn't stifle them even if she tried.

**Letting go and moving on.** That afternoon, I visited the Dollar Tree in search of helium-filled balloons. I feared they might only have the birthday/baby shower variety, but luckily, they had an arsenal of gold, red, and blue star-shaped balloons floating in the front left corner of the store. I considered it kismet and bought eighteen—fourteen for the students, one for me, two for my children who would wonder why I had so many balloons in my car, and one extra for good measure. When the students arrived to class the next day and saw the balloons, they were visibly excited.

“I choose red!” shouted Shonda.

“Gold for me because I'm the best,” teased Gene.

Andrew walked in as the bell was ringing, looked directly at the clump of shiny, floating stars, and smiled at all of us. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a thickly folded letter on lined notebook paper, waved it in the air, and asked, “Can I borrow some tape or string? I need to tie this letter to my balloon.” I pulled out the supplies and we quickly got to work attaching our letters—some fat (Andrew, Zora, and Gene); some skinny (Shonda and Taylor); some tiny (Julian); and some produced at the last minute on copy paper acquired from my desk printer (Raven and Cyrus). We soon realized that some of our words were heavier than others. “Oh no!” Andrew lifted the string of his blue balloon from the floor, revealing a thick square letter tied to its end. “Watch.” He let loose the string and instead of the balloon flying toward the ceiling, it sunk like lead. Some of the others were realizing the same, including me. “Look at mine.” I demonstrated the same, but smiled to lighten the situation and said, “My problems are too heavy.

*Ba-dum-dum.*” I pretended to tap imaginary drum sticks in a quick left, right, left succession like I had seen so many bad comedians do before on TV.

“Ohhhhhh, Mrs. Kusta,” Gene groaned. “That was bad.”

Andrew brought his balloon over to the supplies table, grabbed the scissors, and started cutting. “We’ll just have to make them smaller or rewrite them.” It took some finesse, but we all eventually watched our balloons lift their cargo to the ceiling.

Ready for flight, the students left E-3 as a constellation of shiny stars. Trailing behind them, I peeked into E-4 and smiled at Ms. Patton. Sitting at her desk, she looked confused, and slightly irritated because of someone else’s disruption. I thought of the *stars* in her classroom—the students and the cardboard cutouts of golden stars with names of those who had scored a 5 on the AP exam. Glued to the wall in the back of her classroom, these stars were only visible to those within E-4. Ms. Patton and other advocates of tracking preferred it that way. For too long, their starry sky felt, perhaps, out of reach from the students who entered my classroom almost two years ago as 9<sup>th</sup> graders. Not anymore. I followed my students’ laughter, pushed through the double doors to the outside, and saw a stream of stars that would soon be visible by everyone.

“Come on, Mrs. Kusta! Hurry up!” Beyond the oppressive shadow cast by the aging English building, standing in the sunlight on a verdant patch of lawn, Andrew motioned for me to join the group. I beamed at this student who, two years ago, barely voiced a word. Now, his voice could be heard above all the others. He boomed, “On the count of three: ONE, TWO, THREEEEE!” We let loose our words and watched our stars float toward the golden horizon. No longer silent, Andrew and Melinda spoke.

The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up. (Anderson, 1999, p. 198)

I watched Andrew turn and glide back toward the building. He seemed lighter, taller, happier. Reaching the double doors first, he turned around, smiled at everyone, and threw open the door. His options were, are, and always have been limitless.

### **Conclusion**

Before ending this section, I would like to briefly return to the opening description of River City:

In this straightforward trajectory of a mere six miles, the east and the west differ drastically. At one end of the spectrum, the uniformed men and women employed by the feline factory enter and leave work with a punch on the clock; whereas, down the street the business casual dress worn by the mostly male engineers employed by the rocket facility enter and leave work, well, when they consider it time to do so. Displays of economic disparity sporadically continue as one drives further into the heart of the city flanked by these two industrial magnates.

In many standard classrooms at EHS, little is expected of the students. As long as they quietly work on what, more often than not, resembles menial tasks, they progress. This repetitive pattern continues until May of their senior year, when a flick of the tassel alters their trajectory. But where will they go? East or West? Feline factory or rocket facility? Neither?

Ultimately, their options have always far exceeded the factory/facility dichotomy, but River City's hegemonic class perpetuates this façade in many of the district's standard classrooms. Freire (1970) notes,

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action. (p. 49)

In reality, infinite trajectories exist infinitely. Places shape us and we *become* the place; however, we are always becoming, so places are constantly evolving. River City would like students to believe only two paths exist: feline factory or rocket facility. Poor or rich. Standard or

advanced-level. This simply is not the case, but rather a persistent and inequitable illusion that traps too many people and keeps them from setting out on a new trajectory.

While two years spent in a detracked classroom cannot magically erase years of oppressive practices, it is a mighty good start. Everything we did in class multiplied the number of options students had and hopefully the experiences shared and memories made will remind them of this truth: They have the power to carve their own path.

## CHAPTER 6:

### DISCUSSION

All great things are simple, and many can be expressed in single words: freedom, justice, honor, duty, mercy, hope.

—Sir Winston Churchill

There is a destiny that makes us brothers, none goes his way alone. All that we send into the lives of others comes back into our own.

—Edwin Markham, *Lincoln and Other Poems* (1901, p. 25)

#### **Luminosity**

As a little girl, my dad and I would often lie on our backs and gaze at the stars. On a clear night, we could easily spy Orion, the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper—two formations that I would later learn were actually asterisms, a pattern of stars somewhat smaller than their more official-sounding constellation titles, Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, respectively. I really didn't care for their fancy titles, and truthfully, the scientific explanation of outer space almost ruined my obsession with the magical wonders of the infinite, nocturnal abyss that mysteriously balanced above my head in a dazzling display. While I have forgotten most of what my dad taught me, one piece of trivia remains with me. Did you know that aside from the sun, Sirius is actually the brightest star? Most people mistakenly identify the North Star, otherwise known as Polaris, to be the celestial sky's beacon.

Like stargazers, schools too often train their eyes to focus on what they consider to be the brightest star. The River City school system considers the advanced students to be its North Star,

but by focusing on this one piece, they are overlooking so many other students. I found Sirius in each and every one of my students in this study by broadening my gaze and shifting my focus.

In truth, it really doesn't matter which star superlatively bests the rest, because every single one plays an important role in the night's narrative. The same is true for River City, its students, and every other person in the universe. In one way or another, each ball of glowing gas contributes to the tale of beauty that shines upon all of us from sunrise to sunset. Like the stars that come together to form impressive constellations in the sky, the students of E-3 and I connected and co-constructed a place of infinite promise and change.

### **Introduction**

Academic tracking unfairly divides students into two very different places of learning. In the advanced classrooms at EHS, the instructors focus on building relationships, kindling critical engagement, encouraging, autonomy and spreading empowerment. In EHS' standard classrooms, students suffer through inferior educational practices, such as rote learning, skill-and-drill worksheets, and rarely interact with the instructor. While I would eventually like to see every classroom at EHS detracked, this study began in my own classroom. The purpose of this qualitative critical ethnographic study was somewhat extensive. I began with the following guiding question: What happens when I detrack English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement? To determine the answer, I first explored the ways academic tracking affects the places inside and outside of EHS; and, then I examined the perceptions of academic tracking held by faculty and student participants. Next, I detracked English education for the students enrolled in my 9<sup>th</sup> grade standard English class; and, because the students elected to participate in multiyear placement with me, I also detracked the 10<sup>th</sup> grade standard English curriculum. I used critical literacy practices as approaches to detracking because I consider critical pedagogy liberating and socially just. Over the course of

two years, I observed how students in a detracked classroom make meaningful, personal, and memorable connections.

### **Extending the Theoretical Framework**

Based upon the empirical evidence garnered from this qualitative critical ethnographic case study, I hope to have extended the theoretical foundations on which this research was built. The findings support Freire's notion of critical theory (1970), that argues for the amelioration of the oppressed through liberating practices aimed toward transforming the oppressive state. In this case, I explored the dehumanizing effect academic tracking has on the standard classroom, a place that I considered to be an "oppressive space" in dire need of transformation. While similar studies have analyzed tracking, detracking, critical literacy practices in the classroom, they have not analyzed all three of these components in one study, from the teacher-researcher's point of view, in conjunction with the implementation of multiyear placement, which is generally analyzed at the elementary, not secondary level. This research provided insight into (a) a multiyear teaching approach in a secondary setting; often the studies focus on primary levels; (b) practical classroom applications of critical literacy practices from the teacher-researcher point of view; often the studies explore theoretical assumptions; and, finally, (c) explored what happens once a classroom is detracked, so to speak. While many studies offer suggestions for detracking, very few explore what happens during or after classrooms are detracked.

Regarding Gruenwald's (2003) notion of place as a socially constructed space in which one can transform the self by altering his or her relationship with the environment, I have found that educators must first connect with students inside of the classroom before connecting them to the community beyond the school walls. Detracking English Education with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement can improve the quality of pedagogical practices in the classroom, as well as the relationships between teachers and students; and, it is my hope that by

implementing this necessary first step in place-based educational practices, students who may have felt neglected, such as Andrew and Zora, can begin to see a community in which multiple opportunities exist.

Finally, I consider Casey's (1997) notion of place to be a necessary precursor to a critical pedagogy of place, which, as Gruenewald (2003) notes, "lacks a specific theoretical tradition" (p. 3). Providing a superior education to all students, regardless of track placement, considerably improves classroom ecology. As a result of this study, the place changed and so did, I hope, the students' perceptions—and ultimately—school memories, which they will undoubtedly reflect upon when describing their classroom experiences to future generations.

### **Summary of Findings**

#### **Research Question 1**

The first research question was, what are the implications of academic tracking in River city and Elmsville high school? The study revealed that the practice of academic tracking not only affects the students at EHS, but it also largely influences River City residents. First, it creates division in both places, and this schism starts early. Even though both the faculty and student participants agreed that electing to follow an advanced or standard track is a choice, this is not entirely accurate. While students have the option to choose which track they would like to follow in grades 6-12, they do not have that choice in their primary years. In fact, River City Schools tracks a select group of students into its magnet school program for grades 2-5, and the selection process is less than transparent. The district claims to award invitations to only those who score in the top 5% in response to the following criteria: (a) teacher evaluation; (b) a standardized assessment; and (c) an evaluation of the students' portfolio. Unfortunately, the selection process doesn't appear to be uniform at each elementary school and one elementary teacher that I spoke to couldn't recall specifically how the magnet program selects students.

Based upon the demographics of the elementary schools, it is abundantly clear that the magnet schools structure inequality. Both of River City’s magnet elementary schools, Red Star (RSES) and Yellow Star (YSES), show a higher enrollment of Non-Hispanic White students at 59% and 65%, respectively, than the district’s overall average of 41%. Also, RSES and YSES have fewer students on free and reduced lunch at 48% and 41%, respectively, than the district’s overall average of 56%. Also notable, while not a magnet school, Site F elementary school boasts low student enrollment of 217, and indicates racial and socioeconomic imbalance as compared to the other sites—excluding the magnet schools. With a Non-Hispanic White enrollment at 69%, it possesses the lowest enrollment of minorities among all of the schools in the district. Also, at 35%, Site F has the lowest percentage of students in the district enrolled in free and reduced lunch. With 12 elementary schools, River City needs to combine sites; and, even though Site F should be the first for elimination, residents zoned for this elementary school generally represent multiple generations of River City’s most affluent families. As a result, Site F, in conjunction with the two magnet schools, operate as private schools within a public school district.

Within the walls of these “private” schools, students experience education differently than the rest of their peers. For example, students at the magnet schools participate in the STEM program and are each provided with a laptop. Quite often, the student decides whether he or she will complete assignments in a pencil/paper or online format, and this example of autonomy is not evident in the classrooms at other elementary schools. River City parades around students in the magnet schools as the prize ponies of the district. For example, each year RSES performs a musical at the city’s downtown theater, and the production resembles an off-broadway play. In fact, the school retains a costume designer from New York who spends more than six weeks with

the cast and fashions elaborate garb for the children to wear. Even after the play closes, River City often calls on this elite troupe to perform their most recent play for any of River City's visiting guests—most of whom represent potential business and might just have children of their own, who will likely as future students, arbitrarily receive an invitation to the magnet school.

After receiving years of star treatment, these students, and their parents, constitute a powerful cabal. Entering the 6th grade as celebrities, this academic clique seamlessly transitions into the advanced classrooms, and this track continues through senior graduation and beyond. Because most of the advanced classrooms tout veteran teachers, such as Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry at EHS, I have found that students in these places benefit from experienced instructors, as well as additional time spent with them through multiyear placement. Spending at least two years with a knowledgeable instructor almost guarantees—at least in the cases I observed—access to a superior curriculum centered on building and maintaining relationships, kindling critical engagement, encouraging autonomy, and spreading empowerment.

So, here is the million-dollar question: Who wouldn't want access to a superior education? Why would anyone choose to remain in the standard tracks when they could be treated like kings and queens on an advanced track? According to the eight student participants, only Andrew, Cyrus, and Gene had previously taken an advanced course. Gene confirmed that he took advanced history in the 8th grade; however, Andrew and Cyrus did not specify which course(s) were honors. The remaining five participants' responses shared a similar theme: fear of failure. Julian cited a failure in his grades as the reason he refrains from advanced courses; Shonda felt the work would be overwhelming; Taylor, who is extremely smart, avoids honors courses because she doesn't consider herself "smart enough" to take those classes. I suspect that

if all of these students were extended an invitation to the magnet school at the end of the first grade, they would likely exhibit a higher level of confidence in their abilities.

Unfortunately, when the district labels six- and seven year olds, at the top tier in each school; and, extends a formal invitation into the magnet school, they are largely overlooking a majority of the children. Furthermore, as I reiterated earlier, magnet schools should be open to all students who wish to participate in a more liberal arts and/or STEM curriculum ([magnetschools.org](http://magnetschools.org)); however, River City Schools does not adhere to this policy. As a result, the magnet schools structure inequality among the students from a very early age. Ms. Patton may claim students who do not wish to take advanced classes are “lazy” or “don’t care,” but I found they are protecting their pride. It is fear of failure, not apathy, that keeps these students out of advanced classes; and, this example of cultural and academic hegemony must be scrutinized further.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question was, what happens when I detrack English education for historically underserved students with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement? I found that detracking the classroom requires considerable effort, and from the onset of my study, I experienced many obstacles; however, these did not hamper my determination. In fact, the obstacles provided some much-needed insight into technology and its presence in the classroom. As stated earlier, I initially envisioned a 1:1 program as the solution to student disengagement, and an extensive amount of research supports this premise (CITE); however, I found that students prefer face-to-face conversations and weekly journaling in a composition notebook as opposed to online feeds and posts.

I also found that change of any kind requires flexibility, a lengthy commitment, and the ability to be vulnerable as a teacher. Toward the end of the students’ 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, I realized

that I needed more time because I have found that for some students, like Andrew and Zora, one year of detracking with critical literacy practices is not sufficient for engaging the disengaged. Building trusting and lasting relationships takes time. Andrew resisted and resented change, and he truly did not blossom until the *Speak* unit that we completed during the spring of his sophomore year. Truly, I will never forget the beautiful image of Andrew smiling and standing in the center of my most unforgettable class, the students of E-3, as we all released our shiny star balloons into one of the bluest skies I can remember.

Every child deserves to be a star. Every child deserves a superior education. Every child deserves the most of what we as educators, as humans, can offer—a place of their own to shine.

### **Implications for Practice**

This section examines the study's implications of tracking, detracking, and multiyear placement in the areas of practice and policy. It should be noted that having the opportunity to be the teacher-researcher, as opposed to a transient observer, provided unique insight regarding these topics.

First, I have found that academic tracking not only adversely affects a majority of the students enrolled in the River City School System, it also adversely affects River City itself. Years of structuring academic inequality in the classrooms has created a socioeconomically divided community whose career options seemingly mirror the labels of the tracks: standard and advanced. Much like the problem I observed at EHS where the elite 25% of students in the advanced tracks experience the best of what the school offers and 75% of students in the standard tracks endure mediocrity, the same appears true of the city's industrial opportunities. The city's solo rocket corporation employees engineers, of whom there are few; yet, the city's myriad processing plants, such as the cat food factory, employ a majority of the residents, most of whom earn minimum wage. While not entirely a result of academic tracking, River City's

divisive nature regarding appearance and opportunity does suspiciously mirror its schools' tracking system.

For example, the magnet school program structures inequality and creates two worlds of schooling (Morrell, 2008). The two magnet schools operate as private schools within River City's public school system, which, according to The Magnet Schools of America (2013), negates the spirit of magnet schools because enrollment should be based on student choice, not through a selection process centered on standardized test scores and an arbitrary portfolio system. While all of the faculty and student participants at EHS consider tracking a choice, this is not the case until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, at which point students may choose between standard or advanced content courses. Unfortunately, for the approximately 80% of students left behind or ignored by the magnet schools, this becomes one of their defining moments in the academic world when they are labeled as magnet-school or standard students; or, in the words of veteran AP teacher Ms. Patton, the "haves" or the "have-nots." As the research clearly states, these labels adversely affect students and rarely do they switch tracks (Oakes, 2005). As a result, when the elite magnet school students, already considered advanced because of the elementary schools they attended for grades 2-5, converge with the so-called "have-nots" in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the magnet students largely elect to follow an advanced track from grades 6-12, whereas the standard students largely remain in the standard tracks.

It appears from my study that this separation adversely affects historically underserved students and should be eliminated. Based upon the student participants' responses regarding standard and advanced classes, I have found that fear of failure and a lack of confidence, not apathy, as believed by Ms. Patton, prevents these students from enrolling in an advanced course. I suspect, this seedling of doubt and fear takes root when these students, as first graders, are

denied access to the district's magnet schools, which are essentially the advanced placement classes for children.

### **Eliminate Magnet Schools**

I would like to eliminate the magnet school program in River City. It structures inequality at a very young age; and, if all teachers can focus on building relationships, kindling critical engagement, encouraging autonomy, and spreading empowerment, then why is a magnet program necessary? All education should strive to be magnetizing and every student should have access to a superior education. At the very least, if in the case that the district refuses to eliminate the magnet school program, all students should have the opportunity to attend, regardless of their academic ability, standardized test scores, portfolios, race, creed, gender, and any other discriminating factor. I suspect the district will claim that they do not have the resources to admit every student who wishes to attend, and in this case, RCS should create a lottery to randomly select applicants who are interested in attending the magnet schools. In addition to the lottery, RCS should create a policy explaining the purpose of its magnet schools, outline the curriculum and goals, expound upon how it differs from the other elementary schools, and overall, function as transparently as possible.

The students who do not wish to attend the magnet school, or those whose numbers are not selected during the lottery process, should be provided with the same access to a superior education, including, but not limited to, resources, STEM and fine arts opportunities, and a student-centered curriculum. For example, in addition to the magnet school's yearly play production, each elementary school should also be afforded the same opportunity with matching resources. I have found that when students in a standard classroom are given the same opportunities as those in an advanced classroom, they excel. Which is why, to return to my ultimate desire and first-course plan of action, I advocate eliminating the magnet schools

entirely. If all students are given equal access to a superior education and educators are pairing the curriculum with critical literacy practices, then why is a magnet program necessary? I cannot stress this point enough because I believe that if we can successfully detrack education, we can detrack society.

### **Implement Multiyear Placement (Looping)**

Through this study, I have also found that multiyear placement tremendously improves the academic environment for students. I first became aware of this improvement by watching Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry, two veteran English teachers at EHS, spend two years with all of the students enrolled in advanced English, grades 9-12. At the time, I called this “ping-ponging” students because I was not aware that the practice had a specific term; however, it does and multiyear placement, looping, or “ping-ponging” works. While Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry did not spend two consecutive years with the students, as I did, but rather alternated—Ms. Patton taught them in grades 9 and 11; Mrs. Berry taught them in grades 10 and 12—the advanced students still benefitted. This familiarity between the teacher and students, as well as among the students, benefits all students, regardless of track. My study found what the research supports, which is this practice builds and maintains trusting relationships and boosts students’ confidence and self-efficacy levels (Bellis, 1999; Hanson, 1995; McCown & Sherman, 2002; Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007). Having the same students for grades 9 and 10 provided unique insight into multiyear practice and these findings will add to the scholarly research in this field because there is little data connecting this practice to secondary schools. Multiyear placement provided the students and me with the time we needed to build and maintain lasting, trusting relationships. Without this practice, Andrew and Zora, and perhaps others would, as Mrs. Rowe stated, “fall through the cracks” because one year is not a sufficient amount of time to engage the disengaged

as I found. Ultimately, detracking the classroom with multiyear placement, which I consider to be a critical literacy practice, cemented a foundation on which the students and I built a family.

In conjunction with eliminating magnet schools, I would like for River City to implement multiyear placement for grades 1-12. After kindergarten, all student would spend two consecutive years with teachers. This would create six loops, per se, for students where they would visit the same teacher(s) for grades 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-10, and 11-12. I firmly believe the implementation of multiyear placement with consecutive, two-year increments could benefit every student and provide the modifications our school system so badly needs. Most importantly, a restructuring will not only alter the classroom, but also the community in which we live.

### **Utilize Critical Literacy Practices**

A final implication of my study is that implementing critical literacy practices creates opportunities, choice, and voice for students; this is exemplified in the unit *Speak* where students exhibited components of what Lewinson, Flint & Van Sluys (2002) identify as a critical literacy approach, which include “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting justice” (p. 382). Framing my study in critical theory meant flattening my presence and voice so that the students could be seen, in control, and most importantly, heard. Over the course of two years, I witnessed a transformation of Andrew, who entered the class as resistant and disengaged, but emerged on the other side of his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year as enthusiastic and engaged. He credits our poetry and our weekly conversations as the two components that “changed him.” He now writes poetry for friends and those who need “to heal.” I also observed Zora, who claimed to have no confidence during her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, open up, speak, and gain confidence—so much so that she now spends a portion of her day in the main office at EHS, greeting visitors. In all, encouraging students to

adapt the curriculum and take control of their learning inspired a collaboration of ideas and a democracy of voices that I have not witnessed before in my 12 years of teaching.

My study shows that River City's current policies and practices regarding academic tracking and the magnet schools, benefit the elite few instead of the student majority. The magnet schools structure inequality; and should be eliminated; however, multiyear placement benefits all students and should be implemented in grades 1-12. Finally, students excel when given access to a superior education, which focuses on building relationships, kindling critical engagement, encouraging autonomy, and spreading empowerment.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and Studies**

After conducting my study and reviewing the findings, I believe there are multiple possibilities for future research and studies, and I hope to encourage others to help historically underserved students by expanding upon my research interests of detracking programs and practices that structure inequality and implementing multiyear placement at the secondary level.

One expansion of my study would be to research the history of magnet schools and the policies that supported the implementation of these alternative educational spaces. An investigation into their origins, as well as the historical climate that prompted their existence, might reveal a drastic departure from the original vision of magnet schools.

Another expansion could be to investigate detracking with multiyear placement at the secondary level in other content areas. As someone who struggled immensely in mathematics and only excelled one year of high school because I loved my teacher, I wonder if I could have improved upon my skills had I spent two years with my favorite mathematics teacher. My study focused only on the effects of detracking and multiyear placement in English 9 and 10 for one group of students, but this case study should be expanded to examine all core classes at the secondary level and throughout the entire school district.

I would also suggest research into the alternating multiyear placement practiced by Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry. Under this plan, the group of students would have teacher A for, let's say, Algebra, teacher B for Algebra II, teacher A for Geometry, and teacher B for Calculus. The goal is to create a more familiar environment between the students themselves, as well as the teacher. By expanding the research, we can determine if the familiar environment I found can be reproduced in other core classes, as well as in the elementary levels. How do children respond to multiyear placement? Does multiyear placement create a safe and secure environment for academic success? With multiyear placement, will the faculty practices change over time? Just as Ms. Patton and Mrs. Berry did, would teachers reorganize their lesson plans knowing they will have two years to teach the student? Would teachers collaborate with each other to determine how to best engage the students? I would be excited to see a school district implement multiyear placement for grades 1-12.

Another expansion could be to analyze the effects of a hybridized curriculum combining critical and digital literacy practices, in conjunction with multiyear placement. Through this case study, I would like to explore school schedules and possibly restructure what most schools consider a full day. Hybridizing the curriculum could create flex days in which students would not need to attend school for face-to-face interaction and could instead, possibly intern or volunteer in a field of their choosing. How would this affect their engagement levels? Could this reduce the amount of years students may need to attend college, if that is the plan? Would this reduce chronic absenteeism or discipline issues?

I had hoped to tackle these future research topics when I started my dissertation. While River City allowed me to implement multiyear placement in my subject, they did not appear willing to expand into other subjects or grades. I also attempted to create a 1:1 program with a

hybridized curriculum at River City, but the infrastructure was not in place at the time of my study.

### **Conclusion**

This study adds to the scholarly field of literature in the following ways:

- It provides practical classroom applications of critical literacy practices from the teacher researcher point of view; often the studies explore theoretical assumptions.
- It provides multiple suggestions for implementing critical literacies in the classroom; often studies only provide one classroom application.
- It explores what happens once a classroom is detracked and spans over the course of two years. While many studies offer suggestions for detracking, very few explore what happens during or after classrooms are detracked.
- It explores a multiyear teaching approach in a secondary setting; often the studies focus on primary levels.

Based upon my experiences throughout this study aimed at providing engaging, meaningful, and authentic instruction for historically underserved students in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English/language arts classroom, as well as the amalgamation of data collected, I have found that detracking the classroom with critical literacy practices and multiyear placement provides students with a superior education. To encourage, build, and nurture critical democracy in any space, teachers must focus on building relationships, kindling critical engagement, encouraging autonomy, and spreading empowerment. The rest, as they say, will all fall into place.

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APPENDIX A:  
PERMISSIONS

 SCHOOLS

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*Office of the Superintendent*

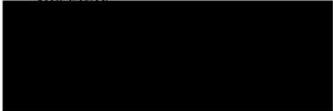
TELEPHONE   
FAX   
Email: 

November 24, 2015

Office for Research Compliance  
The University of Alabama  
358 Rose Administration Building  
801 University Boulevard  
Box 870127  
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487

To whom it may concern:

I am writing on behalf of Charly Kusta's IRB Protocol 7362. Ms. Kusta is one of our English teachers at Austin High School. I am aware of her research regarding Literacy and Tracking in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English/language arts classroom and that she will be conducting the study at  School in her classroom. She has my permission to perform this research.

Sincerely,  


Superintendent  
Decatur City Schools



Principal



*School*



Assistant Principals

November 13, 2015

Office for Research Compliance  
The University of Alabama  
358 Rose Administration Building  
801 University Boulevard  
Box 870127  
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487

To whom it may concern:

I am writing on behalf of Charly Kusta's IRB Protocol. Charly is one of our English teachers at [REDACTED] I am her principal. I am aware of her research regarding Literacy and Tracking that she will be conducting at our school. She has my permission to perform this research.

Sincerely,



APPENDIX B:  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA<sup>®</sup> | Office of the Vice President for  
Research & Economic Development  
Office for Research Compliance

September 27, 2018

Charly Kusta  
Department of Curriculum & Instruction  
College of Education  
The University of Alabama  
Box 870232

Re: IRB # 15-OR-399-R3 "Literacy and Tracking in the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English/Language Arts Classroom"

Dear Ms. Kusta:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your renewal application. Your renewal application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Your application will expire on September 26, 2019. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Study Closure Form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Director & Research Compliance Officer  
Office for Research Compliance

358 Rose Administration Building | Box 870127 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127  
205-348-8461 | Fax 205-348-7189 | Toll Free 1-877-820-3066

APPENDIX C:  
INFORMED ASSENT LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

**Informed Assent for a Research Study**

Dear Student,

I am your English 9 teacher and a student at The University of Alabama. I am doing a study in the English 9 classroom to find out how teaching English in a new way engages students. This study is important because I will learn how teachers can make the classroom better for learning.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are in this English 9 class. Your parents know that I am asking you to be in this study. It is OK with them. I am asking the 23 other students in this class to be in this study, as well as 23 parents, and 10 teachers and/or principals. In total, 56 people will be in this study.

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

1. Do class assignments.
2. Answer interview questions.
3. Be audio taped during class.

The tapes will be typed up after the meeting but no names will be used. The tapes will be destroyed as soon as the typed record is made. If you do not want to do any of the above, you should not be in this study. This study will be done during class time or as part of the homework I expect you to do during two nine week terms.

You will not be paid for being in this study and there will be no cost for you or your parents.

You are a volunteer. You are helping me but you do not have to unless you want to. This is your free choice. If you start the study and decide you don't want to continue, just let me know. No one will be mad at you. There will be no bad treatment and it will not affect your grades if you decide to not participate or drop out of the study.

I do not think there are any risks or harm to you in this study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Charly Kusta, at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You can also ask your parents if you wish. If you have questions or complaints about your rights as a research participant, call [REDACTED]. You may also ask questions, make a suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at [http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO\\_Welcome.html](http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html). After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online there, or you may ask the researcher for a copy of it. You may also email us at [participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu](mailto:participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu).

If you agree to be in this study, please sign your name on this letter below. You can have a copy of the letter to keep.

Thank you very much for your interest.

Sincerely,

Charly Porter Kusta

| Check if you agree | Description of Participation                      |
|--------------------|---|
|                    | I can make copies of your classwork for my study. |
|                    | I can interview you before or after school.       |
|                    | I can audiotape you while you learn.              |

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX D:  
INFORMED CONSENT LETTERS

1

**UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA  
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM**

**Informed Consent for a Non-Medical Study**

**Study title: Literacy and Tracking in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English/language arts Classroom**

**Investigator's Charly Porter Kusta, English teacher, UA Graduate**

You and your child are being asked to take part in a research study.

This study is called Literacy and Tracking in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English/language arts Classroom. The study is being done by Charly Porter Kusta, who is graduate student at the University of Alabama. Mrs. Kusta is being supervised by Professor [REDACTED] who is a professor of Education at the University of Alabama.

**What is this study about? What is the investigator trying to learn?**

This study is being done to learn about new ways in which to teach English 9.

**Why is this study important or useful?**

This knowledge is important/useful because engaging teaching practices must be incorporated into the classroom to help students learn. The results of this study will help teachers understand better ways to help students.

**Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been asked to be in this study because you are a student or parent of a student at this school.

**How many people will be in this study?**

About 56 other people will be in this study. *(Give an estimated sample size.)*

**What will I be asked to do in this study?**

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

Participate in short interviews  
Allow the interviews to be transcribed  
Allow me to use classroom assignments as data

**How much time will I spend being this study?**

Each interview should take about 30 minutes, 90 minutes for all three interviews. The entire study will take about 50 hours of the student's time over the course of 18 weeks. Of course, this time is also time they will spend in the English 9 classroom. Each interview for parents should take about 30 minutes, 90 minutes for all three interviews.

**Will being in this study cost me anything?**

The only cost to you from this study is your time.

**Will I be compensated for being in this study?**

You will not be compensated for being in this study.

**Can the investigator take me out of this study**

The investigator may take you out of the study if she feels that the study is upsetting you.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

There are no foreseeable risks for you in this study, but there are reasons you may not want to participate. For example, you might not want me to analyze your work for publication purposes; you might not have the time to consent to an interview. Participants' identities will be kept confidential by using a pseudonym of your choice. All data and artifacts will be stored until no longer needed in the locked school office of Charly Kusta (room E3) in locked cabinets. When the data are no longer needed, they will be destroyed.

**What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?**

Although you will not benefit personally from being in the study, you may feel good about knowing that you have helped teachers improve instruction for future students.

**What are the benefits to science or society?**

This study will help high school teachers to be more helpful to students.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Participants will be interviewed in a private room or a site of their own choosing and will be told in advance what they will be asked about. Sample questions will be as follows: What do you like about learning with computers? How do you learn best? You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

Participants' identities will be kept confidential by using a pseudonym of your choice. All data and artifacts will be stored until no longer needed in the locked school office of Charly Kusta (room E3) in locked cabinets. When the data are no longer needed, they will be destroyed.

**What are the alternatives to being in this study? Do I have other choices?**

The alternative to being in this study is not to participate.

**What are my rights as a participant in this study?**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with Austin High School, Mrs. Kusta, or The University of Alabama. There will be no repercussions/bad treatment/affect on grades for non-participation or for dropping out of participation.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board ("the IRB") is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

**Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please call the investigator Charly Kusta at [REDACTED].

If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call [REDACTED], the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at [REDACTED] or toll-free at [REDACTED].

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at [http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO\\_Welcome.html](http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html) or email the Research Compliance office at [participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu](mailto:participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu).

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. I agree to take part in it.

I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's name Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator Date

**UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA  
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM**

**Informed Consent for a Non-Medical Study**

**Study title: Literacy and Tracking in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English/language arts Classroom**

**Investigator's Charly Porter Kusta, English teacher, UA Graduate**

You are being asked to take part in a research study.

This study is called Literacy and Tracking in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English/language arts Classroom. The study is being done by Charly Porter Kusta, who is graduate student at the University of Alabama. Mrs. Kusta is being supervised by Professor [REDACTED] who is a professor of Education at the University of Alabama.

**What is this study about? What is the investigator trying to learn?**

This study is being done to learn about new ways in which to teach English 9.

**Why is this study important or useful?**

This knowledge is important/useful because engaging teaching practices must be incorporated into the classroom to help students learn. The results of this study will help teachers understand better ways to help students.

**Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been asked to be in this study because you are a teacher at this school.

**How many people will be in this study?**

About 56 other people will be in this study.

**What will I be asked to do in this study?**

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

Participate in short interviews  
Allow the interviews to be transcribed

**How much time will I spend being this study?**

Each interview should take about 30 minutes, 90 minutes for all three interviews. The entire study will take about 1.5 hours of the teacher's time over the course of 18 weeks.

**Will being in this study cost me anything?**

The only cost to you from this study is your time.

**Will I be compensated for being in this study?**

You will not be compensated for being in this study.

**Can the investigator take me out of this study**

The investigator may take you out of the study if she feels that the study is upsetting you.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

There are no foreseeable risks for you in this study, but there are reasons you may not want to participate. For example, you might not have the time to consent to an interview. Participants' identities will be kept confidential by using a pseudonym of your choice. All data and artifacts will be stored until no longer needed in the locked school office of Charly Kusta (room E3) in locked cabinets. When the data are no longer needed, they will be destroyed.

**What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?**

Although you will not benefit personally from being in the study, you may feel good about knowing that you have helped other teachers improve instruction for future students.

**What are the benefits to science or society?**

This study will help high school teachers to be more helpful to students.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Participants will be interviewed in a private room or a site of their own choosing and will be told in advance what they will be asked about. Sample questions will be as follows: What are the pros/cons of multimodal instruction? What are the pros/cons of tracking? What are the pros/cons of hybrid instruction? You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

Participants' identities will be kept confidential by using a pseudonym of your choice. All data and artifacts will be stored until no longer needed in the locked school office of Charly Kusta (room E3) in locked cabinets. When the data are no longer needed, they will be destroyed.

**What are the alternatives to being in this study? Do I have other choices?**

The alternative to being in this study is not to participate.

**What are my rights as a participant in this study?**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with Austin High School, Mrs. Kusta, or The University of Alabama. There will be no repercussions/bad treatment for non-participation or for dropping out of participation.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board ("the IRB") is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

**Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please call the investigator Charly Kusta at [REDACTED].

If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call [REDACTED] the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at [REDACTED] or toll-free at [REDACTED].

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at [http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO\\_Welcome.html](http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html) or email the Research Compliance office at [participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu](mailto:participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu).

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. I agree to take part in it.

I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX E:  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Students**

1. What English class did you take last year?
2. What novels did you read?
3. How do you learn best?
4. Do you like writing in paper/pencil or typing on a computer? Why
5. Do you read books online or do you prefer a hard copy?
6. Do you feel challenged in your current classes?
7. How do you like for teachers to instruct? For example, do you prefer face-to-face lectures, online lectures, no lectures?
8. Which novels do you like best?
9. Should social media be used in the classroom? Why or Why not?
10. What are your favorite apps?
11. What are your favorite educational apps?
12. Do you own a computer? If so, what kind?
13. Do you own a smart phone? If so, what kind?
14. How can school help you with the real world?
15. Do you feel that your voice is heard in the classroom? Would you share more if you could use social media in the classroom?

**Parents**

1. Do you think your child is challenged in his or her academic classes?
2. What type of teaching style do you think your child prefers?
3. How much time does your child spend online?
4. Do you own a computer in the home? How many?
5. What educational apps do you use to help your child?
6. How much time does your child spend on homework each evening?
7. How often does your child spend reading novels, magazines, short stories, comic books, etc.?
8. What are some pros/cons to the 8 hour school day?
9. What are some pros/cons to online instruction?
10. What are pros/cons for enrolling your child in honors courses?

**Teachers**

1. If available, would you use computers in your classroom as part of your instruction?
2. What are the pros/cons of multimodal literacy?
3. What are the pros/cons of traditional teaching?

4. What are the pros/cons of hybrid instruction?
5. What are the pros/cons of allowing students to use smart phones in the classroom?
6. What are the pros/cons of tracking?
7. Should tracking be eliminated? Why or why not?
8. How does your instruction differ based upon the classes you teach? (Grade-level, Honors, AP, etc.)
9. What education apps do you use to support your instruction?
10. How are students' voices represented in the classroom?

**Principals**

1. If available, would you use computers in your school as part of the instructional plan?
2. What are the pros/cons of multimodal literacy?
3. What are the pros/cons of traditional teaching?
4. What are the pros/cons of hybrid instruction?
5. What are the pros/cons of allowing students to use smart phones in the classroom?
6. What are the pros/cons of tracking?
7. Should tracking be eliminated? Why or why not?
8. How does instruction differ based upon the classes? (Grade-level, Honors, AP, etc.)
9. What education apps do you use to support your teachers' instruction?
10. How are students' voices represented in the classroom?

APPENDIX F:  
JOURNAL PROMPTS

| Journal prompt                 | Description  | Link (if applicable)  |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| My first days at EHS           | Students share their experiences as new students at EHS.   |   |
| Teen interview with Dr. Carson | Students reflect upon Dr. Ben Carson’s message about his experiences with education.   | <a href="#"><u>Teen Interviews Dr. Ben Carson: You Have a Brain</u></a>                 |
| Who inspires you               | Students share with me who inspires them most in their life after listening to the motivational words of Robby Novak, famously known as “Kid President.” | <a href="#"><u>Kid President Inspires Teenagers Be Amazing</u></a>                      |
| “Mr. Wendall”                  | Students consider an outsider’s point of view reflect upon each person’s story   | <a href="#"><u>Arrested Development: Mr. Wendal</u></a>                                 |
| Dick and Rick Hoyt             | Students watch the touching tale of a father and son determined to succeed regardless of the obstacles they face.  | <a href="#"><u>Dick and Rick Hoyt</u></a>   |
| Choral poetry                  | Students construct their “Where I’m From” poem after listening to three brave teenagers share their historical, cultural, and personal backgrounds.      | <a href="#"><u>Changing the World, One Word at a Time!   The Queen Latifah Show</u></a> |
| Button poetry                  | Students write their “I Am” poem after considering perspective and voice.  | <a href="#"><u>Darius Simpson &amp; Scout Bostley: "Lost Voices" (CUPSI 2015)</u></a>   |
| “I am Malala”                  | Students see the many faces of courage and listen to Malala Yousafzai’s inspiring story detailing her fight for the right to receive an education.       | <a href="#"><u>The Incomparable Malala Yousafzai</u></a>                                |
| Kid president                  | Students receive a boost of confidence from Kid President.   | <a href="#"><u>A Pep Talk from Kid President to You</u></a>                             |

| Journal prompt  | Description   | Link (if applicable)   |
|---|---|--|
| What frightens you most                                 | Students learn to face their fears, learn from them, and move on.   | <a href="#"><u>FEAR: Motivational Video</u></a>  |
| Dear Abby   | Students share their concerns with me about life in general.  | <a href="#"><u>“Dear Abby” talks about her big break</u></a>   |
| NY resolutions  | Students outline three goals to focus on in the new year.   |  |
| Under pressure  | Students address what pressures they face as teenagers.   | <a href="#"><u>Queen &amp; David Bowie: Under Pressure (Classic Queen Mix)</u></a>                               |
| Can you live without your parents?                      | Students contemplate a life on their own without parents meddling in their affairs.                         | <a href="#"><u>Taylor Swift: Love Story</u></a>  |
| Being a teenager  | Students tell me what it’s like to be a teenager today.   |  |
| How can you be visible in a positive way?               | Students focus on how they can positively influence others through their actions.                           | <a href="#"><u>Getting stuck in the negatives (and how to get unstuck)   Alison Ledgerwood   TEDxUCDavis</u></a> |
| When are you happiest?                                  | Students share with me what makes them happiest.  |  |
| How do you see the world?                               | Students use imagery to describe what they see inside their homes on a daily basis.                         | <a href="#"><u>How To Change The World (a work in progress)   Kid President</u></a>                              |
| Are you the same person online as you are face to face? | Students consider if they exhibit the same identity in online spaces as they do in face-to-face encounters. | <a href="#"><u>Susan Pinker: Face-to-face vs. online communication</u></a>                                       |
| Five things you should say more often                   | Students share with each other what they should say more in an effort to make the world a better place.     | <a href="#"><u>Kid President's 20 Things We Should Say More Often</u></a>  |