Creating Transformational Spaces: High School Book Clubs with Inner-City Adolescent Females

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Transformation is the act of changing in form, nature or character. It is the process in which we learn something new or are so affected by an event or a conversation that our own selves are no longer the same. Many experiences can cause this transformation: a loss, a tragedy, or an interaction with a friend, loved one or stranger. Transformation can also occur through watching a movie, seeing a play or reading a powerful book. As teachers and administrators, we continually hope that our students' lives are transformed through the power of education. Yet oftentimes, transformation may seem somewhat unattainable due to the increasing pressures and obstacles that are not under our control. Whether situated within the schools themselves, in the surrounding environments, or in the homes of our youths, these hurdles may seem insurmountable and overwhelming. The purpose of this article is to explore how we can create transformative spaces for young adults, and where we can enhance young adults' academic and social and emotional development simultaneously through the unique space of a book club. In highlighting the voices of 12 Latina and African-American inner-city high school girls, I work to demonstrate how a book club provides a forum where affective and cognitive development cannot be separated, in that these two processes are inseparable and enhance one another. In essence, this study is about efficiency and transformation, where educators can work to promote literacy while also addressing students' social and emotional issues.

A Call for Book Clubs: Understanding the Need for Transformative Spaces

Adolescence is a difficult, transitional period that can be saturated with turbulence and emotional upheaval. Not only are young adults experiencing physical changes, but they are going through changes in their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral systems (Allen & Land, 1999). Adolescents start to see increases in the differentiation of self and the other, often beginning to establish autonomy, thus developing a consistent view of their identities. They also may find themselves dealing with more complex problems related to adulthood, often
resulting in heightened susceptibility to mental health problems and to such issues as peer pressure, drugs, alcohol, low self-esteem, and sexual activity (Doll & Doll, 1997). Unfortunately, due to pressures of standardized testing and covering mandated curricula and lack of resources for emotional and social work, many of our students grapple with their problems in isolation which often affects their performance in school and their interactions with others. Thus, it is one of my goals to reveal how the girls in a book club used these spaces to understand and deal with their own struggles with identity, family, and peer relationships. As will be discussed in the following analysis through conversations about texts and the girls' connections to the characters and each other, I will provide evidence of how the girls discussed these complex issues with one another, so as to transform their own current, lived experiences.

It is my other goal to demonstrate how the girls not only worked on their emotional and social issues, but also their academic development. The books the girls self-selected and read primarily were chosen because of the problems they were dealing with at the time of the study—issues surrounding their identities, their families, and their peers. Based on extensive analysis, these are the three topics about which the girls talked about most frequently. Yet, the catalysts for these topics were the books themselves. Through reading the texts and through conversations with one another, the girls also worked to transform their academic development as well—specifically in the area of literacy.

Nationwide, concern has surfaced around addressing the literacy needs of secondary education students, as often youth struggle to access a variety of complex texts that are required in the classroom (Alvermann, 2001; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). The National Endowment for the Arts (2004) reported that youth reading has fallen steadily over the past 20 years. Yancey (2004) found that students are spending an average of 78 minutes for every 12 hours of watching television. Within our inner-city schools in particular, students trail behind their suburban counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Fine, 1991), specifically in dropout and suspension rates, standardized test scores, and college eligibility indexes (Fine, 1991; Morrell, 2004). Morrell (2004) attributes these problems to urban students' feelings of alienation and disempowerment due to traditional curricula, pedagogical practices, and culturally irrelevant texts (Morrell, 2004). Because of these issues, researchers argue for increased studies on diverse, underrepresented populations and how educators can enhance their personal and academic successes (Delpit, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Based on the preceding research on cognitive development, particularly for inner-city students, alternative and innovative resources and support systems are necessary if we are to effectively meet their needs. The achievement gap must be closed so that all students' needs are addressed, thus creating multiple entry points and interventions for academic success and social and emotional well-being so that our school systems are more equitable.

**Conceptual Framework**

In order to represent and establish a theoretical and research foundation for my argument of the transformative nature of book clubs and their effects on reading and social and emotional development, it is essential to visually demonstrate how the process is enacted (Figure 1) and then explain how each piece of this process is supported by various research studies and theoretical dimensions. In subsequent sections of my data analysis, these pieces of my framework (transaction and interaction) will be highlighted in order to demonstrate the multitude of outcomes that occurred, according to what the girls discussed during book clubs and then later reported in their interviews at the end of the year. The data analysis section of this study will provide evidence of the girls' progress in reading and identity development; and personal and social growth, particularly as it is understood within their family and peer networks.

Based on the framework above, book clubs are defined as small, collaborative groups whose purpose is to enhance literacy and personal and social growth. The first step is through transaction, when readers individually engage
with texts, thus impacting their literacy through efferent processes of meaning construction. Equally important are the aesthetic responses, when students connect their own experiences to the texts in order to better understand themselves and others. This transaction however does not become transformative until these individual responses are articulated with and to others—thus the importance of book clubs, where participants share, negotiate and ultimately transform their understanding of the texts, themselves and the world. The argument here is two-fold: one, we cannot separate the efferent; and aesthetic responses during book clubs and, two, the unique nature of book clubs allows for a transformative experience that ultimately affects the individual readers cognitively and affectively.

Understanding Transaction: Reader Response and Personal Growth Models

The first process within this conceptual framework is the individual transaction between reader and text. Rosenblatt (1978, 1995) defined transaction as the point where reader and text meet and meaning construction occurs. Her reader response theory encompassed two purposes for reading: efferent and aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1978). During the efferent process, readers are driven by the need to comprehend the text and acquire information, whereas the aesthetic process is unique in that meaning construction is different based on the readers’ lived experiences. In the ensuing analysis, the girls demonstrate several efferent processes, specifically as they work to clarify what occurred in the text in order to increase their comprehension and interpretation of the novels that were read. In addition, it is the aesthetic responses that demonstrate how the girls used the books themselves in their own social and emotional development. It was the situations and the characters within the texts that provided them with the catalyst to begin addressing their own lives. Rosenblatt (1978, 1995) argued that this aesthetic transaction affects and enlarges readers’ emotional capacity and maturity, where both cognitive and affective development is enhanced. Rosenblatt’s theories have been extended through theories of personal growth models, where educators argued that the purpose of education and literature is to enhance students’ literacy along with their social and emotional growth (Dixon, 1967; Bleich, 1975). Specifically, Holland (1980) explained that students should use literature not just for literacy development but also in order to symbolize and represent themselves. More recently, Beach (1993), Probst (2004), and Wilhelm (1997) extended reader response theories and personal growth models studying the impact of experiential responses where literature is used to help students in identity construction. These responses will be realized and understood within the results section of this study.

Understanding Interaction: Book Clubs and Social Constructivism

While individual transactions can enhance literacy and social and emotional development, the transformative potential is more fully possible through dialogue and social constructivism. Using the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Au (1998), this framework is further grounded in the idea that textual interpretations and understanding of the self and the world is enhanced through conversation. It is the collaborative
quality of a book club that allows for a transformational experience in affective and cognitive growth. While the girls individually enacted different efferent and aesthetic responses, the conversations allowed for transformation, when they discussed with each other how their own lives intersected with those in the texts—and more importantly with each other. These exchanges are highlighted in the data analysis section, particularly as the girls addressed issues surrounding their families and peers. While certainly the girls' experiences were very distinct from one another, they had one commonality: the text. Reading in isolation may cause one kind of transformation, unique to the particular girl in the study; however, it is the conversation that allows for a more global transformation, where each girl reveals her own connection to the text. In the ensuing analysis, these conversations are revealed, as the girls share with one another their individual stories and then later work to merge these narratives so as to understand their lives, their friends, their families, and their communities.

Theorists in social constructivism believe that textual meaning and connection is best constructed in collaborative forums. Specifically within the field of literacy, social constructivists put emphasis on both motivations and emotions, exploring cognitive, strategic, and affective dimensions of literacy (Au, 1998). In fact, many propose that school systems will not close the achievement gap in literacy until they begin to develop more constructivist approaches in literacy (Cummins, 1986; Au, 1998). Cummins (1986) and Au (1998) argue for a constructivist framework for literacy so that students are more empowered—in that their cultural identity is central to their literacy learning experiences and growth. In this way, literacy is enhanced through collaboration within an environment that recognizes and uses students' cultural contexts. Three ways in which book clubs meet this social constructivist framework is through student ownership, instructional materials, and methods. First, students gain ownership in that book clubs are student-centered and student-led. Secondly, the instructional materials that are used within in this study match the participants' diverse cultural backgrounds. Finally, the methods for the study are collaborative and infused with authentic literacy practices.

Several evidence-based studies have been conducted to demonstrate the effectiveness of this social constructivist approach within book clubs—specifically for literacy and social and emotional development. Daniels (2002) found that book clubs expanded discourse opportunities, increased multicultural awareness, and promoted perspectives on social issues and gender equity. Other forerunners found that book clubs helped prepare students to live in diverse societies (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001), assisted adolescent prisoners with emotional development (Hill & VanHorn, 1995), promoted literacy and increased interactions between urban and suburban students (Appleman, 2006), assisted adolescent females in their sense of agency (Smith, 2000), and enhanced Latinas' understanding of themselves (Broughton, 2002). Ultimately, this study adds to this burgeoning research on book clubs and how these forums can be used to enhance both academic achievement and social and emotional growth. What I argue here, however, is that these cognitive and affective developments are intertwined, inseparable, and transformative. Through the girls' voices, we hear not only what they said during the book clubs, but how they reflected on their own growth after this one-year experience.

Context and Participants
This research study was conducted in a small, progressive high school in the Northeast. At the time of data collection, the population was 55% Latino and 35% African-American, with 68% qualifying for free lunch. After one month of recruitment efforts (which included visiting all English classrooms in the school and posting flyers in the hallways), a total of 20 students volunteered to participate. It should be noted that I met with three book clubs total, one which consisted of freshmen and sophomore girls, one of all junior girls, and one co-ed group with students at all grade levels. For the purpose of this study, I will specifically highlight the two all-girls groups, as the dynamics and content of the conversations of the co-ed group were much different than the others. All students self-selected their own
groups (based on age, familiarity with one another, and interests) when I held two informational meetings, one after school and one during lunch. The younger group of girls consisted of two African-American 9th graders, two Latina 9th graders, and one African-American 10th grader; the second group consisted of 11th grade girls—two African American and five Latinas. The following Tables 1 and 2 will provide an overview of both book groups and includes information collected during the initial interviews with the girls:

**Role of the Researcher**

During the time of data collection, I was a literacy coach for the school. As a coach, my role was to mentor teachers in ways they could improve their literacy instruction. Because I was constantly in classrooms, most students were familiar with me. In addition to being a researcher, collecting and analyzing data, my responsibilities included that of organizer and facilitator. As the organizer, I made arrangements for locations and times and worked on funding for the texts. As a facilitator, my task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age—Grade</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Self-Descriptors Based on Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>Age 14—Grade 9</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Parents married</td>
<td>The talker, reader, “boy crazy”, “unpredictable”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Age 14—Grade 9</td>
<td>Columbian/Peruvian</td>
<td>Parents married</td>
<td>Quiet artist, “day dreamer,” reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fay</td>
<td>Age 14—Grade 9</td>
<td>Trinidadian</td>
<td>Single father, Mother deceased</td>
<td>Quiet, fun, reader, artist, singer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>Age 14—Grade 9</td>
<td>Ecuadorian Cuban</td>
<td>Parents married</td>
<td>Fun, “perpetual dieter,” volunteer, reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betsy</td>
<td>Age 16—Grade 10</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Single father, Mother deceased</td>
<td>“Loner,” poet, “not afraid to speak my mind”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Younger Group Participant Descriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age—Grade</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Descriptors Based on Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>Age 16—Grade 11</td>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>Parents divorced, lives with mother, father in the DR</td>
<td>The talker, the reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Age 16—Grade 11</td>
<td>African-American &amp; Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Parents divorced, lives with mother</td>
<td>The writer, the reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>Age 16—Grade 11</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Parents divorced, lives with mother</td>
<td>Confident and silly, fashion designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eileen</td>
<td>Age 17—Grade 11</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Parents never married, lives with mother</td>
<td>Singer and dancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>Age 16—Grade 11</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Parents married</td>
<td>Quiet and sweet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoana</td>
<td>Age 16—Grade 11</td>
<td>Ecuadorian</td>
<td>Father deceased, lives with mother</td>
<td>The comedian, the “Bad Girl”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>Age 17—Grade 11</td>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>Parents divorced, lives with father, mother in the DR</td>
<td>Fun, “Family Girl”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creating Transformational Spaces

was to provide a safe atmosphere with a consistent structure. This safe space allowed me to listen and work to create a forum that was nurturing, confidential, and encouraging. To accomplish this goal, it was first imperative for me to recognize and affirm the girls’ linguistic and cultural diversity. This stance came through understanding and reflecting on who I was as a white woman and through listening to the girls and asking them questions about their backgrounds. I also worked to establish a non-authoritative rapport with the girls. As an adult, a researcher, and a member of a dominant racial group, a power differential inherently existed. Therefore, I had to be aware that my contributions to the discussions could be defined as oppressive or exploitative (Henderson, 1998; Ladner 1987). I tried as much as possible to counteract this stance by primarily listening and responding in non-judgmental ways. Despite our differences, I empathized with them in genuine ways by remaining silent and not intruding on their stories—only commenting when my opinion was requested (Crozier, 2003).

While I certainly made every effort to deflate my own hierarchy and power as an adult white woman, moments occurred when I had to relinquish this passive role in order to enforce equality among the group. In this way, the only time I used my authority was to ensure that everyone’s voice was heard. Sometimes I stopped the girls when they talked over one another or when someone had not talked for awhile, eliciting responses from the quieter girls. In terms of asking questions, the girls came to group prepared with discussion starters, yet I asked questions too. I tried to limit my participation as much as possible but when necessary I asked the following questions: How did you like the book? What do you mean when you say that? How does it relate to your own life? What can we learn from this text?

**Book Club Process and Selection of Texts**
The two book clubs met separately, with the younger group meeting after school and the older group meeting during lunch. The girls met for approximately 45 minutes, discussing the texts and how they related to them. In the initial weeks of the book club, I always came prepared with an agenda for the girls. We began our first few minutes of the meetings checking in on any personal issues. The girls and I asked each other how the week had been and inquired on any new events in their lives. These conversations were essential in warming up the group for future textual discussions. Often we could not immediately begin talking about the book, if, for example, a break-up with a boyfriend had occurred or a major exam was coming up. Once the girls exhausted these conversations, we generally went straight to the content of the novels. I always came prepared with my own copy of the text, highlighted with potential passages to discuss or questions to ask. However, the girls did the same. I constantly provided them with post-it notes where they marked sections they wanted to share. Usually, conversations began with the more vocal girls, but we all—especially me as I stated earlier—made sure that the quieter girls contributed as well. Finally, the last five minutes of the book club was devoted to agreeing on how much to read for the upcoming week. The only times when book club strayed from this agenda was the first day of a new book, when the girls and I brought in stacks of novels that we were interested in reading. We then voted on our text and then I or one of the girls read the first few pages together for later discussion.

In terms of text selection, the girls brought suggestions, or as a group we visited the school library to find texts that intrigued them. All of the texts were young adult literature, as they seemed to best match the girls’ literacy levels and interests. It should be stressed that I felt strongly that the girls selected the books on their own. This not only provided them with ownership of the book clubs, but allowed them to choose topics that were of interest to them. Primarily, the girls selected books with female protagonists who were either dealing with family or peer relationship issues—all concerns that the girls themselves faced the year we met together. The following table provides a list of the books read, including the multitude of issues that were discussed (Table 3).

**Data Collection and Analysis**
Qualitative data were collected from many sources, including observations, interviews, book club discussions, and surveys. Pre-interviews were conducted with all 12 girls in order to document familial, school, and
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Table 3: Young Adult Literature Read and Issues Discussed by Both Book Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Issues Discussed by the Girls during Book Clubs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speak</td>
<td>Anderson (1999)</td>
<td>Girlfriends, cliques, being yourself, boys, sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forever</td>
<td>Blume (1996)</td>
<td>Sex, romantic love, being female, parents, sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiger Eyes</td>
<td>Blume (1982)</td>
<td>Family conflict, parents, rape/sexual harassment, being female, coping, boys, girl fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants</td>
<td>Brahares (2003)</td>
<td>Parents, extended family, being female, boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>Buckhanon (2006)</td>
<td>Girlfriends, boys, sex, self-esteem, being female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainbow Jordan</td>
<td>Childress (1997)</td>
<td>Boys, sex, girlfriends, fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason and Kyra.</td>
<td>Davidson (2005)</td>
<td>Sex, boys, girlfriends, self-esteem, love, parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Girl</td>
<td>Ewing (1999)</td>
<td>Mothers, loss, sex, pregnancy, boys, being female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Meaning of Cleavage</td>
<td>Fredericks (2004)</td>
<td>Girlfriends, girl fighting, being female, dating, sex, boys, romantic love, parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things</td>
<td>Mackler (2003)</td>
<td>Weight, siblings, coping, boys, girlfriends, bullying, parents, being female, self-esteem, being yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut</td>
<td>McCormick (2002)</td>
<td>Girlfriends, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Door Near Here</td>
<td>Quarles (1998)</td>
<td>Family, boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>Sapphire (1996)</td>
<td>Sexual harassment, fathers, being female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

literacy background information, and post-interviews were conducted to obtain information about the girls' perspectives on their experiences in book club. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All book club discussions were also audio-recorded and transcribed for a total of 22 book club meetings with the younger group and 24 meetings with the older group. I also created and distributed surveys which the students filled out anonymously after the last book club meeting. These surveys were evaluations of the girls' experiences of the book clubs, specifically addressing their literacy development and social and emotional growth so that I could later triangulate this data with the interviews and book club transcriptions (see Appendix A). Finally, a field log was also kept to record notes of the observations, context, and my on-going analyses and reflections.

Data were analyzed during and after data collection. Once transcriptions were completed immediately after the meetings, I read through them several times, seeking to find identify patterns and regularities within the data (Wolcott, 1994). On the first read, I began with a holistic lens, targeting initial categories to develop a coding system. I then read through the transcripts another time, coding the data and noting patterns and themes that emerged. These are represented in the outcomes of my conceptual framework and include the following: reading development, identity development, personal growth, and social growth. The code “reading development” includes any reading strategies the girls used in order to unlock meaning from our texts. Using Wilhelm's (1997) three dimensions of reader response—evocative, reflective, and connective, I identified the specific reading strategies the girls used throughout their discussions. The three other themes that emerged addressed the content of the girls' discussions; the issues that arose most frequently during the book club sessions included identity,
family (personal growth), and peers (social growth). Once major themes were identified, I then began to generate my conceptual framework based on the following theories: reader/experiential response (Beach, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1995; Wilhelm, 1997; Probst, 2004), personal growth models (Dixon, 1967; Bleich, 1975), and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Au, 1998).

Results and Discussions
The following analysis elucidates the “outcomes” of my conceptual framework, demonstrating the transformative nature of book clubs—in that this forum worked to enhance literacy and identity development and personal and social growth. Each section will document the kinds of conversations that occurred and how the girls reflected on their experiences and evaluated the setting of book club.

Enhancing Reading Development
To illuminate the kinds of reading strategies the girls employed to construct textual meaning, I used a coding system based on Wilhelm’s (1997) three dimensions of reader response. The first dimension is evocative, during which readers show interest in the texts, summarize major plot events, relate to and analyze characters, make inferences, and clarify and revise interpretations. During the book clubs, before discussing the major issues within the texts, the girls often reviewed the plot. These summaries were sometimes short and simple, other times verbose and tangential—and often a collaborative effort. The purpose of these summaries was to clarify plot and characters, so the girls could then move to more inferential and higher-level conversations.

An example of this evocative dimension is demonstrated when the younger group discussed Forever (Blume, 1996). Tia (all names are pseudonyms) has just given a summary about how Erica is trying to date Arty who is gay. After Tia’s plot overview, the following conversation ensued:

**Betsy:** “Wait, but I didn’t get it. Did Erica like Arty?”

**Sofia:** “I think she really liked Arty but not in that way. I think she wanted to help him more.”

**Tia:** “I feel kinda bad for Arty. He tried to kill himself.”

**Betsy:** “He did with the shower curtain.”

**Tia:** “He was confusing throughout the whole, entire book.”

**Betsy:** “He was all happy in the play and everything and then all of sudden I guess he started hanging out with Erica.”

**Fay:** “She probably confused him because she probably tried to force him... into liking girls more than boys.”

**Tia:** “So why did he tell her I don’t know, maybe?”

**Sofia:** “Maybe he didn’t want to admit it but he had a lot of psychological problems... I think Erica added to the issues cause although she tried to help him, he was like if he knew he was gay and then she was trying to help him he probably felt worse.”

The progression of this conversation demonstrates how the girls participate in the evocative dimension of reader response. They began by summarizing the text which led to character analysis, where the girls made inferences about the characters’ motivations and behaviors—constantly clarifying and revising their initial interpretations through a shared construction of meaning.

The second dimension of Wilhelm’s theory is reflective, during which readers evaluate authors and texts and significance of themes and situations. The girls continually compared and contrasted books and authors, deciding what made an intriguing reading experience. This is elucidated during one of the older girls’ meetings, while reading The True Meaning of Cleavage (Fredericks, 2004):

**Pat:** “I liked Jess’s character.”

**Julie:** “Yeah, I like her too. I love her. She’s like so down to earth.”

**Keisha:** “I’m mad that she didn’t open her mouth about stuff that Sari was doing to her. Like open your mouth!”

**Pat:** “But—but when you come to think about it, it was for something good or like
David would have been like you know messing around with her even though he had a girlfriend.”

**Gina:** “He actually got to go out with Sari?”

**Pat:** “No.”

**Keisha:** “She was dumb.”

**Gina:** “It didn’t work for me cause I was going through the same thing and it was like why would she do that? I don’t understand why Sari was acting like that...They never explained in the book—why would she treat her like this...I just didn’t understand it and that got me upset.”

**Pat:** “I think the book worked for me because in the end, even though Jess did a bad thing and told everybody what she was doing, she was always there till the end, [despite] the things Sari did.”

**Yoana:** “Yeah. It was alright. It’s just the ending. I thought that David was going to end up with Sari and then the whole drama for nothing. [It] just got on my nerves.”

While certainly not reaching a consensus, the girls evaluated the characters’ decisions and the author and the text, using evidence to support their opinions and to reveal significance in the themes and plot. In doing so, the girls began to develop a set of reading values so as to evaluate future texts and authors.

Wilhelm’s final dimension is *connective*, during which readers connect the books to their lives in order to construct meaning. These connections will be illuminated in the next three sections as the connective dimension serves as the most frequent reading strategy used by the girls and demonstrates how reading development is entangled with the girls’ social and emotional issues.

Before moving to this dimension, it is essential to document the girls’ reflections of their reading growth, as experienced within the book club. The exit interviews and surveys revealed that many of the girls felt the book club inspired them to read faster and read more. When asked if they were reading more, less, or the same since joining the book club, the majority (nine) stated they were reading more. Eleventh graders Keisha, Gina, and Julie were the only participants who said they were reading the “same.” The following provides specific examples of their responses:

**Keisha:** “Book club convinced me to read more.”

**Eileen:** “Honestly I’m reading more because before I only read if I had to.”

**Pat:** “I read more since I joined the group because I have learned to enjoy reading.”

Through the interviews and surveys, the girls also discussed how they are now reading faster.

They responded as follows:

**Pat:** “Book club taught me to read books two at a time.”

**Eileen:** “I’ve picked up my pace.”

**Betsy:** “I changed a lot because I used to take forever with just a small book. I wouldn’t take the time to just sit and read but now since I’ve joined the book groups it seems like I read more and I get more interested in books.”

**Yoana:** “I actually have initiative to read now. Before it was like...if I was supposed to read a book, I’d just read the back of the book...but now I get into the book. I actually open the book and go through the books.”

Many girls also indicated that the book clubs have increased their understanding of the texts and their use of reading strategies. During the interviews the girls stated:

**Julie:** “Sometimes I would read it and not really get it and then Gina or somebody would clarify it so then I understood it and I could relate to it more.”

**Gina:** “Now I can balance more books...I remember the topics of the books. Before I used to get the books confused cause I used to read one too many but now I just get to read and read and now you just mention the title and I’ll tell you about the books... I can actually analyze a book. Before I would be able to tell you what the
book was about in a flash, but I wouldn’t be able to go deep into it...I’d never be able to analyze. This whole year I’ve been analyzing a whole lot more.”

Keisha: “I can relate more now.”

Joy: “I’m definitely making more connections.”

Eileen: “I feel as though I can analyze the text better than I could before. Before I would read and then you’d ask me, ‘So what did you just read?’ And I’m like, ‘Wait, give me a minute. Let me sum it up.’ It would be hard for me to do it, and now I’m just like, ‘Oh yeah, this and this happened in the book.’ And so my summarization has gotten better...and my vocabulary has increased.”

Carla: “I’ve expanded my vocabulary...If you’re not born here and you don’t know the language, [reading] helps you to develop your vocabulary. It helps you understand things and it’s just relaxing to just sit there and read instead of doing something else.”

In studying book clubs, Goatley, Brock and Raphael (1995) explained that discussion within these settings naturally leads students to a variety of conversations, thus providing students with a space “to draw on multiple sources of information to interpret text and construct meanings” (p. 357). Looking at the above statements by the girls, it is apparent that not only was their reading developing more—but this development came through dialogue and collaboration. These statements also confirm many studies that demonstrate how book clubs enhance students’ enjoyment and engagement in reading (Fox & Wilkinson, 1997) and literacy development (Klinger, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998; Daniels, 2002). While I am not implying that book clubs will help these girls on standardized tests or school performance, this feedback does suggest that certain literacy skills, e.g. vocabulary, summarization, analysis, fluency, and comprehension, have been enhanced through the book clubs. Future studies could certainly use pre and post-assessments to quantitatively substantiate these claims.

Using Book Clubs for Identity Development and Personal and Social Growth

As stated above, the one reading strategy that was most evident was personal connections—the connective dimension (Wilhelm, 1997)—in that the girls situated themselves within the texts and discussed what they would do if they were in similar situations. These conversations then led the girls to connect their own experiences to those of the characters, demonstrating the transformative nature of the book clubs in that their use of literacy skills—specifically making personal connections—led to essential discussions regarding their personal and social development. Experiential theorists insisted that these personal transactions are essential in literacy development, in that no one meaning exists, as all meaning constructions are based on the readers’ lived experiences (Beach, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1995; Wilhelm, 1997; Probst, 2004). In fact, it is these kinds of connections that pushed the girls to more inferential and critical discussions. The most common of these discussions centered on normative issues such as identity and family and peer relationships.

Architecture of Identity: Using Texts for the Construction of the Self

In terms of identity, the books clubs served as a place for the girls to talk about what it means to be adolescent, female, and in an environment that sometimes undermines their hopes for the future. The girls used the books and characters as blueprints and guides, as examples and non-examples in understanding themselves and their world. In constructing their identities, the girls tackled topics such as self-esteem and sense of agency. They used characters such as Melinda from Speak (Anderson, 1999), Jess from The True Meaning of Cleavage (Fredericks, 2004), Ana from Party Girl (Ewing, 1999), and Kyra from Jason and Kyra (Davidson, 2005) as role models of adolescent girls who were able to maintain their sense of self without bending to peer pressure.

The girls also discussed issues around body image and how this connects to their sense of self-esteem. These were particularly poignant conversations, as nearly two-thirds of adolescent girls have distorted views of their bodies (Orenstein, 1994). An example of this
conversation occurred when the older group discussed *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things* (Mackler, 2003):

**Gina:** “Cause remember how she says her mother’s always nagging her about snacks?”

**Keisha:** “It’s like she thinks about that stuff a lot.”

**Eileen:** “I want to know...why doesn’t she tell her sister that it’s difficult to talk to guys because of her weight.”

**Gina:** “Because her sister doesn’t see her. She sees herself. She doesn’t see herself as fat or like oh you have this cause you’re fat or you can’t do this. She just talks to her like every other girl. It’s herself. She sees herself like that.”

**Eileen:** “Since that’s her sister, I don’t think that her sister would lie to her. She probably just—I don’t know. She’s probably not even that fat.”

**Julie:** “I think she sees it like okay like her sister should be a model but then she’s the frumpy one. Like the youngest one that her mother’s always being nagging her about it. I don’t think her mother ever told her sister about her weight or nothing cause her sister’s like mad perfect. Her brother’s mad handsome and smart. She’s like just average and she feels like kind of out of place with her mother being perfect...”

**Gina:** “I hate books with fat people.”

**Carla:** “You’re not fat, dummy.”

**Gina:** “Yes, I am. It will happen in the book and that shit don’t happen to me. I ain’t got nobody coming up to me saying how beautiful I am.”

**Pat:** “You have a boyfriend.”

**Eileen:** “We tell you how beautiful you are.”

Here the conversation began with an evocative response where the girls analyzed the main characters, discussing their motivations, behaviors and feelings. Gina, however, changed the course of the discussion to herself in a subtle yet powerful way. The other girls immediately picked up on Gina’s connective response because they had gotten to know Gina and her insecurities about her weight. The book club then became a forum where the girls supported one another, offering Gina praise and support as she grappled with her own low self-esteem.

Through the final surveys and interviews, many of the girls specifically discussed how the book club experience helped them to define and change their sense of self:

**Eileen:** “I’m more confident now.”

**Betsy:** “I learned that I can be my own person instead of worrying about how to make friends and to do certain things just to make somebody my friend. I learned that you can be independent and still try to have friends at the same time. I think the book group helped me a lot because if I didn’t know about the book group I would have been so messed up.”

**Fay:** “I’m definitely more open-minded.”

**Tia:** “I learned that I should be respected no matter what my views are.”

These findings support the work of Lenkowsky et al. (1987), Sridhar & Vaughn (2000), and Miller (1993) who found that literature and group discussions increased their students’ self-worth, concepts, and esteem.

*Understanding Personal Growth through the Book Clubs: A Study of the Family*

Another theme that came out of the discussions centered on family, which serves as a representation of how the book clubs contributed to their personal growth. Of the students in the younger book group, two of the girls’ mothers died when they were younger and they both lived with their fathers; the other three lived with both parents. From the older group, Keisha and Gina both were raised by single mothers, while Julie, Yoana, and Eileen all lived with their mothers and stepfathers. Carla lived with her father, and Pat was the only one whose parents were still together. Many of the conversations focused on the parents in the novels the girls read. Several of the girls criticized the parents in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things*...
Creating Transformational Spaces

(Mackler, 2003), Party Girl (Ewing, 1999), Push (1996), Rainbow Jordan (1997), and Cut (2002) for not being supportive of their daughters. On the other hand, the girls praised the parents in Forever (Blume, 1996) and Jason and Kyra (Davidson, 2005), as they allowed their children freedom and independence. For many of the girls, however, these parents were not realistic or reflective of their own familial experiences. Overall, most of the girls claimed their parents were overprotective, especially because many of their parents were first-generation Americans and held tighter reins on the girls’ activities.

The books also raised critical familial issues for the girls—arguments, death, and even assault—all problems they shared with each other after reading about these conflicts within the texts. Analyzing the characters’ familial relationships (evocative responses) often led the girls to communicate their own situations (connective responses), which ultimately led to personal growth in that they discussed with each other how to deal with specific problems in their own families. The following example is taken from a discussion of the older girls as they read The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants (Brahares, 2003):

Keisha: “Carmen’s father—that’s messed up.”
Gina: “He is shady! He gets married and has the perfect family—like the two blond kids, the wife, the beautiful house and she’s like well I don’t fit in.”
Keisha: “So basically he gets a fiancé without telling her. He goes off, moves to a big stone house, white picket fence, everything.”
Julie: “I don’t understand. He has the perfect family. He got everything—nice house, mad cars, whatever. She got nothing. It’s like I disown you.”
Keisha: “He didn’t disown her. What makes her feel like that is he didn’t let her in on anything. She didn’t know....He says he wants to tell her in person but that’s not how you do it. It’s best to tell but tell the person no matter what.”

Julie: “See her father reminds me of my father. You see he got married to this evil—hate her—she’s fake. Hate her. She’s fake. He didn’t even value my opinion when they got married. He just went oh, I’m married and she’s pregnant. Just like tell me out of the blue. Oh, like she’s eight months pregnant. Oh, okay. How you didn’t tell me? You don’t value my opinion or my sister’s opinion.”
Yoana: “Well my dad left me when I was a baby so basically my stepfather he raised me. I didn’t really see my father until I was like seven or eight or five.”
Gina: “My mother she got married once and then they got divorced. My mom said that the next time she’ll get married is when I’m out of the house cause like I’m weird and I don’t like people. Like I don’t want another guy there. You see what I’m saying? I don’t see my dad either. He’s only visited twice.”
Eileen: “No calls or nothing? My dad used be like that but he knows better now.”
Gina: “I’m used to it now. When we do get together, we have like nothing to talk about...It’s hard but I don’t need him...I still write and call him once a month though.”
Eileen: “He doesn’t even do that for you, does he?”

Like previous conversations, the girls used the characters as springboards into their own lives. The discussion of the character Carmen’s father led the girls to then discuss their own families, asking each other questions and sharing stories so the others did not feel alone in their issues. These kinds of experiences reinforce personal growth theories (Dixon, 1967; Bleich, 1975), where texts and conversations are used to understand our lived experiences.

During the exit interviews, the girls revealed that the books and conversations helped them in not only understanding their families but themselves as well:

Fay: “Sometimes reading gives you a different vision of how you see the world. Like some people just see the world as butterflies
and candy drops, but it’s not. And then when you read books and see—even if it’s fiction—it still teaches you something.”

**Betsy:** “It was good that we talked about when we had situations with family members and what they did. I felt that was a big thing cause even though some of the girls may not have experienced it... it’s something that we as women or girls should know ahead of life so we know what to do about the situation and not just sit there and hide it for a long time.”

**Joy:** “The books were helpful in my personal life cause I saw someone else doing what could have happened to me...and how they’re acting it out and I could say she did that wrong and I could do this and that.”

**Gina:** “*The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* let me think of my relationship as it was happening with my father...that hit a chord. I was like wow. I’m not the only one that’s going through this and then when I spoke about it in the group everybody was like, ‘Yeah, I gotcha.’”

These aforementioned statements by the girls of how the books and conversations increased their personal growth supports the findings of many educational theorists (Bleich, 1975; Rosenblatt, 1978; Probst, 2004) in that the girls’ connections with the characters allowed them to make powerful connections to their own lives, so as to work out many of the current conflicts in which they are struggling, thus demonstrating the transformative power of book club. These findings also support research that literature can help to increase students’ emotional and personal development (Herbert & Kent, 2000; Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003).

**Understanding Social Growth and Peer Relationships through the Book Clubs**

While it becomes clear that in reading and discussing the texts the girls demonstrated evidence of literacy and identity development and personal growth, it is the collaborative nature of the book club that seemed to further increase the girls’ textual interpretations and understanding of themselves and their world. Using Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development, Pradl’s (1996) theories on reading as a social act, and Au’s (1998) understanding of social constructivism, I will capture the effects of the girls’ conversations upon one another, specifically within the context of their understanding of peer relationships.

Using the texts as springboards, the girls frequently discussed how their relationships with others girls are entangled and fraught with betrayal, pain, and abuse. At the same time, they used the fictional relationships with boys to understand their romantic relationships too. Thus, the core of many conversations was about unraveling the gossamers the girls encountered not only with boys in their lives, but also with the changing, dynamic friendships they held with their girlfriends. Many of the novels the girls selected dealt with opposite-sex relationships, as most of the girls battled with these issues as well. The girls worked through the texts together not only to interpret the male characters, but also to negotiate an understanding of their own relationships with the opposite sex. Using the texts and discussions, the girls created a shared set of value systems when selecting partners while simultaneously seeking to understand the nature of boys.

The girls continually compared the characters to the boys in their own lives, often critiquing their perceptions of boys, particularly noting their superficiality, lack of respect and ability to communicate, infidelities, and sense of entitlement, especially when discussing sex. For example, while reading *Upstate* (Buckhanon, 2006), the older girls criticized Antonio’s interactions with Natasha, believing that he should have been more honest with her while he was in jail. The girls complained how often guys “front” or put up an exterior when they are in different contexts. Carla explained, “They act one way with you and then one way with others, especially when they’re around their guy friends.”

These kinds of conversations often led to the girls’ discussions of future and current relationships with boys. Together they negotiated
what makes a sensible and healthy relationship, offering advice as to the kinds of decisions they should be making when choosing a partner. While reading *Jason and Kyra* (Davidson, 2005), all of the girls in both book clubs agreed that Jason is the one boy they would all want to date. Eleventh grader Carla exclaimed, "I wish I was [Kyra]'s [Jason]'s perfect." At the same time, the younger girls discussed how Jason did not reflect the reality of the boys in their lives:

Tia: "Guys are like parking spaces. All the good ones are taken and the ones that are left over—"

Joy: "Are crap."

Sofia: "It's like at Walmart in one of those outlet stores. You have a big parking lot and they're all packed and the ones that are empty have shopping carts on them."

These kinds of metaphors are important in that the girls were beginning to construct an understanding of how their current and future relationships may be frustrating or disappointing. Furthermore, they used the male characters as representations for discussing their present situations. All the girls had several stories to share about a variety of male interactions from crushes to year-long relationships. While sharing their opinions and judgments of the characters and then through sharing their own stories, the girls used the texts to build a set of values that make relationships sustainable. Trust and equality were two components the girls discussed as necessary to secure successful relationships. Eleventh grader Keisha explained, "If we're in a relationship, we have equal rights. I can't tell you to do nothing; you can't tell me to do nothing...To me love is like I trust you. Then everything else fades. I trust you. I love you."

During the exit interviews and surveys, the girls further revealed how important the book clubs were in understanding their relationships with boys. Ninth grader Tia hypothesized: The reason why their friendship has drifted apart is high school cause when you first start, you're like I don't know them and you stick to your friends. But after that you... start making new friends. You drift away slowly and it's not that it's on bad terms. It's just you drift away...[Sari] starts changing when she got into high school. You no longer look at her as a person you've known for all your life. She becomes someone different... You're around new people...You're no one and everyone doesn't know who you are. Once you start getting attention, your friend is going to change or you're gonna change.

Ninth grader Sofia agreed, reinforcing the transformative power of this text: "These books are books to read in preparation cause these things do happen. There are friends that separate either because you just don't get along anymore, because one of you changes, because both of you change." This analysis of the friendship between Sari and Jess demonstrates how the girls worked to understand why female friendships often do not last. The text becomes
transformative in that it allows for a literacy event that helps the girls organize societal norms regarding female relationships, which is ultimately a crucial part of their socialization process (Finders, 1997).

It is important to note that while the girls certainly struggled with their female peers outside of the book club, during their book groups, it became apparent that this experience brought them closer. Long (2003) described this bonding phenomenon that often occurs in female book clubs:

Over and over, participants speak of a process that couples reflection about literature with self-reflection in the company of others who bring similar reflectiveness, but different selves, into the process. And over and over, they speak as well of the surprising closeness that emerges from this kind of talk. (p. 111)

Long also found that women who participated in book club made new friends and became more reflective about their lives, more tolerant of others, and more confident about working in collaborative settings, particularly with other women. The girls revealed similar findings through their exit surveys and interviews:

Gina: "Now we [hang out]. Now I see them in the hall, and I'm like 'Hey, you read the book?' But I used to [say] hi to them and we used to be in classes together but it was never like now. Like Pat and me and Yoana got closer."

Fay: "Everyone was nice. They didn't make fun of you or anything. They really paid attention. That was nice cause sometimes you're afraid to be dumb in front of other people. You don't know, so you get shy but then I liked them...I feel like parts of the people have become part of me."

Sofia: "We all became friends...you know the thing that connects us all is the books...the books just like brought us together."

Joy: "I really like being with people who liked books as much as I do and you're reading and you can relate to them and see how they feel."

Keisha: "The groups are therapy. It's therapeutic, man."

Gaining perspective was another social benefit for the girls. Betsy explained during her interview, "From the book group as a whole, I learned that we can all discuss certain things, even though we might have experience from it or we might not. We still had different opinions and ideas, and then those opinions, ideas turned into big vision things." These "big vision things" illuminate the transformative effect of the book club, where the girls worked to broaden their understandings of the texts, themselves, and the world. This social constructivist approach (Au, 1998) allowed the girls to collectively interpret the novels, while simultaneously developing a collaborative conceptual framework of society, specifically as it related to their experiences with their peers. More importantly, through conversations about literature and life, the girls created a social construction of meaning which can be potentially transformative (Long, 2003).

Discussion and Future Implications

While reading *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Brahares, 2003), the older girls criticized one of the main characters, Bridgette, for throwing herself at Eric, her soccer coach:

Gina: "I wanted to hit her when she was at that bar!"

Julie: "She's psycho."

Keisha: "She needs to go to counseling."

Yoana: "No, no, no! She needs book club."

Yoana's statement speaks first to the need of young adults to have spaces where they deal with the pains of adolescence. Secondly, it reflects the conceptual framework highlighted in this article where literature and conversation during the unique space of book club allow for transformation where the girls worked to simultaneously enhance their reading and their social and emotional growth as well. As educators and mentors, if we are to meet the diverse needs of our students in an ever-changing, ever-complex world, we need to rethink the kinds of support we offer; this may mean creating spaces outside of the classroom, where students engage in dialogue using...
texts as springboards for them to address issues they may not feel comfortable attacking in larger settings.

At the same time, we can also use this research to unpack and dismantle our approaches within the classroom itself. First, the need to expand our repertoire of texts is crucial. For students who love to read, book clubs are a viable option for increasing their enjoyment and critical engagement with texts; however, recent concern is centered on students who struggle with reading or are reluctant to read. Using young adult literature may be one way we can support these students, especially in that many of the topics in this genre surface in their daily lives. We also want to select texts that are reflective of our students; for the girls in this study, they chose books where they saw their experiences highlighted, in that all the books focused on high school female protagonists who were struggling with identity issues or problems with their families and peers.

At the same time, we also want to expose our students to texts which may be more challenging emotionally. In using traditional works of literature and the canon, we might quell student dissatisfaction with this genre by appealing to their emotional needs and social concerns. Finding entry points with these kinds of texts and keeping students engaged means making real-life connections to their own lives and communities. If students can see how literature can impact both their literacy and social and emotional issues, perhaps they will become more invested in the content we are teaching in our classrooms. More importantly, in offering a variety of texts—both within the canon and young adult literature—we offer choice, recognizing that our students' interests and abilities are different. In offering student choice in our reading material, whether through independent reading, book partners or book clubs, we open the literary doors for all of our students. In fact, research has demonstrated that teachers who allow for student choice through a reading workshop approach report increases in struggling and reluctant students' reading and motivational levels (Taylor & Nesheim, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Boston & Baxley, 2007).

We can also transfer our understanding of book clubs to our methods within the classroom. One way to achieve higher student engagement is through increased dialogue. Relinquishing the teacher-centered classroom, we can use conversations, either in small or whole group, where students share with each other their own meaning constructions with the texts—allowing for a shared interpretation of the literature, so that students can revise and add to their own personal transactions. Simultaneously, we must also think about ways in which we ask students to respond in these more collaborative settings. Using personal connections as entry points for students, as evidenced here, is a way for them both to analyze the texts more critically while also understanding how literature can impact their social and emotional development—thus promoting transformation. Teachers can achieve this by reimagining our sequence of questioning. For the book club, the responses began at a more literal level so that mutual understanding of the plot was derived. From here, the girls moved back and forth between personal connections and deeper, inferential responses to the characters' motivations and behaviors. This is one way to increase our response to cultural diversity, where students use their own knowledge and cultural background to engage with texts, and teachers exchange skill-and-drill instruction with personal connection, in order to transform the classroom into a community where literacy learning is fostered and enhanced.

Whether inside or outside of the classroom, book clubs as alternative forums for increased and authentic opportunities to engage with texts may be a way that educators can work to enhance their students' literacy skills while simultaneously addressing their social and emotional needs. In fact, these cognitive and affective processes should not be separated if we are to holistically transform the lives of high school students. In doing so, adolescents participating in book clubs can have conversations that begin with literal discussions and then move beyond the books to make personal connections with their lives and their worlds. These kinds of conversations provide transformative experiences in that students learn not
just from the characters but also from each other—thus empowering them as readers and empowering them as young adults who seek to understand and refine themselves and their communities.

References


APPENDIX A

Final Written Survey of Book Clubs

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Of the all the books we read together, which was your favorite and why? What about this book did you find interesting?

Of all the books we read together, which was your least favorite and why? What about this book did you not like?

Are you reading more or less since you have joined the group? Explain.

What conversation made you the most uncomfortable? Explain.

What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about other group members?

Would you do it again next year? Why or why not?

What was the best part of the book groups?

How have you changed as a reader since being in these groups?

What was the most important topic we discussed this year? Explain.

How have these groups helped you as a reader?

How have they helped you in your personal life?

What did you NOT like about the groups? What would you change?