CHAPTER TWO

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The Power of the Mirror

Identity, Academic Self-Concept, and Motivation to Learn

"I think I might know him."

—a fourth grader, responding during literature discussion of Junebug
by Alice Mead

When a group of fourth graders in a St. Louis public school read the book Junebug by Alice Mead, they made such strong, personal connections to the text that it was hard for some of them to imagine that the book was a work of fiction. The students could envision and describe what life might be like in Junebug's neighborhood around the Auburn Street housing project in New Haven. They could relate to ten-year-old Junebug's role as a big brother and caregiver to little Tasha; they understood the challenges that Junebug, his friend Robert, and other boys growing up in their neighborhood sometimes faced, and they identified with Junebug's hopes and dreams for his future.

This chapter discusses why these types of connections are so important for students' literacy learning. It reviews the research on the relationship between identity and academic achievement, and describes how affective connections with texts can lead to increased engagement, effort, and skill. Many examples of students making connections with urban children's literature are woven throughout the chapter, concluding with ideas for using author and illustrator study to help students envision themselves as readers and writers with stories of their own to tell. In subsequent chapters, we discuss specific
methods through which urban children’s literature can be used as a tool to accelerate literacy learning.

The Relationship between Identity and School Achievement

The connection between identity and learning is well documented. When learning activities are connected with one’s sense of self as an individual or as a member of a group, student participation and engagement is especially strong (Brophy 2008; Faircloth 2012). Students are motivated when learning activities connect to their daily lives or lived experiences. This makes the activities meaningful and worthwhile to students. They will take learning seriously and put forth more effort in order to accomplish what they set out to do when they see the value and connection in what is being learned.

While there are many dimensions of student identity, a students’ racial identity may play an especially important role in engagement. Racial identity refers to the beliefs, opinions, and attitudes one holds about his or her racial group (Swanson et al. 2009). The development of racial identity begins in early childhood. Even preschoolers can categorize racial groups by skin color, for example, and can express preferences and beliefs about race and social class.¹ By age ten, children are well aware of racial stereotypes (Swanson et al. 2009). There is a well-established body of research that indicates that a positive racial identity is associated with positive academic attitudes and outcomes.²

How a child’s racial identity gets negotiated in school can have a significant impact on his or her academic self-concept—the perceptions she forms about herself through her experiences in school (Marsh and Martin 2011). Not surprisingly, teachers and school leaders can play a significant role in either embracing or disregarding students’ cultural identities in school. Those who value diversity and engage in culturally responsive teaching can contribute to children’s development of a positive racial identity, which promotes resilience and helps to increase student achievement.³ When children find themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in the curriculum and included in the “conversations of schooling,” they are more likely to be engaged in learning, feel capable and competent as learners, and experience greater school success (Shields 2004, 122).

“When we see ourselves, we are reminded of our existence, our humanity, and that we are worth noting for.”

—Mara Brock Akil (2013)
Making intentional connections between students' home and academic lives provides opportunities for children to stay connected with their cultural identities while engaging at school. Unfortunately, many students face day-to-day struggles when they do not feel a sense of belonging in their school environment. This disconnect can have a strong negative impact on students' academic self-worth, even among competent learners. Consider Javier's story, below:

Javier's Story:

At some point, the mere feeling of being an "outsider" at school began to creep its way into my academic performance. When I was in elementary school, the teacher assigned each of us a country that we had to research to learn about its cultural customs and present to the class. Parents were invited, but like most school activities, this one was during school hours. Although it would have meant the world to me to see my father there, I understood that he could not justify jeopardizing our livelihood and take a day off from work to come see me at school. My mother planned on going and that was enough for me.

The day of the presentation came and I was both excited and nervous. I had done my work and was ready to tell the group everything I had learned about India through my memorized speech that I had practiced over and over. Our presentations began promptly at 11 a.m. and ended exactly before lunch time. The whole time I was in front giving my presentation, I was scanning the crowd looking for my mother's reassuring, proud face. Of course, I didn't see her because my mom still was not used to the rigidness of time that is involved in all school activities. She was running late, and I forget most of my speech.

Afterward, the teacher had a long talk with me about how upset and disappointed she was with my lack of preparation. I was sad and frustrated too, but I didn't try to explain. This was a series of misunderstandings on all sides and the beginning of many failures that I encountered at school. The irony of this is that the very assignment that was intended to help us better understand other cultures made me realize that I did not understand nor was I understood in the very world I was living in.
Despite his commitment and preparation for the assignment, Javier's confidence in learning was negatively impacted by this misunderstanding with his teacher. Rather than try to explain what had happened, Javier felt a need to compartmentalize his cultural identity in a way that resulted in much longer-term effects on his academic achievement. In addition, his teacher's perception of him was altered by this exchange, likely calling into question his capabilities and lowering her expectation for his preparation in the future. Willis Hawley and Sonia Nieto (2010) call this an "inconvenient truth"—that race and ethnicity affect how students respond to instruction and this, in turn, impacts teachers' assumptions about students' capabilities and how much they can learn (1).

Teachers and schools play a critical role in helping children maintain a positive cultural identity while solidifying their sense of selves as learners (Brown and Chu 2012; Cummins 2001; Garcia Coll and Marks 2009). Seeing oneself represented in the characters, authors, and illustrators in a classroom and school library can go a long way in making sure we are conveying a message to children that school is for and about them.

**Literacy and Identity**

The selection of texts that intersect with various dimensions of students' identities can have an impact on reading and writing achievement through its influence on motivation and engagement in literacy learning activities. Readers tend to be more interested in books that they can connect with personally, and they often seek out books with characters with whom they can identify (Francios 2013; Gualtiero 2010; McNair 2013; Sims 1983; Smith 1995). In turn, there is substantial evidence that children who value reading and see it as an interesting activity tend to engage in reading more frequently and subsequently develop better reading skills.4

"It matters when a book has characters named Tamika and Shanice, not named Sarah and Lynn."

—Jill, first-grade teacher, referring to My Best Friend by Mary Ann Rodman

This relationship between reading interest and reading skill is especially important for urban public-school teachers to consider, because it holds true
for all students, including children from lower income families or students whose parents may have less formal education (Guthrie, Shafer, and Huang 2001). There also seems to be a reciprocal relationship between motivation, engagement, and reading skill; as children become more capable readers, they are motivated to read more and more (Morgan and Fuchs 2007), which in turn, continues to support reading development.

Increasing Motivation and Engagement with Urban Children’s Literature

Our willingness to engage in any activity depends both on how much we value the activity as well as the degree which we expect to be able to complete it successfully (Wigfield and Eccles 2000). Using urban children’s literature that reflects students’ experiences can increase engagement in literacy learning because it taps into students’ funds of knowledge and invites them to share their expertise and insights. Being able to offer expertise is satisfying and empowering to learners, and contributes to their investment in what is being taught in school (Brophy 2008).

Teresa’s Story:

When I use texts which students can relate to, it really does engage my students in discussions. It is easier to participate in discussions when you are familiar with the topic or when you understand what a character might have gone through. Students can easily make connections to stories which remind them of home, their traditions, their language. I always find that when a read aloud is about someone who resembles them in some way, even the most introverted student has something to share.

For example, in her work in a predominantly African American urban school, Jeane Copenhaver (2001) reported a dramatic increase in second-and third-graders’ participation and engagement in a literature discussion of Walter Dean Myers’s (1989) Malcolm X: A Fire Burning Brightly. Teachers were “floored” by children’s connections with the text as they related themes from the story to their own lives and shared opinions about the characters’ situations (355). Children were more invested in understanding the text and demonstrated independent use of comprehension strategies such as making
connections, asking questions, and rereading throughout the literature discussion.

Gayla Lohfink and Juana Loya (2010) reported similarly high levels of engagement when reading culturally relevant texts with their bilingual, Mexican American third-graders. Sharing dual language picture book memoirs such as The Upside Down Boy/El niño de cabeza by Juan Felipe Herrera (2006) and My Very Own Room/Mi propio cuartito by Amanda Perea (2000) led to a wealth of text-to-self connections in literature discussion among their students. Having access to books by authors and illustrators who shared their cultural backgrounds also had an empowering effect on students’ identities as writers. After reading a number of culturally relevant texts, students “became the authors” as they transferred their connections into writing their own dual language personal narratives (Lohfink and Loya 2010, 361).

In essence, these teachers are helping children connect their “funds of identity” with literacy learning (Esteban-Gutierrez and Moll 2014)—actively making use of family and community experiences as they begin to define themselves as readers and writers. As a result, children can begin to see their experiences as assets to learning, that their cultural funds of identity can be compatible with their literacy identities, not something to be “left at the door” when they enter the classroom.

"Most helpful to me was simply reading the ground-breaking book The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros. It was a revelation to see that the stories of my own life/culture could make a compelling book. It is easy to overlook the simple fact that seeing examples of your heritage in books empowers you, but there it is.”

—Meg Medina, author of Mango, Abuela, and Me

As Moisés Esteban-Gutierrez and Luis Moll (2014) point out, educators can offer “possibilities” or constrictions” with the choices they make (33), which will no doubt have different effects on the ways children respond to instruction. It is up to us to determine whether to rely on a traditional or “popular” literary canon or to be intentional about text selection that allows our students to bring their whole selves to the learning process.
Tapping into Multiple Identities

The selection of texts that intersect with a number of dimensions of students' identities may have an especially strong impact on reading and writing achievement though its influence on motivation and engagement in literacy learning activities. Consider "Carter's Story" below, which describes a group of second-graders' responses to a read aloud of the book My Steps by Sally Derby (1996).

The story in My Steps included many elements with which children in Carter's classroom in Chicago could identify: the book features an African American primary character; she is about the same age as the children in

Carter's Story:

So as we were reading My Steps, we got to this one page. I'm not from Chicago, so this wasn't very familiar to me, but when I read it to my kids they made an immediate connection.

It says:

I have another friend, that's Nicholas, and when he comes, we all play stone school. Here's how we play: I'm teacher first, because they're my steps. I put my hands behind my back and hide a little stone. Then I put my hands out in front. Essie and Nicholas sit on [step] One (that's kindergarten), and they take turns guessing which hand [the stone is in]. When they guess right, they get to move up to the first grade. And whoever gets to fourth grade first [the fourth step] gets to be teacher next. (Derby 1996, 20)

When my students saw that, they started shouting, "That's Rock Teacher! That's Rock Teacher!" and started making connections to this game they play all the time. They were really excited to see that something in the story was totally related to what they do on a regular basis. So now the book goes from just being some book that my teacher read, to "Man, I can make connections with this book," so I want to read this book and reread this book. So if I do this two or three times a week with a text, they now have these books that they are reading and rereading. Comprehension is going up. Vocabulary is increasing. Fluency is increasing. Their love of reading is increasing."
the classroom; she lives in a city where residents experience changes of seasons, similar to what might be experienced in Chicago; and, to the students' delight, the children in the story played a game very similar to one Carter's students played all the time.

There are many more studies that demonstrate how the use of culturally relevant texts can transform the level of literacy engagement in classrooms (e.g., Boston and Baxley 2007; Carrillo 2012; Feger 2006; Fleming and Clark 2014; Kirkland 2011). In one urban public school serving dual language learners, adding culturally relevant texts to the mix contributed to nearly doubling the frequency of students' reading (e.g., Brassell 1999). Creating stronger links between "what children learn and what they live" may be especially important for supporting the academic engagement of children living in poverty, especially when the realities of these students' lives are seldom acknowledged in the day-to-day of school curricula (Honour 2007, 422).

In addition, there is substantial evidence that culturally relevant texts can support motivation and persistence of struggling or disengaged readers (Al-Haqq 2010; Faircloth 2012). Increasing engagement by connecting learning with identity and inviting children to share expertise and insights from their experience may be particularly important for these students.

Michael's Story:

When you have a reluctant and struggling reader, you have to do everything possible to find books that they can relate to and understand. Every child has a spark in them; it is our job to ignite that spark. I have found that many students who were not [initially] interested in reading were the first ones to go to the classroom library and pick out a book.

Increasing Family Engagement

The connection between identity and reading engagement is also strong for adults. Because of this, urban children's literature may be a useful tool for increasing family engagement around reading. For example, as part of an after-school parent literacy program, Clarena Larrota and Jesse Gainer (2008) used books like The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros (1984)
to spark the interest of their adult learners and support them in making personal connections to texts.

The discussion that followed provided a rich context for participants to practice application of reading comprehension strategies that they could then use with their children at home. Similar programs have demonstrated that family members subsequently sought out similar books to read with their children that captured familiar family and community experiences (e.g., Madrigal et al. 1999; Ortiz and Ordoñez-Jasis 2005).

Books to Explore Emotions

Reading culturally relevant literature not only has an effect on student engagement, but it may also impact how students learn to confront and address emotional concerns that can hinder academic achievement in the classroom. Research suggests that literature is an excellent tool for promoting children's social and emotional learning because it provides a forum for children to discuss the causes and consequences of emotions, and it provides opportunities for teachers to teach social and emotional learning strategies (Ahn 2005; McCoy and McKay 2006; Morrell and Morrell 2012).

As they read about characters going through challenges, children can discuss and debate a range of problem-solving strategies and weigh the outcomes and potential consequences of characters' decisions (Prater et al. 2006). Children also tend to experience less apprehension when discussing situations involving storybook characters versus their own situations. When shared in a trusting, caring environment, urban children's literature may encourage some students to more openly discuss issues they might not have

Jill's Story:

I think about [my students making] connections along the lines of socioeconomic situations, like when we read Gettin' Through Thursday [about a family that's living paycheck to paycheck] or when we had read Junebug and they were talking about living in public housing. When you have those kinds of experiences in books, then that makes the kids feel like it's ok. There is some part of [these types of books] that I think other people might look at and think, "Oh, that's not good," but the flip side of it is that it makes my kids feel like, "Oh, somebody else is going through that, too."
shared otherwise (e.g., Berns 2004; Nicholson and Pearson 2003). It may be an especially useful tool in empowering immigrant children as they adjust to the many changes that come with moving to a new country (Baghban 2007).

Addressing the Need for More Mirrors

Despite its great potential for increasing student engagement, frequency of reading, and reading skills, urban public school students often are not seeing enough “mirrors” in the books they are being asked to read in school. Indeed, the gap between students’ lived experience and schooling may be a primary contributor to a lack of student engagement in reading and school (Fairbanks and Arai 2006; Tatum 2008).

This critical role that text selection plays in literacy learning is often a “glaring omission” (Tatum 2006, 45) in discussion of urban public school students’ achievement. Most publishers of literacy curricula that service public schools tailor selections to reach a national mainstream audience. As a result, few story selections include images of city living, multicultural and multilingual communities, and familiar urban landscapes. Texts may be selected to represent more “generically” diverse families or neighborhoods without authentically representing any student or family in the school community (see chapter 8 for discussion). Moreover, reading curricula in the early grades rarely include stories that discuss the experiences of children in poverty (Hunsberger 2007).

Instead, too often texts are selected solely for their utility in teaching accuracy and comprehension strategies. This focus on improving technical skills tends to outweigh consideration of more “enabling texts” that can help students make connections, sustain intense engagement in literature discussion, and support their exploration of their identities as young people and as readers and writers (Tatum 2006, 47).

Similarly, the omission of books by authors and illustrators of color from school-based book club catalogs contributes to restriction in access to culturally relevant texts (McNair 2008). Especially concerning is the limited availability of culturally relevant transitional chapter book series that are so popular among second- through fourth-grade readers and can contribute significantly to reading fluency and stamina (Fleming and Carrillo 2011a; Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, and Koehler 2009; Rich 2012).

It is a rare occurrence to find series like The Carter Chronicles (English 2013), Make Way for Dyamonde Daniel (Grimes 2010), or Zapato Power: Freddy Ramos Takes Off! (Jules 2010) among the library shelves in any classroom. Not only are there few series featuring primary characters of color, the
series that are available are limited in how many books are published and where they are distributed.

Research has shown that positive attitudes toward reading tend to decrease over the course of the elementary grades (McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth 1995). When students do not see themselves represented in the texts that are utilized and valued in school, they may be left with the impression that this reading “club” is not for them. This can contribute to even greater disengagement, resulting in a lack of investment in reading as a valued activity and limiting the regular practice necessary to build reading skills and keep them strong.

Teacher Beliefs and Actions

When a teacher picks a book to share with students, it sends a very important message to children. Even if we do not explain to children why we chose a particular text, the sheer fact that we selected that book tells them something about its importance in our eyes; it tells them a lot about who we are, what school is about, and what we value. As a result, it is critically important to examine our literacy curricula and trade book collections to determine the extent to which children can see that their families, communities, and experiences are valued in what we teach.

Fortunately, when we find our curricula may be lacking these “mirrors,” we can do something about it. Even in schools with prescribed curricula, teachers, librarians, and school administrators have options when it comes to text selection. This chapter has highlighted many examples of how urban children’s literature can support the development of a positive racial identity and the strong academic self-concept that can contribute to interest and engagement in literacy activities. Chapters 3 and 4 provide additional detail about the critical role urban children’s literature can play in children’s reading and writing development, as well as in the language and literacy learning of dual language learners. These initial chapters are designed to support educators in “making the case” for inclusion of more urban children’s literature in the curriculum. Subsequent chapters in this book provide specific guidance for the selection of high-quality texts, as well as strategies for integrating those texts with the core curriculum.
Summing It Up: The Impact on Racial Identity, Academic Self-Concept, and Motivation

- Connections between school and cultural identities of children promote engagement, participation, and academic resilience
- Culturally relevant texts support positive racial and cultural identities and strong academic self-concepts
- Culturally relevant texts provide important pathways for connecting the experiences and perspectives of children, their families, and their communities to the classroom
- Urban children’s literature can increase family engagement in literacy activities
- Urban children’s literature can promote children's social and emotional learning through reading and discussion
- Recognize and nurture connections between student cultural identity and literacy development

Notes

1. Results of several studies indicate that these findings hold true for very young children of various racial backgrounds. See Doyle and Aboud (1995), Ramsey (1991), Spencer (1982), and Spencer (1984). More recent studies continue to confirm these findings (e.g., Pahlke, Bigler, and Suiu 2012).

2. Much of the research on the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement involves adolescents, rather than younger children. The results of this research consistently reveal positive associations between these constructs: having a positive racial identity is generally associated with more positive academic attitudes and outcomes. Since the development of one’s racial identity starts at a very young age, the connection between racial identity, school engagement, and academic achievement should be an important consideration for educators at all levels. See Chavous et al. (2003); Eccles, Wong, and Peck (2006); and Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) for a more comprehensive discussion.

3. Many studies indicate the important role that teachers and the school environment can play in contributing to students’ racial identity as it relates to school and academic achievement (see Eccles 2006) for an excellent review). Teachers’ attitudes toward students of color and schools’ valuing of diversity can contribute significantly to students’ beliefs in their academic abilities and their willingness to engage fully in school. Feeling positively about one’s ethnic group is especially impor-
tant for maintaining positive engagement in school, particularly when students are faced with discrimination in the school environment (Brown and Chu 2012; Smalls et al. 2007). The opposite is also true. When students perceive that teachers hold low expectations for their achievement based on race, this can have substantial cumulative negative effects on motivation and achievement (see Eccles and Roesner [2011] for review). Given the impact teachers’ attitudes and actions can have on student achievement, teacher-preparation programs that incorporate teachers’ examination of their beliefs about race and engage them in learning about cultural responsive teaching methods is of critical importance (Bryan and Atwater 2002).

4. Seminal research documenting the strong, stable relationship between interest, reading frequency, and skill development has been conducted by the team of researchers including Linda Baker, John T. Guthrie, and Allan Wigfield since the 1990s. Children who find reading interesting engage in reading more frequently and develop stronger reading skills (see Baker and Wigfield 1999; Guthrie and Wigfield 2000; Wang and Guthrie 2004; Wigfield 2004; Wigfield and Eccles 2000; Wigfield and Guthrie 1997). Additional recent studies support these findings (e.g., Unrau and Schrackman 2006; Becker, McElvany, and Kortenbruck 2010).