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# Rewards of reading: Toward the development of possible selves and identities

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## Abstract

Children's voluntary reading positively correlates with school grades, vocabulary growth, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, general information, and attitudes towards reading. Drawing on qualitative interviews collected alongside six waves of longitudinal survey data in an urban setting in eastern USA, We argue that voluntary reading by adolescents also provides learning opportunities that scaffold identity formation, afford 'spaces' where youth rehearse and relationally enact gender roles, ethnic/racial identification, and fashion educational aspirations. The interviews with African American and European American youth were conducted in five visits and spanned 3 years through senior high school and 1 year post-high school. Methods of inductive and narrative analysis identified patterns of benefits and potential drawbacks of voluntary reading. Amount of voluntary reading was affected by school, family, and social and work commitment pressures, and fulfilled a number of broad roles. What and how youth were reading was as important as the amount. Significantly, reading allowed adolescents to explore *possible selves*—an interest in historical figures helped one African American male to develop values resisting stereotypes of *male* or *African American*, just as an African American female came to resist conforming to gender and racial stereotypes in dress and occupational ambitions. Relationships between voluntary reading habits, family context and educational aspirations were identifiable for a number of the interviewees. Crown Copyright © 2007 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Possible selves; Voluntary reading; Leisure reading; Adolescents; Identity

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## 1. Rewards of reading: toward the development of possible selves and identities

The relationship between reading proficiency and educational attainment has been frequently documented (Ogle, Sen, Pahlke, Kastberg, & Roey, 2003). Tightly operationalized measures of reading proficiency and literacy abilities have been shown to predict high school completion, degrees earned, adult income and occupational status (Raudenbush & Kasim, 1998; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). A high level of literacy proficiency is frequently assumed and is indeed central to participation in many social and educational institutions (Wagner, 1999). In Westernized countries education is one of the most important social and cultural institutions providing a formalized structure marking out childhood, as well as transitions through

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adolescence and adulthood (Côté, 2000). Schools are increasingly charged with many responsibilities, not least of all ensuring that children learn to read well so that they can engage with the types of reading and writing that are essential for academic achievement throughout their school careers.

A further, although often less explicitly identified outcome of reading instruction is the enjoyment of reading as a social, cultural and recreational activity. That is, the development of reading as a pleasurable activity in its own right. The reading that children and adolescents engage in for its own sake may also provide 'self-generated learning opportunities' (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997, p. 404), that in turn serve to nurture and support educational aspirations, achievement motivation, occupational choices, as well as ways of understanding one-self and others. More recently, researchers have also turned their attention to a variety of out-of-school and unstructured literacy practices of adolescents (Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Black, 2005; Moje, 2000), noting individuals' motivations for engagement and persistence, even when the task complexity of the literacy practices appears to challenge their skill level (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000). How these new forms of literacy practices influence and impact on school-based achievement is an enduring and unresolved question for literacy researchers. The present study focuses on individual reading of print books among youth, an activity which in children has been demonstrated to have an impact on school achievement.

Individuals engage with different literacy practices as they navigate social environments even when they occur in a single location such as a doctor's waiting room. For instance, we may be asked to sign our name on a registration form, fill out our personal medical history on a checklist, take part in a medical survey, read complex documents that indemnify the medical practitioner, and as we sit waiting to be called, peruse the covers and contents of magazines and newspapers, while the overhead television is reporting the latest news and weather or the latest sporting news. Depending on time, we may settle on an article that captures our interest and is informative, or we may simply pass the time skimming through various stories and viewing the almost compromising exploits of the stars of stage and screen captured by the telephoto lenses of the paparazzi photographers. The point is that this type of reading involves our own interest, as fleeting as that may be. We choose what we will read and there is no one there to check on our comprehension except ourselves. At the same time, to engage in social and cultural activities we increasingly need to deal with an array of literate demands that involve everything from highly complex, specialized texts through to less involved and ephemeral texts such as catalogues, pictorially rich magazines, and the increasingly ever-present assortment of other digital media that insinuate themselves into our lives.

Literacy practices are "an important medium through which we interact with the human environment" (Ferdman, 1990), and by which we directly and vicariously contemplate who we are at any one point in time, who we might hope to be in the future, who we fear being, and who we expect to be. This article examines the broader rewards that stem from the book reading practices that children and adolescents engage in when they are not required to do so, and speculates on the processes by which voluntary reading might provide "self-generated learning opportunities" (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) for older adolescents. Of particular interest is how these "unsanctioned" literacy practices (Moje, 2000) intersect with and contribute to the development of multiple selves that emerge and are played out as individuals move into and through adolescence (Harter, 1999). Further, does voluntary reading play a role in the exploration, contemplation, and vicarious experience of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and "figured worlds" in which the self has significance (see Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) across different situations and contexts during adolescence and early adulthood?

### *1.1. The nature and importance of voluntary reading*

Voluntary reading is the reading that children and adolescents do for their own entertainment, information, and pleasure. There has been consistent research interest in the reading that children and adolescents choose to do for themselves and the impact that this reading has on their educational attainment. Researchers have used various terms for essentially the same phenomenon: leisure reading (Greaney, 1980), spare-time reading (Searls, Mead, & Ward, 1985), reading outside-of-school (Alvermann et al., 1999; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Finders, 1998/1999; Knobel, 1999), voluntary reading (Krashen, 1993; Short, 1995), and recreational reading (Manzo & Manzo, 1995). However named, this type of reading often draws on a wide

variety of printed and increasingly digital texts, covering a range of topics and interests. Unlike assigned reading in school, voluntary reading involves the reader's choice of what will be read, where and when it is read, and invites no check on comprehension or measurement of success, other than that determined by the reader her/himself. Voluntary reading appears to be a valuable resource for in-school literacy achievement, although the duration, scope, timing and stability of these benefits is not well understood.

Not surprisingly, qualitative and quantitative research studies have shown that children who engage in voluntary reading develop positive attitudes towards reading as an activity (Barbieri, 1995; Greaney, 1980; Greaney & Hegarty, 1987; Hepler & Hickman, 1982; Long & Henderson, 1973; Mathewson, 1994; Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1991; Shapiro & White, 1991; Short, 1995). This type of reading has also been shown to relate positively to growth in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general information (Anderson et al., 1988; Greaney, 1980; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990), and to positively correlate with school grades (Anderson et al., 1988; Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986; Greaney, 1980). An international comparison of fourth-graders' reading literacy (PIRLS, 2001, see Ogle, et al., 2003) showed that those who read literary fiction outside of school once or twice a month, had higher reading scores than those who reported they never or almost never read fiction outside of school. The same study revealed that 35% of US fourth graders were reading for fun every day or almost every day, a figure lower than the international average of 40%. In contrast, 18% of students reported watching 5 h of television and video on a normal school day, compared with the international average of 2.2 h. In an increasingly media-rich world children clearly have other competing entertainment interests. In their discussion of the findings from the 1996 NAEP (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997), Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) point to the fact that what they called "engaged readers" at 13 years of age had achievement scores as high as the 17-year-old students who were less engaged.

A longitudinal study by Cipielewski and Stanovich (1992) of the individual differences in growth among third–fifth grade students' reading ability indicated that voluntary reading was significantly related to the amount of print exposure that children experienced. Their findings are important in signaling the reciprocal influences that voluntary reading has on reading interest, reading ability and the volume of reading experienced. This reciprocal relationship was previously identified by Stanovich (1986) as the 'Matthew Effect in Reading', which he summarized as follows: "The very children who are reading well and who have good vocabularies will read more, learn more word meanings, and hence read even better. Children classified as having 'inadequate' vocabularies—who read slowly and without enjoyment—read less, and as a result have slower development of vocabulary knowledge, which inhibits further growth in reading ability" (p. 381). The effects of voluntary reading appear to have the potential to raise achievement scores across subject domains as well as contributing significantly to content knowledge (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991; Krashen, 1993; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993).

The processes through which engaged voluntary reading promotes positive educational outcomes in the form of reading achievement is proposed by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000, p. 404) when they observe that "it is likely that students who are capable of understanding a wide range of texts choose to read independently for their own enjoyment"—although the reverse sequencing could also well be true. Such activities may thus lead to an increased pre-disposition to engage with issues and institutions through literacy activities (Guthrie, Schafer, & Hutchinson, 1991). Teachers and educators explicitly encourage children from the early elementary grades to read both in school and to engage in voluntary reading during their free time out of school. If they are to continue to encourage children and adolescents to read outside of school, then it is important to investigate whether such literacy activity has subsequent benefits. In particular, it is worth questioning whether the correlations found in earlier studies hold simply because so much of school reading *is* fiction reading, or whether such voluntary reading out of school has broader benefits beyond school grades and test scores. In addition it is worth investigating whether other types of leisure reading matter in ways typically untapped by measures of school achievement. Guthrie et al. (1991) argue that it is incumbent upon researchers to establish whether literacy activities lead to positive outcomes in later adolescence and emerging adulthood. Engagement in reading to a level where it provides enjoyment and pleasure clearly does not happen for all students across all groups (Snow, 2002). Reading for some students is not associated with pleasure and as a consequence may not become central to the ways in which they relax, gain information, interpret experiences or vicariously experience real and imagined worlds and envision possible selves.

### 1.2. Adolescence, possible selves and identification

Adolescence is marked by physical, emotional and cognitive changes that take place in relation to social transitions. While researchers have found evidence for differing developmental periods and identified developmental aspects of early adolescence, middle adolescence and late adolescence (Harter, 1999), others have questioned whether the beginning and ending of adolescence is so clearly marked (Arnett & Taber, 1994). In the early part of the twenty-first century in most westernized societies further blurring is occurring of the nexus between late adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2004).

In the context of western societies individual development of young people now coincides with an extended period of time spent in educational institutions—junior high school, middle school and high school, and then for many, college. As a life stage, adolescence is structurally embedded in hierarchically organized educational institutions and since the late 1960s has become an ever expanding part of the market economy. Marketing to adolescents is segmented and targeted to pre-teens, teens, and younger adults so that a constellation of brand named commodities increasingly act as markers of identification and affiliation. Youth ‘pop’ culture is defined and delineated by subtly identified and stratified markets for clothing, food, music, entertainment, new technologies, video games, and a host of other commodities.

Making the transition from childhood to adulthood is an increasingly more difficult and circuitous task, involving the need to make sense of self in relation to traits, characteristics, achievements, attributes, motives, expectations, skills, and abilities, and in relation to others. The possibilities an adolescent sees for him/herself in the future are congruent with the expansion of social roles expected of individuals as they move toward adulthood. Ethnicity, gender, and social class frame the dimensions of the self that is forged during adolescence and, depending on the social context, influence the possibilities that individuals perceive for themselves in the future.

The concept of possible selves refers to how individuals think about their potential and their future (Markus & Nurius, 1986); “the future-oriented components of the self-concept” (Oyserman & Markus, 1993) that represent individuals’ ideas about the ‘ideal selves’ that they would very much like to become; what they might become, and those selves they dread becoming. Possible selves then “represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954), and while they are individualized, they are also “distinctly social”, being “the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual’s own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others” (p. 954). An arena in which adolescents can *safely* try on and contemplate future selves in the world of work, romantic relationships, adventure, risks, success and failure, come to terms with discrimination, find strategies for navigating personal and social relations, and settle on personal values and beliefs, is through the reading they undertake voluntarily.

### 1.3. The present study

In this study, We draw upon data from the *Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study* (MADICS), an ongoing study of adolescent development by Jacquelynne Eccles, Arnold Sameroff, and their colleagues. The study began in 1991 (wave 1) when the participants were in the 7th grade and now has 6 longitudinal waves covering the ages 12–22. The initial sample of approximately 1400 adolescents included 61% African American and 35% European American whose families had been in the USA for several generations. The median income range for the African American adolescents’ families in 1991 was \$45,000–\$49,999 and for the European American adolescents’ families was \$50,000–\$54,999. The average level of education of the primary caregiver was the same in the two ethnic groups: 54% had received a high school diploma and 40% had obtained a college degree.

While the MADICS study was not specifically concerned with reading habits of participants, it did include qualitative data on 35 youth. We drew on this study because intriguingly some of those interviewees did make reference to reading as a highly salient activity in which they voluntarily and willingly engaged. The interview protocol did not ask about reading habits or literacy practices which in and of itself highlights that these activities were integral to the interviewees’ lives and identities. The paper focuses mostly on book reading; the type of reading the interviewees reported doing. Secondly, the study provided a strong longitudinal design that

included a wealth of quantitative data, together with extensive qualitative data from the targeted youth that spanned a 3-year period from late adolescence through until 1-year post-high school. These interviewees also provided journalistic pieces as audiotape recordings in which they described and reflected upon their experiences and interviewed their friends at about the time of the first interview visit during the summer of 11th grade (1996), again in 12th grade, and 1-year post-high school, as they were making the transition to more adult roles and responsibilities. We examined interview transcripts for those of the interviewees, who had made it to a community or 4-year college and who were identifiable as either high or low voluntary readers from their survey data which also measured school-based reading achievement. The MADICS study design was guided by a number of theoretical frameworks. Most relevant to the present study were the theoretical bases of self-schema and identity formation and transactional/ecological theories of development (Eccles [Parsons] et al., 1983; Peck, Eccles, Malanchuk, & Funk, 2004).

## 2. Method

A series of structured qualitative interviews with each participant were drawn upon resulting in extended narrative accounts of life stories (McAdams, 2001) in that participants reflected back on their earlier years and speculated on their possible future selves. The number of extended interview transcripts ranged from three to five per individual. An analytical procedure derived from discursive psychology (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Horton-Salway, 2001; Potter, 1996; Potter & Mulkay, 1985), was used to discern sets of concepts which were grouped into themes related to: the nature, stability, purposes of voluntary reading, influences on goals and participation choices, and identity development through reading. From these data six case study accounts (Stake, 1995) were developed to illuminate these key themes as they related to the voluntary reading these interviewees nominated. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the interviewees to protect their anonymity.

### 2.1. *Juggling multiple demands—stability of voluntary reading*

Although in everyday life we identify people as being “readers” or, conversely, “not readers”, it would be surprising if even avid readers remained stable in the level of voluntary reading they do over an extended period of time. From childhood through to young adulthood people engage in activities and practices that compete for their time and interest. Even small children engage in activities that compete with one another for their time and energy and these competing factors increase through adolescence (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999). It would be unusual to expect that reading habits remain stable throughout these life changes from childhood into adolescence, later adolescence, and early adulthood. In the senior years of high school, the pressures can become so intense for educational achievement that everything else in a student’s life is swamped—including non-assigned leisure reading. One interviewee, Jane (ID#241), a high reader, registered her distress at trying to juggle the competing demands on her time and energy during her final high school year when she was barely able to keep up with the assigned work:

And that plus my, um, AP lit class which is um, literature. It’s really tough because AP it stands for ‘Advanced Placement’. It’s a college level course and it’s really difficult because I’ve always gotten straight A’s in English. No problem. And now all of a sudden like my teacher doesn’t like me or something. I don’t know. And I’m getting straight B’s...and now I’ve started precal [pre-calculus] and that’s tough too. That takes a lot of my time at night. ‘Cuz she gives us homework just about every night. And so most of the time like when I’d rather be working on English or AP so I can get a better grade in those classes. I don’t have time to because I have precal homework. And it’s just—God everything is so crazy...So, I mean, I’m just feeling—so stressed out right now and [sighs]. I don’t even know what to do.

Jane portrays herself as a hard worker who at this point in time is so intent on doing well in school that she has little time for anything else. Her GPA of 4.0 in high school exacted other costs. From her interviews we know that she intended to go to college. Although at one point she intended going to Pennsylvania State University to study architectural engineering, she eventually went to college at the University of Maryland to study civil engineering for a time before switching into chemical engineering (honors).

## 2.2. Purposes of reading—reading as escape or distraction

While Jane was diverted away from voluntary reading by competing demands during the final year of high school, during the summer one year post-high school voluntary reading of fiction again found a place in her life. Jane reported that she had been on vacation with her family and except for doing chores at home she was not working at a job. During her uncommitted time she was reading *Stephen King* and *Dean Koontz* novels:

I: [I]f you're done with your chores and you're not seeing friends 'cause you're not getting along with them what sorts of things were you doing in your spare time?

Jane: Um. I normally end up reading or, um, or like playing computer games [short chuckle].

I: Um-hmm. What kind of reading are you doing?

Jane: Um, mostly *Stephen King*... and like *Dean Koontz* and stuff like that.

I: And you like that?

Jane: Yeah.

I: Um-hmm. What was the other one besides *Stephen King*?

Jane: Um, *Dean Koontz*.

I: *Dean Koontz*, um-hmm. Hmm. So has it been a good summer or?

Jane: Not really (short chuckle).

Jane's comment that her summer was not a good one is explained by relational difficulties with her boyfriend that resulted in them breaking up. As a consequence of the split she was also experiencing difficulties with friends who were also friends of her boyfriend and whom she believed were siding with him. For Jane, reading and playing computer games over the summer was a distraction and a way of filling in time before returning to college when her study schedule would again direct her time use and energy.

Reading as a distraction and as an escape from personal and family issues was also described by another participant. In the case of a high reading European American male, Leon (ID#2114), his interest in reading science fiction was triggered by one of his peers in the seventh grade:

Leon: I read a lot of science fiction I guess because I don't really like this... I never liked this reality for a long time and like to kinda' warp myself into something different. Although I didn't really read a lot until I met a friend in seventh who uh, read a lot of science fiction and then I started reading a lot of it... Just find it interesting. Uh, movies [pause] well, I kinda' like science fiction there again. Uh, it's kinda' the good guy beats the bad guy at the end.

I: Is there anything in particular, a book or movie, that you think actually had a significant impact on who you are now?

Leon: I don't think so. They're a good time waster, a good way to get rid of the situation. (pause) But otherwise they don't shape my life.

In the context of the survey data and the other interviews with Leon, the phrases "they're a good time waster" and a "good way to get rid of the situation" signal that there were other unresolved stresses, tensions and problems that had impacted and continued to influence his life. For instance, in recalling the transition into the middle school (seventh and eighth grades), where the majority of students were African American, Leon indicated that it was at this point he first experienced being a white male and what he called a minority group member.

Leon: Yeah. The area's changed some since I been around here... [pause] I went to a virtually all white elementary school then I went to a virtually all black uh, middle school and that was... strange... Uh, I really didn't know how to meet the expectations of my peers so [pause] kind of difficult being picked on a lot, you know... Yeah, I was like one of, uh, well, junior high school, I was like one of four white males in the entire school or something like that.

I: So you had the experience of being a minority there for sure?

Leon: Oh yeah, it was [pause] jumping in cold water... [sighs] I really hated going to school for those two years but they got better in high school and I can deal with it now it's... fine... Seventh or eighth grade uh, well, back in middle school years, well, people were kinda' out to get you, you know. [pause] Uh, make fun of you, tear you apart or something, stomp on you [pause] uh, [pause] it's not so much the case in high school except

maybe your freshman year. Uh, [pause] that's just for being a freshman. [pause] Seventh and eighth grade everyone's open game.

Leon's account indicated that he felt discriminated against and that he was bullied during the seventh and eighth grades to the point where he "hated going to school". In a later interview he returned to this experience which remained highly salient to him:

I went from elementary school to junior high school—it was, like, all white to all black, and I was, uh, cultural—culture-shock there...it felt pretty lonely...I didn't really have much immediately in common with many people so I didn't make too many friends...it was a hard two years.

His earlier comment that reading science fiction became a "good way to get rid of the situation" spoke volumes about why he also described himself as a "procrastinator." Elsewhere when asked about why he liked to read books, he struggled to give form to his thoughts, but eventually reiterated the point that reading provided an escape into a different reality; a means of not having to dwell on things that he did not want to have to think about:

Leon: I'm uh, no scholar by any means but I like reading books and—

I: Why do you like reading books?

Leon: Uh, different reality, the way that's kind of an escape. Uh, life around me gets a little boring or something happens that I don't really want to think about like say my sister, uh.

Leon's unpleasant middle school experiences were compounded by his parents' marital difficulties and their subsequent divorce which impacted negatively on him. The custody process lasted for 9 years, making his life feel unstable. Between grades 3 and 9 Leon and his three siblings oscillated between his parents' houses and as the oldest son, he did not like having to choose between his parents, although he preferred living with his mother. During the 9th grade Leon was required by a judge's order to attend a psychologist for counseling. He was embarrassed and found the whole exercise unnecessary. When asked how he had changed since the 9th grade Leon indicated:

I feel more secure, more confident; a little happier. Things seem to settle down in my life and, I mean like they went a little bit better, but now I'm getting a little bit nervous because I gotta' make another big change and lose that stability that I like so much.

Despite articulating a desire to do better than he had been doing in high school, his grades declined to the point where for his final year he was bumped down to a lower level program allowing him to coast through.

By the later interviews, conducted 1 year post-high school, Leon was still contending with a propensity for procrastination. At this time he appeared to have very little motivation, was less confident and no more in control of his life. He even spoke of his decision to join up with the Marines as if it had just happened to him without it being intentional:

Someone volunteered me behind my back...Kind of pro-military myself so I didn't push him away. It's kind of interesting what they said and then, the next thing I know I'm down at the recruiting station, signing papers and swearing in.

The lack of privacy and the insistence on authority in the military were not to his liking so he dropped out of boot camp. After leaving the Marines, Leon enrolled at Prince George's County Community College for an associate degree, but this also proved to be more work than he had expected. His entry into college made little difference to his level of motivation which remained problematic:

My motivation's not quite where it should be... Uh... don't get up in the morning and uh, feel happy to be going to school or anything, it's just—eh

Although a little later in the interview Leon indicated a desire to find a job in the field of electronics he remained characteristically vague about how this might happen.

Leon was a high reader with high achievement in reading whose parents had higher educational and occupational prestige levels. We might therefore have expected that his literacy achievement and activities together with his family's economic and educational resources would have ensured that he was destined for

a 4-year college degree. Instead, we have traced the trajectory of a young man who did not cope well with the exogenous shocks to his world over an extended period of time. Despite his claim in the interview when he was in the 11th grade that “getting a good job out of high school... college is almost required now,” Leon seemed unable to overcome his propensity for procrastination and inertia. Without his family’s resources to support him, it is questionable whether he would have attended any college at all. Even though the reading-related educational benefits were not immediately evident for Leon, perhaps his voluntary reading in some ways shielded him from more serious social and emotional problems. Clearly reading was an escape from the reality of his daily existence and he used it as a buffer against what he perceived as unpleasant experiences within his home context and in middle school. His reading of science fiction appears to have acted as a diversion without opening up viable opportunities for vicarious social comparisons and more positive ideas of who he might be.

### 2.3. *Reading as exploration of possible selves*

As indicated earlier, a central focus of the interviews with participants in the larger MADICS study was to uncover the processes involved in identity formation, with the intention of providing a comprehensive description of various developmental trajectories through adolescence for self-related beliefs, values, goals, and expectations. The trajectories of individuals as they shift from adolescence into emerging adulthood are often impacted by many different and competing influences, at the same time as young people are becoming increasingly aware of themselves, their values and their beliefs. Judging from what some of the participants in our study had to say, reading was an important catalyst in the gestation of identity formation related to both gender and ethnicity and career-related possible selves.

When asked about her identification with being African American, Margorie (ID#2624) did not immediately identify with the question. First and foremost, what she responded to was her pride in being *female*; a pride that had its origins in reading books and watching films about what she identified as more “aggressive” females. From the longitudinal survey data, we know that Margorie was a low voluntary reader and that she made it to college where she studied molecular biology. Although her survey responses indicated that she was a low-frequency reader, the passage below suggests that the reading she *had* done significantly shaped the ways in which she *placed* herself in the world. Of greatest salience to her was a pride in first, being female—and then, in being an African American female.

I: Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt proud to be an African American?

Margorie: Um. When I start—well, I felt proud to be a female. I don’t know. I don’t know if that’s what you’re—[voice whisper]

I: Yeah, you can, tell me about that, ‘cuz we’re, we’re gonna get into that too so you can tell me now about, when you felt proud.

Margorie: Just the fact. You know like, Annie [*Orphan Annie*] for instance! [laughs]... That was like my role model. And like *Pippy Longstocking* and all, all these, um. more aggressive, I guess you can say females that were like in stories and movies and even in history. Like when we’re reading about you know, African Americans, like *Sojourner Truth* and all these other ones, I can’t think of any right now! But there are, I know there’s a lot. But it’s the fact that, it was a woman that did it. And people are always make it like men supposed to be the dominant figures you know. Just made me proud, it made me feel that I wanna be one of those women who—and that, it don’t have to be African American. There was like, *Amelia Earhart*, although she never came back [both start to laugh]—but she wasn’t, she was still trying to achieve her goal, you know. It’s just a, it’s, uh, just fascinating! [laughs]... And, when I learned about, there was black females. Then it made me also proud to be an African American—a female African American.

It is not surprising that Margorie did not identify herself with a conventional definition of ‘blackness’ and that she was more concerned with being herself—“the me that I am”. The person she is now and that she wants to be is not confined by the stereotypes of African Americans that she believes people hold:

Well I, I don’t really perceive myself in, with the other African Americans. You see I don’t, I don’t try, to dress like them I guess you could say... I mean there’s no, I don’t understand when people say like “because

you wear your pants down low and stuff like that, that's called dressing black, you know? ... I, I don't associate myself with any of the stereotypes. But because of my parents, I associate myself with the culture.

Equally she insisted that she was interested in classical music and played softball almost as a way of resisting the stereotypes. As she said:

I played softball like in elementary school. And I think I started there because they be like, that's a white girl sport, and I'd be like..."no, not really!"

Given what Margorie had said earlier about strong women being role models and opening up possibilities for who she wanted to be, it is not surprising that she was also not willing to follow gendered conventions. As she said:

I try to portray myself as not necessarily a woman, or ...more like a female, you know? ...Not necessarily a lady, 'cause I don't go out dressed up... I'm still gonna be outspoken, I'm still gonna stick to the way I feel, I'm still gonna carry myself as a female... I'm not gonna, um, conform to, you know, the way I'm supposed to be.

Margorie was not a high reader but her reading does appear to have opened up possible selves and role models such that she was not willing to conform to or be bound by the stereotypical behaviors often attributed to African Americans and/or females.

If Orphan Annie, Pippy Longstocking, and Amelia Earhart were influential figures in germinating a young woman's pride and awareness of herself as a woman and an African American woman, then it is perhaps not unexpected that equally diverse figures from history were influential in the formation of the values, beliefs and expectations of Clarence (ID#809), a young African American male, who was a high reader and successful in making it to the University of Maryland where he studied economics. From the interview transcripts he seemed to be a rather serious young man, who had thought deeply about his Christian faith, issues of discrimination, his ambitions, and gender stereotypes. Clarence identified more with his faith than with his gender or ethnicity; this helped him approach discrimination with less anger and to be more sensitive to others. He was quite conscious of being different in that he observed: "I have interests that, you know, common people really don't care about". Clarence perceived himself as a reader: "I have like a ton of books back there...all kinds of group history, or cultural history. Not that much art history, but I don't really like art." It is telling that he distinguished himself from the "common people" through his association with books, particularly those with an academic intent. These texts and literacy practices in a particular sense inscribe the way he perceived himself in relation to others.

Clarence's reading of history resulted in an interest in economics, particularly the ideas of Karl Marx. He viewed the responses of his peers in school to Karl Marx as rather superficial and wrong: "Because everybody...in school, it's like...everybody hated him, and it wasn't like that". He went on to reveal the depth of his reading beyond the classroom and his engagement with the story of Marx's life. He also engaged with more general issues as to why, in his view, socialism initially appealed to and was embraced by the Russian people:

He was like a decent person. Dirty, but (laughs), you know, because he was poor all the time...he had to depend on friends and different things to support him. And he wasn't ex—exactly the founder of socialism. And socialism is not Communism and things like that, that I had to learn myself, because in school, it was just like, we hate Communism, and they never really explained to us the roots, the reasons, why it came to pass. Why, why Communism even existed, because of the Czar's cruelty to the people—people starving, the pogroms. You know, killing all the Jews and different things.

Clarence's reading was also influenced by a popular television program: *Family Ties*. One of the characters in the show frequently mentioned reading the *Economist* and the *Wall Street Journal*, both of which were unfamiliar to him. This prompted Clarence's interest in the publications to which his father subscribed that were accessible to him in the home:

My father, well my father, he used to subscribe to, um, *Black Enterprise* and different magazines, so those were around, so I just looked at them and started reading them and started learning.

When asked about influences on his life and values Clarence nominated two people—his father and Richard Nixon. It was apparent that Clarence was conscious of the irony of acknowledging Richard Nixon as an influence, given that he was a disgraced ex-President of the United States: “Oh, that’s going to be a real funny one, too. [laughs] Richard Nixon.” He further indicated an awareness of the idiosyncratic way in which his values had been affected by the intersection of watching a television program and the reading he sought out about Richard Nixon, a figure of individual enduring interest to Clarence. Here is his account of how that particular interest developed:

Because [as a] child... I was watching the news and I heard these stories about Watergate and him betraying the country and everything. And then I started reading some of his books, and what he believed in. I, I guess he believed in. [laughs]... I saw a documentary about him, and he, he was reading this speech the day after he had resigned... And Gerald Ford was about to take over... And he had said something like, “never be petty, never, never be, never be mean, or mean-spirited”... Um, others may hate you, but they won’t win unless you hate them back. And that, that really stuck in my head—“Others may hate you, but unless you hate them back, they don’t win”... And, and he let the other people win by hating them back and trying to go after them and attacking them all... I see that, that was like a fatal mistake they’d made, and I made it like a pact in my head never to do that... If, if I see someone who hates me, who wants to destroy me, I’m not going to hate them back... You know, because he was like on top of the world, but he, he decided to hate the people that hated him, and it destroyed him.

Although Clarence could observe that he was “always proud to be an African American” and “always going to be an African American male,” he preferred to see himself as not “part of a group” and not to allow stereotypes and racially prejudiced groups to influence how he looked upon himself. As he said of himself: “When I look in the mirror, I always just see myself... I just, just see me, and who I am.” At the point in time of the interview conducted in the summer of the 11th grade, he did not report much experience with racial discrimination, and it was clear from the values he identified with that he tried to disregard stereotypical, racially offensive remarks. However, when a fellow student derided African Americans with the allegation that they could only get into college through their sporting prowess, he was disturbed:

Well, the one thing that really offended me was when this one person said that the only way black people get into college was through sports, and that really offended me, because I don’t really have like any spatial skills whatsoever. So, I have no talent in sports at all, so that really offended me, ‘cause that’s, that’s a very hard stereotype.

He replied to this remark by saying “all black people can’t play sports”. For Clarence, such stereotypes and prejudices of African Americans derived from people who, as he said, “haven’t dealt with the fact that we’re human beings too” and “just as intelligent as everybody else.” Clarence did not allow himself to make the mistake of hating those who hated him—reading about Richard Nixon’s mistakes appears to have influenced Clarence’s values as he emerged into adulthood.

The people we have examined so far suggest that while there is a relationship between voluntary reading and the values and beliefs with which they identify, that relationship is not linear or direct. In the case of Antoinette (ID#643) we are able to trace a more direct relationship between her voluntary reading and eventual educational participation. Antoinette was a vivacious, talkative African American young woman who, over a series of interviews, provided a detailed account of her life experiences and decisions. Her vivid imagination helped her place herself in different roles, enabling her to take up what seemed like a third-person point of view in relation to her own life narratives. As a result, she recognized and acknowledged the influences of others on her life, traced how her choices developed over time, and demonstrated how her interests in reading literature related to her educational attainment and her occupational aspirations.

Antoinette was an avid reader of novels and other fiction and although she did not make it clear at what age she began to identify herself as a reader, her comments concerning the extent of the collection of books she owned suggested that reading had been an activity central to her life for some time:

One of my biggest interests that I have is I read a lot. If you go back in my room, you’ll see nothing but books all over the place. I have a big box of books... in my closet and then over to the side I have this big

trash can that I made in school. It's full of books and then up on the wall, I have these...I have a whole three, four shelves full of books. That's mainly what I do is read.

It was apparent from her comments that reading was not just something Antoinette did when she had nothing else to do. She nominated it as her major interest such that not only did she read at home in her leisure time, she also read avidly during her free time in school and as a distraction from boring teaching during classes. The following passage captures Antoinette's lively, playful wit and the voraciousness of her reading, even during her lunch breaks:

My best friend, I've known him since the ninth grade and...we've been close all through of high school because I remember my, um, my tenth grade year, we use to eat lunch together...I use to argue with him because I'd be sitting up there at lunch time reading one of my, um, romances. And he'd tell me, he tell me, he say, why are you reading them books. And then he use to make fun of me. Like, "they ain't got no pictures in them." I was like, I was like, you—I'd say, use your imagination, they don't have to have pictures in it for it to be interesting.

Her best friend was clearly not someone who understood why anyone would want to waste their lunch time reading books. Not only did Antoinette read avidly in her free time in school, she also used her voluntary reading as an escape from boring teaching during certain classes. As she said:

[I]f you're a good teacher, I will pay attention to you and I'll do all the work, but if you're not a good teacher, I will just bring a book to class and read it the whole time.

Such behaviors resonate with Leon's absorption in science fiction as a strategy for avoiding the reality of his everyday experiences. Unlike Leon, Antoinette's distractions were not procrastinations. She was highly engaged in writing and reading-activities she undertook voluntarily in conjunction with her friend. Together they acted as readers of each other's stories:

I always wanted to be a writer, but when I was in middle school, I wanted to write horror stories...right now, I would like to write historical romances...Well I know my friend, she's in school, she writes horror stories...I read her stories and tell her what's wrong with them and she reads mine to tell me...what's wrong with mine.

I have focused on Antoinette because she was a high-frequency voluntary reader who went to college. She left her home town and went all of the way to Texas to undertake teacher education so as to become an English teacher. We have a clear sense that she set her sights on being a high school teacher and was especially attracted to being an English teacher because of her love for both reading and talking. It is interesting that she put aside her earlier notion of becoming a lawyer because of the *type* of reading that occupation would require. Not all reading was pleasurable for Antoinette and she did not want a career that involved reading books that were not interesting to her. The type of reading was of critical importance. When she said 'I love reading' she was referring to fiction. It was this that dissuaded her from the idea of pursuing a career in law and made her decide on becoming an English teacher. The role model of her own English teacher together with her love of reading and writing fiction acted as catalysts in the formation of an occupational possible self as a teacher. Here is what she had to say about her career choice and her commitment to sharing her love of reading with her future students:

And at first I had wanted to be a lawyer. But then, I mean I love reading. But then I thought about, thought about all of those hours I'd have to pore, pore over books reading. That probably wouldn't interest me. And I thought: "oh no, that's not something I could do." ...So, and, and I love, I love talking! I decided I wanted to be a teacher and after that, it just seemed like that's the only thing I wanna do. You know I thought about my English teachers and you know, and I hoped I would be, I hope, I will be as good an English teacher to my students as they are to me, but I always wanted to be an English teacher. And I even had these little stupid things. I would picture what I would put up in my classroom like on the boards and stuff. And I, I even had this little stupid one saying I told, I told all my friends that I was going to, um, say it the first time I introduced myself to the class. Have a little sign that says: "Reading, it's funnn-damental!" (Antoinette, ID#0643, African American).

Antoinette's proposed sign for her classroom: "Reading, it's funnn-damental!" captured and underscored exactly how important she felt reading had been to her personally and in the actualization of her goal of becoming an English teacher.

#### 2.4. *Relationship with educational goals and participation choices*

A theme that reverberated throughout the interviews was the intersection of supports and affordances from family, friends and teachers in providing scaffolds to interviewees' educational aspirations, expectations and ambitions. The source of these supports varied but they were there in different guises and formed a sustaining matrix of advice and belief in the capabilities of each individual.

Tracy (ID#1601) was a successful, highly motivated student, who identified with positive role models and supports within her family—even though they were very low on measures of educational and occupational levels; as well as her teachers who had fostered her learning, educational achievement and aspirations. She identified as a reader—"I read everything" as well as expressing enjoyment for writing. In both these endeavors, she was nurtured by the enthusiasm of teachers and her family members. She enjoyed reading and writing in Spanish as well as English, and identified early and enduring influences from her aunt who had provided scaffolding for her reading, math learning and interest in Spanish:

My Aunt Monica... Well, she's a teacher and she's always pushed me to read stuff and do stuff... I read everything. She makes me do math problems that [pause] and she's the one that made me start liking Spanish... I love Spanish now... I can't speak but I can write and I can read it (Tracy, ID#1601, African American).

An equally early and even more enduring support came from her mother who encouraged and believed in her abilities. Her mother's lack of educational participation was influential in encouraging her daughter to achieve the highest level of educational participation possible:

My mother. She encourage me to finish school, graduate high school and go to college because she didn't have a chance to go... She bought me books; she pushed me to go to school.

Importantly, her mother not only "pushed" her to go to school and encouraged her to graduate high school and college; she also actively facilitated her daughter's interests in literacy activities by providing her with her own books. In another interview, Tracy talked of her fear of failure on hearing of the dropout rates at the University of Maryland. Her mother was there assuring and supporting her daughter's college ambitions:

My mother, she motivated me to, um, go to college... She told me that I can do anything I wanted to do and she really, she knows that I really, really want to be a speech pathologist... She told me I could do whatever I wanted to.

Even her early religious training intersected with her developing literacy skills and abilities. She acknowledged the influence her grandmother had had on her religious development and described their dialogic exploration of Bible texts involving reading, questioning and interpretation:

I tell you about... the person in my life who helped me to start thinking about God... The person who was most, um, who has had the most influence in that area of my life is my Grandmother. Because, she helped me, I went to live with her when I was about six and she taught me to read the Bible and I would go to church with her almost every day or every other day and Sunday. She made me read the book, the Bible, to go to Sunday school... [to] learn more about what that she didn't teach. Then, when I come home and she'll ask me what I learned, I'd tell her. She'll tell me more stuff that I didn't know and so on. And the thing... because of what she did, I'm a better person today because I would say I'm well rounded because of my spiritual background.

The skills practiced with her grandmother at 6 years of age surely contributed to the reading skills and abilities she developed during her early years in elementary school.

Not surprisingly, Tracy had a consistently strong academic record. In one of her interviews she indicated that she had an 'A' average in eighth grade, that she had been included in her school's *Talented and Gifted*

*Program*, been a member of honor societies, and had taken Advanced Placement (AP) Science, Math, and Spanish classes. Not only did she have the affordances of supportive family members, this young woman had the active support of teachers at her high school who intervened to direct and assist her. She had a close relationship with her math teacher who had pushed her to take advanced classes and provided her with study aids when she re-sat the SAT so that she could raise her score from 1170 to 1270:

I have to take AP Calculus because my pre-calculus teacher, she signed me up for that. She was like: ‘Tracy, I want you take this’...I was like ‘okay’. Because my math teacher, she’s like I knew her since ninth grade. She taught me Algebra II and trig and now she was my pre-calculus teacher and now she want me to take AP Calculus.

Similarly, she was encouraged by her Spanish teacher to enter for a poetry prize, which she won and by her 11th grade English teacher who encouraged her interest in writing by writing a story with her.

In order to reach her goal of becoming a speech pathologist, Tracy had formulated a clear plan for achievement. She had consulted resources gathered from a speech pathology conference she had attended, and selected a senior year class schedule of speech, psychology, and AP biology. She also indicated that she was aware of the scholarships and awards available to prospective students of University of Maryland—the college of her choice.

### *2.5. Voluntary reading, possible selves, and post-secondary educational participation*

The results from the interviews with African American and European American youth from adolescence through to emerging adulthood provide illuminating case studies that highlight the multiple factors that intersect to influence voluntary reading purposes and behaviors, and in turn relate to educational participation. It is clear that the amount of voluntary reading in which individuals engage is affected by other pressures stemming from school, family, social, and work commitments, all of which become increasingly insistent and invasive as adolescents progress into the senior years of high school and beyond.

The reading that individuals undertake can serve as a means of escape from their daily realities, as in the case of Leon; a means of pleasantly filling in time when nothing else is on offer, as it appears to have been for Jane; or as an avenue for gathering information for developing particular interests and career-related possible selves, as in the cases of Clarence, Antoinette, Margorie, and Tracy. Voluntary reading was important to a number of the interviewees as a catalyst in the formation of identity that allowed individuals to make social comparisons and to distance themselves from the expectations of others. For instance, Clarence’s interest in reading history helped him to develop values as an African American male that ensured he did not conform to the stereotypes of ‘male’ or ‘African American’, just as Antoinette was able to identify herself as not conforming to gender stereotypes in terms of her dress, race, and occupational ambitions.

The intersection of early and later voluntary reading and educational participation and engagement can be seen with all of these interviewees. Clarence had access to reading materials in the home, Tracy was introduced to Bible reading by her grandmother at the age of 6 and had a mother and an aunt who bought her books and “pushed” her to do well in school. In circumstances where reading is a socially valued activity in the home, support for reading may be both explicit and incidental. In order to make reading materials available a certain level of financial resources is necessary. Our focus on participants with the higher levels of voluntary reading resulted in the majority of the interviewees coming from middle SES families. While these parents may have had little or no college education and were employed in blue collar or white collar occupations, they were aware that family finances spent on buying books and other reading materials was an investment in their child’s educational aspirations and future. For Antoinette, Clarence, Leon, Tracy, Margorie, and Jane the relationship between their voluntary reading habits, their family context and their educational outcomes was clearly identifiable.

### *2.6. Implications and outlook*

The implications from this study are that we need to more carefully examine what adolescents are reading voluntarily and why they are reading these texts. Voluntary reading has been taken more seriously among

children than it has among adolescents. Only now are researchers beginning to look seriously at the literacy activities adolescents engage in voluntarily to determine how these are related to the formation of aspirations, expectations, values, and beliefs. This study would suggest that voluntary reading has benefits that extend beyond higher achievement on standardized test scores, although these are highly significant in continuing in educational participation, and that there is a need to focus more directly on reading that encourages middle and late adolescents to think about and contemplate their possible selves—who they want to be, who they are, and who they fear being. In practice this might mean focusing more deliberately on career-related biographies in junior high that map out not only an individual's motivations but also what educational outcomes are needed to 'make it' in a particular career or profession and opening up opportunities for adolescents to read about both successes and failures. Equally, the reading of fiction allows adolescents to "try on" an array of possible—and impossible selves. This study invites us to think more about the processes by which voluntary reading in early adolescence perhaps comes to benefit educational outcomes over and above level of reading achievement.

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