



## “Wearing a mask” vs. connecting identity with learning

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary insights regarding identity emphasize its situated, negotiated nature (i.e., identity is shaped by – and shapes in response – the contexts in which it is formed; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991) Recent work also suggests that this identity/context intersection holds powerful implications regarding engagement in learning (Brophy, 2008). This pair of qualitative studies drew from contemporary models connecting learning with identity (Study 1: *cultural modeling*, Lee, 2007 and *third-space/hybrid-identities*, Gutiérrez, 2008; Study 2: *Kids’ business* inquiry projects, Fairbanks, 2000) to explore the nature and impact of such connections among disaffected ninth-grade English students at a high-needs school. Results demonstrate evidence of: (1) a significant connection between identity and learning; (2) students’ negotiation of engaged patterns of participation; (3) the relevance of student voice to this process; and (4) the impact of connections between identity and learning on students’ participation in, and affective response to, learning.

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### 1. Introduction

The work of achieving a well-integrated identity has traditionally been considered a critical developmental task, one that is particularly salient for adolescents and that often preoccupies their energy and attention (Erikson, 1968). Recent socio-cultural and situated explorations of identity (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schachter, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978) have shed important light on this process by bringing attention to the intersection between the development of identity and the context of that development; that is, they have highlighted the interplay of personal, social, critical, and cultural situational factors in our understanding of identity. In contrast to conceiving of identity as an achieved understanding of the contours of self and as primarily a function of individual mental processes (as some have interpreted Erikson’s work), these theorists conceive of identity as the pattern of practices and choices that emerge (and potentially shift) within the interaction of person and context. Identity can be seen therefore as a type of ongoing negotiation of participation, shaped by – and shaping in response – the context(s) in which it occurs.

Recent theory and research have also recognized this intersection between identity and context as a potentially significant aspect of student engagement and motivation. For example, Brophy (2008) reminded us that Dewey (1910) defined genuine interest in learning as actually an identification of the self with a concept or object, an identification that leads to self-initiated exploration (i.e., energized engagement) of that Concept or object. Similarly, Bergin (1999) suggested that individuals develop schemata associ-

ated with their identity and are likely to be more engaged with topics and experiences that resonate with that schema. Flum and Kaplan (2006) explained that students who intentionally examine the relevance and meaning of school content and learning with respect to their sense of who they are (or want to become) develop an exploratory orientation toward learning that involves actively seeking/processing information. Considering these insights, a vital next step in understanding student engagement and motivation is to discern both the nature and impact of such energizing connections between identity and school-based learning and how these connections might be reliably established and sustained amidst the daily demands of classroom life. The two complementary, exploratory, qualitative studies reported here drew from contemporary models connecting learning with student identity (Study 1: *cultural modeling*, Lee, 2007 and *third space/hybrid identities*, Gutiérrez, 2008; Study 2: *Kids’ Business* inquiry projects, Fairbanks, 2000) to clarify the nature and impact of such connections among two diverse groups of primarily struggling high school students within the academic demands of their ninth-grade English class.

### 2. Emerging views of identity development

Traditional conceptions of identity development – exploring, identifying, and integrating seemingly disparate aspects of the self to arrive at a sense of personal continuity across time and context – have historically been attributed initially to Erikson (1968). Although a thorough understanding of Erikson’s work reveals his attention to the cultural, historical, and institutional elements of identity formation, individual mental processes have often been given primacy in interpretations of his conception of identity development (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; see also Cote & Levine,

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1988; Erikson, 1968; Schachter, 2005). One of the most well established elaborations of Erikson's work, Marcia's (1980) identity status model, is based on the degree to which an individual explores, and commits to, particular identities. McAdams's life story model of identity (1996) asserted that individuals living in modern societies provide their lives with coherence and purpose by constructing evolving narratives of the self (i.e. life stories). Each of these perspectives regard identity development as a process of sorting out (achieving) a reasonably coherent, workable perspective on the self; each is also framed, to a great degree, as a primarily individual psychological process.

In an influential contribution to our understanding of development, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) highlighted the relevance of the multiple, embedded contexts in which individuals find themselves (e.g., home, family, peer groups, school, community, culture, history), each of which may wield a potent influence on development. Although identity has been conceptualized in a variety of ways (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), growing attention to these ecological complexities may provide the most "realistic and ecologically valid view" (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2000, p. 222). McCaslin (2004; 2009) captured the rich interplay of personal, social, and cultural influences on identity development in her model of *co-regulation of emergent identity* (p. 137). She suggested an ongoing reciprocal press among these three influences that together challenge, shape, and guide (i.e., co-regulate) identity.

Many contemporary models have emphasized this situated nature of identity, raising complex and significant issues. For example, Lave and Wenger's (1991) framework of identity drew from practice or activity theory to conceive of identity as an individual's pattern of choices or practices situated within particular contexts. According to these theorists, a range of potential participatory choices exists at any moment within any community; the term *identities-in-practice* refers to the patterns of participation individuals choose to adopt. Use of the term *identities-in-practice* rather than *identities* highlights the important contrast between, on the one hand, a conception of identity as a set of choices and practices co-constructed between an individual and a specific community, and, on the other hand, an achieved, relatively uniform sense of self.

In a similar, widely cited, contemporary understanding of identity, Dorothy Holland and her coauthors also highlighted the reciprocal interplay between identity and context (Holland et al., 1998). According to these theorists, the way individuals come to understand themselves is continually negotiated and co-constructed through what is made possible or necessary amid the daily practices, encounters, discourses, and struggles available to them within a particular context (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; Wortham, 2006). Holland and her colleagues have raised an important issue regarding context as the site of identity work when they refer to contexts as *figured worlds*. This term refers to the fact that contexts are not neutral places, but are *figured* or socially constructed with distinguishable, institutionally endorsed perspectives regarding expected/accepted types of characters, tasks, values, and styles of interacting (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Therefore, at any given moment, individuals have access to a variety of practices, some of which may be imposed; identity (i.e., identity-in-practice) can be understood as an ongoing positioning of self reflected in how individuals receive, resist, or revise those contextual affordances or constraints (Davies, 2000). It may be important therefore to consider identities as negotiated, fluid, and multiple, rather than achieved, unitary, or consistent.

### 3. Identities-in-practice within learning contexts

The concept of identities-in-practice characterizes learning as participation in a community of practice, involving not just local

events of engagement but also the construction of identities in relation to the practices within those communities (Wenger, 1999). That is, to learn in any community means to become a particular person (i.e., select a particular pattern of participation) with respect to the possibilities enabled by that community. For example, by negotiating membership (receiving, resisting, or revising expectations) within a classroom, students are practicing a particular identity in that context (reflecting and/or refracting who they are expected to be, to match who they think they are or want to be in that particular setting). Moll (1990) reminded us that students' lives are full of rich, historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge, skills and resources – referred to as *funds-of-knowledge* – that can be drawn on for such negotiations. McCarthy and Moje (2002) describe this process as an attempt by students to create identities or stories that allow them to feel like they belong in their school setting; they "just want to be part of the story" (p. 232). The ability to craft such connections (i.e., develop a sense of belonging) wields a powerful, possibly essential influence on engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; Juvonen, 2006). Identity may therefore be manifested and engagement empowered as students craft an identity-in-practice in the classroom.

Given the nature and the value of such classroom identity work, it is important to consider relevant dimensions of the figured world of schools. Schools typically legitimize certain school practices while divesting others of status or approval (Bartlett & Holland, 2002; Hatt, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Wortham, 2006). Critical theorists have long urged educators to construct learning environments that are meaningful to students (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Greene, 1995). Failure to do so – which is all too common (Hargreaves, 1996; McDermott & Varenne, 1995) – silences student voices and alienates students from educational experiences (Moll, 1990). A gap therefore often exists between students' preferred choices or practices and school-based expectations; often it is this gap, rather than students' intelligence, skills, or abilities, that must be reconciled in order for them to succeed in school (Klos, 2006).

Thus, from an ecological, socio-cultural, situated, or figured world perspective, a student's negotiation of their identity-in-practice within the context of school (i.e., their participation, or how they choose to receive, resist, or revise contextual cues) is powerfully positioned to either constrain or nurture their engagement in learning. The cost is high when students have infrequent opportunities to harness what is important and powerful to them in order to negotiate meaningful participation in learning (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006).

### 4. Supporting connections between identity and learning

Among motivation scholars, the late Brophy (2004, 2008) has played a major role in highlighting the intersection between students' identities and their learning experience as a particularly powerful site for student engagement. He pointed out that according to Dewey's (1910) notion of inquiry, it is when the public curriculum and the students' personal curriculum become intertwined that students find engagement worthwhile (see also Guthrie & Anderson, 1999). Similarly, Waterman (2004) reported that goal-oriented engagement is especially high when activities connect with an individual's identity or core sense of being. That is, the route to making the curriculum desirable, or most engaging, for students can be summarized in the formula: "It is desirable to act in accordance to one's personal identity" (Nisan, 1992, p. 133). This objective requires creating classroom cultures in which students discover who they are and negotiate connections between who they are and what they do in school. Flum and Kaplan (2006) suggested that teachers can support this process by dialoguing with students about the meaning of school learning,

scaffolding students' skill at relating material to self-knowledge, and encouraging students' sense of self as related to school content and experiences.

Tan and Calabrese Barton (2008) illustrated how paying close attention to students' identities-in-practice amidst the figured world of school provides insight into activities that sustained minority girls' active engagement in science. By carefully observing the classroom practices of sixth grade science students, the researchers observed students transform from an identity of "outsider" (low levels of engagement) to that of a "potential scientist" (active engagement) within one school year. Such a positive transformation appeared contingent on successes that students experienced when they authored various individually meaningful identities as a class participant. For example, one student who saw herself as a budding pop musician wrote (and taught to the class) a song about course content. Another, who characterized herself as a leader, moved from problematic to prominent student as she shared with the class the knowledge that she gained from voluntary Saturday field trips and became actively involved in eliciting class participation in the field trips. For these students, learning was about gaining a space in the classroom that matched what they believed they had to offer. The *non-commodified* (i.e., not traditionally valued, p. 64) funds-of-knowledge inherent in their backgrounds were used to author new identities-in-practice that elevated their engagement in learning.

It is this situated, negotiated understanding of identity that informed the current two studies' exploration of students' identity work in relationship to their engagement. The studies drew from three models for consciously designing connections between students' identities and school learning: Study 1: cultural modeling (Lee, 2007) and third space/hybrid identities (Gutiérrez, 2008) and Study 2: Kids' Business inquiry projects (Fairbanks, 2000).

#### 4.1. Cultural modeling

Using a process referred to as *cultural modeling*, Lee (2007) has suggested that schools must design learning experiences and environments in ways that bridge the differences between school-based expectations and students' funds-of-knowledge. Cultural strengths/resources suggested by Lee as examples that can be built on in classroom learning include the rich metaphorical underpinnings of the culturally-valued speech genre known as *signifying* or *playing the dozens*, or a youth's ability to classify and identify songs within musical genres as a way of introducing the practice of naming and classifying in other knowledge fields. In a similar comparison between the "smartness" that students believe characterizes them – and is required for survival – outside of school (*street-smarts*) and that which is required to survive inside school (*book smarts*), Hatt (2007) agreed that conscious attempts on the part of schools to blend the "authentic" and "academic" lives of students can allow youth to stay connected with their identities (community, cultural, personal) while simultaneously engaging at school.

#### 4.2. Third space/hybrid identities

One of the most explicit applications of a connection between identity and learning can be found in the notions of *third space/hybrid identities*. Gutiérrez and colleagues (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez & Larson, 2007) defined third space as a space that blends the official, traditional definition of experiences and expectations at school, and the unofficial space of facets of identity that students hold dear (e.g., from community, culture, family, interests) but are typically accorded less attention or respect at school. This approach allows students to develop what she refers to as hybrid identities, which interweave personal perspectives with the values

and demands of school. In a study of urban, Latino high school students, Moje et al. (2004) found that although students had significant funds-of-knowledge available to them from their lives outside school, these funds-of-knowledge were rarely accessed in the school settings. The researchers argued that by attending to that which is relevant and important to the student, teachers could help students create a hybrid identity that disrupted the negative patterns of academic motivation generated by the marginalization students experience in traditional school settings. Indeed, research demonstrates both increased engagement and achievement when such third spaces are constructed in classrooms (Faircloth, 2009; Lee, 2007).

#### 4.3. Kids' business inquiry projects

The idea that school learning should be connected with students' identity is also closely aligned with current practices offering students a voice in the texts and topics of their schoolwork (Atwell, 1998; Ivey, 1999; Rief, 1992; Worthy, 1996). Fairbanks (2000) harnessed this notion by inviting students to investigate what she referred to as *kids' business* – i.e., topics of their own choosing that had a specific connection to their lived experiences. Students researched self-selected topics, wrote extended research papers on their topics, and presented their results in formats of their own choosing. Such personal significance closed the gap between learning and students' lives, providing them with real reasons to engage in schoolwork.

Drawn from a larger, multi-year study of high school students' connection with learning, the two studies presented here harnessed these three strategies for crafting connections between students' identities and their learning experiences in ninth-grade English. By exploring these issues, this work stands to contribute to our understanding of how students negotiate an engaged identity-in-practice in the classroom, providing concrete, sustainable, and transferable avenues for connecting identity and learning. Moreover, this work explored these issues among primarily disaffected (remedial, repeating or struggling) students in a high-needs, low-performing school. Given the critical role of such engagement, especially among struggling students, and the potentially preoccupying nature of identity, these studies offer important insight into supporting engagement and therefore academic success among this group of students.

The specific research questions explored in each study were:

1. What connections do adolescents report making between issues and experiences that they find important or authentic (perspectives that may inform their participatory choices, i.e., their identities-in-practice) and their experience in their ninth-grade English class, given the opportunity to focus on or build such connections?
2. What evidence exists that students negotiate engaged identities-in-practice in their ninth-grade English class, given the opportunity to connect learning to issues relevant to identity choices?
3. What impact on engagement in learning do high school students report as a result of connections to identity within classroom learning experiences?

### 5. Study 1

It was the goal of Study 1 to employ the parallel concepts of cultural modeling and third space/hybrid identities to explore these three research questions within two ninth-grade English classes. Each class met daily for 90 min for one semester. At least once a week, students wrote about and discussed as a class their sense of whether a connection existed between their own lives and per-

spectives (i.e., their funds-of-knowledge or issues relevant to their participatory choices) and the tasks undertaken and topics studied in their English class. Four lines of data collection were designed to further inform our understanding of these issues as they emerged in the classroom and to capture students' perspectives (see below for details): (1) student written work; (2) weekly class session observations by the researcher; (3) qualitative surveys of student perspectives; and (4) student interviews used to probe student perspectives.

## 5.1. Method

### 5.1.1. Participants

Participants in Study 1 included 83 ninth-grade students in two English classes designed primarily for remedial, restart (repeating), and struggling students at a public high school located in a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States; 38% were African American, 45% European American, 9% Latino/a, 8% other, and 53% were female. Participants included all students who returned signed parent/guardian consent forms as well as individual assent forms, and who were present on the days of study activities and data collection. Attendance, and therefore participation, varied widely; of the 83 total participants, 67 were present on the days during which interviews were conducted and 73 were present to complete the final survey.

### 5.1.2. Classroom context

The school in which this study was situated was a large (~2000 students each year), diverse, public high school with one of the highest free/reduced lunch rates – and the highest dropout rate – in its county. Despite this challenging setting, the teacher in these classrooms – in her second (Study 1) and third (Study 2) years of teaching – displayed high energy and fierce devotion to her students. In the classroom, she was acutely aware of what was going on (i.e., who was engaged, who was distracted) and consistently legitimized students' perspectives, choices, and sense of themselves. She often framed class examples and activities around students' experiences and interests, as well as asking for and valuing students' ideas. Even with reluctant students or during class sessions that students did not appear to find motivating, her comments were patient, encouraging, and supportive. Moments of frustration were definitely demonstrated (especially when job demands challenged her focus on her students) as evidenced by relatively frequent, frustrated outbursts such as, "If I could just teach!"

In an effort to support her students' connection with learning – beginning in her first year of teaching – this teacher co-designed activities (with the researcher and one research assistant) intended to provide students with opportunities to connect learning with issues relevant to their own identity. It was important to the research team also to design activities that were sustainable, by virtue of being easily reproducible and congruent with the typical requirements of high school English. Therefore, strategies were crafted according to three criteria: (a) connecting learning with students' lives and perspectives; (b) blending school culture/requirements with students' identity/perspectives (i.e., creating a third space); and (c) aligning activities with traditional ninth-grade English requirements (literature, writing, journaling, and discourse) as opposed to merely trading school norms for students' preferences. When studying *The Odyssey*, students discussed and wrote about goals they held that they would be willing to devote a lifetime to (as Odysseus had) and whether there was a relationship between their class work and these personally held goals. When reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they addressed both the ways that Atticus Finch resisted racism within his community and their own personal experiences, ideas and commitments to that issue.

As part of these strategies, students specifically discussed their suggestions for creating a stronger relationship between school learning and identity. During their one-semester course, students from each class section participated in these activities on at least a weekly basis. Students also completed weekly journaling activities exploring connections between the literature they were reading and self, as well as other related written assignments (e.g., a narrative project involving researching and reporting some aspect of their background).

### 5.1.3. Study procedures

**5.1.3.1. Survey.** At the end of their one-semester course, all participants in attendance ( $n = 73$ ) completed a qualitative survey exploring their perspectives regarding the relationship between their sense of their emerging identities (and identity practices in the classroom) and their learning opportunities. Surveys were completed in class, during one class session, and independently, and were untimed. Survey items included: *What activities in your English class have allowed you to relate what you are studying to things that matter to you?*; *What did you like and dislike about these assignments?*; and *Describe an English assignment that you would be willing to devote extra time and energy to and explain why*. Open-ended questions were used in an attempt not to confine participant responses to preconceived themes (see Appendix A for complete survey).

**5.1.3.2. Interviews.** Participants who were present on the 2 days (per class) during which interviews were conducted ( $n = 67$ ) participated in one individual interview with the lead researcher. Interviews explored in more depth the general issues addressed in students' written surveys, allowing the researcher to further understand students' perspectives. For example, students were often asked to explain more explicitly general student claims – e.g., "What makes a classroom activity 'fun' or 'interesting'?" (a frequent student claim). Interviews took place at the end of the semester. They were audio-taped but not transcribed, although notes were taken.

**5.1.3.3. Classroom observations.** Each class was observed by the lead researcher once-per-week for the entire semester (for a total of fourteen 90-min observations per class) and field notes were compiled. Student responses to study activities, the nature of and changes in engagement, and classroom discourse that illustrated students' perspectives were noted.

**5.1.3.4. Student work.** Copies of any student work that was a direct product of study activities (e.g., journals, narratives, and related written assignments) were collected and analyzed as well.

### 5.1.4. Analysis

Because this investigation was genuinely exploratory in nature, data analysis did not begin with a predetermined coding scheme. Through an iterative and constantly comparative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and construction of matrices for comparing themes and student statements across data sources and participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994), central themes emerged. Specifically, student responses (written work, surveys, interviews) were explored by the lead researcher for patterns regarding students' perceptions of connections made between course content/activities and facets of their identities, as well as the impact of those connections on their engagement. Notes from classroom observations supported these analyses with evidence of classroom context, student discourse and engagement. Matrices were constructed that offered a profile, across participants and data sources, of points of convergence as well as diverse experiences with respect to emerging themes.

Consistent multi-student/multi-data-source support was required to justify emerging themes and sub-themes; this process provided triangulation of and therefore confidence in this interpretation of the data. For example, the significant relationship between engagement and connections with identity emerged from many students, across multiple data sources. A partial sample includes: (1) Through surveys and interviews, many engaged students credited their engagement to the “space to be myself” offered by classroom activities; (2) In classroom discussions and interviews, many disaffected students made claims such as “To make it at this school, I’d have to... be someone I’m not”; and (3) In interviews, classroom discussions, and surveys, multiple students defined a “boring” activity as “not related to me or my life.”

Such broad and consistent evidence was present for four themes: (1) the centrality of identity to classroom engagement, among both students who accepted (received) and those who resisted classroom expectations (creating two subcategories); (2) the centrality of “voice” (i.e., speaking about their identity or story) to student engagement; (3) student negotiation (revision) of engaged practices in class by crafting more identity-relevant practices; and (4) the impact of identity connections in class. The impact of identity connections included four distinct sub-categories: (a) a stronger student commitment to engagement; (b) an actual change in engaged practices when negotiation of participatory practices was allowed; (c) more positive affective responses to learning (e.g., higher self-efficacy); and (d) student learning about their own identities and agency with regard to crafting an identity-in-practice in the classroom. Discrepant data (particularly students who remained disengaged) actually corroborated existing analysis.

When coding was complete and themes determined, the research assistant independently analyzed the data according to the established themes. Although diverse interpretations were encouraged, the convergence of interpretations between researchers (>95% agreement) suggested that the analyses were consistent with observed classroom events and patterns, as related to the issues at the heart of this study. Discrepant interpretations were discussed and resolved, but did not affect the overall pattern of results. Results were then reviewed by the classroom teacher, to provide a member check of the accuracy of representation of classroom events and students’ stories.

## 5.2. Results

When the ninth-grade students in our study were invited to individually select books for a final literature project, Davey [all names are pseudonyms] appeared lost. He explained, “Ms. V., you know I don’t read!” His teacher realized that she had the answer at her fingertips when she recalled that although Davey struggled to connect with novels, rock music sprinkled most of his conversations, adorned his clothing, and seemed to fill his head as he drummed nonstop on desktops, doodled, and decorated his notebooks. When his teacher allowed him (within strict parameters) to use music lyrics as his self-selected literature, classroom observations found Davey buried under, and engrossed in, stacks of lyrics.

This vignette illustrated the three key issues explored in this study. Not only was Davey able to forge a strong connection between how he viewed himself (as very invested in music) and this learning task, he firmly resisted engagement until, with his teacher’s help, he was able to negotiate a connection. Once this connection was established, his participation in class moved from frustrated, drifting, non-participant to engrossed eager community member.

An additional powerful event illustrates students’ resistance to participation, followed by negotiation of an engaged identity-in-practice. Initial conversations with students and classroom

observations early in the semester revealed an entrenched sense among most students that the literature they studied in class was boring (defined by students as “not related to me or my life”). Student resistance was demonstrated by: groaning responses to assignments; lack of participation in class activities; skipping class; sleeping in class; chronic non-completion of homework; and explicit claims that class work was boring. One student finally posed the following challenge: “Ms. V., aren’t all of these characters white?” Even amongst these very diverse classrooms, this issue had eluded the teacher and researchers. Literature selections were broadened immediately to include characters whose demographics, culture, and life situations mirrored the students’ (e.g., *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes; *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers; and *A Home on the Field* by Paul Cuadros). Students’ responses to these changes were overwhelmingly positive. Many students whose typical identity-in-practice early in the semester included physical manifestations of the boredom they reported subsequently began to participate in interested, involved, and enthusiastic practices (e.g., asking questions, completing work, reporting eagerness to continue). Several students carried a copy of a new novel in their back pocket, keeping it close by to be read in their spare time (and occasionally in other classes); some asked for their own copy of the books to keep. When asked to account for this transformation, Antoine explained that when he read this book, “I’m there!” In other words, he could see himself in the book, finding it real, which served as a powerful catalyst for his engagement. His classmates agreed that “I felt like I was there” or “I could see the adventures happening.” By negotiating this dimension of their participation in their English class, these students were able to move from resistant, bored non-engagement to energized and engaged participation. This shift again illustrated the three issues explored in this study: (1) the relationship between identity and engaged learning practices; (2) the negotiated nature of students’ classroom identity-practices (i.e., who they chose to be in this classroom); and (3) the impact on engagement afforded by connecting identity and learning.

In these classrooms, there was evidence that identity played a critical role among both students who readily accepted classroom expectations and those who consistently resisted engagement. Even in these remedial classrooms, there were students who regularly completed classroom tasks and consistently demonstrated engaged behavior, with no overt evidence of resistance or the need for negotiation. However, even these students reported that engagement was often a function of their identity. Many explained the personal connections to learning supported by these class assignments, as illustrated by statements such as “I had more space to be myself” and “when I am doing work, it is talking about me, like the book is about me.”

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the strategies employed in these classrooms provided a panacea for student engagement. Some students remained disaffected, attendance fluctuated, and one participant withdrew from school during the study. However, even among students who maintained a disengaged participatory pattern throughout the semester, identity played a role: “In order to ‘make it’ at this school, I would have to dress differently and be someone that I’m not.”

There was also evidence from this study that one “practice” that was particularly valued by students was self-expression of their identity (literal “self-authoring” or “voice”). Students reported enjoying certain assignments because they allowed them to “be honest about what I really think about stuff.” “... talk about our lives.” and “... write our opinion about everything that we have studied.” One reported, “I don’t usually care for writing in journals but in this one [in which they consistently explored their own perspectives] I always have so much to say and then it became a story not a journal.” Many were willing to invest more time in activities

that invited telling their own story – as seen in the statement “I spent a lot of time on my personal narrative project because I wanted people to know who I am.” One student summarized the semester by explaining, “It made you want to find the story that you have to tell for yourself.”

Students in this study were also able to identify the impact of the identity/learning connections they crafted during the semester. They specifically articulated changes in: (1) their decision to engage in learning; (2) their learning practices; and (3) their affective response to those participatory practices. First, students described the ways that their commitment to an engaged identity-in-practice changed this semester. Given the emphasis on the connection between identity and learning, student reports of opportunities to “show people who I really am instead of putting up a front” were especially poignant. One explained that, “People hide themselves; they don’t want to show their real self. Now I am more *out there*, talking about what I really think.” Some explained that they, “never liked to speak up in class but now I am an engaged class member.” Other students explained their perception that identity/learning connections helped them “dig in.” These changes were nicely summarized by a student who claimed that relating learning to identity in this class actually made learning more “amped!”

Study activities resulted in literal participation changes as well. For example, one student reported being more “into it,” offering as proof the fact that “I am actually going to the library now!” Another confessed, “I did not know before that I was lazy, but I have become more hardworking this semester.”

Students’ affective response to learning changed as well. In general, students felt more connected to the practice of learning; “more into the circle.” Pride in their work and self-confidence emerged as significant new experiences. One explained that making personal connections to the readings “makes me feel important.” Others claimed, “I feel stronger as a student”; “I can do more than what I thought I could do”; and “I am no longer afraid to express my opinion.” After reading *The Color of Water* (by James McBride), one student reported new pride in her family history: “It makes me proud of who I am and what my mother did. She had me when she was real young but she made a life for us. . . . She made something of herself” (shared with tears welling in her eyes).

Lastly, an interesting by-product of the semester’s lessons was that many students reported that they had learned about themselves, as seen in claims that classroom activities “made me feel like I know who I really am” or “make you understand the person you want to be.” One was actually “surprised by myself, and what I really felt.” Many realized that they were good writers or poets; others reported realizing that they were capable; pretty good with people; creative; responsible; the adventurous type; opinionated. Students also learned a lot about how they prefer to learn (e.g., by challenging the boundaries of class knowledge or bringing new things to the table).

One student summarized the role of identity connections within learning and the impact of negotiating learning practices in meaningful ways as a “buoy.” Such was the effect of connecting learning and identity: a prop, a guide, keeping some afloat, lifesaving for some. Whatever the role, the potential of such opportunities to support students’ engagement is well worth the investment of additional research and thought.

## 6. Study 2

During the spring semester of the following academic year, the same teacher and researcher (without the research assistant) collaborated again to offer struggling students additional opportunities to connect learning with identity. In order to build on insights from Study 1, Study 2 employed the individual inquiry project (kids’ business) proposed by Fairbanks (2000) to offer all

students the opportunity to negotiate a strong connection with learning. (Although there was no overlap in students between studies, some of the activities designed and literature selected for Study 1 were maintained in Study 2.)

### 6.1. Methods

#### 6.1.1. Participants

In order to explore these issues at the same public high school, the same ninth-grade English teacher and researcher co-designed an individual inquiry project assignment for the 34 students (40% African American; 45% European American, 9% Latino/a, and 6% other; 53% female) in her two sections of ninth-grade English. As in Study 1, participants in Study 2 were all students who returned signed parent/guardian consent forms as well as personal assent forms, and who were present on the days of study activities. Again, attendance and participation varied; of the 34 total participants, 27 were present on the days during which interviews were conducted; 32 were present to complete the final survey.

#### 6.1.2. Classroom setting

The teacher and researcher worked throughout the semester to allow students to connect a substantial portion of their work in ninth-grade English to an individually meaningful issue or topic. The project invited students to: (1) choose and research self-selected issues; (2) write extended research papers on their topic; and (3) present their results in forms of their own choosing (producing a play, designing a pamphlet) which provided all students an opportunity to explore their “voice.” Research questions paralleled Study 1.

#### 6.1.3. Measures

Survey protocols and procedures, student interviews, and weekly observations mirrored Study 1. Student engagement in projects was observed and described, but their work was not collected and analyzed as in Study 1.

#### 6.1.4. Analysis

Data analysis proceeded as with Study 1. Although Study 2 was a much smaller study (with fewer students, as well as a singular strategy), students were once again able to identify: (1) the importance of identity/learning connections; (2) the importance of their own “voices” in this process (i.e., telling their own stories); and (3) the impact of these opportunities on their investment in learning and their affective response to that participation. Their negotiation of a meaningful learning topic and changes in their engagement were clearly observed.

### 6.2. Results

Luiz typified the unengaged ninth-grade students in his remedial English class. It was unusual to find him attending to class activities or even awake (when he attended class at all). His preferred posture was slumped over his desk, either sleeping or well on his way. Daily attempts by his teacher to encourage his involvement were met with frustrated claims that the class was boring. However, a visit to class two months into the semester revealed him to be busy working on a research project on prison life that he claimed he found important and interesting. As class ended, he sought assurance that he would be allowed to continue working on his project the next day.

What occurred in the interim was that students had been invited to select topics about which they were genuinely passionate for a semester-long research project. The project invited all students to negotiate this aspect of their participation in class (rather than waiting for frustration or resistance to emerge). Topics included

issues such as depression, divorce, drugs, gangs, abuse, and guns, many of which were common currency in the lives of these students (based on class conversations, student artifacts, and reported out-of-school experiences). Prison life was a particular favorite for many students who regularly visited incarcerated family members or had been in adolescent “boot camp” themselves, as was the case with Luiz. (Attending prison boot camp was a part of Luiz’s experience that surfaced repeatedly in how he talked about himself in class and related to class work.) Engaged participation was reflected in many examples of well designed research presentations: public service brochures; a play to be performed at a local community center; organized opportunities for community service for classmates; and organized tutoring opportunities. It is again important to note that this strategy was not a panacea; some students produced elementary-level posters and some did not complete the assignment. Nevertheless, this experience again illustrated many students’ negotiation of meaningful learning practices, the connection between learning and identity, and the impact of that connection on their engagement (the foci of this study).

Students consistently reported the value of being able to connect their learning with real life issues that mattered, or were connected, to them. Many reported surprise at being offered an opportunity at school to: “really do what I wanted to and what I thought was important,” or “do something I thought mattered.” Others reported that this project helped them “relate more to the class”; “had so much more meaning”; and “made school less boring.” Multiple students reported positions such as “I started to like English class. In fact, I started to like coming to school.”

As seen in Study 1, these participants placed particular value on being able to share their perspectives. This value was expressed in comments such as “We got to hear our own voice”; “It helps us when we get to tell our feelings about things goin’ on”; and “it made me think more.”

Given this opportunity to negotiate an engaged identity-in-practice, some students reported important insights regarding their engagement in learning. One reported realizing that they, “ha(d) not been getting as much out of school as [they] could have or needed to.” Others reported that this project “made [them] work harder” and that they realized that, prior to this experience, they had not been working hard enough.

Changes in students’ affective response to learning also surfaced in this study, including pride, self efficacy, and explicit connections with learning. Students commented on the pride they experienced in their work in comments such as “I was proud to turn (this project) in” and “This project meant so much to me.” Students also reported that certain projects “helped [them] better understand what [the class is] learning;” and “made [them] smarter,” suggesting that the experience had a positive impact on their perceptions of who they were as students. Several students explained that “it made the work easier for the topic to be something we enjoyed;” and “I felt like I knew what I was doing.”

The connection to learning that students crafted through this experience was powerfully summarized in one student’s explanation that, compared to this experience, in most classrooms he was “wearing a mask instead of really feeling connected.”

## 7. Discussion

At the heart of these two studies are their illustration of the negotiated, participatory-based, and reciprocal nature of the adolescent identity experience and the resulting (potentially essential) impact of that process on engaged participation in a learning community. Harnessing three theoretical models with the potential to provide connections between learning practices and students’ identity/participatory choices in the classroom (i.e., who they want to be in the classroom), these studies saw the majority of students

move from evidence of (or describing themselves as having) an identity as resistant or non-engaged students to adopting engaged practices (or describing an engaged identity-as-student). Study 1 provided clear evidence of students who had been resistant to expected classroom participation patterns adopting – after they negotiated alternative practices – practices/identities as engaged learners. Moreover, Study 1 provided evidence (i.e., student self-reports) that, even without evidence of resistance to classroom expectations, connections to identity-relevant-factors were still foundational to many students’ engaged participation. The smaller and more focused Study 2 invited identity negotiations for all students (in an effort to bypass some resistance and encourage meaningful identity-based choices for all) and also observed that many students shifted their classroom identity practices toward more engaged participatory choices. Students reported placing great value, relative to their engagement in learning, on their ability to relate learning practices to who they were or were becoming in that learning setting. They preferred, enjoyed, or needed classroom connections to things that were foundational to them.

Not only did students value connecting their individual stories to their work in English class, but many also needed to “tell” those stories. Their sense of self seemed to clarify and their connection to learning practices strengthen as a result of being able to “speak” about various aspects of their identity. This perspective echoes the work of Williams (2006), which suggested that it is essential to allow students to express their identities as a way of exploring the world within which they live. It also resonates with McAdams’s (2001) narrative life-story perspective on identity and Anzaldúa’s (1999) identity-as-clusters-of-stories metaphor, each of which focused on the construction (possibly negotiation) of individuals’ identities through the process of telling their life stories. Through this lens, individuals’ ongoing life stories *are* their identities, for stories—and identities—are constantly being renegotiated as new experiences shed light on and help make meaning of the old ones. From a life-story perspective, then, identity is inherently dynamic and reciprocal, shaping the identity in the telling of the story itself.

These two studies also provide evidence of a reciprocal interchange between students’ identities-in-practice and their learning experiences. That is, while the fluid negotiation between identity, story, and learning is integral to adolescent students’ engagement in learning, the reverse is true as well. As if seeing their reflections in a mirror, not only are students able to determine whether they recognize themselves within (i.e., resonate with) their learning experiences; but they also grow to know themselves better through the learning experience itself. This echoes McCarthy and Moje’s (2002) claim that all learning can be conceived of as important moments in the process of identity construction.

These experiences may be especially valuable in light of recent research that suggests that an enduring positive sense of connection to one’s learning context, often referred to as sense of belonging, serves as a pivotal, potentially essential determinant of student engagement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; Juvonen, 2006). Indeed, recent research on belonging has actually begun to suggest that one important source of belonging is provided by opportunities to establish connections between school experiences and their developing sense of their own identities (Faircloth, 2009).

Although the current studies are not stringent tests of the three strategies employed, the results do suggest concrete mechanisms through which connections between facets of students’ identities and their learning experiences may be offered to students. Moreover, these pathways involved relatively modest, reproducible strategies that fit within the normal requirements of a ninth-grade English class. Thus, the current study affirms the value and demonstrates the practicability of harnessing identity negotiations as a powerful catalyst for student engagement.

One especially valuable dimension of these studies is that they are situated among students for whom support for engagement is most desperately needed: typically disaffected, low-performing students in a high-needs school. Although the strategies are not offered as a quick fix for all struggling students – and indeed did not work flawlessly for all individuals – the results of these studies do offer hopeful strategies and key insights within very challenging settings. They highlight the growing realization that the gap between students' lived and schooled experiences may be a primary culprit in student lack of engagement (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006) and suggest that this gap is not immovable.

Several limitations to this study are important to note. First, the small size, brief duration, and exploratory nature of these two studies serve as limitations to the depth of insight and breadth of generalizations they might provide. It is also important to note that conducting this study in English classrooms might have facilitated the application and exploration of these issues; the nature of other course content and pedagogy (e.g., math or science) may be much more challenging. In addition, not addressed in these studies are obvious issues that deserve future investigation, including cultural or gender differences in the nature of participation in a classroom community, as well as other factors that might influence participation, such as the needs for distinctiveness or power. It would also be dangerous to view the approaches in these studies as a panacea; not only were they not effective for all students, but clearly there are situations in which following a student's identity would be counter-productive or even harmful.

One last complexity of these studies is an apparent overlap between student interests and identity. Attempting to draw upon the multiple dimensions and facets that shape who a student chooses to be and what they chose to do in a classroom community required considering issues such as their interests. Indeed, Dewey (1910) and many for decades since have argued that genuine interest actually involves an identification with the self. Moreover, when speaking with students in these classrooms about the goals of this study, we employed the term *identity* – a word for which they had a basic understanding – which provided a lens through which they could attempt to understand and participate in discussion of these issues.

Despite these limitations and complexities, the results of these studies raise important considerations in the study of student identity and engagement in learning. They provide evidence of students' identities-in-practice that changed over relatively short periods of time; that is, they are to some degree multiple and fluid. They also demonstrate the negotiated nature – and the value therein – of the identity-in-practice model. Lastly, they suggest engaging learning experiences may be successful in part because they enable students to craft an engaged identity-as-learner (i.e., a participatory profile) through allowed or invited negotiation of learning experiences that connect with who they want to be or to become in the classroom. Moreover, these promising insights emerged among students for whom engagement has been a chronic challenge. This emerging understanding of students' connection to learning contributes a valuable resource for individuals invested in supporting student motivation and achievement across all student groups. In light of the ongoing struggle to support student success in today's schools, these explorations have merit. Broader investigation of the relevance of student identity to their learning, as well as investigation of additional pedagogical practices that support these connections, is definitely called for.

## 8. Conclusion

Two important summary points emerged from these studies. It is first important to note the modest, practical nature of these

strategies for supporting the natural identity-in-practice model as an approach to scaffolding students' appreciation for learning. Brophy (2004, 2008) clearly articulated the requirement of engaging with the learner's identity and agenda to support students' valuing of – and engagement in – learning. In this study, accomplishing this seemingly lofty goal occurred smoothly within the normal pedagogical requirements of a ninth-grade English class and with a particular challenging group of students. Hence, these studies not only affirmed the importance of such connections but also demonstrated that such accomplishments are within the reach of any educator.

Moreover, supporting such connections is not only doable but also essential. According to these two studies, the need for congruence between student identity practices and the learning context held serious ramifications for students' engagement at school. Simple attention to such individually relevant perspectives toward learning can position schools to help students negotiate both meaningful engagement with learning and academic success.

The current studies also suggest important future directions for this line of research. The emphasis on student voice that emerged in the stories told by these students echoes the growing attention to the importance of crafting authentic student voice as an element of student motivation and learning (Romano, 2004). The next steps in this research program aim to explore more thoroughly the development of student voice and its impact on students' experiences of learning. In addition, students in these studies clearly responded strongly to the opportunity to determine for themselves what “mattered” with regard to learning. Within classroom conversations as well as collected data, students suggested that teachers should listen more to students, who knew what they themselves needed for meaningful learning. Trusting this line of reasoning (for a similar argument, see Basu & Calabrese Barton, 2010), the fourth year of this overall research project will involve students in helping to design the study – including research questions – and determine appropriate classroom activities. It is anticipated that students' connections with learning, and our insight into those connections, will benefit from engaging students more actively as partners in this educational enterprise.

## Appendix A. Identity belonging survey

Please answer the following questions about your experiences in your English class this semester:

1. a. This year, in your English class, what activities were most motivating (interesting, engaging)?  
b. Why are some activities in your English class more motivating than others? (What were the most motivating activities like?)
2. a. What aspects of your English class – or experiences in English – did you value the most?  
b. Why did you value them the most?
3. a. What was your reaction to the research project you did in your English class about a topic you were interested in (in which you got to pick the topic)?  
b. What did you like and dislike about this assignment?
4. a. What activities in your English class have allowed you to relate what you are studying to things that mattered to you (your culture, your family, your interests...)?  
b. What did you like and dislike about these assignments?  
c. How did doing this kind of activity (one that related to things that mattered to you) affect how you felt about school?

(continued on next page)

- d. How did this kind of activity affect how hard your worked on your school work in English?
5. a. In what ways has your interest in learning in your English class changed this semester?  
b. What has made it change?

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