

# 5

## Stories Matter

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**Out of all the texts in the world, why do we put these texts in front of African American adolescent males living in economically deprived communities?**

—Tatum (2009, p. 42)

**It's a beautiful thing when I have to tell my Black male students to stop reading in class so that they can pay attention . . . and that has happened several times since we started [the Black male book club].**

—Butts (2011, para. 3)

Much has been written about how to improve literacy rates among children and teens of color, and a good deal of this research focuses on the choice of texts. Research has stressed the importance of providing children and adolescent readers with texts that reflect their personal experiences and accurately portray characters like themselves and their families, friends, and peers (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Bell & Clark, 1998; DeLeón, 2002; Gangi, 2008; Purves & Beach, 1972). The availability of such texts affects both reading achievement and reading motivation in students (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Bell & Clark, 1998; Gangi, 2008; Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Research shows that “when readers interact with literature that relates to their culture-specific experiences, their reading comprehension performance will improve” (McCullough, 2008, p. 7). It also suggests that youth of color who typically display antipathy toward reading may react differently when provided with texts that are culturally relevant, as author Sharon Flake describes:

Black boys will read. But to get them off to a flying start, we've got to give them books that remind them of home—who they are. When this happens, they fly

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through books—even the most challenged readers. They hunger for the work like a homeless man finally getting a meal that’s weeks overdue. (Flake, 2007b, p. 14)

In a recent book, Alfred Tatum (2009) takes the idea of culturally relevant texts a step further, arguing that African American adolescent males need exposure to texts that not only contain characters who look, act, and think as they do, but also encourage and empower these young people to take action in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. Tatum (2009) maintains that one reason that African American male youth suffer academically, emotionally, and culturally is a lack of exposure to “texts that they find meaningful and that will help them critique, understand, and move beyond some of the turmoil-related experiences they encounter outside school” (p. xii). Tatum calls such writing *enabling texts*.

Tatum’s argument for using enabling young adult and adult texts with Black adolescent males applies to male and female Black youth of all ages. Today, there are numerous picture books and middle-grade novels that allow Black youth to explore and view concepts, issues, themes, and issues from multiple perspectives and in relation to their multiple identities. Examples include picture books such as *One Million Men and Me* (2007) and *Tea Cakes for Tosh* (2012), both by Kelly Starlings Lyons, and middle-grade novels like *The Cruisers* series by Walter Dean Myers (2010a, 2011, 2012, 2013) and *Unstoppable Octobia May* (2014) by Sharon Flake. If teachers and librarians wait until middle school or high school to connect Black youth with meaningful and engaging texts, they may be missing opportunities that are difficult to recapture. The love of reading and writing needs to be cultivated early, and youth, even in the elementary grades, need to begin to understand the role that literacy plays in shaping their life outcomes.

In this chapter, we first define the characteristics of enabling texts. We then discuss how librarians might use enabling texts in their work with Black youth. Finally, we include a sample list of enabling texts that feature African American protagonists.

In this chapter, we:

- Define the concept of the enabling text.
- Identify the characteristics of enabling texts.
- Explore the connection between culturally relevant and enabling texts and academic achievement.
- Discuss how librarians might use enabling texts in their work with Black youth.
- Provide a sample of enabling texts that feature African American protagonists.

## DEFINING AND IDENTIFYING ENABLING TEXTS THAT FEATURE AFRICAN AMERICANS

How can educators, librarians, and parents identify texts that are culturally relevant, powerful, and able to make a positive difference in the lives of their readers? This is a difficult task, particularly given the small number of books featuring African American characters published each year (Horning et al., 2014). While any given book with an African American protagonist may hold the interest of Black readers, many of these texts fall short of the benchmarks set for enabling texts, which promote a healthy psyche and serve as a road map for being, doing, thinking, and acting, according to Tatum (2009). In fact, as Tatum (2009) argues, some books with Black characters actually “reinforce a student’s perception of being a struggling reader incapable of handling cognitively challenging texts” (p. 65). He calls such texts *disabling texts*. Included in his definition of disabling texts are books that are developmentally inappropriate—that is, books that may be on the students’ reading level but “ignore their need for human development” (p. 67). As an example of this type of disabling text, Tatum describes a case in which a *Berenstain Bears* book, written for primary students, was selected for instructional use with a 16-year-old Black male (p. 67).

Also included in his definition of disabling texts are books that serve mainly to reinforce the stereotypes of Black communities, especially Black urban areas. Some titles in the street fiction genre in particular may meet this criterion; as Brooks and Savage (2009) discuss, many of these books “embod[y] the potential to valorize infidelity, criminal activity, and a wide range of unprincipled and even stereotypic behaviors” (p. 50). However, as these researchers also note, street fiction novels are scattered along a “nuanced and varied” continuum, so dismissing all street fiction as disabling shortchanges the genre (p. 51). It also denies the ability of Black teens to take a critical stance as readers and judge for themselves the authenticity of the text or the author’s intent in writing the book.

To help teachers, librarians, and parents identify texts that have the potential to motivate Black youth to become better readers and to help them define themselves, we have used Tatum’s definition of enabling texts to create the rubric shown in Figure 5.1 (Tatum, 2009, p. 77). Unless otherwise noted, each characteristic was derived from Tatum’s work. In the next section, we use sample enabling texts to illustrate each element of the rubric.

### Characteristics of Enabling Texts

#### *Provide a Healthy Psyche*

Tatum (2009) argues that enabling texts portray characters who practice self-reflection, leading readers to look within and to define themselves. The process of self-definition is often an explicit part of an enabling text’s narrative. Take, for example, David, the protagonist in the novel *Pull* (Binns, 2010). After a tragedy strikes David’s family, he must decide whether to risk splitting apart

**FIGURE 5.1 Enabling Text Rubric**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Provides a healthy psyche (Tatum, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leads Black youth to look within</li> <li>• Shows Black youth defining themselves</li> </ul>
Provides a modern awareness of the real world (Tatum, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connects to issues/questions that students find essential today</li> <li>• Takes place within the context of their life experiences</li> <li>• Deals with issues that are important to Black youth</li> <li>• Presents real environments/conditions Black youth face inside and outside school</li> </ul>
Focuses on the collective struggles of African Americans (Tatum, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides insight into issues related to social justice</li> <li>• Allows youth to take a critical look at their oppression and oppressors and to examine the academic &amp; social ills they face</li> <li>• Contains content that will cause youth to take action in their own lives</li> <li>• Challenges youth to think about their existence</li> </ul>
Serves as a road map for being, doing, thinking, and acting (Tatum, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflects an improved human condition</li> <li>• Suggests steps/strategies/supports for improving life</li> <li>• Speaks to the power of the individual and of the collective</li> </ul>
Recognizes, honors, and nurtures multiple identities (Tatum, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic</li> <li>• Cultural</li> <li>• Economic</li> <li>• Gendered</li> <li>• Personal</li> <li>• Social</li> <li>• Sexual</li> <li>• Communal</li> <li>• National</li> <li>• International</li> </ul>
Demonstrates resiliency (Tatum, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on self-reliance</li> <li>• Focuses on self-determination</li> <li>• Shows Black youth, adults, or both as problem solvers</li> <li>• Challenges victim mentality</li> </ul>
Interesting and provocative (Tatum, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thematically engaging</li> <li>• Complex—multilayered</li> <li>• Developmentally appropriate</li> <li>• Fast-moving and provocative</li> <li>• Taps into feelings, imagination, and intellectual curiosity</li> </ul>
Avoids caricatures (Tatum, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflects the diversity within racial and ethnic groups</li> <li>• Avoids common tropes associated with Black youth (e.g., the teen mother, the hoopster, or the gang recruit)</li> <li>• Avoids stereotypical portrayals of other youth of color (e.g., the nerdy Asian)</li> <li>• Portrays youth of color as complex and multidimensional</li> </ul>
Includes a mentor or role model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides guidance or offers wisdom to the protagonist</li> <li>• Often an adult or elderly member of the African American community</li> <li>• Not didactic or preachy</li> </ul>

his younger siblings in order to pursue a college education and basketball career (his mother's dream for him) or to keep his family together by foregoing college in favor of an apprenticeship with a construction foreman. David eventually chooses the latter path, explaining his decision to his high school basketball coach this way:

You asked me what I want for my future. I want the wind. And mortar and bricks too . . . I want to look over the plans for something that never existed before. I want to dream up those plans and make them real . . . And I'll be taught by a master. And in the meantime, I'll be keeping my family together. Not because I feel guilty, and not because I have to. I'm doing it because I want to. (Binns, 2010, p. 302)

David comes to this decision after a good deal of introspection, and his thought processes are clearly documented throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, David summarizes what he has discovered through his deliberate decision making: "People can learn if they're willing. Learn to live their own lives, and overcome their own faults. They can decide not to crash and burn, and not to be ruled by other people's dreams" (Binns, 2010, p. 307). Novels like this one provide teens with a healthy model for their own decision making.

### ***Provide a Modern Awareness of the Real World***

As Tatum (2009) notes, enabling texts connect readers with the world around them by honestly portraying characters, issues, problems, and environments that African American youth might encounter in the real world. Two important facts related to this characteristic of an enabling text should be considered. First, *real* is a relative term—that is, what each reader finds realistic will vary depending on that person's experience.

One reader might relate to Coe Booth's *Tyrell* (2007), whereas another reader might identify more with the twins in Kwame Alexander's *The Cross-over* (2014). This is one reason

Not all Black teens will identify with a protagonist who must check his clothing for gang colors before leaving his home each morning.

that it is critical to offer a spectrum of novels that reflect the lives of Black youth in our libraries and classrooms, so no one single story is being presented. Just as we should not assume that a White child or teenager comes from a middle-class, dual-parent, suburban home, we should also take care not to assume that all African American youth come from urban, poverty-stricken, violent communities (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2010). Not all Black teens will identify with a protagonist who must check his clothing for gang colors before leaving his home each morning, as the characters in *Chameleon* (Smith, 2008) must do. This does not mean that gritty urban fiction cannot be enabling or is not realistic—undeniably, many people do live in situations like these and both persevere and grow despite the challenges they face. However, educators, parents, and librarians must recognize that some African American

readers may find it difficult to connect with the characters in such novels. As one Black teen noted in a discussion of *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* (Myers, 2005)—a book that meets the criteria of an enabling text—“I mean it was a good book, but since I’m not in a gang, it wasn’t anything I could relate to” (personal communication, March 15, 2011).

The second important factor to keep in mind when considering which texts offer a modern awareness of the real world is that books other than contemporary, realistic fiction can meet the criteria for this category. Tatum (2009) recommends that teachers also use historical works, such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Douglass, 1845/1997). These texts, while seemingly not at all modern, still offer truths that resonate with Black youth today. While the world has changed in the decades since such historical texts were written, adolescents can still draw parallels between the people, events, and issues in these texts and their modern-day lives. According to author Sharon Draper, studying the past allows us to “understand some of the social, economic, and political realities of the present. The past is a teacher from which we can learn much” (as quoted in Hinton-Johnson, 2009, p. 92). Similarly, genre fiction (such as fantasy and science fiction) should not be automatically discarded for failing to represent the “real world.” Like historical texts, genre novels often present modern, real-world problems and issues indirectly; they require only a small leap from the reader to bridge seemingly fantastical narratives with the realities of everyday life.

### ***Focus on the Collective Struggles of African Americans***

The African American community has faced and continues to face a variety of obstacles along the path to equity. Enabling texts neither ignore these struggles nor paint African Americans as merely victims of history. Instead, as Tatum (2009) argues, enabling texts challenge African American youth to examine critically the challenges that they face, whether those challenges are academic, social, economic, or personal. Enabling texts may achieve this focus through looking at historical African American struggles such as slavery, reconstruction, or the Civil Rights movement. For example, *The Rock and the River* (Magoon, 2009) explores the Civil Rights era through the eyes of a young man who feels torn between the nonviolent beliefs of his father and the Black Panther allegiance of his brother. Alternatively, enabling texts may deal with present-day civil rights struggles faced by African Americans. Tupac Shakur’s poetry anthology *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* includes several poems that confront the economic and social ills of African Americans. Consider this untitled piece that implores readers to “Please wake me when

African American youth need concrete strategies for confronting problematic issues in their own lives, and enabling texts can help provide such strategies.

I’m free / I cannot bear captivity / where my culture I’m told holds no significance / . . . / But now like a nightmare I wake 2 c / That I live like a prisoner of poverty” (Shakur, 1999, p. 15).

### ***Serve as a Road Map for Being, Doing, Thinking, and Acting***

Despite an awareness of societal and personal challenges facing African American youth, enabling texts are positive in that they affirm the power of both the individual and the collective to improve one's life (Tatum, 2009, p. 68). These texts do not present miracle solutions to poverty, oppression, prejudice, or violence. In fact, if a novel resolves itself with such a magic bullet—a character wins the lottery and is transported out of poverty, or a gang member suddenly and without significant cause sees the error of his ways and reforms—this is a good indication that such texts are not enabling, in that they do not reflect the way that problems are solved in reality. As Tatum argues, African American youth need concrete strategies for confronting problematic issues in their own lives, and enabling texts can help provide such strategies. For example, in *The Rock and the River* (Magoon, 2009), the protagonist, Sam, decides to testify at a friend's trial, even though it will mean possibly endangering himself. Sam's brother tries to prepare him for what this choice signifies: "You have to understand what it means to tell the truth. . . . People are afraid to testify. It's a serious thing to stand up and say the cops are lying." Sam replies, "The easy choice is almost never the right one, right?" (p. 222). Enabling texts present difficult choices and genuine responses to issues—responses that readers can use as models when making similar choices in their own lives.

### ***Recognize, Honor, and Nurture Multiple Identities***

Just as real people can never be defined by a single trait, neither should book characters. As Tatum (2009) notes, characters should instead be portrayed as having multiple identities—academic, cultural, religious, gendered, social, national, etc. Such a nuanced portrayal is closer to reality and encourages readers to reflect on their own identities, as well as to realize that other people that they encounter in life should also not be defined or judged by a single characteristic. Two titles that illustrate this characteristic are *We Could Be Brothers* (Barnes, 2010) and *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002). In *We Could Be Brothers*, the two main characters—young men who initially appear to be insurmountably different from one another—each discover hidden identities within the other, leading them to develop respect and friendship for one another. The students in *Bronx Masquerade* develop a love of poetry during a study of the Harlem Renaissance. When they begin to share their original poetry with each other on open-mic Fridays, they discover the individuals beyond the stereotypes. Tyrone explains:

I look around this class and nobody I see fits into the box I used to put them in . . . Mr. Ward [the English teacher] says you have to take people one at a time, check out what's in their head and heart before you judge. Word. (Grimes, 2002, p. 86)

### ***Demonstrate Resiliency***

Whether an African American reader is growing up in urban poverty or in suburban affluence, developing resiliency—the ability to think critically, solve problems, and bounce back from negative events—is critical for long-term success. According to Tatum (2009), enabling texts can assist in this development by portraying characters who are self-reliant problem solvers. Seeing such a positive portrayal of African American youth can confer a sense of self-efficacy on readers. An example of a text that fulfills this criterion is *Bang* by Sharon Flake (2007a). The protagonist (a Black male) finds himself kicked out of his home and has to survive the violent streets of his neighborhood on his own. Despite a few missteps along the way, the protagonist ultimately finds a way to survive without resorting to the cruelty and lawlessness of those around him. While his particular path is not one that many adolescent readers would choose to follow, the overall positive portrayal of this young man as a determined, resourceful problem solver gives African American readers someone to look up to in literature and affirms the reader's ability to demonstrate those same character traits in the midst of adversity.

### ***Interesting and Provocative***

For Tatum (2009), a key component of literacy is the ability not only to read, but also to be able to express oneself in writing. Thus, enabling texts should provide positive reinforcement of the characteristics of strong writing. They should be engaging and fast-moving; they should be thematically rich; they should provoke deeper thinking from their readers; and they should awaken the intellectual curiosity of the reader. One example of such a text is *Shadowshaper* (Older, 2015). The novel is suspenseful and fast-paced, and it deals with weighty issues such as family, ancestry, and appropriation—all while the heroes are trying to escape terrifying, otherworldly creatures. The novel's plot provides fertile ground for the exploration and discussion of such questions as “How does art convey power?” and “How can people or groups appropriate culture from different communities?” Another example is Tupac Shakur's poetry. After reading the following poem, teens might be inspired to write their own poetry that addresses the “weeds” that they believe are holding back the growth of Black youth in the United States: “I find greatness in the tree / that grows against all odds / it blossoms in darkness / I was the tree who grew from weeds” (Shakur, 1999, p. 115).

### ***Avoid Caricatures***

Tatum (2009) notes that stereotypes of Black youth and communities are prevalent in disabling texts, where Black teen males are likely to be portrayed as “the hoopster, the fatherless son, the gang recruit, the truant, the dummy in need of remediation, and the purveyor of poor grammar” (p. 82), while Black



teen females are depicted as welfare mothers or manipulative women who use their sexuality to control and exploit men. When Black characters defy the stereotypes, they are often mocked by others for demonstrating intelligence or for breaking the norms of their impoverished neighborhoods. A fact not mentioned by Tatum but equally important is that disabling texts also often stereotype non-African American characters as well (for example, the Asian nerd, the Hispanic girl with an attitude, or the cruel White teacher). Enabling texts avoid such caricatures, providing well-rounded and multidimensional characters instead. Often, such texts succeed in this regard by showing characters directly challenging stereotypes or realizing in the course of the narrative that the stereotypes that they hold are invalid. For example, the protagonist in Sharon Flake's poem "You Don't Even Know Me" rebukes his teachers, neighbors, and even his friends for making assumptions about his academic ability, his career aspirations, and his behavior based on stereotypes of Black male teens: "You know / I've been wondering lately / Trying to figure out just how it could be / That you can see me so often / And don't know a thing about me" (Flake, 2010, p. 4). In *The Freedom Writers Diary* (Freedom Writers, 1999), one female teen writer comes to discover that she cannot be defined by the labels that others place on her: "For the first time, I realized that what people say about living in the ghetto and having brown skin doesn't have to apply to me" (p. 203).

### ***Include a Mentor or Role Model***

One aspect of enabling texts that is not discussed by Tatum, but which we identified in many of the texts we evaluated, was the presence of a mentor or role model. This character is often, but not always, significantly older than the protagonist and passes along wisdom and advice in the course of the narrative. While the mentor or role model is often an African American adult, this is not always the case. In fact, sometimes the role model relationship develops unexpectedly, as in Walter Dean Myers's *Lockdown* (2010), where the mentor role is fulfilled by an elderly White character who at first seems openly hostile toward the protagonist. Nor does the mentor figure have to be physically present in the narrative; in *Jimi and Me* by Jaime Adoff (2005), the main character idolizes Jimi Hendrix, whose song lyrics and life story provide the guidance that the protagonist needs to navigate a difficult family situation.

### **A Word About "Nontraditional" Texts**

In the discussion so far in this chapter, we have used traditional print resources to illustrate the characteristics of enabling texts. It is important to remember that other forms of media can also serve as enabling texts. For example, Morrell (2004) and his colleagues (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2001) use hip hop as a way to teach African American youth. They have designed lessons that incorporate hip-hop music and culture into the traditional high

school English curriculum, encouraging African American youth to see the connections between hip-hop artists and post-Industrial poets, as well as to investigate the parallels between hip hop and classic novels. Teen librarian Faith Burns sponsors a Music and Popular Culture Club, where the Black teens that she works with explore issues such as cultural appropriation in rap music and the stereotyping of Black youth in advertising, movies, and even TV news (personal communication, November 5, 2015).

After the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, a high school English teacher in Portland, Oregon, had her students listen to or read the transcript of President Barack Obama's speech about the court decision and critically examine it by considering questions such as: What do you agree with in the talk? What resonates most with you? What do you find problematic? What is missing? Who is the audience for this speech, and how do you know? The next day, the teacher had the students watch an interview with Professor Cornel West in which he criticized the president's speech. She challenged the students to analyze Dr. West's comments in the same way that they had President Obama's, and then to compare what Dr. West said with what President Obama said, and then with their own interpretations of each. In this way, she used nontraditional texts to engage the students in a complex literary analysis and writing experience (Christensen, 2013–2014).

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## Youth Voices

I think *Sunrise Over Fallujah* is a good book for African American males to read cause it's common for us to go to war without noticing really why. A lot of them they don't really join the military unless they think they have nothing . . . or because they think they don't have anything else to do.

—16-year-old Black male

This book [*Skeleton Key*] showed how [African American males] are always having to struggle for everything, and we really have to earn everything we get. And it really was a good way of showing how Jarett turned nothing into something. And he was able to do all these positive things in such a negative environment.

—16-year-old Black male

[*Bronx Masquerade*] . . . tells us that African American males feel like we do have a future, we just have to invest in it. . . . Me, for example, I don't live in a neighborhood in a community where I have problems like this. I'm sorta one of the luckier males. But these guys have to work hard day in and day out to make something with their life while people around them are constantly telling them they have no future, that they can't do anything with it. So these guys are really brave and courageous for going past what other people think is right in the African American community to make a future for themselves.

—16-year-old Black male

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## DISCUSSING ENABLING TEXTS WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

Not only should enabling texts be put into the hands of African American youth at every opportunity, but these texts should also be mediated by a teacher, parent, librarian, or other adult; that is, they should be utilized to “engage the students in dialogue about issues and concepts that matter in school and society,” and to do so from “multiple perspectives and in relation to multiple identities” (Tatum, 2009, p. 90). According to Tatum (2009), the mediation or discussion of enabling texts is critical. He argues that without the chance to discuss their reading with others and to respond to the texts through writing, enabling texts cannot fulfill their true potential in the lives of these young people.

In his book *Reading for Their Life*, Tatum (2009) offers a framework for mediating texts that includes six components: identifying the appropriate literacy platform or developmental asset that will “allow them to benefit in racially segregated and racially integrated settings” (p. 41) by defining the self, becoming resilient, engaging others, and building capacity; selecting passages and vocabulary to introduce the text; developing framing questions to guide the discussion; establishing a writing connection; determining the format (small group, whole group, or individual) for the discussion; and evaluating the discussion and students’ ongoing needs. Figure 5.2 illustrates how this framework might be used to guide a discussion of Andrea Pinkney’s *Sit-in: How Four Friends Stood up by Sitting Down* (2010).

The most challenging elements of Tatum’s framework are often selecting a passage to introduce the text and developing the framing questions. In Figure 5.3, we have provided suggested passages to capture readers and framing questions for two texts, *We Could Be Brothers* by Derrick Barnes (2010) and *Stella by Starlight* by Sharon M. Draper (2015).

Selecting the passage is like creating a booktalk—finding the right “hook” that will entice a struggling or reluctant reader to want to read and discuss the book. As Tatum (2009) notes, the attention of struggling readers is often not captured by the first pages (or even chapters) of many books. It might be a passage in the middle of the book, or even at the end, that motivates them to want to read it. Tatum illustrates this point by sharing the story of a young man who he observed one day during sustained silent reading sitting slumped in his chair, not even pretending to read. Dr. Tatum approached the young man with a copy of *Bang* and shared this passage from the middle of the book: “A black boy don’t get a hundred chances to get it right. Sometimes he just gets one. That’s it . . . You blow your chance, you blow your life” (Flake, 2007, p. 124). The young man immediately began to read the book, and when it was time for sustained silent reading to end, he did not want to put the book away (personal communication, June 10, 2012).

The framing questions are essential questions—questions that encourage youth to grapple with pressing issues they face in school and in society. A question is essential when it provokes “deep thought, lively discussion, sustained inquiry, and new understanding as well as more questions” (Wiggins, 2007, para. 7).

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## FIGURE 5.2 Sample Text Mediation Plan

**Title:** *Sit-in: How Four Friends Stood up by Sitting Down* by Andrea Pinkney (2010); illustrations by Brian Pinkney

### Literacy Platforms

- Becoming resilient ✓
- Engaging others ✓

### Introducing the Text (*getting students into the text right away*)

- Required vocabulary—[1–3 words]
- Text to introduce the book—use an excerpt to get the students involved right away

*Write words on board—Segregation; Integration*

*Show book “trailer”: Freedom Walkers; read first six pages of Sit-in; ask kids for the definition of each term*

### Framing Questions

1. *Is it better to follow what everyone is doing, or to do what you know is right?*
2. *What are the benefits of doing what you know is right? What are you willing to give up to do the right thing?*
3. *Are there things that are happening in our school or in your neighborhood that you would like to change? How could you start to make these changes? How could you get others involved?*
4. *Are there connections between standing up for what you know is right and becoming resilient and engaging others?*

### Writing Connection (*calling attention to the text as a language model and helping students read as writers*)

Let’s examine the first six pages of the text. What do you think about the author’s:

1. **Word choice**—Is the author using words that invite the reader in or lock the reader out? (*Pinkney uses words related to recipes, which most children are familiar with; this invites readers in*)
2. **Voice**—Does it sound like a real voice? Is the author taking care to get a point across? (*Pinkney uses the students’ names and repeats them throughout; there is a connection to a real place, Greensboro, NC*)
3. **Momentum**—Is the author able to keep the reader’s attention? Why or why not? (*Pinkney uses short sentences; rhythm; illustrations; words/phrases in capital letters*)
4. **Investment**—Does the author seem to really care about what she is writing about? (*The inclusion of timeline and notes at the end demonstrates the care that Pinkney took to be accurate*)

### Mediating Discussions Around One of the Framing Questions

*In the whole group: Reread the first six pages; discuss Framing Question 1*

*In small groups: Read the rest of the book; discuss Framing Question 2 or 3; OR*

*Individually: Read the rest of the book; students write about something that they would be willing to stand up for*

### Evaluating the Discussion and Students’ Ongoing Future Needs Going in Different Directions

1. **Pacing.** *Did the students have adequate time to absorb and respond to the text?*
  2. **Grouping.** *Did students participate effectively in both small- and large-group discussions? Were the discussions substantive?*
  3. **Individual writing assignments.** *Is there evidence that students defined themselves through their writing?*
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### FIGURE 5.3 Sample Starter Passages and Framing Questions for a Book Club

**Title:** *We Could Be Brothers*, by Derrick Barnes (2010)

**Annotation:** Two eighth graders from very different backgrounds, Robeson “Crease” Battlefield and Pacino Clapton, discover in after-school detention that they have a great deal in common.

#### **Starter Passages**

“I don’t want other kids thinking I’m trying to be white or talkin’ white like you do or calling me soft. You know.”

“No, I *don’t* know. And who says white kids have a monopoly on being good students . . . And I didn’t know that using the English language like it’s supposed to be used was a crime. *Talkin’ white* . . . you don’t know how stupid that sounds.” (p. 39)

“You don’t need to be hood to protect yourself, fool. He may want to hurt me, but I won’t play into that stupid stuff. I’m about using my mind, not fighting.” (p. 104)

#### **Framing Questions**

Is the view of school achievement as “something for Whites only” real or imagined? Who has the authority to define your intellectual aspirations—you or society?

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**Title:** *Stella by Starlight*, by Sharon Draper (2015)

**Annotation:** When the Ku Klux Klan reappears in Stella’s segregated Southern town, the community unites to battle prejudice and injustice.

#### **Starter Passages**

“Stella stopped in her tracks, mouth agape. The horses were nearly upon her, but more terrifying were the horsemen. Each wore a white full-length robe. And a pointed white hood. And each carried a flaming torch in his left hand. The Klan.” (p. 171)

#### **Framing Questions**

What are the alternatives when someone tries to stamp out the existence of others?

What does it mean to *truly* be free?

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## Students Carry the Discussion

It is also possible to teach students to mediate texts. The middle school librarian at Chewning Middle School in Durham, North Carolina, did just that, inviting students interested in facilitating book discussions to a workshop to learn how to establish and lead book clubs. In addition to sharing the guidelines shown in Figure 5.4, she taught students how to select a book for discussion, design a book “trailer” to motivate other students to want to read the

**FIGURE 5.4 Eighth Grade Book Club Guidelines**

<b>Expectations for Student Facilitators</b>	<b>Expectations for Participants</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select the book and design the plan.</li> <li>• Promote the club, recruit, and choose members.</li> <li>• Prepare for each meeting by reviewing the reading, writing discussion topics, and possibly planning activities related to the book .</li> <li>• Hold book club members accountable for participation and behavioral expectations.</li> <li>• Keep a notebook with your discussion questions and other preparation related to the book club. Share this notebook with the librarian on Mondays.</li> <li>• Keep the conversation focused on the book.</li> <li>• Encourage equal participation of all group members.</li> <li>• At the end of the meeting, review the next steps with your members.</li> <li>• Make sure that your meeting space is clean before you leave.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete the sign-up form in the library.</li> <li>• Obtain permission and a pass from your third-period core teacher to attend meetings on designated days at lunch.</li> <li>• Return to class on time after each meeting.</li> <li>• Prepare for each meeting by reading the assigned section and thinking about what you can contribute to the discussion.</li> <li>• Participate by sharing and listening at appropriate times.</li> <li>• Ask questions when you do not understand. Offer help or ideas when necessary.</li> <li>• Honor your commitment to the group by attending meetings regularly.</li> <li>• Leave your meeting space clean.</li> </ul>

*Developed by Lara Will, Chewning Middle School, Durham, North Carolina*

book, and develop a list of questions to guide the discussion. The student facilitators met with the librarian once a week to discuss their book group's progress. In a school that had many reluctant readers, the librarian soon found that she had more students wanting to join a book club than she could accommodate.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The ultimate goal of literacy instruction is not simply to improve reading scores, but to support African American youth as they become agents of change in their own lives. Simply modifying the texts that we use in our literacy instruction will not achieve this goal, but it is an imperative first step in the process. Equally important is engaging Black youth in meaningful discussions about texts. When we do this, we motivate youth to want to read, we stimulate their intellectual curiosity, and we help them connect literacy to their lives—to see

that literacy has a purpose beyond the four walls of the school. As librarians, we are not limited by the restrictions of standards and tests. We can be proactive and bold, and engage Black youth in dialogue about pressing issues that matter in school, in their neighborhoods, and in society. In this way, we can help close not only the literacy gap, but more important, the life outcome gap.

## NOTE

This chapter is based on two previously published articles: Rawson, C. R., & Hughes-Hassell, S. (2012), “Rethinking the texts we use in literacy instruction with adolescent African American males,” *The ALAN Review* 39(3): 21–29; and Hughes-Hassell, S., Rawson, C., et al. (2012), “Librarians form a bridge to books to advance literacy,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(5): 17–22.

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## Make It Happen in Your Library

Use these enabling texts to get started:

### Elementary Picture Books

- Blue, R. (2009). *Ron's big mission*. New York: Dutton. [Biography]
- Copeland, M. (2014). *Firebird*. New York: Putnam. [Realistic fiction]
- Deedy, C. A. (2009). *14 cows for America*. Atlanta: Peachtree. [Biography]
- Grimes, N. (1997). *It's raining laughter*. New York: Dial. [Poetry]
- Myers, C. (2000). *Wings*. New York: Scholastic. [Fantasy]
- Myers, W. D. (2009). *Looking like me*. New York: Egmont USA. [Poetry]
- Pinkney, A. D. (2008). *Boycott blues: How Rosa Parks inspired a nation*. New York: Greenwillow. [Historical fiction]
- Pinkney, A. D. (2010). *Sit-in: How four friends stood up by sitting down*. New York: Little, Brown. [Historical fiction]
- Pinkney, B. (1997). *The adventures of Sparrowboy*. New York: Simon & Schuster. [Fantasy]
- Robinson, S. (2009). *Testing the ice: A true story about Jackie Robinson*. New York: Scholastic. [Fictionalized biography]
- Shange, N. (2004). *Ellington was not a street*. New York: Simon & Schuster. [Poetry]
- Stephens, J. (1997). *In daddy's arms I AM TALL: African-Americans celebrating fathers*. New York: Lee & Low Books. [Poetry]
- Weatherford, C. B. (2005). *Freedom on the menu: The Greensboro sit-ins*. New York: Dial. [Historical fiction]
- Woodson, J. (2001). *The other side*. New York, Putnam. [Realistic fiction]

### Upper Elementary

- Amato, M. *Invisible lines*. New York: Egmont USA, 2009. [Realistic fiction]
- Bryan, A. (2009). *Words to my life's song*. New York: Atheneum. [Biography]
- Curtis, C. P. *Bud, not Buddy*. New York: Delacorte, 1999. [Historical fiction]
- Freedman, R. (2006). *Freedom walkers: The story of the Montgomery bus boycott*. New York: Holiday House. [Nonfiction]
- Grimes, N. (1999). *My man blue*. New York: Dial. [Poetry]

## 100 Libraries, Literacy, and African American Youth

- Harris, T. E. (2014). *The perfect place*. New York: Putnam. [Realistic fiction]
- Levine, E. S. (1993). *Freedom's children: Young civil rights activists tell their own stories*. New York: Putnam. [Biography]
- McWhorter, D. (2004). *A dream of freedom: The civil rights movement from 1954 to 1968*. New York: Scholastic. [Nonfiction]
- Myers, W. D. (1998). *Me, Mop, and the Moondance Kid*. New York: Delacorte. [Realistic fiction]
- Smith, H. A. (2003). *The way a door closes*. New York: Henry Holt. [Novel in poems]
- Williams-Garcia, R. (2010). *One crazy summer*. New York: Harper Collins. [Realistic fiction]
- Williams-Garcia, R. (2014). *P.S. Be eleven*. New York: Harper Collins. [Realistic fiction]
- Woods, B. (2014). *The blossoming universe of Violet Diamond*. New York: Penguin. [Realistic fiction]
- Woodson, J. (2003). *Locomotion*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. [Novel in poems]

### Middle School

- Adoff, A. (1997). *I am the darker brother: An anthology of modern poems by African-Americans*. New York: Simon Pulse. [Poetry]
- Adoff, J. (2005). *Jimi & me*. New York: Hyperion/Jump at the Sun. [Historical fiction]
- Alexander, K. (2014). *The crossover*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. [Novel in poems]
- Barnes, D. (2010). *We could be brothers*. New York: Scholastic. [Realistic fiction]
- Davis, S., Jenkins, G., Hunt, R., & Draper, S. (2005). *We beat the street: How a friendship pact led to success*. New York: Dutton. [Nonfiction]
- Flake, S. G. (1998). *The skin I'm in*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion. [Realistic fiction]
- Grimes, N. (1998). *Jazmin's notebook*. New York: Dial. [Realistic fiction]
- Grimes, N. (2005). *Dark sons*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. [Realistic fiction, poetry]
- Hansen, J. (1986). *Yellow Bird & me*. New York: Clarion. [Realistic fiction]
- Johnson, A. (2005). *The first part last*. New York: Simon Pulse. [Realistic fiction]
- Lewis, J., & A. Aydin. (2013). *March: Book one*. New York: Top Shelf [Graphic novel]
- Lewis, J., & A. Aydin. (2015). *March: Book two*. New York: Top Shelf [Graphic novel]
- Magoon, K. (2010). *The rock and the river*. New York: Aladdin. [Historical fiction]
- Myers, W. D. (2000). *145th Street: Short stories*. New York: Delacorte. [Short stories]
- Myers, W. D. (2004). *Here in Harlem: Poems in many voices*. New York: Holiday House. [Poetry]
- Neri, G. (2010). *Yummy: The last days of a Southside shorty*. New York: Lee & Low. [Graphic novel]
- Pearsall, S. (2008). *All of the above*. Boston: Little Brown. [Realistic fiction]
- Shenkin, S. (2014). *The Port Chicago 50: Mutiny and the fight for civil rights*. New York: Roaring Book Press. [Nonfiction]
- Smith, S. L. (2009). *Flygirl*. New York: Putnum. [Historical fiction]
- Reynolds, J. (2015). *When I was the greatest*. New York: Atheneum. [Realistic fiction]
- Robinet, H. G. (2001). *Missing from Haymaker Square*. New York: Atheneum. [Historical fiction]
- Watson, R. (2015). *This side of home*. New York: Bloomsbury. [Realistic fiction]
- Woodson, J. (1995). *From the notebooks of Melanin Sun*. New York: Scholastic. [Realistic fiction]
- Woodson, J. (2000). *Miracle's boys*. New York: Putnam. [Realistic fiction]
- Woodson, J. (2002). *Hush*. New York: Putnam. [Realistic fiction]
- Woodson, J. (2008). *After Tupac and D Foster*. New York: Putnam. [Realistic fiction]
- Woodson, J. (2014). *Brown girl dreaming*. New York: Penguin. [Memoir]

### High School

- Binns, B. A. (2010). *Pull*. Lodi, NJ: WestSide Books. [Realistic fiction]
- Flake, S. G. (2004). *Who am I without him? Short stories about girls and the boys in their lives*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion. [Realistic fiction]



- Flake, S. G. (2010). *You don't even know me: Stories and poems about boys*. New York: Hyperion. [Poetry, short stories]
- Franco, B. (Ed.) (2001). *You hear me: Poems and writings by teenage boys*. New York: Candlewick. [Anthology]
- Freedom Writers. (1999). *Freedom writer's diary: How a teacher and 150 teens used writing to change themselves and the world around them*. New York: Broadway Books. [Nonfiction]
- Grimes, N. (2002). *Bronx masquerade*. New York: Dial. [Realistic fiction]
- Harper, H. (2006). *Letters to a young brother: MANifest your destiny*. New York: Gotham Books. [Nonfiction]
- Hefler, A. (2006). *A graphic biography of Malcolm X*. New York: Hill & Wang. [Graphic novel]
- Houston, J. (2005). *New boy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. [Historical fiction]
- Lester, J. (1995). *Othello: A novel*. New York: Scholastic. [Retold Shakespeare]
- Magoon, K. (2014). *How it went down*. New York: Henry Holt. [Realistic fiction]
- Mitchell, D. (2014). *Freedom summer murders*. New York: Scholastic. [Nonfiction]
- Myers, W. D. (2006). *Autobiography of my dead brother*. New York: Harper Collins. [Realistic fiction]
- Myers, W. D. (2010). *Lockdown*. New York: Harper Collins. [Realistic fiction]
- Reynolds, J., & Kiely, B. (2015). *All-American boys*. New York: Simon & Schuster. [Realistic fiction]
- Shakur, T. (1999). *The rose that grew from concrete*. New York: MTV Books. [Poetry]
- Volponi, P. (2005). *Black and White*. New York: Viking. [Realistic fiction]

