

# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT

by

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(Under the Direction of Bob Fecho)

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study highlights data collected over a four-month period with a focus group of ten high school students in Oglethorpe County, Georgia. The study was designed to examine how empowerment was realized in the lives of those students. The author examines the way the students discuss their experiences in school, at home, and in their community in order to uncover the extent of empowerment each one may or may not be experiencing in his life. In addition, the author looks at the ways their dialogues uncover emerging themes that show how school may or may not be fostering youth empowerment.

Chapter one begins by describing the process the author went through in making decisions about designing the study and presenting it. Chapter two includes a brief review of the literature on youth empowerment and marginalized youth. Chapter three examines interpretive phenomenology and the importance of Vagle (2011) on this study. In particular Karin Dahlberg's work on bridling (2001) is of importance to this study, as that practice was an integral part of the author distancing herself from the data and the words of the students. Chapter four highlights four of the participants as they discuss empowerment and as each highlights issues of control, power, and inadequacy. Finally, chapter five includes an extension of the review of literature in

order to explore literature relevant to the themes that emerged during the study, and then concludes with a discussion of the implications and significance of this study.

Examinations of the dialogues of each of the students highlighted here reveal a disconnect between the students and the system of education they are a part of. They know that their goal is to graduate high school, but several are unsure of why that is a goal other than that they have been told that it must be by their teachers or family. There is a lack of efficacy because of that lack of understanding, which was vocalized in nearly every discussion.

INDEX WORDS: Adolescent, Marginalized youth, Empowerment, Identity, Gee, Bakhtin

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## DEDICATION

To my husband AJ, my daughter Ella, and my son Sullivan, who all sacrificed time and attention so that this dissertation would finally be finished. AJ, without you there wouldn't have been an undergraduate degree, much less any that came later. For my Papa, who needed another doctor in the family so badly that I felt the need to do all of this.

And for Daddy, who was the only one who said I could quit if it would make me happy, and whose constant support is the reason I did not.

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When I fell in love with Heidegger I discovered what it really meant to be a doctoral student. That discovery helped me remember how sad it is that so many of my students never find a love of learning. I'm constantly reminded that the achievement gap so frequently discussed in education is rarely discussed in terms of the children who do not make it. Those discussions and questions have caused me to be horrible to deal with at work, in my courses, and at home, and for all those who have put up with it (and hopefully those who will continue to do so) I offer many thanks.

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who refuses to stop being a student; it must be maddening. My father and brother, who both question the true intelligence of a person who cannot explain the difference between a brown and black bear. My Nana and Papa, whose dedication to education means sacrificing so that the rest of us can afford to go back to school, and who have always been the strongest advocates of reading I have ever known. My girlfriends and sisters, who have listened to me complain about the trials of teaching and motherhood in many single happy hour sittings: Jenn, T, Jules, Kaycee, Kelly, Kristen, Jongie and Dani. Thank you so much. My amazing mother and father in law, without whose help I wouldn't have been able to work on this while my children were well cared for. And the biggest thanks of all to my best friend, Courtney, whose strength and support have made me want to do better since I was five years old.

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# A Phenomenological Study of Adolescents' Perception of Empowerment

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

There are two stories that I carry with me each day. I tell them to countless teachers and students; I have used them for training purposes as well as instructional tools. Yet what drives me to be a better educator and a better person is the memory of the two young men who are the main characters. One, Ced, should have graduated in 2008. Ced was motivated, driven, and athletic. He had several scholarship opportunities. However, he took the Georgia High School Graduation tests for the first time in 2007 and failed all five of them. He tried a second time, and passed the writing and science portions of the test. He tried a third time, and did not pass any additional tests. The fourth time was the spring of his senior year. By now he was panicked. We worked after school each day before football practice. That spring, he passed mathematics. However, failing the social studies and language arts portions for the fourth time meant that he could not graduate with his class.

By May most of his teachers were deeply concerned. Ced had lost interest, and felt that he was not capable of passing the tests. He said, "if I can't pass the tests, ain't no way college will work for me." Yet he tried again that summer. He managed to pass English Language Arts, but failed Social Studies for the fifth time. His score dropped so dramatically that all of his teachers were at a loss. Yet the fall of 2008 he came back again. He received his scores, yet had no time to practice over the summer because he was incarcerated. He was seen spending time with a student who dropped out early in high school and was a known drug dealer in the area. Yet he looked like the child I knew as a sophomore in high school. He gave a shy smile, and said, "I'm not going to quit yet." He came back for two weeks to review for the test. The

weekend before he would have tried to pass the Social Studies portion of the Georgia High School Graduation test for the sixth time, he got into an argument with his father about chopping wood. His father shot and killed him. Ced, a child who made good grades and did everything right in his early years of high school had all of his hopes stripped from him by testing, the failure of a school system to prepare him, and the environment in which he was raised and never escaped.

Soon after Ced's death, however, another young man, Rico, came into my classroom. He was another football player, and was a junior in high school. The death of his former teammate shook him into reality. He asked me to calculate his academic grade point average (GPA) to calculate his National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) eligibility. He was a complacent student during his freshman and sophomore years of high school, and was far more interested in popularity than grades. His GPA was a 1.7 out of 4.0. He asked what he could do. "How will I get out of here?" I told him that as a junior, his only option would be to make all As. He scoffed, but there was a look I couldn't place in his eyes. Over the course of the school year, he indeed made all As. I was shocked. His GPA continued to climb, and his scores on the ACT were high enough to get into college. Rico passed all portions of his graduation test by the end of his junior year.

I thought of my student who was killed. Was he the motivating factor for this young man? How had the system failed one child so miserably, while another found such success? I began to wonder about empowerment. Both young men saw college as the chance to escape the environment they were being raised in. Both young men came from volatile home environments, and both showed similar resignation at some point in their high school careers that their lives were chosen for them. Was this a question of faith for them? Did they believe God had a plan

that they were not supposed to interfere with? Was it a lack of knowledge of self? Was it a lack of belief in ability? Was it a lack of empowerment? It seemed to me that at some point each of these young men realized that he had the ability to empower himself – to rise above his surroundings – and that education was the tool to do so. Unfortunately, only one got to act more fully on his belief.

I did not believe that this research would find an answer, and it did not. I don't think there is an empowerment band-aid that you could have placed on my student that would have given him the confidence to pass his tests. However, I believe many times as teachers we forget the power we have to encourage children. Words of encouragement push children who are beginning to empower themselves. Helping children understand the power of education and how it may be used as a tool could push them towards self-empowerment. Most importantly, if we never tell a child to ask "what if", the worst possible outcome could be nothing. I wonder each day what would unfold if none of us ever asked what if.

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### **Academic**

In an era of high stakes testing, many public school teachers are offering differentiated instruction and extra help to encourage underachieving students to achieve and go on for postsecondary education (McQuillan, 2005). However, there is little training for teachers on what techniques will actually empower underachieving students. If students are not empowered, they will most likely have difficulty becoming part of the dominant discourse in society and will have even more difficulty succeeding in postsecondary education (Delpit, 1992). The societal implications of a national system of education that fails to encourage self-empowerment are causes for alarm.

The community where I currently teach is predominantly white and working class. Many of the working class citizens in our rural county have no formal education beyond high school, and according to recent data collected by our Board of Education, as many as 75% of our students' parents are currently unemployed. Unemployment seems a source of embarrassment for our parents and students, and often parents and students complain to me about the parents' lack of formal education. Anyon (1980), when writing about students' perceptions of self, wrote, "[working-class] children already "know" that what it takes to get ahead is being smart, and that they themselves, are *not* smart" (p. 14). Many students identify smart as connected to formal education and employment; in this rural county, neither goal is being attained by a majority of the population.

According to our most recent census data, 25% of the local population is unemployed, and in particular 72% of the black population is unemployed. I choose to use the terms "black" and "white" as opposed to "African American" or "Caucasian". I began my teaching career in a school district that was nearly 90% black, and my students there lectured me frequently on using the term "African American". Their reasoning was that they call themselves black, and me white, and they felt I should do the same. I have chosen to continue using that terminology because I understood that it meant something to them that I adopt some of their terminologies, and also because I have become so accustomed to it. Similarly, I choose not to capitalize the terms "black" and "white" because my students and I had numerous conversations about how much importance is placed upon capitalizing terms to refer to race, seemingly to put everyone on equal footing, when in fact capitalizing and complicating the terminology counteracts the entire process. What I mean by that is by placing such emphasis on the terms to describe ourselves we

highlight that which we wish to make less of. My students argued that point when we read Peggy McIntosh, and I agree with them and have stuck with lower case and color only.

The unemployed families were primarily working class prior to the boom in unemployment. Because of the dynamic between the working class white families and black families, there was a great deal of racial tension in the area. To add to that dynamic, a majority of the teachers at Oglethorpe County High School were raised in Oglethorpe County and attended high school there. There is thus some tension inherent in the philosophy shift within the school community to ensure that all students are equally successful. Many of the white families feel that people from Clarke County are moving in to take their jobs. The tension is thus in part racial, in part cultural, and in part socioeconomic. There has been a boom in the black population to the current figure; forty percent of the students are African American. When disaggregating data in the fall of 2008, it was discovered that out of 176 students in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 25 were behind on credits. 13 of those students were black, and 12 were white. Those numbers had not been analyzed by previous administrations as far as we knew, nor had there been anything documented on that disparity by the Georgia Department of Education. At first glance, the numbers for the racial groups look fairly equal. However, when looking at the numbers compared to the total population in each category, the effect is more shocking. 36% of the black junior population was behind on credits as opposed to 9% of the white population. The upshot is that this data revealed a problem that needs attention.

When, as an undergraduate, I began working for a local law firm, I was able to pick up on the legal jargon quickly. I developed an institutional identity as quick, well spoken, and efficient. Yet it was easy for me to attain that identity, because the dominant culture of the lawyers was middle class white American, and the dominant language was an upper middle class white



version of English. This concerns me and seems to be problematic. Is it necessary for learners of any new language to share common traits with those they seek to join? For our students, the language spoken at home and with friends might not be “the King’s English”. In fact, for marginalized students, it very rarely is. Thus, as language users encounter a range of cultural perspectives, “language is the currency with which they negotiate . . . border transactions” (Fecho, 2001, p. 13).

I wonder if educators embrace the different attitudes, fears, beliefs, and convictions held by their students, could true transcendence take place? As Fecho noted, “coming into contact with different cultures . . . forces language transactions that have the potential to both enrich and threaten one’s sense of self” (Fecho, 2001, p. 13). However, “some teachers, and some teacher educators, opt to table the dialogue that might emerge from further investigation of a salient student question” (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007, p. 548). The very questions and conflicts that are often ignored should be the basis from which those marginalized students would form their academic identities. By ignoring difficult questions or difficult children, educators refuse to allow those children to join the dominant discourse, thus marginalizing them further. For a student to discover empowerment, and then empower him or herself, first he or she must feel comfortable assuming an institutional identity fluent in the dominant language of that institution. The problem then is that the literature does not indicate that many teachers do not know how to handle the issues surrounding marginalized youth or empowerment. Fecho’s work often incorporates the theories of Bakhtin, and the idea that I incorporate from Bakhtin in this work is the idea that interrelationships are essential for dialogues with adolescents (Fecho, 2001). The relationship I chose to enter into by creating a community within our school in the form of a discussion group changed my perspective and that of my students I think.

## Personal

In both of the rural, low socioeconomic schools in which I have worked, students have worked to impress upon me the difference between “street smart” and “book smart”. When I first began teaching in Greensboro, Georgia, I was overwhelmed by the case my students – nearly all black – made for the importance of street smarts. They would say, “Ms. Adams – you real smart but you ain’t got no common sense, ya know? We couldn’t let you go on the street alone.” I can picture the first child who said that to me, and I heard that same phrase time and again, almost verbatim. When I began my doctoral studies, I learned that this comparing street smarts to school smarts is a common theme among marginalized youth (Holland et al., 1998; Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 2001).

When marginalized youth face the implications of being “smart” in school, they are pushing against the dominant discourse in society and against the constraints of power and society themselves (Hatt, 2007, p. 146). When I began understanding that those youth who are marginalized by the dominant discourses in American society create their own definitions of concepts like “smart” or “powerful”, I then understood how their identities are of their own making (Holland et. al, 1998). I put myself in my students’ positions when thinking of abstract concepts like “smart”. Do I identify myself as smart? How do I define that term? Whose term is it for me to alter? How is it used by different people?

The student I mentioned who passed his classes and is now in college decided to become the traditional definition of “smart”. “Rico” wanted to make straight As. His father was a felon who had been out of prison for nearly a decade. Rico’s father was criminally active, but frequently avoided getting caught. The way the other students spoke of him was with reverence. “Rico” said often that his father was his hero because of how smart he was. I wonder now if that

type of smart takes any less work than the type of smart valued in academia. I know now that it does not matter whether it does or does not. I believe that above all else, my students configure their identities in school based upon whether or not others consider them cool. If being smart in school is cool, or allows the child entry into a certain group, then smart in school will become a desirable trait. In my marginalized students, I most often see this manifest itself with street smarts. Being able to survive outside of school is a skill my marginalized students value above most other skills they are able to attain. Identity is figured (Holland et. al., 1998) and is something that is produced socially. Academic identities are “the ways we come to understand ourselves within and in relation to the institution of schooling” (Hatt, 2007, p. 146).

Above my desk, I keep a picture of my student who was killed. He smiles down at me each day, reminding me that education can be a matter of life or death. What if he had chosen to leave for the military and forget the high school diploma? What if he had chosen to get the diploma from another state? Yet he did not. He wanted to prove that he could pass the tests and move on to college. Was it he proving it to his teachers, his father, his classmates, himself? I never thought to ask him those questions. I wish now so much that I had. However, he somehow knew that education meant the possibility of empowerment. He somehow knew that the possibility of another life was just beyond his grasp. I need to know more about that, in the hope that students and I may come up with a working definition of youth empowerment that could do some good in rural communities around Athens, Georgia. I have given the story of these two students in order to illustrate how I was personally affected by the issues concerning marginalized youth and their lack of agency in their schools. Just as those two stories framed the way I think about marginalized youth in public education, theories of identity and the empowerment of marginalized youth provide the theoretical framework for this study.

## Theoretical Framework

### **Using language to shape identity**

The work of Bakhtin is important in framing this study primarily due to the concepts of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. Authoritative discourse is that which cannot be argued with. In terms of religion, such as in the case of Catholicism, authoritative discourse is the doctrine of the church that cannot be disputed. If you choose to argue with a law, such as being pro-choice in terms of abortion, you may be excommunicated. Internally persuasive discourse is that which may be manipulated by the speaker or listener. It is language that invites the receiver into dialogue. As a teacher, I hope that the discourse in our classroom is internally persuasive. I hope that the climate fosters dialogue, and that my students may choose to disagree with what I say. If the language of the classroom is authoritative, and students feel that what the teacher says cannot be argued with, the pressure on the teacher to convey “truth” or even civic-minded, unbiased information seems more than I can imagine. More importantly, the worry is that education will become a place where “truth” is conveyed rather than a place where inquiries are made and students and teachers work together to make meaning.

Language is often conceptualized as a means of social stratification (Bakhtin, 1981), and thus when looking at marginalized students it is necessary to look at language as an aid in constructing identity. If the students of unemployed families see education as a tool to be successful or gainfully employed, and neither the student nor the parent have achieved those ends, then smart becomes something not attainable. In addition, work on issues like code-switching shows that marginalized youth become stratified because they are not part of the dominant discourse community formed by those speakers who do not code-switch (Au & Jordan, 1981; Banks, 2002; Gay, 2000).

Because language is also societal and communal, (Volosinov, 1973), identities are formed based upon the languages understood by those within those communities. For example, in some communities “shut up” might be the normal way to tell a child to stop speaking. But for others, that term might be considered extremely offensive. Also within communities are rules that are taboo to break. There is a language of “rules” that cannot be broken. A professor in the Comparative Literature department at the University of Georgia, Karim Traore, describes some of those rules extant in his homeland in West Africa (K. Traore, Personal Communication, 2007). For example, you do not touch anything with your left hand. Clean things like eating and shaking hands are done with the right hand, dirty things like those involving toiletries are with the left. This is not something that is spoken, but is an understood code, a type of language, understood by the members of his culture. Bakhtin calls those codes, the things signified and meaningful in a culture “authoritative discourse” (1981). Authoritative discourse may be the authority of tradition, or generally acknowledged truths, and cannot be argued with – “it can only be transmitted” (Bakhtin, 1981). It is part of the structure of a culture that may be embedded in accepted traditions and truths that are part of the everyday lives of the community.

For Bakhtin, members of a working class must particularly learn to maneuver between many languages and identities. This is important when using Bakhtin to theorize concepts of marginalized youth. With the example of the peasant, Bakhtin really explains what Gee tells us much later about the various identities we all assume in our daily lives. The peasant, “miles away from any urban center . . . lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language . . . sang songs in another, spoke to his family in a third and, when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities through a scribe, he tried speaking yet a fourth language” (Bakhtin, 1981). In some countries, the different languages spoken may be different language systems, the English

required in school and the Spanish spoken at home for example. However, Bakhtin means here that there is a language that is natural to that peasant, a language he must use according to his religion, a language he learns through popular culture, and the language of the society or law of the land he lives in. This is the initial language learned by the peasant; it is the language spoken at home that he learns when learning to speak. The peasant must pass from one language to the other automatically – “each was indisputably in its own place, and the place of each was indisputable” (Bakhtin, 1981). The language of the peasant’s home is valued for its own merit; the language of the peasant’s work and society is valued because of its otherness. The value of the other is central to theorizing the identities created by marginalized youth.

### **How dialogue impacts identity**

Gee refers to the language that receives preference as the “institutional identity” (2003). Gee sees reality for social beings as extant on several planes (2003). Various languages intersect within and without the individual, and thus the way those complex individuals make meaning with the language is constantly morphing. Students must use the language of the school, the language of their friends, the language of technology, the language of popular culture, the language of their home, and perhaps even the language of their church. They must be able to move fluidly between those language and the identities they create with each of them. Language acquisition allows social beings to create an infinite number of identities. Gee feels that the issue we face, then, is when one identity/language is given dominance over the others (2003). The value each identity/language is given is often placed upon it by an outside force. Thus, with our students, when we help them become conscious that they speak different languages for different purposes, they must begin to choose one language/identity over the other, and typically they will form that decision based upon the language that has been put upon them by an other.

I have been arguing that language and identity are interwoven. I think it is equally important to look not only at how various languages allow for identity construction, but also how dialogue using those languages can reaffirm or deconstruct those identities. That construction is a constantly changing process. Gee talks about four different identities that are dominant in education: natural, discursive, institutional, and affinity (2000-2001). The institutional identity exists for professional environments. Natural identities are who we are when we are born, so if I had an identical twin, he or she would understand this side of my nature even if I could not express it verbally. My discursive identity is the identity I develop as I begin to speak. Affinity identities are identities developed amongst those who share interests. I believe that discursive and affinity identities are crucial when attempting to delve into how adolescents develop their various identities.

Gee says that “all of us control many different social languages and switch among them in different contexts” (2000-2001, p. 142). Citing Bakhtin, he notes that “all languages are composed of many different social languages” (p. 141). This is important in order to identify the various identities of our students and allow them to move fluidly through them in our classrooms. Gee’s examples in his chapter cited here (written with Judith Green) (2000-2001) do not focus necessarily on marginalized students or students of color. However, according to researchers, those students using code-switching deal with problems switching among identities daily (Baugh, 1983; Dillard, 1972; Labov, 1969; Sternglass, 1974). Marginalized students will not feel comfortable developing an institutional identity until systems of education—and schools in particular—begin to value the identities they assume at home, on the streets, and technologically. The theoretical framework of this paper leads me to wonder what kind of academic identities my students have created, and whether or not those identities lend themselves

to self-empowerment. In a larger sense this theoretical framework has caused me to wonder about the various ways authoritative discourse is used in educational settings and whether that helps or hinders the identity construction of marginalized students.

### **Assumptions**

This section is an addition to the theoretical framework in a sense. It is an exploration of what I believe as an educator. My beliefs are strong, and I will need to reflect diligently on what is my opinion and what the research tells me. In addition, many of those beliefs explain why I chose the theories and theorists I did in the theoretical framework. As I will explain later, these assumptions are all things that I will need to bridle as I conduct my research.

### **What I Believe**

I do not want there to be authoritative discourse in schools. I understand that when Bakhtin wrote of authoritative discourse, he meant something like abortion to a Catholic; it is doctrine that abortion as sin cannot be disputed. What concerns me is that in school, often teachers perceive themselves as the authority. What teachers say is law in their classrooms. They dictate what is learned, how it is learned, and by what methods learning should occur. My concern with that is that not all students enter high school understanding the accepted norms involved in public education. Furthermore, I disagree with the rules. What I fear is that in the model of teaching where students receive information without participating, for example in classrooms where only lecture style teaching is used, they may not feel that they have a voice. I believe that for students to take ownership of what they are learning they need to have ownership in it, and dialogue in the classroom is essential in that process.

Bakhtin says that as opposed to authoritative discourse, where the rules cannot be argued, internally persuasive discourse is open for dialogue. When students begin to take part in



classroom dialogues about their learning and the ways in which they learn best, they become part of a classroom community (Sorenson, 1996). Participating in a democratic classroom allows students to empower themselves and take charge of what and how they learn (1996). I think that process may be necessary for some students to love learning. I believe that this is not uncommon in education. Educators were often good students.

I believe that as educators it is important to explore our own academic identities. What kinds of learners were we, and do we continue be learners? More importantly, we must explore the academic identities of our students. Have they developed one yet? Do they love learning? Do they have a favorite subject? What do they enjoy learning outside of school? James Gee has helped me create a lens through which I view student identities. What I am calling academic identity is what Gee refers to as the institutional identity, and says that we must all adhere to it (2003). When we are at work, we must take on an identity portraying ourselves as professional. We must communicate in order to get work done, and there is some governing system or persons dictating that behavior and language (2003). There is a relationship between our institutional identity and others. I must concern myself with how others in my office perceive me. In this way, one of the important things about identity is that it involves an “other”. Gee has pointed out time and again, (2003), the relationship between self and other is a shifting relationship that is as complex as it is intricate. The reality of our daily lives is often constructed by what we think another person meant; we use the actions or lack of actions by others as our guide for how we need to proceed.

### **Connecting My Beliefs to Issues of Empowerment**

In order to feel comfortable creating new identities for ourselves, social beings must make decisions about our natural and discursive identities. How do I identify myself? How do

others see me? How do I see my parents? How do others see my parents? If I answer those questions negatively – I am a poor student, I don't understand my teachers, and my parents are so embarrassing that I cannot ask for their help – I begin to marginalize myself. Society has already marginalized me, so this further separation from what is viewed as successful pushes me even farther from what my society deems “successful.”

Yet if I embrace who I am – I am a poor student, but my teachers like me and say that my Mom is great – I may begin to feel that I can push my way towards the center, towards ‘success’. My students mentioned earlier found a place where they felt comfortable. In my classroom, slang was permitted when we were speaking. When reading and writing, formal English (my term) was used, but I spoke at the beginning of each school year about the importance of us all feeling comfortable speaking in class how we would at home. I said that to get into literature, I felt it was very important to discuss it. I always begin by discussing music. How would I describe to a friend a new song I just heard and loved? We'd all take turns, and laugh, and then decide how we would proceed to do the same with literature. It was a process. I believe that Rico and Ced understood that. Ced would not have continued coming back to take those tests had he not felt that success was near. He knew what he wanted, and was determined to get it. By listening to students and respecting all of their languages/identities, we may begin to truly teach them; we may reach them in a way that we would not have using the status quo. This leads to the problem stated above. Students will never learn what empowerment is or how to empower themselves if teachers do not learn to accept and work with all of the languages of their students.

As I thought about my study, the key points that stood out and were the crux of my argument were about discourse and identity. I suspected that students would feel most supported in developing academic identities and empowering themselves if they were able to join

discussions regarding their academics. If the discourse of the classroom is authoritative and students feel unable to become agents of change, students might not feel able to empower themselves. I also suspected that if students developed positive academic identities they would be more likely to empower themselves academically.

In the following discussion, I presented what began as a proposal for an in-depth phenomenological study designed to examine questions about the impact of dialogue and identity on youth empowerment. That proposal eventually turned into the first three chapters of this dissertation. The theoretical framework just discussed is making an argument for the way identities are constructed, the impact identity has on marginalized youth, and the way marginalized youth may or may not empower themselves.

Chapter two, the initial review of literature, explores self-creation as specific to marginalized youth, followed by how society shapes identity. When conducting phenomenological research, it is crucial to be reflexive and to be open to any assumption you may have as a researcher (Vagle, 2011). Thus, when reviewing literature for a study, it can be difficult to keep from adding to assumptions that will need to be questioned as the data is analyzed. For that reason, some phenomenological researchers recommend briefly reviewing literature on the phenomenon in question, and then revisiting that literature after the data has been collected (Vagle, 2011). This allows the researcher to be reflexive and thorough, and in my case, was very important because it allowed me to follow the data; I was able to review literature that more directly tied to the findings, as the findings did not show youth empowerment happening at all. Finally, I discuss my theoretical stance on research and outline my research methods and design.

Chapter three goes into much greater detail about my methods and methodology. When designing this study, it seemed necessary to align myself with either Husserl or Heidegger (2010). As I worked through the data, I found that I agreed with Vagle (2009) that there is not as good a reason to see the two as mutually exclusive as I originally thought, and that discussion is included briefly in chapter three as well. There is a description of why I chose phenomenology as well, and of course the outline of how the study was conducted and designed.

Chapter four is the chapter for data analysis, and includes four case studies. The data was analyzed by separating the transcripts and looking at each case study individually, and then analyzed across the data as well. Thus, the chapter is presented here that way. The data was also analyzed through the lens of Bakhtin, and each case study includes how that was done and what I constructed using Bakhtin. Finally, Gee was useful when looking across the data, and that section ends the chapter.

The final chapter, chapter five, is somewhat unique. Chapter five was originally going to include the extension of the review of literature on youth empowerment, followed by implications and the conclusion. However, as mentioned, I followed the data. What I found was not youth empowerment; the students in our discussion group had no idea what empowerment was, nor were they realizing it in their lives. Thus, chapter five reviews literature more relevant to the findings, on the themes of power, control, and inadequacy in the lives of marginalized youth. Chapter five also includes implications and lingering questions, followed by a brief conclusion.

In the following chapter reviewing the literature on youth empowerment, it is most important to note the original questions guiding the study. They were: for marginalized students in rural Georgia, how is empowerment realized in their lives? How does the language and

identity of each student in the focal group affect the way he defines empowerment? How does the marginalization of each student in the focal group affect the way he has experienced empowerment? What are the implications of the focal group's construction of a definition of empowerment to impact each student's interest in empowering himself? Those are not the questions I ended up with, but they were what guided the study as it began.

## Chapter 2

### A Literature Review of the Empowerment of Marginalized Youth

The issues surrounding youth empowerment and the identity construction of marginalized youth were central to the framing of this study. The students who participated will be discussed their communities, their goals, their identities, the roles they play in their day to day lives, and the efficacy of school and our school system. Thus, the two large areas that were necessary for the review of literature were marginalized youth empowerment and the identities of marginalized youth. As noted, following the work of Mark Vagle on conducting phenomenological research (2011) the original review of literature was relatively short. The review of literature was extended in chapter five and was used to examine not only marginalized literature but also any other literature relevant to the data.

#### **Empowering marginalized youth**

Writing in 2005, McQuillan took the neoliberal reform head on when he wrote that “Student empowerment . . . seems a logical reaction to current demands for school reform and accountability . . . . how can schools propose to improve achievement or enact significant change if students remain little more than passive recipients of reforms developed by others?” (p.642). He went on to argue that there are three areas of empowerment that must be addressed to help students “crack the code” of being productive citizens in the United States: academic, political, and social. He said that students must “be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life” (p. 643). Delpit argued that students need to understand the codes that are essential in mainstream America, and believed that for marginalized youth to understand the urgency of acquiring those codes relationships must be relevant between teacher and student. She said that the job of the teacher must be the belief in “commitment and transformation”

(1992, p. 296). She told stories that spoke to “how people, given the proper support, can “make it” in culturally alien environments” (p. 297). If teachers are willing to make sacrifices and commit fully to the task of student transformation, it can and does happen (p. 297).

According to Hatt (2007), the fact that there is a discrepancy between their academic performance and the performance of white students is clear to black students as early as elementary school. Students of color and poverty are marginalized based partially upon academic performance, which leads to tracking in the upper grades (p.148). There are many reasons that students are marginalized, but other reasons are their color and their socio-economic class (p.149). Based upon the stratification process in schools, their teachers frequently perceive them as less “smart” than higher performing students, and they accept the view of their teachers and other members of society. Thus, they become further marginalized because the cycle of low expectations and low performance locks them into the reality of low performance and little success (p. 148).

When Delpit talked about empowerment, she spoke about turning systems on their heads in order to make available more voices contributing to the dominant Discourse (1992, p. 302). “Acquiring those linguistic forms and literate styles need not be ‘bowing before the master.’ Rather, the acquisition can provide a way to turn the sorting system on its head and to make available one more voice for resisting and reshaping an oppressive system” (Delpit, 1992, p. 302). Another study arguing for school reform said to begin with the students shaping school literacies (Heron-Hruby et. al., 2008). The study investigated how students who were classified as underachieving used popular culture to improve their reading skills. Yet the study found that “conflicts arose when the adolescents’ use of popular culture differed from the adults” (2008, p. 311).

If conflicts arise from a difference between the expectations or definitions of the adults and those of the students, it is important to set up studies and projects based upon norms accepted by all group members. Several current studies on youth empowerment emphasize the importance of shifting the mindset of the participants when undertaking an effort allowing for youth empowerment. The students must know first that the “adults would respect our decisions, and listen to our ideas” (Cargo et. al., 2003, p. 572; Ginwright, 2006; Lopez & Slack, 2001). Instead of focusing on violence, teen pregnancy, adolescent literacy, or drop-out rates as singular issues facing today’s adolescents, youth empowerment models emphasize democratic participation as the “greatest challenge facing youth” (Ginwright, 2002, p. 27). Ginwright suggested that there are several questions that may be answered by allowing marginalized youth ownership in decisions made in secondary schools. “What role can youth play in forging a democratic society and creating more equitable institutions? How can adults support sociopolitical development among youth? And what can be learned from youth organizing and its impact on the development of young people?” (pp. 27-28).

If there are authentic youth-adult partnerships taking place within schools as communities and within the larger community as a whole, marginalized youth in particular gain insight into the value of receiving an education (Roche, 1999; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Unfortunately, however, most schools and communities are unable to focus their attention on innovative programs like those listed above. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has caused a disproportionate focus on the test performance of marginalized youth and a demand for an immediate increase in that performance (Noguera, 2001; Ferguson, 2000; Conchas, 2006). “The federal government has called for higher academic standards and greater school accountability, but done little to address the vast inequities in resources and funding that characterize public



schools throughout the United States” (Noguera, 2006, p. xii). Currently, schools are being told that testing will be done on computers by 2014 and will be mandatory. However, there is no answer when officials are asked what schools who do not have adequate computer access for all students will do to remain in compliance with federal and state regulations (Noguera, 2006).

Allowing for the drastic measures needed in public secondary schools in order to see immediate success of marginalized students would mean reorganizing the entire distribution system involved in secondary schools (Conchas, 2006; Noguera, 2001). Instead of placing new teachers with marginalized students, the best teachers would be placed with those students. Instead of using standardized test scores and historical grades to determine which students took Advanced Placement courses, they would be open to all students willing to attempt them (Conchas, 2006). “We are in a period that is characterized by immense contradictions and significant obstacles” (Noguera, 2006, p. xiii).

The contradictions and obstacles extant in public schools about the options for marginalized youth create the opportunity for discussion and growth about how communities may be re-formed. Community cannot just be a classroom community, or a school community, but must be community involvement at all levels (Bailey, 2003; Plucker, 1998; Sanders, 2001; Kahne & Bailey, 1999). Deryl Bailey said that “improving economic and social conditions for a community or a particular group in the United States has always been linked to education (2003, p. 15). “Researchers suggest that intervention programs that incorporate a developmental and comprehensive approach might be more successful in assisting African-American male students in making significant gains both academically and socially” (2003, p.16). In Bailey’s “Project Gentlemen on the Move” (PGOTM) academic after-school programs are combined with retreats, discipline record evaluations, parental involvement, and teacher and administrative reports in

school (2003). This program is thus an effort to create an after-school community for African American males within the larger context of the Athens-Clarke County community framed by the high school the students attend. Because there is required parental involvement, the students' home communities are essential as well.

Jay MacLeod's study insisted that at the time, to empower black and working class youth, educators must begin helping students tie their community and school into an inseparable union. The Rural Organizing and Cultural Center serves Holmes County, Mississippi, an area that is dominantly black and whose schools are composed of nearly all black students. The desperate conditions of black students in that county lead to a high rate of illiteracy and an even higher rate of functional illiteracy. Thus, MacLeod decided to draw upon his experience in youth enrichment in order to begin a youth empowerment program investigating local history through student written and produced magazines. "Initially bewildered and even resistant to taking responsibility for their own learning, the summer students gradually embraced the idea. By the end of the first week the enrollment had doubled and the students had planned the 10 steps ahead of them" (1991, p. 264).

When setting up studies on youth empowerment, there are decisions that must first be made about how and why the students involved are marginalized, or if they are. The literature being reviewed revealed that there are several studies about the primary factors marginalizing American youth today. For the purpose of this study, there will be no assumption as to why the youth involved are marginalized, only that they are labeled at-risk based upon definitions provided by the National Center for Dropout Prevention. The following section reviews literature about the politics of marginalization to provide information on the various ways youth may be marginalized.

### Issues facing marginalized youth

Anderson's text, *Streetwise*, focuses on society as the primary marginalizing factor facing today's youth (1990). Akon disagrees. He feels that "issues of racism and racial discrimination operate just beneath the surface" (2006, p. 83). By making social capital theories race neutral, white privilege is perpetuated, and "fails to illuminate the ways in which race, space, place, gender, and sexual orientation influence both the accumulation of social capital and its efficacy as a mobility resource" (p. 83). This is crucial to studies of youth empowerment. Should the researcher study marginalized youth, marginalized youth of color, the politics of marginalized youth in white dominated educational discourses, etc? These questions are raised throughout the text *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change* (2006).

"These questions are central to the emerging field of youth development because they reflect tensions between how we theorize social capital and urban youth and what young people are actually experiencing at the ground level" (Akom, 2006, p. 83). An important clarification is made that when discussing youth empowerment, social capital is an assumed undertone. Furthermore, while the "concept of social capital is used widely in this emerging field . . . the field as a whole lacks definitional clarity with respect to the racial dimensions of social capital, how social capital is measured, and when social capital began to theoretically develop" (p. 83). While measuring population data, demographics, and poverty levels are hugely important in understanding social capital and marginalized youth, Assensoh found that "focusing on race, poverty, and neighborhood composition [showed that civic engagement] is higher in high poverty, low income areas". This was measured by the attendance at community meetings in various locations, taking into account the average socio-economic status of the community members in that part of town. The findings indicated that "residence in concentrated poverty

neighborhoods can facilitate social capital and civic engagement by spurring citizens to seek political redress for existent inequalities” (Assensoh, 2002, p. 887). All of the studies above emphasize that youth empowerment must involve community involvement; Assensoh’s study illustrates for disbelieving teachers that parents and community members are active in high poverty areas.

### **Identities of marginalized youth**

The question of parent and community involvement in high poverty areas is tied to issues of social capital. Many of the studies reviewed used the theories of Pierre Bourdieu on social capital in order to make arguments about the issues surrounding marginalized youth. Bourdieu defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). Bourdieu makes clear that social capital is made up of the social relationship that allows individuals to claim acquisitions and the quality of the acquisitions they claim (1985). In the case of marginalized youth in secondary schools, even when they take advantage of educating themselves, the quality of that education may be inferior (Conchas, 2006). For many marginalized youth, that knowledge may be the fuel that allows for political activism and change. Using that knowledge may also allow marginalized youth to construct identities as positive agents of change in their communities.

Ginwright points to the importance of youth organizations in the 1960s and 1970s as examples of marginalized youth changing the political landscape of various areas. He points particularly to the South during the Civil Rights Era, Brazil joining the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the changing of ballot initiatives in California after six thousand youth from “all over the San Francisco Bay Area walked out of school and rallied

in front of a newly built police station, across from a dilapidated school” (p. 32). Those politically active youth became what Anderson calls “old heads” (1990, p. 70). Anderson says that old heads are people who “embody the values of the civil rights movement: ‘decency,’ ‘willingness to sacrifice for their children,’ and a fundamental belief that ‘hard work pays off’” (1990, p. 70). However, “as meaningful employment has become increasingly scarce, drugs more accessible, and crime a way of life for many young black men” a group Anderson calls “new old heads” have begun to take over (p. 69). Anderson says that these authority figures may be “younger and . . . the product of a street gang making money fast and scorning the law and traditional values” (p. 69).

### **What is Less Clear in the Research**

Although models exist for students to take charge of their own learning (MacLeod, 1991 & Wood, 1992), it seems that there is relatively little in terms of adopting models of youth empowerment already in place (Akom, 2006; Noguera, 2001; Noguera, 2006; Assensoh, 2002). Current literature addresses youth empowerment and social capital as significant concerns in the era of No Child Left Behind, and all of the texts listed above emphasize the need for further inquiry into the affects of the empowerment of marginalized youth upon society. However, it is unclear whether the buy in of politicians and educators is established. According to Conchas (2006), there is already an aversion to empowering marginalized youth in many communities. Teachers are frustrated by increasing demands to increase the performance of underperforming students without the support of local, state, or federal politicians (2006). In addition to there being little support by politicians, Conchas is concerned that the current political climate is unlikely to change.

This study is being designed from the perspective of a classroom teacher. I believe that there are teachers who believe in helping students recognize the opportunities for self-empowerment. I believe that in the rural south, there are still many teachers who not only understand the social capital their students come in with or without, but also who believe that the cycle of marginalization can end. This study does not aim to tackle the political issues associated with youth empowerment or social capital, nor does it aim to emphasize the theories associated with either. Of course those issues will be discussed, and they must not be ignored. This study is being designed as an exploration of what a group of marginalized youth believe empowerment is and how they feel they are able to use their social capital to take advantage of empowering opportunities in their communities. It is also a dialogic exploration of what happened when I entered into a conversation with a group of marginalized young men in a rural high school.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology and Research Methods

This section gives a brief overview of the specific methodology that was used in this research. I used phenomenology, however, I used a type of interpretive phenomenology, which is called post-intentional phenomenology. The section explores the type of phenomenology I used, foundations of phenomenology, the similarities between phenomenology and hermeneutics, and the theories of each. It is followed by the key research questions that drove the study, followed by the specific research methods that were utilized.

#### **Methodology**

Gadamer says that “understanding is already interpretation because it creates the hermeneutical horizon within which the meaning of a text comes into force” (1989, p. 397). We are directing ourselves toward an understanding of the text – and Gadamer emphasizes that text can be literally print texts or dialogue – and between what you are trying to interpret and how you are interpreting it is where understanding occurs. In addition, the clearest understandings for both Gadamer and Heidegger take place when reflecting upon that entire process (1989).

Reflexivity is a practice that framed the entire process of conducting and writing about this study. For that reason, the organizational structure of the paper is meant to document that process. The design is fluid, meaning that the steps listed were followed, but were constantly shifting and changing as data was interpreted. The best way to describe this is to say that the first three chapters were not set in stone and were added to based upon the interpretation of the data. Vagle says there are two primary ways phenomenology is practiced, and as listed earlier in this paper the division is usually seen as following Husserl or Heidegger (2010). Thus some phenomenologists may argue with changing the research design as the research is practiced.

Their method is more constructivist as opposed to interpretive, as described in the first chapter. Yet Vagle says there is no need to make a division between the two methods (Vagle, 2009). Vagle says that instead, post-intentional phenomenology makes a move toward a more “nuanced reading of lived experience” that focuses on how knowledge is “endlessly deferred” (Vagle, 2011). Knowing that my biases as a researcher always include the belief that knowledge changes as we become part of a conversation, I chose to use Vagle’s work to foreground this study. Vagle lists a five step process for conducting phenomenological research, which was followed in this study.

Component 1: identify a phenomenon in its multiple, partial and varied contexts /

Component 2: devise a process for collecting data appropriate for the

phenomenon under investigation / Component 3: make a bridling plan /

Component 4: Read and write your way through your data in a systematic manner

/ Component 5: craft a text that captures tentative glimpses of the phenomenon

(Vagle, 2010, p. 400).

The first component caused the design of the first review of literature, which looked at youth empowerment and marginalized youth. The second component caused the research design listed in the following section, including the section on bridling, which is component three. The fourth component is discussed in the section of this chapter under the sub-heading “data analysis”. Finally, this entire document is meant to address component five.

### **An Explanation of the Importance of Reduction or Reflexivity**

Ricoeur wrote an essay titled *Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* (1981) in which he argued that there is a “mutual belonging, which it is important to make explicit” (p.579). He argued that because it was built from the foundations of phenomenology, there are elements of



phenomenology in hermeneutics that keep it from standing alone. To understand hermeneutic theory, he argued, requires some knowledge of phenomenology. He goes on to say that “hermeneutics is erected on the basis of phenomenology and thus preserves something of the philosophy from which it nevertheless differs: phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics” (p.579). Ricoeur is arguing that phenomenology requires prior understanding of hermeneutics (2002). Heidegger continues Husserl’s foundational phenomenological belief that pre-suppositions must be questioned and reflected upon in order for researchers in the human sciences to be taken seriously (2002). For my research this is particularly important because I wanted to be as transparent as possible when aligning myself with Heidegger, Gadamer, and interpretive phenomenology, and wanted to be clear about why I am using phenomenology at all when there are other, more “post” methodologies I could have chosen.

A similarity between Husserl and Heidegger is in the belief in the *reduction*. Ricoeur says that the reduction does not take place when the researcher questions himself, or questions his beliefs. Instead, he says the reduction occurs when the researcher questions “the pre-given, the existing, and the being” (p. 581). In other words, Ricoeur says that the phenomenological reduction, the questioning of truth, occurs when the researcher does not allow anything to be self-evident or assumed. The researcher attempts to go in without any bias, and attempts to maintain that distance throughout the research process (2002). When phenomenological researchers discuss “bracketing” or “bridling”, they are attempting to set aside their assumptions or beliefs to become more open to the data or phenomenon. In this study, I am joining a conversation about empowerment, both in the broader sense of academia and in the sense of having asked questions of my students about empowerment. In the methodological

sense, I gave the following example when proposing the study: “When researching my students, a student who had parents who passed away may discuss loss. When discussing loss, I would immediately think she was speaking from the frame of reference of having lost her parents. When using phenomenology, I would include that in my data analysis. I would then attempt to continue to analyze what the student said while being mindful of my assumption that she was talking about her parents. If I felt it was an important distinction, I could follow up on the discussion with an interview with her and ask if she was speaking about loss from the perspective of a grieving child.”

Historically, this began with Husserl, who created phenomenology including bracketing, which is taking an assumption and unpacking it. For example, if I am analyzing my data, and I discover that I’ve assumed that my students are marginalized based upon their speech patterns, I should stop and bracket that. I should look at what I assume about speech patterns and their effect on marginalization and why I think that. The process is typically kept in a journal that is useful as data in itself and can be used as part of the phenomenological analysis.

Karin Dahlberg used the concept of bracketing and changed the term to bridling. Her argument is that bracketing is used in writing to set information aside in order to examine it more thoroughly, or exclude it from the primary point of the argument (2001). She argued that a horse reference, to bridle or pull back and tighten followed by a move to loosen or slacken, is a better analogy for what researchers can do. We pull back on our assumptions in order to allow that process to impact our analysis of data (2001). After pulling back on those assumptions and examining them, there may be a slackening of our beliefs, a loosening on things we may have believed so strongly. I think of this as an ebb and flow. She agreed that a journal of that process is helpful, and coined the phrase “bridling journal”.

### **Grounding the Methodology Historically: A Move Away from Husserl**

The aspect of Husserlian idealism which hermeneutics questions first is the way in which the immense and unsurpassable discovery of intentionality is couched in a conceptuality which weakens its scope, namely the conceptuality of the subject-object relation. It is the latter which gives rise to the necessity of searching for something that unifies the meaning of the object and the necessity of founding this unity in a constituting subjectivity (p.582). In other words, Heidegger questioned whether there was a discovery of meaning within the subject-object relation. In phenomenology and hermeneutics, the act of deciding to undertake an investigation of a phenomena is described as directing oneself towards that phenomena. If I want to understand love, I am directing myself towards love. Husserlian idealism discussed discovering “love” after directing oneself towards it. Heidegger felt that it was more like the person directing himself was joining an ongoing conversation about that phenomenon. When I join a conversation about youth empowerment, I am not discovering what youth empowerment is. I’m joining a conversation about youth empowerment and constructing meaning for myself by joining that conversation.

Hermeneutics differs from phenomenology first in that it feels that intentionality, directing oneself towards an understanding, must not be considered a way to define what is being understood. By directing myself towards an understanding of love, I am not coming upon the object “love” and understanding the “true” meaning of it. I am searching for love, and in that searching am creating a definition for myself of what that means. I am thus constructing love by trying to understand it. This is very different from the way Husserlian phenomenology is typically used (2002). Husserlian phenomenology is associated most with discovering truth or finding the meaning of the phenomenon being studied.

This paragraph most explains why I align myself with Heidegger and not Husserl. I am not of the opinion that life is one big delusion I am suffering from, however, I am of the opinion that life is all about interpretation. I believe that I construct meaning, that I find emerging themes through dialogue and my own constructs, and that in research I have no choice but to be an insider. I cannot be a teacher who researches without having a large part to play in that research. To begin with, I create the community where I do my research. So if my classroom is warm and inviting, I created that environment, if it is cold and exclusive, I made it that way. I love that Heidegger and later Gadamer focused on language and how that is such a large part of how we construct meaning – how we understand being-in-the-world (2002).

Heidegger expresses belonging as “being-in-the-world” (p. 583), and says that being-in-the-world precedes reflection, and is what causes the difference from Husserl because of its insistence upon interpretation (2002). There is a “dependence of interpretation on understanding” (p. 583). At this point in the essay, Ricoeur relies primarily upon Gadamer, because he prefers Gadamer’s idea of belonging to Heidegger’s idea of being-in-the-world. However, Ricoeur sees the two theories as interchangeable. He says that it is “easy . . . to return to the phenomenological roots of some well known hermeneutical theses” (p.591). The insistence upon interpretation distinction is also critical in the way Heidegger describes *intention* and *intentionality*, or the self and that which is to be interpreted. Gadamer says that for Heidegger, truth is “simultaneously exposure and concealment” (1985, p. 188). Gadamer’s own opinion is that “the language of philosophy never finds its object but rather constructs it” (1985, p.191).

Post-intentional phenomenology is a move even further from Husserl. It is a way to further examine lived experience using the methodology introduced by Husserl in a new way more in line with the beliefs of those of us who lean toward “post”. The importance of doing

phenomenology as opposed to hermeneutics is in the idea of intentionality (Vagle, 2011). I decided to put together a discussion group of young men in order to explore how empowerment is realized in their lives. The lived experience of empowerment is important to me. As I joined that conversation, I directed myself towards an understanding of how they do or do not realize empowerment. I hoped to come to an understanding of how empowerment is realized, and instead found that it wasn't realized at all. Yet phenomenology, in this case post-intentional phenomenology, allowed me to pull back on my assumptions, examine them, remain open to what my students were saying, and then move forward. At the core of that process is bridling, and in the chapters that follow bridling and what it allowed me to reflect upon will be important.

## **Research Design**

### **Key research questions**

As noted earlier, my experiences as a teacher in a rural Southern US school with a predominantly black and poor student population led me to want to know more about how my students position themselves in terms of self empowerment. Subsequently, the most central question in this study became:

1. For marginalized students in rural Georgia, how is empowerment realized in their lives?

Other questions that guided this study are:

Other questions guiding this study are:

1. How does the language and identity of each student in the focal group affect the way he or she defines empowerment?
2. How does the marginalization of each student in the focal group affect the way he or she has experienced empowerment?

3. What are the implications of the focal group's construction of a definition of empowerment impact each student's interest in empowering him or herself?

These questions are not, however, the questions I ended up asking and unpacking in my study. I followed the data, and the students, and we discussed other questions. As sometimes happens in qualitative studies, this led to me changing my questions to:

1. What are the possibilities for sharing power in the classroom, and how do marginalized students perceive the division of power in the classroom?
2. How much control do marginalized students have over their own academic performance, and how do they perceive control?
3. What feelings of inadequacy do marginalized students feel, and how do those feelings impact their academic performance and classroom behavior?

### **Subjectivity statement**

There is no subjectivity statement in phenomenological research. Beginning with Husserl, there was a trend in phenomenology to “pull yourself” out of your research when researching the humanities and lived experience (2008). Husserl termed this “bracketing”. I suspect that Husserl did so because he wanted his method – we must remember he was inventing an entirely new form of research – to seem as scientific as possible. He wanted qualitative research to “hold up” against “scientific research”, and he emphasized that time and again in his work (2008). Thus, it is important to note that it is essential for researchers to constantly question and examine their assumptions as we join conversations about a phenomenon. Dahlberg extended that idea into bridling, which was used in this study. Karin Dahlberg used the concept of bracketing and changed the term to bridling. Her argument is that bracketing is used in writing to set information aside, or exclude it from the primary point of the argument (2001). She argued that a

horse reference, to bridle or pull back, is a better analogy for what researchers can do. We pull back on our assumptions in order to allow that process to impact our analysis of data (2001). She agreed that a journal of that process is helpful, and coined the phrase “bridling journal”.

In addition, the study contained excerpts from what van Manen (1990) calls lived experience descriptions. Those are written discussions of topics from our discussion group. They are meant to help participants develop their thoughts more fully than might happen in conversation, and allow an additional layer of data for the researcher to analyze. The participants were asked to describe a time when they felt empowered, and I did the same. We were then able to choose to share that document or not, but it was an additional piece of data describing what the students consider “empowerment”.

### **Research site and participants**

I used the high school where I teach in a rural area in Georgia, and used convenient sampling. I met with eight to twelve students who agreed to meet weekly to discuss their community. Once participants agreed to join our discussion group, I contacted parents and had them sign a consent form (See Appendix A). Students were not in any course I taught, and were thus not required to participate. There were no interventions based upon what I saw in the study, in other words, the students were not analyzed scholastically. All of our contributions were equally valued. I took field notes during my observations, and used memos to keep up with themes I constructed as I researched. I also kept a bridling journal throughout my work, questioning assumptions I have as I went through the research process. This then became data I was able to use.

## **Data Collection**

I planned and executed a phenomenological study, and used a focal group of eight to twelve high school students within that study. I asked them to write lived experience descriptions according to van Manen's design (1990), I wrote lived experience descriptions, I conducted interviews with them, and I conducted observations. As described above, we all wrote on a time when we felt empowered. In my interviews, I asked questions about what empowerment is, when they have experienced something that empowered them, and where they see opportunities for empowerment in their cultures and communities. My interviews were conversational and open-ended, with those three large themes as the driving force behind my questions. The purpose of the phenomenological interview is to get your subjects talking openly and honestly, and within those conversations the researcher later goes back to look for themes and strands of meaning close to the phenomenon being studied.

### **Interviews**

Our discussions were not interviews in nature, and for that reason I conducted at least one interview of anywhere between fifteen and sixty minutes with each participant. The transcripts of those interviews represented a major component of the data collected in the study. I believe our shared conversations allowed for analysis of dialogue and offered insight into the varied identities of the students (Baugh, 1983; Dillard, 1972; Labov, 1969; Sternglass, 1974). That data and the transcripts from the interviews allowed for the process of constructing our shared ideas on power, control, and issues of inadequacy. As noted, the process did not do what I thought it would; I was unable to construct a shared definition of empowerment.

### **Observations**



During my observations, I was open, yet I began each discussion asking about empowerment. Again, the goal was to construct a narrative based upon our varied responses to discussion questions. In that way, the narrative might have begun to reveal some common threads amongst the students about how empowerment is seen in their lives. These themes and questions were drawn directly from an open observation where I went in with no phenomena of interest in mind other than to see what opportunities were available to my students. That observation caused me to question whether or not my students know what empowerment is, and if they are able to empower themselves in a small, rural area with such derision between communities. I observed my students as they discuss the topics at hand and used video recording and tape recording to capture our conversations. The students signed consent forms agreeing to be video and tape recorded (See Appendix A).

This is the method of phenomenological observation most prominent in the work of Max van Manen (1990) and Mark Vagle (2010). The phenomenological observation can involve researcher participation or distance, yet the importance is on the researcher being open-minded and looking for themes only when returning to the observation notes. Vagle says that open-mindedness is important because “a person must remain open to wherever the phenomenon manifests itself in the lived experience of the practitioner” (Vagle, 2010, p. 396).

### **Data Analysis**

I then used thematic analysis to analyze my data, and again used van Manen’s method described in his book (1990). This was an arduous process. I first read the transcripts of my observations and interviews without doing anything but taking in information. Upon my second read, I began looking for codes and themes, though I found that my process is to jump immediately into themes. Upon a third read, I began to pull data from the transcripts in “chunks”

based specifically on those themes. I began noticing the themes of power, control, and inadequacy across the data, so I created a new Word document where I copied and pasted those sections into that document. I followed suit creating a separate document for each of the four case studies I chose to be included in the final document. Then as I constructed those new documents, and was satisfied that I constructed sufficient themes to portray the thoughts of my students, I put the transcripts away. Then I read the new documents through the same three step process. Ultimately my goal was to exhaust my data by reading and re-reading the themes the students and I were creating. Because I already had three large themes in mind, and those themes framed my research questions, I looked for anything relating to empowerment first, though I remained open to finding other questions as I analyzed my data thematically.

From a phenomenologist's perspective, that was one of the most important steps. By following the data and bridling my desire to create a definition of empowerment by pushing my students to accept my own definition of empowerment, I feel like I created a document here that allows the reader to hear the concerns of my students. They not only did not describe empowerment, but also had very real concerns about their school they wanted to discuss. We did that. In addition, I continued to bridle throughout this process, to be sure that when I am describing these themes I am using the voices of my interviewees and students' perspectives from my observations and not always putting my words in their mouths, so to speak.

This was all the original plan, and I thought when beginning to write this dissertation that I would then look at what the participants had in common in order to define empowerment. However, the process led me to more questions than answers, and left me feeling that I would be untrue to the phenomenological process if I created a definition of empowerment where I did not

see one in the data. Vagle says that phenomenological researchers must not create “prescriptive models” but allow our research to “open up possibilities” (Vagle, 2010, p. 397).

Thus, where the data collection process began with taking large chunks of data and breaking it into smaller pieces, the following chapter will start with smaller pieces of information and then connect them all looking across the data. There will not be a definition of empowerment constructed from the dialogues of our discussion group, as there was not one. The students did have many similarities, and I identified many themes in the data that warranted elaboration. I decided to change the format of chapter four based upon those similarities. For the purposes of a chapter on data analysis this means that each student who is included was written as a case study, and will be described first separately. Then there will be a section looking across the data at similarities between the various case studies.

### **Trustworthiness**

I established trustworthiness in part by using my bridling journal to question myself, my methods, and my assumptions, and also because there was triangulation of methods of data collection. Instead of relying on only the lived experience descriptions, I also included interviews and observation in order to look across collection methods for emerging themes as well. The interviews and lived experience descriptions are confirmable, and follow up interviews are a requirement when students agree to participate. Much of the follow up writing occurred via email to allow the students more freedom and comfort when answering and also for their convenience so that I don’t take up more of their time after school.

## Chapter 4

### Analysis of the Data

When framing this study, I anticipated the data highlighting various ways empowerment was realized in the lives of the participants. I imagined that this chapter would outline how I joined the conversation about empowerment, and would include data analysis and excerpts from my bridling journal. I knew that by being part of the discussion group, and asking follow up questions, I would change what the students “knew” about the phenomenon. I hoped that I would be able to bridle my way through my own assumptions in order to be open to what the data was showing me. As a phenomenological study, I assumed that I would then spend this chapter pulling from that data to weave a definition of what empowerment looked like to all of us who were part of the discussion group. I imagined a collective definition that might then be used to think about what elements of empowerment were missing in Oglethorpe County, if any. It did not occur to me that there would be little consensus of what empowerment was, and that one collective definition might not be possible.

After looking at the transcripts from our group discussions and the follow up interviews, it became clear quickly that unless I orchestrated a definition of what we thought empowerment was, there would not be one. There was more to the methods than I had planned. I asked questions about empowerment, and was met with blank stares. I rephrased questions and included words that I felt hinted at what I believed empowerment was, like “power” or “taking control”. I began trying to listen to students in the group speaking without interjecting my own opinion too much, and by the third meeting I put the plan aside and just joined the group. I took notes and bridled at the end of each meeting, but as we sat there, we became a community within the school. Methodologically, I am not sure if this was advisable. As a teacher, a compassionate

adult, and a member of that community, I know I did the right thing. What you will see in this chapter, then, is the themes that emerged from our discussions. You will also see large excerpts from my bridling journal. It may sound in places as though I'm protesting too loudly. I found issues that made me angry and upset going on in our school, and those issues seemed very upsetting to the students in our group. I began the dance between reflexivity and reality, and became even more pleased that phenomenology allowed me to change plans after beginning the study. The bridling excerpts are no more important than any of the other excerpts, but as they are a place for me to illustrate to readers what I felt, I chose excerpts that I found particularly powerful or profound and thus it may seem at times that I weighed those opinions more heavily. I did not. They are part of the data, and like the transcripts, help tell the story of our group and what we all learned from it.

What I identified were themes that begin to get at what might be empowerment to these students for now. This has led to many issues that I will need to work through as a teacher and as a researcher, and I will leave those thoughts for areas for future research. Among these thoughts are that it is strange that the only consensus our discussion group seemed to come to was that there is different treatment of black students than white. What I noticed from the discussions, which was not clear to the students, was that these young men had no real concept of empowerment. Even those who say they want to attend college have no real concept of what that means or how to get to that end result. As noted in the previous chapters, chapter four is presented as four case studies and an analysis of themes that were present in the data: issues of power, issues of control, and issues of inadequacy.

In order to allow the students to speak for themselves and to do my best to most accurately share what they seem to understand as empowerment, I am presenting here four

students from our group. All four are black males from similar communities who come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Moochie, Meat, Ace, and Bodie attended nearly every session and all participated in follow up interviews. Because I now feel that my question for the lived experience descriptions was too leading, and because I only received two of them back from the students, I am leaving those out of the data analysis. What is presented is from transcripts of the discussion groups and interviews.

The three major themes that emerged from across the data are control, power, and inadequacy. Control and power may seem very similar; the data showed them as different in that control for the boys is the control they have over their own lives and their own academic performance – or lack of control in some cases – and power is a theme about hierarchies and who in the school has power. None of the boys felt they had power at school while all of them felt they had varying degrees of control over their own academic performance.

For each of the four boys I will discuss how each one discussed those three themes and will continue each case study section with excerpts from my bridling journal that apply to either that particular student or that is most relevant to what he was saying about those issues. I will end each section with a discussion of the classroom discourse of each student, or how we might view the data through the lens of Bakhtin. I originally planned to use Gee similarly, and have a separate section for each student on identity. However, because the data revealed such similar academic identities for each student it seemed more fitting to collectively discuss identity. The order of the case studies was intentional as well. Moochie and Bodie had many conversations during our discussions, as did Meat and Ace. There were many similarities between Moochie and Bodie, and again many between Meat and Ace. In addition, the students are ordered based upon their eagerness to “succeed” in school. Their perceptions of how a student succeeds in school

vary, but it is also interesting that there is a willingness to try to succeed based upon perceptions of how that might sacrifice self. Moochie seemed the most willing to sacrifice for success – even if that means compromising some of his values; Ace was the least willing to compromise any part of himself no matter what the reward. Thus, they are presented in that order, and in between Moochie and Bodie’s case studies and Meat and Ace’s are dialogue excerpts to give the reader some raw data to provide more insight.

### **Case One: Moochie**

Moochie is a funny and affable ninth grader who gets along well with students and teachers alike. He came to every meeting of our discussion group, and became a regular visitor to my office on days we were not scheduled to meet. Of all of the students involved in our group, Moochie is the one with the most definite plan for the future. Moochie was relatively sure that his career will somehow involve music, and he is taking steps outside of school to prepare himself for that life. His love of music is odd, though, in that he did not talk about it very often. In fact, when he finally began discussing his career and spoke with such intelligence about the various careers in music he would be interested in pursuing, it came as a complete shock to me. We had been meeting for weeks at that point, and I had gotten to know him within the group and outside of that time, and had never heard him speak of music before. Drums and piano are the instruments Moochie is most comfortable with, though he is also fascinated with recording and all that it entails.

Moochie spoke frequently of his family, and of sports. He has a passion for all sports, but is most dedicated to football. He is about five feet five inches tall, and cannot possibly weigh much more than 100 pounds. Throughout the dialogues he spoke highly of his coaches, and he clearly spent a great deal of time working with them on his academics. Moochie said, “They [the

coaches] see that I don't get it, and they'll explain it another way." When he was cut from the basketball team during the winter, he was completely devastated. His coach said later that Moochie came back a few days after cuts and said that he wanted what was best for the team. He asked then what he might do to make the team his sophomore year. Though not a gifted athlete, he is a dedicated worker and has the good opinion of his coaches and teachers because of that work ethic.

Moochie is the youngest of three children, and spent a lot of time talking about mistakes his older sisters made in school. Frequently in our discussions Moochie encouraged the other boys to go out for sports, or go get extra help from their teachers so that they could play sports. He was not afraid to vocalize his belief that his peers' laziness (and his own) is part of the reason for their lack of success in school. When asked what that means he said their lack of success is shown most clearly in their failure to obtain the full amount of possible credits each semester.

### **Issues of Control**

Moochie came back to the idea of control numerous times over the course of this study. He felt that in order to be a successful student, as shown by making good grades, students must take control of their missing work. For Moochie, most unsuccessful students are lazy and refusing to stay after school to receive the extra help they need. He agreed with several of the other boys that often teachers are unavailable when students need extra help. "Some of my teachers are gone home or are somewhere else." Yet he said that there are always other teachers who do stay after school and who are willing to help any student who needs it.

Moochie learned during one of our sessions that another student had received make-up work from a teacher they had in common. The work missing was bell-ringer or warm-up work, which often cannot be made up. This is work that is done at the beginning of class to get students



ready for the day's lesson, and which is often filler to give the teacher time to take attendance and set up various things needed for the lesson. This work typically does not take more than five to ten minutes, and some teachers do not offer credit for it. In this particular class, the bell-ringer work counted as participation points. Thus, Moochie assumed that if he received a zero for that work, it must remain a zero. During the course of that day's discussion another student mentioned that he went to the teacher and asked for alternate work in order to bring up those zeroes. The teacher agreed. Moochie interrupted that day saying, "Oh I'm going today!"

Moochie also felt that students have some control over a teacher's opinion of them. He felt that sometimes a student gets onto a teacher's "bad side" and then has trouble changing his reputation. "I was on the teacher's good side, but then others were talking and I started playing a lot, so now I'm trying to work my way back in. But it be hard to get them to like you again." For Moochie, if the teacher does not like him, he finds it hard to be in control of his grades. In fact, he saw the teacher's feelings towards the student as inseparable from the grade the student will receive in the course. "If the teacher don't like you, there ain't no way you are going to pass. All of us know that."

He said that he has one teacher who "gives him control of his grade". That teacher gives students control by giving them all a weekly printout of what they have earned for the week. The students then have a designated amount of time to stay after school and make up missing assignments with teacher assistance. Those assignments are then entered. It was not clear whether those assignments then take the place of the missing assignments or if they are entered as new grades, but Moochie viewed that opportunity as crucial to student success. He said that teacher gives them "the chance to make up tests and quizzes and stuff". He said that the difficult part of taking control of your grades and success in a course is that you have to admit you do not

understand. “And it is hard because sometimes you want to concentrate but it’s embarrassing to ask for help in front of all those people who be playing all the time.” That is part of the reason he waited and got extra help after class from one of his coaches. He did not like the embarrassment of asking for help in front of the class. “Man your face gets tight when you have to ask for help and all the kids look at you like you don’t get it.”

Yet the concern this raised for all of us was whether or not the teacher understood that the student in question, in this case Moochie, did not understand. He mentioned one teacher in particular whose teaching he did not understand. He said he “did not get the way Mr. X teaches it.” His way of resolving that is to get help, however, we pointed out that if the teacher does not know students do not understand, s/he may not be able to fix the problem. This led to questions about power. Moochie’s opinion was that “they [the teachers] get paid, I don’t.” Most of the time, then, he says he defers to the teacher’s judgment. While he does his best, he still doesn’t always “get what it takes to take charge.”

### **Issues of Power**

Moochie saw control as something possible for him to obtain. If he could understand what was necessary for him to take charge of his own learning, he would be able to take control of his grades. He said he studies his notes at night, and takes his book home with him to review that way as well. He was the only one in our group who has those study habits established. This is important to note because he was the most diligent student in our discussion group, and still saw the locus of control as resting with someone else.

No matter how much he studied, Moochie saw the power over his success as resting in the hands of an other. He saw his parents as having control over his success as a musician, because they are paying for his lessons. He saw it as impossible for him to shift that power to

himself by participating in the band, because he said that he cannot participate in both the band and sports at our school. He saw his church pastor as having power over the type of music he performs for an audience, because that is the only venue where he currently performs music. He saw his teachers as having power over his success in school, because no matter how much control he has over his effort, the teacher ultimately decides his grade in the course.

Moochie's questions about power were not really questions. He seemed to have a hierarchy of power in his mind that he follows, and there is very little that he questions about it. He said that he "do[es] what the teacher says so I won't be in trouble." He felt that the "honors kids" have power, and seemed to think that they have power over their grades because they don't get into any trouble and are therefore well-liked by the teachers. He went so far as to criticize the other students for not trying to get on teachers' good sides. During the conversation about those students he said, "I mean I want to be one of the smart kids." He wants to go to college and have a career, and said that he needs a tutor so that "when I take a big test it won't bring my grade down, or not too far anyway."

I would not go so far as to describe Moochie's tone as defeatist. He has accepted what he sees as a lack of power, and seems to feel that once he has finished college and become a musician, he may have some power for himself. He took lessons to become a musician, and felt that he may be able to study music in college. Though he has not ever taken a music course in high school and does not formally study it, he felt that his lessons were enough to make it to college as a musician. "I know everything about music. You have to know how to read music, to stay on beat, the keys, the rhythm of the song, how to start songs."

At home, he said he has power over "his snacks and stuff." His room was his sanctuary, and he said he has power over it as well. He saw these as victories, and saw getting his high

school diploma as the first step in gaining more power. The control to do well seems to rest almost entirely in control over classroom behavior as opposed to performance on tests and assignments. This was articulated by feeling that teachers help students they like and do not help students they do not. “If the teacher don’t like you, there ain’t no way you are going to pass.” Somehow, though, he did not ever articulate that if he took control over his grades, he would then have the power over the system.

### **Issues of Inadequacy**

Moochie felt that the work he was doing after school was adequate to make passing grades. For Moochie, passing the courses was adequate. The goal for him was to graduate high school and attend a four-year college. He was not interested in transferring from a smaller two-year school, which was often pushed with other students in our school. In fact, for his two older sisters, he said there was no other option offered by the school. His sisters accepted that a two-year school was the only possibility for them if they did not want to join the work force immediately following their graduation. During our last session, Moochie said he had “two f’s but can bring them up” and was upset with himself about those. He said that those credits are important to him because he “wants to get out of school.” For many of the other students, the yearbook was one of the most important factors in feeling inadequate. There was a lengthy discussion about whether or not students are put in the section of the yearbook based upon the number of years they have been in school or based upon completed credits. Moochie said he did not care about the yearbook. “It ain’t about that. I just want to graduate.” This conversation is the excerpt that follows Moochie’s case study.

Moochie only showed feelings of inadequacy in his envy of the honors students. For him, the “smart kids” have it all figured out. They get along with their teachers, they get good grades,

and they have little trouble with behavior in school. He mentioned more than once that he wants to be one of those kids. Yet one of his most powerful statements shows that he does not feel that teachers consider him one of those kids. “I know they get tired of working with me, but I need the extra help.” This followed the conversation when he admitted that he frequently has to go to coaches for extra help because his academic teachers are not available to help him. When another student mentioned getting the extra help during class, a discussion ensued that there are teachers who will not accept questions from students who are viewed as behavior problems. Other boys in the group mentioned that some teachers assume that if a student who “plays in class” raises his hand, the teacher will get angry that the student is taking up class time. Moochie answered that “for those teachers it is just easier to ask them when you are alone or let it go and do it in summer school.”

### **Bridling My Assumptions About Moochie**

As mentioned, bridling is being reflective of assumptions and attempting to pull back on and examine those assumptions as you work through the data. In joining the conversation about empowerment, the issues raised by Moochie were difficult for me to bridle. Some of my questions were: “Are there teachers who are not available during the prescribed times for extra help for students?” “Is there a bad side that a student can get on and then be punished academically?” “Are there teachers who are not allowing students to ask questions during class?” “What types of classroom communities are being fostered in our building?” “Why is Moochie not questioning the fact that he thinks teachers can control his grade in any way other than by measuring his performance?” “Why do I think Moochie’s grades are not based on anything other than his performance?” The last question is the one I bridled about most extensively. In fact, that

question was so prevalent that it became one of the focus questions for the extension of my review of literature to follow in chapter five.

The concern that question continued to raise for me was that Moochie was not wrong. In his classes, he was being measured by his performance on tests. He mentioned multiple times that he was staying after school to retake tests and quizzes he failed, so he was at least trying to improve his grades by increasing that performance. However, he was being penalized in more ways than just test grades for his behavior. He said that he needed to move to the front of the room and raise his hand in order for the teacher to take him seriously. He also mentioned multiple times the importance of being on the teacher's good side so that he could get the help he needed. So, if all of that is true, then when in class Moochie was being marginalized because of his behavior, which was probably in part due to his failure to comprehend the material. So he began not understanding, then was afraid to ask questions and began talking to his friends, then got into more trouble, and got less help, and thus became further behind. When the test or quiz finally came, of course he did not know the material. So he fails the test or quiz, and has along the way missed out on participation points during in-class assignments, and has make-up work to do along with teaching himself (or having a tutor teach him) material he did not understand, and then must re-take the tests and quizzes. This cycle means that the system punished Moochie daily for his behavior, and thus, is he right? Is behavior and being on the teacher's good side more important than being one of the "smart kids?"

### **Classroom Discourse for Moochie**

The first year I taught there was considerable time spent in my building discussing how we might word a new school vision and mission statement. The first step in that process was to sit down as departments and then as interdepartmental teams to discuss what we wanted our

students to be able to do. In that school district and in the one I am in now, there was a high turnover rate of teachers and administrators. For that reason, I've been a part of at least four such panels over the seven years I have now taught. Yet that one stands out because of what we decided upon. We wanted them to be productive citizens. That was all of it. We wanted them to be able to read a newspaper and criticize it, we wanted them to understand media bias and elections and we wanted them to be able to make informed decisions about the world around them. It seems so simple, but when broken apart and analyzed by the skills needed to be a productive citizen we found that our school district was not preparing our students with that goal in mind at all. I feel sure that there are districts that are preparing productive citizens, but I have not yet been a part of one that was able to say we were reaching that goal for all of our graduates.

In looking over Moochie's transcripts I began to wonder about what "ideological consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342) we were helping him build. If he was not able to take part in any decisions being made in his classes, or even feel power over the grades he would receive, were we preparing him to make decisions and participate in local or national politics? Moochie said that teachers get paid, he doesn't, and so he trusted that they knew what they were doing. My question was, did they? Have we become so comfortable with authoritative discourse as the primary mode of operation in the classroom that we do not worry about helping students build a civic-minded consciousness?

Bakhtin said that "frequently . . . an individual's becoming, an ideological process, is characterized precisely by a sharp gap between those two categories [authoritative and internally persuasive discourse]" (p. 342). Moochie accepted authoritative discourse as that which cannot be argued with, and accepted that his teachers' have the power over him to put those values, emphases, and rules upon him. For Moochie, the "sharp gap" existed. Bakhtin also says that we

must acknowledge the authoritative word, “connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher” (p. 342). It is given “in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact” (p. 342). This is what Moochie was doing by accepting his teachers’ voices or commands as authoritative. As Moochie pointed out, with some teachers it is “easier to ask them when you are alone or let it go and do it in summer school.” In those situations the teacher is so unapproachable that the child does not ask questions even when alone with the teacher for fear of having to deal with unnamed negative repercussions.

In order for us to form our ideological consciousness, we must have the “struggle and dialogic interrelationship” (p. 342) between internally persuasive and authoritative discourse. A large part of how we expect students to form that ideological consciousness stems from their learning in school. Yet in Moochie’s case there is little struggle between the sharp gap that exists. He accepted the authoritative discourse of his teachers as authoritative, and there was no movement on his part to make that a “relic” (p. 343). An excerpt from a conversation between Moochie and Bodie follows, in order to display some raw data but also to show how Moochie felt about teachers not caring about him. Moochie felt that teachers should do their job and reach all students, not just the honors students.

Moochie: I said they don’t care all the time

Me: Who?

Moochie: these boys. You don’t always care Bodie. I mean, I went to Ms. X and she gave me all the help I needed. But she don’t have time to give me extra help in class.

Bodie: That is her job

Moochie: NO, her job is to teach everybody. All them kids on her nerves so I went after school and she gave me all my work. Everybody knows they’ll do that. I mean, they set the rules. I just want my grades.



Me: What made you decide to do that?

Moochie: My credits

Me: What about them?

Moochie: I don't want to be in ninth grade for a bunch of years like these fools

Meat: Man I'm in tenth grade

Me: Why do you always assume they mean you? We know you are in tenth grade

Fritz: Hmm

Me: For the rest of you, is it embarrassment that makes you want to get control of your credits or is it that you realize you need to graduate for some other goal

Bodie: Both. It be embarrassing when you get your report card

Moochie: The yearbook. I keep telling you we show up in the other sections.

Meat: Don't say me, why you got to say that

Bodie: It be embarrassing any time. They see your report card too

Moochie: I'm trying to get out of school. It isn't because of the yearbook

### **Case Two: Bodie**

For Moochie, the first issue was the teachers not caring about all students, and the second was how embarrassing it was to be in the wrong section of the yearbook. Moochie understood that perhaps teachers do not always have time to help individual students, but felt they should do more after school. For Bodie, there was at first little question about why teachers react the way they do. He felt they should teach him no matter how he behaves in class. "That is her job." Yet Bodie cared greatly about the effects of his lack of understanding – he did not want to be in the wrong grade level in the yearbook or on his report card. From an analysis standpoint, Bodie was the most difficult for me because he wanted to be more rebellious, but was actually constantly in need of approval. Bodie was funny and easy-going, and rarely got into trouble in class for

classroom behavior. When he was disciplined at school it was nearly always because he became frustrated to the point of breaking down and then spoke out of turn in class. He was eager to learn, and when observed in class was nearly always at the front of the room seemingly paying attention to the lesson. Yet when I have worked with Bodie one on one, his comprehension level, particularly in reading, is so low that his complaints of not understanding the teachers throughout our discussions are clearly legitimate. Bodie focused well in class, and tried to listen to his teachers, but he does not comprehend or retain information unless he is working with a teacher or a tutor one on one. By the April meetings of our discussion group Bodie had begun working with a tutor, and all of his teachers commented on the difference in his work. His self-confidence improved at approximately the same time, and I noticed a difference in how much he vocalized in our meetings.

Bodie did not speak as frequently about his family as the other boys. I gathered that he has an older sister and a younger sister, and that he lives with his mother. His older sister is an exceptional student, and he complained frequently that she would not do his work for him. It seemed as though Bodie felt his sister and mother expected more from him in terms of his academic performance, and on several occasions he commented that he was not as smart as his older sister. Yet their encouragement is quite possibly the reason Bodie has not given up. Bodie was at the end of his second year of high school, and despite failing three or more classes every semester of high school thus far, he remained optimistic about improving those grades and going on to some form of post-secondary education.

Oddly, that optimism is part of the concern I have about Bodie. When looking at the transcripts the discrepancies in the reality of his academic performance and his perception of that performance were unmistakable. Bodie's grades were not good enough for him to play basketball

during the current school year, yet a large part of his plan for college was to play basketball and earn a scholarship. His courses he felt were preparing him for his goals after high school were weight training and team sports because those would prepare him to be better at college basketball. In addition to the fact that he did not play, he is approximately 5 foot 8 inches tall and not very athletic. His attitude about his courses was equally unrealistic. He said at one point that he was doing well in his classes, at another point said he wanted to improve so that he would be eligible for sports (which requires passing only the majority of courses attempted each year) and finally that he was failing more than three courses again that spring semester. Bodie seems to have no idea what he needs to control in order to meet his goals, and says frequently that he feels that way.

### **Issues of Control**

In the first conversation our group had about empowerment, one of the students said that it was being in control. Bodie looked confused, and almost immediately responded that he isn't empowered, because he "has to do what the teacher tells me to do." He said that some people have control "in the relationship with [their] girlfriend." The conversation turned to one about power, but that brief exchange taught me a great deal about how Bodie feels about control. He consistently expressed the opinion that control is important, but that he does not have it. As mentioned, this is particularly worrisome when looking at the plans he is making mentally for his future. He wants to become a college athlete, but feels he has no control over that happening, and yet has not discussed with those he views as in control the possibility of him doing so.

Bodie did see students he feels are in control, and unlike Moochie, he did not view the honors students as the only students who have power and control. He seemed impressed by students who stand up for themselves in class. "If you don't follow the teachers directions then

you have the power.” As the conversation continued, another student said that a friend consistently does stand up to teachers with negative consequences. Bodie agreed with him. He felt that standing up to a teacher undermined the authority of the teacher. “It would seem like the students were trying to run over the teachers, like they [the teachers] weren’t doing their jobs.” While I feel sure that Bodie has been taught this in class, either explicitly or implicitly, it worries me that there is this conflict. He wanted to stand up for himself, to express that which he does not agree with or does not understand; yet, he felt afraid to do so. There could have been an explicit warning from the teacher, in the form of “do not talk back” or a rule posted about insubordination, or implicitly students who disagree with the teacher may be given discipline referrals or otherwise made an example of in class. Bodie wanted a dialogue about how that might be different. “You are still in control because you stood up to the teacher, like what Tron did the other day.”

Bodie’s attitude about standing up to teachers who do not consider the needs of their students is evident in other threads of dialogue as well. He said “even if you get in good with the teachers you don’t do better. That don’t always work.” He said that he goes in to speak with his teachers if he does not understand the material, and the teachers still seem unwilling to work with him. When asked, “why aren’t they helping you?” he responded, “I don’t even know.” Moochie suggested in that conversation that Bodie “plays too much” and that the teachers do not want to help him because he does not pay enough attention in class. Bodie responded, “my problem isn’t behavior, I just can’t catch up when I get behind. I miss some work and then it is too hard to do on my own, and there is too much, and I just can’t get it or see the end of it.” His frustration does not end there. “I mean, I like the teachers. But it is a real problem if you get tardies or something and you get ISS [in school suspension] and then you don’t get your work

down there and stuff and you get even farther behind.” He felt that a student who cannot control their punctuality – he rides with his older sister to school – is then punished for tardies by missing class, and a cycle that is difficult to break begins. Being unable to break the cycle takes away any control the student might have been gaining.

### **Issues of Power**

Similarly to the lack of control the student has over (in Bodie’s case) tardies, Bodie felt that there is a lack of control directly related to students’ lack of power. When asked the best way to handle a problem with a teacher, Bodie answered “you go talk to them. Y’all might work some way out to solve it. . . Because, if me and her [the teacher] are having problems, she don’t want to hear what I got to say anyway.” He felt that I might be able to get the teacher to listen because I am an adult. He said that in his house the situation is similar. If he had a problem with his mother, he asked for his sister to help him, because he felt his mother would listen to her. “I don’t really got no power at my house.” He seemed to think that power was held by others, and unless you “buck the system and don’t follow the teacher’s directions” then you “don’t have the power.” What he hinted at throughout our discussions is a hierarchy that he saw present and acknowledged without knowing what it is or why it is there. He saw that students have control over their grades if they work with a teacher or “get on the teachers’ good side”, but does not see that he placed himself at the bottom of the power structure at home and at school.

Bodie said that some teachers don’t care if you raise your hand, “or if you do they think you playing anyway.” He said, “I don’t need that attitude” [from the teachers]. Yet he said he goes to other teachers to get help when he doesn’t understand. He also said “people on the streets don’t got control over their life. They could easily get themselves into trouble, and I just want to get out of school and stay out of trouble.” So although he was frustrated by the system, and felt

that he had no power or control over his own education, he saw education as the key to keeping himself off the streets and out of trouble. Additionally, he saw getting himself help when he doesn't understand as the key to succeeding in school. He mentioned help from other teachers, and by the end of our scheduled meetings he was seeking tutoring professionally as well through a free service offered in our school district through Title One.

### **Issues of Inadequacy**

It may be obvious that Bodie felt inadequate. Asking for his mother to sign him up for tutoring was a huge step for him, because it required admitting his feelings of inadequacy. Some of those feelings may be due to not feeling in control of his education or educational future. Yet those examples are only the surface of how Bodie expressed feeling inadequate in school. First, he said that he needed to redo work frequently because he "doesn't get it." Another student said that he could copy the work and get a better grade. Bodie responded, "if they put us in a room by ourselves, they'll find out we don't know nothing." He went on to say that this will be shown on tests, including state standardized tests. He said that he tries to learn the material so that he can show he does know it, but that he cannot understand it no matter hard he tries.

Bodie said that he plays in class because "it is hard to concentrate if you don't get it." He said "the teacher doesn't explain it in a way I understand." He admitted that often the problem is work that is missing, and thus there is a cyclical problem. Yet he also said that a great deal of the time he does not complete his work because he does not understand it. When he stayed after school with his teachers to get help, "sometimes they be helping other students." He felt that often the teachers are helping students who can understand the material more quickly, (like Moochie he mentioned the honors students) and thus they run out of time and he has to ride the

bus home. He asked during one session if he can get his schedule changed for next school year because he “wants to get out of classes with people who play.”

Bodie wanted to do better in school, in part so that he can have good enough grades to play sports and in part because of a drive to stay out of trouble. He came up with a relatively elaborate plan to make sure students who miss class work are able to catch up. He said that if he asks his teachers what he is missing, they tell him he needs to check Powerschool. He also mentioned that he is not allowed to use the computers at lunch (a school policy) and he rides the bus to and from school, so he had limited time before and after school. He had no computer access at home, and did not live near our public library. Thus, he was not always able to check Powerschool. He felt this “ain’t fair. Some teachers give you a printout so you know how you are doing in case you don’t have a computer.” He felt this should be done in every class, every Friday. He thought that way all students would be on equal footing at least in terms of keeping up with what work is missing and how to catch up. He then indicated that then he could make plans to stay after school to get help as well, and complete all assignments with help. He could choose a day per core content area subject, “and if that teacher had other students you could go to another teacher or work in the library.” His plan makes sense and shows how earnestly he wants to improve.

### **Bridling My Assumptions About Bodie**

Bodie made joining the conversation about empowerment easy. In fact, I might go so far as to say that Bodie made it impossible for me to be an inactive participant. Bodie wanted answers, and he was excited that there was an adult listening to him. In many of the excerpts he said, “do you see Mrs. Adams” or “ain’t that right, Mrs. Adams?” He wanted me to listen to him, and once he had that audience, he wanted to talk. Bodie and the transcripts involving him evoked

the most powerful emotions of any of the students involved in this study. I do not want to add to what was included in my bridling journal, but want to make it clear here that only a small portion of what Bodie evoked will be listed here. He seems to me a powerful example of a student who has a true problem understanding, and whose behavior reflects that, falling through the cracks of the system. The first except that applied directly to Bodie was related to him saying if he has a problem with a teacher he thinks the most appropriate solution is to seek my intervention. He used missing work as an example; he does not know what he is missing because he has no computer access at home, and wants the teacher to give him printouts of what is missing. The excerpt from my journal reads,

Another student said that he doesn't even know what he is missing because it is too much. He wants a system in place. That is empowerment, he wants a system put in place, but he has never asked the teacher because he doesn't feel comfortable. So he tells me, which is great, but what if there is no me? What are we doing as a school to foster classroom communities and building relationships? Without that none of this matters because it isn't a cycle that will be broken.

For several sessions I felt that Bodie might provide a strong definition of empowerment for this study. He does not seem to realize that he is taking control of his own life, but he is driven by something internal and wants to see a change in the system that is failing him. If I had decided to try to piece together a group definition of empowerment, a great deal of that definition would have come from Bodie. The fact that he feels inadequate and is so frequently overlooked by his teachers is going to be the driving force for every area I list as urgent for future research. The issues Bodie brought up about the failures of the system are relevant and make this study applicable on a larger scale to the school system. These examples from the bridling journal serve



to remind me of the importance of bridling in phenomenological research; I am part of this discussion group and thus want to insert my own opinions and beliefs into the data. Bridling helps me do that without speaking for the students.

From one of my later bridling journals I wrote,

I want them to see how to take control, and yet I am not sure that they can. They are up against the system. The system or the powers that be are always hard to fight. Yet as they talk about teachers not giving them extra work or not sending work to them in ISS, I know they are telling the truth. I also know from hearing the teachers talk that they don't think "these kids" deserve help. Is it because of their race? Their SES? Their behavior issues? None of these kids do anything but talk in class. There is no fighting, there are no drugs, and there are no weapons. Yet they are treated as though they are the dregs of society here. I feel like I need to defend the teachers so that they can see how to change their own behavior to reach a goal, how to fit what is needed in order to make progress. Yet the larger part of me wants to scream . . . . And Bodie is right, it is their . . . job to teach them no matter what behavior issue their might be. It is hard for me to defend the teachers here when these kids are acting in a way that is so well documented it is embarrassing that the teachers don't get it. Of course they are talking and acting out, they cannot read or do math at grade level. So they need differentiation and support. But the school system is saying that our school needs practice before teachers will be forced to differentiate . . . The reason there is no goal beyond high school for these kids is that Oglethorpe is an isolated community and all of these boys have parents and grandparents who came through this school system. There was nothing beyond this. Is there now?

My anger in this excerpt was in part due to the frustration I felt in early meetings with the students. It is difficult for me to transition between their teacher and a research, and often I wanted to tell them the very things listed in this bridling journal. The importance of the distinction between teacher and researcher is not lost on me in either role. For example, as a researcher I am learning the importance of some distance, and that with thought some things I would have said to the students needed to be rethought or toned down. This has helped me moderate some of the opinions I share as a teacher as well, which I think may be a good thing. I think being in the middle of the extremes of the hierarchy in our building will better allow me to help the students who need it; I often feel that in defending students in need of assistance or who are having trouble closing the gap between themselves and their teachers I seem adversarial instead of helpful.

### **Classroom Discourse for Bodie**

The hierarchy of power that Bodie saw in school is a contributing factor in his lack of development. He saw power as resting with the teacher, or some other, and did not see himself as able to tap into that power in order to become successful in school. He knew that some students, “the smart kids” are able to tap into the hierarchy and work the system, but did not see that as an option for himself. He has neither developed a strong academic identity or the knowledge of how to begin forming one. His participation in classroom discourse was nearly always negative, involving him demeaning himself because he does not understand. He felt that when he asked for help and legitimately needed it, the teacher still assumed he was not taking his work seriously or was trying to get his classmates’ attention by asking for help. Where Moochie accepted the teachers’ power as a part of authoritative discourse, Bodie seemed on the verge of rejecting that power. Bodie and Moochie both saw a hierarchy, yet Moochie felt that the teachers are paid to

know more than he does and thus he trusted that they should have more power than he does. Bodie was not yet unwilling to accept that, but was not as willing as Moochie. He said that he “got to do what the teacher tells me to do” early in our meetings. Yet later he said, “I want the teacher to help me, but . . . I ain’t getting chumped all the time.” The tension he felt between the hierarchy that exists and accepting that nothing can be done about it – or that something can be done about it – seems him making an effort to close the gap between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342).

Yet can Bodie close that gap? Bakhtin says, “understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (p. 282). Bodie, even when at his best in class, did not have the background knowledge to work with in order to form understanding of the new concepts. He was also unable to respond in class because of the pressures he perceives to behave appropriately, which he feels is being quiet and still in class. Whether the teacher was actually telling him not to respond or not, Bodie felt that even a positive response may be construed as acting inappropriately and thus may meet some negative consequence. Until that cycle is broken, his response was not to respond. Can he understand, then? An “active understanding . . . assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system, that of the one striving to understand”, and in addition, “the speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word” (p. 282). The teacher wants the students to take the material, the content they teach, and have students assimilate that into their own understandings. The goal is that the language of the content will become part of the language of the student. The speaker uses his or her own conceptions in order to try to find ways to express that in the students’ language(s). The concern then, is that some teachers may be unaware of the

failure of their concepts to translate for students into understanding. In Bodie's case, it seems that the expectations of the teachers concerning behavior is as much responsible for Bodie's failure to understand as his lack of background knowledge. There is no dialogue between speaker and listener in order to make sense of the conversation, or the material being covered. There is only the speaker's utterance without the response of the listener. Without that response, and without the ability to respond, active understanding will not take place for the student.

### **Case Three: Meat**

Meat was a sweet young man who wants to earn the respect of his peers. His motivation for success stemmed entirely from the desire to please his family, and he was very close with his mother. She is a single parent, and he was vocal in his admiration of what she does for him. Yet his work ethic and his goals in life are nearly all derived from a nearly hero-like worship of his father and grandfather. Meat struggled in school, and during our sessions he sometimes vocalized what daily conflicts he goes through because of that. Meat seemed more comfortable in a small group, so on days when only three or four boys would show up for our discussions he was far more open. There were several meetings when he said very little, and when looking at the transcripts I noticed that those were days when we had all of our participants present. This speaks to me of his need to fit in and be respected; when he is in a group of peers he feels comfortable with he will address his insecurities openly, but otherwise he remains silent.

Meat was bitter and often on the verge of quitting school. He admitted that getting his high school diploma is significantly less important to him than giving his family the satisfaction of seeing him walk across the stage at graduation. He saw little in school that was helpful to him and his goals, and was frustrated that he must work so hard for something that means so little to

him. He was fed up with the system, and honestly, he seemed to have a realistic grasp of how the system was failing him and many of his peers.

Yet there were some discussions when Meat seemed hopeful that things at school would get better. He was bitter with his teachers for not understanding what his needs are, and he was frustrated that they do not seem to care about his success in class. However, though each semester he failed at least four out of seven courses, he saw himself improving. The failing grades were higher than they once were, he seemed to be learning how to communicate with his teachers and with other adults in the building, and he was articulating goals for himself that involve a high school diploma. In the months that we met, Meat began to articulate his opinions much more clearly and with a much more open mind to how things might improve for him and for others like him in our school.

### **Issues of Control**

When discussing school, even towards the end of our meetings, Meat showed little appreciation of the control he had over his own grades and performance. However, when discussing his plans for the future, he showed a great deal of knowledge and foresight and wanted to have control over his own career and finances. In the beginning of our meetings, he said he could not get his work turned in because he was habitually in ISS. He said he did not mind going to ISS, but he minded that “they be making it strict. They be trying to make it seem like regular class. Why can’t we cheat?” He believed that while in ISS he should be able to get other students to give him their work so that he can get caught up. When asked why he does not stay after school to receive extra help if he needs it, he replied, “some of these teachers be acting like females, like you can’t say anything to them.” In other conversations he showed similar

feelings towards his teachers. His bravado hid a fear of showing vulnerability to those teachers.

“They just won’t listen to me, and I don’t get how they teach.”

Meat said that there are students who have control over their relationship with teachers and thus their performance in class. He said the “girls who are always in class talking . . . never get a write up. I get them.” His control was limited to telling his younger sister what to do and controlling “my room and the living room. I mean, the TV and I put my feet on the sofa if I want.” This response seemed as though perhaps he does not control his house, however, because clearly at some point there was conversation about not putting his feet on the sofa. Often he made remarks like this to the other boys as well. “I don’t know about y’all, but I do what I want.” And then later in our conversations, he admitted that he is not allowed to go to a certain part of town because “my mama would kill me. Y’all get in too much trouble over there.”

For work, however, Meat said that he is in control. He wanted to take classes to get his Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) and then wanted to own his own trucking business with Ace. He wanted to take some courses at Athens Technical College in mechanics so that “you get another way to look at it [truck driving].” He knew that he wants to own his own truck, and wanted to cut down trees and then sell the wood after taking it to the processing plant. He was also certain that he will only hire other drivers if they don’t have their own truck, because he said they “try to run over you” if they have their own truck. Much of his knowledge came from watching his father and grandfather do this type of work. Yet he said that he does not want to make the mistakes his father made. “My Daddy made a million dollars in five years. He ain’t got nothing to show for it now, but he did it.” He felt that he has learned from his father’s mistakes and wanted power over others and over his own fate.

## Issues of Power

Meat said that his father had power when he owned a house and numerous cars, and that he lost that power when he made poor business decisions. Meat did not want to make the same mistakes. “I want to put my money to use. I don’t want to spend so much on child support every month. I don’t want all them cars. I want one good car, and I want money to build a good house for my family. It is stupid to spend all your money on rims.” He also felt that power is in part about making yourself happy. He said that the work his father and grandfather do looks interesting, and he says that when he is “out there watching them work . . . it looks like fun.” What he wanted was to have that power at school as well. He felt that he could show teachers the things he is able to do if we offered different courses.

“Can’t we have a mechanics class? Or even a career class? I mean, we got a business class, but you can’t choose your topic . . . . Instead of researching a career that you don’t want to do and getting a bad grade you could research what you want to do and then you would be interested and you would understand it.” He felt that it is important for him to walk across the stage to prove that he graduated, but he also felt that if he had to be in school for two more years he would like to enjoy his time here. Thus far, he was not enjoying high school. “We ain’t got the right to say anything. I mean, why can’t I pick how I learn? I know they get paid to show what I learn, but why can’t I pick how?”

In Meat’s family, very few people have graduated high school. He said that his “granddaddy only went to eighth grade” even though his mother went further in school. In part due to that, he wanted to prove himself to them. He felt that having that diploma would give him the power to get better jobs. “Maybe not always better, but jobs where you can make more money.” He also felt that he might need further education so that he has a backup plan if his

business fails. “I have to keep trying because I don’t want to give up. I’d try to open my business back up or just keep my truck and get a loan. But, I would work for someone else if I had to.” He said that learning mechanics is crucial in a business like this one, because you could fix your own truck if something goes wrong, but you could also then find work for someone else as a mechanic if you needed to. He said one day there may be limited work in this area for a logger/truck driver. He also noted that many times his grandfather and father have to go to neighboring counties for work, and that often people aren’t looking to pay for their trees to be cut. “You can cut in other areas too, and fill up your truck and go to the mill with the wood. You can make money either way.”

### **Issues of Inadequacy**

Similarly to Bodie and Moochie, Meat said that he did not feel comfortable going to the teacher to sort out a disagreement or misunderstanding. “If I say anything to a teacher, they say I got a smart mouth. That leads to me getting another write up. The teachers don’t understand if I got a smart mouth it is only because I’m so frustrated.” He wanted to understand, and said that he wanted to be interested in school. He frequently expressed how much better he wanted to do. “I don’t know why y’all look at me about credits – I ain’t in ninth grade no more.” He was very sensitive about being in the correct grade and about getting caught up on his credits. Like so many students who are low level, though, his only hope is credit recovery during the school year accompanied by summer school. He does well in summer school, but says he “can’t do that stuff on the computer. It is too hard and nobody can help me.” The virtual credit recovery is all done independently and at home. In one way he is lucky that he has the computer at home to do the work, (unlike Bodie, for example), but it does not matter if he cannot do the material on his own.



He said, “the teachers don’t teach in a way I can learn. When I ask them to teach that way, to slow down or show me, they got something smart to say.” This lack of communication causes the feelings of inadequacy to deepen, creating a further distance between Meat and his goal of graduating high school. “I mean I want to do right. I want to go down a straight path and set goals for myself. You end up broke because you are in and out of jail if you get in trouble. I don’t want that. Plus you got to run from the police. I keep asking my teachers if I don’t understand. It ain’t going to work most of the time, but at least then I know I tried.”

### **Bridling My Assumptions About Meat**

Meat gave me a lot to think about every day – not just on days we met with our discussion group. He became attached to me very quickly upon me being hired in Oglethorpe, and when I decided upon a topic for this study I think subconsciously I was thinking about Meat. Just from the last excerpt it should be clear that there was much to bridle about Meat. First, I am still bridling the fact that he and Ace are not from Greene County. My students in Greene felt a similar anger to that felt by Meat and Ace. Their families had been failed by the same school system, and for the vast majority of students there was anger that the system would fail them as well. It was hard to see, but it made life as a teacher easier in a lot of ways. When I suggested to a student that we make a change, or gave them ideas of how to better communicate with teachers, they were very receptive. I have learned since starting work in Oglethorpe County that the Greene County system was receptive in a lot of ways as well. At least at the high school, if suggestions were made to administrators or teachers about how we could improve our students’ academic experiences, those ideas were nearly always accepted. We had standing committees on leadership and school improvement, and there was a lot of work done that led directly to improved student achievement.

With these students, I still rush to judgment that we can improve their experience as well. This community is different. There is a great deal more isolation between the different populations in the community, and that isolation has led to friction within the building. So many of the teachers at the high school were students at the same school, and thus have been part of that community and those frictions throughout their lives. I have to bridle a lot of my assumptions that we can make things better, and quickly. With Meat, of course what I wanted to tell him was that he should go straight to those teachers and talk to them, and if they refuse to help we should document that and take it to the administration. Yet, I know that as a teacher and as a researcher I need to be sure of what I am asking before I ask it. This has been more than a little challenging for me.

In one of my entries I wrote,

It isn't because I'm a researcher that I feel like an outsider looking in. In Greene I was able to see a problem and immediately work with kids and other teachers to fix it. We saw immediate results; kids taking ownership of their own futures, kids applying to colleges they normally wouldn't have; kids finishing college and coming back to tell us all about it. Here I'm lost. I hear about how we don't want to be like the "surrounding counties" because we want to raise the bar. We don't want to focus on the lower kids and sacrifice our honors kids. They love the quote "No child left behind but the honors students" and use that on me all the time if I do vocalize concerns. Yet the honors kids are all going to Athens Tech. We don't have anybody applying to anywhere better than UGA. Has the bar been raised? How? Isn't it just a way to perpetuate the racism and classism that has been going on here for so long?

### **Classroom Discourse for Meat**

Meat and Ace were very different from Bodie and Moochie in the sense that Bodie and Moochie were willing to play the game that is school. None of the four of them seemed to understand precisely what they need high school for, but Bodie and Moochie accepted that it was important to their future in some way, or some combination of ways. Meat was quick to dismiss school as unimportant, and made it clear multiple times that he was staying in school so that he could walk across the stage. The diploma was far less important than participating in the ceremony to both Meat and Ace. For Meat, classroom discourse was not something he feared, but something that he resisted to avoid trouble. His constant discipline problems caused teachers to distrust him, and thus if he spoke in class at all it nearly always resulted in a conflict. Also unlike Bodie and Moochie, part of the problem was that Meat was aware of the system and did not trust it. He felt that teachers were uniformly unfair and against him. He was not yet as resistant as Ace, who was past the point of rebellion and was now in acceptance of the fact that the system did not work for him or “people like him”, but Meat was strongly influenced by Ace and moving towards rebellion. “Man those teachers don’t care about me, and I don’t care neither” is one of Meat’s most powerful quotes.

Meat is like Bakhtin’s example of the peasant. “As soon as a critical interanimation of languages began to occur in the consciousness of our peasant . . . the necessity of actively choosing one’s orientation among them began” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 296). Meat has chosen internally persuasive language over authoritative, or is at least in the process of doing so. He does not accept that the teacher has earned a higher place in the social order of the school. He does not accept that he must silently accept the discourse of the teacher, which means that he also does not accept the necessity of the content the teacher stresses as so important. Like the

peasant, he sees that “the ideological systems and approaches to the world that were indissolubly connected with these languages contradicted each other and in no way could live in peace and quiet with one another” (p. 296). Meat wants to own his own business as a truck driver, and wants to earn the respect of people who work for him and people in his community. He sees that respect from others as an integral part of his future. School is not providing him with courses he needs to enter his chosen career, nor is it providing him with the social status he needs to earn respect.

In fact, he says that school is not preparing him for his future at all. When asked why he is in school, he lists the goal of walking across the stage so that his family will respect him. Yet when asked about how school is helpful, he says that it is not. Why would he accept the disrespect of teachers if he sees the futility of his efforts? He does not pass the classes anyway, even when he tries his best, which lowers his self-esteem; he is demeaned while trying to earn the best grade he can, which is always mediocre at best. School is the antithesis of what he has set as goals for his future. So for Meat, he is stuck trying to reconcile the language of school with the language outside of school, and the two are seemingly irreconcilable. What follows is an excerpt of a conversation between Meat and Ace. Meat was confused in the beginning of the conversation because he thought he needed college in order to drive a logging truck. As the conversation continued, it became obvious that Meat changed his stance according to what Ace said he needed to do for their shared goal of owning a logging company and trucking business.

Meat: Me. I want to go to college to drive big trucks

Ace: You mean you want to go to college for auto diesel

Me: Hold on I'll let you go one at a time

Me: What college are you interested in?

Meat: Well, you don't really have to go to college . . . I don't think so

Me: Okay. You said you don't have to go to college to get your CDL? Then why do you want to go to college

Meat: Because, you get another way to look at it. I mean learn the mechanic part

Me: Let me make sure I'm understanding you right. Let's say you go to college and then start driving trucks. And you do it for a while and decide it is not for you, then you would get a job as a mechanic? Or would you try to work on the trucks you are driving?

Meat: I would do both. If your truck breaks down you don't want to pay all that money to get somebody to work on it

Me: And let me see. I don't know anything about it. If you drive one of those trucks is it yours?

Ace: If you buy one

Meat: Yeah, you can buy your own

Me: Ace, let's move on to you since you two are tag teaming. You two both want to go to school to do this.

Ace: We want to own a business together

Me: Okay, is one of you going to major in business to know how run the business?

Ace: Yeah, me, Meat can't do the business stuff and doesn't need to be going to school

#### **Case Four: Ace**

Ace was very sure of what he wanted to do in the conversation above, and was also sure about what role he wanted Meat to play. He was so sure, and has spent so much time telling Meat what he needs to do, that he ended the conversation making it clear to me that he would be the brains of their operation. The case studies were put in this order to take the reader from one extreme to the other in the personalities and outlooks of the students. Moochie, as mentioned,

was affable and aimed to please his teachers. Ace was the opposite extreme, at least on the surface. Ace's body language and actions said as much as his dialogue. Ace sat leaning against the side rail of the student desk, as though lounging. He kept his head tilted to the side, and rarely made eye contact with anyone during the discussions. He did not speak nearly as often as the other students, yet when he did, he typically said something that showed street smarts and maturity far beyond most of the students in our school. His face was typically set in a mask of complete indifference, yet, there were times when he said something passionately about not being taken advantage of that he made direct eye contact and seemed wary of the reaction he may get.

Ace lived with a single mother, but his father was involved in his life as well. He said in one meeting that most of his family has a minimum of a high school diploma, and that several members attended college. Yet he said that his education is not important to his family. He said that he is free to do as he pleases outside of school, and at times teased the other boys for their lack of freedom. He lived on a street that the other boys said they are not allowed to visit – one of the boys who is not a case study but was a participant lived near him and the two of them showed a great deal of pride in their neighborhood. It seemed that there was violence and a drug culture on their street, and thus they have grown up quickly and are proud of knowing how to handle themselves.

The actions that speak loudly for Ace are far different from his general presence and attitude, though. He came to every meeting, though of course they were all voluntary. In addition, he remained after every meeting. He would grumble about having to be at school anyway, but would always offer to carry my notebook or recorder and would help clean up our meeting area. By the third week or so of our meetings, he would come in and roughly throw a

book or backpack into my office before heading to the cafeteria for breakfast. Some mornings he would say hello, other mornings he would not, but he began to poke his head in at odd times throughout the day. When we were nearing the end of our meetings, he began to speak up more frequently, and often he would become frustrated if he felt I made an assumption. In one meeting I mistook his look to mean that he did not want a family. I said, “Ace, family is not as important to you?” He sharply said, “I didn’t say that did I?” I apologized and said that he had been quiet and I thought I noticed a look. He said, “Nah, family matters to me, I just ain’t going to decide my career because of kids I don’t have.” In transcribing the data I listened to that part many times, and of course will discuss how much I had to bridle about my assumptions because of Ace. That example just shows his personality. He was never really angry, but was perhaps distrustful, and if given the chance could articulate clearly what he felt. I got the impression from him that his teachers do not often take the time to get to know that about him. I got the impression from his teachers that they feel he is low-level and performing at his potential. I know Ace doesn’t feel that way about himself, and I believe he is performing below potential in part because of his frustration with the system. Ace was an intelligent young man who was caring of others but who was not willing to take disrespect from anyone, and who did not give respect unless he received it.

### **Issues of Control**

Ace believed that he had full control over his performance in school. He said that if he was failing a class, he stayed after school in order to make up the work he was missing. He said that all students have the ability to do what they choose. He felt strongly that the students who complained because teachers don’t listen to them are at fault. He said, “none of [my] teachers talk to me like that. I keep to myself and don’t bother them so they usually don’t bother me.” He

did not like school, but felt like it is a game to be played. If you play it badly, he said you have “the power to stay in Crossroads (alternative school) or get run over by the Principal.” He thought that students have the right to stand up for themselves, but said that they need to know that when they do they might get “run over by the Principal.” He mentioned our Principal several times in the discussions, and while he used “run over” in most of the comments, he says it with a certain level of respect. His tone when talking about teachers was not always as respectful.

He said, “sometimes I want to tell the teacher what I think of him. Who he think he is?” Yet he maintained that the system is set up so that students must be seen and not heard. “We need to be able to speak our mind at school, and ain’t no teacher gonna let me do that.” He said that in the past, he tried talking to his teachers about the problems he had in class. After being shut down repeatedly, he stopped bothering. “They don’t listen to what I be telling them anyway.” This statement is made with the tone mentioned earlier. Where Bodie might say something like this as a plea, asking for my help or the advice of an adult, Ace said it as fact. He used a flat tone and did not seem angry at all. He accepted that the system is set up this way, and the choice is to play the game or not. He chose to play the game in order to graduate, and seemed somewhere between accepting of this fact and resigned to it.

He said that his problem is that he “can’t take all that hollering. I mean, I hear it at home. What makes those teachers think they can holler at me like that? Ain’t none of them my mama or daddy.” He chose to remain silent in class and turn in work as he can so that he can avoid conflict. Yet he did not back down either. Ace’s demeanor was such that when confronted, he used eye contact and a smirk to handle the situation. He seemed to intuitively know how to handle situations to deescalate them. In addition, he was critical of how the other boys handled those situations with adults. He said to Moochie, “Oh yeah, at least when they holler at me I



don't say "yes sir" with my head down like you do." When I asked if he didn't think Moochie's way might not get him more leeway with his teachers, he said, "Hell no. I'd take trouble over bowing down to some teacher any day." His beliefs were not negotiable. If the teacher respected him, he would respect the teacher. He was aware that the rules of the class say that students will respect teachers, but he adamantly insisted that there should be a rule that teachers have to be respectful of students as well.

### **Issues of Power**

Ace did not seem to be arguing that he wanted power over any of his teachers, but that he felt that power should be shared. When Bodie said that the honors students get more help after school than he does, and that things don't seem fair, Ace said, "well it ain't equal bro." He shook his head as he said it, and later said that teachers are always going to "treat students different." He never said if it is an ability issue, or a race issue, or a socioeconomic issue, but I am not sure he cares which one it is. For Ace, the inequality is there, and it is there in part because students are not given power over their own education. "It is the teacher's responsibility for me to learn. If they ain't gone do their job, then either I do mine or I don't. But I'm the only one who gets a punishment, because I fail. When they gone fail a teacher?" Moochie argued then that the grade is the reward, and that should be what Ace is working towards. Ace said, "you go ahead and get those grades if you want."

While it might seem as though that refusal to give teachers the power would mean Ace would be failing most of his classes, his grades were actually better than any of the participants in our group. He was mature enough to keep his mouth shut in class, which seems to be all teachers wanted from him. When there was a conflict, he did not back down, but he did not get loud or belligerent either. I believe the difference is that Ace takes his work and teaches himself

when he needs to, and the others do not - or cannot - do that and earn the same grades Ace is earning. Ace saw what the other boys saw; their classroom behavior was inseparably linked to their grades. His power over his teachers stemmed from that knowledge, and from the fact that he was playing the game. Ace thought that he was refusing to allow the system to dictate what he did or how he acted in school. Yet his classroom behavior showed that what he was doing was part of the game he was expected to play to do well in school. He may not have earned or been giving respect, but he was sharing power by refusing to get into trouble, and was in control of his own grades because he found a way to do well without feeling like he was compromising any of his values.

### **Issues of Inadequacy**

Ace did not feel that he was inadequate, but did feel that the system was inadequate. He felt that teachers were unfair, the way the school is setup was unfair, and the courses he was required to take are unreasonable. His argument about the courses is the only one that has not yet been explored. Ace was certain about the career path he wants to follow. He wanted to be in charge of the company he and Meat planned to own together. He wanted to take business classes in order to understand the finances involved in running that business, and then wanted to be in charge of the hiring and firing of employees. His problem with the courses offered in our school was that they are too limited. In addition, he said that if he must take a business class, it should be “teaching [him] what we need to start our own business.” Like Meat, he felt that he should be able to design the curriculum in that class to fit what he wanted to do. “What is the point of a career class if it ain’t helping you on your own career?” He said this with a roll of the eyes, again completely frustrated at what he saw as a lack of common sense.

He also felt that he should be able to design school so that it better meets his needs. “School ain’t got nothing to do with my future. They don’t know all that math is on the computer now?” He said that to be a logger and truck driver there are classes in high school that students can take; he also said we do not offer any of those classes in Oglethorpe County. He insisted that he would enjoy school if he could see how it mattered. “I mean, why can’t I work on things I want to do? I like things that look interesting and keep my attention.” He noted that he chose truck driving and logging for that reason – they looked interesting to him. He was able to work with some family members and get hands on experience, so that when he does graduate he can work and take classes at Athens Technical College. That training, he said, is worthwhile. “Then I’ll know what I’m talking about, and I’ll get respect from people. I ain’t hiring nobody who don’t show me enough respect.”

### **Bridling My Assmptions About Ace**

Ace was a student I wanted to win over. I wanted to be part of a community where Ace would feel comfortable and where I could figure out what was bothering him; why was this child so angry? What I bridled about him after the first meeting was that I wanted him to respect me, and that I knew I’d have to work hard to earn his respect. I wrote in my journal:

Ace is so much like some of the kids I had when I was first in Greene County. He is not really angry, but is fed up with the system to the point that he feels anger is a wasted emotion. I want very much to earn his trust so that I can tell him that there is reason to be angry, and that systems can change if people stand up to them. I think he is very bright, and I think he is right about most of the teachers he dislikes. I think they fear him because he is so direct, which is probably why he doesn’t get pushed around as much as the others. Yet there is part of me that wants to “fix” it, and I’m trying to bridle that. What if

it isn't something to be fixed? What if this is something he is doing the right way? He is earning better grades than the others, and stays out of trouble, so maybe he has found a way to keep his pride, respect himself, and get by. Is that wrong?

There are other entries that have snippets of Ace, but that one is the most important to illustrate the struggle I had in pulling back on my assumptions that he needs my help, or anyone's help. I think now that this may be a career and lifelong struggle for me, and the bridling has helped tremendously in thinking through how much of what I want is because of my own background and not because of some special ability to tap into my students' feelings and needs.

### **Classroom Discourse for Ace**

Ace's insistence upon respect allowed him to internalize the discourse of his teachers. He was able to see the system in place, as opposed to following the rules of the system blindly. He did accept the teacher's authority in the sense that he typically followed the rules of the classroom and the school, yet for him there would be no taboo in refusing to follow those rules if he so chose. In that way, Ace has taken away some of the power of the teacher, and has made the discourse of the classroom internally persuasive as opposed to authoritative as it is to the other boys included in this study. This shows an "evolution of . . . ideological consciousness" that has awakened to an "independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). In other words, he acknowledges the dialogue of the other, in this case his teachers, and accepts it or rejects it according to how he processes it. This was illustrated in the section on control. The difference is that for Ace there was no taboo in arguing with the teacher, or in expressing to others his adamant disagreement with many things that happen in the classroom. He was aware of a discrepancy between what was expected of him and what is expected of other students – namely honors students. For Moochie, Bodie, and Meat,

that left them feeling helpless and powerless. They felt unable to express to their teachers their dissatisfaction with the system, and were often unable to articulate their feelings of anger and distrust. Ace moved beyond those feelings and was able to clearly articulate those feelings. He was at the point where he made decisions daily about whether to bother fighting the system or not; he had clearly processed that the gap between student and teacher exists in his case and often decides to ignore that gap and do what he feels needs to be done in order to produce an acceptable outcome – namely a passing grade.

Bakhtin says this process occurs “rather late in development” (p. 345). Ace’s street smarts may be one reason for the difference in his development; it is also possible that the intelligence seen in his responses is in part responsible. He may be low-performing because of the failure of teachers to recognize his intelligence as opposed to a lack of ability or effort. It certainly appears based upon this data that he is not challenged sufficiently. Yet that lack of challenge may be part of what fuels his frustration with the system, which may in turn allow him to criticize flaws in power structures. “When thought begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse, along with a rejection of those congeries of discourses that do not matter to us, that do not touch us” (p. 345). By thinking about all of the problems he saw with the system and with society in his community, Ace was able to think in a discriminating way. He separated between internally persuasive discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse, and did so responsibly. He did not go against the grain in a way that can bring disciplinary action against him. Instead, he may have refused to respond to a teacher or a question if he disagreed with the way it is phrased or objects to the tone of the speaker. As mentioned, Ace relied as much on body language as he does on speech. This was a

safe way for him to reject authority if he disagreed with it. If the discourse was unimportant to him or he found it irrelevant, he did not shut down or become frustrated immediately as the other students in this study seemed to. Instead, Ace did not allow it to touch him. It was simply inconsequential to him. This showed maturity beyond many high school students not in small part because he was able to use what he needed from his classes and reject that he did not need.

### **Identity Formation: Looking Across the Data**

The different personalities, abilities, and discourses of the four students included here should be evident. Where Ace is mature enough to use school as he needs it, Moochie coasts through school not really knowing what it is he should be trying to get from it. However, the differences between the students do not equate to a large difference in academic identities. The institutional identity discussed by Gee is the primary identity that should be different for these students (2000-2001). They were all born in the Athens, Georgia area, and have grown up in the same rural area. That does not mean that their natural identities are the same, but some similarity in those identities would not be surprising given those circumstances. The students are all friends, who are around the same age, and are part of the minority in their high school. They are all involved in various sports and are seen as very similar by their teachers. They are part of a defined peer group. Thus, their affinity identities may be somewhat similar as well. The students' discursive identities are different, as shown in each one's section on classroom discourse, yet the data cannot show how those identities developed. According to Gee, discursive identities begin forming when we learn to speak (2000-2001). This study was not expansive enough in scope to see how those identities formed for these four students.

When framing the study, the plan was to use Gee as a lens for each student as was done with Bakhtin. What would the lens of identity show about the data? What would be gleaned

about each student by looking at his various identities? Yet after looking across the data, the surprise was that the identities of the students are so similar. Again, most surprising is the similarity in their institutional or academic identities. Each of the four boys sees himself as an inferior student. Each of the four boys identifies many of his failures in school as problems caused by the school itself, and with the school system. Each of the four boys identifies problems with communication between student and teacher as part of the problem, and at some point in discussion or interview each one of the boys points to a teacher's refusal to teach him as part of the problem. What each boy has done with that identity is different – their responses vary from anger to acceptance – and each boy receives different outcomes in the forms of disciplinary action and grades.

Gee says that we should be able to form an infinite number of identities, yet that the four identities listed above are crucial for us to begin that process (2003). If these students have similar institutional identities because the school is failing to see the differences between them, or because they are failing to develop one of those identities for some other reason not illustrated in this data, what other identities will they fail to form later in their lives? The goal of this study was to construct a group definition of empowerment. Yet we were unable to come up with a definition in part because the students did not see empowerment. They themselves in various stages of taking control of their own lives, and of their educations, and they all saw issues they wanted to discuss about power – particularly who had power and who did not. Yet none of them had situations in their lives where they had experienced empowerment. They feel ill equipped to take power and to make decisions for themselves. Is that because they have failed to develop a positive or strong institutional identity? Is it because they feel inadequate in their discursive identity as it applies to school? They may have strong discursive identities at home, or in their

community, though only Ace expressed even that identity. The only thing clear about identity from the data is that these students are not being helped in shaping a positive institutional identity.

### **Reflections**

These four students began meeting to discuss empowerment in the early part of spring semester. After several meetings, it became clear that empowerment was not being realized in their lives. Yet they were passionate about the problems they were having in school. They had opinions about their futures, as shown in the excerpt of conversation between Meat and Ace about their logging company. They also had real fears about what other people in the school thought about them and about their lack of success in school, as shown in the excerpt about the yearbook sections between Bodie and Moochie.

In general, they were all doing something they had not done before. They were meeting weekly with an adult to talk about school. In listening to them talk about their experiences, it was difficult for me to try to listen and respond without trying to fix all of the problems they were discussing. In fact, that is still difficult. I have gone to my principal to ask if we might use some of my findings in our school.

For that reason, instead of implications, you will see in chapter five suggestions for how the data might be used in our school and others like ours. In addition, in chapter five you will see literature that is relevant to the findings on power, control, inadequacy, and marginalized youth – and added to that literature literature on best practices with marginalized youth. The most obvious conclusion from the data was that some changes must be made in order for our marginalized youth to take steps toward first becoming part of their classroom and school communities and then beginning to realize empowerment in their lives.



## Chapter Five

### Connecting the Data to the Literature, Implications, and Lingering Questions

It should have been clear to me when completing the first review of literature for this study that youth empowerment is an action; it is a decision that must be made by all stakeholders to allow the youth involved to begin a process (McQuillan, 2005). In the few months our discussion group met, we discussed youth empowerment, and the students and I talked about various issues they saw as relevant to power and control. For those students, power and control were definitions of empowerment. The flaw in my plan was that there was no contingency for when the students not only did not feel empowered in school, but also did not really know what empowerment meant. I found myself in a difficult position. I could guide us to what I see as a definition of empowerment and work from there, or I could listen to them and discover what they thought empowerment was or was not. The complexity was that I began with the first – guiding us toward a definition, then moved to the second and listened to them. That led me to a third possibility; I identified what was salient from the data and followed it. I felt uncomfortable pushing them to understand empowerment, or even to ask pointed questions to see if perhaps there were examples of empowerment in their lives outside of school. As mentioned, many times Ace came close to describing himself as empowered in his personal life – based upon my definition of empowerment. Yet I see now that there is much more to study, and to take on this task phenomenologically was a good place for me to start as a researcher interested in youth empowerment.

In a place where youth empowerment is not currently taking place, as seems to be the case in Oglethorpe County High School, the youth in question are not likely to know what empowerment is or to have experienced it academically. What I suspected was that I would see

little evidence of empowerment in students' academic lives, but that I would see evidence of empowerment in their identities outside of school. My hope, I admit, was not only to describe that in this study, but also to help students discover that they were empowered in their lives somehow and help them begin uncovering ways to translate that into academic empowerment. What I see now is what was missing in my description of Ced and Rico in the introduction.

Ced and Rico both had underdeveloped academic identities when we met. As described, Rico changed his academic identity over time, while Ced became more entrenched in a negative academic identity because of constant and repetitive failure. Yet their other identities were fully developed. In fact, I would say that both boys had stronger affinity and discursive identities than I do. They both spoke fluently the language of their culture, and were able to translate easily that language into the language of other cultures (Gee and Green, 2000-2001). They both identified strongly with their communities and felt that they had control of their lives in those communities. If they chose not to further their careers academically, or strengthen their academic identity, they could feel secure in the place they had societally, or as they say in Greensboro, "on the street". They identified strongly with their community and culture and showed resistance to accepting another culture, or the "white" culture of school (Carter, 2003 & Mahiri, 1998). This may be in part because Greene County is eighty percent black where Oglethorpe County is only forty percent black; I don't know. However, I began this study boxed in by the belief that this is true of black males in rural schools. I am shocked at this now, and want to reiterate it to be sure what I am saying is clear. I was making an assumption based upon my experience in Greensboro, and worse, allowed those beliefs to cloud my thinking as a teacher and researcher. I assumed the black males in my study in Oglethorpe County would be similar to those I knew so well in Greene County.

Obviously when analyzing the data I found this was not the case. The students in this study do have affinity identities, but they are not as secure in their identities outside of school as the students in Greene. These students, even Ace, make statements boldly occasionally, but even those seem to have question marks at the end, waiting for adult approval. There was a hardness in the statements of many students in Greensboro, particularly male students, as though daring an adult to question their validity. This is not the case in the young men in this discussion group. That hardness seemed to me evidence of the realization of empowerment in some areas of the boys in Greensboro's lives, and the lack seemed partial evidence of the lack of realization of empowerment outside of school for our discussion group. The data verified that. Yet Meat, Moochie, Bodie, and Ace have definite and strong opinions about control and power in the classroom, and all four seem to want to get past their feelings of inadequacy in the classroom and in their homes and communities. These issues require an extension of the review of literature, as they are different from the literature reviewed on empowerment prior to the collection of data. Following the review of literature will be a section on possible implications of this study and a short section on lingering questions.

### **Connecting the Data to the Literature**

There is a large body of literature on authority in schools and classrooms. Closely related, there is a great deal about how teachers and students handle issues of power, control, and feelings of inadequacy caused by how that authority is handled and projected. For the purposes of this review, the sections will be divided into power and control, and separately, feelings of inadequacy in marginalized youth.

### **Literature on Power and Control in the Classroom**

The first assertion made by our discussion group is that the teacher and the marginalized students do not share power. Our view is that the teacher has the power and only “smart” or “good” or “honors” students may share that power. This is a common view among researchers studying marginalized youth (Apple, 1986; Clark, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 1988; Deyhle, 1987; Dillon, 1989; Kailin, 1994; Ogbu, 1987; Osborn, 1996; Zeichner, 1993). Students in our discussion group perceive a difference between the treatment of students who share power in the classroom. While the students discussed classroom behavior as the cause of that difference, there are issues of social stratification that is suggested in the literature (Ogbu, 1992; Ream & Palardy, 2008; Shimahara, 1983; Brantlinger, 1990).

Learning should go “beyond constructing new and flexible understanding” and should allow students to become “a different person with respect to the norms, practices, and modes of interactions determined by one’s learning environment” (Bishop, 2012, p. 36). In school, students learn who they are. Those identities “affect not only how we learn or fail to learn any subject matter at hand but also who we become – what we pursue, what makes us happy, and what we find meaningful (p. 36). This is also described as possible selves, or the people we are all capable of becoming (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

Bishop (2012) and Markus and Nurius (1986) describe identity as the factor that can keep students from becoming those selves in school. They say that the identity taken on by those students in school can determine their success or failure in various subjects (Bishop, 2012; Markus and Nurius, 1986). Those identities are in part shaped by the relationship formed with teachers in school (Bishop, 2012). If students share power with a teacher, and see themselves as

part of a classroom community, they are more likely to take risks and see themselves as successful (2012).

Students' personal identities are largely consistent with the cultures of their classrooms (Cobb et. Al., 2009). Regarding power structures, Cobb and colleagues say that if students share power with the teacher and see themselves as high achievers, they become high achievers (2009). In addition, "norms for acceptable participation" often become part of "existing identities to positively shift" some students' identities while "maintaining another student's negative" identities (Bishop, 2012, p. 43). Unfortunately, for low achieving black students like the young men in our discussion group, norms for acceptable participation are often unknown. In addition, "white teachers, conditioned by their upbringing and the negative stereotypes still reinforced in the media, continue to make negative assumptions about the behavior of non-white students" (Irvine, 1990, p. 17). When "black students "misbehave" in class, white teachers take no chances, and throw the troublemakers out" (p. 19). Graybill notes this pattern in her study and maintains that it has remained consistent since integration (1997).

Accepting that many of the academic problems the young men in our discussion group have is directly related to a problem with schools and systems of education, it is hardly surprising that they feel they do not share power and that they are not in control of their own success. The causes of the problems in education for all minority groups in the United States are varied (Ogbu, 1991). Ogbu argues that the "reason is not that minority children start school lacking the "cultural capital" of the white middle class" (p. 288). Ogbu suggests that the problems affecting the social adjustment and academic success of black students are cultural problems that span the classroom, school, society, and community of those students (p. 288-289). He suggests that the school students are from and the groups they are within that school causes a

problem that is separate from the community the students are from. If the community the student is from positively promotes education and its values, that student is more likely to succeed (p. 289). This correlates to what the students believe about behavior. If students follow a different set of norms and values from those of the teacher or other authority figure, certain classroom behaviors are not accepted that may be accepted in their community (1992). Thus, classroom behavior becomes part of the power struggle, and children who are from communities valuing certain behaviors or societal norms in common with the teacher do better than those who do not (1992).

This thought follows the work of Bourdieu on cultural and social reproduction (1973). The norms being reproduced do reify the beliefs of the person in power, namely the teacher in this case, and are thus marginalizing those of different backgrounds further. Is school set up intentionally as a system of domination? How do those in power “secure the compliance of those they dominate?” (Rafanell & Gorringer, 2010, p. 604). Bourdieu says it is habitus, the concept that individuals internalize social structures and unconsciously agree to be ruled by them (1973). Thus, when the power dynamic of school says that the teacher has power over the students, the students agree. My students and I agree that this is the case. If Ace or Meat truly decided to rebel against the system, they certainly could. They chose not to because it is in their best interest to play the game by the societal rules, as mentioned in chapter four in Ace’s section. While Ace played by the rules for the most part and thus typically avoided getting into trouble for classroom behavior, his academic performance was still something of a mystery to him. He did not see a direct correlation between what he saw as effort and grades. “What difference do it make? Even if I try I don’t be passing Ms. X’s class.”

Students in our group perceive a lack of control over their own academic performance. While they all know that classroom behavior is part of what is keeping them from succeeding, they don't seem to know how to change the cycle they mention. Bodie says, "we have the power not to get in trouble . . . to do what the teacher is telling you. All your work and stuff is up to you . . . but you be in ISS [In School Suspension] and you get behind and then it is harder to pay attention because you don't be getting it, and then it's frustrating, you know?" That cycle, and how to control behavior in class, comes up in several discussions. The perception is that the teacher has control over students' academic performance because grades are tied to behavior. In fact, grades are tied to classroom behavior, not only in the sense that the teacher may or may not send work to a student who is not in class, but also in the sense that the teacher may assign participation grades where talking or being off task may cause points to be deducted (Malmgren et. al., 2005).

During the 2011-2012 school year, I was on a team working on changing the instructional design of our school. One of the major shifts we proposed was getting rid of participation grades. Those teachers we talked to before making that proposal all had different ways of measuring participation. Quite frequently, being on task and quiet were key components of a weekly participation grade. That measurement was based only on the teacher's observations, and was far too subjective. This indicates that the perception of the students in our discussion group was correct. Not only could they be punished with a discipline referral, but also with a deduction of their grade. If they are already performing poorly on tests, and possibly not doing homework because of situations at home beyond their control, then when combined with a poor participation grade those students truly are not in control of their grades.

According to Malmgren et. al., this is in part the fault of a lack of proper training in classroom management for teachers in secondary classrooms (2003). They use the Canter model of assertive discipline as an example of an effective classroom management model for secondary teachers (p. 36). This is a model with four components: consistent and fair rules, “positive consequences for adhering to the rules”, “a prearranged set of negative consequences when the rules are not followed”, and “a plan to implement the model with students” (p. 36). The idea is that a systematic approach to classroom management puts students in control and helps teachers make “rational, informed decisions about behavior problems and decreases the possibility that they [teachers] may make knee-jerk decisions” (p. 38).

### **Literature of Issues of Inadequacy**

In part, that control could be given to students if teachers understood better the importance of the type of feedback students receive in classrooms (Cassidy et. al., 2003). Adolescents actively seek certain types of feedback, and will accept negative feedback over no feedback at all (p. 612). There has “been little empirical examination of the active role children and adolescents may play in selecting the information about themselves that they receive” (p. 612), however, adolescents “tend to re-create familiar social environments as part of an attempt to maintain coherence of the self” (p. 613). Thus, in a community that is as socially stratified as our discussion group feels Oglethorpe County is, if students and teachers do not understand each other’s communities, teachers may not be familiar enough with students social environments to understand the self they are re-creating in the classroom. Cassidy et. al. found that students with a perceived lack of competence often perceived neutral feedback as negative, and responded negatively to any feedback not perceived as positive from teachers (2003).



The students in our discussion group all feel inadequate and feel that they have poor academic performance. They fit the description of the students in the Cassidy et. al. study who are in the low-competence group, and showed a perception that the teachers do not care about them or their success. The data suggests that there is a connection between academic performance and classroom behavior, and the Cassidy et. al. study suggests that there is a correlation between classroom behavior and perceptions of competence. Changes in teacher feedback might be one way to begin a shift in those students' classroom behaviors if there is in fact a correlation between "perceived competence and feedback seeking" (Cassidy et. al., 2003, p. 616).

While a goal listed by many researchers for public high schools says that all students should have opportunities to participate, many schools only offer this cursorily through student councils and other similar institutions if at all (Bickmore, 2001; Kamii, 1991). Students who are marginalized thus feel unable to become part of the participatory community of the classroom, becoming further marginalized and feeling isolated (Shimahara, 1983). The students in our discussion group show a more positive attitude toward "coaches", as shown in the conversation listed between Moochie and Bodie. It is possible that their positive response is in part because they are in a participatory relationship with those coaches. Both Moochie and Bodie participate in multiple sports – thus they are part of that community. This may indicate that if they were to become participants in their classroom communities they would feel more included and would thus feel more encouraged to participate positively in classroom activities.

How else can those youth be encouraged to participate? Our groups' suggestions ranged from allowing them more freedom to curtailing punishments for talking in class and other minor behavior infractions. The most powerful suggestion was to open more clear lines of

communication between teacher and students who have been marginalized or isolated because of behavior. Smetana and Bitz' (1996) study found that students' view of teacher authority is limited to "school" rules, such as "kissing in the hallway" (p. 1157). The common opinion of the students in their study was that they (the students) were not breaking important rules by talking in class or otherwise misbehaving in class (p. 1158). Other research asserts that teachers' are quick to react to such minor infractions, and then the punitive school discipline creates a cycle that is difficult to break (Welch & Payne, 2006; Noguera, 1995a). If students and teachers break that punitive cycle through communication, the marginalized students in this study would feel more in control of their own educations and futures.

### **What Schools Can Do**

The following section discusses the implications of this research and what those implications might mean for our school and community and others like it. The data showed that what is being done in our school is not working for the students in our discussion group. Thus, it seemed important to look at literature on power, control, and inadequacy as they affect marginalized youth. However, it also seemed important to look at what implications that had for our school and schools like it – what can we do to fix those issues? I begin by discussing the need to educate teachers on best practices when working with marginalized youth, then transition into the importance of one of those best practices - journaling. The next section discusses the implications of the study for conducting work in schools phenomenologically, and the final section discusses the importance of fostering self-advocacy in marginalized youth. Each of these sections is meant to encourage discussion about how teachers might rethink working with marginalized youth, and black males in rural high schools in particular. Most importantly these

discussions should help teachers become better mentors for students, hopefully creating partnerships that foster youth empowerment.

### **Best Practices for Teachers of Marginalized Youth**

The perception of the students in our discussion group is that many of their teachers do not care about their academic success. Chapter four does not paint a pretty picture of the teachers in our school. It may be comforting to some of those teachers that this is just the students' perception, but some of them likely believe that perception is reality, as I do. Another perception of the students in our group is that most of their teachers do care about the academic success of honors students. Thus they perceive a gap between the treatment of successful students (called "those smart kids" by Meat) and unsuccessful student, not only in the form of grades, but also in the form of equity. I plan on sharing these findings with our faculty, and thus one implication that is important to me is what best practices might help our faculty reach our marginalized students.

There are several well-documented best practices that our school can adopt as procedure in order to more effectively reach our marginalized students. These may also apply to other rural schools with similar demographics to our school, and those are listed in the introduction. First, teachers who are finding success with marginalized students should be identified so that they may share what is working with other teachers (Osborne, 1996; McLaughlin, 1989; Smith-Hefner, 1993). This supposes that first, as a school, we accept that there is an inequity in the way we are reaching and teaching our marginalized students. Thus, another best practice to adopt is using our professional learning community (PLC) time to study the work of Bourdieu or someone similar. We need to be critical of our own subjectivities and be willing to look at our own cultural capital and that of our students (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). If we first

understand that we are all bringing to school and/or work with us baggage from our own upbringing, and that baggage affects our ability to teach and learn, then we may accept that we need varied teaching strategies that work with all children. I do not believe all of our faculty accepts or acknowledges this yet.

Teachers need to be sure that they are treating all students with respect and that they are demanding the best from each student. “Culturally relevant teachers are personally warm toward and respectful of, as well as academically demanding of, all students” (Osborne, 1996, p. 296). The combination of warmth and rigor shows students that teachers expect them to do their best and that they care about their success. It is easy to blame students for their lack of understanding, and more difficult and time consuming for teachers to delve into why a student is not performing well and try to fix that on an individual basis (Osborne, 1996). Often, teachers misunderstand what a student needs to be successful because the teacher uses test based performance as evidence of student motivation and ability as opposed to understanding affective factors like home culture and lack of prior exposure to content (Malin, 1990).

Most importantly, our teachers need to “spell out the cultural assumptions on which the classroom (and schooling) operate” (Osborne, 1996, p. 298). Many of the students in the discussion group show an interest in going to college. Yet none of them show a clear understanding of what college can do for them, how to get in, or what they would need to complete when there. In addition, the boys constantly spoke to each other about situations where they could improve. The example was given in chapter four of Moochie saying he is “going today” to make up work in a teacher’s class. He was unaware that the teacher would be willing to help him after school and give make up assignments for daily work missed. The assumption of the teacher seems to be that students who want to make up work will come in to make it up, the

assumption of the student seems to be that a teacher will ask him/her to stay if they are allowed to make up work. Thus, the simple miscommunication about the “rules” of the classroom are keeping some students from succeeding. If we learn to be up front about what we expect of our students – and importantly, why we expect it – then we can avoid miscommunicating with our students.

There are many other important best practices for teachers of marginalized youth that are well documented in the literature (Osborne and Coombs, 1987; Erickson and Mohatt, 1982). For the purposes of this paper, those listed above would provide a good starting point for our school. One of the best practices listed, journaling (Lee, 2010) would possibly encompass all of these, and is given its own section. It is also a best practice for researchers practicing phenomenology, and is thus listed next. Journaling is a tool that can be used by teachers in order to be reflective of their practice and thus their assumptions in the classroom, and the sharing of pieces of those journals could become part of a school’s PLCs in order to facilitate teacher growth and productiveness with regards to marginalized youth (2010).

### **Journaling as a Best Practice in Teaching**

There were many moments over the course of conducting this study that I read over notes in my bridling journal and had a life changing realization. At one point I was listening to a tape of a discussion session and reading over what I bridled when I realized that I had dominated a large portion of our meeting that day. My comments were mostly helpful, or at least well intentioned, and my bridling journal showed my frustration with what the students unveiled. I wrote, “how can teachers not see that these students are crying out for help? How can they not allow them the opportunities they need to be successful? How hard it is to give them extra time on an assignment or find out why they were unable to do the work at home?” I was very

frustrated. I had immediately jumped to the conclusion that the teachers were not doing those things, and I was generalizing. I heard in my own voice on the tape reflections of that frustration, letting the students know in my tone that I disagreed with some of the practices of their teachers. I was ashamed of myself. It was not good politics and was not smart of me. I knew I could have found more productive ways to help the students than cutting the other teachers' legs out from under them. Only through journaling did I realize this.

I have since become a full time teacher again, and am journaling every day at the end of the day. I am bridling in the journal, but am also using it to remind myself of things I need to do differently. For example, "fourth period had trouble connecting Mrs. Merriweather [from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960)] at the pageant to the woman who made racist comments at Aunt Alexandra's luncheon" was a reminder that I needed to spend time on class discussion fleshing that out the next day in fourth period. Most importantly, the journaling process is helping me think through issues with students. There is an entry that says, "had success getting D to take a test today. He needed some time, and sat silent and angry for a few minutes, but I left him alone instead of asking him repeatedly to get started. He finally began to work and worked diligently for the last thirty minutes of class".

This student has been a classroom behavior problem throughout high school. He is often angry or agitated when he comes to class. I often have to ask him to settle down or stop talking and get on task, and I have changed my tactic since this journaling entry. I try to overlook any minor infractions and allow him a little freedom. I have been open with him that I think we both need to change for him to make a good grade in class. I am going to give him more freedom, and in return I want him to try to sit quietly when he is having a bad day. In other words, I accept days when he does not do work if he sits quietly, and I give him extra time to do it when he can.

On good days, I expect him to work from bell to bell. So far I have had mixed results, but he has not failed any assignments since we made our agreement.

Teacher reflection and journaling are not new concepts; John Dewey encouraged reflection as a tool to re-conceptualize teaching in the 1930s (Dewey, 1933). A study of pre-service teachers using interactive journaling reported that journaling facilitated their practice in terms of accessing content, “offering additional ideas and suggestions,” and “providing confidence and social support” (Lee, 2010, p. 129). According to another study, however, the importance of tools like journaling become less important after time has passed from pre-service learning (Ozkan, 2011). Teachers in that study admitted that their priorities changed after time in the classroom, and many of the tools that they found useful, like journaling, became used far less frequently once they were teaching full time and not working on a practicum or under a mentor (2011). I was guilty of this myself; I kept a journal during my first year of teaching and did not resume the practice until conducting this study.

The process of conducting this research led me back to journaling, and the act of journaling has helped me bridle many assumptions that could have kept me from being the best teacher I can be. Journaling is necessary in conducting phenomenological research using Vagle’s method, but more importantly it should be emphasized as a best practice (Vagle, 2011). For teachers of marginalized youth, it is especially important to constantly question assumptions and rethink possible ways to teach our content and make it applicable. One study found that journaling helped teachers of African American students examine problems in maintaining discipline (Tillman, 2003). A teacher found that “her difficulty in maintaining discipline was directly linked to her low expectations for student performance” (Tillman, 2003, p. 230). She reflected in one journal entry that her negative feelings toward teaching and her students were

directly linked to her feeling a lack of control in her classroom. She asked for help from a colleague, and by the end of the semester had experienced a change in her own attitude, and an improvement in her students' work, which she believed were directly correlated (2003).

This study also encouraged the principal at the urban, predominantly black school to journal. The process promoted the sharing of excerpts of journals as well, creating a professional community where journaling allowed for honest communication and created a feeling that teachers and the principal supported each other for the benefit of the students (2003). When the teacher above noted her frustration, the principal "was aware that the teacher was having difficulty with teaching and classroom management . . . and in journal writing, he reflected on his role in helping the teacher experience professional and personal competence" (2003, p. 231). The collaboration of the teachers then involved time for teachers to share things they journaled about their students and practices with others. That study, and this one, indicate that journaling may be more than just a good practice for teachers, it may be a way to improve the climate of schools in order to reach all students.

### **Self-Advocacy in Marginalized Students**

"Teachers struggle to motivate students to read and write and engage in their classes, all the while, students are reading and writing all around them" (Weinstein, 2002, p. 23). Weinstein conducted a study looking for unsanctioned reading and writing activities among students in the school where she taught. All of the students in her school were marginalized youth – the school was a second chance alternative school for students who had dropped out; nearly all of the students in her school were either "Hispanic or African American" (p. 21). Yet she found what I see in my building, and what others have found as well. Marginalized youth are participating in



various literacies daily – reading magazines and blogs, reading texts, writing songs, playing video games (Finders, 1997; Moje, 2000; Adams, 2009).

It is important to encourage the best practice of teachers, yet equally important to foster the self-advocacy of marginalized students. Students must find connections between required reading and their own lives and required writing and their own interests, and must also tell their teachers themselves when they are having trouble making those connections (Moje, 2000; Weinstein, 2002). One way to encourage students to do this is by creating a classroom community in which they feel comfortable (Adams, 2009; Moje, 2000) and another is to begin their reading and writing activities with something they are familiar with or feel comfortable with; Gee (1996) says to invite them to use a discourse they show an affinity for.

The students in our discussion group articulate not feeling in control or in power, and in expressing those feelings show strong feelings of inadequacy. Yet the students they feel are smart, and the teachers they feel intimidated by, would feel inadequate trying to describe some of the things that these students know quite a lot about. In class yesterday several of the students from our discussion group were going into great detail about a football game they watched over the weekend. They were spouting technical terms and debating a call made by the referee. Their verbiage showed depth of knowledge and mastery of content, two things that are being spouted as essential in our school at the moment. I began wondering why they couldn't write a persuasive essay on the call of the game. I gave that as an option for the writing practice we were doing, and the boys' writing was incredibly persuasive. If we give our marginalized students the chance to show their strengths and become confident enough to advocate for themselves, they may have a better chance in school and in life.

### **Lingering Questions**

When writing the early chapters of this dissertation, my major professor said that I needed a section on beliefs. I had written two pages passionately listing things I believe about education without realizing it. My bridling journal was at one point longer than my transcripts of data, because I am constantly finding things that bother me about how schools work – or don't work. I have a terrible habit of making judgments and assumptions, and am learning how detrimental this can be. I assume, for example, that my defending at risk youth vehemently is positive, yet I do not always take time to pull myself out of the situation and see what negative effects there might be because of my actions. For example, in chapter four I quoted Bodie when he said he wanted me to speak to his teachers about helping him bring his grades up. "You go talk to them . . . they don't want to hear what I got to say". Am I crippling him by doing things for him? Sorting through those questions is a process. I chose phenomenology as the tool I felt would best fit that process, because it is meant to allow the researcher to be open and reflexive. The first lingering question is: did I allow this study to open up possibilities for creating positive change in our school?

The phenomenological method worked very well for me, and appeals to me because it forces the researcher to be reflexive. This study is meant to document the research process, both the steps that were taken and the changes I went through while being reflexive and thinking about the data. As noted by Vagle (2011), phenomenological research today can "allow for a more nuanced reading of lived experience" (p. 3). I believe what Vagle posits in his work on post-intentional phenomenology, which is that phenomenology today can help researchers who believe that "knowledge is partial, situated, [and] endlessly deferred" (2011, p. 3).

For that reason I was able to accept the fact that I started a study on youth empowerment only to find myself unable to construct a definition of empowerment with those youth. The most interesting part of the process was moving between the data, my feelings as noted in my bridling journal, and the document. That space in between gave me documentation and a record of my thoughts to see where I was putting my own beliefs into the data and then decide how much of that to describe in the analysis section. As noted, I do not believe the students in our discussion group know what empowerment is and are not experiencing it. Another lingering question is: if had I defined empowerment for the students, would the results look completely different?

If the students had shown knowledge of empowerment, or had given an indication that they were experiencing what I would define as empowerment, chapter four would have outlined a definition of empowerment constructed from our mutual understandings. Since the data did not lead me there, my interpretation of the data highlighted for me a different problem. The thread that I wove from the themes was a lack of empowerment, both a lack of knowledge of the term and a lack of application of all the term entails. They are not living empowerment. A large concern is that the students see college, or post secondary education as a goal, but have no knowledge of why it is a goal. It is not a means to an end for them, but an acceptance of something that “should” come next. A student not included as a case study but who participated said, “I mean, I’m gonna go to college for football. And I guess I’ll major in something while I’m there . . . but I mean I’ll go even if I can’t play football . . . and then I’ll come back here because I want to drive trucks for somebody, like Publix or something”. He has no real plan for why college is needed, but feels that it is somehow necessary. This is common amongst our students, and amongst the boys who participated in this study. The lingering question is: are adolescents being taught what college is needed for?

## **Conclusion**

This paper documented a process, the process of designing, conducting, analyzing, and presenting research. Yet it was more than just that process, it was the process of opening myself up to new possibilities as a teacher. After eight years in the classroom, it is refreshing to realize that like my students, I am capable of much more than I expected of myself. I am able to look critically at my own teaching and pedagogy and am able to feel comfortable ending a study like this one with more questions than answers. When I told my major professor that I wanted to do my research on youth empowerment nearly two years ago now, Bob said, “that is a career question, not a dissertation question. Let’s be more specific”. As I’ve gone through this process, I’ve realized how right he really was. My discussion group and I have no idea what youth empowerment looks like in Oglethorpe County, nor are we sure that it is happening there. Our group did not do what I originally intended it to do – we did not define empowerment. What we did do was take the first step towards empowerment for these young men. We looked critically at what is happening to them personally and educationally and began to ask questions. I’m not sure how long it will take us to answer those questions, or if any of us ever will, but taking that first step may be what is needed for change to begin.

## **Epilogue**

I am happy to be back in the classroom this school year, and I am teaching most of our discussion group in either Tenth or Eleventh Grade Literature. I have Ace in class during the sixth block each day. Each morning, I arrive at school early and enter my classroom to get ready for the day. Ace’s bus gets to school very early as well, and each day at 7:30 he comes into my room. He frowns, mutters a “hey Mrs. Adams” and throws his book bag onto the floor roughly. He typically mutters something about having to come by my room so early. Yet, his first class is

across the building, and after breakfast, he comes back to my room to retrieve the book bag. I don't mention the fact that coming by isn't necessary, nor does he. I look forward to his gruff greeting each day; Ace makes it clear in his own way that my room is a safe space for him. He said to Meat one morning, "that's my teacher" with a strong emphasis on the "my". He said it as a threat, and with ownership, the way my daughter says "that's my mama" when another child holds my hand.

He does other things to signal his ownership of my room as his space as well. He and the other boys leave their things in my room throughout the day, and check in at times other than their assigned class period. Moochie and Bodie stand with me in the hallway before their sixth period class down the hall, and then come to me for language arts seventh period. They make references to things in our discussion, for example, Bodie will say things to Moochie that they discussed during our group time. Moochie always responds and said one day, "Yeah, but you didn't fix your work. You told Mrs. Adams you were going to stop forgetting to turn your work in so you can get your grades right." There is always banter and laughing in the hallway. In the room, they put their names and jersey numbers on my board frequently, and like Ace's bluster in the mornings, I fuss that I need that space for other things. I am like Ace as well in that it is a half-hearted gesture at most, and they know I do not mean the rebuke because I leave their names there for days at a time.

I do not mean to imply that our discussion group did anything magical or earth shattering for any of us – it did not. I do think what happened was important for all of us. The students gained a space that is their own, even if it is sometimes treated as nothing more than a large locker. It is a touchstone, a home base, a place in the building where they can feel safe sharing their opinions. Ace leaves his cell phone in my desk each day when he goes to gym class seventh

period. He is concerned that it will get stolen in gym, and also concerned that if he holds on to it he will get it taken up for having it out during the school day. Students are not allowed to have their cell phones on or visible during the school day. Ace's trust shows me a couple of things that are valuable to me. First, he trusts me with something that is so important to him. I do not teach any students who do not feel that the cell phone is the center of their universe, and Ace is no exception. Additionally, he feels secure in my classroom as a place respected by other students.

I tell him weekly that I teach a class seventh period, and that by leaving his phone he is taking a risk. I make it clear to my students that I am not responsible for lost belongings. Furthermore, his phone gets placed in my desk. My desk is a shared space in our classroom, meaning that students use it as a workspace when they choose to. The only part of the room that is off limits to students is a locked file cabinet, and that is only for confidentiality. Thus, it is possible that the phone could be stolen. However, at the start of each year I discuss that the room is a shared space, and that I keep my stuff out for student use and that I hope they will eventually feel comfortable doing the same. In other words, I want our room to be a place where we could leave a cell phone and have it remain safe there. Again, this is not a utopia. Things have gone missing, though never anything as important as a cell phone – typically a pen, folder, or book go missing. Yet the fact that Ace feels safe leaving his phone there makes me think we are making progress in having a place where we all trust each other.

Thus, the most important thing I learned from my study, and the one thing that may be most valuable to other teachers, is that creating a classroom that is a community for students can change your teaching entirely. These are the students I hear teachers complaining about in the lounge. These are the students who are always on the detention or In School Suspension list. They are all at-risk of not graduating on time because of a lack of credits, and are seen by

teachers as either behavior problems or low level, and are not the kids teachers get excited to have in class. Yet because they trust me, and because they have my room as a safe space, I don't have those issues in my class. I don't have to write kids up, because they respect me and do not act disrespectfully.

I have been accused throughout my career of being too easy on students, and I know that many teachers in my building think that I just ignore behavior problems. Here is the truth of that, and how it applies to the data I have collected in this study. Do I ignore a child talking to another child during a lesson? Sometimes. Do I sometimes let a kid slide who pulled out a cell phone to check the time? Yes. Do I ignore major disruptions, disrespect, or tolerate blatant violations of school policy? Never. Truly, I have never had to tolerate any of those issues in my room. What I have learned is that behavior is tied to academic performance, and students know it. I also learned that most of the behavior issues that are inhibiting the performance of the students in my discussion group are minor, and should be able to be handled easily, quickly, and without any outside assistance by a teacher who has a positive relationship with those students. I have also learned that it is helpful to students, and not scary for me, to share power with my students. If I give them control of their grades in my class, most students respond positively. If I say to them, "This is your space, and mine, and I want to share the responsibility of your learning with you," not only do students understand that, they also appreciate it.

I loved the experience of conducting this study, and I loved the process of reviewing the data and learning from it. What do I wish I would have said? I often wish I would have given the students more ammunition, more power to stand up for themselves in order to feel that they are getting somewhere in school. However, what I gained from not saying all that I thought is far more powerful for me. I think now that maybe it wasn't necessary to say all that I thought.

Maybe just by joining a conversation with them, and adding the perspective of an adult who showed them respect, I allowed them to begin a process of empowering themselves. It isn't that I think one thing directly led to the other, just that like me, they may have begun thinking about things a little differently, and may have entered into a new community. Maybe now we will all question our assumptions and those of us in our group will be better able to enter into those conversations with other people in our building.

I know that as a teacher I feel that I am better able to look at what is happening in our building and question it, and am better able to listen to what Ace is really saying in the morning. He may grumble about how annoyed he is at having to come by my room, but underneath that gruffness he is clearly happy to have a space that he considers his own in the building. The larger picture, I think, may be that as teachers we can control our own issues with students by going back to the basics and creating safe spaces where students feel respected, in control, and part of the educational process as a valued member of a school community. Sharing power with students may be daunting for teachers in the beginning, but students need to feel capable of sharing power with adults. I know that Ace, Meat, Bodie, and Moochie are now better able to begin the process of empowerment because they feel slightly more confident with an adult in their corner. This is where the data led me, and I know now that empowerment is truly a career question, not a dissertation question. I hope that by joining this conversation I have added some insight into what empowerment might look like, or added some glimpses of how we might interpret empowerment as educators. I think the work this discussion group and I did provides a good starting point for a larger conversation and further research on power, control, and inadequacy and how we might look at those issues as part of the larger discussion about empowerment.



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## APPENDIX A

## Consent Forms

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

**Unsigned Manuscripts: The Authoring of Adolescent Struggling Readers  
Minor Assent Form**

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in my research project titled, **“What does empowerment look like in rural Georgia?”** Through this project I am trying to understand the ways students in rural Georgia define empowerment.

If you decide to be part of this project, you will allow me to audio record an interview with you. You will talk to us about your experiences with empowerment in a rural area of Georgia. You will also be invited to attend weekly meetings to discuss with myself and several of your peers the ways in which we see people empower themselves in our area. I will also video tape our group discussions. In addition, I will be asking you to write about your experiences with empowerment.

You do not have to participate in this project. Your participation or non-participation in this project will not affect your grades in school. I will not use your name on any papers that we write about this project. I expect us to meet weekly in October, November, January, and half of February this 2011-2012 school year.

If you want to stop participating in this project, you are free to do so at any time. You can also choose not to answer questions that you don't want to answer. Hopefully, there will be no discomfort other than talking about yourself with people you only know briefly.

If you have any questions or concerns you can always call me at 706-743-8124. You can also email me any time at madams@oglethorpe.k12.ga.us

Sincerely,

Megan Adams  
University of Georgia

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I understand the project described above. My questions have been answered and I agree to participate in this project. I have received a copy of this form.

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Signature of the Participant/Date

**Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.**

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

**What does empowerment mean in rural Georgia?**

### Parental Permission Consent Form

I give my permission for my child to participate in the research study titled “**What does empowerment mean in rural Georgia**” that is being conducted by Megan Adams, Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706-743-8124, under the direction of Dr. Bob Fecho, Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706 207 5909. This participation is entirely voluntary. My child can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled. I can have the results of the participation, to the extent that it can be identified as that of my child, returned to me, removed from the records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The reason for the research is that it will give the researcher and other educators a better understanding of the opportunities students have for empowerment in rural Georgia.
- 2) The benefits my child might expect are an improved ability to think about his/her learning, to better understand how American schools operate, and a possible improvement in communication skills. The benefit for society is a better understanding of what happens and what it means when students feel isolated or do not understand how to empower themselves.
- 3) I understand that the study will take place from October 2011 to February 2012.
- 4) If I agree to allow my child to participate in the study, I agree that he/she will, once a week, write one short personal story about some event that occurred as part of his/her experiences as a student in public schools. This writing will take place on my child’s time and should take no more than 30 minutes per week.
- 5) I also agree to allow my child to do all of the following: (1) take part in an audio-recorded interview conducted by Megan Adams; (2) be video recorded during group discussions, and (3) allow Megan Adams to observe and take notes on him/her as he/she learns during class. He/she will be expected to do these activities described in Points 4 & 5 from October 2011 to February 2012. This will occur at a place that my child and I are comfortable with. The observations will occur in school.
- 6) No risks to the participants are foreseen, except the minimal risk sometimes associated with revealing personal information through writing and speaking.
- 7) The results of my child’s participation will be confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior written consent, unless otherwise required by law. All participants will be assigned aliases and all specific identifiers will be removed from reports. Only Megan Adams will have access to the audio recordings and only excerpts from the written transcripts will be shared in reports. All data, paper or electronic, will be stored no less than four years (September 2015) but not more than eight years (September 2018), at which point they will be destroyed by shredding.
- 8) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research now or during the course of the project and can be reached by telephone (706-743-8124) or e-mail ([madams@oglethorpe.k12.ga.us](mailto:madams@oglethorpe.k12.ga.us)).

#### FINAL AGREEMENT:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student’s Name (Please Print)

#### Please check:

\_\_\_\_ I WILL ALLOW MY CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY.

\_\_\_\_ I WILL NOT ALLOW MY CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY.

**My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I give my consent to allow my child to participate in this study. In addition, I have been given a copy of this form**

---

Signature of Researcher

Date

---

Signature of Parent

Date

**Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one and return the other to the researcher, who can be reached by telephone (706-743-8124) or e-mail ([madams@oglethorpe.k12.ga.us](mailto:madams@oglethorpe.k12.ga.us)).**

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**Additional questions or problems regarding your child's rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address [IRB@uga.edu](mailto:IRB@uga.edu)**

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## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guides for Student Participants

#### Interview Guides

##### Meeting One: General Background and History

###### *The Student*

1. Tell me about yourself. What words would you use to describe yourself? Why?
2. Tell me about things you like to do. Why?
3. Tell me about things you don't like to do. Why?
4. Do you have a job?
5. Tell me a story about yourself that will help me to understand you better.

###### *The Students' Family*

6. Please describe the members of your family. Who do you live with?
7. What are your parents'/guardian's attitudes about school? Tell me a story about your family that will help me understand their attitudes towards school.
8. How do you see yourself fitting in/not fitting in with your family? Tell me a story about your family that will help me understand your relationship with them.
9. Do members of your family read? What kinds of things do they read?

###### *Educational History*

10. What have been your favorite subjects in school? Why?
11. What are the subjects you disliked in school? Why?
12. Have you had any teachers encourage you to go beyond high school? How did they suggest it?
13. In what subjects did you struggle? Why?
14. Tell me a story about your school experience that shows me how you felt supported by the school and /or teachers.
15. In what subjects did you put forth the most effort? Why?

16. Tell me a story about school experience that shows me how you didn't feel supported by the school and/or teachers.
17. Have you ever had a situation in the community that made you feel the desire to change your life? Describe that.
18. Have you ever had a situation at school that made you feel the desire to change your life? Describe that.

## APPENDIX C

### Principal Letter

08/05/2011

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, “What does empowerment mean in rural Georgia”, presented by Megan Adams, graduate student at UGA, under the direction of Dr. Bob Fecho, UGA professor. I have granted permission for the study to be conducted at Oglethorpe County High School.

The purpose of this study is to explore how a struggling readers’ identity development is influenced by their experience in schools, particularly focusing on the role their interactions with their teacher shape these perceptions. This study will provide valuable insight into the ways teachers can work with struggling readers and help them acquire the skills necessary to be successful in schools.

The interviews will be conducted over a time period of no more than 6 months. I expect that this project will end not later than March 2012. Mrs. Adams will also *contact* or *recruit* student participants according to district regulations and in accordance with the IRB approved procedures of the University of Georgia. Student participation will be entirely voluntary. The interviews and observations of students will take place at a time that is mutually convenient and does not interfere with regular classroom activities. These interviews will also be conducted over a time period of not more than 6 months and end no later than March 2012.

I understand that Mrs. Adams will receive consent from her participants. Mrs. Adams has agreed to provide me any documents that I request in relation to the study. Any data collected will be kept confidential and will be stored *in a secure location accessible only by the researcher*.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number listed above.

Sincerely,

G. Darrell Wetherington, Principal