It is common practice to enroll adolescents in classes designed to improve their reading. Previous studies of literacy intervention classes have focused on students’ acquisition of reading skills and strategies, but few studies have considered how reading identities may contribute to literacy learning. To address this gap, I used theories of positioning and identity to answer the question: How did students’ understandings of literacy and their own reading identities interact with the figured worlds of their literacy intervention classrooms? I analyzed interviews, field notes, and artifacts for two students and teachers in different classrooms, focusing on students’ acts of agency. Analyses revealed that both students’ identities as good readers conflicted with the figured worlds of their classrooms, but they responded differently. One challenged the norms of his classroom in a manner contrary to his teacher’s expectations and was unable to disrupt his positioning as a struggling reader. The other acquiesced to the norms of her classroom in ways her teacher recognized as characteristic of a capable reader, ultimately upsetting her struggling reader subject position. The findings reveal that students’ acts of agency and teachers’ interpretations of those acts are informed by students’ perceptions of themselves as readers and teachers’ understandings of literacy and learning in intervention classrooms. The findings problematize the practice of placing students in classes that position them as deficient. Additional research that attends to sociocultural factors in classrooms is necessary to understand the academic, social, and personal implications of particular approaches to literacy instruction and intervention for individual students.

Many students struggle with reading in secondary school. The reasons for students’ difficulties, however, are as diverse as the students themselves. Some students continue to have trouble recognizing or decoding words. Others find it difficult to comprehend what they read due to a lack of fluency or, more commonly, a lack of familiarity and flexibility with the use of reading strategies to tackle complex texts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). The ability to use reading strategies to access texts is essential in secondary school, where students must engage in a variety of advanced reading tasks across disciplines (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).

In response to the reading difficulties many older students face, experts in adolescent literacy have identified effective literacy practices to guide instruction in middle and secondary schools. These principles highlight the importance of
instruction that explicitly teaches comprehension (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999) and vocabulary (Kamil et al., 2008), ideally in the context of specific disciplines (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007); attends to students’ motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy (Alvermann, 2002; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Kamil et al., 2008; National Council of Teachers of English, 2006); introduces students to diverse texts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Moore et al., 1999); and fosters collaborative learning (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004) and critical thinking (Alvermann, 2002; National Council of Teachers of English, 2006). Although the specifics of these principles vary, their proponents share the goal of supporting reading instruction that ensures students’ academic literacy skills are sufficient to handle reading tasks across disciplines in middle and secondary school and beyond.

One way secondary schools have sought to address the literacy needs of students who struggle with reading is through ninth-grade literacy intervention classes. While often taught by English teachers, these classes are distinct from regular English classes, and many attempt to embed the aforementioned principles of reading instruction into their approach. Two examples are WestEd’s Reading Apprenticeship Academic Literacy course (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001) and the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning’s (KU-CRL’s) Xtreme Reading course (Schumaker et al., 2006). The Enhanced Reading Opportunities Study (Corrin, Somers, Kemple, Nelson, & Sepanik, 2008; Somers et al., 2010) measured the effects of the Academic Literacy and Xtreme Reading courses on students’ reading skills and behaviors at the end of ninth grade and academic performance and behavioral outcomes in tenth grade. Both intervention models improved students’ reading comprehension, academic performance, and credit completion in ninth grade (Corrin et al., 2008). However, the positive effects did not continue into the students’ tenth-grade year, when they were no longer enrolled in the courses (Somers et al., 2010).1

With few exceptions (e.g., Greenleaf et al., 2001; Skerrett, 2012), attention to students’ socially situated reading identities (Alvermann, 2001) is often omitted from the research on ninth-grade literacy intervention classes. This omission is striking in light of the emerging consensus that identity matters to literacy (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Moje & Luke, 2009) and recent efforts to include discussions about identity as part of intervention curricula. The Academic Literacy course, for example, includes “reader identity” as one component of the personal dimension of its instructional framework, and identity is a key focus of the first unit of the course, Reading Self and Society (Greenleaf et al., 2001). Likewise, Xtreme Reading includes a component called “Possible Selves,” which addresses students’ academic and personal motivation (Hock, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2003).

Beyond intervention settings, an important body of research has begun to consider the role identity plays in adolescents’ literacy development. Some of this work has demonstrated that adolescents develop and refine sophisticated literate identities in out-of-school contexts (Black, 2009; Buck, 2012; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005). Other studies have focused on the impact of in-school contexts on students’ literate identities, in terms of both challenges (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; Hall, 2009, 2010) and possibilities (Hall, 2012; Ivey &
Frankel

The Intersection of Reading and Identity

Johnston, 2013; Rex, 2001). For example, in their longitudinal study of three adolescent girls, Fairbanks and Ariail (2006) demonstrated that students whose literate identities were not closely aligned with the expectations of the school had few opportunities to bring their knowledge to bear in academic contexts. On the other hand, Rex (2001) found that an average reader took on the identity of a good reader as a result of her participation in an integrated gifted-and-talented English class. In each of these studies, the findings demonstrate how students’ literate identities interact in complex ways with their literacy practices both in and out of school.

Despite mounting evidence that identity matters, there is little discussion of students’ literate identities in intervention settings. One explanation for this omission is that these settings are often viewed and evaluated from the perspective of a skills-based autonomous model of literacy in which literacy is measured as a decontextualized skill rather than a sociocultural, ideological model (Street, 1984) in which literacy and its associated skills are understood in the context of social practices (Street, 2005). The limited research focused on adolescents’ identities in intervention contexts has attended to the positive implications of these classes for students’ identities (e.g., Greenleaf et al., 2001; Skerrett, 2012). For example, Skerrett (2012) documented how one student’s reading identity was positively reshaped in her ninth-grade reading class as a result of her teacher’s pedagogical approach, which encouraged students to broaden their understandings of what it means to be a reader. More research that takes into account sociocultural factors such as race, class, and gender and that critically examines literacy intervention settings by attending to these factors is necessary to better understand the implications of the classes for students.

The purpose of the present study was to consider two ninth-grade literacy intervention classes from a sociocultural perspective by examining students’ reading identities in these contexts. Research that takes a sociocultural perspective on intervention settings is crucial at this time, when many states have recently adopted the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) with the aim of raising expectations for reading and writing across content areas. As teachers and administrators consider ways to help their students meet the new expectations, they may view literacy classes that target underperforming readers as an appealing model to address this challenge. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature on secondary literacy interventions by providing additional insights into the identity implications of these classes for students.

Theoretical Framework: Identity and Positioning

I drew from sociocultural understandings of identity (Gee, 2000–2001; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Ivanić, 1998) and positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990) that situate individuals in specific social, cultural, and historical contexts, processes, and discourses. Gee (2000–2001) contends that identities are performances rather than “internal states” (p. 99); individuals have multiple identities that are enacted in particular contexts. Similarly, Holland et al. (1998) conceptual-
ize identities as enacted self-understandings: “people tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (p. 3). They propose the concept of *figured worlds* to situate identity within specific social, cultural, and historical processes. In their theory of *identity in practice*, “identities and the acts attributed to them are always forming and re-forming in relation to historically specific contexts” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 284). This emphasis on identities as they are formed and reformed in practice and over time is crucial because it illuminates the ways in which contexts—here, academic contexts—give rise to certain ways of viewing oneself and one’s abilities (Wortham, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, the subject positions made available to students in literacy intervention classes are also important to consider. Davies and Harré (1990) define positioning as “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (p. 48). Among the many different types of positioning, van Langenhove and Harré (1999) highlight the forced positioning that occurs when institutions (here, schools) classify certain people in certain ways; this classification, they argue, involves both tacit and explicit acts of positioning. The simple act of placing a student in a literacy intervention class positions that student as a struggling reader. However, students may or may not be willing to assume the struggling reader identity that is implied by this placement.

While it is important to understand how contexts shape identities, it is equally important to understand how the identities that students bring to the classroom shape their interactions in that space and, consequently, the space itself. In the figured world of a literacy intervention classroom, a student is discursively positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990) as a poor reader, which is an identity that some students are more inclined to accept than others. Whether or not a student accepts—or partially accepts—the poor reader identity depends in large part on his or her history as a reader. Holland et al. (1998) describe this coming together of individual and context as a collision in which a person’s *history-in-person* comes into contact with specific circumstances that may or may not align with his or her self-understandings and prior experiences. Holland et al. (1998) are deeply concerned with the possibilities for individual agency that arise from these collisions; they contend that identities are “possibilities for mediating agency” (p. 4). Similarly, Davies and Harré (1990) note that positioning theory considers how discursive practices position individuals in certain ways while also attending to the ways in which individuals negotiate new positions within and through these practices.

The figured world of a literacy intervention classroom may shape a student’s identity and position him or her in a certain way. At the same time, that student may also shape the context by negotiating new positions. Holland et al. (1998) term these negotiations, or acts of agency, *improvisation* and *self-directed symbolization*. Improvisation occurs when an individual’s history-in-person intersects with an incongruous present: “[it] is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises . . . in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18). Self-directed symbolization is the ability to
engage in self-authoring practices, to imagine oneself in new, yet-to-be-realized ways that then mediate subsequent behavior. In literacy intervention classrooms, improvisation and self-directed symbolization are manifestations of agency in a context that, by definition, positions students as deficient.

Through these theories of identity and positioning, I addressed the following research question: How did students’ understandings of literacy and their own reading identities interact with the figured worlds of their literacy intervention classrooms?

Methods
I employed a case study design in which I identified multiple, embedded cases (Yin, 2014). Two literacy intervention classes—Enhanced Reading and Reading Workshop—in two different schools and districts were the larger cases, and focal students in each classroom were the embedded cases. The data I drew upon for this analysis, which was part of a larger yearlong investigation of the two classrooms, were collected during the first semester of the 2010–2011 school year.

I purposefully chose both literacy intervention classes through “reputational case selection” (Goetz & LeCompte, as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28), in which I identified exemplary teachers who had been teaching ninth-grade literacy classes for at least five years. I selected student cases by identifying individuals who demonstrated different orientations toward reading and exhibited diverse reading behaviors in the context of classroom literacy practices. I determined students’ reading orientations by examining the introduction letters they wrote to their teachers at the beginning of the year and by observing their participation in classroom literacy activities. I gained insight into students’ reading behaviors by observing them as they engaged in classroom literacy practices and discussing their reading strengths and needs with their teachers.

Although standardized test scores were the primary reason students were placed into the classes, I did not use them to determine reading ability because, following my theoretical framework, I was interested in the various ways that students engaged with reading in this context. I did not administer other reading assessments, such as informal reading inventories, because I was concerned that assessing students in this way would further position them as deficient and negatively affect my personal relationships with them.

In this article, I focus on two student cases—Dennis in Enhanced Reading and Tory in Reading Workshop—because these students actively positioned themselves as good readers and exhibited agency in ways that differed from many of their classmates whose reading orientations and behaviors were more consistent with teachers’ expectations.

Participants and Settings
Dennis and Mr. Taylor in Enhanced Reading
Dennis was African American, and his first language was English. He represented himself as someone who enjoyed reading and positioned himself as a good reader...
in class. Mr. Taylor observed that Dennis comprehended at a high level when he read in class but that he was a disengaged student.

Mr. Taylor was a White male in his early 30s. He was in his sixth year of teaching Enhanced Reading and his tenth year of teaching overall. Mr. Taylor’s pedagogical approach was informed by the preparation he received in his English education master’s program, which took a sociocultural perspective on teaching and learning.

Enhanced Reading supplemented a student’s regular English class and was scheduled during his or her elective period. There were 11 students in this Enhanced Reading class, which was one of five such classes taught by Mr. Taylor at Northern High. The composition of the class reflected the overall demographics of students enrolled in Enhanced Reading but did not reflect the student body as a whole (see Table 1). The main emphasis of the class was on engaging students in the reading process by modeling what it means to be a reader and exposing students to a multitude of high-interest and culturally responsive texts.

**Tory and Ms. Cheung in Reading Workshop**

Tory was White, and English was her first language. She represented herself as someone who loved reading, describing herself as “a reading machine,” and positioned herself as a good reader in class. Ms. Cheung viewed Tory as a capable reader and student who possibly did not need to be in Reading Workshop.

Ms. Cheung was a biracial (Asian/White) female in her mid-30s. She was in her sixth year of teaching Reading Workshop and her twelfth year of teaching overall. Ms. Cheung was trained in teaching the reading strategies that underpinned the Reading Workshop curriculum.

Reading Workshop supplemented students’ regular English class and was scheduled during their elective period. There were 14 students in Ms. Cheung’s Reading Workshop class, which was one of two such classes at Southern High. The composition of the class reflected the overall demographics of students enrolled in Reading Workshop but did not reflect the student body as a whole (see Table 1). The class was modeled after KU-CRL’s Fusion Reading Program (Hock, Brasseur-Hock, & Deshler, 2012); its main emphasis was on teaching students reading strategies that they could use to complete the reading in their content-area classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Student Percentages by Class and School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northern High</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ENHANCED READING CLASSES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(n = 80)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASIAN</strong></td>
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<td><strong>HISPANIC/LATINO</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>WHITE</strong></td>
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<td><strong>OTHER</strong></td>
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**Researcher Role**
As a White female and former reading and writing teacher, I undertook this research in order to understand the types of literacy opportunities afforded to students in intervention settings. I was sensitive to my own position of power and the potential for my presence in the class to have the unintended consequence of further positioning students as deficient. To mitigate this risk, I positioned myself as a participant observer (Patton, 2002) and a learner. I participated in the get-to-know-you activities in both classrooms at the beginning of the year and used these activities to explicitly state my role as a researcher to the students. I framed my presence in the class around my desire to learn from them. Over time, I assumed a more observatory role in both classrooms. I wanted the students to see me as someone distinct from their teachers so that they would be willing to speak more freely during our interactions.

**Data Sources**

**Interviews**
I privately interviewed students and teachers once during the fall semester. For Dennis, this was the only formal interview I conducted because he did not remain at Northern High for the spring semester. For Tory and the teachers, this was the first of three interviews conducted over the course of the school year. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. I supplemented the interviews with informal discussions with students and teachers during classroom observations.

**Observations**
I observed Enhanced Reading for 36 hours and Reading Workshop for 33 hours during the fall semester. I took notes in a spiral notebook and composed typed field notes within an hour or two of leaving the classroom. In October, I began supplementing these notes with audio-recordings. I typically observed Enhanced Reading on Tuesdays and Thursdays for 60 minutes each day and Reading Workshop on Tuesdays during a 90-minute block period. I also sampled additional class sessions in consultation with the teachers.

**Artifacts**
Students in both literacy classes were required by their teachers to keep collections of their work in their classrooms. In Enhanced Reading, students completed their work in spiral notebooks. In Reading Workshop, students filed their work in binders that were kept on a bookshelf. I made electronic copies of focal student work. I also collected all worksheets and other handouts that were distributed during the classes I observed.

**Data Analysis**
I used Holland et al.’s (1998) theory of “identity in practice” as a lens through which to understand students’ and teachers’ histories-in-person and students’ acts of agency within the figured worlds of the two classrooms. During first-cycle cod-
ing (Saldaña, 2009) in the qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti, I developed descriptive and simultaneous codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2009) to capture the richness of the data and begin to identify codes that co-occurred across students and data sources. Next, I ran a series of queries within ATLAS.ti and generated preliminary data reports for students. To generate these reports, I created super-codes that captured students’ understandings of a range of topics related to their current and prior experiences with reading. I created within-case displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994)—which included dimensions such as reading-history, reading-changes, and reading-school—and used these displays to construct profiles of students’ histories-in-person as readers. It was at this point that I identified Dennis’s and Tory’s histories-in-person as distinct from those of other students in the class. I returned to the data and coded for instances of agency using Holland et al.’s (1998) notions of improvisation and self-directed symbolization (see Table 2). During this process, I selectively transcribed audio-recordings from my classroom observations by identifying key moments in my field notes that were instances of improvisation and self-directed symbolization. I transcribed these moments and embedded them into the field note data. Finally, in order to examine interactions between Dennis’s and Tory’s histories-in-person as good readers and the contexts of their literacy intervention classes, I created a cross-case, conceptually ordered matrix, which included dimensions such as students’ and teachers’ stated and enacted beliefs about what it means to be a good reader.

**Findings**

Dennis’s and Tory’s histories-in-person conflicted with their placements in literacy intervention classes. They engaged in improvisations that challenged the subject position of struggling reader, as well as self-authoring practices to imagine alternative subject positions. In the sections that follow, I describe the figured world of each class and examine how Dennis and Tory each negotiated their identities as readers in these spaces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improvisation</strong></td>
<td>A reaction to the intersection of one’s history-in-person with a contradictory subject position</td>
<td>Dennis corrects a classmate’s pronunciation as she reads aloud; Tory explains that the fluency and decoding strategy involves breaking down words</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Directed</strong></td>
<td>An act of self-authoring upon which one builds over time to imagine a different subject position</td>
<td>Dennis discusses a book that he says he can relate to; Tory brings a book to class that she says she’s read 10 times</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Coding for Improvisation and Self-Directed Symbolization**
The Figured World of Enhanced Reading

Mr. Taylor’s History-in-Person as a Reader and Teacher

Mr. Taylor’s identities as a reader and teacher were intertwined. He represented himself as someone who loved reading and wanted to share this passion with his students. On the first day of school, Mr. Taylor read aloud a letter he had written to his students in which he explicitly called attention to this goal, explaining, “I teach this class because I love reading and I want to share my enthusiasm with you” (field note, September 1, 2010). As the only Enhanced Reading teacher at Northern High, Mr. Taylor had sole responsibility for developing the curriculum and teaching the class. He also was responsible for enrolling students, which added an element of stress to his job. The prior spring, the vice principal had told him that if he could not find enough students to enroll in Enhanced Reading, he would have to teach something else.

Mr. Taylor’s Storyline: Changing Reading Habits and Attitudes

Mr. Taylor believed that Enhanced Reading was a place for students to become better readers by changing their reading habits and attitudes. He attributed his students’ difficulties with reading to two main factors. First, he believed they experienced difficulty with basic reading skills. Second, he believed they struggled because of their negative attitudes toward reading, explaining, “a big struggle in this class is getting the kids to want to read” (Mr. Taylor interview, November 5, 2010). He believed that all students, regardless of skill level, could benefit from the opportunity to read more in a structured setting that encouraged them to view themselves as readers. Further, Mr. Taylor believed that all students in the class needed to develop more positive attitudes toward reading in order to become better readers, explicitly describing his objective as “just trying to change habits and attitudes” (Mr. Taylor interview, November 5, 2010).

Mr. Taylor provided students with the concrete steps he believed they needed in order to become better readers. He gave each student a “Student Reading Record” to glue inside the back cover of his or her notebook and taped his own record to the wall at the front of the room (field note, September 16, 2010). Throughout the semester, he talked with students about the book(s) he was currently reading and encouraged them to add these titles to their “Someday Lists”; as the semester progressed, students gave book talks of their own for extra credit. Informed by his history-in-person as an individual who loved reading and a teacher who wanted to share that passion with his students, Mr. Taylor adopted a storyline for his students that focused on changing their reading habits and attitudes.

Dennis’s History-in-Person as a Good Reader

Dennis’s beliefs about himself as a reader were not compatible with the figured world of Enhanced Reading because it positioned him as someone who needed to change his reading habits and attitudes. Dennis’s identity as a good reader had a long history. As early as third grade, he remembered “getting awards in my class for reading, like the most books read in a year” (Dennis interview, December 14, 2010). Dennis believed that being a good reader meant having agency, observing,
“One thing about reading, you do have options” (Dennis interview, December 14, 2010). He added that reading requires finding something “that you’re comfortable reading, not something that you dislike or something that somebody tell you to read” (Dennis interview, December 14, 2010). Dennis reflected on his evolution as a reader over time, explaining, “[Now] I’m more smart about my reading. I’m not reading anything anybody tells me to. I’m reading something that makes me comfortable and that I’m confident that I can read” (Dennis interview, December 14, 2010).

Dennis’s Improvisations: Challenging the Norms of the Classroom

Because Mr. Taylor explicitly framed Enhanced Reading around the assumption that his students needed to become better readers, the very act of Dennis’s placement in the class challenged his identity as a good reader. In order to maintain this identity, Dennis contested the basis of his placement in Enhanced Reading through a series of improvisations. From the beginning of the school year, Dennis regularly arrived late to class. Of the 36 classes I observed during the fall semester, Dennis was 10 or more minutes late to six of them and absent for fourteen of them. Some of Dennis’s tardiness was likely due to his use of crutches for a sports-related injury to his leg, which made it more difficult to navigate the hallways between passing periods. Some absences were excused for doctor’s appointments related to his leg injury. When I met with Dennis’s grandmother to gain her permission to work with him, she expressed concern that he had already missed so much school. However, not all of Dennis’s tardies and absences in Enhanced Reading, which took place during the last period of the school day, were excused. Mr. Taylor noticed and was concerned by Dennis’s absences, commenting, “So now Dennis has kind of just gone AWOL. . . . I don’t know if that’s related to the shooting. . . . Dennis has been gone this whole week. He maybe showed up one day” (Mr. Taylor interview, November 5, 2010). The shooting to which Mr. Taylor referred had occurred days earlier, when a ninth grader at Northern High was shot by his friend, an upperclassman. The boy later died and many students in Mr. Taylor’s class, including Dennis, were deeply affected.

When Dennis was in class, he regularly communicated his superior reading abilities to the rest of the students. For example, Dennis corrected another student when she mispronounced the words “furious” and “shuddered” (field note, September 7, 2010). A week later, when another student stopped at the word “aromas” while reading aloud from *The Gun* (Langan, 2002), Dennis jumped in and pronounced it for her (field note, September 14, 2010). A month later, Dennis’s participation took on a more negative tone. When a student said “closet” instead of “clothes” while she read aloud, Dennis laughed loudly and for a long time. Later, another student read “never” instead of “ever” and Dennis again laughed out loud (field note, October 19, 2010).

As the semester progressed, Dennis increasingly opposed the norms of the classroom. On days when he was present, Dennis often failed to bring his backpack or his independent reading book. He seemed to go out of his way to distract other students from their reading (e.g., asking provocative questions, bouncing tennis
balls, flipping coins) and indicate his disinterest in the class (e.g., sitting with his head on his desk, not reading along with the class). When another student asked Mr. Taylor how students were placed in Enhanced Reading, Dennis explained that he was only in the class because he could not be in P.E. due to his knee injury (field note, October 14, 2010). While this explanation may have been true in part, according to Mr. Taylor it was not the only reason Dennis was in the class. Indeed, Mr. Taylor identified Dennis as a poor reader due to an apparent lack of engagement with reading:

He’s got some skills but they’re, you can tell they’re a little rusty too. At one time he was probably a good reader, like in higher reading groups if they had such, but he probably didn’t read for some years, much at all, so he’s still kinda there. But he also knows what’s going on because [of] his comprehension when he’s reading independently and as a class. (Mr. Taylor interview, November 5, 2010)

Mr. Taylor believed that Dennis needed to reengage with reading in order to be a good reader. Dennis, however, saw himself as someone who had been and still was a good reader.

One day at the end of September, Dennis’s resistance resulted in an open confrontation. As Mr. Taylor checked in with Dennis about his progress on his independent reading book, Dennis loudly and repeatedly told Mr. Taylor to stop harassing him. At the end of class, Mr. Taylor spoke with Dennis about what happened and explained that Dennis made him feel disrespected as a teacher. Dennis told Mr. Taylor that he did not like people checking up on him because it made him feel dumb. Mr. Taylor assured Dennis that he did not think he was dumb and promised to give him more space in the future (field note, September 29, 2010). By checking in with Dennis to verify his reading progress, which Mr. Taylor did regularly with all the students in the class, he overtly positioned Dennis as a struggling reader. Dennis’s improvisation was a way to resist the subject position imposed on him.

Dennis’s Self-Authoring Practices: Imagining His Future as a Reader and Student
At the same time that Dennis communicated his lack of interest in, and even disdain for, the class, he also remained concerned about his performance. In September, Mr. Taylor praised three students who had an A+ for reading. Dennis wondered about his book, which was 300 pages long, and asked how many pages he needed to read to have an A (field note, September 14, 2010). Later that week, Dennis asked Mr. Taylor how to get his tardies removed. Mr. Taylor told him that he would not mark him late as long as he arrived at class within five minutes of the bell (field note, September 17, 2010). The following Tuesday, Dennis arrived three minutes late, an improvement from his typical arrival time of ten or more minutes after the bell (field note, September 21, 2010).

One class session exemplified what happened when Dennis chose to engage positively in class and, in so doing, showcase his reading abilities. On this particular
day, Mr. Taylor told the class that they would be working on vocabulary and asked, “What do you do if you come across a word you don’t know?” Dennis responded that you look at the words around it, and Mr. Taylor validated his response, saying, “Yes, you use context clues.” Mr. Taylor asked students to draw pictures to represent each word. For example, one student drew a half-mutant, half-person to represent the word dehumanizing. Dennis volunteered his own drawing for dehumanizing, a picture of a large person, then a smaller person, and then a smaller person, and explained that they kept getting smaller “to leftovers.” Mr. Taylor observed that Dennis was drawing “symbolically.” Later, as the class began to read from the group reading text, Life in Prison (Williams, 1998), Mr. Taylor asked, “What two words does he use for ‘doo doo’?” and Dennis responded, “Feces and human waste.” When they reached the end of the chapter, Mr. Taylor asked the students to “raise your hand if you have an idea how he stopped himself from going stir crazy,” and Dennis responded that he kept himself “productive” (field note, October 28, 2010). As Dennis left class that day, he mentioned to Mr. Taylor that a family member would be released from prison in 11 days.

In December, Dennis volunteered to do a book talk, an act that highlighted his personal agency as well as his ongoing struggle to reconcile his existing identity as a good reader with his presence in the class. Dennis stood at the front of the room and described his book, Confessions of a Serial Kisser (Van Draanen, 2008):

This book called Confessions of a Serial Kisser. I don’t know, I just bought this book, I thought it was going to be interesting. I don’t know, it’s just about this girl trying to figure out who she is, going to high school, just kissing all the other boys because she read a lot of books, because she read a lot of books talking about love and stuff and she just trying to figure out who she is. (field note, December 16, 2010)

When another student in the class asked, “Why do you think people should read it?” Dennis replied, “I don’t know, I just, it’s interesting, like I can relate to it, like I’m in high school. . . . She was just trying to figure out who she is. So, it was just an interesting book” (field note, December 16, 2010). During this book talk, Dennis revealed that he had bought the book himself, rather than checking it out from the class or school library; that he was interested in the main character of the novel because she tried to negotiate her own identity through the books she read and the actions she took in her own life; and that she did these things in order to “figure out who she is” in high school in a way that he could relate to. Dennis appreciated this book for how it portrayed a fellow high school student’s struggle to carve out an identity for herself at a complicated time.

Dennis’s discussion of Life in Prison and subsequent decision to do a book talk are examples of self-directed symbolization. He actively participated in activities sanctioned by the figured world of Enhanced Reading because the topics (life in prison, navigating high school) resonated with him on a personal level. At times, Mr. Taylor seemed to recognize Dennis’s attempts to imagine himself as an engaged reader and student in the context of Enhanced Reading, observing:
I hope this class helps him engage or reengage with school. If he is here, he’s definitely picked up his reading. I think part of it’s a pride thing. He looked around and saw all these kids were reading all these books and he was just kind of slowly getting through a book, but he started finishing books, so if he’s here for a whole year I think he’ll read a lot of books and so he’ll improve on all those things: vocabulary, spelling, confidence . . . . I think he needs the class because I don’t think he would be doing any of this reading otherwise. (Mr. Taylor interview, November 5, 2010)

When Dennis returned after the winter break, he wrote in his “welcome back check-in” that the most memorable thing during the break was that his “brother went to jail” and that the only thing he read over the break was the newspaper. He indicated that his New Year’s resolutions were to “stay out of trouble” and “stay on task.” A week later, however, Dennis was removed immediately and permanently from Northern High for bringing a firearm to school. Thus, he did not have the opportunity to build on his early self-authoring practices in the ways envisioned by Mr. Taylor.

Dennis’s identity as a good reader was incompatible with Mr. Taylor’s framing of the class. He challenged his placement in the class through a series of improvisations. At the same time, Dennis engaged in self-authoring practices that revealed a complex negotiation of his position as a reader and student within and beyond the figured world of Enhanced Reading.

The Figured World of Reading Workshop
Ms. Cheung’s History-in-Person as a Teacher and Coach
Ms. Cheung’s identity as a reading teacher was connected to the multiple subject positions she held in her school and district. She was a district-wide professional developer and literacy coach with training and expertise in the Strategic Instruction Model (University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, 2015), as well as the literacy coordinator in charge of facilitating communication among Reading Workshop teachers in the district. Ms. Cheung modeled her instruction after KU-CRL’s Fusion Reading Program (Hock et al., 2012), which at the time was one component of the Strategic Instruction Model. She focused on seven strategies: a fluency and decoding strategy, a prediction strategy, a paraphrasing and summarization strategy, an inference strategy, an action plan and goal-setting strategy, a test-taking strategy, and a generalization strategy. Placing students in the class was a collaborative effort between Ms. Cheung and other eighth- and ninth-grade teachers and administrators in the district.

Ms. Cheung’s Storyline: Teaching and Learning Reading Strategies
Ms. Cheung was deeply invested in the Strategic Instruction Model. She viewed Reading Workshop as a place for her students to become better readers and students by learning reading strategies that would help them in all their classes. She observed that “most [students] are there because they are not strong readers, so it’s okay if they’re struggling” (Ms. Cheung interview, October 19, 2010).
Like Mr. Taylor, Ms. Cheung was explicit with students about her objectives. On the second day of class, Ms. Cheung asked students to work in groups of two or three to answer the question, “What is a strategy?” She explained that “having strategies is important. In this class you’re going to learn how to be strategic learners and thinkers” (field note, August 31, 2010). Similarly, during the second week of school, Ms. Cheung filled out a course organizer and map with her students. She explained these documents’ importance by noting that they included information about “what I expect you to learn in here” and stressed that the class was about “being a strategic student, having a plan and getting where you need to go” (field note, September 7, 2010). Informed by her history-in-person as a literacy teacher, coordinator, professional developer, and coach, Ms. Cheung adopted a storyline for her students that focused on teaching them the reading strategies that she believed would make them better readers and students.

Tory’s History-in-Person as a Good Reader
Similar to Dennis’s, Tory’s identity as a good reader had a long history that conflicted with her placement in Reading Workshop. Tory explained to Ms. Cheung and her classmates that “I used to love to read when I was little” and described how she would dress up as the girl from *The Big Comfy Couch* (a television series that involved reading) when she wanted to read (field note, September 1, 2010). In our interview, Tory explained her adoption of this reading persona in more depth, remembering, “I used to wear these big blue glasses that I got from *The Big Comfy Couch*, and I would get out a book and sit on the couch and start reading . . . . I was very young when I started reading” (Tory interview, December 1, 2010).

Tory believed that being a good reader was contingent on what a person liked to read and how much a person read. She also believed that reading ability was an indicator of a person’s education and intelligence. Tory identified her mother as a good reader and explained that her mom had “always loved English” and was “just really smart” (Tory interview, December 1, 2010). She also believed her best friend’s status as a good reader went hand in hand with her intelligence: “She’s also, as I mentioned with my mom, very educated. She’s very smart . . . . She’s in a lot of the advanced classes here” (Tory interview, December 1, 2010). Tory believed that she had changed as a reader over time, moving from reading “very easy read stuff that anybody could read” when she was younger to “adult novels” (Tory interview, December 1, 2010).

Tory’s Improvisations: Acquiescing to the Norms of the Classroom
In contrast to Dennis’s, Tory’s improvisations reinforced her identity as a good reader in the context of Reading Workshop. Tory viewed herself as a good reader while also remaining concerned about being perceived as a good student. Therefore, her improvisations centered on demonstrating that she was a good student who should not have been in the class. Despite indicating in a survey at the beginning of the year that she had no prior knowledge of reading strategies, Tory actively contributed to class discussions in ways that showcased her mastery of course
content. For example, when Ms. Cheung explained that the class would be reading *The Gun* (Langan, 2002), Tory commented that she had already read it in summer school years ago (field note, September 1, 2010). Over the next few days and weeks, Tory answered questions about the very strategies she had previously claimed to know nothing about. When another student in the class incorrectly answered Ms. Cheung’s question about the prediction strategy, Tory jumped in with the correct answer (field note, September 3, 2010). The next week, when Ms. Cheung asked what it meant to be a strategic learner, Tory raised her hand and said, “It means you’re one step ahead. You have a plan for what you want to do as you go along” (field note, September 8, 2010). Similarly, despite her stated disinterest in *The Gun*, Tory regularly volunteered to read and answered Ms. Cheung’s questions about what was happening in the story. By participating in Reading Workshop in ways that demonstrated her prior knowledge of the course content, Tory pushed back against the struggling reader subject position without overtly challenging the norms and expectations of the class.

**Tory’s Self-Authoring Practices: Imagining Her Future as a Reader and Student**

Simultaneously, Tory allied herself with another student in the class, Donna, who also believed she was a good reader who had been inappropriately placed in the class. Tory frequently turned to Donna to make a comment or ask a question that subtly reinforced their shared lack of interest in—or need for—the class. A few weeks into the fall semester, Donna spoke with Ms. Cheung about switching out of the class. During this conversation, in which Tory was an indirect participant, Donna told Ms. Cheung that she had learned some of the strategies “in like third grade” and that she would rather be in drama. In response, Ms. Cheung told Donna that her mother needed to write a note requesting a different elective (field note, September 13, 2010). Tory followed Donna’s lead about a month later by successfully petitioning Ms. Cheung to switch out of the class and into a health and wellness class. Ms. Cheung revealed to me at this time that she now believed Tory was in Reading Workshop for the wrong reasons (field note, October 12, 2010). In our interview, Ms. Cheung expanded on this observation, explaining retrospectively, “[It] was very clear from the very beginning that [Tory’s placement in Reading Workshop] was not good” (Ms. Cheung interview, October 19, 2010). She further noted that Tory was not included on the class roster she had compiled based on students’ standardized test scores, which suggested that Tory had been recommended for the class by one of her middle school teachers.

Tory herself reflected on what she believed was the reason behind her placement in Reading Workshop and subsequent ability to transfer out of the class:

Last year in middle school I was not doing very good in English. . . . I’m ashamed of it . . . . Whenever we turned in essays or whenever we were reading aloud in class I would always get really bad grades on it because I was kind of self-conscious, I guess. But recently, since I got to high school, I’ve been getting As on all of my writing, I’ve been answering stuff in class, I’ve been volunteering to read. (Tory interview, May 27, 2011)
By recruiting Ms. Cheung to recognize that her placement in the class was a mistake, Tory successfully rejected the struggling reader subject position that had been imposed on her through this placement. Her success in this endeavor was particularly important in light of her belief that reading ability was an indicator of a person’s education and intelligence. By acquiescing to the norms of the classroom while simultaneously imagining herself in ways that were consistent with her beliefs about herself as a reader and student in high school, Tory ultimately succeeded in transferring out of the class. This outcome validated her identity as a good reader and a good student who did not belong in Reading Workshop in the first place.

Discussion and Implications

Despite holding positive views of themselves as readers, Dennis and Tory were discursively positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990) as struggling readers through their placements in literacy intervention classes. Their different responses to similar acts of positioning were shaped by (a) their and their teachers’ histories-in-person and (b) the institutional constraints of the classes.

Histories-in-Person across Figured Worlds

The students’ and teachers’ histories-in-person influenced their interactions and positionings. In the figured world of Enhanced Reading, Mr. Taylor believed his students—including Dennis—struggled with reading because they lacked basic reading skills and had negative attitudes toward reading. A good reader was someone who had a positive attitude toward reading, read a lot, and thus had the opportunity to build strong reading skills. A self-proclaimed reader in whose life reading played a defining role, Mr. Taylor hoped that reading might play a similar role in his students’ lives. In contrast, Dennis believed that good readers had agency—they were “smart” about their reading and read selectively. This emphasis on agency reflected a larger commitment to agency in his life, and it is possible that Dennis’s sometimes-contentious interactions with Mr. Taylor and his peers in Enhanced Reading were shaped by this commitment.

These findings are consistent with Davies and Harré’s (1990) understanding of positioning as an unfolding narrative in which individuals may assume multiple and potentially contradictory positions as they “acquire beliefs about themselves which do not necessarily form a unified coherent whole” (p. 58). In the figured world of Enhanced Reading, Dennis was frequently resistant to class activities, but he was also a reader with strong comprehension skills and an emerging willingness to work hard in school. In other figured worlds, Dennis was an injured athlete with an uncertain future in sports, a student performing poorly in most of his classes, a friend and teammate to another ninth grader who had recently died from a gunshot wound, a brother to someone who had been incarcerated over winter vacation, and a young person grappling with weighty decisions that would profoundly affect his life.

In the figured world of Reading Workshop, Ms. Cheung believed her students struggled with reading because they lacked reading strategies that would help them
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become better readers; a good reader was a strategic reader. This understanding was in line with Ms. Cheung’s professional roles as a professional developer, literacy coach, and literacy coordinator whose job it was to facilitate the implementation of the Strategic Instruction Model (University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, 2015) in her school and district. Tory’s beliefs about good readers—that they were “educated” and “smart” and sought out challenging texts—were compatible with her teacher’s perspective. Moreover, in contrast to Dennis, Tory’s self-positionings were more consistent within and across contexts. In the figured world of Reading Workshop, Tory was an obedient student who regularly showcased her prior knowledge of course content through improvisations that were consistent with her teacher’s understanding of good reading. In other figured worlds, Tory similarly positioned herself as a competent reader. She allied herself with other good readers and actively distanced herself from the student she was ashamed of being in eighth grade.

As Holland et al. (1998) suggest, the concept of figured worlds extends beyond the immediate context (here, a literacy intervention class) to the broader cultural and historical contexts in which students’ identities are refined and socially inscribed. For Dennis, these broader contexts at times conflicted with and at other times reinforced the subject position of struggling reader and struggling student. For Tory, these broader contexts assisted her in positioning herself as a misguided eighth grader who became a better reader and capable student in ninth grade. Tory’s practices in Reading Workshop made her part of an affinity group (Gee, 2000–2001) of good readers, which gave her status in her interactions with Ms. Cheung and her peers and, eventually, the ability to change her situation. Although Dennis also had a history as a good reader, he did not consistently engage in the kinds of practices Mr. Taylor understood to be characteristic of good readers and did not have the same kind of status in Enhanced Reading as Tory did in Reading Workshop.

What It Means to Be a Good Reader

The participants’ different descriptions of a good reader reveal the importance of these understandings to how students are positioned in classrooms. While Mr. Taylor and Ms. Cheung emphasized what went into the act of being a good reader (i.e., reading frequently, using strategies), Dennis and Tory focused on the outcomes of being a good reader (i.e., having agency, being educated). For the teachers, being a good reader was about acquiring the habits of good reading; for the students, being a good reader was about being a certain kind of person.

These findings build on prior research that has uncovered teachers’ and students’ different understandings of reading and what it means to be a reader and the consequences of these differences for learning. As Hall (2010) has documented, teachers interact with students in ways that align with their own understandings of what it means to be a good reader and whether or not the identities they associate with particular students fit those reading models. Dennis did not always engage in the types of behaviors that Mr. Taylor believed were necessary in order to be a good reader, so he remained a struggling reader in his teacher’s eyes. Tory,
on the other hand, molded her classroom interactions to align with Ms. Cheung’s understanding of what it meant to be a good reader.

**Sociocultural Factors in the Classroom**

Dennis’s and Tory’s very different experiences in their classrooms support the need for more explicit attention to the ways that race, class, and gender are intertwined with literacy (Guzzetti, Young, Gritsavage, Fyfe, & Hardenbrook, 2002; Tatum, 2008). As an African American male challenging the struggling reader subject position imposed on him by his teacher, Dennis performed his improvisations as overt acts of resistance within the figured world of Enhanced Reading. Mr. Taylor did not recognize these acts as legitimate ways of participating in the classroom. Similarly, Dennis’s self-authoring practices, which were consistent with his own history-in-person as a good reader, were not always taken up as such by Mr. Taylor, who had different understandings of what it meant to be a capable reader and engaged student. From Dennis’s perspective as a reader with agency and autonomy over his reading choices, many of these improvisations and self-authoring practices were appropriate and even consistent with Mr. Taylor’s vision for the class: to foster a lifelong love of reading in his students. Rather than being viewed as resistant to classroom norms, such practices might instead be accepted and encouraged in classrooms as powerful evidence of a student’s attempts to navigate the expectations of the classroom in ways that are consistent with his own sense of self. These practices might also be opportunities for teachers to explicitly acknowledge the many ways that students’ acts of agency shape their classrooms and imagine new ways of engaging students in school.

In contrast, Tory’s improvisations and self-authoring practices as a White female were shaped by a knowledge of—and willingness to acquiesce to—Ms. Cheung’s implicit and explicit expectations. Ms. Cheung understood Tory’s improvisations to be indicative of her knowledge of the norms of the classroom as well as her mastery of course content, and she viewed Tory’s self-authoring practices in light of this understanding. Specifically, Ms. Cheung interpreted Tory’s interactions with Donna, which were at times quite disruptive to the class as a whole, as further evidence of Tory’s status as a good reader and student. Tory’s knowledge of and willingness to operate within the norms and expectations of the classroom meant that she could resist the struggling reader subject position without jeopardizing her status as a good reader and student. However, despite her ability to demonstrate knowledge of reading strategies, it is unlikely that Tory left Reading Workshop a more strategic reader. Just as Dennis’s engagement with reading might be seen as consistent with Mr. Taylor’s goal of fostering lifelong readers in Enhanced Reading, Tory’s superficial understanding of reading strategies might be considered antithetical to Ms. Cheung’s goal of helping students become better readers through deep knowledge of reading strategies that they could use in their other classes.

Dennis’s and Tory’s respective experiences in their reading classes each reveal missed teaching and learning opportunities and support the call for learning contexts that are sensitive and responsive to the diverse experiences and perspectives that students bring with them to their classrooms. Tatum (2008) argues that teach-
ers of African American adolescent males, in particular, must attend to students' lived experiences in and out of school at the same time that they attend to the processes of reading (i.e., reading skills and strategies). While Ms. Cheung prioritized knowledge of reading strategies over engagement with texts that were personally meaningful to her students, Mr. Taylor intentionally grounded his instruction in culturally responsive texts—what Tatum (2008) calls “enabling texts” because they include a “social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus” (p. 164). However, Mr. Taylor’s use of enabling texts did not in itself foster an environment in which Dennis’s identity as a good reader and agent of his own learning was recognized. Therefore, attention to students’ experiences must extend beyond the curriculum itself to account for the ways in which students continuously shape the classroom space as they position and reposition themselves over time. For example, Dennis might have benefited from additional opportunities to seek out and engage with texts like *Confessions of a Serial Kisser* (Van Draanen, 2008) that were not already sanctioned by Mr. Taylor. He might also have benefited from time and space to explicitly challenge the negative subject positions he encountered in school and experiment with repositioning himself in ways that would validate his multiple identities and positions within and across figured worlds.

**Institutional Constraints on Teachers and Students**

The importance of students’ and teachers’ histories-in-person notwithstanding, Dennis’s and Tory’s experiences cannot be understood fully without also taking into account the institutional constraints of their classrooms. Although prior research has demonstrated that ninth-grade reading intervention classes have the potential to reposition students’ reading identities (Skerrett, 2012), the findings discussed here suggest that the simple act of placement in such a class resulted in contradictions for Dennis and Tory.

Placement for most students in Enhanced Reading and Reading Workshop was based on middle school state standardized test scores—a practice that runs counter to research that has uncovered the many different factors that underlie students’ underperformance on standardized tests (Dennis, 2013). However, Dennis’s and Tory’s placements came about through other processes (i.e., teacher recommendations, scheduling). Nonetheless, Mr. Taylor and Ms. Cheung structured their classes based on their understandings of the types of students enrolled and what would make those students better readers. Mr. Taylor structured Enhanced Reading around the assumption that all of his students could become better readers by reading more. This assumption, combined with the institutional pressure to ensure sufficient enrollment for the course, meant that switching out of the class was not an option for Dennis. Although Dennis had some agency (e.g., choosing his own independent reading books, setting his own pace for reading, choosing if/when to do book talks), the simple fact of being in Enhanced Reading undermined that sense of agency.

In contrast, Ms. Cheung structured Reading Workshop around the assumption that some students lacked the strategies necessary to be successful readers.
Moreover, she had clear institutional support for Reading Workshop and was not under the same pressure to find students to enroll in the course. As a result, leaving the class was a viable option for a student like Tory, who claimed to know and use the reading strategies that were its focus. Thus, the ability to petition Ms. Cheung to switch out of the class gave Tory another opportunity to reposition herself in a way that Dennis was not able to do in Enhanced Reading.

None of the aforementioned placement criteria adequately accounted for students’ actual reading abilities. Prior research has shown that adolescents who fail state assessments in reading have diverse reading strengths and needs that are only revealed through instructionally informative assessments (Dennis, 2013). A first step for teachers and schools, therefore, is to implement processes for better understanding students’ reading strengths and areas of need so that they receive appropriate reading instruction.

These findings also call into question the practice of placing students in classes explicitly intended to improve their reading. Even if the curriculum is grounded in research-based best practices, as Enhanced Reading and Reading Workshop were, the identity implications of these placements are of great concern. Research-based curriculum and instruction notwithstanding, the findings presented here indicate that there is a very real danger of negatively affecting students’ reading progress by enrolling them in classes that position them as deficient.

**Conclusion**

The findings discussed here extend existing research on literacy interventions (e.g., Corrin et al., 2008; Somers et al., 2010) by looking beyond standardized assessments of reading and measures of academic progress to the ways that sociocultural factors such as race, class, and gender contribute to students’ experiences with reading in school. Specifically, they call attention to student agency in the classroom and document how prior experiences with reading and related reading identities shape classroom interactions and student learning in ways that may impede or facilitate individual students’ attempts to position themselves in particular ways. These findings also contribute to existing research on adolescents’ literacy development in school (e.g., Greenleaf et al., 2001; Hall, 2012; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Rex, 2001; Skerrett, 2012) by revealing some of the consequences of placement in literacy intervention contexts for students whose reading identities do not match teachers’ expectations. More research that takes a sociocultural perspective on adolescents’ reading in school, in general, and in intervention contexts, in particular, is essential in order to (a) understand the effectiveness of established research-based literacy practices for particular students in particular contexts, (b) account for the ways in which students shape classroom literacy practices while they are being shaped by them, and (c) develop reading measures that capture adolescents’ literacy practices as they occur across contexts, over time, and in light of these students’ emerging identities as readers and agents of their own learning.
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NOTES
1. Both WestEd and KU-CRL have continued to develop their respective intervention models as part of school-wide literacy initiatives.
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. All focal teachers and students agreed to participate in the study. I obtained written assent and parent/guardian consent for students and written consent for teachers.

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