This phenomenological case study explores the disconnect that high school readers labeled as struggling perceived between their reading identities and experiences in traditional English classes. It analyzes how participation in a young adult literature (YAL) elective provided participants space in which to enact identities and exhibit agency in ways that were different from those afforded in their English classes. This paper contributes uniquely to the larger research conversation by examining two different spaces (traditional English classes and a YAL class) and demonstrating how students’ identities as readers manifested in different ways across two contexts. Using Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain’s (1998) theory of identity as a lens of analysis across student-generated oral reflections gathered through Seidman’s (2006) interview protocol, the study reveals how student participants were supported in their attempts to deconstruct their experiences in traditional classroom spaces, build new conceptions of their reading selves in a unique classroom setting, and, in the process, assume greater agency in shaping their individual reader identities, advancing the argument that differing classroom contexts can provide students with varying levels of opportunity to reject and/or accept ascribed reading identities. This work is significant in the way it emphasizes the importance of classroom and school contexts, the possibilities that come with inviting students to engage as readers in school rather than engage in school reading, the benefits and risks of reimagined relationships between students and teachers and students and peers, and the possibility that young adult literature in and of itself offers implications for reader agency.

Young adult literature [class] has definitely supported me as a reader. English has not helped at all because English class just . . . they give you boring books, so it is kind of hard for you to want to read if you don’t have a good book. But in young adult lit, you pick whatever books you want to read. In English class this year, I haven’t read any books. In young adult lit, I have read about four or five books [from January to May] . . . . The young adult lit class has made me want to read more. Just because of the fact that you get to choose the books you want to do, and it is such a fun and relaxing class.
This excerpt comes from an interview with Nia (pseudonyms are used throughout this paper), a high school junior labeled by school authorities as struggling. At the time of our study, she was enrolled concurrently in a traditional English course and a young adult literature (YAL) elective that encouraged reader independence and autonomy.

Nia's language reflects a complicated tension experienced as she navigated two course contexts. She attempted to manage differing classroom norms, defined in one space by the assignment of “boring books” that made it “kind of hard for you to want to read” and in the other by the creation of a “fun and relaxing” setting that made students “want to read more.” Nia also engaged with differing power dynamics across these contexts. In describing the traditional English class, Nia noted that “they give you” the books you will read, with “they” referring to teachers who determined texts for full-class reading. In contrast, Nia identified the YAL class as one in which “you pick whatever books you want to read,” with “you” referring to students who self-selected titles of interest. As Nia navigated these norms and manifestations of power, she described repeatedly enacting agency as she decided whether to accept or resist them. Perhaps most significantly, Nia recognized the impact of these differing contexts—the norms, power positionings, and her response to them—on the development of her identities as a reader; she articulated clearly that the YAL course experience supported her as a reader, while the traditional English experience did not.

Our research indicates that, through participation in a course experience that invited resisting behaviors by honoring individual reading preferences, Nia and other readers labeled as struggling redefined their identities in meaningful ways. This phenomenological case study (1) explores the disconnect that students perceived between their reading identities and experiences in traditional English classes and (2) analyzes how participation in a young adult literature elective provided them space in which to enact identities and exhibit agency in ways different from those afforded them in their English classes.

**Literature Review**

Personal, social, and institutional values combine through discursive norms to shape readers' identities in school (Dillon & Moje, 1998). Schools as institutions of socialization influence identity construction by positioning readers in particular ways (Vetter, 2010) and assigning particular reading identities (Hall, Johnson, Juzwik, Wortham, & Mosley, 2010). Students, however, bring their own histories and understandings of these positionings and identities into the classroom (Zacher, 2008). Moreover, students vary in the degree to which they accept their assigned positionalities (Alvermann, 2001). Hall's (2010) multiple case study, for example, explored how middle school readers labeled as struggling and their content-area teachers worked together on classroom reading tasks during an academic year. This work revealed how students engaged in particular behaviors—selected silence or refusal to try various reading strategies—that protected their social status in the classroom but reaffirmed their externally perceived identities as struggling readers,
identities they themselves desired to change. The students “believed that they lacked the identity capital associated with good readers” and “knowingly refused to engage in actions they believed would allow their respective audiences to identify them as poor readers,” even when these actions might have helped them achieve the positive reading identities they desired (Hall, 2010, p. 1823). In contrast, Hall’s (2012) study described efforts to work with middle school students labeled as struggling to help them consider who they wanted to become as readers. Although students initially identified their classroom teacher as being in charge of their reading development, they eventually took greater responsibility by working with the teacher to meet individual goals and change their perceptions of themselves as readers. Students were encouraged to engage in spaces that welcomed counter-discourses of who they were supposed to be, thus allowing them to reposition themselves and reshape their identities.

Some young people who are ascribed identities of struggling readers in school identify themselves (and/or are positioned by others) as highly successful in out-of-school literacy activities. Leander and Lovvorn (2006), using actor network theory to propose a way of reconceiving of literacy and its relations to space and time, described how a high school student positioned as disorganized and disengaged demonstrated impressive literacy skills through engagement with online games and media. The low grades he received failed to accurately represent his skills, potentialities, and identities as a reader and writer. In a similar exploration of in-and out-of-school literacies, Kirkland’s (2011) case study employed an ideological framework to critique how the school he studied and literacy scholarship in general used deficit language, which led to certain (mis)assumptions about students. He argued that “youths are not failing to engage texts; many of the texts we teach in schools are failing to engage youth” (Kirkland, 2011, p. 202). While Derrick, Kirkland’s (2011) focal participant, resided in “a kind of academic purgatory that exists on the edges of school” and did not read much in this setting, outside it, he “wielded language and texts with the grace of a poet” (p. 202). Kirkland pushed readers to recognize that reading in school represents a sort of sacrifice for many students, particularly Black males, who do not identify with the uniform texts that are too often selected without consideration of their needs.

Student-peer and student-teacher interactions assume significance as students navigate norms and determine how to respond at institutional and individual levels. Skerrett’s (2012) case study, grounded in theories of identity as socially constructed and positional, explored the reading development of Angelica, a 15-year-old Latina. The study examined the school literacy experiences that positioned Angelica as a struggling reader and the pedagogical practices of her ninth-grade reading teacher that allowed her to reposition herself in this school community and redefine her reading identity. Angelica “took a critical lens not just to the curriculum, but to the construct of academic identity … This identity was taken up as part of official study as students daily reflected, wrote, and discussed with others their attitudes toward reading, the ways in which they were engaging with or disengaging from texts, why, and with what effects” (Skerrett, 2012, p. 72). Similarly, Rogers, Mor-
rell, and Enyedy’s (2007) case study adopted a communities of practice approach to learning to examine how students whose early school experiences positioned them as “not academically capable” individuals (p. 430) engaged in rigorous and culturally relevant historical work to collaboratively critique their educational experiences and assume more confident, positive academic identities.

When resisting students disrupt classroom norms, they can redefine themselves by enacting agency, reimagining their own life stories through a rejection of school-sanctioned definitions of who they are. Enriquez (2011) explored this in a qualitative case study that examined the body as a site and product of discursive processes in the investigation of two urban, eighth-grade students identified as struggling readers. Although these young people embodied a “deep sadness and sense of loss” (Enriquez, 2011, p. 106) growing from a struggling reader identity that positioned them through a deficit lens and named them as “excluded others,” they also “sought to disrupt how others perceived them as readers and therefore rewrite their reading identities” (p. 106). Coombs (2012) identified this disruptive persistence in her multiple case study of seven adolescents who self-identified as struggling readers. Her work discusses how the examination of story elements offered insight into the narrative identities of these young people, demonstrating how they ultimately “acted as agents in the telling of their narratives and the authoring of their identities” (Coombs, 2012, p. 82).

This paper contributes uniquely to the larger research conversation by examining two different spaces (traditional English classes and a YAL class) and demonstrating how students’ identities as readers manifested in different ways across these contexts. Unlike the classroom spaces described in several studies discussed above (most notably Leander & Lovvorn, 2006, and Kirkland, 2011), the YAL course experience was intentionally modeled to support students’ socially constituted identities, and all classroom reading experiences were designed to support developing identities, offering a unique counterexample that might have potential for supporting readers who feel marginalized in schools. This study parallels that of Hall (2012) in its examination of resistance among readers labeled as struggling in a classroom in which positions of power and privilege, and resulting student and teacher expectations, are shifted to allow students greater ownership over their reading identities; but it also adds another layer of complexity by exploring this resistance across two course contexts to understand how the development of positive reading identities can be simultaneously hindered and helped in differing learning spaces.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded in the understanding that identity results from myriad interactions between an individual and his or her environment and that an individual enacts multiple identities over time in response to this environment. We drew heavily on the work of Holland et al. (1998) and their belief that people are concurrently agents in the determination of their sense of self and subjects of the culturally constructed, socially imposed worlds they inhabit. As Holland et al.
(1998) explained, persons are “caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them” (p. 4).

Holland and her colleagues (1998) explored the intersection between the culturalist and constructivist lenses for understanding identity, arguing that both are essential in explaining how “behavior is mediated by senses of self or what we call identities”; as a person responds to a current or recent social situation, he or she is influenced by a longer-standing internalized cultural logic (pp. 8–9). Individuals negotiate the tensions that emerge when these forces collide and participate in an active process of identity formation that can result in “many, often contradictory, self-understandings and identities, whose loci are often not confined to the body but spread over the material and social environment” (Holland et al., 1998, pp. 7–8). Important to our work, then, was the recognition that negotiation occurs in a particular context imbued with particular structures of power and privilege and that listening to the voices of students as they navigate this negotiation is essential to providing authentic opportunities for students to challenge the structures that position them as readers. As individuals imagine who they can become in the abstract, they are bound by real elements of rank and status inhered in the relational hierarchy of a lived social and cultural reality (Holland et al., 1998). Students can imagine new identities, but these identities become real only as students attempt to enact them in the classroom setting; given existing issues of power, what students imagine may or may not be supported in the ways they anticipate or desire.

Holland et al.’s (1998) understanding of identity indicates that there is hope for students who are negatively positioned. Identity can shift as a result of lived experience, and in the process of “continuous self-fashioning, identities are hard-won standpoints that, however dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 4). When individuals learn to mediate their own meanings and choose how to respond in their social and cultural settings (engaging in behaviors that may or may not align with social and cultural norms), they are afforded greater opportunity to exhibit agency over their identities. Primary to our work, this mediation process creates opportunities for adolescent readers to resist expectation and rethink how others define them—and how they want (and are able) to define themselves.

Methods

The primary goal of this study was to understand participants’ perceptions of their experiences in their English and YAL classes. To accomplish this goal, the study was grounded in interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), a branch of hermeneutic phenomenology (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This methodological approach concentrates on insider perspectives of participants who may be negotiating conflicting lived experiences (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Our study can be more clearly defined as a phenomenological case study because all of our participants were labeled as struggling readers and were concurrently taking the English and YAL classes; this allowed us to deeply understand the ways in which
differing course contexts provided differing levels of opportunity for participants to enact their desired reading identities.

**School and Course Context**

Participants attended high school in a district in the northeastern United States that draws students from two neighboring towns, one suburban and one urban. At the time of the study, there were approximately 1,000 students enrolled in the school, of whom 71% identified as White, 13% as African American, 9% as Hispanic, 5% as Asian American, and fewer than 1% as American Indian. In 2012, the year of the study, 32% were eligible for free or reduced lunch, and the district was ranked as one of the thirty lowest-performing in the state.

Participants chose to take a semester-long young adult literature elective in addition to their required grade-level English course. The elective was open to all sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and while the course counted toward an elective credit requirement, it did not meet any other graduation requirements and could not be considered an alternative to reading remediation.

Enrolled students met every other school day for 84 minutes. In a typical session, students spent 15 minutes discussing books and sharing recommendations; 20 minutes learning about new genres, forms, trends, or other book-related topics; 20 minutes meeting with book groups; and 30 minutes silently reading self-selected texts or talking quietly with peers and/or the instructor about their titles. There were no completion deadlines, although reading progress was tracked, and students were encouraged to engage with diverse texts from the classroom library. Students’ reading logs allowed for differentiation, and each student’s reading progress was evaluated through teacher conferences and personal effort. Students were assessed through student-generated projects, reading logs, class participation, and online participation on a social networking website.

We chose to study students enrolled in this YAL class because the flexibility of the course contrasted sharply with the structured environment of the students’ traditional English classes. Because the coinvestigator was the classroom teacher and had access to students’ grades, we knew that students were highly successful in their reading habits and academic performance in the YAL elective, which contradicted the low to failing grades earned in their traditional English courses. We wondered how these students were making sense of their experiences across these two contexts.

**Participants**

At the outset of our study, all 10 students enrolled in the YAL course agreed to participate. One participant transferred to a different school before data collection began, and before all data were gathered, a second dropped out of school for academic reasons. For this paper, we focus on the experiences of the five students labeled by school officials as struggling in reading (see Table 1). Like the participants in Kirkland’s (2011) study, these young people “treaded the margins of success and failure” in a “liminal state” (p. 202) and were aware of the labels assigned to them. Our small sample size aligns with the traditions of IPA research, which concentrate
Their teacher (a coauthor) is a female who self-identifies as Native American. She designed and received school board approval for the YAL course three years prior to study implementation. At the time of the study, she had been teaching English for five years, all at the same site. Her research collaborator (and coauthor) is a White female who works as a teacher educator at a nearby university. A former secondary English teacher, she had been teaching at the university for 10 years at the time of the study. As researchers for this study, we recognize our potential bias given our roles as the teacher, who grades students, and a university professor, who might have an investment in the success of the course. We made strong attempts to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>School Identification as Struggling Reader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AARON</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Placed by teacher and counselor in lowest-level English class each year of high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Earned failing grade in senior English and was forced to complete class online to graduate</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Did not meet proficiency requirement on reading section of state-mandated reading assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEMETRIUS</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Earned consistently low grades in English classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEVON</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Earned failing grades in all English classes with the exception of a summer class passed in ninth grade and the young adult literature class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Did not meet proficiency requirement on reading section of state-mandated reading assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JULIA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Due to behavioral and learning concerns, placed by administration in a self-contained classroom (in which students take all of their classes in the same room with the same peers for the entire school day) during her freshman and sophomore years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Placed by teacher and counselor in the lowest-level English class during her junior and senior years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Placed by administration in a Reading Essentials class in addition to her English classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Did not meet proficiency requirement on the district’s reading comprehension tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Placed by teacher and counselor in lowest-level English classes in grades 9, 10, and 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
position ourselves as researchers rather than teachers, but as IPA methodologists, we believe that researchers and participants inevitably co-construct an account of a phenomenon (Finlay, 2009). We conducted all interviews in a separate classroom to allow participants to feel as if these conversations were separate from course activities and outcomes. Students were reminded that their responses would not affect their grades. Interview questions were framed to capture students' personal experiences, and data were analyzed subsequent to the completion of the course.

Data Sources and Analysis
Listening to students as they navigate the negotiation of identities is essential, not only in honoring their perspectives, but also in ensuring they have genuine opportunity to challenge the structures that position them as readers. To honor the voices of our participants as they engaged in this process, we employed Seidman's (2006) interview protocol. IPA researchers focus on participants' perceptions rather than investigating the actuarial account of what is occurring (Smith & Dunworth, 2003), and we believed that interviews were the best method to understand these perceptions. We were interested in exploring how students made sense of their reading identities across two differing contexts, rather than testing whether or not their perceptions were enacted behaviorally in these contexts. We conducted individual interviews with each participant at three distinct points in time over the course of the semester in which they were enrolled in both an English and a YAL course, and we aimed to build a richly contextualized qualitative report of participants' narratives as readers, in alignment with quality interview-based work in educational research (Charmaz, 2002; Tagg, 1985). Through the implementation of Seidman's (2006) protocol, participants validated their stories in successive interviews about the same topic, allowing researchers to examine the coherence, or lack thereof, of responses and participants' repetition across interviews to enhance the trustworthiness of the data. As coauthors, we shared interviewing responsibilities equally; due to the realities of scheduling during the school day, interviews were conducted by whichever researcher was available during the selected interview times. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Seidman's (2006) protocol is intimately connected to phenomenological research in the ways it outlines meaning as its primary objective for each interview in three forms: “focused life history,” “details of the experience,” and “reflection on the meaning” (pp. 17–18). First interviews were conducted in March and explored participants' life histories, particularly learning experiences in and out of school and associated reading attitudes and behaviors. Answers to these questions provided context for second interviews, which were conducted in April and explored participants' learning experiences relative to both course contexts. Third interviews were conducted in May; the participants and interviewer examined, synthesized, and generated meaning from responses given during the first two interviews. Data collection began two months after the start of the semester (to allow ample time for participants to experience the YAL context) and concluded just prior to the end of the academic year.
We analyzed the responses individually as case studies and then more generally looked for categories across participants (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). To begin, we independently (re)read the interview sets, which were ordered chronologically by participant, until we were familiar with the content. We each then revisited the transcripts and recorded marginal notes to summarize individual interpretations of each participant’s comments, paying careful attention to our study’s purpose. Our notes were guided by Holland et al.’s (1998) theory that individuals embody multiple identities and respond to social contexts in ways that are influenced by internalized culture and ideologies. These marginal notes, our initial codes, reflected participant experiences in multiple contexts defined by multiple cultures (at home, with peers, and in school) and included references to access to reading materials, support for reading in the home and among peers, perceptions of self as a reader, changing reading behaviors over time, etc. We compared our initial codes, which did not differ substantially, and reached consensus regarding any discrepancies.

We then revisited interview sets, first by participant and then across all participants, and organized initial codes into categories, selecting those that demonstrated and/or explained how participants enacted their reading identities. We repeated this process multiple times to allow themes to emerge from the evidence. Following this iterative process, we grouped like codes to create categories that were grouped into the three overarching thematic findings below.

Findings

The three sections that follow employ a building metaphor to present participants’ thinking around their reading identities across two classroom contexts. The first section describes how participants deconstructed their understandings of the traditional English course when given time to reflect upon their experiences. The second section presents participants’ thinking as they engaged in identity reconstruction efforts growing from enrollment in the young adult literature elective. And the third section explores the thoughts of participants as they transitioned from rebuilders to architects of their own identity designs with independent visions for their futures as readers. Although this process of change was nonlinear and recursive, and identities overlapped as it transpired, we provide readers with opportunities to consider discrete steps in participants’ processes of identity (de/re)construction.

Deconstructing the Game of English

Students’ concerns regarding their traditional English course experiences had been verbalized prior to the study as part of regular YAL classroom discourse. This course provided space for students to experience an alternative to English classes, and the study offered participants opportunities to unpack these concerns more systematically. In the deconstruction of experiences in traditional English courses, participants repeatedly conceptualized a game, one in which there were clear rules students might or might not choose to follow and in which the choice to participate or not led to certain consequences.
Throughout our conversations, participants used game-infused language to define English course experiences. They positioned teachers as rule makers and referees and students as captive players. Julia described English teachers as “just picking one book and having half the kids not paying attention to it, and then [the students] would fail all the tests they take on the book because they’re not paying attention to it.” According to Julia and her peers, too many students were set up to lose when teachers required one text for all students and ignored the unique interests and needs of individuals. Devon built upon these claims by noting how more student control over the rules of the game would benefit him. He said, “I feel like I am being strangled by the box that is given. And I just, I feel like I have to break it.” For these participants, the game of English felt constricting and limiting, denying autonomy and suffocating their reader identities. When analyzed through Holland et al.’s (1998) frame, these readers appear limited in their ability to imagine who they could become in the abstract, as they were bound by the decisions made by their teachers; participants seemed to feel powerless amid the established hierarchy in the social and cultural reality of the traditional classroom.

**Exerting Control**

Participants articulated that the singular form of control they possessed in this game was whether to participate. The few who chose to participate argued it was simply what was expected of them in school. Even if they did not enjoy the involvement, it was what they believed they needed to do. “It was my job,” explained Devon. “I did it. You know. I got the grade.” However, even participants who described choosing to participate noted the subversive strategies they employed to get by. They played their own game to successfully navigate the teacher’s game. Nia’s comments capture this sentiment well. Describing her strategic approach to English, she admitted,

> I’ll either look up notes online, or when the teacher talks about the books, I will take notes. . . . One day, the teacher was talking about the whole book. I wrote down a whole bunch of notes, and I got an 80 [percent] on the test on a book that I didn’t even read.

Nia participated for her own academic self-preservation, not to meet the aims set forth by her teacher. The fact that she won by passing the test offered incentive for additional resistance.

To varying degrees, all participants refused to participate. Those who exerted control by choosing not to play sometimes did so with fervor and defiance; their comments suggest a sort of rebellion against the constraints put in place by the game makers. As Aaron explained,

> The required school reading? I didn’t read any of that. Ever. I just didn’t read it. . . . I mean, they gave us the list of stuff, and there could have been good titles in there, but I just never gave it a second glance. I was just like, “I don’t want to do this.” I just threw it out.

For Aaron, even the existence of potentially worthwhile titles on this list could not counter his resistance to reading school-sanctioned texts. In the consideration of
reading identities, these attempts at resistance illustrate how participants reacted to the tension between the reading identities they wished to enact and the power-imbued context that failed to recognize their preferences (Holland et al., 1998). They were bound to the rules of a game that was not of their own construction.

**Accepting Negative Consequences**

Although this resistance might be admirable in the way it reflects students’ commitment to their beliefs, it has the potential to result in negative consequences. Participants reported the dangers of nonparticipation for their academic success in the English classroom but chose not to engage anyway. Demetrius’s claims reflected participants’ knowledge of both the rules and potential outcomes of their choice: “Overall, I know English, and I can do the rules that I am told to follow, but overall, I do really bad in English.” Despite knowledge of the rules and potential consequences, Demetrius chose not to play the game. Students described a prescriptive enactment of reading instruction that forwarded a singularly correct way of “doing English” and denied them opportunities to explore their identities that might still be under construction.

In this context, Holland et al. (1998) might explain that students have the capacity to envision new identities, but these identities can only emerge when students are supported in ways they anticipate or desire. We agree but extend this line of thinking to recognize that agency doesn’t happen in a vacuum. At the same time that participants learn how to position themselves for themselves (Holland et al., 1998), they must simultaneously accept the risk of negative consequences of this act in their daily lives—potentially debilitating, long-term effects, particularly given their positioning as adolescents in an adult-ruled community. Participant identities are indeed under construction, but too often there is little or no sanctioned space or opportunity in schools for the necessary building.

**(Re)Constructing Reader Identities**

In contrast to the descriptions of their English course experiences, participants described how the YAL elective provided greater space for the exploration and development of more liberating reading identities. The process of deconstruction described above was expanded and developed further with space and opportunity for (re)building individual reading identities.

**Choosing What to Read**

All participants identified the essential value of self-selecting reading materials, a central element of the YAL course. Participants described required readings as inhibiting interest and, often, success. Nia explained how she struggled to achieve academically and, as a result, failed to affirm a strong reading identity in her English class, given the forced reading. When asked about her English grades, she noted, “The reading parts, I suffer in ’cause I just don’t like school reading. I have had a little bit of trouble.” Devon described not only dissatisfaction with the assigned titles but frustration over the fact that they were assigned in the first place. He
reported, “I never really liked English. . . . It was like, ‘I’m being forced to read this. I really don’t want to read this, but I have to.’”

Interview data suggest participant recognition of a tension between authority and freedom when it comes to selecting titles; they equated teacher authority in this process as limiting to their reader identities. Julia argued, “In English class, we’re forced to read books that we don’t want, or we read short stories. And in YA lit, I get to sit down and read my own book.” In this final line, she suggested that reading should involve self-selection of titles rather than forced consumption, seeming to reveal how she assumed ownership over her reading identity. Similarly, Aaron described regular English classes as giving students what he called “singular book educations” that failed to honor the diversity of reader identities and available texts. In his experiences, reading in English meant that students “sit here, listen to the teacher read a book for you or read by yourself silently.” He continued, “They’ve always picked out . . . the set books every year.” When asked to describe the effect of this experience on students, he added, “You are restricting them, and no one wants to be restricted in any way like that.” His suggestion was to “instead, have people choose whatever book they want like we do in YA lit.”

Interview comments across participants indicate that students in the YAL class equated the freedom to choose with increased motivation and engagement in reading; choice fostered reading for exploratory purposes and increased the likelihood that reading would indeed happen. In describing why choice mattered to him, Devon explained, “It’s more motivating to read. You’re not as restricted, so there’s more freedom and independence. . . . It’s like, your freedom to read.” Nia’s claims captured the willing acceptance of responsibility that accompanies this choice. When asked how the YAL course experience differed from that of a typical English class, she offered, “Because you get to pick. Since you get to pick, you can have exciting books or dull books, if you want. But it’s all up to you.” In accepting the choice to select titles of potential personal interest, rather than deferring to the choice of a teacher, participants had the opportunity to assume greater responsibility for their reading practices and thus their identity construction was supported.

As participants engaged in this process of identity reconstruction, they inhabited a transitional space, both literally and figuratively, between the traditional English classroom and the YAL elective and between their associations of authority and freedom within each context. The work of Holland et al. (1998) helps explain the multiplicity inherent in such a transitional space. In the process of identity formation, individuals vacillate between longer-standing internalized cultural logic (traditional English classroom norms) and the logic of a current social situation (the YAL class community). As participants negotiate tensions that emerge when these forces collide, they experience varied, sometimes contradictory, self-understandings and identities. In the YAL context, participants were given increased autonomy over their reading practices through the provision of choice; having a say in what they read allowed them to explore, expand, and redefine the kinds of texts that resonated with their identities as readers.
Experiencing Autonomy in Classroom Spaces
Participants expressed appreciation for the increased autonomy they experienced with regard to class session protocols and assessments in the YAL course. Their comments suggested that they valued the invitation to be readers in school rather than engage in school reading. This distinction was noted repeatedly in participants’ reflections on how they behaved as readers across these contexts with regard to pacing. Devon made a direct comparison: “The way we read is different. [In YAL], you’re not told, ‘You have to read to this page by . . . .’ And it’s more just, ‘Read at your own pace, but have it done in a reasonable amount of time.’” Nia expanded upon this observation by noting how these differing approaches influenced her success as a reader:

[In YAL], you basically get to read at your own pace. So it’s not, “Oh, you have to read Chapter 7 by tomorrow.” I’m a really slow reader, and I have a lot of issues with reading, so when I have a specific time, it puts more pressure on me and makes it a lot more difficult for me to read. But when I just have whenever, when there’s no specific time, I tend to read better and faster and more efficient.

For Nia, in particular, being treated as a real reader proved empowering. She was trusted to determine largely for herself how much text to read while still meeting course expectations.

This same distinction between behaving as readers in school versus engaging in school reading was reflected in participants’ comments on responding to literature. In the English context, participants equated response with identifying and communicating a singularly correct answer, often to appease a teacher; texts were read for the sake of examination and in preparation for the essay that followed. Devon argued that this process of analysis hurt him academically and hindered his ability to read and respond in ways congruent with his learning preferences. Describing a typical approach to texts in his English courses, he noted,

You’re just doing reading and then doing the writing after you’re done with the book, so it’s kinda like I suffer. . . . It’s kinda like, “Here’s the book. Read it, and, at the end, we’ll talk about it and see how you felt and write an essay kind of thing.” It’s not the way I like to read.

Aaron’s exasperation when asked about English course content made his claims both troubling and persuasive:

It’s just mainly stuff that has something to do with special meaning or symbolism or something really ridiculous that no one really cares about ever. . . . [English teachers] stop every five seconds and go, [dramatic voice] “What were they trying to say?” As opposed to “This is a great moment because the person did something.”

Both Devon and Aaron reported that they read for pleasure because it allowed them to make connections to characters and think about big ideas raised by the
challenges these characters faced. When reading became a process of finding the right answer, it lost its appeal.

The YAL course experience also invited students to participate in a community of readers for the first time. Participants noted that, prior to enrolling in the course, they did not realize that other readers existed within the school and that this elective created space for them to develop strong reading connections with their peers. Julia stated, “Yeah, I actually didn’t know that a lot of people like to actually read and learn about other books, too, like me.” Because students in the course shared this connection as readers, they occupied space within a particular reading community, one in which all students served as literature experts whose knowledge and recommendations were solicited in the selection of texts. Participants took this role seriously and actively engaged in classroom projects designed to highlight a wide array of available titles. Julia described how a project afforded opportunities for readers to make connections with each other: “So another kid can read it and read their summary and be, like, ‘Oh yah, I want to read this book, too.’” In this community, student knowledge was held in high esteem, and discussing and sharing books was normalized and celebrated.

The distinctions that participants drew with regard to pacing and literature response across classroom experiences in these two contexts—and their varying levels of participation and engagement in each—might be explained in part by Holland et al.’s (1998) discussions of the tensions between past and present in the negotiation of identity. The “past histories that have settled in [participants] and the present discourses and images that attract them” run counter to one another and place them in a space of negotiation (Holland et al., 1998, p. 4). They make evaluative judgments about their experiences, explicitly identifying themselves as more at home in one community over the other. Although past histories are likely to exert continued influence, the pull of the new space is strong, given the autonomy and support it offers. We must also recognize, however, the realities of the school context in which these participants reside. Participants’ past histories reflect the official record, the one sanctioned by school authorities and used to make educational decisions on behalf of students. Even if students might no longer want to participate in reading remediation courses, for example, the school record of their presumed needs limits the extent to which they can reject past histories and move fully into the new space.

Engaging with a Teacher as Partner
Participants described a vision of the YAL teacher as respectful partner rather than rule maker. Interview comments revealed an appreciation for how their teacher trusted them to select and reject titles based upon their reading interests; participants noted and celebrated the teacher’s confidence in their abilities. Nia explained,

She used to have me try different books, but she would never push me…. She would just be like, “Here. Try this book. If you don’t like it, bring it back and we will find you another one.” . . . I guess it is just respecting the kid’s opinion, really, is what it comes down to.
Nia saw her teacher as an ally in the book selection process, someone who could share recommendations but honored individual decision-making about what to read. Participants repeatedly discussed the positive, safe, flexible environment created by the teacher. As Julia explained, “I just like how [we] have fun while learning about books and reading books and learning more.” With its classroom library stocked with titles that students self-selected, futons and beanbag chairs for lounging, and examples of student work blanketing the walls, the YAL classroom was an encouraging space for Devon. He called it “a comfortable zone to read.”

Allowing readers to make choices about what and how they read, the teacher invited participants to explore their reading selves in a low-risk environment, thus increasing the likelihood that students would try on the identities that resonated most strongly with who they wanted to be. Holland et al.'s (1998) frame provides greater understanding of the teacher-partner, who provides “social support” for participants and fosters a safe environment in the classroom, granting participants permission to be “vulnerable to change” (p. 4). In this welcoming environment, participants explored and reconstructed their conceptions of their identities (Holland et al., 1998, p. 4).

**Becoming Architects in the Design of Reading Identities**

In the YAL elective, participants were granted opportunities to deconstruct their experiences in traditional classroom spaces and build new conceptions of their reading selves. They were also encouraged to assume agency and ultimately served as architects in the design of their individual reader identities.

**Discovering Reasons to Read**

While in the YAL course, participants reported reading for enlarged reasons that extended beyond those privileged in the traditional English classroom. They advanced the idea that they, as readers, had the right to read titles that existed outside the boundaries of those sanctioned in school. As Julia explained, “[YAL] lets me learn more about different kinds of books that I didn’t really learn about in English.” Devon added, “[Without YAL,] I wouldn’t necessarily know as much about the subcultures and types of books necessarily.” Nia explained, “[Before YAL,] I didn’t know of a lot of different genres and all that stuff that we’ve gone over in this class which helps and widens my view to books. And it’s just made me want to read more.” These comments revealed an increased sense of ownership over text selection growing from increased knowledge about what was available.

Participants were not only allowed and encouraged to assume responsibility for selecting books they might read; they were also supported in their conceptions of why readers might read. All participants expressed a common goal of “reading to connect,” something they identified as too often missing in English courses centered on textual analysis and application of literary devices. Devon reported paying close attention to the way a book made him feel; for him, positive feelings yielded a higher likelihood of personal connection. He explained, “If it’s a book I can relate to, where I feel a good mojo with the book, then it’s like I can relate to this really well.” Participants argued that they experienced this connective “mojo”
when reading young adult texts written with them in mind. Demetrius reported that he selected books with intention and focused on titles that “young adults and teens can really connect to personally . . . where they can find a point in their life that connects it to the character’s life [and] really, just have that connection rather than connecting it to someone fifty years older than you that has died.” Relatedly, Nia enjoyed the freedom to focus on her favorite genre, urban fiction, because the titles paralleled her life experiences. When asked why she focused on texts in this genre, Nia answered, “Because I can relate. I can relate to a lot of stuff in the books that I’ve read.” Aaron revealed that his favorite aspect of the elective was that “you get to experience reading,” and Julia preferred YAL over English because, as she explained, “the books I pick usually relate to me or my life . . . and sometimes in English, I can’t relate to some of those books, and it’s just different.” All participants expressed the importance of building connections with literature. When they were trusted to select their own texts, they sought titles that promoted these connections and, in turn, were more motivated to read them.

As participants took control over what and why they read, they recognized and challenged how certain readings were privileged in the traditional school setting. They asserted their rights as readers to choose for themselves which stories were worth reading and to read them for reasons of their own determination. As a result of lived experience that led to a process of ongoing self-fashioning, participants were supported in their attempts to assume more positive reading identities. Although Holland et al. (1998) would define these as “hard-won standpoints that, however dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible” (p. 4), we believe these changes were not only more significant but also likely to withstand future challenge. The participants’ self-selection of literature may have promoted a move toward agency that may have been in response to the power of the literature itself. Young adult literature as a field constitutes another community, one validated by a social authority that exists outside the realm of school in the form of bookstores that stock the shelves with YAL, film companies that translate titles into films, etc. By choosing to engage with YA titles, these readers entered into a reading community that existed beyond the walls of the school and perhaps somehow lessened school’s power over them.

**Expanding the Reading Self**

While in the YAL course, students reported reading much more. Participants shared that they rarely did any of the assigned reading in their English classes that year—or ever. Four students laughed when asked whether they read more or less in the YAL class. Nia said, “In English class this year, I haven’t read any books. In young adult lit, I have read about four or five books since January.” Devon described a similar experience, saying, “I never read for English. I only skim. And for young adult literature, I actually read the books.” When asked how often he read for the elective, he replied, “Every study hall I have. So pretty much every day. And occasionally on weekends.” Demetrius described his reading practices, saying, “[In YAL,] I read a lot more. . . . I don’t think I’ve read one [book] yet in English. I think I’ve read
six books so far [in YAL].” This space encouraged students to behave like readers in ways that aligned with their conceptions of what reading could be and resulted in increased engagement in reading as evidenced by the number of books read. More important, this engagement manifested itself in students’ enthusiasm for reading, as captured by Nia’s assertion, “When you go to young adult lit, it’s like, ‘Yes. Finally, this class is here. I get to read.’”

**Discussion and Implications**

This study revealed how student participants were supported in their attempts to deconstruct their experiences in traditional classroom spaces, build new conceptions of their reading selves in a unique classroom setting, and assume greater agency in shaping individual reader identities.

**Acknowledging Context**

This research suggests first that differing classroom contexts can provide students with varying levels of opportunity to reject and/or accept ascribed reading identities. Students who played the game of traditional English donned a surface identity that they described as contradictory, uncomfortable, and/or temporary. When they were afforded a safe space in which to do so, participants were given permission to address these contradictory, uncomfortable, and/or temporary identities. The YAL classroom space invited such thinking and action in ways the traditional English courses did not and allowed students to enact desired reading identities that had been ignored, silenced, or denied. Throughout this process, participants engaged in the negotiation of tensions that emerged when inconsistencies arose and threatened the stability of their differing reading identities across contexts. The norms that name readers’ identities in school, then, seem to carry significant weight; context matters.

It is essential to consider, however, that certain contexts carry more weight than others. Participants were bound somewhat by the assigned identities prescribed by those in positions of power at the school. Even when newly developing identities resulted in greater confidence and engagement with reading, participants continued to participate in remediation and/or hold the assigned label of struggling reader in their English courses. The school as institution positioned these readers in particular ways (Vetter, 2010) and assigned particular reading identities (Hall et al., 2010) that, in some ways, persisted and were difficult to shake. Autonomy defined the YAL classroom space and invited participants who had historically struggled as readers to exercise agency on their own behalf; however, these histories were affirmed by the institution and served to reaffirm students’ deficit labels. And yet, this work offers hope: at the same time participants were reminded of the school-sanctioned struggling reader label, they increasingly challenged this perception and, as evidenced by their reports of reading success and engagement in the YAL course, simultaneously countered the expectations held for them.
Inviting Authentic Reading Spaces

These findings challenge school-based decision making that results in remediation programs for struggling readers—which are often scripted and lacking in differentiated support—and offer instead the potential promise of course experiences that honor individual reading interests and practices. Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller (2001) offered findings that demonstrated the gains that might come from trusting students in the learning process. In their study, academically underperforming high school students participated in an academic literacy course designed to help them become better readers by “demystifying” academic reading through “ongoing, collaborative inquiry into reading and texts” with their teachers (Greenleaf et al., 2001, p. 79). Students gained, on average, two years of reading growth per academic year on a standardized test of reading comprehension. Although our study focuses on participant perceptions of reading identities rather than gains as readers in a particular context, future research might not only examine whether reading gains are made by students enrolled in courses similar to the YAL course, but also compare any such gains in performance to those evidenced in the traditional English context to examine whether and how space for agency offers similar effects.

We are reminded of our participants when we think of Terrance, the ninth-grade participant and self-motivated out-of-school reader described in Greenleaf and Hinchman’s (2009) study. Beyond the walls of the classroom, Terrance enacted “an identity as a knowledgeable, confident, resilient reader, undaunted in the face of complexity, interested in the outcome of the case, and able to bring a repertoire of text-based, discipline-specific, problem-solving strategies to bear on his reading” (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p. 11). And yet, in the school setting, he received support for reading development in the form of scripted decoding and fluency-focused drills that discounted the full range of his reading abilities. We suggest that the YAL context described in our study paralleled the norms afforded readers in out-of-school contexts and that such a classroom space, one that invites critique of school-sanctioned norms and encourages independence, can offer young people opportunities to redefine their vision of reading and themselves as readers and challenge school-sanctioned definitions of identity—without having to leave the school. Whereas young people who are ascribed identities of struggling readers in school might identify themselves as highly successful in out-of-school literacy activities (Leander & Lovvorn, 2006), our participants found a space in school to challenge ascribed roles that were based on deficit models growing from their school-based positioning as struggling readers. Unlike Derrick, the focal participant in Kirkland’s (2011) case study, our participants inhabited a school space in which they did not have to sacrifice their interests or read the uniform texts that are too often selected without consideration of students’ needs. Participants expressed the development of an enlarged reading stance and associated positive beliefs and behaviors resulting from their experiences as readers in the YAL course, similar to those reported by avid out-of-school readers (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Kirkland, 2011). They were invited to resist the school norms that defined them as struggling and
instead determine for themselves the identities that best defined them. Participants were allowed and encouraged to reimagine their life stories through a rejection of school-sanctioned definitions of their identities (Coombs, 2012; Enriquez, 2011), but they did so in the very place they were often marginalized.

**Rethinking Relationships**

This study affirms and extends the significance of student-peer and student–teacher interactions as students navigate school and classroom norms. It builds uniquely on the work of scholars who have shown the kinds of identity shifts that can happen when teachers encourage students to think critically about their school experiences (Rogers et al., 2007; Skerrett, 2012) by offering analysis of a reconfigured classroom space that fundamentally alters the roles of teacher and students. Because the teacher relinquished a significant degree of control in the course design and instruction, students were given permission not only to thoughtfully critique the norms that defined their English course experiences, but also take ownership in the development of new norms that opened opportunities for changing reading identities. In this different classroom space, students could not only imagine new identities but live them, given the shift in power, autonomy, and support it embodied (Holland et al., 1998).

It is important to note, however, that the opportunity to engage in such autonomous ways brings significant risks that come with any sort of challenge to existing norms and values. Hall (2010) noted the influence of socially formed and sanctioned pressures that led students labeled as struggling to engage in behaviors that protected their social status in the classroom and subsequently affirmed their externally perceived identities as struggling readers. Our study posits the additional risk of agency in an institution that holds certain powers over students. Given the authority held by school as an institution and the teachers who work within it, this work reminds us that students are at a disadvantage in their attempts to progress as readers when these attempts call into question the recommendations made for them, texts selected for them, and identities enacted on their behalf. In the choice to live the new identities Holland et al. (1998) described, rather than simply imagine or wish for them, participants make themselves vulnerable; for adolescents with limited real and perceived control in the school setting, the resulting outcomes can be lasting and detrimental.

**Considering Content**

This study also offers a new influence to consider in fostering positive reading identities in adolescents labeled as struggling. As described in the prior paragraphs and evidenced by work cited, instructional decisions can have significant influence on reader identities. Our work suggests, however, that content matters, too. There was something special about what students were reading beyond the instructional and communal spaces in which they read. Student voices revealed that young adult literature, as a unique genre written explicitly for adolescent readers, provided these young people stories of resonance, connection, personal meaning, and enjoyment. Readers appreciated young adult titles that featured adolescent
protagonists experiencing life in ways that participants described as familiar (even when dissimilar to their identities). They joined a community of readers that existed beyond the school setting—and beyond the influence of the school that assigned them an undesired reading identity. This suggests the necessity of additional work to determine the extent to which the literature itself (beyond the fact that it was self-selected) influenced these participants as they deconstructed and reconstructed their identities as readers.

Student engagement in the YAL elective was likely influenced in part by the philosophy of the teacher. As an educator committed to building relationships with students to support academic and social development, she fostered a classroom in which students were encouraged to consider multiple perspectives, learn from one another and the teacher, and provide feedback and solicit support whenever desired. And yet, despite her best efforts, the instructor encountered students unwilling to engage in her non-YAL courses. When she applied several of the same elements of the elective course to her traditional English courses, engagement among students increased, but not to the same degree. This suggests that the pedagogies enacted in the YAL course benefited students, but that something more, perhaps the YA literature itself, might have been essential, too.

We acknowledge other possible influences on the findings, such as the small class size and the fact that more individual attention could have affected student learning, issues of power, and the nature of teacher-student interactions. Also, the absence of standardized testing might have helped create a positive, safe space; allowed more teacher autonomy; and enabled the teacher to act as a respectful partner. In years preceding and following the study, however, the teacher had class sizes of up to 25 students in the YAL elective and witnessed similar results.

We recognize, too, that this shift resulted from a willingness on behalf of students to assume greater autonomy over their reading practices in this particular classroom community and that these identities remain in flux and are likely to ebb and flow as participants become members of other culturally and socially constructed worlds. However, we are hopeful that participants will continue to internalize their identities as readers even when this vision collides with future social situations that undermine these identities (Holland et al., 1998). A follow-up study currently in preparation attempts to uncover how Nia defined her level of power positioning from high school through her first year of college across three differing English course experiences; the field would benefit from similar longitudinal explorations. Participants’ voices indicate that the YAL course experience offered generative space in which struggling readers were afforded opportunities to question and (re)develop their reader identities.

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