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Proximal Processes in Urban Classrooms: Engagement and Disaffection in Urban Youth of Color

Tanner LeBaron Wallace
University of Pittsburgh
Vichet Chhuon
University of Minnesota

We examine adolescents' interpretations of instructional interactions to understand the academic and developmental implications of pedagogy for urban youth of color. In doing so, we seek to advance existing knowledge regarding student engagement in two ways—enhancing the ecological validity of such theories and making the links to teacher practice explicit. Urban youth of color (N = 28) were recruited from two urban high schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and two youth development programs in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The following three emergent findings summarize engagement-relevant interpretations of instructional interactions made by the adolescents in our study: (a) feeling heard in class, (b) going all in, and (c) taking students seriously.

KEYWORDS: urban education, high school, adolescents, engagement, instruction

The challenges related to urban education have been discussed and debated for decades (Gallagher, Goodyear, Brewer, & Rueda, 2012). Scholars have well documented how urban school systems, which disproportionately serve students of color,¹ tend to reflect the myriad of social challenges that characterize these same urban communities (Rury, 2013). While rural and suburban districts may encounter similar problems, the issues

TANNER LeBARON WALLACE, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Psychology in Education Department, University of Pittsburgh, 5946 WWPH, 230 S. Bouquet St., Pittsburgh, PA 15260; e-mail: twallace@pitt.edu. Her research focuses on urban adolescents' interpretations of instructional interactions.

VICHET CHHUON, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota. His research interests center on how race, identity, and institutional opportunities shape academic engagement and youth development for immigrants and students of color.

faced by urban schools, including concentrated poverty and high rates of student mobility, are unique in the broader conversations on equity and education. In this article, the term *urban* refers to both the physical and socio-political contexts in which young people live and attend school (Milner, 2012). Urban schools generally describe campuses within large metropolitan areas and those surrounded by businesses, as well as underfunded institutions that tend to enroll a disproportionate number of lower income students of color (i.e., African American, Latino, and Southeast Asian American students). Within these communities, the lives of urban youth of color are often characterized by increasingly complex relationships and difficult considerations about the future, such as coping with the frustrations of limited resources and contending with specific dynamics created by social stigma and privilege (Lee, 2010; Spencer, 2006).

Despite these challenges, researchers (see for example Howard, 2010; Noguera, 2003) have also described highly successful case examples of urban educational environments. Likewise, some other scholars (see for example Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Lee, 2010; Spencer, 2006) have highlighted how an asset-based, ecological perspective of adolescent development for urban youth of color can help us better understand how resiliency is engendered by adaptive responses to functioning across multiple, interdependent contexts. Nevertheless, a robust body of research indicates enthusiasm for learning declines in young people as they move through K–12 schooling (Finn & Zimmer, 2012) and that this decline can show up disproportionately for adolescent youth of color in urban settings (Benner & Graham, 2009; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). These demonstrated patterns of declining enthusiasm for school for urban youth of color have garnered much policy and practice interest over the past few years, especially prompting efforts to evaluate effective teaching.

The majority of the research on effective teaching in urban schools, however, tends to focus on teacher practice conceptualized as an independent variable and whether students learn (or not) as a kind of dependent variable. The Gates Foundation–funded Measures of Effective Teaching Project is one example of this variable-centered approach (see for example Kane & Cantrell, 2010). This approach to modeling the associations between teacher practice and student outcomes assumes students' reactions to instruction are continuously labile and describable in terms of variation on an ordinal scale that stays the same across time (F. Erickson, personal communication, November 4, 2013). Yet, if one were to spend some time observing in what we like to call an “engagement hotspot” in an urban high school, what one would see is the dynamic, interactional, likely even transactional, moment-by-moment co-construction of instructional interactions.

We argue here that one way to advance theories of effective teaching is to understand from the perspectives of urban youth of color how engaging, positive, educationally significant adolescent-adult relationships are

constituted in the day-to-day interactions of a high school classroom. Current theories of student engagement, upon which measures of teaching quality should draw from, suffer from two significant inadequacies, especially for students of color. First, these theories often rest upon an underdeveloped conceptualization of teaching. Effective teaching, composed of discrete behaviors and actions, involves subject-matter knowledge as well as advanced capacities for discretionary adaption and judgment (Ball & Forzani, 2009). Too often, in student engagement frameworks teacher practice is operationalized as a set of decontextualized practices rather than complex constellations of interactive and adaptive cycles of decision and action. Second, these theories do not adequately attend to the role that adolescent youth of color themselves play in the co-construction of the interactional spaces that are consequential to engagement orientations. In other words, existing theories of adolescent contributions to the evolving developmental dynamics embedded within instructional interactions (see for example Connell & Wellborn, 1991) have supported productive lines of research that demonstrate these ongoing interactional moments shape the developmental potential of a classroom context (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011). Yet, these theories (and the measures of teaching quality that instantiate these theories) have been developed exclusively from adult perspectives without prioritizing adolescent meaning making as critical to advancing theory. Thus, these theories are often not race-conscious, though race and racial identity have been significant points of interest in U.S. schooling for decades. With some notable exceptions (see for example Gutiérrez, 2011; Lee, 2001; Martin, 2009; Nasir, 2011), relatively few studies have honed in on the links between the microprocesses of instructional interactions, identity, and sustained engagement in challenging academic tasks for urban youth of color.

In this article, we situate instructional interactions as experienced by urban youth of color in formal classroom settings as instructional moments with developmental possibilities. This work is grounded in the idea that learning and development are fundamentally relational processes (Grossman et al., 2009). Specifically, we examine urban adolescents' interpretations of instructional interactions to understand the academic and developmental implications of pedagogy for youth of color. In doing so, we seek to advance the existing knowledge base regarding student engagement in two ways—enhancing the ecological validity of such theories and making explicit and robust connections to teacher practice.

We build on our previous research with urban youth of color, to extend further what we call *adolescent perceptions of being known* in high school. The following sections examine how concepts including *proximal processes* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and *engagement* and *disaffection* (Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009) operate within classrooms and enhance our conceptualizations of being known. Here, being known is

hypothesized to mediate the proximal processes experienced and engagement/disaffection orientations for urban youth of color. These interdisciplinary concepts, adapted from the fields of human development and educational psychology, serve as interpretive lenses to study teaching and learning in urban high schools.

Our research contributes further empirical specificity to the concrete particulars of engagement-enhancing instructional practice in urban high school classrooms. We advance a more nuanced theoretical lens through which to view student engagement for urban youth of color as the motivational consequence of ongoing instructional interactions between urban youth and their teachers in high school classrooms. Developed through the careful study of the experiences and meaning making of urban youth, these theoretical advancements contribute to the future refinement of our theories and measures of effective teaching.

Proximal Processes in the Classroom

In this article, we explore how and why certain teacher practices are interpreted by adolescents as either engaging or inhibiting their academic striving. Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) conceptualization of *proximal processes* is very relevant to this study of classroom instructional practice. As part of a bioecological model of human development, Bronfenbrenner and Morris view proximal processes as a primary mechanism for producing development, typically occurring within a person's microsystem (e.g., the classroom, the family) and composed of an individual's ongoing interactions with people and objects in their immediate contexts. They described,

A proximal process involves a transfer of energy between the developing human being and the persons, objects, and symbols in the immediate environment. The transfer may be in either direction or both; that is, from the developing person to features of the environment, from features of the environment to the developing person, or in both directions, separately or simultaneously. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 818)

An important characteristic of these interactions is bidirectionality; just as the relationships and interactions in the immediate surroundings influence the adolescent's development, so too does the adolescent influence the immediate surroundings.

There exists tremendous developmental potential for adolescent-adult relationships that are established and maintained within the context of challenging, authentic, and generative pedagogical experiences (Lee, 2001). Adolescents and their teachers may, over time, form what Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) have called *developmental alliances*—teachers joining their students to contribute to students' growth as well as their own. This is

perhaps best articulated by Nakkula (2008), who observed, “It is not enough for teachers to move students, as this movement is unilateral or unidirectional. Transformational learning occurs when students sense that they too have moved their teachers—through their efforts or accomplishments and through their deep engagement in the learning process” (p. 19). Thus, meaningful learning, perceptions of competence, and feeling authentically known characterize developmental alliances.

Adolescent Perceptions of Being Known

In recent research with urban adolescents, we have theorized about adolescents’ perceptions of *being known* to suggest that this perception is a significant experience that can promote learning and development across educational contexts. We argue that adolescents’ perception of being known is a distinct component of sense of belonging formed phenomenologically through the dynamic experiencing of relational structures, particularly with teachers (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012). Central to perceptions of being known are adolescents’ interpretations that teachers “know them” beyond the misconceptions and stereotypes of adolescent youth, and that teachers are supportive of adolescents’ complex identities and postsecondary goals. Thus, perceived *known-ness* in a high school classroom is proposed to occur when a young person’s developmental needs are addressed within instructional interactions.

The function of being known is intimately related to the population of interest—urban youth of color—and the specific developmental period—adolescence. The later adolescent period (15–19 years old) that typically encompasses high school is a distinct time for young people, given their physical maturity, cognitive development, and newly acquired adult-like privileges such as driving, employment, and other responsibilities (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). For urban youth of color, productive or unproductive stage-specific coping strategies are based upon the experiencing of challenge or supports within a context (Spencer, 2006). For this reason, a closer understanding of proximal processes in classrooms that result in adolescents’ perceptions of being known may be a particularly promising solution space for urban education. For example, the elicitation of students’ thinking through teacher questioning practices might simultaneously communicate content (Franke et al., 2009) and engender adolescent perceptions of being authentically known by the teacher in ways that mitigate context-specific stressors—often related to identity and social stigma—experienced by marginalized youth (Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2006; Spencer & Tinsley, 2008).

The being known concept derives from a number of theoretical perspectives across human development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), psychology (Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1943), and education (Noddings, 1992; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). For instance,

the concept both draws on and departs from the rich literature on sense of belonging in schools. Our review of this literature indicates that the sense of belonging construct tends to emphasize broad orientations toward school as an institution without delving into the proximal processes within which these broad orientations are constituted over time. In other words, survey-based research has established empirical associations between key variables of interest, but we have fewer ethnographically oriented investigations focused on pursuing adolescent meaning making, particularly the meaning making of youth of color attending underserved urban institutions.

Adolescent perceptions—derived from experiencing specific interactions with school-based adults, including teachers—are a critical aspect of connectedness, especially within the high-stakes context of high school. As well, we are informed by Stanton-Salazar's (1997) view of teachers as institutional agents, referring to those nonfamilial individuals within a hierarchical relationship (i.e., adolescent-teacher) who are in a position to transmit institutional opportunities and resources to youth. For many urban youth of color, teachers represent critical agents of the school institution who can affect students' development of motivation, goals, and positive sense of self (Roeser et al., 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Furthermore, Noddings's (1992) philosophy of care in education is integral to students' perceptions of being known. Importantly, Noddings's notion of care has been demonstrated in other forms within urban classrooms, including through examples of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Ware, 2006) and deficit-like "subtractive" schooling (Valenzuela, 1999), by scholars working in urban contexts. A premise across these conceptualizations of care within the adolescent-adult relationship is the asymmetry of status that exists between a teacher and a student. Feeling known is a critical aspect of teacher care, because when an adolescent perceives that a teacher "knows me," this signals that the identities being ascribed to the student via experiencing the classroom environment are coherent with the deeply personal, evolving identities that students hold. At the same time, when an adolescent perceives that the teacher "doesn't know me," this signifies a lack of teacher care and opportunities for engagement and learning are significantly diminished.

A Process-Oriented Perspective on Student Engagement

In our present being known work, a useful process-oriented student engagement framework for understanding how instructional interactions provide the source material for short-term assent-to-learn from a teacher and long-term enduring identities is Skinner et al.'s (2009) engagement and disaffection framework. This framework links qualitatively distinct micro-contexts constituted through adolescent-adult interaction with adolescents' developing sense of self. This sense of self is derived from

experiencing such contexts and causes short-term *engagement* and *disaffection* in relation to that context.

Engagement is frequently conceptualized as a multidimensional construct typically defined with three interrelated components—behavioral (what students do), emotional (how students feel), and cognitive (what students think; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). More recently, agency has been discussed as a relevant fourth component of student engagement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Agentic engagement refers to students' sense of "constructive contribution in the flow of the instruction they receive" (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, p. 258). When experiencing agentic engagement students feel as if they are proactively providing input into their own learning. We recognize that these distinct dimensions of the engagement construct do much for the accurate measurement and operationalization of the engagement construct, but we also believe that understanding engagement as a broader meta-construct allows us to appreciate the dynamic interplay of behavior, emotion, cognition, and agency that characterizes students' general inclination and interest in learning what the teacher is teaching. Moreover, we agree with the assertion that "engagement is not conceptualized as an attribute of the student, but rather as a state of being that is highly influenced by contextual factors, such as policies and practices of the school and family or peer interactions" (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003, cited in Skinner et al., 2009, p. 231).

Central to this view of engagement is the notion of *action*, which represents the "simultaneous consideration of emotions, attention, and goals" (Skinner et al., 2009, p. 225). For urban youth of color, the possibilities for engagement are unfortunately matched by the likelihood that these students can feel alienated and misread by their teachers. Hence, these youth often experience a state of *disaffection* in the classroom. Disaffection refers to a broad range of actions and reactions that include boredom, anxiety, and alienation. Like engagement, disaffection can be exhibited through behavioral (e.g., disturbance, procrastination, withdrawal) and emotional (e.g., anxiety, boredom, and frustration) acts (Skinner et al., 2009).

In this study, we examine both the ways in which proximal processes and adolescents' perceptions of being known can shape the engagement and disaffection orientations of urban youth of color within the urban high school classroom. Figure 1 provides a conceptual model of how instructional interactions are co-constructed by adolescents and their teachers. Adolescents make sense of their schooling via proximal processes experienced within instructional interactions. Examples of proximal processes constituted in instructional practice include providing feedback to students on the work they produce, structuring and implementing learning activities, and managing student behavior.

Adolescent interpretations derived from experiencing instructional interactions are hypothesized to inform short-term engagement and disaffection

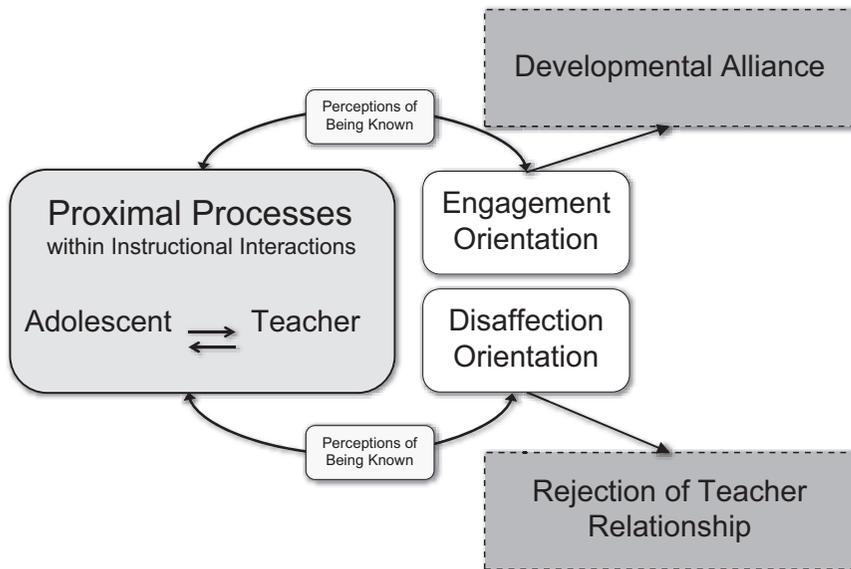


Figure 1. Conceptual model of proximal processes as the source material for short-term engagement orientations and long-term implications for adolescent-teacher relationships.

orientations depending upon the nature of the interaction experienced and the perceptions that are derived from the interpretations of that experience. In other words, the meaning making that results from experiencing instructional interactions informs adolescents' short-term decision to assent to learn or withhold that assent (i.e., engagement or disaffection orientation). Providing or withdrawing that assent likely is made on the basis of whether or not face threat has been reduced and/or whether productive identity work or narrative revisions have occurred as a result of the nature of the meaning made from the proximal process as experienced (Erickson, 1987; Erickson et al., 2007). In our work, we describe these identity-related perceptions as *adolescent perceptions of being known*. Figure 1 depicts how perceptions of being known mediate experienced interaction and engagement orientation.

Over time in the classroom, adolescents experience many of these linked interaction-perception-engagement cycles; each time adolescents and their teacher co-construct an instructional interaction, source material is generated that informs a short-term engagement or disaffection orientation. This dynamic progression of experiences and interpretations occurs over and over again during instructional segments. Each occurrence offers

the possibility of new or revised orientations toward the learning activities of classroom because new ways of being or thinking in that context have been co-constructed by the specific contributions of each participant—in this case the adolescent and their teacher—in each particular instructional interaction. This potential for change represents the transactional potential of such interactions; these interactions are conceptualized as proximal processes. Thus, interactional histories between an adolescent student and the teacher are hypothesized in our model to have implications for the quality of the relationship they establish over the course of their time together, because experiences of subjective meaning involve the crossing of crucial thresholds of discontinuity. An overwhelmingly positive (or negative) moment of experience results in an engagement orientation switch that is likely not to reverse without new (and disparate) source material being generated within subsequently experienced proximal processes. Collectively, the developmental potential of a classroom experience is determined not only by the quality of the adolescent and teacher relationship, but also by the provision of relevant, meaningful learning tasks and the acquisition and use of higher order cognitive skills.²

The Current Study

As we designed the present study, we prioritized the closer integration of education research that centers on the *instructional dynamic*, defined by Ball and Forzani (2007) as the multiple interactions that involve “active processes of interpretation that constitute teaching and learning” (p. 530), with developmental theories that attend to ethnic and cultural diversity (see for example Spencer, 2006). More specifically, we employed the methods of interpretive science (Erickson, 1986) to explore the ways in which teachers’ instructional practices, as perceived and experienced by youth within the proximal processes of a classroom, influence engagement and disaffection orientations in urban classrooms. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do adolescents make meaning of the proximal processes occurring in urban high school classrooms?
2. In what ways do these proximal processes relate to engagement and disaffection orientations for urban adolescents of color, as perceived by youth?
3. In what ways do adolescents’ perceptions of being known relate to proximal processes in the urban high school classroom and engagement orientations of urban youth of color?

Method

These data originate from a larger research project on adolescents’ perceptions of being known in school. In the present study, we closely examine

urban adolescents' meaning making around their school-based experiences. Our primary data source is verbatim transcripts generated from in-depth, individual interviews with urban adolescents. In the following sections we describe our participants, our data collection and analysis procedures, and our positionality within the study.

Participants

Participants ($N = 28$) were recruited during the 2011–2012 academic school year from four different sites—two urban high schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and two youth development programs in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The high schools in Pittsburgh serve primarily African American students from working-class, urban communities. The Saint Paul site was a Boys and Girls Club located in an urban community in which many participants from a nearby high school in the same community were active members. Finally, interviewees were drawn from an after-school program in Minneapolis that was connected to the students' high school and sponsored by the school district. The program met at the district's central office. Given that the purpose of this research is to examine how urban adolescents of color experienced engagement and perceived being known by their teachers, the commonalities across the 28 participants interviewed for this study warranted their inclusion in the sample.

Basic demographic information was collected at the completion of the interview. Adolescents self-reported their racial identity, resulting in 64% of the sample ($n = 18$) identified as African American, 18% of the sample identified as Latino ($n = 5$), 11% of the sample identified as Asian American ($n = 3$), and 7% of the sample identified as biracial ($n = 2$). Our participants were mostly 11th grade students ($n = 12$), but we were able to interview students in every grade level (9th grade = 5 students, 10th grade = 4 students, 12th grade = 6 students, recent high school graduate = 1). The average age of a participant was 16.43 years old at the time of the interview, with a range in ages from 15 years old to 19 years old. Table 1 provides the student profiles of our adolescent participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

We, the authors and the co-principal investigators of the study, conducted a single individual interview with each of the participants during the spring of 2012. Both of us have secondary teaching experience and in three of the four sites had conducted previous research in the settings from which participants were recruited. Based on recommendations from teachers, program coordinators, and the youth themselves, our selection of participants took into account gender, achievement level, and racial and ethnic diversity. For about half of the interviews, the adolescents had met or interacted with one of us previously.

Table 1
Adolescent Student Profiles

Student (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Race and Ethnicity	Grade	Geographic Location
Ani	16	Female	Lao	11	Minneapolis, MN
Aniyah	16	Female	African American	11	Saint Paul, MN
Brandi	18	Female	African American	12	Pittsburgh, PA
Brandon	14	Male	African American	9	Pittsburgh, PA
Brittany	15	Female	Vietnamese	10	Minneapolis, MN
Cam	16	Female	Vietnamese	10	Minneapolis, MN
Daniel	16	Male	Latino	11	Minneapolis, MN
DeAndre	15	Male	African American	9	Pittsburgh, PA
Derek	18	Male	African American	12	Saint Paul, MN
Diamond	17	Female	African American	11	Pittsburgh, PA
Dolores	17	Female	African American	11	Pittsburgh, PA
Elijah	17	Male	African American	11	Pittsburgh, PA
Emerson	15	Female	African American	9	Pittsburgh, PA
Imani	18	Female	African American	12	Pittsburgh, PA
Jayla	18	Female	African American	12	Pittsburgh, PA
Jennifer	16	Female	African American	11	Saint Paul, MN
Josiah	15	Male	American Indian/ African American	9	Pittsburgh, PA
Madison	15	Female	African American	9	Pittsburgh, PA
Malik	16	Male	African American	11	Pittsburgh, PA
Maria	19	Female	Latino	Recent grad	Minneapolis, MN
Mikaya	15	Female	European America/ African American	10	Minneapolis, MN
Nathaniel	16	Male	Latino	10	Saint Paul, MN
Oscar	17	Male	Latino	11	Saint Paul, MN
Rico	16	Male	Latino	11	Saint Paul, MN
Theo	17	Male	African American	11	Pittsburgh, PA
Tiana	18	Female	African American	12	Pittsburgh, PA
Xavier	15	Male	African American	10	Minneapolis, MN

A semistructured interview protocol guided our conversations with youth (see the Appendix for a copy of the interview protocol). Furthermore, we developed elicitation devices that were used at two different times during the interviews and were based upon findings from prior research. These included cards with the key components of sense of belonging (respect, support, and acceptance) and a list of instructional experiences. After adolescents rank-ordered the sense of belonging component cards and

talked through their placement of these components, we provided them with the instructional experiences cards. To elicit explanations for card placement, we engaged the adolescents in a series of prompts to encourage them to talk through their reasoning for card placement and the factors that went into the decision-making process. These “think-alouds” were aimed at making implicit and, often, internal meaning making explicit and external. Key prompts included the following: “What did that mean to you?” “What was that experience like?” and “How did that shape your understanding of school?” Interviews lasted around 45 minutes each and were conducted in quiet rooms so as to honor the adolescent participants’ privacy.

The theories that inform our research questions reside outside of the research setting. However, as we noted earlier, the explicit purpose of this study is to advance existing theories of student engagement through an inductive approach that attends to the perspectives of urban youth. Our role as researchers in such interpretive processes situates this work in particular ways. Erickson (2004) reminds us that “data in qualitative research must be *found*—they do not simply *appear*” (p. 486) and that “each datum must be defined and identified in a process of searching repeatedly through a set of information sources” (p. 486). Here, we report the series of inferences that shaped our analytic process and subsequent findings.

Verbatim transcripts were produced by a third-party transcription service from the digital audio files of the interviews. Data analysis for this study consisted of a three-cycle coding process. During the first round of coding, content codes were applied to adolescent participants’ responses to the interviewer prompts. Only adolescent participant responses that were content coded as *school-based experiences* ($N = 182$ response excerpts) were included and analyzed in a reduced data set. Per our coding definition, a school-based experience comprised a response in which the adolescent described something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through (Merriam-Webster, 2012) while at school.

In jointly reading over the corpus of data, we noticed that adolescents, in most cases, stated clear affective stances toward the experiences they shared. So, working with the reduced school-based experience data set, a second cycle of coding occurred that employed *value coding*. Broadly speaking, value codes reflect participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2009). During this cycle of values coding, we engaged in microanalysis, or the examination of single words, phrases, or sentences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to assign the codes *negative* ($n = 50$) or *positive* ($n = 52$) to school-based experiences where these affective stances were transparent in the adolescents’ descriptions of a particular school-based experiences. Specific affective stances were differentiated and decided upon on the basis of the following interrelated factors: protocol prompt, word choice, linguistic strategies employed by youth, and tone. During a third round of analyses, we further reduced our data set to focus on only the subset of school-based

experiences that represented *instructional interactions* (e.g., providing feedback, structuring learning activities, facilitating classroom discourse; $n = 93$). During each stage, we analyzed the content of the experienced instructional interaction within the positive and negative descriptions adolescents provided to us. During these rounds of analyses, we focused on emergent themes to understand the nature of the proximal processes experienced and the engagement orientations that adolescents reported as resulting from these experiences. We engaged in discussions of the data wherein we articulated and debated our individual understandings of the emergent themes. Rather than exclusively emphasizing shared agreement from the outset, we leveraged initial disagreements as opportunities for further deepening and sharpening our analytic understandings. In all cases, extended discussions resulted in common, albeit revised, understandings of both the analytic distinctions of importance and the meaning of such distinctions.

The final step of analyses was to select excerpts for writing up analytic commentary units that would provide detailed accounts of the concrete particulars of the emergent themes. Strategies for communicating evidence in qualitative studies vary, yet the primary task of such efforts is to illustrate important aspects of general points (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Selecting illustrative quotes is a difficult and subjective process, but the excerpts selected and discussed in the findings section have been carefully selected to accurately and holistically reflect the meaning making of the adolescent participants. Prior to finalizing the findings, a draft version of the findings section was shared with a small group of adolescent participants as a member check. Member checks are critical confirmations of the credibility of the information or narrative account (Creswell & Miller, 2000), and in regard to our findings, adolescents reported positive identification and congruency with the representation of their experiences and perspectives. Significantly, they suggested that future research attend more directly to the influence of peer dynamics on instructional interactions.

Researchers' Positionality

We carefully considered how our own individual social identities influenced this study. As Milner (2007) would suggest, we posed a series of reflective questions to make explicit the various levels of consciousness embedded within our research design, our interactions with study participants, and our learning from and building from the data. For instance, we acknowledge the many privileges (including race, class, gender and age) that we brought to our conversations with our adolescent participants. Though we are highly experienced interviewers familiar with the lives of youth of color and urban school settings broadly, we recognize that students likely took to us differently based on our perceived personal characteristics and that a single interview may not be sufficient for building the levels of

trust and rapport needed to delve deeply into issues of identity that are relevant to gaining more fully valid understandings of participants' raced and gendered experiences in school. Without a doubt, our individual identities, at different moments, seemed to have provided important commonalities and dissimilarities with participants that influenced, and in some instances strengthened, the one-on-one interviews.

Each of us, the study's coauthors, have collaborated for several years on research aimed at improving the education of urban youth of color and have come to recognize intimately one another's researcher lens, as shaped by our various social identities. Wallace's identity as a White, middle-class mother who started her career teaching public middle school in the Mississippi Delta influenced her interpretations of the data we gathered, but also afforded deeper conversations related to the gendered nature of high school classrooms with many female adolescent participants. Chhuon's biography as a Cambodian American and person of color who attended urban schools similar to those of his interviewees led to increased openness and rapport with many participants. As scholars interested in the lives of urban students of color, we acknowledge the danger of reiterating harmful stereotypes in our work. Such is the risk that is often present in research and writing. We recognize that urban youth of color are often represented in negative ways in media and research, thus we are particularly cautious in our discussions and in our writing to not further circulate deficit-oriented perspectives of participants and their communities. Importantly, we relied on each other to remain alert to the fact that we were only interpreters of these young people's perceptions, and sought to stay open to the unexpected, or as Milner (2007) would describe the *unforeseen*, consequences of our positionality. For instance, we regularly discussed how our youth participants reacted to certain questions and topics in light of our various identities as well as their own. In short, we sought a reflective stance throughout the study, routinely guided by the important work of others and our own commitments and collaborative history, to examine the constraints and affordances of our positionalities across the research process.

Findings

Our second cycle coding identified specific descriptions of experienced instructional interactions ($n = 93$) within the school-based experience subsample of the interview transcripts ($N = 182$). Our conceptual definition of an instructional interaction situates such interactions as a proximal process occurring within a classroom context. These interactions involve participants in the classroom interacting around an intentionally designed learning activity. Within the microsystem of the classroom, participants shared both their enjoyment and dissatisfaction with specific instructional interactions. We begin the reporting of our findings by broadly describing the general themes

of adolescents' interpretations of proximal processes in their urban high school classrooms. In these sections, we attend to how these interpretations relate to engagement orientations. Next, we present a detailed analysis of how proximal processes experienced by students are related to perceptions of being known. Last, we discuss the potential implications of being known on adolescents' engagement orientations and relationships with their teachers.

Adolescent Interpretations of Proximal Processes in Urban High School Classrooms

Adolescents' descriptions of instructional interactions provide a window into adolescent interpretations of proximal processes in urban high school classrooms. We highlight the following three emergent themes: (a) feeling heard in class, (b) going all in, and (c) taking students seriously. These three themes, while reported on separately, naturally overlap with one another within the narratives shared by youth. Table 2 provides a summary of the findings.

Feeling Heard in Class

In adolescents' descriptions of proximal processes that included positive instructional interactions, the structure as well as the implementation of the learning activity facilitated robust instructional interactions. How teachers taught provided ongoing opportunities for rich interactions around core academic subject matter. Given the significant role that disparate racial identities and cultural understandings have for student-teacher dynamics in the classroom (Gutiérrez, 2011), we asked participants (all of whom were students of color) about instructional moments involving their teachers (almost all of whom were White) in which they felt truly engaged. We learned from our participants that well attuned teachers made good on opportunities to simultaneously challenge students to foster skill development, but also to learn from their students. Students were interested primarily in academic learning in order to "pass the class," but at the same time adolescents sought a kind of holistic knowledge brokering within instructional interactions that transcended subject matter content. Put another way, it was important for youth to feel heard within the teaching and learning process. One young man, Rico, shared,

Let's say I didn't like how [my teacher] was teaching the class because I couldn't understand. If I told her, "I can't understand what you're saying," her doing a good job would be like trying to explain it more, or doing it a different way so that other people can understand. And if any students were to tell her that they couldn't understand she was like, "I'll work on that."

Table 2
Summary of the Key Themes

Adolescent Interpretation of Proximal Process	Engagement Orientation		Disaffection Orientation	
	Key Terms	Characteristic Descriptions	Key Terms	Characteristic Descriptions
Feeling heard in class	"I'll work on that" "ask me"	Attuned following student leads and considering of student input	"doesn't listen" "ignores" "walks away"	Ignoring or overpowering student voice
Taking students seriously	"help" "feedback" "guide"	Providing the benefit of the doubt to students and authentically including their experiences into the instruction	"prove ourselves" "misunderstood"	Applying stereotypes to students or rejecting of student perspectives
Going all in	"speaking my language" "connect to real life" "not going to give up"	Uninhibited, enthusiastic, and sustained focusing on connections with students and course materials	"just teach" "getting so little" "complete slacker"	Inconsistent or absent committing to student relationships or learning

Here, Rico reported remaining engaged and persisting in the face of difficulty in response to his teacher's willing to meet her learners' needs and listen to her students. Examples like this in which youth felt acknowledged and *heard* within instructional interactions were emblematic of positive proximal processes.

An especially potent form of feeling heard in class involved adolescents' interpretations that teachers allowed student critique and adapted instruction on the basis of that feedback. We hypothesize that these allowances reinforced the normative and deeply held desires of adolescents to influence and shape their environments. Unfortunately, much evidence suggests that classroom environments for urban students are more often focused on issues of teacher control and custodial perspectives of classroom management rather than proactively attending to fostering student initiative and thinking (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; van Tartwijk, Brok, Veldman, & Wubbels, 2009). Teachers' willingness to adapt instructional practice to better meet the needs of their students provided a tangible source of evidence to adolescents that signified intentionality on the part of the teacher to co-construct instructional interactions and, more broadly, learning environments. This is a consistent finding across many research studies—the more educators provide students with choice, control, challenge, and collaborative opportunities, the more motivation and engagement increase (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Also significant across our interviews is the understanding that learning activities can disrupt or suspend what Crosnoe (2011) has labeled “the social side of schooling.” For example, adolescents whose faces were drawn with worry and anxiety when discussing the complexities of peer dynamics within their urban high school tended to relax and begin speaking in animated, enthusiastic ways about instructional activities that focused on student contributions. For example, Mikaya, a 10th grader, articulated a particular learning experience in the following way:

This year, we built windmills and cars, and we had to test the speeds and mass and all that fun stuff. . . . I like that we get to do hands-on stuff in science but if we were to do like more hands-on stuff in other classes, I think that I'd like those classes more. [I like it] because you get to do it yourself and so you kind of, you just get to experience it first-hand and so you more understand it when you do it yourself and when you're all working together as a team.

Mikaya's enthusiastic reporting of her “hands-on” experiences in science was distinct from her experiences in other classrooms. Despite increasing adolescent interest and enjoyment, this mode of learning was uncommon across the high school classrooms. Similarly, Tiana also described how she experienced hands-on learning in her English class. She described these kinds of instructional interactions as “kind of really get you into to it instead of the teacher like just giving you worksheets and just telling you, ‘You have to do this.’” Though youth understood that they “have to do this” given the hierarchical nature of the adolescent-teacher relationship, this kind of coercive approach to instructional interactions undermined the enjoyment of the activity because adolescents wanted to feel like they had some autonomy in how they would complete course assignments and structure their learning experiences. Often the significance of learning and the purpose of learning are only marked by the teacher in urban classrooms (i.e., “Do this now as it will be important later”), which results in students who are uncertain of the role education plays in a secure future to question the value of participation (Holdsworth, 2000). Unfortunately, participants shared that the most frequent modes of instruction were characterized by these kinds of deferred purposes of learning and did not involve interactional learning experiences that authentically engaged students' independent thinking by supporting adolescents' autonomy. This finding aligns with decades of research regarding the differentiated and inequitable instructional and disciplinary practices across classrooms, particularly experienced by youth of color (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

The role students were expected to play in the proximal processes of the classroom was quite limited across the descriptions adolescents provided. Also noteworthy is the fact that adolescents discussed a variety of subject matter content in their descriptions. Whether math, science, English, or

art, subject matter content served as a vehicle for other instructional aspects of the class. What was common across the positive descriptions of different instructional interactions, however, were students' feeling that they were a significant party to the success and failure of the lesson. One participant, Jayla, shared,

In English class, you have conversations [and discussions] that helped you feel like you get close to [the teacher] and build a little bit of a relationship with her. [We do] a lot of discussion-based stuff, and I loved it. We were reading the story and hearing other students' opinions and perspectives about what was going on. This teacher is always open to hearing our opinions, hearing what we have to say or what we don't like or what we do like.

While learning content was important, from the perspectives of youth, equally significant (if not more) was the manner in which content was delivered and accessed by students. Here, Jayla reported being intensely engaged in her English class because the teacher had structured for authentic participation of and listening to students. Conversely, when instruction was presented in didactic, teacher-as-authority ways, students shared feeling disaffected and alienated from the learning process. Theo, an 11th grader, discussed his disaffection with one class this way: "The teacher, he doesn't really explain what we're doing. We watch the video, but I don't really understand what we're doing. He doesn't explain it. He just gives us the sheet of paper and expects us to do it." Alternatively, youth participants described the cognitive and emotional engagement that comes with being heard in class. Theo described another class where one particular teacher kept him continually engaged:

My teacher keeps me interested. It's really difficult to keep my interest. She keeps me engaged. Keeps firing questions at me. My psychology class is about seven people so there's a whole lot of not really lecture-based, which, like, caught me off-guard when we started at the beginning of the year. I was like, "Well, we're not doing lectures, we're actually having discussions and charting and you're asking our opinions?"

While smaller class sizes can certainly be helpful for better engaging students, participants emphasized more their teachers' attitudes and dispositions toward students as most significant for positive and meaningful instructional interactions. Moments involving "discussion-based stuff" and "asking our opinions" were shared as deeply meaningful processes that helped youth feel heard and also served to engender a sense of being an authentic participant in their own learning. In these moments, learning was interpreted as a co-constructed process whereas the youth were granted ownership of and responsibility for producing the knowledge.

Going All In

Just as students need to be more than simply physically present in a classroom for a classroom experience to be transformative, teachers must also *go all in*. Going all in, or moving beyond surface, inauthentic ways of interacting and connecting with students and course materials, may look and feel different for different teachers, but students' perceptions that some high school teachers often spent minimal efforts in their work with youth represents a key theme related to their interpretations of instructional interactions.

A typical interpretation that led to adolescents' disaffection in class was captured by Dolores, an 11th grader, who shared, "I don't like when I feel as though I be doing so much and I have received so little. You don't get into like personal. They just teach you and the day's over." Examples regarding teachers who "just teach you" represent Dolores's and other participants' disappointment with some adults' lack of genuine commitment and enthusiasm for their instructional practice. Other sentiments about some teachers included Brittany's experience in her science class:

[My science teacher] was a complete slacker. It was disappointing to me because I actually took it seriously at first, like I took the class seriously for the first good three weeks but then the way he acted and how he took so much time off for talking about things that were not even related to science, then I just started slacking because he didn't make it seem interesting, and he made it like, "Oh, just do this and then turn it in tomorrow." And then the whole class wouldn't really do it.

Here, Brittany depicted the interactive process by which she altered her engagement orientation based upon her interpretations of the teacher's commitment, or lack thereof, to promoting student learning. She scaled back her own contributions to the instructional dynamic when she sensed the teacher's lack of commitment to student learning—evidenced to Brittany by the teacher wasting instructional time and portraying low expectations. In other words, her disappointment with her science teacher's low effort to teach science in interesting ways influenced her engagement orientation. Brittany's example represented well how not going all in on the part of the teacher engendered students' disaffection orientations.

Conversely, our participants also shared how some teachers consistently demonstrated enthusiastic contributions to instructional interactions. One particularly meaningful demonstration of going all in for the adolescents we interviewed was explicit instructional efforts to connect course material to life outside of the classroom. For instance, Tiana explained,

But we go outside to just get out of the classroom setting, and we measure or try to find the height of things. And if we go outside,

we use real-life scenarios. Like I always wonder what does this have to do with real-life situations, and our teacher relates it so well, that we all understand it so easily.

To foster deeper, more meaningful connections with the subject matter, Tiana's teacher created instructional interactions that traversed both physical and psychological contexts. Many adolescents shared a desire to experience personally meaningful instructional interactions—ones that honored and challenged their individual developmental journeys. Moreover, participants wanted to better understand their teachers as real people who are willing to share things about themselves.

Teachers revealing their thinking and perspectives in transparent and accessible ways is another form of going all in. For instance, one young woman, Jayla, described a classroom in which she very much wanted to work hard: "My teacher will take the time to really explain it or compare it to like something that I will understand, like compare it to her life story or something like that to make me really understand it." When teachers offered up their life narratives and experiences, even in small parts and doses, participants shared that this relational approach to teaching represented rich opportunities for engagement. Teachers, especially White teachers teaching urban youth of color, who help students to see them as "real" people and work to find commonalities with students help deepen their connections with adolescents in urban schools (Milner, 2010).

As well, youth reported feeling engaged by teachers who took into account their learning preferences, their backgrounds, and as well as teachers' genuine efforts to help them learn and grow. At another point in her interview, Brittany described her math teacher's efforts in this way: "[My math teacher] was a bit hard on us, like for grading, but then the attitude he had in school, it was like, well it made me try to work harder and accomplish things faster." For Brittany, her math teacher's high expectations and way of interacting around those expectations encouraged her to exert concentrated effort toward accomplishing learning goals. This finding resonates with Ware's (2006) description of warm demanders in urban classrooms, that is, successful teachers of students of color who are perceived to care about their students while keeping their standards high in teaching them. Likewise, Malik's description of one teacher centered on this instantiation of going all in:

Like just the biggest point is like if the teacher was to show them that they care and the student knew that, nine times out of ten, that student he'll probably work harder to do better in that class because he feels as if she really cares if I do good or not so. It likes drives them to do better.

Brittany and Malik's quotes are compelling because they document the critical role of teachers' attitudes and disposition for students' engagement and

motivation to learn across content areas. For students of color, the absence of classroom engagement is often misconstrued as students' lack of care for their education and their futures. Across our data, we were struck by how strongly students' engagement orientations derived from adolescents' interpretations of teachers' attitudes about their jobs. This major finding is consistent with our previous research that identified students' sensitivity toward teachers' "just teach" classroom dispositions as troubling for youth (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012; Wallace, Ye, & Chhuon, 2012). In the current data, we observed specifically how instructional interactions that demonstrated the structure of the learning activity and the directions that accompanied the activity were not simply "because I'm the teacher" (thereby replicating and reinforcing unproductive power dynamics) but instead involved explanations about the logical merit of the learning activities and made explicit connections to the lives of urban youth best supported engaged orientations.

Taking Students Seriously

Our participants no longer viewed themselves as children, though they understood that the inherent, and inevitable, youth-adult hierarchy existed in schools. Likely for this reason, the desire to be taken seriously by teachers emerged as a prominent theme across our interviews. While they recognized teachers' role as institutional agents, and even gatekeepers, adolescents in our study wanted to be acknowledged as vital partners in the teaching and learning process. For example, DeAndre memorably remarked in his interview,

So when I say something, not all the time I'm joking. Well, most of the time I'm not joking. . . . It's every now and then that I am joking but you know I feel like what I do and what I say is based off the person I am and that should be taken seriously.

Comments like DeAndre's were common across our interviews. When youth do not perceive their teachers as taking them seriously, particularly as learners, it engendered dejection and discouragement for adolescents. Being taken seriously as perceived by youth involved participants feeling that they have a say in their learning. Another participant, Imani, put it this way: "Teachers can show respect by listening to what you got to say and give input so the teacher can help you and guide you to where you need to be." Articulated somewhat differently, Xavier noted that "respect is like taking students seriously; take me seriously when I say something or do something." In short, adolescents positioned *being taken seriously* during interactional interactions as a manifestation of teachers' respect for their students.

Finally, being taken seriously by our adolescent participants was also described through teachers' willingness and ability to offer instrumental

support. Participants were clear that being taken seriously involved an authentic assessment of their classroom performance, regardless of perceived ability level. As Ani explained, teachers that were able to engage all students were teachers like this: “In class I can see teachers trying to help the lower kids. Even if you’re not the smartest they’ll still try to get you on task with your homework.” It is important to mention that the majority of our youth participants reported that they were not in Advanced Placement or honors courses at their school. Rather, they mostly belonged to the “regular” tracks but wanted their teachers to know that they are highly concerned about their futures and that academic achievement is integral to their postsecondary goals. For instance, Brandi described how those high school teachers who cared enough to honestly let her know about her classroom performance supported her engagement in those classes:

It’s like the teachers that want to help me and they make me want to do more. It motivates me because of the teachers that want to help. The feedback teachers give shows you actually have improved, and the teachers that teach will give you feedback and stuff on how you’re doing and that will just make you want to make more progress towards that goal.

Provision of appropriate feedback contributed to students’ cognitive engagement as they could monitor their own content learning and growth. Such tangible support was related to perceptions of teacher respect; these teachers were able and willing to provide expertise and resources that youth perceived as preparing them for life after high school.

It is important for readers to understand that the emergent themes we report on here are most accurately understood as the representations of characteristics of engaging, relationship-enhancing pedagogy. These themes provide a helpful lens that can be applied to the study of instructional interactions; the themes sensitize us as to what may be important to prioritize as we develop empirically based theories of effective teaching in urban high schools. As such, our hope is that this line of inquiry could enhance existing professional learning opportunities for teachers around cognitively rich instructional practice, thus serving to integrate the cognitive and affective components of teacher practice. We will return to these ideas of integration and professional learning in the discussion section.

The Function of Being Known for Urban Youth of Color

In this section, we apply a *being known* lens to adolescent interpretations of proximal processes in their classrooms. Specifically, we explore how perceptions of being known link adolescent interpretations of instructional interactions to engagement orientations. When students are taken seriously, teachers offer students the benefit of the doubt. Conversely, when teachers engage in stereotyping and portray these conceptualizations to

adolescents during instructional interactions, (not surprisingly) students feel misunderstood. Instructional interactions that result in adolescent perceptions of being misunderstood transform the developmental potential of an instructional interaction from an opportunity for engagement into a moment of disaffection. For our participants, teachers judging kids “by their covers instead of what’s inside” represented experiencing instructional interactions characterized by adolescents feeling judged or misunderstood.

Instructional interactions that resulted in these perceptions appeared to have a direct and powerful influence on an adolescents’ willingness to participate jointly with that teacher in learning activities. For example, Emerson explained that variations in student engagement across classrooms often depended upon how teachers related to students as individuals. She described some teachers’ contributions to instructional interactions like this:

Teachers judge kids by their covers instead of what’s inside. . . . It just depends on where that person comes from. A lot of teachers do not really know what goes on in kids’ lives and they don’t really factor that in and give kids any leeway. They should give a little leeway for us to have a chance to prove ourselves.

As Emerson poignantly observed, if some teachers were to better know their students, this is likely to lead to a certain “leeway” that opens up opportunities for youth to understand themselves as capable, worthy participants. For urban youth, adults’ lack of understanding normative adolescent development—that includes the productive processes of experimentation and risk taking—can put urban youth of color at risk for being misunderstood as deviant (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Spencer, 2006). Unfortunately, opportunities to learn from mistakes in engagement-enhancing ways are often misdirected away from some youth. Over time, a lack of being known may lead to teachers’ misperceptions of adolescents’ intentions. Xavier explained,

. . . because teachers do not really talk to us. Like the teachers just teach and then they’re done. They don’t know like what goes on at home or what I have to go through. Like, “Why did I miss one day of homework?” [The teachers] get mad at you, and like say, “Oh yeah, you didn’t get your homework done because you’re a slacker.”

Sentiments like this were frequent responses when we asked youth to describe instructional moments in their least favorite classrooms. From participants’ perspectives, some teachers’ low trust in students resulted in students’ own questions of teachers’ trustworthiness and genuine concern about students’ well-being. Teachers who were unwilling or unable to view their adolescent students as evolving young people with complex lives ultimately frustrated participants, leading to students’ disaffection. Dolores, for example, was troubled by how some teachers seem to base important decisions upon simply “who they think” is deserving: “Sometimes it doesn’t

seem like they even give kids a chance. [The teachers] pick and choose between the fact of who has a good grade and who has a bad grade or who they think is trying and who they think isn't trying."

The quality of the communication occurring within instructional interactions influenced perceptions of being known. When a student interpreted communication as encouraging reciprocal dialogue and even allowing students' criticisms and negative affect to be considered, there were increased perceptions of being known. A lack of reciprocal dialogue was interpreted as not feeling heard. This was exemplified by Emerson's description of instructional interactions with one particular teacher: "You can't really communicate with [my teacher]. She will overpower, like she won't let you speak, and if you speak, she think that you're being disrespectful," or Diamond's description of instructional interactions with a particular teacher:

Whenever I have a question, [my teacher] always like kind of ignores you or puts it off and like just walks away. She's not really any help, so I do whatever I can to understand her class by myself, but I just stopped asking for help now because there's no point in asking if she never helps.

Not surprisingly, these interpretations of not feeling heard on the basis of intractable and problematic power imbalances led to resignation and withdrawal for our adolescent participants. Importantly, participants across each site reported that almost all of their teachers were White whereas the majority of students were youth of color. Tiana offered this advice for educators who rely on negative stereotypes of urban youth of color, based on her experiences: "So like you shouldn't think that just because they're this ethnicity, that they live in this part of the ghetto, or like just—you shouldn't assume." In some ways, this comment is a remark about the overwhelming number of teachers in U.S. urban schools who do not share students' racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. While Tiana seemed hesitant to cite "race" specifically, her comments throughout her interview about teachers, being known, and authenticity were essentially about racial differences in her school experiences. For instance, she stated,

And I think that like me, if my teacher is of a different race they should try to learn and understand their students and how they act, especially in an urban setting because it's way different. . . . So like just try to relate to us in some way, and don't try to be someone you're not. So if you're not a Tupac fan, don't try to act like you're a Tupac fan.

Tiana's specific mention of Tupac suggests that her teachers, who are predominately White and not from similar backgrounds, should not "try to act like" or pretend to know about their students' lives.³ Rather, these

same teachers ought to take steps to learn about and genuinely understand their students and the neighborhoods from which they come.

When a teacher pairs genuine listening and attending to students during instructional interactions with a going-all-in approach, it can result in moments of authentic connection between the adolescent student and the teacher. As described in an earlier section, Brittany and Malik's perceptions of high expectations and care were ostensibly about teachers who are White. Likewise, Elijah described his favorite class as full of instructional interactions where his teacher "showed me like that she understood and that she wanted to help me by helping." Elijah went on to explain that his teacher engaged in an open communicative style that fostered a reciprocal dialogue and permitted student criticism. He continued by describing this exchange with his teacher around "help" and that his teacher wanted to be a support to him by ". . . giving me the right help that I need. I understand if [the teacher] thinks she understands and she's trying to give me help, and it's not the help that I need. I respect that because it's not the help, but she understands that I need help . . . she don't assume she knows what kind of help I need, you know? I like that she asked." Conversely, Theo experienced a series of instructional interactions in a class that were disaffecting, because this particular teacher was not adaptive in her practice and did not incorporate student input into the management of the class:

My teacher, she, it's hard to have interests with her because she's like, she's dull. It's hard to focus in her class. The class is small and you don't really have interests in her learning. She goes too fast, and we tell her to slow down, and she's like, "I can't slow down. We're going to have to finish before finals, before school is over." She doesn't listen.

Thus, Theo's perception in this example centered on the teacher portraying that the priority was material needing to be covered, rather than focusing on students' learning needs. Theo shared that this stemmed from both the teacher's just teach disposition and not knowing her students. Despite the small class size, the teacher missed the opportunity to form developmental alliances with her students; her "just teach" orientation didn't promote knowing Theo or an engaged orientation for him. Rico, however, experienced a teacher going all in in the following way:

[My teacher] speaks your language. He'll tell you how you want to hear it. Like let's say me. He would tell me, "You're going to get locked up if you don't do your work." That's how he would tell me. If he would see another [student] that doesn't do bad in school, the student's just had a bad day, he's like, "You know, just try to do your best." My teacher speaks your language. He's really good at that.

Examples like the one Rico shared suggest that teachers who can "speak your language" help youth feel known and engaged in class. A number of

our participants shared that those teachers who take opportunities to know their students are more likely to teach in ways that engage youth because they are likely to understand more fully the texture of young people's lives. From speaking a student's language to other similar metaphors used by students suggest that being known meant that teachers were attuned to their students' social and learning needs. Such examples are less about understanding students' language literally (although it can be) but more about expressing an authentic care for youth. Students felt known in these examples because teachers paid attention to them as individuals, but also because students felt recognized as important social partners in the classroom.

Discussion

A main assertion underlying this research is that particular ways of teaching create interactional spaces within instructional moments. While acknowledging the important research that has been conducted on diverse students' engagement in urban classrooms (see Bingham & Okagaki, 2012, for a review), this study's focus on the transactional nature of instructional moments for urban adolescents of color offers a unique contribution to the field. *Instructional interactions* are a vehicle for receiving socially derived feedback and, as such, provide the primary source material for meaning making. These "transactional contributions of the context" (Spencer, 2006, p. 870) influence the long-term educational significance of the adolescent-adult relationship established over the course of an academic year by altering the receptivity of both the adolescent and the teacher to fully engage in academic work. In particular, adolescents' interpretations of their teachers' practice are linked to specific interactions experienced by students. Consequently, adolescent-teacher connections strongly influence student learning. Thus, a focus on *experienced interaction-derived perceptions*, as the building blocks for an explanatory framework for effective teaching, may represent a potentially powerful solution space in urban education.

Across varied instructional and relational contexts, urban youth of color shared vivid examples of both engaging and disaffecting classroom moments with their teachers. Adolescent descriptions of positive instructional interactions were characterized by bidirectional influences on thought and/or action occurring between the adolescent and their teacher. Conversely, adolescent descriptions of negative instructional interactions were characterized by a lack of reciprocity and bidirectionality across teaching and learning moments. Importantly, course content was the vehicle for structuring and/or anchoring the interaction. The production of text or project product provided teachers an accessible, socially safe (i.e., peer-approved) window into adolescent meaning making. Engaging relational moments included those in which students perceived teachers to be authentically and enthusiastically leading their learning and development, as well

as attuned and receptive to students as important social partners in these processes. These opportunities represented a mutual respect between students and teachers while shaping developmental alliances between youth and adults. Our participants sought both guidance and respect from their teachers in the teaching and learning process while recognizing the asymmetrical status between adolescents and teachers in the classroom.

The concept of being known offers a helpful framework to explain the significance of the themes that emerged across adolescents' interpretations of instructional interactions. Being known attends to the developmental needs of high school youth. These needs include autonomy and connection as they navigate increasingly complex relationships and future expectations. For high school youth of color in urban contexts, these needs are additionally complicated by issues related to the realities of race and class in U.S. society. When reflecting on the adolescents' accounts of their school-based experiences, what becomes clear is the sheer amount of energy and focus required to successfully manage the multiple, and sometimes competing, aims of high school. This is further challenged by the feelings of disconnect with students' predominately White teachers along with curricula that they believed was rarely relevant to their lives. In addition to the obvious academic achievement aims that are implicit in the current study, adolescents are faced with a multitude of social objectives that include, but may not be limited to, surviving the complexities of evolving peer dynamics and navigating an evolving sense of self amid a collective of evolving selves. These social and identity-related aims, foundational to normative adolescent development, are often neglected in our theories of effective teaching. These non-achievement aims demand a tremendous amount of emotional energy and necessitate what can be described as a constant "ear towards the ground" on the social scene—keeping the pulse of what is happening locally but also more broadly within the school building so that one can adapt efficiently or effectively should the tides of influence change or proof of worthiness be demanded. Grounded in the "key distinction between what high school is supposed to be in theory and what actually goes on in high school in reality" (Crosnoe, 2011, p. 9), we have provided an interpretatively oriented framework for exploring the links between instructional interactions in urban high school classrooms and engagement and disaffection orientations for urban youth of color.

How urban youth perceive their schooling, including instructional interactions in the classroom, matters a great deal to these orientations. In some cases, it seemed as if the nature of the subject matter content contributed deeply to the essence of the proximal process. While this finding is likely not surprising to instruction and learning scholars who always remind us that content matters, it provides further justification for our assertion that ecologically valid conceptual models of student engagement must attend

to both adolescent meaning making *and* instructional practice, including the nature of the content.

In some noteworthy ways, our data are consistent with research on the importance of student voice in schools, and its potential to support gains in positive youth development (Mitra, 2009) and the mastery of academic skills and knowledge (Lee, 2001). Taking student perspectives seriously is an opportunity to engage and reengage youth, particularly those working through issues related to race, class, and social stigma. The current student voice literature, however, tends to focus on formal initiatives aimed at youth leadership and school reform. We argue that positioning *feeling heard* as an analytic lens, rather than a school-reform initiative, advances our understandings of effective teaching in productive ways. In this sense, feeling heard, and the closely connected and overlapping interpretations of *taking students seriously* and *going all in*, are about attending to the active ingredients of effective teaching practice.

At the article's outset, we discussed the unique challenges faced by many urban schools. We recognize that there are many negative images associated with the term *urban*, in both the extant research literature and U.S. discourse more broadly. While it is important to be aware of those negative associations, it is critical to keep in mind that urban communities also provide important developmental assets to young people. Many of these urban centers have within them a wealth of sociocultural history, which promotes a sense of deep pride among their residents, particularly those from communities of color and immigrant backgrounds. As well, we understand that the very real problems that exist in urban neighborhoods are intricately linked to larger sociopolitical forces that shape the challenges experienced by urban school leaders and the students they teach (Sharkey, 2013). Surely, some of the teaching and learning challenges that exist in urban classrooms, as discussed in the present study, will resonate with the struggles of counterparts in rural and suburban settings. It is nevertheless important to recognize the unique conditions that residents of many U.S. urban neighborhoods navigate daily, including substandard housing, lack of employment opportunities, and higher levels of crime. Thus, the engagement issues relevant to urban adolescent youth must be considered in relation to the societal conditions that affect their perspectives on learning.

Focusing on proximal processes within the urban classroom context heeds the calls across the fields of human development and educational psychology to more fully consider sociocultural influences on learning and development, particularly for students of color. Broadly speaking, the sociocultural perspective informs many relationship-building frameworks in teacher training. While these "getting-to-know-your-student" strategies may encourage interpersonal connections between adolescents and adults, the interactional spaces created by such techniques are unlikely to disrupt or revise powerful context-linked feedback loops about students' social

identities that exist in urban schools. Nasir (2011) describes these kind of *benign affectively positive adolescent-teacher relationships*, positioned as precursors to academic work, as especially problematic for urban youth of color. Whereas adolescents may come to feel comfortable with a teacher and, therefore, experience stress reduction from not having to engage in identity-protecting self-presentation management efforts within benign relationships, these kinds of adolescent-adult relationships are not characterized by learning growth. On the other hand, powerful pedagogical encounters are likely source material for meaningful and enduring revisions to adolescent and adult narratives of possibility (Lee, 2001; Martin, 2009; Rose, 1989).

Attending to the competing management and instructional demands of an urban classroom requires a tremendous amount of social and emotional competence on the part of a teacher. When classroom climate demands outpace teachers' skill sets teachers become distressed and, often, default to more hostile and punitive interactional styles (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011). So, while our findings contribute to more precise understandings of the linkages between instructional interactions, student engagement, and learning outcomes, there is still work to be done to translate these interactive perspectives of effective teaching into models of professional learning for teachers and instructional leaders. Without a doubt, the promise of such work is matched by the challenge of such work. To provide two brief examples, a teacher *going all in* to accept students' negative affect and one *making students feel heard* in learning activities that leverage and honor the lived experiences of urban youth both require significant self-awareness and responsiveness on the part of the teacher.

What we really need to positively shift the quality distribution of urban educators, but do not quite have yet, is a practice-oriented training model focused on (a) embedding the relational aspects of teaching into cognitively rich learning activities and (b) enhancing teachers' capacity to engage in nonjudgmental information processing within the instructional dynamic in order to effectively attend to the multiple, competing demands of self, adolescent(s), and content. We believe that improving the precision and ecological validity of measures of effective teaching is one particularly promising starting point. To our knowledge, all current observational instruments used in teacher evaluation systems rate the relational aspects of teaching separate from the delivery of core content. Yet, the most effective urban educators we know, and research has identified (see for example Howard, 2003; Milner, 2010), seamlessly embed connection-enhancing strategies *within* instructional moments to foster, and not distract, from robust student learning. Moreover, our measures of teaching do not afford teachers opportunities to better understand their own decision-making patterns. For example, stepping away from the instructional storyline to redirect student behavior might be productive in one situation but counterproductive in another. Helping teachers develop this kind of productive attentiveness and adaptive

expertise around student learning is a critical responsibility of the field. One way the research community can support such work is to develop instruments that support and structure these specific kinds professional learning.

Limitations and Future Research

No research, including the present study, is without its limitations. A major aim of this study is to discuss productive ways for engaging high school youth in urban classrooms. While we wanted to privilege the perspectives of urban youth of color, we recognize that one-on-one interviews, taken alone, result in the reporting of specific narratives from particular vantage points. In this article, many narratives centered upon students' dissatisfaction with classroom instruction. Thus, readers may interpret the present study as painting a broad negative stroke over the important work carried out by high school teachers in urban areas. Our goal, however, is not to contribute added blame onto a respectable profession that is under constant scrutiny and pressures. We are quite aware that, as Kennedy (2010) reminds us, the causes of good and bad teaching are likely the result of an intricate combination of teacher characteristics and situational factors.

Furthermore, this study drew on the Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model of human development, which describes four sources of proximal influences to the face-to-face encounters occurring in the micro-system—within-person, structural characteristics, objects, and characteristics of the other persons. In this study, we did not collect any specific data on any of these proximal influences as they relate to instructional interactions described by our participants. Nevertheless, in the narrative accounts of their school-based experiences, many adolescent participants did include information and working theories about these four proximal influences on instructional interactions. For example, adolescents described the composition of classrooms in terms of classmates eliciting particular (often negative) environmental responses as well as administrative decisions around procedures that influenced patterns of interactions. It is likely that other types of participant data beyond interview transcripts may have been helpful in portraying the most ecologically valid representation of these experienced interaction-derived perception links.

Future research should test the hypothesis that interpersonal connections between adolescents and adults forged within instructional interactions are strengthened when a concern with students' learning and the skill to effect that learning all come together in these transactional moments. This future research might map out and describe the different kinds of instructional interactions that occur between adolescent students and their teachers in urban high school classrooms and examine how variations within instructional interactions and patterns among instructional interactions link to the long-term educational significance of an adolescent-adult relationship.

Importantly, the conceptual model underlying the current study—positioning adolescent meaning making as the primary mechanism by which long-term educational significance is achieved—would remain central to this future research. In summary, a focus on proximal processes via instructional interactions within the microsystem of the classroom could powerfully inform frameworks for teaching and learning in urban high schools. Ultimately, this line of inquiry is about supporting engagement for both urban youth of color and the adults who teach them.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

Educational “Check In” and Student Profile Guiding Questions

How do you think others would describe you as a student?

How would you describe yourself as a student? What are your grades like?

On a scale from 1 to 10 with “10” being the best and “1” being the worst, how good is school right now?

Can you tell me a bit about that? What would make it [higher number]? What would make it [lower number]?

Overall, how important is school to you?

What are your plans after high school?

Who do you talk to about these plans?

Who do you live with? Does ___ talk to you about school? What kinds of things do ___ say?

Respect, Acceptance, and Support Across School-Based Social Bonds Guiding Questions [Manipulative—a set of three cards with “acceptance,” “respect,” and “support” written on them.]

I am interested in relationships/experiences with your kids at school. Can you put these characteristics in order in terms of how important they are to relationships with kids at your school? [Explicit placement explanations]

In what ways does respect matter to relationships with kids at this school?

In what ways does acceptance matter to relationships with kids at this school?

In what ways does support matter to relationships with kids at this school?

[Prompt: How did that experience shape your understanding of school?]

I am interested in relationships/experiences with your teachers at school. Can you put these characteristics in order in terms of how important they are to relationships with teachers at your school? [Elicit explanations for card placement.]

Wallace, Chhuon

In what ways does respect matter to relationships with teachers at this school?

In what ways does acceptance matter to relationships with teachers at this school?

In what ways does support matter to relationships with teachers at this school?

[Prompt: How did that experience shape your understanding of school?]

Instructional Practice Guiding Questions

I have a list of things here that some teachers do in their classrooms.

[Adolescent is provided a handout with the following instructional practices]

Lets me know how I'm doing in class

Helps me when I don't understand something

Knows how I learn

Tries to find things I have in common with him/her

Takes me seriously when I say/do something

Makes work fun

Helps me see the big picture

Are there things you would add to this list?

Which ones are important to you?

Explain to me why you feel these are important.

Can you provide me some details of times when you have experienced this kind of teaching in a class?

Which ones do you think your teachers could do better or more of?

How do these things relate to respect?

How do these things relate to support?

How do these things related to acceptance?

What is your favorite class in school? What makes this your favorite class? Can you tell me about the things you do in there? (probe instructional features of the classroom)

Can you tell me about a class that you like the least? What could make it better? (probe instructional features of classroom)

Teachers' Role in Student Identity Work Guiding Questions

A lot of students will say that adults in school, such as teachers, don't really know them. How true do you think this is? How true do you think this is for you?

Can you share with me a time in school when you thought "wow, this teacher really knows me"? Please describe what you were feeling.

How do these experiences with teachers shape your understandings of who you are?

How do these experiences with teachers shape your understandings of who you want to be?

Those are all the questions I have planned. Do you want to add anything you think is important that I missed? Thank you so much for your time.

Notes

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¹In this article, we use the phrases “students of color” and “youth of color” to describe individuals from nondominant communities that are typically well represented in urban schools. As scholars interested in bettering the opportunities for urban youth, we recognize that these terms are often employed as part of a racialized and deficit-oriented discourse of some social groups (see Ladson-Billings, 2000). We adopt the sociopolitical category to draw attention to the different racialized experiences that many non-White students endure in U.S. schools relative to White peers.

²Boykin and Noguera (2011) conceptualize these as “asset-focused factors” that create opportunities to learn.

³Tupac Shakur (1971–1996) was a well-known hip-hop artist whose work is increasingly used as part of educational pedagogy (see Dimitriadis, 2009; Duncan-Andrade, 2011). His rap lyrics often provide powerful metaphors for urban young people, particular youth of color.

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Proximal Processes in Urban Classrooms

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