

# The Temporal Expectations of Schooling and Literacy Learning

## JERMAINE'S STORY

*Catherine F. Compton-Lilly*

Compton-Lilly draws on a 10-year case study to explore what school literacy experiences offer, allow, and reject as youths construct identities as students and literacy learners.

“**M**y right grade is 11th grade.” Unfortunately, as he speaks these words, Jermaine, at age 17, has again been placed in the eighth grade and is headed for yet another retention at the end of the school year. Multiple retentions, being overage, not keeping up with the pace of instruction, and failing to meet grade level benchmarks (e.g., failing state ELA tests, low report card grades) have resulted in severe temporal mismatches that accompany being 17 years old and attending middle school. While Jermaine’s is a singular case, his story is not unique among African American male students attending schools in high-poverty communities (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012).

In the United States, policies related to grade level retention have a long and controversial history. As Labaree (1984) and Natriello (1996) noted, retention is a serious disruption to children’s educational trajectories. This disruption is particularly problematic and pervasive

for African American male students (Garibaldi, 1992; Owings & Magliaro, 1998).

In particular, Owings and Magliaro (1998) have noted that retention is not effective in remediating the performance of students and often has negative long-term effects. They argue that educators must seek interventions and alternatives to retention that support students with school success. However, retention is only one of several temporal disruptions that students face. Temporal disruptions involve times when students do not meet school expectations involving temporal markers (e.g., age, grade level), including not passing standardized proficiency tests, not being able to read texts at grade level, and not being promoted to the next grade level.

In this article I draw on the voices of Jermaine and his mother to tell one story, though I suspect that many readers have encountered similar students who have struggled to meet the temporal expectations of schooling, experienced multiple retentions, and eventually left school with limited opportunities and a diminished sense of ability relative to schooling.

Here I use the construct of *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 1981) to explore the temporal disruptions Jermaine faced as he moved through school. Although the term *chronotope* may be unfamiliar to many, the meaning



Catherine F. Compton-Lilly is an associate professor at University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA; e-mail [comptonlilly@wisc.edu](mailto:comptonlilly@wisc.edu).

and significance are likely to resonate with English language arts teachers. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotope is a literary construct that explains how people make sense of the characters that inhabit stories. Briefly, the ways authors access and use time and space invite readers to envision particular types of characters and genres of stories.

I invite readers to join me in drawing on the chronotope as a heuristic to analyze Jermaine's school literacy experiences, including temporal disruptions that affected the types of school trajectories that were offered, allowed, and rejected as possibilities for him. In short, students come to define themselves based on the ways they move through time and space in schools. Chronotopic analysis invites teachers to consider how students are situated in schools across time and to consider the effectiveness of the literacy interventions offered to students.

This analysis began with my experiences as Jermaine's first-grade teacher. Jermaine is one of seven students whom I followed over a 10-year period to explore how my students and their parents made sense of literacy and schooling across long periods of time (see Compton-Lilly, 2011). In the following sections, I briefly review Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotope and describe the methodology for the current study. I then focus on the ways time and space merge to present possibilities and limits related to change, the reversibility of events, connections and disconnections with historicized worlds, and opportunities for critique across Jermaine's school trajectory.

## A Theoretical Framework for Identity Construction: Bakhtin's Chronotope

One way to explore the temporal disruptions that Jermaine encountered in school is through the lens of the chronotope. Bakhtin (1981) adopted the term *chronotope*, which literally means "timespace," to explore how authors shape the narrative possibilities of novels by incorporating constellations of time and space. Specifically, Bakhtin argued that in literature, time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible," and "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (p. 84). Bakhtin located the essence of various types of novels in the ways authors position characters to act and interact within time and space. Although temporal disruptions (e.g., failing standardized tests, falling behind in reading, grade level retention) initially

drew my attention to the power of the chronotope for examining Jermaine's school trajectory, my current understanding of the construct of chronotope has situated temporal disruptions within larger constellations of time and space. In this article, I focus on four chronotopic dimensions that were among those identified by Bakhtin: (1) the amount and degree of change that is expected, conceivable, or possible, (2) the degree to which events are reversible, subject to renegotiation, or bound within fixed sequences, (3) the degree to which characters are connected to "real" and historicized worlds, and (4) the insights and critiques of everyday people.

Expected, conceivable, and possible changes for characters are conceptualized differently within different types of novels. In Greek adventure novels, despite the unfolding events and challenges, "the biographical life of the heroes does not change, their feelings do not change, people do not even age" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 91). By contrast, in the adventure novels of everyday life, points of metamorphosis reveal "*how an individual becomes other than what he was*" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 91, italics in original). Some types of novels allow reversibility. Some characters can use magic or power to reverse events; others cannot. The adventure novel is characterized by the "reversibility of moments in a temporal sequence and their interchangeability in space" (p. 100); sequence in the other types of texts are "irreversible...a closed circuit" (p. 120). Where some novels are situated in particular historical moments, others occur within nebulous temporal spaces—"once upon a time." Adventure novels suggest "no indications of historical time" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 91), whereas historical novels situate characters within history.

Although attending to the perspectives of everyday people may appear unrelated to time or space, clowns or rogues speak when their characters step outside the ongoing action or plot of the story (Bakhtin, 1981). In the novel of everyday life these characters are ideally positioned "for spying and eavesdropping on private life with its secrets and intimacies" (p. 125) and for naming "social contradictions" (p. 129). They "see the underside and the falseness of every situation"

*Authors shape the narrative possibilities of novels by incorporating constellations of time and space.*

(p. 159). These characters “pass through the everyday sphere of private life” (p. 129) but remain outside the temporal narrative of the story, talking back to the ongoing action. Although their voices often do not affect the novel’s plot, they contribute substantially to readers’ meaning construction.

I argue that the ways chronotopes define types of characters and novels constitute a powerful heuristic for considering how students are situated within the time and space of schooling and how students come to be defined by themselves and others. Ultimately, it is the chronotope that presents particular images of literate students and evokes possible literate and school trajectories. In particular, we can identify spaces where teachers might intervene, successes might be celebrated, and relationships might be developed that could contribute to revised school and literate trajectories. Finally, this analysis also has the potential to challenge problematic short-term policies and interventions (e.g., those related to retention, transition from high school) that can have significantly negative long-term effects.

## Methodology

### Research Times

According to Saldaña (2003), longitudinal research enables educators to view the breadth and depth of people’s life experiences and to document change. The case study presented in this article followed Jermaine and his family (pseudonyms are used for all people and places) over a 10-year period. I began the case study when I was Jermaine’s first grade teacher and concluded the study when he was 17 years old. Jermaine and his family participated in the study when Jermaine was 6, 10, 13, and 17 years old. The Table depicts a timeline for the project, noting the research phases and data sources. Although the study included my voice, as Jermaine’s first-grade teacher, and an interview with his English teacher during the final year of the study, this article focuses on the voices of Jermaine and his family members. Admittedly, Jermaine’s teachers might tell a very different story.

### Research Spaces

In first grade, Jermaine attended Rosa Parks Elementary School, where 97% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. The North-eastern city in which the school is located continues to struggle with unemployment, substandard housing,

a lack of quality physical and mental health care, the closing of local libraries, gang violence, and a proliferation of illegal businesses, including drug trafficking. It was also a community whose residents consistently demonstrated high levels of resilience, agency, and hope for their children’s futures. By high school, 7 of the 10 families remained in the study and attended schools in the district. Jermaine attended four different schools and lived in five different apartments during the course of the 10-year study. Although this information may suggest significant spatial change, all the schools were within the same school district and subject to the same institutional policies, and all the residences were located within a one-mile radius of Rosa Parks School.

### Research Participants

In first grade, Jermaine’s classmates often teased him about his dreadlocks and small stature. He was the youngest of three children and lived with his mother and father in an apartment near the school. Despite his participation in Reading Recovery in grade 1, by the end of the year Jermaine was approximately three months behind his peers. In grade 4, Jermaine was classified as having a “disorder of written language”; an IEP was written that prescribed resource- services.

His mother, Ms. Hudson, described doing “a lot” of reading with her own mother yet sometimes found school boring; she reported that she “failed” the seventh grade and did not graduate from high school. She enrolled in a GED program but left after a few weeks, explaining, “[I] didn’t like it...I guess it was just the long hours.” Ms. Hudson had worked previously as a home health care aide, but during most of the study she received disability benefits because of health problems. Mr. Hudson was a retired nurse and former jazz singer and drummer.

Jermaine was a social person who often spoke about his friends and enemies. In middle school, he won a talent contest as soloist with his church choir; he described himself as a good singer and discussed the possibility of auditioning for the *American Idol* television show. Jermaine was a member of the school’s wrestling and step teams and took boxing lessons at the local community center. He had an engaging sense of humor that he displayed during interviews when he bragged about registering his fists as lethal weapons and caricatured his teachers in entertaining and perhaps exaggerated ways.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Initially, I was interested in the concepts about reading held by Jermaine and his family. Literacy remained the focus of the research, but over time and across the research phases, the scope of the research broadened in response to students' and parents' comments about school, teachers, and their goals for the future. Jermaine's case study included interviews, classroom observations, field notes, reading assessments, state test scores, and writing samples (see Table).

All interviews with Jermaine and his family were audiotaped and transcribed; field notes were typed. I used data analysis programs to sort segments of interview and field note data into code sets based on patterns suggested by multiple readings of the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once interviews were coded, I revised, condensed, and combined these codes into categories. I combined code sets that were similar and re-sorted data from particularly large code sets to identify subthemes.

While coding contributed to my understanding of the data set and led to the identification of the various temporal disruptions, an additional round of analysis informed the chronotopic analysis presented in this article. Multiple readings of the data suggested that some aspects of chonotope, as described by Bakhtin

(1981), were particularly salient. This observation led me back into the data set to hand search for issues related to trajectory and temporal expectations; hand searching led to the identification of search terms (e.g., "failed," "fast," "catch-up") that were applied to transcripts using the Find function of Microsoft Word. These searches, alongside my intimate knowledge of the data set, led to the current analysis.

Jermaine was not the only student whose school trajectory was marked by challenges in meeting temporal expectations. In middle school, three of the students were a year behind in school, and Jermaine was two years behind. By high school, Jermaine and one other participant were placed in grade 8 at age 17.

## Researcher Reflections

As a teacher, I grappled with the temporal and spatial expectations of schools. When Jermaine was in first grade, the state education department cited our school for failing to meet state standards in grade 3 reading and math. I experienced the repercussions of teaching at a school that faced closure (e.g., imposed curricula, displaced administrators, surveillance by the state education department). Philosophically, I recognized the need for temporal flexibility; however, I also recognized the consequences that falling behind had on students (e.g., failing tests, retention, special education placement), teachers, and schools. As illustrated below, I was concerned that Jermaine's academic difficulties with reading and writing were not addressed despite repeated acts of agency on the part of Jermaine, his mother, and some of his teachers.

## Jermaine's Literate Identity: Change, Sequence, Historical Worlds, and Critique

Chronotopic analysis focuses on Jermaine's actions across time and space alongside the ways he makes sense of these experiences. It invites teachers to attend to literate trajectories in terms of expected, conceivable, and possible changes; fixed, malleable, negotiable, or reversible sequences; school experiences as connected/unconnected to real, historicized worlds; and the silencing of critical voices.

### Expected, Conceivable, and Possible Changes

Chronotopes invite teachers to attend to expected, conceivable, or possible changes that *should* occur as students move through school. Despite participating

TABLE Research Phases and Data Sources

Phases	Data Sources
Grade 1 1996–1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 4 parent interviews</li><li>• 4 student interviews</li><li>• Field notes</li><li>• Portfolio/classroom assessments</li><li>• Classroom discussions</li></ul>
Grade 5 2000–2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2 parent interviews</li><li>• 2 student interviews</li><li>• Reading assessments</li><li>• Writing samples</li></ul>
Grade 7 2003–2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2 parent interviews</li><li>• 2 student interviews</li><li>• Reading assessments</li><li>• Writing samples</li></ul>
Grade 8 2006–2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3 parent interviews</li><li>• 3 student interviews</li><li>• Reading assessments</li><li>• Writing samples</li><li>• School observations</li><li>• Teacher interviews</li><li>• Student-created writing, photos, audiotapes, journals, drawings</li></ul>

in Reading Recovery in grade 1, receiving resource room services beginning in grade 4, and participating in a computerized reading intervention in middle school, Jermaine continued to struggle with school-assigned reading tasks. In grades 4 and 8, Jermaine failed his state English language arts assessments. According to an informal reading inventory administered in grade 7, Jermaine read instructionally at the fifth-grade level. Three years later he continued to read at the fifth-grade level.

In elementary school, Jermaine consistently associated being able to read with being promoted: “If you know all the words you and read and...you can go to second grade. You gonna have to read when you go to third grade.”

In literacy classrooms, students are expected to learn material at an established rate. Jermaine identified teachers as contributing to his difficulties. In fourth grade, he complained about teachers who “only give us five minutes to do something”:

When they teach you so fast, you don't pick up that fast....They do like a week of this and then next week...[they] do something that's different....Cause I don't pick up stuff fast like the other kids...you gotta wait. Like do two weeks of it.

Around this time, Ms. Hudson worked with Jermaine's teacher to “confront” the school board and ensure that Jermaine received supplemental services. Jermaine was identified as a student requiring special education services because of a “disorder of written language.”

The year Jermaine repeated grade 7, he was assigned to a computer lab where he worked with a computerized reading intervention aimed at developing and strengthening the student's cognitive skills. Jermaine believed that if he completed this compensatory program, he would be promoted: “They let me know they had a program I could join and they could skip me up [to a higher grade].” As he explained, “I was like in eighth-grade class. They gave me eighth-grade work and everybody else seventh-grade work....I'm in the 9th or 10th grade now.”

During the following summer, Jermaine assumed he would be promoted to high school, saying, “I passed that program. I took the test for them, passed it, and they put me in 9th and 10th grade and into another program where I could take it again, and I could be in my right grade. My right grade is 11th grade.” However, when I visited Jermaine during the

next school year, Jermaine remained in seventh grade and his mother was frustrated. Although Jermaine had sat at the computer terminal, completed the assigned activities, and progressed through the program, he was not promoted.

A focus on keeping busy and task completion was also evident in his eighth-grade resource classroom. On the day I visited, the entire 45-minute class was spent making corrections on a paper assigned by Jermaine's math teacher. Jermaine spent half of the 45-minute period locating a working calculator and then struggled to get the numbers entered correctly. Bereiter (1997) refers to this situation as entailing a “limited time horizon” (p. 289)—a focus on completing assignments rather than learning and mastering the skills, strategies, and thought processes that would help Jermaine become a more successful reader or mathematician. As Bereiter explained, discourses in schools limit learning by focusing on short-term goals and task achievement rather than long-term commitments to knowledge building.

Despite being classified as a special education student and receiving various compensatory services, Jermaine remained behind his peers and never regained lost time. Jermaine was aware of his difficulties. In grade 4 he reported, “I can't read.” In seventh grade he explained, “[I'm] not that good a reader...that's why I don't read in front of people.” At age 17, he stated, “I don't like reading. It's not me.” While Jermaine consistently articulated his intention to attend college, “I prove to you I [will] finish school and get a good job,” his mother described his chances as “borderline.”

Failing tests, not keeping pace with instruction, and being retained resulted in Jermaine not fulfilling school expectations for achievement. Learning in school involved a “limited time horizon” (Bereiter, 1997, p. 289) that emphasized keeping busy. Jermaine was characterized as a slow learner, and the interventions provided did not focus on genuine learning, revealing assumptions about Jermaine's potential for learning.

### Fixed, Malleable, Negotiable, or Reversible Sequences

Chronotopic analysis addresses the degree to which trajectories are reversible or subject to renegotiation. Because Jermaine was among the lowest performing first-grade readers in the school, he was selected to receive Reading Recovery services. Reading Recovery is designed to accelerate the progress of the lowest

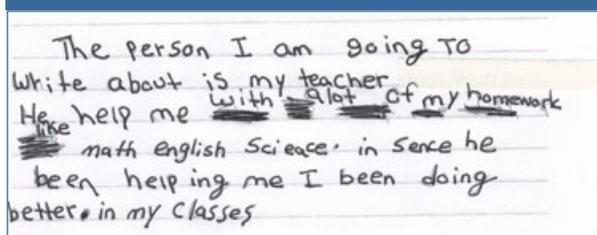
performing first-grade readers, enabling them to perform at levels commensurate with successful children in their classrooms (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2010). By midyear, Jermaine had raised his reading level to the average of the class and was beginning to progress with writing. This drastic increase in abilities suggested that his literate trajectory was malleable and that his progress could be accelerated. However, after Jermaine completed Reading Recovery, his reading abilities plateaued.

In grade 4, Jermaine recalled repeating grade 2: “The third-grade people be saying, ‘Ah-hah, you’re a second grader.’” Although Jermaine and his mother had been assured that Jermaine could be promoted to third grade if he completed summer school, he “acted up” and failed summer school. As his mother reported, “He just went to summer school for nothing.”

Despite his distress over being teased, three years later Jermaine similarly mocked a classmate in middle school, saying, “This boy he’s 7’5” and he’s in seventh grade. And he been there for *five years* in seventh grade!” Jermaine added, “Oh my God! He’s been in Tubman School [for] *seven years!*” When I asked Jermaine if he worried about that happening to him, he identified “trying hard to get my work done” as his preventative strategy.

Jermaine and his mother described some teachers as supportive (see Figure). In addition to his Reading Recovery teacher, he wrote about his resource teacher, Mr. Dennis, in grade 7. Jermaine described this teacher as helping him with homework and enabling him to do better in school. However, descriptions of supportive teachers became increasingly rare during his final years of schooling. Notably, Jermaine’s identity as a struggling reader was accompanied by successful literacy experiences. In particular, he enthusiastically identified the Bluford series by John Langan, Peggy Kern, and Anne Schraff—a set of mysteries written at the fifth-grade level and featuring African American and Latino/a youths—as books about “stuff that happens in real life.”

FIGURE Mr. Denis, Grade 7



The degree to which Jermaine’s school experiences were bound within fixed irreversible sequences was particularly well illustrated by his experiences in the compensatory computer program. While in that program, time was presented as malleable; Jermaine’s commitment to finishing assigned work and passing the tests did not change his school trajectory or result in promotion to high school.

As Jermaine reported at age 17, “If I was reading like when I was with ya’ll [in first grade and in Reading Recovery], [if] after I left that school, if I would have kept on reading, I would have been a real good reader.” Once Jermaine’s literate trajectory was marked by negative motifs (e.g., failing tests, retention, summer school, special education placement), not Jermaine’s interest in reading, his mother’s efforts, or some good teachers were able to change his literate trajectory.

### School Experiences as Connected to Real, Historicized Worlds

Chronotopic analysis allows teachers to consider the degree to which students are connected to real, historicized, economic, and politicized worlds. Participants rarely made explicit connections between school and the world beyond, but out-of-school expectations eventually caught up with Jermaine. At our final interview, Jermaine was 17 years old and still in the eighth grade. Although his girlfriend was pregnant, Jermaine was committed to staying in school, saying, “I’m not dropping out of school because I’m gonna have a baby.” Ms. Hudson disagreed; she expected him to leave school and enroll in a vocational program, saying, “How can you be a father and be sitting in the eighth grade?” As she explained, being a father meant that Jermaine needed to get a job.

Although Jermaine was drastically out of synch with the temporal expectations of schooling, the school district offered no viable options. It did not provide information about alternative schools, GED programs, transitional programs, or vocational programs. Jermaine’s parents identified Job Corps as a solution. The opening paragraph on the organization’s website reports that “Job Corps is a free education and training program that helps young people learn a career, earn a high school diploma or GED, and find and keep a good job.” Jermaine’s parents believed that Job Corps prepares students for jobs in engineering, masonry, and computer programming; however, a

search of the website identified training for cooks, maintenance technicians, recreation specialists, and substitute security officers—service professions rather than skilled vocational training.

Despite repeated retentions, Jermaine was prepared to return to eighth grade in pursuit of his diploma and resigned to leaving school only when his mother insisted. Notably, throughout the 10-year study, Ms. Hudson did not accept the school-imposed meanings associated with retention and special education. Despite her son's multiple retentions, low grades, and struggles with literacy, Ms. Hudson did not question Jermaine's ability or intelligence. Demands from the world beyond school eventually led her to revise her expectations. Being overage in school and confronting the economic demands of supporting a family while faced with limited employment options converged on Jermaine, leaving him without strong academic or vocational skills and few options.

### The Silenced Voice of Critique

Just as Bakhtin (1981) described everyday people (e.g., rogues, clowns, fools) as stepping outside the ongoing action of the story to present critique, challenge conventions, name hypocrisies, and reveal social contradictions, Jermaine often voiced critiques of his school and teachers. In fact, Jermaine was a master of invoking laughter, displaying irreverence, and highlighting the ironies of schooling. Over the course of the interviews, he regularly presented humorous, highly critical, and probably exaggerated descriptions of his teachers.

In the following example, Jermaine described an altercation with his seventh-grade science teacher.

I had, like, a red mark. [Jermaine points to his arm.] He [the teacher] goes and says, "Get away from me. You got a disease." He's like, "I don't want a disease from you. You got a nasty disease." I say, "I ain't got no disease....It's just like something bit me." He's like, "Disease. Get out my room." "Damn. I'm not getting out your room cause that's the stupidest thing cause I got a little mark on my arm and it's not no disease." "It's a disease! Shut your mouth. You got a disease." [Spoken in the voice of the science teacher.] "Mr. Lyons," [said Jermaine], "do not [blank] me off....I don't got no disease. I tried to be nice to you for so long. I'm the nicest person in the classroom until you make me mad." And he come and tell me he gonna shoot the desks and jack me up and told me to get out his class.

"Well," I said, "you put your hand on me one more time, I smack the crap out of you."

The story continued, with Jermaine describing hitting the teacher "dead in the face" with a book and getting suspended from school. Although the account was serious, it was told with humor, explicative-laced language, and amusing affect. Jermaine told similarly entertaining stories about a teacher who kept a "bong" under her desk, another who publically called Jermaine "gay," and another who admonished a classmate for smelling bad.

Although Jermaine's descriptions were not necessarily indicative of what truly happened, like the rogues and clowns of classic literature, Jermaine named ironies that accompanied a school trajectory characterized by stagnation and institutional neglect. In his more extreme critiques, teachers blatantly violated school norms and engaged in profoundly unprofessional practices. In these cases, Jermaine stepped outside the narrative, reflecting on his experiences and highlighting hypocrisies. Notably, Jermaine's critiques voiced during conversations with the researcher and among family members had no effect on his literate or school trajectory, just as the critiques of clowns and rogues in literature fail to affect the plots of novels.

### Discussion

I have drawn on the voices of Jermaine, his mother, and myself to tell Jermaine's story. Admittedly, other accounts could be told; stories told by Jermaine's middle school teachers might be very different. Chronotopic analysis provided a lens for focusing on Jermaine's long-term challenges and positionings. It also invites teachers to disrupt and complicate negative chronotopic messages that are offered to some students, challenges some of the chronotopes that operate in classrooms and schools, reveals structural policies that allow those chronotopes to continue, and asks teachers to consider how their own work contributes to, solidifies, and/or challenges existing chronotopes.

Certainly, Jermaine's story is not representative of the experiences of all African American male students. Yet, challenges associated with retention (Labaree, 1984; Natriello, 1996) and meeting the temporal expectations of school have disproportionately plagued African American male students (Garibaldi, 1992; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). Teachers alone cannot be blamed for the

chronotopes that operate in schools or for the policies that operationalize temporal policies, but we can ask them to name and challenge these policies and practices. I humbly offer suggestions for teachers that could reverse past failure, build connections with the world beyond school, and provide students with opportunities for their critiques to be voiced and heard.

### Possibilities for Change and Reversing Past Failure

Chronotopic analysis suggests that teachers must contemplate strategies for changing students' trajectories and reversing past failures. The current analysis suggests that change would entail helping Jermaine to learn the things he needed to learn to reclaim lost time and be deemed successful. Unfortunately, the interventions that were provided to Jermaine did not change his school trajectory. Retention did not help him to be a stronger reader, nor did it nurture passions and interests that could serve his future. Retention stigmatized Jermaine and separated him from his peers. Computerized reading programs and his experiences in the resource classroom entailed "limited time horizons" (Bereiter, 1997, p. 289) that neither changed Jermaine's school trajectory nor enabled him to catch up with his peers.

In this environment of high-stakes testing and scripted curriculum, it is easy for teachers to get caught up in practicing for tests or following scripts rather than helping students acquire authentic skills, strategies, and thought processes that are involved in learning to read or think mathematically. As professionals, teachers must challenge practices that hold little promise for reversing students' school trajectories or making substantive change in students' lives. Jermaine should have been provided with instruction from a highly qualified reading teacher capable of designing individualized instruction that would have enabled him to become a capable reader.

Admittedly, accomplishing such goals entails changing practices in schools and classrooms as well as increasing funding for education—actions that are increasingly difficult in schools as teachers are becoming ever-more vulnerable. When teacher effectiveness is measured through a combination of student test scores and administrator observations, and teachers' collective bargaining rights are increasingly threatened, teachers' voices are too often silenced and their attempts to advocate for students are thwarted.

**Make Connections With the World Beyond School**  
Teachers also need to attend to connections between their work with students and worlds beyond school. A "limited time horizon" (Bereiter, 1997, p. 289) focuses students and teachers on the short-term—completing particular assignments rather than thinking about how students are served in terms of their goals that extend beyond school. Jermaine's interests in music and urban literature (e.g., the Bluford series) could have been used as a catalyst to engage him in school literacy-learning activities. Unfortunately, school tasks were rarely connected to Jermaine's interests and passions.

In addition, few options were available to Jermaine, a 17-year-old father in the eighth grade, and his family. When he experienced repeated difficulties in middle school, attempts should have been made to address those difficulties or to provide him with vocational options that might have built on his strengths and interests. Although district and school policies are the ultimate culprits, teachers are often among the only witnesses to the challenges faced by students like Jermaine, and their voices must be heard.

Teachers must be able to name inequities and advocate for students. Vulnerable students need advocates (e.g., teachers, administrators, counselors) across time who not only work to address short-term challenges but also craft possible futures alongside students and their families. As advocates, teachers cannot be fearful that teaching evaluations and, ultimately, their jobs will be contingent on their silence.

### Provide Students With Opportunities to Voice Critique

Lastly, student and parent voices must also be heard. When Jermaine describes teachers who don't care and who treat him unfairly and without respect, his concerns matter whether they are true or false. Jermaine's critiques, and those voiced by his mother, reflect the perspectives of the people whom educators are hired to serve, and their perceptions of what we do is significant.

In English language arts classrooms, inviting students to voice their critiques might mean creating assignments that allow students to voice their opinions about topics that matter to them and their

*Teachers are often among the only witnesses to the challenges faced by students.*

## Take Action

### STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Talk to students about their past experiences in school and their hopes for the future.
- ✓ Be sure to connect with family members and former teachers. There are often stories to be told and latent talents to be explored.
- ✓ Consider the big picture. What is really important for a particular student? Completing a homework assignment or becoming a capable reader or thinker? What resources might be available to support students in meeting critical goals?

community. The local newspaper can become the source of personally relevant issues, and assignments might involve students researching concerns in their own communities. In addition, students must be invited to voice their opinions about school policies, practices, and experiences. Students and families bring critiques to school, and these voices need to be heard not only out of respect for students and their perspectives, but also because these voices have the potential to help teachers revise and refine their practices and policies.

Teachers cannot easily and individually craft pathways for students. Unlike novelists who can define the limits of the worlds in which they situate their characters—highlighting particular contextual elements and ignoring others—chronotopes in life operate with the full range of lived complexities, including social, cultural, political, economic, and societal fields.

Chronotopic analysis is a useful descriptive tool for revealing some of the ways time and space operate in literate and school trajectories. However, solutions are dependent on teachers and policymakers creating institutions that allow for variation in the pace and the sequence of instruction, providing opportunities for renegotiating assumed trajectories, attending to real worlds beyond school, recognizing students' critiques of their experiences, and providing teachers with the resources they need to support students. Perhaps most troubling is that, unlike the chronotopes of literature, chronotopes of schooling, and the identities suggested by those chronotopes, are real and have real effects on students' lives and futures.

### References

- Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), Emerson, C. & Holquist, M., (Trans.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (pp. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bereiter, C. (1997). Situated cognition and how to overcome it. In D. Kirshner & J.A. Whitson (Eds.), *Situated cognition: Social, semiotic, and psychological perspectives* (pp. 281–300). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2011). Time and reading: Negotiations and affiliations of a reader, grades one through eight. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 45(3), pp. 224–252.
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2012). *Reading time: The literate lives of urban secondary students and their families*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (1992). Educating and motivating African American males to succeed. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 61(1), 4–11. doi:10.2307/2295624
- Labaree, D.F. (1984). Setting the standard: Alternative policies for student promotion. *Harvard Educational Review*, 54(1), 67–87.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Natriello, G. (1996). Scholarship and practices: The case of research on promotion. *Teachers College Record*, 97(3), 357–361.
- Owings, W.A., & Magliaro, S. (1998). Grade retention: A history of failure. *Educational Leadership*, 56(1), 86–88.
- Reading Recovery Council of North America. (2010). *Reading recovery*. Retrieved August 31, 2010, from [www.readingrecovery.org/reading\\_recovery/facts/index.asp](http://www.readingrecovery.org/reading_recovery/facts/index.asp)
- Saldaña, J. (2003). *Longitudinal research: Analyzing change through time*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Tatum, A.W., & Muhammad, G.E. (2012). African American males and literacy development in contexts that are characteristically urban. *Urban Education*, 47(2), 434–463. doi:10.1177/0042085911429471

## More to Explore

### CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

#### BOOKS

- Compton-Lilly, C. (2012). *Reading time: The literate lives of urban secondary students and their families*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McLeod, J., & Yates, L. (2006). *Making modern lives: Subjectivity, schooling, and social change*. Albany, NY: State University Press.

#### ONLINE RESOURCE

- *Timescapes: An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Initiative* [www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/)