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Boys, Books, and Boredom: A Case of Three High School Boys and Their Encounters With Literacy

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Abstract

We examine the literacy gender gap through the documented experiences of three representative high schools boys and their teacher—how they view themselves as students, their dispositions toward schooling and education, and their engagement with literacy — as a way to further understand how literacy teachers can better work with them. We offer a case study analysis of the boys’ struggles with academic reading in high school reading classes aimed at addressing the needs of young people who read far below grade level in school. We highlight the multifaceted, complex nature of “struggle” or “reluctance” toward academic reading and argue that no one single factor drives or maintains reluctance. Instead, we demonstrate how cycles of narrow definitions of literacy and what it means to be literate, negative experiences with teachers, frustration with academic and social structures in schools, and difficult relationships at home all work together to perpetuate struggles with reading.

The U.S. Department of Education released a report in 2004 showing that boys scored 16 points lower in reading than girls. That same year, the National Endowment of the Arts published *Reading at Risk*, citing that book reading was down 12% for boys compared to 4% for girls between 1992 and 2002 (Froschl & Sprung, 2005). Those two reports exemplify numerous studies citing boys’

underachievement and ceasing engagement with reading in school. However, these forms of data can only offer limited information about student performance (Alvermann, Hagood, & Heron-Hruby, 2007; Weaver-Hightower, 2003; White, 2007). First, there is a disconnection between standardized practices in the classroom and young men's literate practices outside of the classroom. Second, test score gaps should not be the only indicators used to measure what is happening with boys; the disadvantages of boys shown on tests are but one piece of a complex puzzle and generally should be viewed as small, insignificant, or greatly overstated (Weaver-Hightower, 2003; White, 2007). In addition, although many boys are disproportionately at the bottom of these results, there are many more whose scores are spread across the spectrum, including at the top (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). What is surprising is that those who are labeled *struggling readers* by schools based on standardized assessments may not view themselves that way and voluntarily take part in literacy practices outside of school (Alvermann et al., 2007).

Overall, the gap in literacy between boys and girls is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Equally complicated is what can and needs to be done about it. The research suggests that boys may be more likely than girls to reject the school curriculum, seeing little connection to the reading they do outside of school, and therefore it is imperative to examine gender in relation to literacy contexts (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Recently, the assessment and accountability climate has driven curricula even further away from the needs and identity of boys. Consequently, because of this apparent widening gap between home and school literacy, boys' attitudes, self-concepts, and perceptions are negatively influencing motivation, undeniably leading some boys into a vicious cycle of reading failure and lack of academic progress (Alloway, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

(Re)Engagement in school: What researchers know about high school reading instruction

Struggling and reluctant readers tend to have a history of frustration and failure with reading in school (Casey, 2008/2009; O'Connor, 1997; Paterson & Elliott, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2004). Researchers point to a couple of common experiences among youth: (a) As students progress through elementary and middle-level grades (and eventually into high school), their experiences confirm their attitudes toward reading; and (b) those who continually encounter difficulty with reading repeatedly find themselves in unsuccessful situations, and these repeated situations of failure often cause feelings of anxiety, frustration, and eventually dislike for the act of reading. Stanovich (1986) called the compounding factors of failure, frustration, self-concept, dislike, and motivation the "Matthew effect." It

recursively develops low literacy achievement as students grow older. In order to counteract Matthew effects, students will create barriers to protect themselves against failure (Paterson & Elliott, 2006). Struggling students have low self-efficacy, and they believe that failure is just something that happens to them; they are passive learners and have a sense of learned helplessness (Heron, 2003). Anger toward the school or a particular course, which can manifest itself in acting out in class, is yet another barrier (Paterson & Elliott, 2006). A final barrier may be flat-out resistance as a way to refuse participation (Casey, 2008/2009). In sum, most students often resist activities that cause anxiety or a perceived incompetence. That in and of itself can limit success, no matter how skilled or expert a teacher of reading may be.

The deficit-laden view of boys and the label of *reluctant reader* does not account for interaction with literacies embedded in complex social and individual identities as well as family dispositions toward reading, peers, and school (Hinchman, Payne-Bourcy, Thomas, & Olcott, 2002; Love & Hamston, 2003; Young & Brozo, 2001). Although boys value reading in school, some may still reject it because it is at odds with the types of reading they do outside of school or because they favor other interests and academic pursuits not valued in the literacy classroom (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Boys exercise their agency in literacy based on what they value, and they seek practices and specific types of reading that carry for them an immediate purpose or investment in the here and now. They also tend to choose texts that complement their views of their own masculine identities at that age (Hinchman et al., 2002; Love & Hamston, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) documented how important purposeful reading is to boys. Four main principles important to boys for having creative, flow-like experiences with reading are a sense of control and competence, a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill, clear goals and feedback, and a focus on the immediate experience (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In connection to flow-like experiences, there are four recurring themes in the literature for teachers to address as ways to help readers reconnect in school: student choice, student motivation and self-efficacy, relational teaching, and active inquiry-based learning (Casey, 2008/2009; Heron, 2003; Moje, 2000; Paterson & Elliott, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2004). Sometimes those themes and strategies are successful, yet other times teachers who use them encounter meager results.

Casey (2008/2009), Heron (2003), and Smith and Wilhelm (2004) suggested that students should have choice over the texts they read, the assignments connected to those texts, and the assessment of their work. Choice allows students to read texts about subjects already familiar to them and about which they have some prior knowledge, motivating them to read more and persist with text. But choice may not ensure automatic success. Some struggling students claim that they do not like it when they are given a choice. They would rather have

teachers give them explicit instructions because it helps them understand what they are expected to do, especially on difficult tasks (Delpit, 1988; Heron, 2003). Another roadblock to choice is that students may only read familiar texts that are below their instructional levels. Also, teachers may broaden students' perspectives by encouraging them to read about unfamiliar topics, because in order to read a text to learn something new, students have to agree to read untried texts. Finally, a student may choose a text that is excessively difficult, causing that student continued frustration. Of course the research literature points out that choice may not really be a choice in that it is shaped by commercial markets (e.g., slasher books for boys, romance books for girls) and the sociopolitics of the classroom (e.g., the teacher's implicit view of formula books or peers' notions of what is "cool" and acceptable to read; Enciso, 1998; Finders, 1997; Lewis, 1998).

The research also posits that student motivation and self-efficacy are important. Teachers must find ways to motivate their students to want to read, such as scaffolding skills so that they perceive themselves as successful, helping students set individual goals, and developing background knowledge (Heron, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2004). However, motivating students can be quite difficult, and strategies for motivation may not work. Ultimately what reading teachers do is help students uncover the intrinsic rewards of reading, which is much more difficult to foster.

Relational teaching—caring about students and knowing them—helps teachers connect with their students and build trust in order to overcome challenge and struggle. That is the most prevalent theme in our literature review. When struggling and reluctant readers have teachers whom they trust, they are more likely to engage with reading (Casey, 2008/2009; Heron, 2003; O'Connor, 1997; Paterson & Elliott, 2006; Sarroub, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). However, the fear of failure or the difficulty of the challenge at hand might be more powerful than the relationship (Smith & Wilhelm, 2004). The teacher should be familiar with students' cultural capital—students' out-of-school literacies and other knowledge—and the influence it may have on their participation (or lack of participation) in reading (O'Connor, 1997; Paterson & Elliott, 2006).

The final theme suggested by the research is that teachers must use more active learning and inquiry-based instruction in their classrooms. For example, students learn from one another while also giving themselves some agency and power over the curriculum (Casey, 2008/2009; Heron, 2003; Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008; Smith & Wilhelm, 2004). Examples of these strategies may include literature circles, small-group work on assignments, and inquiry-based projects. Managing the groups and ensuring that all students are participating and equally doing work can be another roadblock for some teachers.

The research posits that if teachers use one or more of these four themes or strategies—choice, student motivation and self-efficacy, relational teaching, and active inquiry-based learning—in their classrooms, they will be successful at helping struggling and reluctant high school students learn how to read. In addition, researchers have suggested that successful reading teachers must be able to confront, challenge, and combat the feelings, emotions, and attitudes (or affect) about reading that students bring with them to high school (Love & Hamston, 2003; Paterson & Elliott, 2006). The temperament or frame of mind struggling students have with regard to reading is shaped by individual, family, peer, and institutional dispositions (Love & Hamston, 2003), although as C. Lewis (personal communication, September 2, 2012) pointed out, “in trying to challenge or combat emotion we fail to see how emotion can support learning in general and critical literacy in particular,” so there is room for alternative perspectives for what might work with struggling students.

Methodological perspective

Ongoing attention to boys’ literacy practices raises the following questions: Why do boys appear to be falling behind girls on standardized measures of reading and writing assessments? How do social and cultural constructions of masculinity influence boys’ sense of identity in school and with literacy, and how does that impact their motivation and engagement? Are teachers and schools operating in ways that either directly or indirectly marginalize boys? Ultimately is there really a boy crisis and, if so, for which boys? Experts asking these questions are arriving at multifaceted and oftentimes contradictory conclusions (cf. Epstein, 1998; Lopez, 2003). Furthermore, the complexities of the causes of apparent failure of boys in school are not entirely understood (Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Young, 2000).

As a high school teacher who regularly taught remedial reading and writing classes, Todd had been curious about the predominance of boys enrolled in these courses. Loukia, the university researcher, had wondered why there were increasing numbers of students in high school reading classes and growing numbers of classes devoted to reading. Our collaborative efforts to study these phenomena prompted us to better understand boys’ lifetime encounters with reading and writing, all of which appear to be layers of intricate complexity binding them to their current situation. We acknowledged the complexities and individualities of boys, their literacies, and their masculinities because of the serious implications they hold for boys’ literacy lives in school (Alloway, 2007; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 1997).

Data Collection and Analysis

Here we describe and analyze the unique individualities of three different boys and how they view themselves, their schooling, and their literate lives as a way to further understand how literacy teachers can better work with them. Through observation, interviews, and the analysis of school artifacts, we sought out the boys' perspectives, hoping to gain a better understanding of what it means to be a young man in a high school reading class. In recruiting the boys as research participants, we used a mixture of maximum variation with snowball/chain sampling. The maximum variation sampling strategy involved us as researchers purposefully selecting a sample of young people or contexts that best described or represented the wide experience related to the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed with a focus on common literate experiences.

A case study design was used to document the boys' literacy practices, and attention to the particulars of the case illuminated their construction of their identities across school, home, and work settings. We systematically carried out daily observations in Todd's high school English and literacy classes during a 2-year period. The initial observations made about the three boys led us to maintain regular contact with them in school and to construct semistructured interviews using Spradley's (1979) protocol for ethnographic interviews, and a domain analysis of the first interview generated questions for the follow-up interviews. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and open, exploratory questions. Participant observation was conducted in the contexts of the school and the classroom. The boys' engagement with various literacy tasks was coded during the year, and oral interactions and responses to various print texts were also analyzed. Informal reading inventories (Johns, 2007) were conducted with them to determine their approximate reading levels. Artifacts such as schoolwork samples, personal work samples, grade point averages, and biographical information were collected. After every encounter with or observation of the three focal boys, Todd wrote a set of field notes that he shared with Loukia on a weekly basis. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) defined *open coding* as the process during which "the researcher reads field notes line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate" (p. 143). The themes identified in the open coding are also referred to as *emerging themes*. The next step of analysis of field notes, called *focus coding*, also requires the researcher to go over the fieldwork line by line. However, that type of coding allows for a clustering of the emerging themes into a smaller set of main themes on the basis of the topics identified being of particular interest. According to Emerson et al., in-process memos are generated as the product of the examination by researchers of recently written field notes in order to identify and develop particular interpretations, questions, or themes. In-process memos may also help adjust

fieldwork procedures and determine follow-up actions during the data collection process. Constant comparative analysis was used to examine the data, including the daily in-process memos and weekly analytical memos as well as the coding of field notes by both researchers. Todd conducted the interviews with the boys, and Loukia, using domain analysis (Spradley, 1979), parsed through the interview data, which were collected through both formal interview sessions and informal conversations. She looked for the key terms the boys used that elaborated their experiences with literacy practices and learning. She then organized those terms into domains reflecting the boys' particular dispositions toward school, their families, and their literacy work in Todd's classes. The analysis of the interview data was triangulated with the analysis of the field notes, thus providing thematically coherent and holistic portraits of the boys' perceptions and experiences as students and literacy learners. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study in reference to people and places described in the study.

Entrée Into Todd's Literacy Classes

Todd first met Harry when the boy and his mother walked into his classroom during Open House, which took place one afternoon before the school year began, and parents and their children could pick up class schedules, explore the school, and visit classrooms to meet teachers. Harry and Todd immediately engaged in conversation about cats—his shirt was emblazoned with a giant picture of one. Todd described Harry as an energetic guy with a terrific smile. Harry quickly exclaimed his dislike for English and reading, saying that they were classes of historic struggle for him. His mother expressed immediate pleasure that Todd was his teacher; she said she was excited that Harry would have a younger male teacher who she felt would be better able to understand her son. She suggested that old and jaded teachers with whom Harry was unable to relate had caused Harry's middle school struggles.

Todd's initial meeting was memorable, and the more he learned about Harry as a student, the more he became increasingly fascinated with him as a student. Harry was enrolled in Todd's adjusted section of English 9, a course called English 9E—with modified objectives for readers identified to be reading at the third- to fifth-grade levels. As Harry's teacher from Terms 1 and 2 of that year, Todd noticed moments of reading success beyond the fifth-grade level, but he also identified problems with decoding and reading fluency. In class Harry often complained about reading, expressing his dislike for the activity.

Jesus, a student from the same class, also attended Open House, but he quietly walked into the classroom with three of his peers and no adult. Jesus was more reserved and did not say much, seemingly more interested in figuring out where his classes were than with talking to Todd. He was awkwardly polite

and shy, direct, and concise. He did not linger long enough for Todd to learn much about him.

In class, Jesus was a conscientious student who generally followed directions and was attentive and diligent with reading assignments. Usually one of the first students to offer an answer or volunteer during class activities, he seemed less reluctant than most of the students in class to talk; however, his skill level was somewhat inconsistent—which could be caused by his identified learning disability or the fact that English was not his first language. Jesus rarely expressed disinterest or dislike for reading, making us curious as to why a student engaged with reading was placed in a class in which target instruction was far below his grade level.

Derek, an 11th grader, was a student in another class Todd taught, General English. The course was for juniors and seniors who had not yet passed the district writing graduation demonstration exam; the goal was to provide students with a literacy experience to help them develop skills that met the writing standard. Derek arrived late to class the first day of school, walking in quietly and unassumingly. He spoke quickly, in short bursts and with a scowl on his face, asking whether there was going to be a seating chart in the class. When Todd said no, Derek said, “Good,” and then he promptly sat in a seat, slouching down and crossing his arms across his chest.

Derek often seemed to be disengaged in class. He appreciated Todd’s moments of sarcasm, and we quickly learned that cynical remarks and jokes were the way to bring a smile to his face. His moments of detachment were countered with times of serious literacy involvement. One day during a mini-lesson devoted to creative techniques, Todd gave students a handout with examples from published authors. One technique was a nameless character description, and after Todd read the three lines from the handout, Derek animatedly pointed to a line, saying it was about Hagrid from the Harry Potter series. We were surprised because it was difficult to identify that line of description without having read the book. Derek expressed that he loved reading the Harry Potter book, and we were intrigued by his enthusiasm.

Thematic findings: Three representative cases of boys in high school reading classes

Harry

“I’M NOT GOOD AT MAKING FRIENDS”: IDENTITY AND SOCIAL LOCATION

At the time of his first interview Harry was a 14-year-old ninth grader grappling with peers and friendships and a complex family history. He lived with his grandfather, mother, and twin brother Jack in an affluent area of the city. His mother was finishing her last year of medical school as a full-time resident at one

of the city's hospitals. From his mother's first marriage, Harry had two half-siblings, a sister, age 26, and brother, age 30. Harry described his older sister as "one of his moms" or a "godmother" who occasionally resided with him when his mother was not present. Harry's father, a top executive for a gas company, lived in California, was remarried, and paid Harry's mother child support. Harry visited his father twice a year; from his father's current marriage, Harry had a half-brother who was 3 years old. Harry had lived in four different states.

Harry described his twin brother Jack reverently: an athlete who worked out, lifted weights, and was an expert at video games. Harry said that people who had not met Jack had misconceptions about him because of his status as a Major League Gamer for the game *Call of Duty 4*. Harry noted that peers' notions of Jack's online status caused them to assume that he was a "nerd," but when they met him they "[saw] how cool he looks because he lifts." Even though he described Jack favorably, Harry spoke briefly about conflicts they had, saying his brother "starts stuff," yet his mother was never around to see the origin of those fights. Harry claimed that their arguments centered on Jack being "a hog of everything," including an Xbox gaming system, which Jack used exclusively until Harry received one of his own.

Harry described himself as someone who had difficulty making friends, attributing this to speaking his mind. Harry often spoke of his contentious social life and troubles with peers, all of which started when Harry was in seventh grade at Risdale Middle School. Harry said that he was "really cool" among his peers and enjoyed skating during his free time, going to skate parks, dressing in the "skater" style, and listening to "skater" music. But then a fellow student whom Harry called "a pretty bad kid" and who was a member of a band and did not like skaters began to make fun of Harry for his interest in music and clothing. Harry viewed this student as having the ability to turn many of his friends away from him, and arguments about music, clothing, and interests erupted on a regular basis. Because of these problems

Harry wanted to transfer to Yankton Middle School to get away from his negative peers at Risdale, but his mom "never put effort into trying" to initiate the change. In choosing a high school, Harry elected to attend one within a different neighborhood boundary from his own because many Risdale students, including his twin brother Jack, chose the neighborhood high school. However, Harry's choice of a different high school did not result in better peer relationships, and he reported being unable to find peers with whom he could associate. He interacted with Xbox gamers but he did not "hang out with them." Xbox seemed an important space in which Harry encountered success and spent the majority of his free time.

Harry's strong sense of social conscience seemed to guide his interactions with all peers. Multiple times Harry described situations when his peers offended him with their gender-biased remarks. This happened indirectly in classes when fellow students made degrading remarks about gay people and directly when

Harry was targeted for having his ears pierced, something that his sister had helped him do when his mother agreed it would look nice with his hair. In addition his friend did not believe Harry's claims about Jack's gaming status and accused Harry of lying, frustrating Harry to no end. Although he seemed perplexed and frustrated by those events, he also dismissed hateful or judgmental peers.

"TRYING" VERSUS "TRYING TO TRY": MIXED SUCCESS IN SCHOOL

I try to try, but again, like, the homework is just overwhelming. I actually have . . . I think I'm going to start getting my homework done more because of something actually some kid in your class said to me on Xbox live. Uh, you know uh, Cole, that's his little brother . . . Mason? He said to me, "There's something called doing your homework after dinner. It's a pretty good invention." So, like, I just decided that I'm going to do my homework after dinner from now on.

Harry disliked school. His first semester of freshman year was better than the subsequent one because he had some "cool teachers" and liked some of his classes. Harry perceived himself as unsuccessful during the following semester because he was not trying, yet he was conflicted about whether he was a good student in school. His mixed success between the first semester and the second semester was troubling for him. In an interview Harry mentioned learning how to write paragraphs for the first time in Todd's class in addition to learning to write dialogue and to use quotations. Harry described learning how to read new words that he had not encountered in the past.

Harry also complained about teachers, specifically Mrs. Shanahan. He said she "made a scene" about everything and often got upset with him. One interaction occurred when he wore a mushroom necklace acquired from "some inappropriate store" that was given to him by his mom's friend. Mrs. Shanahan asked him to remove it because it was drug related, and Harry claimed he reluctantly did so. He was unclear about why it represented drugs. Harry said the other students would target him, making fun of him because he was frequently "called out" by the teacher in front of the entire class. He then questioned whether he wanted to attend class:

There's positive energy and negative energy. There's so much negativity that runs through Mrs. Shanahan's class that my mind just goes crazy. Like I almost broke down in tears in class today when they were making fun of me. I almost got up and walked out. But I would get in so much trouble. I don't know where I would go to. I don't know. Like every

morning I run through my head, should I ditch that class, but I know I shouldn't. But like, it's just like, I don't know.

Harry depicted this English class as ruining his day because of the problems he had with his peers, to the extent that he started skipping school at least 1 day a week. He said, "I'm afraid to come to the class and get judged." He gave his mother several reasons why he did not attend, ranging from staying home to complete homework to made-up illnesses. When he stayed home he played video games all day. Harry said he constantly wondered what his school day would be like if he did not have to go to his English class. "It drags on me. It's like something that follows me and just never will go away. It's like . . . I don't now . . . I can't, I can't, like right now I can't even get it off my head." Harry said that the class would be better if there were nicer students in it.

Aside from difficulties with other classmates and not liking his current English class, Harry said he was not trying in school because "there's so much that runs though [his] mind and [he couldn't] focus and [he] just [didn't] care." Harry defined "trying" in school as actually doing his homework, saying if he just did his homework, then he would be able to pass his classes. He attributed his failure to lack of homework completion and not caring. But trying in school was not the only factor Harry cited as an influence on his lack of success. There seemed to be a distinction between what Harry called "trying" and then something he called "trying to try." When talking about his Civics class he said the following:

I could try to try . . . I could give it my all and my best but if I like . . . just like there's so much stuff that runs through my mind in that class . . . like it's like she expects way too much out of us, but she's an amazing teacher. She just expects way too much.

Harry defined "trying" in school as success: He was successful when he could complete the assignments and homework given to him by his teachers. "Trying to try" meant failure in school: He was unsuccessful when he became overwhelmed with the amount of work teachers gave him and in spite of how hard he tried, he was unable to succeed.

Harry talked favorably about "trying" for teachers whom he liked. Good teachers were those who didn't "favor" certain students and were fair. He also said that good teachers knew how to grab students' attention and keep them engaged. Harry enjoyed classes in which teachers allowed him to interact with his peers and work on group projects. Bad teachers were those who inadequately explained concepts in ways he could understand, overwhelmed him with assignments to the point of frustration, and ignored (or were unaware of) social dynamics in the classroom, leading him to be ostracized.

"I NEVER REALLY WAS THAT GOOD OF A READER": VARIED NOTIONS OF READING

I never really was that good of a reader. I was . . . I never grew around an environment where everyone read. My dad would say . . . like, try to teach me how to read. But I had . . . I think the only time I ever knew about him reading to me was when I saw a picture of it. I mean . . . like if my parents weren't always fighting and actually reading to me, I bet I would have been a little better reader.

Harry did not view himself as a reader. Beginning at a young age, he said that he thought he could read but he was not good at it. Harry's earliest memories were of his parents fighting, and he hypothesized that he might have been a better reader if his parents, specifically his father, had read with him. In school, Harry recalled learning words in kindergarten, but he was unsure that he was able to decode the words. "I mean, I don't think I honestly learned how to read until like the second grade." His most vivid, early learning memories were about math, not reading.

Those early childhood reading struggles influenced Harry's negative perceptions and disengagement with literacy, informing his disposition toward reading in high school. Harry expressed a strong dislike for reading, viewing it as boring, noting that he often grew impatient with detailed storylines of rising and falling action. He wanted stories to quickly "get to the good part." Harry said he liked to read about unordinary topics, what he called "creepy" or "kind of weird." An example that he enjoyed was the short story "The Most Dangerous Game" in Todd's class. The story is a thrilling adventure about a man who is stranded on an island and then hunted by a man who inhabits it. Newspapers were also appealing because he liked to learn new information, especially about people getting arrested and other strange events. Sections of the newspaper that were unappealing to him included those about politics, the economy, or other world events, because problematic issues caused him worry.

Harry spoke favorably about teachers who read aloud to him in school. He likened those experiences to watching a movie. Harry also spoke favorably of a former friend who used to read aloud to him when Harry visited his house. The friend would sometimes read excerpts out of a *Larry the Cable Guy* book. Harry expressed different sentiments when he was asked to follow along with the text while someone read aloud; the words became a distraction, leading to his inability to focus. He reported losing his place and struggling to follow along with the words. Harry was acutely aware of his difficulty with words. Getting caught up in and stumbling over text were problems he thought his peers did not experience. He enjoyed being in Todd's English 9E class because other students were more like him.

What I liked about this class is when you were called on to read, you could screw up 'cause everyone else screws up. Then all of my other classes are like "the chronologicals of the physical . . . blah, blah, blah." And I'm like "The du . . . du . . . duck cr . . . crossed the br . . . bridge."

Decoding and reading fluency were areas of struggle for Harry. Reading independently was only enjoyable for Harry under certain conditions: a quiet and calm classroom. Aside from reading the newspaper, Harry explained that he had read only two books independently: the first Harry Potter book and parts of *Twilight*.

Jesus

"I HAVE A LOT OF FRIENDS": RELATIONSHIPS AND CAMARADERIE

Jesus was a 14-year-old freshman born in Moroleon Guanajuato, Mexico. He and his family entered the United States when he was 5 years old, and Jesus attended school in New Jersey for a short period of time before attending first grade in Midwest City at the age of 6. Spanish was Jesus's first language, and he was labeled a Level 1 English language learning (ELL) student until he was 10 years of age, at which time he was put in Level 2. He remained a Level 2 ELL student until the age of 12, when his family signed a form waiving ELL services for him.

Jesus lived with his family—mother, father, and two sisters, ages 13 and 7—in Midwest City's most urban neighborhood and chose to attend Scooter High School, not his neighborhood school, several miles away. At the time of our data collection, Jesus also had an older brother in his mid-20 s, married and with two daughters and a son soon to be born. Jesus's father worked at Leeper Foundry, a company that manufactured iron castings for construction and municipal industries. His mother was not employed.

Jesus described positive relationships with friends at school, noting that the best thing about school was his group of friends. A group with whom he associated was interested in biking exploits Jesus called "crazy stuff," which included racing, completing tricks, and amazing feats. He spoke fondly of those activities. "Like one time, we raced and there was like five of us and I crashed into my friend and our bikes were stuck together. And our three friends didn't notice so we had to wait until they came back." Many of his biking friends were skilled at the level of being sponsored by companies and attending official "trick" competitions and "racing" events. Jesus also had a bike, but he had only attended one of those events and had never participated. In addition to biking, he also reported enjoying other activities with his friends, such as playing soccer and basketball. They also enjoyed going to the mall to "hang out" or watch movies.

Video games was one of his top passions, and he owned almost every video gaming system: Sony Play Station, Play Station 2, Play Station 3, Portable Play Station, Nintendo 64, Xbox, and Xbox 360. Jesus appreciated video games that challenged him, and they were a way for him to play against his friends online, showing expert skill. He explained that Final Fantasy VII Crisis Core was his favorite video game: "You play as this guy who has these swords and powers and you go on missions and it's kind of hard. I like hard games. Because I like to see how long it takes to beat it."

A passion for fixing cars was an increasingly important focus in Jesus's life and future endeavors. He expressed interest in becoming a body shop designer and owning a car shop after high school because his uncle, whom Jesus occasionally visited in Chicago, had his own body shop business. Whether alone or together with his father or brother, Jesus liked working on cars in order to learn more about them. They worked together to fix family vehicles—either those of his parents or brother—repairing engine problems or installing upgrades. His family purchased a 1995 Ford Mustang Convertible for Jesus, and he spent a significant amount of time working on it. He expressed a desire for auto design classes in school so he could continue to learn.

"RIGHT NOW, I'M OKAY IN GRADES": ADEQUATE AS ACCEPTABLE

"Well, I'm not the best, but I'm not bad so I would put myself in the middle. I don't do bad but not great." Jesus thought of himself as successful because he had a lot of friends and was earning passing grades. He earned "okay" grades and viewed himself as an average student. He did not identify with students who he said skipped school and did poor work, but he was also unable to identify with high-achieving, "great" students. For Jesus, a good student was one who attended school every day, turned in completed work, and attempted to work to the best of his or her ability. He expressed that doing well in school meant not flunking any classes.

Even though Jesus thought he could do well in school, he encountered some experience with failure and expressed apprehension about certain classes: "Well some of the classes are hard work. Some classes like physical science, she would give us this huge packet every day." Hard, strenuous, or difficult work alone was not what soured his perceptions of classes. Rather, he resented the amount of work, which consumed his time. Jesus described being receptive to putting forth the effort required—even if it challenged him—but he expressed frustration with teachers who assigned a lot of work outside of the classroom. He often failed the classes in which too much work was assigned.

Teachers were integral to Jesus's sense of achievement. He framed bad teachers as those who gave him a "hard time" and used him as an example in front of the class without his permission. He believed that some teachers picked on him

and he viewed them as flunking him (i.e., as in his physical science teacher). He said she did not like him

for a lot of reasons, but mostly because of the last test. I got done and my friend and I were talking and she said she was giving me a 15%, and I got mad because there were two girls in the back talking and she didn't do anything.

Good teachers were described as those who were able to "get along with their students" and "have a good time," which meant they aided students with their work. Not only were good teachers helpful, they were also able to relate to students, often relaxing and laughing with them. Jesus's favorite class was Fitness for Life because he enjoyed playing games, but he expressed not liking the "health part" because he was expected to read and write. He did not like the amount of work he had to do in the class, such as take notes when the teacher was speaking. Even though he noted Fitness for Life as his favorite class, he was unable to articulate what he was learning aside from saying, "Right now we're all talking about how fitness can help your life."

"WELL, I'VE GOTTEN BETTER; I THINK I'M PRETTY GOOD": READING FOR LIFE

Jesus viewed himself as an improving reader. When he talked about reading in the past, he said, "I used to read pretty slow and not understand the words but now I'm a lot better." Reading to him meant the speed at which someone could read something along with understanding the text. Regarding reading as enjoyment, Jesus said that he described himself as someone who occasionally liked books. He recalled many types of books he appreciated, and at the time of the interview he was reading *Monster*. It was a choice book that he selected to read for his English class during sustained silent reading because the story seemed realistic. Books had to be "cool" for him to be excited about them. He spoke of other high-interest books that he read in school, expressing an interest in reading independently for short amounts of time in English classes. He said that reading time is what helped him get better at reading. However, Jesus also spoke of reading as a "boring" activity when he had to do it for long periods of time. Struggling with reading happened when he encountered a topic of little interest to him or when "the words [were] hard to understand." Also when certain students were in class with him, he could be easily distracted during reading time, and that made reading unappealing.

Reading was also viewed as an important out-of-school activity. Jesus thought of reading as a practical activity for playing video games because many of the characters or games "don't talk so you have to read it." He said reading was necessary for letters or the mail and for cooking a recipe. Home was described as a print-rich

environment with Harry Potter and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books. He could not recall having been read to as a child, and he said that his mother never read. His dad often bought books about cars, or car manuals, in order to understand how to fix a vehicle he repaired. He would often read the same car books as his dad: "If we're both working on a car, he'll ask me to read the manual to him for help."

Derek

"WE DON'T REALLY SEE EACH OTHER THAT MUCH": FAMILY AND WORK

Derek lived with his mother and father, yet when he spoke about his family it was usually in reference to the constant turmoil that was present there, especially the fights he had with his parents during his middle school years. He explained that he didn't see his family very much because all three were working—his parents during the day and he at night after school. The fighting decreased, partially due to the fact that he was now older and had a job. In the rare circumstance in which he and his parents were all home together, they ate dinner and then separately watched television. "We generally get along. Um, it depends. Sometimes we don't and sometimes we do. It's changed a lot since I've grown up. Before, I didn't even want to go home because we always fought so. I like going home now."

In middle school, Derek's fighting with his parents became intense enough for him to leave the house and wander around at night in the neighborhood. "It got so bad that either one of us would have to leave the house or my mom would go crying to her room, and I would end up leaving or going downstairs." He did this to wait for his mother to go to bed, because he could not tolerate being around her. He and his parents would fight about everything, from school matters to advice they gave. He noted that he would try to do what his parents told him, and then they would change their minds or tell him they wanted him to do something different, upsetting him and leading to yet another clash. He said they would even argue when he brought homework home to ask for their assistance.

Derek attributed the fighting to his seeking more independence as an adolescent. With each change in his life, he and his parents would quarrel about the particular situation, and then it would eventually improve with time.

As I turned like 16 or 17 and started driving then it kind of quit but then after I got a job it happened for a little bit until they got used to my hours because they didn't like me coming home at like 2:00 in the morning after I got done closing. Now things are looking up for the best because they're understanding, and they are understanding that I'm not like five anymore.

At the time of the study Derek worked 40 hr a week at Buffalo Wild Wings during the evenings, after school, and on weekends. He was a cook who took the lead by preparing the kitchen at the beginning of every shift, then cooked orders all night long, staying until 10:00 or later depending on how busy the restaurant was. The job was important to him, and he took pride in his ability to run the kitchen. He looked forward to going to work and making money for himself.

"I'M A DIFFERENT TYPE OF STUDENT": TROUBLE, TEACHERS, AND TUMBLING THROUGH SCHOOL

I'm a different type of student, I think because I have changed over the years and I do my work but at the same time I don't do anything in class. I do what I need to do and that's it, and I don't try to do extra, extra stuff. I don't know how to explain it. I'm just a different type of student.

Derek had a history of getting into trouble at school. In addition, school had never been easy for him, and being unable to remember lessons had increased tensions and discomfort. Finally, he simply did not invest any time into school and recounted stories of troubling events with what appeared to be little remorse or emotion, as if he were disconnected from the issues of his past. His first school was a Catholic grade school, and he talked openly and in a matter-of-fact way about the troubles he had there until he was kicked out, later transferring to the public middle school. "Um, it built up over time. I had a very big record of terrible, terrible things. I got into a lot of fights."

The final incident that led to his expulsion from the school was urinating in a milk carton. Derek was adamant about not being the student who was guilty, that he was with some friends who participated in the event. He said they all had watched an episode of the television show *The Family Guy*, in which one of the characters defecated in a musical instrument, and they wanted to emulate the scene in their own way.

This school was ready to kick me out. I was on my last strike, so I just took the blame for it and everyone else just blamed it on me. So when I went to the principal's office, the principal was like, "Derek, we're going to have to get rid of you," and I was like, alright.

In recalling the incident, Derek seemed unable to see the seriousness of being kicked out of a school. His parents, however, were devastated. Derek talked about both how they valued his attendance at this school and how somber they were when called to a school meeting one evening. They tried to talk with him about the gravity of the situation, but Derek spoke with levity about the contrast between his and his parents' reactions to this meeting.

So I had to go in there like six o'clock at night. My mom and dad are like all dressed up, and I was just like in regular clothes like I don't really care. I was standing in the kitchen and I remember my mom saying, "Don't you have butterflies?" And I was like, what are you talking about? Like I really didn't care, like, I was just standing there like this is normal, let's do this, you know. I didn't even get to sit in on any of the meetings when I was suspended. I had to sit in the library and finally when I got called into the office, they're like, Derek, you have one choice. Either you can leave or when you are here, you are on lockdown, like you are not going to be able to do anything. I was like, see you later, I'm leaving. This school sucks. Goodbye. So I spent a week at home and then I went to Burrow.

At his new public middle school and high school, Derek continued to have trouble behaving appropriately both in and out of classes. That was especially true during his first 2 years of high school.

Coming from my first year here and in middle school I didn't really care about anything or anyone. I cussed at a lot of teachers, I threw stuff, I didn't show up for class, I didn't care about homework, I ripped it up. If you called my parents, I would yell at you. I got sent to the office on a daily basis and if you tried to punish me, it didn't work. I just walked away. It was bad. It was really bad.

School was a place in which he resisted any authority. He often struggled to get along with his teachers because they angered him. On a bad day, he was prone to being unable to tolerate teachers' requests.

I don't like teachers that get on my back about the littlest things, that like to send me to the office easily, that take my phone a lot, telling administrators about stuff that I didn't even do, just really makes me mad. And it is all depending on the day too because sometimes I just don't really want to put up with anything.

Although Derek was quick to claim teachers as the factor he attributed to his inability to function well in school, he did allude to some personal responsibility for his own actions, saying that sometimes teachers caught him at the wrong time or were unable to sense that he was in a bad mood. He would say that he was more agitated on certain days and times than others.

Derek talked about his success and failure in school as being dependent on teachers' initial perceptions of him.

I seem to have a different connection with teachers. I think teachers just know and they can see something different when they see me. Like when I come to classes I just sit in the class and some teachers will just

like leave me alone and not say anything or they will just try to be super funny towards me. They won't just be like normal . . . some kids will get yelled at . . . some teachers just make jokes all day. I don't know if it is just that teachers talk and they find out things about students but ever since my first year here, teachers have acted different towards me. I don't know why. Maybe it is just because you guys talk or maybe just because I'm a different student.

He appreciated teachers when they connected with him and when he perceived them as treating him with care and dignity. He spoke openly about the importance of a teacher's ability to know what is right for each student based on the context of the situation.

I think a good quality of teachers is that they can read students the first day. They way they act, you know, they know how to approach them in different ways. I like to be approached a certain way and not every kid is the same. I think a good teacher knows when to approach them, when to leave them alone, and when to like send them out of the room and when not to.

Derek had strong opinions about teachers, yet he was equally open about his difficulty in learning in school. He acknowledged that his struggles with learning were another way to explain why he was different from others and one who was not easy to teach. He often could not remember lessons, and he wondered about his ability to learn certain subjects.

I'm really difficult, um, there are a number of things that aren't easy. Um for some reason I can remember like how to make everything at work but I can't remember how to do a math problem to save my life. I'm a really hard learner, I don't know how I learn. I can be physical one time and then I have to be hands on or I have to see things. I don't know my one particular strategy for learning.

Because Derek often forgot the lessons of the day, he often struggled to complete homework. In the past, he had tried to get his parents to help him with homework, but they were unable to do so, and he stopped asking them for their help. His past experiences at home working on schoolwork erupted into tension and fighting, so he never did homework. He would then wait to get help from a teacher.

When I get home and I don't understand the homework, I just put it off until tomorrow and I make something up and I get to go to RBD [Resource for Behavior Disorders] and hopefully Mrs. Sazama is there to help me. I don't like to ask my parents for help because I don't like sitting there and waiting for them to look through the whole entire book when I can just go down to one of my teachers and they can help me

right then and there because they know what they are doing. So I just wait to do it at school and if I need anything I just come in early.

"I JUST DON'T LIKE READING. IT JUST SEEMS TO MAKE THINGS HARD."

Reading did not give Derek a feeling of confidence. From his earliest memories of learning to read as a child through high school, reading was an activity that caused him struggle and boredom. He coped by reading as quickly as possible, skipping words, and never being deliberate about making sense of the words on the page. On the rare occasion a text would capture his attention, reading became pleasurable, and interest was the gauge he used to judge it as a valuable activity because he overwhelmingly found it to be uninteresting and difficult. He was bored and inept at it.

Reading makes me feel like . . . I don't know. . . sometimes it makes me feel like good and other times it makes me feel like I do not want to read anymore. This is really boring. I really want to leave. So, sometimes it just really makes me feel down and depressed. Like if it is boring, sometimes it will just put me to sleep. I will just fall asleep reading. Like if it is not fun or interesting, I will just fall asleep. Reading is not a very good subject for me.

Derek's struggles with reading began at an early age. He remembered having most texts read to him because he struggled with speech and decoding words. He vividly recalled the services of a speech teacher who arrived at his elementary school to work with him.

They had something called a speech bus that came to my school, and I had to go to that like almost a year and half . . . I worked with my vowels and saying different letters. I couldn't say different sounds when I would say letters so they made me read these words like a lot. She made me say "dolphin" like six times. It was crazy. Like she was pretty cool. She had free candy and stuff.

Aside from recalling the work he did in the speech bus, Derek did not remember doing much reading in school; it was an activity in which he put minimal effort. Even in most of his high school classes, he said that he often would guess on the assignments he was given in class with the hopes that his answers would suffice. Yet at times it appeared that Derek could in fact read. There were rare moments when he found a text engaging, so much so that he actually read and comprehended it. Derek had read the first two Harry Potter books, some books about the military, and *The Absolute True Diaries of a Part-Time Indian*. He reported the first two Harry Potter books as being the best books that he had ever read.

In addition to books, Derek read the local newspaper, remaining current on local and national events. Occasionally he read magazines about guns or cars. Reading those types of texts specifically served a purpose of keeping Derek informed, which he stressed was important but not necessarily a pleasurable experience. Although he read magazines and newspapers more frequently than books, he did not find reading to be inherently engaging. For Derek, reading took effort, and that was the reason why he did not enjoy it. If the text was not immediately appealing, the sustained effort to read thoroughly or well was a low priority for him. He sometimes struggled to make sense of the words, and his fluency needed work. Instead of persevering through the text, such as rereading in order to make meaning, he would just skip words or lines in order to continue and finish the task presented. "My eyes just seem to skip over words as I'm going down the page." He enjoyed being read to, and he said that he appreciated it when teachers would go out of their way to read to him.

I seem to do better on tests when people read things to me . . . I somehow just skip over words on tests and then like I'll go back through and someone will read it to me and like I realize I never knew it said that. That's why I like . . . when I was in World History I had all my tests read to me and I think that is why I passed world history, actually, otherwise I never would have passed.

Discussion: Complicated considerations

The most important consideration for the three boys' literacy learning is their engagement with reading. They all described reading as oftentimes boring. First is Harry's lack of engagement: His mother reported that he was disengaged with English and reading during middle school. He compared his reading fluency and ability to decode with those of his peers. Derek's historic struggles in school are similar to Harry's. Derek had few positive memories about reading and none about learning to read. He made it through school by relying on his teachers to read for him and then taking chances through guessing answers if they were not there to support him. Both Harry's and Derek's past low achievement led to negative perceptions about their abilities, resulting in increased detachment from reading (Beach & O'Brien, 2007). Now, as high school students, low achievement, negative perceptions, and disengagement compounded one another, with disengagement becoming an increasingly perilous factor. Both boys had moments when they did engage with texts, such as the Harry Potter series or informational texts about current events. However, if they were generally unwilling to engage in text, it would become gradually more difficult for teachers to help them improve their skills and change their perceptions of themselves as poor readers.

Jesus viewed reading as boring only occasionally. Generally he saw reading as a mildly engaging activity and appreciated reading books that were of interest to him. Reading became difficult when he was unable to connect to the topic he was reading about or when he struggled with comprehension. Unlike Derek and Harry, Jesus was willing to engage in texts and viewed persisting with reading as helping him develop into a stronger reader. His willingness to read seemed to correspond with his ability to recall positive reading experiences. Positive perceptions of himself as an improving reader and his overall conceptualization of himself as a student translated into his views of reading as a necessary and also engaging activity.

The boys' perceptions of failing as permanent, stable factors outside of their control are informative. For Harry, his distinction between "trying" and "trying to try" is quite revealing. He viewed himself as a bad learner because he was overwhelmed by school and peers. He wondered whether the cause of his difficulty was bad teaching. Conversely, Jesus found that school provided him with a feeling of success. However, Jesus too perceived failing as outside of his control. Physical science was a class in which he was overwhelmed with the amount of homework assigned. Derek and Harry spoke about classes in which they perceived themselves as unable to do well because of their relationship with or lack of connection to a teacher, though they commented that in other classes they had good rapport with teachers and were passing. All three boys expressed that teachers who forged positive relationships with them helped them learn.

Teachers might attune to Hinchman's (2007) pedagogical principle of "simplicity rules" as an appropriate plan of action to counter boys' perceptions that failure is outside of their control, including a conscious effort to not overwhelm them with language and countless assignments. In different ways, the boys struggled with homework. Refraining from assigning a significantly large load of homework to provide them with a feeling of accomplishment while gradually increasing the amount of assignment activity as the class progresses might be one strategy for teachers to consider. Offering touchstone texts such as the Harry Potter books that attract boys' interest would be another strategy to try.

An intriguing factor in the boys' lives that cannot be ignored is the role their parents played at home. Harry rarely spoke of either of his parents, the only time being when we specifically inquired about them. Although Harry lived with his mother, he only referred to her job, and his connection with his father was minimal because they lived in different states. It is interesting that Harry specifically spoke of his father not helping him learn to read, although he could recall images of his dad reading to him as a child. Derek had a tumultuous relationship with both of his parents, and he seemed to cope by distancing himself from them through leaving the house and occupying himself with his 40-hr-per-week job. For both Derek and Harry, the turmoil at home seemed to transfer to turmoil at school. Jesus, conversely, spoke of his father often, even in relation to reading

texts. He reported that his father often purchased books and manuals about cars. The two of them read the same material, often together while they were working on cars. Jesus said that his mother did not read, but he viewed his father as someone who read for specific purposes. The role of parents and the way the boys talked about their parents demonstrates that reading has to be purposeful to be engaging and that young people pay attention to the adults who foster engaged literacy in their lives.

Testing and Teaching in Conflict With Boys' Need for Purpose

P. David Pearson (2007) asserted that there is a problem with the current trajectory of the literacy community. In "An Endangered Species Act for Literacy Education" Pearson wrote that the current national climate to improve teaching and learning has led educators and researchers to unintentionally compromise three of the most enduring values of teaching literacy: transfer of learning, faith in teacher prerogative, and regard for individual differences. The assessment and accountability environment has overrun these three principles and is altering the way in which literacy teachers are working with youth, creating a divide in pedagogical approach. On one side of this divide is the camp of teachers who focus on the curriculum, contributing to what Kelly Gallagher (2009) termed "readicide" or "the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools" (p. 2). In the other camp, teachers are clinging to Pearson's three enduring, yet endangered, literacy values.

In the first camp are those teachers who teach books; they are focused on figuring out which standards they are required to teach, which books are part of the required district curriculum, and how much time they are going to spend teaching each unit or lesson. An overemphasis is placed on the types of reading students will confront on standardized reading tests. Until they met Todd as their teacher, the three boys in this study experienced reading as a set of tests and hoops and social stigma as they fell further and further behind their peers academically in English and literacy classes. This focus on the literacy of the curriculum slights them and other students and emphasizes predetermined outcomes, whether those are standards, a final exam, or a culmination activity or project. The test-taking climate of accountability is counterproductive: It ignores students' real and current worlds; it dismisses the premise that literacy learning is a social practice; and it focuses curriculum solely on external, nontransferable goals (Damico, Campano, & Harste, 2007; Moore & Cunningham, 2006; Pearson, 2007). The constant goal on an end product often neglects any reference to what is important to students in the present here and now.

This narrowing of curriculum is endangering the minds of students (Gallagher, 2009). Schools have removed interesting reading material and replaced it

with short texts similar to those on the exams so teachers can focus on teaching isolated reading skills, such as decoding, fluency, and basic comprehension (Gallagher, 2009; Pearson, 2009). The approach taken by teachers, schools, administrators, and policymakers is working against developing independent readers (Gallagher, 2009). Students who can read are placed in remedial classes in which there are few opportunities to read interesting texts, to think deeply, and to delve beyond the literal level of comprehension (Gallagher, 2009; Pearson, 2009). A lack of reading for pleasure provides a void of relevant, current texts in the curriculum.

Instead of teaching that follows sound practices to push students to high levels of reading and engagement in order to develop skills that will transfer to a test and beyond, the opposite is happening. The test dictates the teaching of rote skills for the sole purpose of taking the test, and this was the case in Midwest City schools, where the high school literacy curriculum was defined by the reading demonstration exam. Pearson (2009) noted,

In an effort to meet these consequential outcomes, we scurry to find materials and activities that we think will help students do better on the test (even though we may suspect that it will not help them develop more of the cognitive attribute the test is supposed to measure). (p. 147) Those well-intended teachers contribute to readicide—infesting their students with a dislike for reading (Gallagher, 2009).

In the second camp are those teachers who focus on teaching students critical literacy skills (Harper & Bean, 2006). Rather than emphasizing the curriculum, including the standards, texts, and scope and sequence of skills, this group of teachers considers student agency and motivation to be an integral part of reading. Instruction is appropriate and purposeful, not far from students' lived experiences (Smith & Wilhelm, 2004). These teachers, Todd among them, also understand and negotiate the sociocultural nature of reading, recognizing that students bring to school a great deal of cultural capital or lack thereof from which instruction can be scaffolded (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Paterson & Elliott, 2006). The teacher acknowledges the literacies of the students, focusing on strengths, potential, and transfer—teaching skills and helping students not only apply those skills to text but also critically analyze and apply them.

Literacy teachers in this camp have a deep understanding of pedagogy and content while thoroughly understanding how these fit into students' lives. They acknowledge that there is not a neat way to package and reproduce what works in one classroom with the goal of transporting it to another. They understand that reading is a complex process; it is autonomous, developmental, psychological, contextualized, and social. Those complexities highlight that teachers must not accept one surefire strategy for teaching reading. Instead, they must add and embrace Pearson's (2007) two other endangered principles—teacher prerogative and

regard for students' individual differences. Teachers abandon district-ruled reading scripts and standards because they see them as a list of skill-and-drill worksheets in direct conflict with their philosophical beliefs about literacy instruction. They incorporate additional approaches for teaching students to read, helping students read difficult texts, showing them the value of reading and its connection to current issues in today's world (Gallagher, 2009).

Teacher prerogative plays the most important, critical role in helping students become better readers. Gallagher (2009) argued that teachers should provide for students "the proper level of instructional support without abandoning them or without drowning them in a sea of sticky notes, double-entry journals, and worksheets" (p. 87). He suggested that teachers need to find the "sweet spot" of instruction, which is the in-between of either underteaching or overteaching books. Teachers focus on student individualities to introduce them to books that are of an appropriate reading and engagement level, meaning that the books are not too easy and therefore boring or too difficult and thus frustrating (Gallagher, 2009; Pearson, 2007). Teachers ought to use their expertise to help students navigate text so that it brings value to their lived lives and reading experience. The teacher is a coach, or reading expert, modeling how one reads and learns through teaching strategies in short time segments utilizing a variety of contexts (Gallagher, 2009; Hinchman, 2007).

The testing and accountability climate has caused some in the literacy community to enter into a compromising, narrowing of curriculum that is in direct conflict with how boys "do" school (for those who struggle and for those who are disenfranchised). Boys who reject school yet still value literacy need teachers—particularly those of the second camp variety already mentioned—to reengage them in school.

Limitations

Our work with Harry, Jesus, and Derek gives us some insight into the lives of boys in similar situations, but the interviews combined with classroom observations do not provide a full view of their worlds and their interactions with print and other literacies, including multimodal literacies. Heron (2003), Moje (1999, 2000), and Paterson and Elliott (2006) drew upon sociocultural theory, the idea that the context of any action or "reading" of text must be considered, meaning that all learning (or reading) develops within a certain set of practices where the students "live" their reading and constructing of meaning of text. Essentially, sociocultural theorists view reading as a complex activity that involves the entire person. Teachers must consider boys' attitudes, perceptions, and the reading process itself when teaching all boys across the spectrum—struggling, reluctant, and disengaged.

In addition, and as A. Thein (personal communication, December 10, 2011) pointed out, our study highlights the multifaceted, complex nature of “struggle” or “reluctance” toward academic reading. Our interviews point to no one single factor that drives or maintains reluctance but instead demonstrate how cycles of negative experiences with teachers, frustration with academic and social structures in schools, and difficult relationships at home all work together to perpetuate struggles with reading. However, in each of the cases reluctant readers did have moments of engagement either in the aesthetic pleasure of literature (often Harry Potter books) or in the efferent pleasure of making reading do purposeful work for them (for instance, reading a manual on auto mechanics). Yet somehow that engagement is persistently difficult to translate into engagement with school-sanctioned texts. Thein’s (2009) work points to similarities between the research that she has conducted with girls and their reading practices both inside and outside of schools. Specifically, in one study Thein found that Molly, an 11th-grade student, although a good student, was rarely engaged in school literature and was often disengaged because she read for different purposes outside of class than she did in school. Research on girls and reading suggests that girls often read primarily for personal purposes, and they read primarily narrative fiction outside of school. Molly certainly fit that description, but in addition she read in ways that were very important to her identity as a working-class girl—ways of reading that did not translate well to school texts. Ultimately, Thein concluded that part of the disconnect for Molly was that she had not been taught nuances in genres or nuances in reading practices that align with various genres. Hence, another implication of our work might be that teachers need to be more explicit when they assign reading to students in explaining why students are being asked to read certain texts and how they might most effectively go about reading those texts. Not everything that students are assigned to read in schools will be engaging or relevant or will be something with which they can personally engage, but sometimes disconnection and cognitive dissonance are important too. Therefore, teachers need to help students understand why they ask them to do difficult work and how to get past the boredom that may come with tensions, dissonance, and lack of familiarity.

Conclusion: Literacy as a matter of policy and reform

Teachers must not only recognize complexities but also approach them in delicate and purposeful ways for each individual student. Because reading is ideological rather than autonomous (cf. Street, 1995), as well as developmental, psychological, contextualized, and social, it is necessary for literacy teachers to honor and understand the recursive processes at play. P. David Pearson (2007) asserted, “Our schools and our society need teachers who can apply their craft with great

flexibility. Why? Because of the undeniable fact that children differ from one another" (p. 151). Flexibility is the radical middle or sweet spot of instruction—the lived space where teachers reclaim their literacy classrooms and the courage to do what is right by first focusing on students and then making the appropriate pedagogical adjustments based on daily movement and interactions with curriculum. In turn, school districts ought to enact similar flexibility as curricula are implemented. Public school teachers are not independent entities and bear the responsibility of negotiating and articulating the curriculum among reading levels and among schools in order to meet district-level expectations. If all work in concert, this type of teaching will transform high school literacy classrooms into places of rich engagement rather than static and boring school spaces that are stigmatized. Through embracing the similar and differing complexities of Harry's, Jesus's, and Derek's literate lives, paired with the flexibility of using various interventions, teachers can help young men avoid becoming yet another statistic in a report about how boys are falling behind in reading.

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